

## Interview with Bishop Rawls Part 1

Monique:

Well excellent. So I've got a script that I always give at the start of the interview. I'm going to do that and then I'm just going to start it.

Bishop:

Sure.

Monique:

And at any point you want to take a pause we can do that.

Bishop:

Okay.

Monique:

I record on three devices simultaneously. So excuse the variety of technology. I'm paranoid. So, let's begin recording.

Monique:

My name is Monique Moultrie and today is June 1, 2018. And I'm here with Bishop Rawls. We're here to conduct an oral history for the LGB trans website and for my research project, tentatively entitled "Hidden Histories: The Faith Activism of Black Lesbian Religious Leaders." We will begin early in life and hit milestones along the way. Feel free to skip any questions you want and choose what you want to elaborate on. So I start in the beginning. So I know you were raised in Newark, New Jersey. Can you tell me about your early life? What time of neighborhood you grew up in. What your friends were like.

Bishop:

Yeah. So I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. I was born there actually. My mom was living there at the time. She was a textile designer, working in Manhattan. And so, my neighborhood was primarily working poor. We lived in an apartment. I remember it being very communal in many ways 'cause that was a time where children could actually play outside. So we had many friends in the neighborhood that we could play with. And so, that phase of my life was pretty amazing.

Bishop:

I have three younger sisters. So at the time though it was just two of us. My self and my sister Sabrina who is 11 months younger than me. So, I used to hate the month of May 'cause my birthday's June 8th and hers is May 11th. So, for that period of time she would consistently daily say, "you know you're not the boss of me 'cause we're the same age." Right, so. So that brought lots of joy but it was a really rich childhood. My mother was not particularly political in anyway. She was an only child. My grandmother was also an only child so I wasn't raised with cousins and things like that. Our cousins were much much older. They were like my grandmother's cousins were our cousins. So, that kind of traditional way of having bigger family was not my truth. Excuse me. But my mother did have some very close friends who we were raised as cousins kind of with this... they were our aunties and cousins and those kind of things. As we often do within the black community. We create family. And so, that was always something very important to us.

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Bishop:

When I was five, the Newark riots broke out. You know, King had just died. I remember this was the most political thing I'd ever seen my mom do. She had political opinions but it wasn't like she was activist oriented. And, excuse me. The day Dr. King died, I remember not understanding what had just happened because all the adults in my world were crying and were just showing up in a way I'd never seen before. Including my mother. And I remember she sat us in front of the television. So I was five and Sabrina was four. To say, "remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Has just been assassinated." And we didn't even know what the word assassinated meant at the time when she explained it to us. And she said, "and the world will forever be changed because part of why he died was he fought for freedom for all." And, excuse me. And from that day forward my mother never allowed us to go to school on King's birthday. We just as a family, well before Stevie Wonder and everybody else starting fighting for it to be a holiday, my mother felt it critical for us to always remember.

Bishop:

The second thing she did after King died, you remember all the riots broke out. Excuse me. And what my mother did was about two weeks after the riots were over, so it never came kind of on our block but it was in my neighborhood. Particularly in the downtown kind of area, on Bergen Street in those areas. And my mother walked us to the downtown area. So as we were walking, and again that was very strange 'cause it was like her to just talk us for walks. We live in an urban area. It's not like you can just walk through the neighborhood all the time. She did walk us downtown and I remember seeing the Woolworth's that we used to buy school clothes at or little place we would get our ice cream from. All of these places that were our life were burnt to the ground. Windows broken. It literally looked like a war zone.

Bishop:

And she said something that has impacted my life since she said it back then. And she said, "I wanted you girls to see"...'cause we were devastated. And we were like, "what happened mommy? What was this?" And she said, "well these were people who were in pain because of Dr. King's assassination, when we were talking about Dr. King." And we said, "yes." And she said, "but the lesson I want you girls to learn is it's okay to be angry but you never tear your own stuff up. That is not what you do. That is not how this plays out well. Anger is appropriate in this case because definitely as black people we've been very hurt by the fact that this leader has been taken from us. But nothing justifies tearing up your own stuff." And it was something about that, even as a young child, that left such an imprint on me about what in her mind honorable protests look like. Because what was left in the wake of people's anger and pain and angst was a destroyed neighborhood, that we then had to rebuild even though the ones who were the perpetrators were left pretty much unscathed. And so, in her way that was a way of communicating to us this kind of foundational message about organizing.

Bishop:

One other really pivotal thing that happened when we were about three and four I think, my sister Sabrina and I three and four, was... so when we were about three or four my grandmother, [Precious Jewel Harris was her name. Her dad named her that. And my mom was 20 when she had me and my grandmother determined she was too young to be called grandma. Okay, so what she did was she approached my sister Sabrina and I, we were able to talk and have some thought, and she said, "so I don't like the name grandma. I definitely don't like granny." And she listed a couple of other names she really just did not like. And she said, "so what I want to offer to you two is the opportunity to name me.

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And I want you to come up with a name and the name you come up with is the name that I'll go by, as your grandmother. Now I am your grandmother but in terms of what I'm called I want you all to have input in that."

Bishop:

So we adored our grandmother first of all, okay. So we go off and we try to think about what are the things that... you know 'cause we love her so much to pick a great name for her. So Sabrina loved potato chips. I love pretzels. So, we came to her and said, "potato chip and pretzels." And wisely what she said was, "okay. I hear that." And we explained why, 'cause we love her and we love potato chips and pretzels. So she said, "well, what I want you girls to do is I want you to go back and I want you to come up with a consensus of a name." I mean, she didn't use the word consensus. "But I want you to come up with a name you can agree on and it can't be a food group." But again, she didn't laugh at what we said. It was like, "I need you all to agree and it needs to be not in a food group." I have no idea but we came up with this name but we liked the name Donna. D-O-N-N-A. We came back to her and said, "what about Donna? 'Cause we both agreed and we really love it, the name, and we love you." And she said, "Hmm. I like it." And she was Donna from that day forward.

Bishop:

And so, when we would go places, 'cause you know we were of a generation where you did not call adults by their first name, and so we'd say, "Donna, such and such" or "Donna, you know can I get this?" And to the adults would be freaking out. And one woman finally just broke down, and we're in the store somewhere, and she said, "you allow those children to call you by your first name?" She said, "my name is Jewel. They're not calling me by my first name." And she didn't feel the need to explain beyond that, "my name is Jewel." And she affirmed our right to do that. And what that did was... you know, you don't realize it until years later... but the personal agency that extended to us at such a young age, that we could have the power to name an adult who would honor the name we came up with, how amazing was that. Where did she even get that wisdom from? You know, to do something like that? And so it was.

Bishop:

All our friends called her Donna. So it was weird because Donna while it was grandmother for us, for others it was like this surrogate kind of name that everybody just kind of used. And of course then my mom, she was Donna to my mom and all of our other relatives... "where's Donna? When is Donna coming over?" Or whatever the thing was. And so, there was great power in that. Those two instances, in particular, again between like four and six were so profound.

Bishop:

One of the other things that was profound and interesting... it's funny this memory would come back... was the first day I went to kindergarten. And because Sabrina where her birthday fell, of course she was a year behind me, but it was the first time we were apart from one another. Cause you know we were raised almost twin like in many ways. And I remembered her face when I went to school for the first time. And she was sitting at the window, and our elementary school is right across the street from my house, so it was really... I just had to walk across the street to get to school. And I remember her crying when I was leaving and as I was leaving and as I walked out I looked back and I saw her and I remember thinking about how powerful our connectedness was. And my connectedness to others kind of in a weird kind of way was also impacted by this notion of not leaving people behind. There was something that seemed wrong about leaving her behind.

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Bishop:

And so I remember really wanting to make sure my younger sister was okay. When I came home I would talk to her about my school day. But all of these things, even at a young age, again you don't realize when you're doing it but when I reflect back it was so that she wouldn't feel bad. She got to kind of participate in that process with me. So that was really really powerful for me.

Bishop:

At eight, my mom and dad... my mom and dad divorced when I was two. So really, it was kind of right at the point Sabrina was born or right after she was born. Shortly after that my dad was in the navy. My mother's name is Josephine... well at that time was Josephine Elliot. And my dad's name was Aristotle Rawls. So Josephine and Aristotle raised me in my early years. But as a navy person, he really kind of wasn't centrally in our life at that time. So I really wasn't raised with him in my life. I remember seeing him twice. I have a memory of him twice. And the third time was at his funeral. He died at 35 years old-

Monique:

Oh wow.

Bishop:

From a heart condition. And so, my mom... we would spend our summers in Savannah Georgia like many kids did who were in the north east. They would send us south. And so, this one particular summer we come back and I have a new stepdad, named Paul. And, excuse me. So my mom, in that experience, my sister Cynthia was born shortly thereafter.

Bishop:

Paul took good care of my mom but he also was a pedophile. And so, I was molested in that situation. It was... I was in my late teens, early twenties when my mom never knew anything had happened, as happens often. And so, it's important to note that experience because as an eldest child, now of two younger sisters, I really felt it was important for me to make sure everybody was okay, as incest survivors often do. I didn't want my mom hurt. I didn't want my sisters to lose our support. Even like contentiously you're not thinking about it like that. And so, I kept that secret.

Bishop:

And I remembered my aunt, we had an aunt that lived kind of... and again, she really was my grandmother's cousin. But she was... we just called her aunt 'cause just for age. Who lived kind of diagonal across from their apartment complex. This time we moved to Orange, New Jersey.

Bishop:

And she had noticed that he had called me upstairs one day from playing. We were on a third floor apartment. And she happened to catch him call me up. And I had been playing before that and then she sees me go upstairs and come back downstairs really like sullen. And so she says to my mother, "I think something happened. I think something has happened." And she asked me, my mom asked me, "did Paul do anything to you?" and I said, "no, ma'am. Nothing." And this was the same day that this had happened. Excuse me. So, she asked me this at my aunts house 'cause that's when my aunt said, "noticed that he had called you upstairs." So the two of them are having this conversation trying to pull information out from me about what happened.

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Bishop:

So they had asked me and I came up with some explanation about why I went upstairs. I can't imagine they didn't also ask him and that his answer would have had to be different than mine 'cause he didn't know what I said. And shortly after they wound up being divorced. We didn't know details or any of that kind of stuff but... half of that played out... what transpired from me was an early kind of silencing around my own pain and struggles. It also, as often happens with incest survivors, I turned into like this mega type A personality. I was always kind of smart but this was kind of in over drive. And again, not consciously done. But I just didn't want to be like the problem 'cause my mom was working so hard for us and all of these kind of things. Pause.