

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JENESYS ALICEA

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Leo Valdes: My name is Leo Valdes. It is June 12, 2019, around twelve-twenty. I am here with Jenny, and we are going to start the interview now. Tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Jenesys Alicea: Jenny Alicea. I was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1981, November.

LV: Cool, 1981, November, in Newark, New Jersey.

JA: [Yes].

LV: Tell me a little bit about your parents. What are their names? Where were they from?

JA: My mother's name is (Migdalia Quinones?). She was born here and raised here in Newark, New Jersey. My father's name is Juan Alicea. I believe he was born in Brooklyn, New York, but pretty much raised in New Jersey as well.

LV: He was born in Brooklyn ...

JA: Yes.

LV: ... But then he moved at a young age to Newark.

JA: Well, I think my grandmother was down there and then ended up giving birth down there. They have family down there, so I think that's how it was. He's always been a New Jersey native, but where he was actually born, I believe, was in New York.

LV: Did your parents attend school from elementary to high school?

JA: Yes, my mother attended school all the way and graduated high school. She graduated actually four months pregnant with me. Her and my father met when they used to go to church.

LV: Really?

JA: Yes, they used to go to church, and that's where they met. I think they met at the age around fourteen. My mother is a year older, I believe, than my father. So, my father was probably around thirteen years old when they met.

LV: Are they religious?

JA: We come from a religious background. From my father's side of the family, they are Pentecostal, so my father was raised in a Pentecostal background but now identifies as Catholic. My mother as well chose to go to Pentecostal Church and stuff like that, but we always pretty much grew up in a religious background.

LV: Cool. You said they went to elementary and finished high school.

JA: I don't think they went to the same school. I know my father went to Broadway Middle School. My mother, I think she went to Webster and then from Webster went to Barringer. So, I don't think they met in school. It was more they met in church and had their relationship through there.

LV: Did they go to public schools?

JA: Yes.

LV: In Newark?

JA: Yes, both of them were public schools.

LV: Tell me a little bit about what you know of their childhoods. They met at church. What were your grandparents like? Do you know your grandparents' names? Do you have relationships with them?

JA: Yes, well, from my father's side, my father's biological father passed away when my father was young, so I never got to meet him. My grandmother from my father's side ended up remarrying, so the only grandfather I know is her husband until this day, which is my grandfather. My father has siblings through that marriage as well. On my mother's side, my grandmother is still with us, but my mother's father passed away when she was also at a young age. I never met my biological grandfather on either side.

LV: Are your grandparents also from the New York-New Jersey area?

JA: My grandmother from my father's side, I believe, was born and raised here in New Jersey. My grandmother from my mother's side was born in Puerto Rico and lived out there, I think, until she was maybe about sixteen, seventeen. Then, she came down here--I think she met my grandfather in Puerto Rico--and then they moved down here. She got married with him, I think it was at eighteen or nineteen.

LV: On your mom's side, both of her parents are from Puerto Rico.

JA: Yes, born in Puerto Rico.

LV: They spoke Spanish, I assume.

JA: Well, my grandmother speaks English and Spanish. She's been down here for years, so she speaks fluent English and fluent Spanish. Same as my grandmother from my father's side, but in Puerto Rico, I believe, just all Spanish from that timeframe and stuff. When she moved down here, she was a young girl, my grandmother, so she adapted down here.

LV: When she raised your mother, did she raise them speaking Spanish and English?

JA: Yes.

LV: Your mom speaks Spanish.

JA: Yes, fluent Spanish.

LV: Do you speak Spanish?

JA: Yes, I do.

LV: Awesome.

JA: Yes.

LV: That is great. Tell me a little bit about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

JA: My mother, like I said, graduated high school pregnant with me, and her and my father were together. I do believe that they got married. It was through court and stuff like that, so they were married for a period of time. When I was a baby, I don't obviously remember too much, but I know that they had their apartment on Verona Ave. in Newark. Then, after that, shortly after that, they separated. I was very young when they separated, so I pretty much always lived in Newark growing up, as a child, always seeing my father. My father was always a part of my life, even though they separated.

Growing up, it was a journey, I would say. It was a journey. I always knew from a young age something was different. [laughter] I can remember as far back as being three years old, still when my mother and father were together, and always wearing a set of pearls that you could not get me out of. I pretty much knew from as far back as I had memory that something was different. I didn't relate to the boys' stuff or anything like that. My mom and my dad, I guess they kind of suspected as well and wondered, but, like they said, it never changed their love for me. They've always figured, "Well, when she's ready, she'll say whatever it is that she needs to say." Then, they just always supported and loved me, and that was that.

LV: That is amazing. You said that you have this early recollection of you wearing pearls when you were three.

JA: Yes.

LV: Your parents separated at a young age.

JA: Yes.

LV: How did your parents make a living during that time?

JA: My father, to this day, has always been a go-getter. He will find a job wherever, and he's always been so [hardworking]. From what my mother tells me, he was just always, when it came to that, there was nothing that she needed or I needed in the house. They were young, my mother

was eighteen, my father was seventeen, I believe, when I was born. She said he always managed to--they had a roof over their head, food on the table. He always came from work. I had everything I needed as a child, in the timeframe that they were together. I don't remember too much of how that was, little vivid things that I remember, but, yes, they've always managed. My mother I guess, at that time, was a stay-at-home mom.

LV: What kind of vivid things do you remember?

JA: Like I said, I remember the pearls. I remember my father had DJ [disc jockey] equipment, so music has always been a huge part of my life, from as far back as I can remember. My mother loves music. My mother used to sing in church. My sister actually sings as well. Music and singing and stuff like that from the art has always been a part of my life.

LV: What kind of music?

JA: Every kind of music that you can possibly imagine. In the '80s, I would say freestyle and Spanish music, salsa, merengue, early hip-hop, [laughter] Run-DMC, and stuff like that. Yes, it was pretty, pretty eclectic when it came to the music. My grandmother, my mother's mother, loves country music, so pretty eclectic when it comes to music. I love all genres.

LV: Your grandma was part of your childhood growing up.

JA: Absolutely, yes, both my grandparents, well, from both sides.

LV: She was also supportive of you wearing pearls.

JA: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Well, I guess in the early '80s, they probably asked questions at that point, "Why is he wearing pearls?" or stuff like that, but they've always been a supportive family. So, to my knowledge, it's never been anything but that, so I've grown up with nothing but support and love and acceptance. Me personally, I've never experienced anything but that from both parts of my family.

LV: That is great. You mentioned you have a sister.

JA: Yes, I have a younger sister.

LV: One younger sister. Do you have any other siblings?

JA: No, just me and my sister, same mother, same father.

LV: How much younger is she?

JA: I'm going to be thirty-eight. I believe my sister is probably thirty-six or thirty-five, or just turned thirty-six or thirty-five this May that passed. It's a little confusing after so many years. We just look at ourselves like we're twins, to be honest with you, when it comes to that. Yes, she's about two years younger than me.

LV: Are you very close?

JA: Extremely, extremely close.

LV: That is great.

JA: The bond that I have with my sister is like no other.

LV: What is her name?

JA: (Cynthia?), (Cindy?).

LV: Cindy.

JA: Yes.

LV: That is pretty.

JA: (Cynthia Leigh?).

LV: Cynthia Leigh, awesome. When you were growing up, did you live in an apartment or a house?

JA: Apartments.

LV: Were they in Newark?

JA: In Newark. Then, when I was maybe I would say thirteen or fourteen, we ended up moving to Belleville.

LV: Belmont?

JA: Belleville, New Jersey.

LV: In which neighborhood in Newark did you live?

JA: Oh, God, it was a few neighborhoods. Yes, we moved around, not a lot, but we moved around. My mother would get bored with the apartment, or we needed more space or something, but it was always the North Newark area, never pretty much outside of North Newark.

LV: Are those Latino neighborhoods?

JA: Yes, Latino--well, a mix. You had white American and you had African American, but it was, what I remember, just a big Latin community. It was very mixed. Like I said, you would see black people and white people and Asian people and everything, but the majority, what I

remember, we were always, it was a very strong Latin community.

LV: Like grocery stores, churches.

JA: Everything, grocery stores, churches, corner stores, whatever parks we went to, if we did family outings and stuff like that, as a child. Then, of course, as we got older, it was easier to travel outside to different locations, but pretty much always a strong Latin community.

LV: Do you have fond memories of your childhood?

JA: I have a very long memory. [laughter]

LV: Very long memory, that is great.

JA: Yes, it's a lot. We could be here for days if I was to go on.

LV: Well, like I said, the tape has twenty-four hours. [laughter]

JA: We could go for days. [laughter]

LV: That is great.

JA: I was always very close with both sides of my family. I don't remember growing up and it being one side more than the other. Both of my families were very involved in my life.

LV: Who were some of the people you clicked the most with?

JA: From my mother's side, of course, after my parents separated, I grew up with my mom, so I'm close with all of them. My mother has two brothers and three other sisters, so we're still, to this day, very tight, cousins, great cousins, extended cousins, family, so it goes on and on. From my father's side, growing up as a child, pretty much all of them. My father has one brother and four sisters, let me see, yes, four sisters. It was pretty much the same thing. Now, at this time, some of my father's siblings, one lives in Florida, and we're still very close. But who I'm very, very close to from my father's side is Nate's mom (Jacquelyn?) and my other aunt (Yolanda?). I am extremely close with them.

LV: That is awesome. What is that closeness about, do you think?

JA: Well, my father's sisters, Yolanda and Jacquelyn, Nate's mom, they're the same mother and father, so I guess it's a blood thing that you kind of get drawn to, that you just have that bond. With all of them, it's all love, but I've always had that special bond with those two aunts of mine.

LV: That is wonderful.

JA: Of course, my father's mother, being religious, now she's a little bit more--how do you want to say?--more open as far as religion, but the background that she came from, religion was very

strong, Pentecostal, with the skirts. When it came to family, the rules were kind of twisted. They accepted and loved. It was nothing of how you would expect the people in that community of church to be like, "Oh, well, it's wrong," or this or that. Even when I came out--before I came out as trans, when I came out as just being gay--I was hesitant to tell that side of the family, my father's side, but to my shock, it was acceptance. My grandmother pulled me aside privately and had a conversation with me and said, "No matter what, God is love, and I love you." My grandmother had a brother that was gay, so she kind of was already familiar with that, and that was her favorite brother. It was just she kind of had already experience in that. The main thing she went through with the Bible was just, "Love is love, and I'm not here to judge," and acceptance. To this day, that's how it is.

LV: It is interesting that you said that the rules were twisted for family.

JA: Yes.

LV: It is an interesting way to put it.

JA: That's how I would put it because you've got a lot people that are in that religion so strong, they'll respect you, but they'll always try to throw in, "Well, the Bible says this or that, or this and that." I never experienced that with my grandparents, and when I tell you they are very religious, they live right next door to the church, literally, right next door, all their lives. My father, pretty much from that house, that's the only house I remember. They've been there for--like I said, I'm thirty-eight, I'll be thirty-eight--so, they've been there for I don't know how long. So, it was not like that with them at all. It was just love and acceptance, and that's how it is to this day.

LV: That is wonderful. Tell me about your school growing up.

JA: School, growing up ...

LV: Where did you go to school?

JA: Okay, so elementary school, I went to Elliott Street School in Newark. Then, after that, I went to--I guess you could say junior high school--I went to Ridge Street Annex, Ridge Street. It's also in North Newark. I went there until about maybe sixth or seventh grade. After that, we had moved, so the district required me to go to Broadway Middle School, and I went there just for eighth grade. Then, after that, my mom moved. That's when I did high school, nine through twelve, in Belleville.

LV: Belleville. So, that is outside of Newark.

JA: Yes, it's actually the next town over here. It's in between Bloomfield and Newark and Kearny.

LV: Did you like school?

JA: I liked school, obviously, of course, because of the friends and stuff like that. School, I dreaded like, "Oh, God, I have to go to school for work," but I always did what I had to do. I was, I guess you could say, I was smart, but I was more popular. [laughter]

LV: You had a lot of friends.

JA: I had and still to this day have an extreme amount of friends. I'm still in contact with a lot of them from that era of being young. From middle school and elementary and junior high school, I still keep in contact with a lot of people from all different eras.

LV: Did you come out in high school?

JA: Okay, I guess that's a little weird question for me how to say it because since I was young, young, young, I was--I guess you want to say--not flamboyant, but there was always a nice little sweetness to me. [laughter] So, people always knew, but, of course, I was young, so I didn't know anything about gay or anything like that. My mom had a friend that was gay, but as a child, I didn't know that that was what was gay. I was always very delicate and clean. I didn't want to get dirty, and [laughter] I didn't do the things that normal boys would do in playing. Even when I would get gifts as a child, if it was cars and stuff like that, they would pretty much stay brand-spanking new. I wouldn't play with them. I would have them, but I wouldn't play with them.

As far as school is concerned, I didn't officially come out until I was a junior in high school. Actually, I came out to one of my friends first. Their response was, "We love you regardless. We knew, and it doesn't change who you are." To my parents, my mom, I came out shortly after. I actually came out to my aunt first, my mother's younger sister, because she is very ...

LV: Yolanda?

JA: No, from my mother's side, Daisy, my aunt Daisy. She was the youngest of them, so she's only, I would say, ten years older than me. She was more in tune with the newer things and the generation and what was happening in that era. So, it was easier for me to come out to her, and she was the one that actually helped me come out to my mom.

LV: How did she help?

JA: Well, my aunt Daisy, she's a character herself, so she's not one to sugarcoat or anything. She just said, "Okay, well, I always knew. I'm proud of you. I love you. We're going to tell your mom." She was like, "I'm going to tell your mom you have something to tell her, and you're going to do it." That's how it went. I sat my mother down in the living room. She was there, my aunt was there with me, and I told her. My mother cried for, I would say, maybe about twenty minutes or so. She was just emotional, but it was just the emotion of just me coming out. Having conversations with her now, it was more of, not her crying for me being gay at that time when I came out as gay, more so about what I was going to face. It was her fear, but she accepted it and supported me and here I am today.

LV: You mentioned you had a lot of friends in high school. Were a lot of them LGBTQ?

JA: You know what, in recent years, a lot have come out, but a lot of them, believe it or not, were and are straight, have families. I'm very close with them as well. I don't even know how to explain it; it was just such an acceptance when I came out to them. I was more concerned with some of my guy friends, because, at that time, I was hanging out with a lot of guys, you know, my friends from school, girls as well, but I had a group of male friends that were like my best friends, my brothers. To this day, I'm still very close with them, with their children as well. That was what I thought would be more difficult, but it actually wasn't. When I came out, they accepted it. To this day, now me as trans, they say I'm their sister. So, it wasn't a bad experience.

LV: With your brothers and everything, what did you guys like doing?

JA: We were normal teens.

LV: Clubs?

JA: No, well, at that time, I was still in high school, and so what I did with them was the normal things, going to the houses, partying at the pools, or going to amusement parks, the local festivals and stuff that we would have in Belleville and carnivals. That's what we would do. It's weird, I don't want to say I was living a double life, but when I was about fourteen, I met who today I call my gay mother, Ivan. Ivan was one of the first really out-there gay people that I met at that age, at that young age, not out there in the sense of craziness, out there meaning they lived the life. He's a few years older than me. I'm thirty-eight. Ivan's got about ten years on me, so he was in the community a lot longer. He's the one that kind of introduced me to the club scene and going out, so I can remember sneaking into clubs when I was about sixteen, with a fake ID. At that time, in high school, I was already experiencing gay clubs. I didn't tell my friends just yet until I came out, but I was already experiencing the LGBT life already between fifteen and sixteen.

LV: Where did you meet Ivan?

JA: Ivan, I met through, actually, believe it or not, my aunt (Lucero?). My mother's sister had a friend that lived in Newark, and when she would go visit her friend, he lived across the street. I would always see that there were people there and his friends. Of course, I was already fourteen, fifteen. I knew what gay was at that time, so I knew. One day, he was across the street at my aunt's friend's house because he lived on that block for years and years, and that's how we met. Then, through talking, that's pretty much how our friendship evolved. So, I consider him my gay mom, [laughter] and we're extremely, extremely close still to this day.

LV: When you would hang out with him, you would go from Belleville to Newark.

JA: Well, no, at that time, I had just moved to Belleville. Whenever I would go to my aunt's friend's house with her, and I would see him there, that's how we started. Then, eventually, I would go and go on my own, once we actually established a friendship.

LV: Is he also Puerto Rican?

JA: He is Puerto Rican, yes.

LV: From Newark.

JA: Yes, well, born in Puerto Rico and moved to Newark at a young age and pretty much the rest of his life.

LV: Do you speak with him in Spanish?

JA: Spanish, English, whatever, whatever way our conversation goes, Spanglish. [laughter]

LV: In terms of your high school, was it like? What was the racial, ethnic mix up?

JA: Well, at that time, it was a lot of white American people.

LV: In Belleville.

JA: Yes, at that time. It's now more of a mix, you know, mixed environment, but at that time, the majority was white American.

LV: You moved from Newark, which was very mixed, you said, white, black, Latinx.

JA: Mostly Latinos from the area I grew up.

LV: In North Newark.

JA: In North Newark.

LV: Then, you moved to Belleville, which was more of a white community. How was that for you?

JA: It actually wasn't bad because my aunt had moved, my aunt Lucero, had moved to Belleville. When I would go visit her, I started meeting friends. The block that she happened to live on was full of teenagers and kids around my age, so I kind of had already a friendship with a lot of people before I went to Belleville High School. When I went to Belleville High School, I was already known.

LV: You had a lot of friends already.

JA: [Yes]. I was always into doing hair and stuff like that. Before I even started Belleville High School, I had already done a lot of girls' hair, stuff like that, so going into Belleville High School, I was kind of already known.

LV: You were doing girls' hair when you were in eighth grade.

JA: Even younger, yes. I took my sister, when she was a little girl, I chopped her hair off in the dining room and swept it up under the table. She came out half bald. Hair was always a thing for me.

LV: You just chopped off her hair.

JA: Just put her on the chair, grabbed the scissor, and chopped it up. [laughter]

LV: Were you experimenting?

JA: Well, I was five years old, six years old.

LV: Having fun.

JA: Having fun, yes. I grew up around, like I said, my mother had a lot of sisters, the three sisters, very close--of course my uncles, too, but one of my uncles was already a little bit older. Even though my mother is the oldest of all of them, one of my uncles out of the two was a little older. He was already doing his own thing, so I wouldn't see him as much. Then, my other uncle was the baby, so he was in school still and stuff like that. Growing up, I was always around the female environment, so seeing them do their hair and stuff like that, I was drawn to it immediately.

LV: Yes, your mom is the oldest of her siblings.

JA: My mother is the oldest of all of them.

LV: Of all her siblings, so your aunts and uncles are fairly close to you in age.

JA: Yes, pretty much, because my mother had me, like I said, she was eighteen years old. Then, after that is my aunt, which is a year younger. My other aunt is another year younger. My uncle is another year or two years younger, so pretty much close. Only the last two, I'm closer to age with them, a ten-year difference, nine-year difference.

LV: That is nice. That is a lot of friends growing up.

JA: Then, my mother and my father, their backgrounds are pretty much similar. Both my grandfathers passed away when they were a young age. Two siblings from my mother's side are from a different father, which are the two youngest, and three from my father's side, which are the youngest from them. So, it's kind of a similar thing that I had going on with both sides of my family.

LV: That is great. That is a big family.

JA: For the immediate one, yes, but I have a humongous family on both sides.

LV: Yes, Nathan has told me a little bit.

JA: It's huge. It's so many, and beyond, some that we haven't even met. This year, I'm actually going to a family reunion from my father's side of the family, so there's going to be a lot of people there that I'm going to meet that I haven't met. My father is the lovable one, I guess you can say, the one that was everyone's favorite, so me being his child, it's kind of the same thing. They're looking forward to it. They know that I've transitioned to trans. They're very accepting, so I'm looking forward to it.

LV: Do you know your great grandparents?

JA: I never met my great grandparents from my mother's side because my great grandmother lived in Puerto Rico, like I said, when my grandmother left, so she passed away, I think when my mother was a young girl. I did meet my great grandmother from my father's side, but I was very young. I have memories with her; she was the most lovable thing ever. Yes, that was my grandmother's mother. So, that's as far back as I go to the great grandparents.

LV: She was also from Puerto Rico.

JA: Yes, but she lived down here.

LV: She lived here. Okay, awesome. That is great that your family has kept Spanish throughout generations while you have been here.

JA: Our community, as far as being Latino, we're very proud of, very proud of, so I've done Puerto Rican parades from as young as I can remember. Parties have always been involved in that kind of genre, so, yes, the whole ethnic part of being Puerto Rican and being Latino is very strong in our community. From the culture, to the food, to the art, to the people, to you name it, we have a strong sense of knowledge when it comes to being Puerto Rican.

LV: That is really interesting. I want to hear more about that, but let me ask you why you chose to go into cosmetology. How did you do it?

JA: Okay, well, like I said, being young, I always knew I was different, so I was drawn to Barbies and feminine stuff as far back as I can remember. Growing up, living with my mom, my mom always did her hair and kept herself up with makeup and stuff like that, so I was drawn to that. I was drawn to the makeup and the hair and the stuff being feminine and pretty, so that was always a part of me. Like I said, from a young age, when I grabbed a pair of scissors--normally, young kids grab the scissors and cut their own hair--I was like, "No, you sit down. I'm going to cut your hair." [laughter] So, that's how that went. I've always been drawn to it.

Then, when I was in high school, I heard about taking cosmetology in high school. That was new to me. I was like, "Wow, they have cosmetology in school." Everybody was like, "You've got to take it, you've got to take it." I applied to take it, but because of the way the credits fell, I wasn't able to, because I was doubling up on certain classes, so I was able to make sure that I finished on time by my senior year. I wasn't able to grab it--do you know what I mean?

LV: Yes.

JA: To actually take the course, but, like I said, I've always done hair and stuff like that on my own. Then, a friend of my aunt's, where she used to go get her hair done, heard that I was very interested in doing hair when I was about fourteen, fifteen years old, so I started working at the salon in Newark. With no experience or nothing, they took me under their wing, and I started. The owner, he was gay himself, so it was a very easy environment. The environment was fabulous. He would sing. He would stop in the middle of his clients and grab a role brush and start performing and singing, if he would have heard Tamia come on, "Stranger in My House." [laughter] That was kind of my first salon environment. They took me under their wing.

They started me off, I guess, as a shampoo person, but I actually had hands on. I would do proms. I would do events, going away with them when they had events. They would travel; they would bring me along as an assistant or a protégé, I guess you would say, so I got a big experience with that. That's when I found out that cosmetology, I was able to take it in high school, but I couldn't. I was working back and forth, in between the salons, and going doing jobs with them, so I was always already in the salon industry. Proms and pictures and stuff like that, everybody would come to me in high school, "Go to her. She'll do your hair," you know, "She's the one."

Then, after I graduated high school, I took about a year or two just to really find myself and just enjoy myself because I was out of the closet. I was more able to experience the LGBT life. I know it sounds weird, but that's where I put my focus on. I wasn't really able to do it young, so I went full fledge with experiencing the gay community, the lifestyle, the nightlife, the environment. That's what I did. Then, after that, once I was already able to just learn how to balance, "Okay, I could do this at night and do this," I enrolled in school. I enrolled in Concorde in Bloomfield. I took the course, and it was a six-month course. I completed the course, and that's where I'm at.

LV: Would you say that the salon industry when you were a teenager was an entry point into a bigger LGBT part of your life?

JA: Yes, because the owner, like I said, he was gay, so he had gay friends coming there. He had a lot of women coming there. It was very mixed, but a lot of LGBT people. Plus, at the same time, I already was building a very close friendship with Ivan, who was already showing me the scene. At that point in my life, pretty much between fourteen and fifteen, was where everything really kicked in, the LGBT lifestyle and my love for pursuing doing hair and makeup and stuff like that. It was actually pretty much at the same time, the hair lifestyle and the LGBT lifestyle, which kind of went perfect with each other. So, it was pretty much all together. I experienced both things together at the same timeframe.

LV: What do you mean by LGBT lifestyle?

JA: Like I said, I grew up, my father's side is very, very religious and stuff, so it's not something that you would see there, though, again, they were very accepting when I came out. But it wasn't

something that was normal and see there. I guess I was the first one to bring that there in a very long time, besides my grandmother's brother. I guess I was the next one. So, I didn't see that. Then, of course, on my mother's side, it was all women and stuff like that. My uncles, they were off doing their thing. My mom had, they had a gay friend, but at that young age, I didn't know that that's what that was. So, I didn't really know the lifestyle, as far as what was to be gay and what came with it. Then, again, you've got to think, this was the mid-'80s to early-'90s when I was still a child, so I didn't really see it. I wasn't exposed to it as much, though I've seen it, but it wasn't something that was around for me to really experience and know what it was.

It wasn't until I was in high school that I was able to experience, like I say, the LGBT lifestyle, which was seeing gay people and knowing about a gay parade and experiencing, knowing that there's clubs where people go to and the Village. [Editor's Note: The Village refers to Greenwich Village in Manhattan, New York.] So, at that age was when I would experience, but, again, my mother wasn't one to be like, "Oh, yes, go. You can go out with your friends." I still had a curfew. I was still in school, so I wasn't freely able to go. When my friends who were older, Ivan, for example, would be like, "Okay, well, we're going out," and it was a Thursday night, I had school, so I was like, "Okay, I have to go to school." My mother wasn't one, "Oh, yes, go." Of course, I did the sneaking away thing and the lying, "Oh, I'm going be at Ivan's for a while," and we'd go to New York. I experienced it between like fifteen years old, sixteen, New York, the Village, and stuff like that. That was where I started getting a little experience, but, again, in my household school came first. I had to be home at a certain time. It was hard for me to get the full experience, which is why I said after I graduated high school, I didn't go immediately to hair school. I didn't enroll in college. I didn't do any of that. I wanted to just find myself. I had just came out the closet. I had a group of friends.

Then, when I was eighteen, I was already out of high school, one of my best friends at that time in high school was Darius, a friend of mine. After high school, we ended up getting an apartment together, all of us, me, Darius, my girlfriend Roxanne and my girlfriend Cybil. We did the whole, "We're moving out. We're eighteen. We're graduating, so we're moving out." We moved right around the corner from my mom and her mom, so we had a little apartment for a while.

LV: Were you still in Belleville?

JA: Yes, in Belleville. I found out that my friend Darius was bisexual. He was experimenting, what he says, that he was experiencing bisexuality. It was the comfort, because I actually got to, at that age, not only be with Ivan, who I was already experiencing things with, but my friend as well. That was where we were able to go to the clubs, like Colosseum and New York and Limelight, when Limelight was still the church. That's how I started experiencing it at that time, which is why I just wanted to not do anything right after high school. I wanted to enjoy life and see what it was like being out and experience that lifestyle, now that I was out and able to do it freely, that it wasn't a shock. I took that time to really experience the community and learn about what people have went through and the Stonewall Riots and stuff like that. At the same time that I was experiencing and having fun, I was also getting a lot of knowledge. [Editor's Note: On June 28, 1969, New York City Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village that was owned by the Genovese crime family. As the police arrested over a dozen people and

beat one patron, the crowd outside of the Stonewall grew, until patrons and locals began rioting in protest of ongoing police harassment. The unrest continued for the next five days. The Stonewall Uprising galvanized support for the gay rights movement, launching the modern LGBTQ+ movement.]

LV: I have a couple questions.

JA: Go right ahead.

LV: First, what was Colosseum? What is Limelight? When you moved into the apartment with your friends right after high school, was it a one-bedroom apartment?

JA: No, it was a four-bedroom.

LV: Four bedroom.

JA: We each had a bedroom.

LV: That is nice. In Belleville, how were you supporting yourselves?

JA: Well, I always worked. Once I was able to legally work, I guess in high school when they give you the work program, so I already started working there. Then, when I was about seventeen, I started working in Starbucks. I took a training in Starbucks, and it was by Newport Mall. It was in Wayne, New Jersey. It was the training, but it was for a location that was opening, the first location in downtown Newark. I was still in high school. After work, I would go there and go to work, go to training and stuff like that. By the time I graduated, I became full time. I was working at Starbucks in downtown Newark, so I had a job. My friends had a job as well, right after high school, the girls were doing secretary work, the other one was working in a nurse's office, a doctor's office. Then, my friend Darius also was working doing--I don't know what Darius was doing exactly; I think it was retail or something. They weren't the best jobs--we were young--but enough for us to put our share in and have our little apartment. That was one thing, we were very responsible regardless. We would go out to the clubs. I would still go to straight clubs as well, even when I was out, because I had a lot of straight friends. I never separated that life, where it was like, "Okay, now, I'm out of the closet, so it's only gay clubs and this." No, I still continued with the life that I was accustomed to as well. My friends, it was just, "Now, I'm out the closet." That was it. We still went partying. We did our thing, going to clubs, so I had both environments, still very mixed. I was just able to experience the LGBT environment a lot more, without worries and without restrictions of age.

LV: Was it because you were eighteen?

JA: Yes.

LV: What is the Colosseum you were talking about?

JA: Well, Colosseum was a nightclub. I think it was in Plainfield. It was one of the first gay

clubs that I went to. That, to me, still holds a very, very dear place in my heart because I got to experience so much there, friendship, meeting people, drag queens, meeting transgendered people. That was a life-changing experience for me. It was a club that was very upscale. It was beautiful, but it was just so full of love and it was so free. A lot of straight people went there, too, but it was just great. It was beautiful. It was a beautiful experience. Of course, now, it's closed, but that was one of the first clubs. That was an every-weekend thing. I mean, we were a family there, so that was the club to go to. During the weeks and certain days, I was experiencing other clubs as well, but Colosseum was the beginning. I was eighteen. It was eighteen to party, twenty-one to drink. I was already going there when I was seventeen. It was a great environment, but it was a nightclub.

LV: It was the beginning.

JA: It was the beginning, I would say, of the nightclubs, yes. I had done a few clubs before, straight clubs, like I said, that we would sneak into or go with my friends, or teen clubs and stuff like that, but for the LGBT, that was the beginning. That was the beginning of my experience with the clubs. Then, from there, it went to New York and the Village, even though I went to the Village at a young age, fifteen, sixteen, with Ivan, but experiencing the clubs, able to get in, it was after that, after Colosseum. Colosseum was always the first and during until they closed.

Then, Limelight was a church. It was the famous church that was a nightclub. It was a church in the beginning, and it went to become a nightclub. I always say, me and my friends, we were the last generation to see it still as a church. After that, while we were there, they closed it down, and then they opened it up as another club. Limelight was--I guess you could say Colosseum in New Jersey was just more of a club environment--but in New York, the Limelight was where you got to see different environments. People here, the upstairs, the drugs, it was that type of lifestyle, gay, straight, I mean, everybody. It was insane. It was fabulous, but it was where the eye-opener came in, "Wow, this is what's going on," beyond just going to listen to music and having my friends at Colosseum and partying and the gay flag and drag queens and everything. This was a little bit more raw, I guess you could say. It was drugs around. It was people having sex in the hidden rooms, people hanging from the ceilings and water flowing from the hoses and getting wet and bubbles, I mean, everything in one.

LV: Where was Limelight?

JA: In New York City. Limelight was at--let me find out right now. It was in Manhattan. It was in Manhattan on Sixth Avenue, in New York, so it was right there in the heart of Manhattan. [Editor's Note: The Limelight was a nightclub franchise. The Limelight in New York City opened in 1983 in a former Episcopal Church located at the Avenue of the Americas, also known as Sixth Avenue, and West 20th Street.]

LV: Is it closed now?

JA: No, it's still open. I think it's something else, another type of club or environment, but it's not what it was before. Now, it doesn't look like a church in the inside. They covered up a lot of stuff, but when we went, there was still the stained-glass windows and the crucifix hanging up in

one spot. It was a controversy, but it was fabulous.

LV: Was that in the 1980s?

JA: No, that was in the late '90s, early 2000s. The year '99 was when I graduated high school. I was Class of '99, just eighteen. This was me going from that age until I was about twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, when it finally closed down. So, maybe the early, early 2000s was when it was done.

LV: It seems the club scene was a big part of your life ...

JA: Yes.

LV: ... When you were eighteen, nineteen and early twenties.

JA: Yes, a very big part.

LV: I am going to jump a little bit. How you identify right now?

JA: What do you mean?

LV: You mentioned being gay, and then you mentioned meeting transgender people.

JA: Well, me, personally, I identify now as transgender. I came out as trans to my mom. I would say in my mid-twenties was when I told her. Actually, I didn't tell her. I left my purse-- because at that time I was going out, I was very androgynous dressing, very feminine, still in between because I was finding myself. Again, in that scene, I ended up meeting a group of friends that lived here in Newark, which was the first trans girl that I actually was able to have a friendship with because she lived here in Newark, even though, like I said, in Colosseum I saw trans women and trans men. I had met her here in Newark through Ivan and stuff like that, because we had a little group that would go to the clubs back and forth, like a little community of our own that we would go clubbing. I met Maria, which was a trans woman. Through her is where I really experienced the trans experience, so I was curious. She had given me her hormone pills, and I started taking a couple of them. Then, I was already feeling a little weird taking them, because they're the pills, the hormone pills, so I stopped.

LV: How old were you then?

JA: I must have been about nineteen, twenty, around there. Then, I stopped. It was just taking her pills and stopped. She was the one really where I experienced what trans was like and transitioning and stuff like that, so she always looked at me and said, "I know you want to be a girl." She was like, "I can see it. You want to be a girl." She's the one that I came out to first, saying that I wanted to be trans and kind of helped me open my mind to what it was. But then I put that on the back burner, and I just kept enjoying life. It wasn't until my mid-twenties where I made the choice, yes, early twenties to mid-twenties where I made the choice of, "Okay, I want to start transitioning." I had a friend of mine, that was part of our little clique, that also wanted to

transition, so we did it together. We said we'll start together. There was a place in Jersey City, where it was like a little community center where they helped youth, trans youth, to start transitioning, and they would give them the hormones and there was a doctor on site and stuff like that.

LV: Do you remember what it was called?

JA: Oh, my God, I don't remember the name. It was on the corner of Newkirk and I think JFK [Boulevard] or something like that. So, it was a very small, little thing. Now, when we went there, that's where I met my trans mother, Ivie, Ivie Koy Gordon, and she's a big activist. She has GLITS NYC, which is a big community project. She travels all over, to Paris, to New York, to here, to there, spreading knowledge and helping the trans youth and the LGBT community and getting places for these people to stay and stuff like that. That is what she's doing, but that's where I met her.

LV: You met her at the Jersey City center.

JA: Yes, at the Jersey City one, but she had opened up a little spot up down here on Bloomfield Ave. in Newark that was also trying to start something for the LGBT community. She was the one that gave me my first hormone shot, me and my sister, I say now, (Akasha?), and we started together. Then, like I said, I started, but I was hiding. I still remember the date. It was July 22. I don't remember the year, but I was in my early twenties, so I would say like two thousand and something. I was doing it already for like three months, and one day I left my--I guess you could say--purse or little wallet on the table. Of course, my mother grabbed it, and she opened it up, because my mother is nosey. [laughter] She found my hormone pills in there, and she asked me. That's when I sat her down, and I told her, "I'm taking hormones, and I want to start transitioning." It was a little rough for her but not for any bad reasons. It was, again, the fear of, "Oh, my God," how people are out there and worry, the worry as a mother, but, again, she got over it shortly after and that was it. That was my experience of how I started transitioning.

LV: Ivie was the one who you said introduced you.

JA: Ivie is my trans mother. She is the one that actually started me on hormone therapy, through the little communities that she was--they were like little, I don't even know how to say it. I don't want to say like little community outreach programs. It was just like where they started, they started off on a floor of a building renting the space, bringing in the right people and starting a little organization where they were able to help trans youth. That's how I started my hormones.

LV: That is very grassroots. That is amazing.

JA: She started literally from the bottom. Now, she's this huge activist and travelling the world and doing so much and, like I said, she has a big, big organization called GLITS. You can Google it, YouTube, it's amazing.

LV: I am going to press pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED].

LV: We are recording again. Can you say something just so I can check the decibels?

JA: Hi.

LV: That is perfect. At this point in your life, you were in your early twenties and you were starting to think of yourself more as trans.

JA: I've always thought of myself as trans, believe it or not. I just didn't know what trans was. The first thing, the most common thing was coming out of the closet as gay because it's what was out there. It wasn't until I met trans people and really got involved in that trans community that it was like, "Wow, okay, this is where my heart is. This is what I've been feeling this whole time."

LV: Tell me a little bit more about the trans community. Do you have trans mentors? What exactly does that community look like? How is it different than the gay community?

JA: Honestly, from my experience, it's really not much different than the gay community, because I always had the experience where we were just one. I guess maybe it was because of the timeframe that I was in. I know early, early in the gay community, there was division between the trans community and just being gay. A lot of trans weren't accepted in the gay bars and stuff like that, so from history, I know that it always hasn't been a solid community. But at the timeframe that I came out, either way, coming out as gay, and then coming out later on as trans, it was always one community, from the timeframe that I came out. It was not much different as far as the experience.

Now, the lifestyle, absolutely, it's different, because trans people want to live their life as, if they're male to female, they're trying to live their life as a female, and if it's female to male, they're trying to live their life as a male. Still, at that time that I came out, they still identified with the LGBT and proudly, so I didn't really experience a separation at that time when I came out.

LV: Were your gay friends accepting?

JA: They were accepting. I was called the "Doll of the House." I was the Barbie of the house. You know, I was the sister. I was one of the only ones in my clique, besides Maria, the one that I had experienced what trans was, looking at her, how gorgeous she was and beautiful. I couldn't believe that she was trans, but she was a lot older than I was. With my certain clique, I was the only one, besides my sister (Akasha?), but she kind of faded and started doing her own thing. She lived in Jersey City, and I lived here.

LV: When you mentioned your house, were you still talking about those four people who you had a four-bedroom apartment with, or a broader house?

JA: I had lived with my friends from high school; it was only about a year. Then, of course, we

all went our separate ways. When I mean the house community, it was like my gay friends, with Ivan, which is my gay mother, and my trans mother, which was Ivie Koy. She was very much a part of our lives because we would go visit her and go over there, and, you know, my gay friends, so that was our clique. We started like a little house of our own, which was called the "House of the Dolls." It was just pretty much the "Newark Crew," how they would say it. When we would go places, they'd be like, "Oh, there goes the Newark Crew." It was my gay friends and me, [as] really the only trans in that clique right there, but that was my little community, with them.

LV: Maria and Ivie were not part of that Newark community.

JA: Well, Ivie was from Jersey City. I had met her because when I started transitioning, the outreach program was in Jersey City at first. That's how I met her. Maria was down here, but Maria was already established doing nails. She had her job going on as well, so she was part of our clique here in Newark. Out of my gay friends and the trans that I knew, it was her. Again, she worked and she was a little bit older than us, had experienced a lot more. She was fully transitioned, so she had already years in the experience.

LV: After you lived with your high school friends for a year, where did you move?

JA: I moved back home.

LV: You moved to Newark.

JA: Well, no, my mother lived in Belleville at the time. I moved back home.

LV: It was a block away.

JA: [Yes].

LV: Why did you do that?

JA: Well, one of my friends had to move back with their mom to take care of their mom. She had a very bad accident where she broke her clavicle bone and stuff like that and was basically forced to retire. So, she had no choice but to go back. Then, we didn't want to bring another roommate in and we were already on a budget on how everything went. Between us three, it was just going to be too much. Everyone pretty much went back home, I guess you could say.

LV: How long did you live with your mom after you moved back home?

JA: I lived with my mom--I was maybe like nineteen--I lived with her until I was maybe about twenty-four, twenty-five.

LV: That is interesting.

JA: Yes.

LV: You were living in Belleville with your mom and going out to Limelight in New York City.

JA: Yes, yes.

LV: You were going to Newark, going to all of these LGBT places.

JA: Yes, she experienced it with me. She was seeing it. She was seeing the transition slowly.

LV: Tell me more about that.

JA: Like I said, I moved back. I was maybe about nineteen years old. At that point, I was already really experiencing the LGBT community. I was dressing a little bit more flamboyant and experimenting with different dressing, androgynous clothing and very feminine and stuff, so she got to experience that with me. She's always been around to see the transition slowly to the point where I am now, which is full-fledged trans. I still experienced the community and the lifestyle the way I did, but when I was living with my mother, I still had a certain line of respect. I still would come home at a decent time. Of course, I was older, so I could come [home at] three o'clock in the morning and four in the morning, but it wasn't an everyday thing. I still worked. I helped her out with bills, and she worked. I still had that line of respect, still, but my friends were coming over. She loved all my friends. There were times that a van would pick me up full of--basically a little, mini gay parade [laughter]. But my mother loved all my friends. They were all very respectful, so my mother is very in tune with a lot of my friends. They see her like a mom as well. The experience wasn't any different, me living with my mom.

LV: Was your sister living there too at the time?

JA: No, actually, my sister was not living there. My sister had already moved and had her own apartment as well. My sister is very independent and work-oriented. When she moved out, she stood out.

LV: Let me ask you if you have ever experienced obstacles for being trans, if you have ever faced issues with employment, or if your employment prospects have been affected, or if you've faced discrimination in public or things like that.

JA: I've got to say, I mean, I hear a lot of stories and I've heard a lot of stories and what history has shown me, it hasn't been easy for a lot of gay people or trans people, but I've got to say that I am very blessed. I didn't experience any of that. I don't know what it's like to be gay-bashed or excluded from certain things. To this day, I still have a lot of male friends that, like I said, are heterosexual and have their wives. They're very accepting, and I do their hair now and stuff like that. I never experienced that. It was very accepting. I was blessed with friendship and family and people to support me. Again, when it came to the job experience, it was kind of easy for me, because I was always in the hair lifestyle and that kind of environment with hair and makeup and fashion, and so it was very accepting. Especially at the time when I was coming out and transitioning, it wasn't like a shock, the way it was back in the day, so I didn't experience that. I didn't experience that. I've heard stories from other friends of what they experienced and how it

hadn't been easy for certain jobs that they went for, but because of the type of environment that I was in and what I pursued, I didn't go through that. I didn't go through that. It's hard for me to speak on it. I mean, I know that it exists and it happens, but even to this day, the worst thing that will ever happen in my life is to be like, "Oh, my God, that used to be a guy," that's like the worst. I love it. To me, it's not even a problem. I love it because, from my experience, they're not saying it in a negative way. They're just shocked, like, "Oh, my God, look, that was a guy," but, you know, "Oh, my God, you're so beautiful. You're so pretty." I've been very, very blessed when it came to that part. I didn't experience that.

LV: That is wonderful. You were working at Starbucks, you said, and you put on the survey that you went to cosmetology school. When did that happen?

JA: During the time when I was working at Starbucks, around there. I was already out of the closet when I was working at Starbucks. Of course, my manager, then supervisor, at Starbucks was gay, so it was a fun experience. After that, in between working and stuff like that, I was taking my courses back and forth.

LV: When you say out of the closet, do you mean gay?

JA: Yes, out of the closet in the fact that I was relating to being gay, because at that point I still didn't really get the full experience of what the trans community was about.

LV: We were talking a little bit before we took our break about that transition from gay to trans and meeting these trans mentors that you had, Ivie, and befriending (Akasha?) and Maria.

JA: Well, (Akasha?) was my friend from before. She was the one that had told me that she was starting to transition.

LV: She told you first.

JA: Yes, she's the one who told me, "I took a hormone shot." At that time, I already knew Maria and stuff like that, I was already in my twenties, my early twenties, and that was when I decided to make the decision to really do it and I went with her.

LV: How did you feel when she told you that?

JA: I was happy for her and proud and excited and nervous at the same time because I knew, okay, this is my chance to do it with her and experience it with her because she already had a foot in the door to start transitioning.

LV: A foot in the door, did you all go to clinics?

JA: Yes, yes, she was already doing it. She was already into her, I think like second hormone shot, so she was already into that. Before that, she was already experiencing it. She was going there and figuring out, "Okay, what was going on? When am I going to start?" There is a whole process before, doctors and checking you and stuff like that. That's what I mean by having a foot

in the door. She was already in the process, so when she told me, she was already two hormone shots in. I just took advantage of it and went with her when she went for her next shot.

LV: That was in Jersey City.

JA: Yes.

LV: You got your shot then and there.

JA: Actually, when I went, I filled out the paperwork, had to see a doctor there that was on staff. I made an appointment, but because that organization was a little travelling organization, they would come to Newark. They would do it in Jersey City. They would do it in certain parts of New York and stuff like that. It was like a travelling organization to help.

LV: This was Ivie's organization.

JA: Yes, Ivie. When I took my first shot, it was actually when she was in Newark. I made the appointment. The appointment was set, and it was for here in Newark.

LV: Did she work with doctors?

JA: Yes, yes, yes, she's always worked and stuff like that, so, like I said, it was a little organization and a non-profit for the trans community.

LV: Yes, that's really interesting. My experience was so different and many trans experiences are very different because they had people who had to live as their gender for a year before they could have hormones, but you didn't experience anything like that, did you?

JA: No, no.

LV: It was easier.

JA: It was, "I'm ready to transition," and, "Okay, let's do the paperwork. Let's get you your physical. Here you go, happy birthday, your first shot." [laughter] That's exactly what she told me. When she gave me my shot, she cried because she was, you know, I guess it was a touching experience for her as well to be able to help the younger generation. She wished me a happy birthday, and that was it.

LV: Ivie is one of your mentors.

JA: She is my trans mother.

LV: She is your trans mother.

JA: She is my trans mother and the only mentor in the trans [community]. Maria was my friend and I got to experience the beauty part and the shopping and the feminine because she was

already transitioned, but Ivie was the one, Koy--we call her Koy--Koy was the one that I experienced everything with. I would go to her house; we would do Sunday dinners, family and friends and gay community and her trans daughters. She has trans daughters scattered all over the world, I mean, all over. From here to Amsterdam to Paris, she has a wide range of daughters, trans daughters.

LV: How did you meet her?

JA: It was through Akasha, when I went to do my transition. She was the one that gave me my hormone shot. She was the one with the little organization starting to help the trans youth. I ended up building a friendship with her from going, and she said, "I'm going to adopt you as my daughter." She's like, "You and Akasha are my daughters," and that's how it started. We would go over there with her husband, food, Thanksgiving. I was experiencing a different sense of the trans community that I was like, "Wow, it's just like a normal lifestyle. She's just living her life as a woman." She has her fiancé. There's gay friends, there's straight friends, family, all acceptance. My mother met her. She would come to my house. My mother loves her. Yes, she is my trans mom. She's my mom. She's my mentor. She's the one that told me about the streets and what these girls do, because a lot of experiences are different. You've got a lot of girls that go into prostitution to be able to afford their hormones or the quick way, so they just want to get their breasts done and their bodies done. They don't want to wait; that costs money. She kind of steered me into that direction of what not to do and how to be patient, what to expect, and what not to expect. She was and is a beautiful person and my mentor, and she's my trans mom.

LV: She steered you into how to be patient.

JA: Yes, steered me in how to be patient and how to be healthy and safe, what to look forward to, as far as fetishes, how people have, how these men, you know, men and stuff like that, so she steered me to give me knowledge. It's not only about what you see out there; it's also a certain lifestyle of how it's done. Of course, what people promote out there, what people say is, "Oh, all trans are out there selling their bodies and this and that to get this," but it wasn't like that. There is variety in everything. In every community, there's a variety. She just gave me the heads-up on how to go about it in a better way, instead of taking the quick route and falling into what a lot of trans women fall into, which is prostitution and drugs, you know, the crazy lifestyle of the club scenes to pick up men to be able to pay for their hormones or surgeries. So, I was blessed with her.

LV: Yes, it sounds like a blessing.

JA: I was blessed with her. It was more, "If you're going to live your life as a woman, it doesn't mean a trans woman, it's just a woman, like any other woman." You find yourself a good man, focus on your studies and work and health and being a good person. It helped me out a lot, because I wasn't one to focus on, "Well, I want to meet a guy for this or meet a guy for that." I was working, and I had graduated from cosmetology school. I started working at a salon. I was just in the beginning of my transition, and I was looking pretty and my hair. I was able to dress and I would say passable, and that's how I ended up meeting my fiancé. I've been with him now nine years.

LV: Wow, nine years.

JA: We just got engaged this December.

LV: Congratulations.

JA: Thank you.

LV: You met him at twenty-nine.

JA: I met him at, yes, twenty-nine. I was twenty-nine already. I was already maybe about three years into transitioning and into hormones at a low dosage of hormones because they wanted to gradually put me in, you know, get me up to the dosage that I needed. So, yes, I actually met him on May 27th, on my sister's birthday. I was coming out of work and I went to the store. I was dressed for work, so I had a pretty dress on. My hair was done pretty, so it was nice that I had met him looking pretty and not crazy because sometimes I work with hairstyling and stuff like that. You look crazy; you put your hair up in a bun. I had an event to do after work for prom and I had a client that I had to go to, so I stopped at the store and that's where I met him.

LV: What store?

JA: The corner store, a little bodega store. I was leaving work, here in Bloomfield where I was working.

LV: In the salon.

JA: Yes, in the salon, and heading towards the client, which lived in North Newark but going toward Heller Parkway. It's the Forest Hills section, so on the route down, I stopped down at the little corner store to just grab a few things.

LV: How did that connection happen?

JA: He was in there, and he was buying some stuff. I looked, and I made a comment on what he was buying. He looked at me with these wide eyes, and I was like, "Uh oh," you know, you get a little nervous. So, I didn't say nothing. Then, I walked out of the store, walked to my car. Then, I'm in the car just like flipping through the stuff, organizing the stuff that I bought really quick, and turned on the car. I hear a knock on my window, and when I looked, it was him. I kind of got paranoid. I was like, "Oh, my God, he's knocking on my window. What is it?" Psycho, crazy, transphobe, you know, you think a million things. He was just like, "Your dress is pinched in the door," and I was like, "Oh, okay." I opened the door, and I lowered the window. I was like, "Thank you," and he gave me his number. He was like, "I think you're beautiful." He was like, "I've seen you around a few times, and I always thought you were beautiful." So, I took the number and went. I drove off to my client, but I texted him immediately. I told him, I said, "Listen, I'm flattered, but I just want to let you know I'm trans." He was like, "Oh, I know," and that was the beginning. Here we are nine years later. [laughter]

LV: That is like a movie.

JA: Yes, yes, and here we are nine years later.

LV: Do you have a lot of queer and trans friends? It sounds like you do.

JA: Yes, yes, I do.

LV: One thing I was curious about, you mentioned that at Colosseum or maybe it was just more broadly in the LGBT life, you know trans women. Are there a lot of trans men in your life?

JA: Believe it or not, there are a few trans men that I know, that I can say that I have connections with, that I communicate with and talk to, and when I see them, if I happen to be at an event or a club that we go to and I see them there, that I'm close with. But the one that really opened up my eyes to the trans man experience was my cousin Nate. I was able to really see everything because people would think, "Oh, okay, transition from female to male and male to female, it's the same thing." It is not the same thing. I feel like it's a lot easier for us to transition and less invasive than what it is for a trans man to transition. I experienced that with my cousin Nate.

LV: What do you mean less invasive?

JA: Well, again, it's from the experience that I've seen and witnessed with my cousin Nate. A lot of the trans men that I do know have already transitioned and done it, so even I was still a little, I guess you could say, naive to it. I thought, "Okay, they could take their testosterone shots and remove the breasts and that's it," but watching him experience it, it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. It was a lot, it was a lot. For me, with my experience, I thought it would be the same, like, "Okay, they take their hormones, they transition," like how we start to get feminized and, obviously besides the voice--the voice is a tricky thing--but I was like, "Okay, it would be the same thing." Then, when I see him transition, I was like, "His voice is getting deeper and stuff," so I was like, "Wow, okay, it's pretty similar." When it came to the surgeries and stuff like that and just the process, I was like, "Wow, it's not the same. It's a little bit more complex." For us as trans women, we get the implants. It's just a bag they stuff under your skin. You get a little laser hair removal and a little surgery here and there, if you want to just widen out the hips, or for a lot of the trans community, which is the silicon, the illegal injections, which I experienced. I've done them.

LV: Did you say illegal or legal?

JA: Illegal, technically, because you have crazy people out there that will inject anything into you. When I saw his transition, it was a lot more invasive, I would say, because, for us, it's like as trans women, we have the male organ, they work with that to create, but for trans men, they have to take pieces from somewhere to be able to reconstruct and it's in so many processes and layers of how to get it done. For us, it's a one surgery, you know, to remove the male genitalia. It's just you remove it, slice, dice, [laughter] and create a vagina. For a trans men, it's so much

more steps to go through and what they've got to do to create, so it was not what I was expecting. It was not what I was expecting. I was so proud of him for the journey that he took and just mesmerized with everything that he went through. I was just amazed and proud because he went full force, and he's so involved in it, but the surgeries and the transition, it's a lot different than what us as trans women experience. Our surgery, okay, we get our breast implants. Two, three hours, they send us home. We get our bottom surgery. We're in the hospital for a while, and you go home and it's done. With the transition from female to male, it's a few back-to-back, and what you go through, it wasn't what I was expecting it to be. I was still naive to that. I was like, "Oh, okay, they'll take a hormone shot just like we do, and they start looking like a guy," and it's not, it's not. It's a lot more to it. I'm very, very proud of him.

LV: Do you want to take a break?

JA: No.

LV: I have a question. You said that you haven't faced discrimination in employment or public.

JA: No, no.

LV: Tell me about healthcare and what that has been like. You mentioned an illegal market out there for trans women.

JA: It's difficult, in a sense. I, again, have been blessed and lucky to have had people that I know in so many different environments of work that were able to help me out, like, "Okay, look, you've been transitioning for quite some time, just get the paperwork from Callen-Lorde and we'll continue the same format that you're on. Of course, every once in a while, go see an endocrinologist just to see your levels," and stuff like that. So, I've been lucky. I'm on welfare for the Medicaid. My Medicaid covers my hormones, so I'm able to get them. My friend works for a doctor's office who was willing to take me, so I've been pretty okay with it. I have a little experience, when I was going from New York to here, that was just more of not being comfortable, "Ah, I've got to drive down to New York," because I hated catching the trains because then I got to catch a train back. I'm just lazy like that. [laughter] I would rather just drive, get there, and come back. That was the only little hurdle I had to go through, which was just finding the doctor to take me here in New Jersey, but I didn't really have a bad experience with it. I'm lucky that my Medicaid covers it, and I'm able to get my hormones. So, for me, it's been an easy experience as far as that, but I have seen a lot of my girlfriends that live in New York that were still struggling to get the hormones, or the places are backed up and booked, or you can't get an appointment, or there are certain doctors that don't want to take you. So, I've heard of other experiences, but me, personally, I haven't. I didn't experience that.

LV: Have you always been on Medicaid, since you have been using trans-related healthcare?

JA: Yes, when I knew that I was going to start transitioning, that was the route that I needed to go to. Since I'm a freelance hairdresser, I don't have insurance or nothing like that. It was just easier for me to get on the welfare for that, just to cover the Medicaid and for health and stuff like that.

LV: That is great that Medicaid does cover it.

JA: Yes, yes. I had a little loophole. One of the insurances wasn't covering it, but because, again, due to the industry that I work in with hair, I meet a lot of women that work in different environments, so I had a little connection with someone in the healthcare system that told me, "Listen, switch from this insurance to this one because they cover it." That's what I did, and I was able to get it covered because some insurance don't cover it, even on Medicaid. I was able to switch and get a little tip on the side, and that's what I did.

LV: Through talking to people, you said, "They're not covering it. Can someone?"

JA: My girlfriend was like, "Listen, switch to this. I've dealt with a few people that have wanted hormones or their Medicaid wasn't covering it or insurance, so switch to this one and they'll be able to cover it."

LV: Since you went to cosmetology school in your mid-twenties, until now have you been working steadily as a freelance cosmetologist?

JA: Well, I've worked in a few salons in between, just to do the salon experience because I love the salon experience, being there. I've pretty much always been freelance and have such a big clientele, so it's easier for me to work from home until one day I'm able to open up my own business.

LV: Do you have a lot of clients from the LGBTQ community?

JA: Yes, yes.

LV: And from the straight community?

JA: Yes.

LV: Are most of your clients Latinx?

JA: When it comes to my clients, no, I have a big mixture.

LV: A big mix.

JA: Yes, I have a big mix, black, Asian, Middle Eastern, white American, Latino. It's pretty broad.

LV: When did you move to Bloomfield and why?

JA: I always lived in Belleville. I had an apartment and I had lived with my sister at one point, me and my sister shared an apartment together, with my fiancé, with my husband. Then, she started dating and then she was with her boyfriend, which is her husband now, the father of her

children, and I was already with him, so we just split separate ways. She was already dating and it was getting serious, so it was just easy. I would have stayed in Belleville, but I found an apartment in Bloomfield here, which I loved. It was just a coincidence, and I've been here ever since. It was not for any particular reason. I just wanted to stay within this area. I didn't want to go back to North Newark, not for any specific reason or anything. I wanted to stay in this area because of accessibility and being able to get to places that I need to get to that are close to here, or my clientele, the range of clientele, just whatever is easier to get to, like the stores. I always just wanted to stay within this area, so it really didn't matter if it was Belleville or Bloomfield or even North Newark, right there where it's borderline. It was just wanting to be in that area. It was nothing specific.

LV: Is your fiancé also Puerto Rican?

JA: He's Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian.

LV: Now, tell me a little bit about Latinidad. First of all, what is your racial identity? How do you identify racially?

JA: Puerto Rican.

LV: Culturally as Puerto Rican?

JA: [Yes].

LV: In terms of race, do you identify as ...

JA: Hispanic, I'll say Hispanic, because there's different versions of Hispanic. You can be Mexican, you can be, you know, so, generally, it's Hispanic but Puerto Rican.

LV: On the census, they have you say Hispanic or not Hispanic, and then they say white, black, mestizo, Amerindian. What do you say?

JA: I put Hispanic. If they say other and if Hispanic isn't there, I'll put other and I'll put Puerto Rican.

LV: Have you ever been to Puerto Rico?

JA: Yes.

LV: When did you go?

JA: The last time I went was with Ivan--well, actually, to meet Ivan there. His mom passed away. They had the funeral services in Puerto Rico, and we went there. We went there for the first week to do the funeral arrangements and stuff like that and just be supportive, and then we took him away and we did a week of just, you know, experiencing Puerto Rico and having a good time because his mom had passed away.

LV: Yes. How long ago was that?

JA: That was a few years ago. I haven't been to Puerto Rico since. It's been a few years.

LV: Did you go before that?

JA: Oh, yes, I went a few times before with family.

LV: Where do you go when you are travelling in Puerto Rico?

JA: Well, when you're travelling in Puerto Rico, you go to visit family, I mean, you can go and stay in the resort in San Juan, but being Puerto Rican, you have family there, so you stay with family. Pretty much, it depends on which family member I was visiting. I have family all over Puerto Rico in different parts of the island. But the last time I went, I saw a few of my family members, but it was more so I was there for a specific reason with Ivan to support him and then the last week just to do a friend thing and it was just me and Ivan and my two other gay friends.

LV: That's nice.

JA: We experienced the gay life out there, the LGBT life out there, and it was fabulous. [laughter] Yes, we took advantage of experiencing outside and not visiting family. We went for a purpose. We went to support him for the funeral and to be there for him that first week and stuff like that, and the last week, we went and stayed at my friend's house. He had a house there.

LV: What is the Puerto Rican gay scene like?

JA: Oh, it's amazing. It really is. It's amazing. It's not much different than down here. The drag queens, the trans, the gays, the club scene, it's just a tropical feel to it. You'll have a club right in front of the beach. That's the only difference. It's just a tropical feeling.

LV: How is the music?

JA: The music is the same, house music, club music, techno music, freestyle music, hip-hop, of course, your Spanish music.

LV: Reggaetón?

JA: Yes, everything, salsa, merengue, bachata.

LV: Do you like dancing to all of that?

JA: Yes, I love it. I love it. I love dancing to any music. [laughter]

LV: How would you describe your interactions with other racial communities, like African American communities, in the States? Ivie, is she African American?

JA: She's African American. Again, from my experience, it's not much of a difference, except culturally certain things, but it's not much of a difference. It's the same thing, family, food, music, love. It's not much of a difference, to be honest with you. I know a lot of black people and I know a lot white people, and it's really the same thing. I have a lot of white friends as well, and it's all pretty much the same. It's just different cultural experiences, but it's all the same, food, family, friendship, love and togetherness. It's not really much of a difference, from my experience.

LV: When you were building your own home, your own apartment, do you try to include a lot of things that remind you of your upbringing?

JA: Yes, I mean, well, the food is always one thing. It ties you to your culture.

LV: What kind of food?

JA: Of course, my Latin food, my rice and beans and fried food and everything that can possibly tie you. I make Italian food and I'll make Mexican dishes, so it's just depending. When it comes to my personal culture, yes, it's very much alive here when it comes to food and family and music and stuff like that. Other than that, it's pretty normal. I just live life normally.

LV: What about your class identity? Do you have any particular identity in terms of class, like working class, upper class?

JA: I would say we've always been middle class. My mother always tried her best, as well as my father, and our family, we've always been, from my background, with both sides of my family, they've always worked. They've always tried to do better, so I would consider ourselves middle class. We've had hard times, of course, but blessed to say that we've never been so down and out like other people. We've always maintained a structured pattern of working and working hard for what you want or need and always trying to strive for something better and not what you might see around and what people go through. There's always an option.

LV: You said on the survey your dad worked in, was it in construction or shipping and handling?

JA: Yes, my father has always worked in factory work, but he's always worked all different types of jobs, wherever he can do or make extra money, he's done it, but he's always been in that business of shipping and handling, and stuff like that, factory work.

LV: What about your mother? You said she was a stay-at-home mom when you were growing up.

JA: Yes, just when we were growing up. Then, when we were going to school, my mother did her thing, she went to training for work. There was a training course, and then she ended up working and getting a job at the Essex County Division of Welfare. She was there twenty-eight years and retired. It wasn't always easy. We struggled, but my mother always made sure that we

had what we needed first before she did, us growing up. She made a lot of sacrifices, dropping us off to school, then walking from our school all the way to wherever she had to go, before she had a car and stuff, and she made it. She completed her training, and she got the job and was there all those years and kept building up, got herself a car and apartments, bigger apartments, and able to afford [it]. She's definitely a role model.

LV: She has had to make a lot of sacrifices.

JA: Yes, yes, but we've always had what we needed. We don't remember the struggle but growing up and hearing the stories or remembering certain things like, "Wow, *mami*, you used to drop us off to school, you didn't have a car. You used to walk all that?" So, yes, but we were blessed. My father was always a part of our lives and was always there to help with anything we needed if he could. My father remarried my stepmother, and she's like another mother to us. They all get along great and she's been another mother figure to us, growing up.

LV: Have you ever had any negative encounters with police or other authority figures?

JA: No, a lot of my family members are police officers or in law enforcement, so I've been pretty lucky. I mean, of course, I've gotten pulled over once or twice, but throw a name and be like, "Oh, I'm So-and-So's niece," and they're like, "Okay, well, make sure you get this light fixed," but I've never experienced any bad things. A lot of my clients, their husbands are police officers as well, so I know a lot of cops and police officers. I've never had any bad experiences of being pulled over or being mis-gendered, even when I give them [my ID], because my ID still says male. I'm still in the transition of doing all that, and they respect who they see in front of them. I've never experienced any negative things.

LV: That is amazing, even when your ID says something different.

JA: Yes, yes, my name is still under my biological name because I'm still in the transition, which Nate is the one helping me with. It's just been so much going on that I've just put that specific thing on the backburner. They address me as "ma'am." Even if I don't know the police officer, they've been really kind.

LV: Do you think that you have been lucky in comparison to other trans people?

JA: Yes, I would just say that I've been lucky, or I've just happened to come around good people, that whatever experience I went through happened to be just good people.

LV: Have you ever been forced to move homes?

JA: Nope. I've rented apartments with no problem. Being trans, it's never been an issue.

LV: How about for money reasons?

JA: No, no, I've always been able to show what I needed to show to be able to get what I needed to get as far as apartments or pay stubs or stuff like that. Even when I got this apartment here, or

even the other one before this one, a couple years ago when I lived in Belleville, I explained to them, "I'm a freelance cosmetologist. My fiancé works," and that was it. I never really experienced any hardship of struggling, like, "Oh, how am I going to get this? How am I going to get this apartment? They're going to give me an issue." No, I mean, like I said, I've been here going on five years.

LV: That is great. I think I have some questions left, but maybe start wrapping it up. You did mention on the survey that you are very active in LGBT organizations to this day, politically speaking, right?

JA: Yes.

LV: Tell me all about that.

JA: Well, I'm not going to toot my own horn and say that I've gone out of my way to look for ways to be able to protest or to be a part of the rallies or organizations or anything like that. I just know so many people that they, "Jenny, listen, we're doing this here," so, okay, I'm there. "Jen, we're doing something here for a speaker, an outreach program. Will you be able to attend?" I'm there. "We're doing a fundraiser for this," I'm there. "There's something going on in downtown Newark for LGBT to protest, they killed someone, a trans. Would you be able to be there to support?" I'm there. Any type of involvement that I can be in, I'm a part of. I'm just lucky that I know so many people that they give me the heads up, "Jenny, this is going on down here," or, "We're doing an organization here or a fundraiser here, or someone passed away, or can you be a part of this or help out with this or donate with this or volunteer for that or put your views in on this or be a speaker here," and that's how it is. I'm always willing and ready and able to share my experience or help out in any possible way I can, not only with my Latin community, but my LGBT community as well.

LV: Is this in New Jersey and New York City?

JA: Yes, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, wherever it's going on. If I can make it, I'm there.

LV: How do you find out about these events?

JA: So many people that I know.

LV: Do they tell you by texting or Facebook?

JA: Oh, they'll call me, or they'll reach out to me, or message me, or send me a text, whichever way is easy at that moment for them to reach out to me. I'm pretty much always available. I pick up my phone. I'm always looking at my messages and so they reach out to me, and if I'm able to help in any possible way, I'm there, whether it's support or even just lending an ear to listen, you know, whatever I can do.

LV: Do you have daughters of your own?

JA: Yes, I do.

LV: Tell me about them.

JA: Let me see how many I have. I have my daughter Star. I have my daughter Candela. I have two new daughters, (Sania?) and Chanel. I try not to get too crazy with collecting the daughters because you can't help but feel like a motherly feeling toward them, especially when they're young and you want to give them advice and steer them the right way. My daughter Star, she lives in New York. She's doing great. She has her own eyelash business and extensions, and she's worked on all types of people and even some celebrities. Then, my daughter Candela, she's a working girl. She works in New York, and she's doing good, her apartment and stuff like that. Then, I have my two daughters, (Sania?) and Chanel, and they're young. They're just out of high school. They're experiencing the little experiences of the nightlife and going out, so I just try to give them the same advice that my trans mother gave me and steer them in the right direction.

LV: How did you meet them, all of them?

JA: Star, I met when we would go out. This was years ago, of course, through my friends through the Newark clique, how I said, with us going out and the little clique. She was part of that. After I started transitioning, I started putting her onto transition the same way. I introduced her to the right people, and she started. She's been a part of my life ever since, over ten years.

LV: What about your other daughters?

JA: Candela, I've known her when she was a boy. She was part of the clique, and she asked, she wanted to start transitioning. She always says, "I looked up to you and how you did it and how you started and where you went," and she started. At that time when she started, it was easier for her to go to Callen-Lorde and stuff like that, so she went that route. Now, my two daughters, because they're younger, so they dress up, and they just look like girls, their pretty features and stuff like that. Now, they're starting to get the information to actually start transitioning, with the hormones and stuff like that. They're doing okay. They're good. They're in school, and they come out of school and their coursework and playtime and stuff. They're still young.

LV: That is nice.

JA: They call me for advice or they call me if something is going on, so we're pretty much in tune with each other and I always stay involved. But then I have my sisters, I have my girlfriend, you know, which she is my sister Natalie, my sister (Melanie?), we're all in just the same kind of boat and working and living our lives, so I have a few sisters, as well.

LV: Are they around the same age as you?

JA: Yes, around the same age as me, maybe give or take a few years younger. (Melanie?) is maybe two years, three years younger than me. Natalie is maybe two, three years younger than me. Natalie is a makeup artist, and she's also a performer at nighttime. She does shows.

(Melanie?) is just pretty much like me. She lives her life as a woman. She has her apartment. She works in the salon industry as well, but she's a braider.

LV: You're not a braider.

JA: No, I braid as well too, but that's her. She has her business in the salon with braiding all the guys and stuff like that. She's amazing with the braiding. It's insane the artwork she does on the hair with the braids.

LV: You do dyeing and cutting.

JA: Everything, dyeing, cutting, extensions, everything. Weddings, proms, makeup, everything.

LV: Interesting. I have some concluding questions.

JA: Perfect.

LV: What have been some of the most important events and experiences in your life, as a woman, a trans woman, a Puerto Rican, a Latina, a person?

JA: As a person, it's just been the experience of experiencing other people and trying to accept them for the stuff that they're going through or issues that they have or just person to person, that experience like that, excluding being trans, excluding being a woman, just a human. I'm very blessed with that as far as being able to experience people in different genres and their lifestyles and what they go through, good, bad. That's always been something that I cherish, that I get to experience so many different people.

As a woman, I'm just grateful to have the women that I have around me to be a role model for me to be a woman or to know what a woman is, whether it's my trans mother, my mother, my sister, my aunts, my grandmothers, my stepmom, the experience of what it is to be a woman. Being a trans woman, the experience that I would say that I'm blessed to have is just that I've been able to go through this experience and not experience bad things and hard stuff that I know other people have [gone] through. It's been a pretty easy road for me and I'm blessed with that, to have the surroundings that I have, with the trans girls that I do know, the experiences that I've had, to be able to see the good and the bad and know which direction I wanted to go with, with my personal life, as being a trans woman, and just the knowledge that I've been able to spread to straight women and straight men and other trans women and stuff like that. I've just been able to share my experience, as being just trans, if I'm going to break it down to being just trans, it's been a blessing, it is. It's been a blessing.

Being Latina is just the cherry on the cake, to be honest with you. I love it. I love my culture. I love my community. I love the fact that I can be a trans, I can be a woman, I can be a person, and I can be Latina and be accepted in that community by Latinas and all other types of people. When it comes to my Latin roots, I just love it, the culture, the sense of family, the sense of structure, the strength of these women, these Latina women, these strong women from generation to generation that have fought to get to where they need to get and put it in your head, "You can

do it on your own. You don't need a man," or, "You don't need this," or don't rely on just, "Oh, well, I can't do this because of that." There's always an option. When it comes to that part of being Latin, it's just the strength and the love that comes with it. It's just empowerment, like you can do it. You fall down, pick yourself back up. If you can't make something out of this, find out what is in the damn cabinet and make something else. If life threw you this, make something out of it with this. Just everything that comes with it, like I said, the love, the support, and seeing the pride and joy of not only being LGBT and being trans or being anything in that specific community, but just the fact of embracing being Latin and being in that community and being accepted not only by your LGBT community, but being accepted by your Latin community. Latinos, when it comes to that, are very, very accepting. So, I'm very proud to be all of the above. I'm very proud to have come out of the closet as a gay boy and learned where I wanted to be and be the trans woman that I am now. I'm extremely proud of the women that surround me, as well as the men that have supported me. I'm extremely proud to be a Puerto Rican trans woman in this day and age. I'm very lucky and I'm very blessed. It's been a wonderful experience, and it's continuing to be a wonderful experience.

LV: Building from that, are there any things you have witnessed or experienced that were formative in shaping who you are, how you define yourself, your worldview, or your life's trajectory?

JA: Yes, it all boils down to my mother. That's the one answer I can give you. It's my mother. Just seeing what my mother and my grandmother have done. My grandmother lived a little bit of a rough life down here and stuff, but she always managed to have everything for her six kids, the same thing with my grandmother on my father's side. To narrow it all down, my mother. Every experience that I've been through and experienced and went through and continue to go through, I always look back to her. What would my mother do? How she handled herself, everything, any part or aspect of my life, it's always been my mother. It's because of her, every experience I went through, whether it's what's out on the streets, what to expect. It's always been my mother. Everything points to my mom, everything from political views to religious views, to being a strong person, to just every possible thing that I can say of what I've experienced and how I experienced it and how I've taken it and accepted it to deal with certain experiences, is because of my mother. It's because of what she's instilled in me and how she's raised me to be able to deal with anything that comes in my life, any direction. It's my mother. I can't say anything else besides that; it really is. With my views, with how I look at things, with how I handle things, with how I want to handle things, how I want to go about things, if I want this or what do I want to do to achieve this, or how can I deal with a problem or sadness or anger, it always has been my mother that I think of, what she has instilled in me to deal with what I deal with every day in my life. It's always been her.

LV: She is your guiding light.

JA: She is my everything. She is my everything, my biggest fan, my number one supporter. Everything that is in me is her and how I deal with life is because of her. It's no credit to no one else. It's her, it really is.

LV: That is amazing. I hope she gets to hear this one day.

JA: I hope so, too. It's her.

LV: Two last concluding questions, you said your political views in the survey. We did not really touch on that.

JA: I would say a Democrat, but I'm not really one into politics. I [think] what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong and how I see it is how I want to project it. If I feel something is wrong, I'll speak on it. If I'm able to change somebody else's mind on something, I'm there to give them the explanation of how I see certain things in politics, as well as religion. Politics isn't something that's a number one thing [for] me. It's always changing, and if you go into it too deep, you lose friendships over it. You go crazy about trying to put your view. My main thing when it comes to politics is respect everyone's decision to do whatever and try to make a change for what you believe in. That's the only way you can go. I'm not going to go out there, I'm not a fan of president Trump, but I'm not going to go out there and freaking hold signs and say, well this, this and that, or go and burn buildings because I hate him, or light myself on fire. It makes no sense to me. I just deal with it and say what I feel I think is right and wrong. If it happens to be a conversation, a political conversation with someone, I always go into it with respect and try to make them understand what I see, as well as me trying to understand their point of view. When it comes to politics, I don't put too much time into that, to waste my time with that.

LV: Do you vote?

JA: I have voted a few times. I've got to say I get lazy sometimes, with so much going on. Then, I'm like, "Okay, I'll go tomorrow. I'll go this," and the polls close. It's like, "Shit, you can't go," but any chance that I get to, I vote.

LV: Is there anything you would like your Latinx community to know?

JA: I just want them to know that they're freaking awesome. My Latin community is amazing. They're accepting. I love them. Keep doing what they're doing, in terms of history and to where we're at now. I mean, you look at it on the TV, and you look at it everywhere. Puerto Ricans are everywhere, and Latinos are everything. Not just Puerto Ricans, but Latino as a whole are everywhere, and they're doing great things. They're doing great things. Even here in Newark, you know, they have Taino's, which is a big place. It's a restaurant, but they have an organization where they host things. They've done wonderful things for Puerto Rico, with the hurricane, as well as other organizations in the Latin community, for Latin people, food, furniture, donations, fundraisers, fundraisers for cancer and stuff like that. It's not only just the Latin community, but they spread out, pretty much a wide range. As far as my Latin community, I just want to say I love them. I'm proud to be a trans Latina. I am proud to be the person that I am in this day and age, and I'm just happy. I can't be any more prouder of being Latina and just seeing what my Latin community does, which is a lot. We're a wide range, and we do a lot of good things. I hope everyone can see it.

LV: Is there anything you would like the LGBTQ community to know?

JA: That I love them, I know their struggle. I know it's not easy. I know it can be hard. I just want them to know: love themselves. It's very, very crucial to spread love in the right way, get their message across the right way. Be proud of who we are as a community and as a person, and just keep fighting the fight. We're all beautiful people. The LGBT community is just a beautiful community, it really, really is. I'm proud to be a part of it. I will continue to be a part of it. I will always associate and do anything that I can for my community. Like I said, I just want them to know that I love them and to keep rocking on, and love wins and pride is everything in every aspect. We're a strong community. We're beautiful. God makes no mistakes, and this is what it is. Be proud.

LV: Are you currently religious?

JA: I guess I'm more spiritual than religious. Do you know what I mean? I pray, and I believe in my God. I believe in stuff like that, but I wouldn't say religious to the fact where I'm reading a Bible every day or I'm in church twenty-four/seven. But do I have God in my house? Absolutely. That's why I say I'm more spiritual than religious.

LV: Do you go to church?

JA: Yes, I go to church every chance I get, like on Easter and stuff. It's not the best. Or if I'm feeling down, I'll go to church and just say a prayer and stuff like that, or pass by and just do a little visit and pray.

LV: Do you go to a queer church?

JA: I've been to a church where they accept LGBT community. I don't like to just limit myself to, "Okay, I'm going to go to a church where it's just LGBT," or, "I'm going to go to a church that's just Christian or Catholic." I try to just keep it open, where everyone is accepted. They have one in Belleville, where it's a little church, and they have the gay flag out there proudly.

LV: What is it called?

JA: I don't know the name of the church. It's on Washington Avenue; you can't miss it. It's the only little church with a gay flag, bright, shining, and flowing in the wind. I've also gone to regular churches like St. Michael's, and they've accepted me walking, they're like nothing. I've just baptized my goddaughter last year, and that was in the cathedral. I was dressed up and looking beautiful and presented myself as her godmother and they accepted it a hundred percent. I don't limit myself to just a specific thing. As far as going to a specific church, I have a few churches I go to. I stop by and say a prayer. That's how it is, nothing specific. Nothing in my life is specific. I try to keep an open mind and an open eye and an open range and different experiences. If it's not good, I'll let it be known.

LV: For the last question, do you have any specific or favorite place in New Jersey where you feel like you can be the most trans and the most Latina at the same time?

JA: Everywhere in New Jersey. Everywhere in the world, I feel like that. Wherever I go, I feel

like that. There is no specific place. I feel like that in my house. I feel like that when I step outside. I feel like that when I'm in family functions, events. I feel like that twenty-four/seven. I am proud, and I feel great every single time. Whether I'm in my house or walk out of my house, it doesn't matter where I'm at; I feel that pride of being a LGBT trans Latina all day every day, yes.

LV: Is there anything else you want to say?

JA: No, I feel like I've said pretty much everything I need to say. The only thing I want to say is that, everybody, just love one another and respect one another. It would be an easier world to live in. It really would.

LV: Yes, it would.

JA: Yes, I believe so. If you just respect, agree to disagree, and move on, I think this world would be a lot easier because that's how I deal with it. I've got a say, with just dealing with it in my personal way, it's worked for me.

LV: How you deal with what?

JA: Anything. If someone doesn't agree with something or my lifestyle or religious views or political views, I handle it with respect. I handle it with, okay, we agree to disagree, and we move on. That's how I live my life, and it's worked to this day. I've lost no friendships. I have no ill will with anyone, and people that are completely different that even have shocked me, that believe something, have met me and said, "Okay, you've changed my way of thinking. I still believe x, y, and z, but you've made it easier for me to just see you and see you as a person and not anything else." That's how I live my life. Love and respect, that's my biggest message, love one another, respect one another.

LV: That is great. I agree.

JA: Yes.

LV: Well, thank you.

JA: Thank you, Leo. It's been great.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

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