CS: Alright, this is Chloe Stuber. It is July 31st, 2018. I'm here interviewing Regina Duggins and we are at the Addlestone Library in Charleston, South Carolina. Oh, and I forgot to ask, if you haven't already, if you could silence your phone so that we don't—okay.

CS: Okay, alright. And so can you state for the recording, what is your name?

RD: My name is Regina Duggins.

CS: Okay. Regina, my pronouns are she, her, hers. May I ask yours?

RD: Mine is the same, she, her, and hers.

CS: Okay. So how long have you lived in South Carolina?

RD: It will be eight years come August 2nd.
CS: Eight years come August 2nd, okay.

RD: In 2010.

CS: And what do you do for a living?

RD: I'm a special ed. teacher's assistant for middle and high school students.

CS: Do you have any long-term partner or partners?

RD: Not at the moment, but I've had, yeah. Probably, I'll say, three relationships. I'm more of a long-term person, I don't like short relationships. So my first was five years, the next one was six, and then this one was, the last one was a year but due to other situations, so. But I don't really like short term.

CS: So you didn't grow up here, but can you describe the place where you grew up? What was it like?

RD: I grew up in Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York. Big city. Full of life. Sky's the limit. A place where you can live your life, you know, openly and freely. Just a place where you can kind of be yourself, you know. There's something for everyone there. And that saying, if you can make it here you can make it anywhere, is kind of the guidelines that I've lived by, which made it easier for me to transition here to Charleston, South Carolina.

CS: How so?

RD: Because like, if you can make it in a big city, anywhere else small, rural, you know, towns, it's kind of like, what can't you do, you know? If you've already made some way, it's just about not being afraid and not being scared to be yourself even though you moved from somewhere else. So, just coming here I continue that type of outlook on life, and even though Charleston is much smaller than Brooklyn, New York, I still see the same struggles and I still see the outcome being something positive.

CS: What was your family life like growing up?

RD: My mom was the spearhead of the family. My dad was killed when I was three years old, on Valentine's Day in 1981, so I grew up without my biological dad being present in my home. My mom has six children but five of them lived with her, you know, she raised. I had, it was three girls and two boys.
My mom wasn't, I could say, very religious but she made us go to church, like I can say that. Like she, might of, didn't go every Sunday but we had to go on Sunday, so at first we started out at a Pentecostal faith but that wasn't my calling, so I ventured off into a Baptist church. I stayed under that faith and I really enjoy that.

So growing up it was a single family home. My mom worked two jobs. She was a nanny to predominantly white families. They loved her, shown her a lot of respect. They loved us, but in that interim my oldest sister was the caretaker, care giver of us. I have an older brother. I'm the youngest of five, well six.

And I went to the public-school system.

How would you say your family's world view, you mentioned religion. How would you say that that's impacted you?

It's impacted me greatly, and those are some of my biggest challenges living here in the holy city of Charleston, South Carolina, being that I am a lesbian black woman. So in New York, you know, it wasn't as much of an issue, but I notice here, you know, it's spoken out heavily against, gays in the church, especially in the black community and black churches. And, didn't really hit that close to home when I was in New York growing up.

Church is my life, you know what I'm saying, that was my comfort zone, that was where we go for you know, just everything, it's like, you know you put God first and your days will be better and your life will be long. It's like, you know and then we lived by the ten commandments and one of them is like, "Honor thy mother and thy father," you know so, religion has always played a major and a pivotal role in my life, in my outlooks on things and my culture.

What would you say your family life is like now, here in Charleston?

Here in Charleston, okay, two of my siblings is deceased, so that changed my family dynamic while I was in New York. In 2000 I lost my brother. He was 30 years old, in a coma, with complications of HIV/AIDS. My sister, she died two weeks before her 40th birthday due to pulmonary embolism and, which is like blood clots that was forming in her legs that went into her lungs.

So, changed my outlook on life, because I was very, very close to them. And, they were just the main focus of my whole life, my childhood, you know. My brother and I were very, very close. He had two children. I had the privilege of raising them, and so because—see like, we had a pact
when we were younger that, whoever had children first we would name them, and I didn't have, I don't have any biological children. He had a boy and a girl and so his first girl is named Regina as well. And now Regina is twenty-two years old, and she graduated from Voorhees College in the business administration. She's under, she's a Zeta, you know so she's in a sorority, sister. She's pregnant right now, so I'll be having my first grand come September.

CS: Congratulations.

RD: Yes. And so my brother also has a son, his name is Samson. I raised him. He graduated from high school. He's incarcerated right now at this time, but I still have a very close relationship with him. Both of them were actually—my brother made sure that they were my godchildren so I had christened them. And he kept them very close in my life, knowing that, at that time, he passed in 2000, so in '93 he found out that he was HIV positive, and they actually told him he had seven years to live. And he died at that seven-year mark.

RD: He was a bisexual male who also explored the transgender realm. So he was very open and honest with me. At that time my mom and some of my family members weren't as accepting of his lifestyle. Like, you know, my mom was as supportive as she could be because he didn't want to tell her. But she wasn't as supportive of him being a, at the time, called cross dresser. Like he would do shows, and do like drag shows, and you know the dressing up and—or the hair is what my mom didn't accept. Because one time I remember Tommy came and I was—and he had some kind of finger waves kind of design, but he had a pony tail piece.

RD: And my mom saw him, "Before you leave out of this house you have to take that hair piece out." And he was getting ready to go do a hair show. But she didn't care. And he had to take it out. And then I guess when he got to wherever he was, they put it back in. But she was just more—honestly what she told me was, she was more fearful of how the community would do to him, and that she didn't want him, on the way going to do something good, to have to experience all of that while he's on his way. So she was more being protective as a mom. But you know, maybe how it came across was like she was against him for being who he was. But she says she always knew there was something different about him, and she even made jokes that he would wear her perfumes. He admired that more over wearing men's cologne.

RD: My sister who—her name is Anne, she passed in—two weeks before her fortieth birthday, which was in 2008. She was a bisexual woman but under cover as well. They both lived closeted lives. They kind of changed my
outlook on the LGBTQ community of color that I wasn't going to live that kind of lifestyle. I've actually, I don't like to say been out the closet so you'll hear me saying oftentimes, I let people into my world. And it was fourteen years ago, fourteen, fifteen years ago.

RD: And I was honest with my mom. And I sat my mom down and told her, you know, like, "Listen. If you love me, then I need you to accept me." And she just said, "What do you mean?" And I told her. And you know, it was something that she said she wished my other siblings had did. And so it was like, I was the breakthrough child as far as being straight up with the community, being straight up with my family.

RD: And then when I gained the support from my mom, the fears, everything just disappeared and I no longer cared what people thought of me, because I was her baby and I knew that she was going to protect me against that cold hard world. So nothing else mattered after that.

RD: My older brother, it took some time for him to accept my lifestyle, but I've noticed within the last two, three years, he's been—especially like this last year, he's been so open and with talking to me about the LGBTQ community, and just now relating it to blacks and slavery. And he's drawing the conscious and understanding that like, "Okay, that's your lifestyle, it's not mine." And that was what was the problem with him -- was because he always felt like, "Oh, if someone knows that my sister is gay, how are they going to perceive me?"

RD: When he took himself out of the equation, now he learned to accept me. And I think that's the problem with a lot of the world. Like, the association with an LGBT person automatically makes them feel like, "Are they going to question my lifestyle?" So you have to be secure within yourself. And I feel that once you are, then anyone can be around you and whatever, you know, status that they use, and it should be fine.

RD: But I do have another sister. And I'm raising three of her children, I have been for several years. And she's totally against my lifestyle. So her and I have not communicated in over three, four years—about three years. She doesn't even communicate with her children nor my mom.

RD: So this lifestyle change has also drew a hindrance, a wedge, between my sister and I. But I still—and then I know that with the permanency of her children being placed with me, also was another situation, but I just feel like as a whole it changed what I was used to in my childhood. But even growing up, her and I, we wasn't really, really close. But because I was the youngest I lived in that household where you respected your older siblings, and you did as you were told. So when it came time for me to be
the caregiver of her children I automatically did that because it was embedded in us that family stays together. So even though she might not have agreed to my lifestyle and I didn't agree with some of the personal choices that got her to the situation where she wasn't able to be a fit parent, I didn't let that change my role as being the aunt and caregiver now of her children.

RD: So as you can see, that I've raised five children. Biologically I don't have any of my own, but I love them as if they are.

CS: How old are the three, your sister's kids?

RD: They're fourteen now, seventeen and twenty-two. Two girls and a boy. The twenty-two year old, he's my gentle giant. Out of all, you're not supposed to have any favorites but out of all he is my favorite, because of his circumstances. He's an autistic child who's nonverbal, profoundly mental, with mental retardation, but what I love about him, and it's very related to my life, is that that's just the outside shell. The inside of him, where they've always categorized him as a one-year-old and not having the mindset or capabilities of any more than a one-year-old, he's able to do so much—if you just take the time and get into his mind.

RD: So my master's is in special education and he was my reasoning of doing it. So to learn more about him and his world and how to be able to care for him and love him and just, like I said, be a part of his world, not making him be a product of my world, my norm. So, he's my inspiration.

RD: And just to see me have one step conversations with him and see him actually do these tasks, is amazing. He's like beating out all the odds from others that said to him, that he couldn't do, because if you're a one-year-old mind set then of course a one-year-old can't grasp a lot of these things. And I said that this is not true. Because if I say to him, "Put that glass there," or, "Come sit here," or, "Come give me a hug," or "Hug Grandma," how do you know all of these people if you have a one-year-old or below mindset? So he beats the odds.

RD: And I relate that to myself is that, being a black lesbian woman, and even relating now, eight years in Charleston and knowing the pushback that's here, and being the Bible Belt, the holy city. I'm that special gem here that I feel is going to change the dynamics of how LGBT community is being seen or has been seen. So that's how him and I are so related, that people automatically ostracize us until they get to know us, and then they're like, "Wow, they are—there's so much more to them. They're not just LGBTQ, they are people. They are human beings." So that's how I tie special needs and the LBGTQ communities.
CS: That's beautiful.

CS: So you've said a couple of times that you identify as a black lesbian woman.

RD: Yes.

CS: Do you consider yourself sort of within the LGBTQ plus, do you ever use that to identify with?

RD: Not really, I'm just—like, it's funny because a lot of my family members when I first told them that I was gay they were like, "Yeah, right. Oh, you don't look like a gay woman, and what does that mean?" I'm like, "Uh, what does a gay woman look like?" And see they were so used to the depiction of why I don't wear beads, or why I don't wear this and the colors and things like that.

RD: I said, "Listen, my life is just living," you know. My lifestyle is, where I say, "I let you in because I let you know that I'm in love with a woman. And, they're not my best friend." Because see I notice in this community, if they're your best friend they don't mind you hugging them. They don't mind you holding hands with them. They don't mind you being, you know, sharing and open, or they can be around you twenty-four-seven. They don't have a problem. It's until you reveal that this is your partner.

RD: So now I feel that the sexual entity comes in more than the actual basis of the relationship. And I feel that that part—no one should be concerned with because that's personal, that's intimate. And if I was with a male, it still shouldn't be your concern of what I'm doing in my bedroom. If I'm with this male, you should be proud or just thankful that I'm in a relationship, you know, so when I say, as with a female to female relationship or male to male, that's their own precedence. And that, I feel that—where religion comes in is because religion has this whole quote that you know, you are to be reproductive and producing and if you're female, female, male and male, you're stopping the continuance of generations. And I say, okay, so that is your actual argument? But what about women or men who cannot conceive? Are they now ostracized as well? Are they not looked as being human beings?

RD: So you question their actual beliefs within it, because there are a lot of ways it can be perceived, two ways and two folds. It's always, like I said, an argument that's outside of, anything you can find to argue actually. But you know when it comes down to religion, I question a lot, and they say that you're not supposed to but at the same time that's natural what humans supposed to do. So in my religious faith, because I have such a strong
belief and made a connection with my God that I no longer live on the realm of what the outer people say about my religion and my connection with my God. So I just basically been able to live my life in that realm and that scope.

CS: When did—was there a moment when you definitely knew that you were a lesbian, or you liked women?

RD: Yes. Uh-hm. I was really young. And I was probably about like eight or nine years old. And what it was—well, some back history, okay. From six to nine I was molested from my brother's best friend. So a family friend whom no one would ever expect because he was a part of the family. He was like the only guy that was trusted to come into our home.

RD: And, he made me feel comfortable. So it didn't seem like he was doing anything out of the norm, because of what he told me, we were playing house. And this is what all girls your age do. And that, you know, it was making our relationship closer. And he was like maybe probably about sixteen, seventeen, because he was up with my—my baby brother, my brother and I, the one I was real close that passed, they were best friends.

RD: So you know, so I kind of, three years living in that, it became the norm. But then I noticed that I didn't like it. And then—but I never was fearful of him. So when he came no one would know that anything was going on, because like my brother would play music, and I wrote this in my poetry as well, in the living room, and I'll be in my room playing with my dolls on the floor, and here he would come, and the music is loud, so you know, and then I just have visions of him coming in, and, "Here, you can play with me with my toys on the floor," make you very comfortable, and then he'll say, "Well, hey, why don't we play house, you're already playing with your dolls."

RD: But we all start doing it. And then I'd say fine, and then I remember him taking me into the bathroom and just, just doing things, and everything possible. And then I remember like my mom used to have long tablecloths on the dinner table, and like I remember like a ball with my like, or something would roll under the table and I would go under the table. He'll have his private part out, and he would like make me do things. And then when someone comes he would like push me off of him from underneath the table so no one really knew what was going on. Or he would just like give me little signals and let me, you know tell me to come and sit on his lap, and then he would put my hand there to hold him. And, so it's not like straight out things that people would ever feel would be a problem because they was so trusting of him.
RD: But as people, when you get older and they start to talk about rape or a situation where they say, you know, "Don't let men do this or come near you," or this. So that's, like going to the doctors and I would hear them talk to me and my mom and ask my mom, you know, just say different things. It started to wake me up inside, like this is wrong. It was wrong what he did.

RD: And I didn't speak about it until I was seventeen years old, preparing to go away to college. And the nightmares started to come. And I didn't know what the heck was going on. So I finally told my mom and my sister, and didn't give the name of who it was, just told them, you know, what was going on, and then finally I disclosed who he was. But he was already incarcerated for something else. And so you know, my mom, you know my sister had got angry.

RD: I never had told my brother even up until the day he died. I've never told him that his friend did this. But I did have a conversation with my older brother about it, because the gentleman got out of prison and started coming around the neighborhood, wanted to come to the house. And I had just started retaliating against him. Like I remember a time, he was just outside and you know, bragging in the community, it was a playground and he was just sitting out there and he was just like, oh, and he was dressed in like a beige colored suit. He was like, I'm getting ready to go to a club, I want to meet up with some girls; I'm going to have me a great time.

RD: And I had a Welch's grape soda and I shook the soda up and I just opened the soda up and threw it on him. And everybody's like, "Regina, you are so evil, you're so—how could you do—?" And he just looked like, "I can't believe she did this." And I just was like, what—and I always had that attitude like, "What's the problem? I didn’t, what I did? I did something wrong?" And they was just like, and he just looked at me and like, and just walked off. But everybody was just so coming down hard on me, and I was smiling. But they didn't understand why.

RD: So there was another time, like he had just gotten like a chicken box of food, and he had chicken, you know some food, mashed potatoes, little chicken box, snack box to eat. And he was eating it and I walked up and I took the box and threw it over the fence.

RD: So he was just like, "Why you keep picking at me? What's the problem with you?" And so I think the final straw was, he was with his guy friends and he had a cooler full with glass bottle beers. And I came over and I kicked the whole thing over and the bottles of beers broke. And I don't
know if him and his friends chipped in, or whatever. So he went to go tell my brother. Now he told my brother all the incidents and why.

RD: So my brother was like, "Why you keep like, antagonizing, why you bothering him? What's wrong with you?" Like, you know, "Why you just picking on him like—" And he was like, "This is odd," because he said, "The only reason if Regina would be like this to someone, they had to have done something." And he’s like, "You ain't been around, you just started coming around. Why is she so angry with you?"

RD: And he kept on telling my brother he didn't know why I was angry with him. He just, he's like, "She just constantly just bothers me." And that was when I told my brother. And my brother went from like zero to one-hundred. Wanted to really hurt him. And I had to tell my brother that it's not worth it, because I knew my brother would be incarcerated. So my brother told him that he better not ever come to him about anything that I've done to him, because he said he's surprised that I didn't do more. And the guy stood there in total shock and didn't say anything, and actually denied—He just, he didn't even answer, he just stood there and looked at me and looked at my brother because he was so afraid of what my brother was going to do, so he just walked off. Because I told my brother, it's not worth it.

RD: And then, which was something like probably about a month later, I saw him at a party. And we were all in like, the building used to have parties. So we were all in the party, and I was like, they had a terrace, so I went out on the terrace. And he came out there. And I was just like, "Why are you bothering me? What do you want?" Like, "Get away from me, I don't like you."

RD: And he was just like, "You know, I'm sorry Regina." I said, "What are you talking about?" He was like, "I came; can I talk to you?" I said, "I give you five minutes." He was like, "I want to tell you that I never thought you would remember this, that." I said, "Why wouldn't I, that was a horrible time in my life, you know when I look back at it." And he said, "I'm sorry," he said, "what happened."

RD: He was touched at a young age around that time, and he never could tell anyone. He said he also had been raped several times in prison. I told him, "Well you got what you deserved." I didn't have no sympathy for him. And then he was just like, he felt that God was cursing him, and I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Because I have three daughters now." I said, "I'm going to tell you this right now. Did you tell your wife about your past?" He was like, "No." I said, "I'm fearful of your daughters." He said, "No, I would lose it if somebody ever put their hands on my
daughter." I said, "Well what about yourself?" He said, "No, I could never see myself doing that to my daughter." I said, "Oh well, but you remember you did it somebody. I am somebody's daughter." And I left off this terrace. So.

RD: I never knew who his wife was because I wanted to tell her. But you know, I just said that you know, I prayed, I said that night to God that like just to make sure those girls don't ever experience what I've experienced.

RD: And so going back to the question of you know, I started noticing around eight or nine my best friendships, I became very clingy. I have a friend that I've had since kindergarten, and she tells me still to this day like, "Regina, I always knew you were gay." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she was like, "You just always wanted to hug everybody." But I came from that kind of household. My mom was always huggy and loving on me because what happened was my mom was out of the home a lot. So when she came home it was like, just hugging all on me, you know. Giving me love, making me feel like she's been there all those hours, you know. And very close with me. Like I sat on the counter and watched her cook. She went to the bathroom, I sat out front the bathroom 'til she came out.

RD: Then I had a sister who picked on me all the time, so I definitely was like—I slept with my mom, well in the same bed until I was sixteen years old. I had my own room but I was so afraid of my sibling, my sister, that I didn't want to be out my mom's sight because, you know she would do things to me in the room and my mom, and I was scratching the wall, and my mom would come in and notice that she was like beating on me, or just treating me so bad. And so my mom was like, "You know what? You come and sleep with me."

RD: Even my mom had a, remarried, had a husband. And when he would come in from work, then she would move me to my room. Or she would tell him, like, "In an hour she's going to get up and go to school," so he would sleep in the recliner on the side where she was at. You know, so I was spoiled, they all put me in those labels. But I noticed that I'd gotten that closeness, that bond and that trust, from a female, which was my mom, that that's how close I became with other females.

RD: And I just had a better connection with women. I fought the boys in the neighborhood. Even the guy that liked me, he would just like, make a comment about my body parts, and then I would just totally pound him down. I would just like, I couldn't—and, I just couldn't accept that a guy was giving me a compliment. But when a female compliments me about something, I felt so good inside, and I felt so safe.
And there was another rape when I was twelve. Two guys, and one of the guys, he was like two years older than me, and what it was, was that he really liked me. And he couldn't get, like he was the rough guy but he was attractive, and didn't understand why of all the girls, they all gave him attention but me. And he was just so annoyed by it, and like let down because that was something that he never got. Everybody would flirt with him or do whatever he wanted to have, because he was also the tough guy of the neighborhood.

So him and his best friend, I was going to go pick up a cousin, and they came from around the corner when I got off the elevator and they held me by knife point and they raped me. In the corner of the corridor of the hallway. So I never got to my cousin's house. But, like, after everything, they switched and did what they did, I put my clothes back up and I went back downstairs in front of the building like nothing.

So they decided to go to the back of the building where all the kids played, and they was just telling everyone, my friends, that what they just did, laughing about it. So the girls came looking for me. And it was like, "You okay?" And I'm like, "Yeah, what's the matter, I'm fine." And they was just like, "They told me what they did to you." And I'm, "What are you talking about, nobody did anything to me," and they was like, "Regina, you need to be, go tell your parents. You need to go tell your brother and sisters," because they were home, you know they were—so I was like, "No, what's to tell." They was like, "Regina. You need to tell somebody. Because that is not okay." And they were just making it as a joke.

So I finally told my sister and my brother and they came outside. It was like a big, big thing. It was like—my mom was at work, he called my mom. My mom came home and my mom going to their house and talking to their parents. They called the cops. I had to go to the emergency room. I had to go through the whole check. They—I had washed up so they couldn't find evidence on me. They checked my clothes.

It was just a mess in my life. And even the legal part of that, I stopped it. Because while pressing charges, I couldn't say that he put his thing inside me and I touched his thing. They wanted me to use the actual terminology, as being vagina and penis, and my mom didn't allow us to talk like that. So to talk to adults coming to the house, and my mom's sitting right there, I just went into a whole trance, like emotions, and I was just like, "Ma, I want it to stop."

Like they're picking on me more in the building because you know they were just like, "Oh, why are you trying to make it a big thing? Yeah, I know that happened to you, you know, but they're sorry, and they're
young, and y'all young." you know and I—and it's like, it got downplayed. And I just told my mom I wanted it all to stop and go away.

RD: And I felt the only way it would go away is if I stopped proceeding with the charges, and I said, in that religious aspect I said, that God will handle them in their time. And they both have had horrible lives. So God did deal with them. They've been in and out of jail. They just never, nothing—I mean they have children of their own, but they're so much in and out of jail they don't have any bonds with nothing and no one. They're heavily on drugs.

RD: So they've had a very rough life. So I didn't have to add to it, you know what I mean, and in that aspect even though—but one thing I can say, and this is where I'm going to work on. It's kind of hard, but an autobiographical book. My dance group I started when I was twelve was called the New York Styles, and it was the reason, because there was so many girls, and people were so trusting in this one building, and they felt like we, or my mom, the adults felt that, oh, there's always an adult watching over the kids, but that's not always the case.

RD: So I started my dance group and I asked my mom, could I transform the living room to have—and I didn't tell her why, but she kind of got to understanding why. But I was like, "Ma, after I take them to free lunch can they come here and dance and practice at the house?" And she said sure.

RD: So I would get as many kids who wanted to come. I remember I had like thirty something kids in my mom's living room. I had, they would do shifts and sit in the hallway, and some were dancing, and then they'll switch back out, or they'd be in the living room. My mother started making cakes, like twice a week. She would always have Kool Aid, so they still talk about that. My mom always made sure there was extra snacks for them after they got tired. So they would be with me from 12:00, no, from 11:15 lunch started, I rang their bells and they would come downstairs until like 6:00, 6:30 when I knew their parents were home. Because back then we were latch-key kids, you know, so their parents started to know—

RD: And so I would have them Monday through Friday, and then sometime on Saturdays. My mom bought me a big boom box radio, so I would either take them to the park if my mom was home that day from work, and so that we'd be outside. She’d get my batteries, whatever I needed to just help me. I would be up at night recording and making mixed tapes and learning how to, I don't know, getting songs from the radio.
Regina Duggins
LGBTQ-OH-008

RD: I, it was just incredible. And we became one of the top dance groups out there. We did hip hop, reggae, praise dance. We would go to different block parties and perform. They danced even at the Apollo one time for amateur night. They did some other shows in Manhattan. And that went from on to twelve to eighteen 'til I graduated from high school and went to college, and then I started a summer dance camp for two summers.

RD: And then what changed was when I started raising my niece and nephews. But for that period of time, from like I'll say 1988 until like, up unto 2000 I'd say or like '99, something like that, probably about ten years or so, I did a good run. That was all my life. And like a lot of my friends, they didn't understand it, my peers, because they were just like, "Why you always with little kids," like, it was like I would give, five-year-olds would be my youngest up until twelve or thirteen. I did an older teen group for a little while but it didn't really last long. But my main core was the six to like, fourteen, fifteen, thirteen years old.

RD: And it was that. And that's a lot of people don't know that that's why I started my dance group. I became mothering. I became a nurturer. I didn't want to see any other kid have to experience what I experienced. And I felt that if they were with me they wouldn't experience that because I was so protective of them.

RD: And they'll tell you, I was strong. I was disciplined. I was, even during the school year I wanted their report cards. I mean, I was sixteen and I became the youth president of my building's tenants association. So I would go to meetings and actually talk about issues and things that went on in the building that I felt like the older adults needed to know about.

RD: And ask them, "How can we use this community room to have parties and functions so that the kids won't be outside?" So my mom, you know, they didn't grant me the community room. My mom would let me have parties in the house. Because she didn't want us in the street. So up until two in the morning on a Friday or a Saturday for, I mean it started to become, it started off annual Halloween party to an Easter party to a Thanksgiving dinner to award ceremony for my dance group to an end of the school party or back-to-school party. So any way, my mom would have the biggest Fourth of July party, and then my mom would also, a cookout, and then my mom would also be one of the biggest families to do with the block party.

RD: And she fed anybody and everybody that came. I remember her, one of my vivid memories is, she would get two big watermelons and slice them up and have me walk with a pan up and down the block to make sure
everyone got a watermelon. And then tell them who gave it. So my mom built community in me, and the neighborhood as well.

RD:

There were some very pivotal people, adults that supported me with my dance group. And I didn’t, it was free. This was all just me doing. All I asked was for the parents to help me to get their uniforms. And then like I would used to go to grocery stores, that's why I said, now with all these non-profits and all this, I told them I didn't have a non-profit but I did this work. I would go to the store and just say to them, "Listen, I need hot dogs, I need sodas, I'm going to be teaching this dance group," and tell them, "If you want to see where your money went to, come to this block party and see my dance group." I showed them a picture if I had a picture of them, or I would bring the kids to the store.

RD:

I mean so, I was my own billboard. I didn't have business cards. I didn't have flyers, nothing. I just did it word of mouth, and people would build in trust with me. And then people would see me with kids. I remember my mom giving me allowance, or giving me money, and I would say, the kids in the neighborhood didn't have money. "I'm buying them ice cream off the ice cream truck." So my mom noticed that I was doing that, so what she did was, she would buy a big gallon of ice cream and cones and tell me, "Instead of spending your money, just come upstairs and make a bunch of cones. And just send 'em downstairs. Or take the whole thing down and give 'em out."

RD:

So I remember taking kids to the store, and I would lead like six or seven across the street at a time. I had, and then that's the thing that people loved about me was like, I had this control that I can line 'em up in the store and stand 'em there in the front. I would send one, "Go get your juice, get your chip, come back. Go get your juice, get your chip, come back." And then I would add it up and tell them, the man, "Here's the money." And then I would cross them back across the street. Bring them back to their parents now, with a chip and a juice, and the parents would say, "How come you did that?" I said, they said, “I thought you was just going to walk them around the corner or whatever, just to give them a little—" I said, "No, I didn't feel right eating a snack in front of them. And I see all of them, and I don't know what y'all situation may have been." And they was just like, wow.

RD:

And that's how I used—that's how I started becoming a community, I could say, activist, at so young, and still do it to this day. So, but like I said, I became very close with females just by being around them. And I noticed how related—and I've always wanted to give them more than what I felt they deserved. And I just felt like, especially a lot of my close friends and best friends, I notice like, these guys dogged them out. Treated them
like crap. And I just was like, "If I'm going to get with a female, I'm just going to be that giving type of person."

RD: You know people say that sometime that's the hard part because you can get used, but I just felt like, "I'm going to do the best that I can." And that's just who I felt more comfortable with. And I didn't—I started to not trust men. And I've dated guys, and things like that. I've had a guy like, try to choke me and I – so I've had some experiences and it wasn't too good. And I just felt that they were like always trying to overpower me. And I was too strong for that.

RD: But then the thing is now, though, with women I'm the opposite sometimes, so it's just like—you know I've questioned myself on that, too, because you still got to have your strength in any relationship. But I know that I wasn't as strong as I had to be when I was with a male, I always had my guard up. I wasn't open. I was on the defense, or I felt that I wanted to be with them just to use them. And I'm being honest, like, "Oh, you can't take me to a restaurant." My standards got so high when it came down to a man that I didn't do with females. It's like even playing field, or I would do the catering.

CS: You mentioned how you became an activist at an early age, and how big community has been for you. What has that life been like in Charleston, have you been able to—what's been your outlet for activism and community here?

RD: With this poetry, I mean poetry in the last two years has taken me into a whole other realm, and it's also opened me up to so many community projects. So this January, they had the women's march, I spoke at the women's march. So I've been able to speak on a lot of different platforms. Poetry I use as my main platform to speak about whatever issues, women's issues, social injustices, police brutality, rape. I've spoken at a rape conference they had, and just blown away, because I was just like, I just felt like survivors was not enough of a bigger term.

RD: I felt that they should be called warriors because it's like, we've reigned over. We're no longer, you know, that hurt person any more. And I don't talk about rape as a hindrance. I talk about rape as an empowerment, you know, it's made me a stronger and better person. It's given me the wisdom to see life in the better eyes. So in a way, it's not to say I'm thankful that I was raped but it's made me a more stronger person. Like once you overcome that, you stop feeling powerless. You become powerful. So, you know, things like that.
RD: So my words is my weapons now, and my strength. And then I like to be able to speak with people because you never know who's experienced in this situation. I wrote a poem about my brother that passed away and I like, I'm very visual. So I'll give a lot of just highlights of him and someone came up to me, they were in tears, this was like, you know, "I just lost a brother a couple of months but you just showed me how to honor him."

RD: I said, "You honor him by keeping their memories alive. By remembering even the smells on them, or talking about the way they made you feel, or—I talk about my brother, he loved making music and our culture and just the foods and all the music that he listened to and played, so I would put that in my writing as well so people kind of like, they can see my brother, and they know the person he was. Just from my writing.

RD: So that's where the activist part comes in. I'm strong on youth issues. I have a, non-profit but it's still like, it's not fully non-profit yet, you know I have to do the federal piece, but it's called Black Magic Girls Mentoring Program. And it's not just for black girls, but I put that focus on it because I feel that black girls and women are the underrepresented group. So that's why, but I don't alienate it.

RD: And I do not not cater to guys, too. So I do let boys come too, because I've had a brunch, a breakfast at Hannibal's on April 4th in honor of Martin Luther King's fifty year anniversary, and we had about twenty-five kids and we fed them that morning. I had a team come from the school I work at play the saxophone. We had music. So that was one. We just did an MLK, I took fifteen kids with another organization, we just came back last weekend for a youth MLK black history tour, so we went down to Monroe, Georgia. We were in Atlanta, Georgia, and we were also in Alabama.

RD: And then I had a Stop the Violence May 20th concert, youth concert, at the Charleston Performing Arts Center in James Island. So I do a lot and I stand on a lot of the issues, like police brutality. School shooting and violence and just violence in black on black communities. You know, so I speak out about it. And I'm not afraid. Even in my own community, to tell them where they're wrong, that, I would love to be—you know people say this is far-fetched but I would love to be at a Southern Baptist Pastoral meeting and to let them know how it feels to be alienated because of my LGBTQ status.

RD: Because if I feel that you are the church and we're not supposed to cast stones and condemn people; how could you make someone who—it is who they are, you know, it's not like—people keep feeling like it's a life
style, like you choose to be a smoker, or you choose to cut your hair today. No, this is who I am. How could you not accept me?

RD: And as you, you know, the scripture says, God made you in His image, so how is that if He made me in His image then how can you not accept me? That's where my activism come in. And I use it as much as I possibly can.

RD: And then I'm also the Secretary of Charleston Pride. I was the first black female to actually, in nine years, to be on their board. So I'm up against a lot, even last year coming in. This is the ninth year, and it was, it was new, because the board is a lot of young white males and one of them a female. Two are black and just a lot of changes, and I question all the time, when I'm on anybody's board, to make sure that we are following their mission and our purpose. And when we're swaying away from it, then they will hear from me. And I don't care who it offends, because it's not about offending, it's about standing on—

RD: And I keep saying to them, diversity is not just because I'm a woman on the board. I'm talking about cultural diversity which means it needs to be engulfed in every event and activity that we do. And if it's not, then we're not living by our code of ethics and I don't want to be a part of it.

RD: And I don't mind walking away from it, because I am a representation of not just LGBTQ but LGBTQ of color. So that's a big realm and shoes that I walk in. Every time that I go to these events and promote this event or be a part of this event, so I need to make sure that I know what I'm—if platform or what shoulders I'm standing on, when I go out there. It's not a easy task, but, like I said, I felt that God built me this way for a reason. And I'm kind of thankful for it. Stuff. [Laughs]

CS: When we were walking up to the room you were talking about how this project's important because there's such a unique community here?

RD: Yeah.

CS: Can you say more about that?

RD: The beginning of, I believe July, the City of Charleston was finally giving the apology to the starting of slavery here in Charleston, South Carolina. It's 2018, and that is the issue. That's how I know that we have not come that far from where we should be.

RD: You know, everyone talks about Independence Day is when slavery was supposed to been abolished, but we all know that it was Juneteenth when it was actually, because if we're still in an injustice environment in another
state, we're still not free. But in totality, blacks are not all the way free, because there's still a lot of other aspects in areas where we're still enslaved.

RD: So, and where I'm talking about is—what I think, I believe is like thirteen or nine states that is still—that is considered the Bible Belt that holds on to a lot of old ways. And we're kind of cycling back, due to our current president which is opening the floodgates to race and relation issues that has never been on the forefront, and I believe that the actions is causing the reactions for the separatism again. So it's that quickly that we can resort backwards, then we haven't really gotten that much farther away from.

RD: So that's my concern, and my issue with the—say that Charleston is in a sketchy kind of situation right now, so that apology was warranted but then to turn around and have a young child be arrested for selling palmetto roses on the street corner as a peddler when that's his culture's actual, you know, his cultural dynamic, you know. And so you're taking away the culture, stripping it from them, but you just apologized for what the slavery did to that group of people. So it's like, you know it's a misconception here.

RD: So that's how I know the LGBTQ community of color or just in general is going to always have a push back, because those small things have not been accepted. Where race, and color is an issue. And so of course anything outside of that realm is going to be a bigger factor. So it's not a lot of support, it's not a lot of allies for the LGBTQ community. So we're constantly fighting.

RD: And in an African American community, in the Bible Belt state of Charleston, South Carolina, where the skyline is steeples, where the weight of the NAACP and the National Action Network and black historical dynamics is here, the diaspora was originating, we're saying we came through here, have not been able to accept that their children are gay.

RD: So when we go into the churches and religion is their basis, because that's all we ever knew as our safe haven, to be accepted in society, now this thing that is, how could you be gay? Is that another evil demonic force that's trying to put hindrance into our culture? And what pushes it is because of the holy city.

RD: But then the second fold is, it's a college town. It's a party town. Certain cultures are looked upon differently. There's classism still going on here.
We have thin lines that separates us and every time someone gets closer to that line or steps across it, there's another rezoning that takes place.

RD: And if I was sitting up on high, looking down low, I can see that we are not far from the changes that we speak about because this may not be right in our front door, but it's like as closer and closer we fight in this city, they're moving the chocolate and brown faces out.

RD: So the problem that I have is, if we have not been able to accept each other as human beings, then how can we be able to accept the LGBTQ culture or community? We're at a standstill here.

RD: So I think that this is pivotal because it gives the voice to us being the voiceless, and lets us be known to others in the community, like we are here. We're an underground entity because of you not letting us come out of that surface. And the Trans community being killed, I mean it's like up to seventeen, I believe, have already been killed over the United States and one, Sasha Wall that was killed here in South Carolina. And the numbers are going to increase, because people can't seem to understand the differences and be okay with it.

RD: We wasn't meant to be the same. And I think the diversity of it should be taken as a praising kind of thing, like if I was at a table with fifteen different people, we all got something to bring. We all can make this world a better place. But instead, the alienation and the ostracizing and the this and that, and instead of finding out what we have more in common we more praise about what we don't have in common, and the dislikes.

RD: And that's what gives me the challenges here, living here in Charleston. But it hasn't run me out. It just makes me want to stay here so that I can break through some of this tough territory and to just bring light to these faces that just feel like they have no hope. And I'm out here—

RD: I had a conversation with someone yesterday in Walmart, it's just funny that, just that you know—she said, "Regina, you know, do you know how powerful you are?" And I said, "No," I said, "What are you talking about," like, "I'm a poet, just you know—" She was like, "No, you really don't know what you're doing. Do you get it?" I'm like, "No," I said, but she's like, "People really appreciate you." And I'm like, "Okay, thank you," you know. Humble. I don't, you know. And she's like, "People thank you, you know why? Because you're doing something that's helping a generation that's coming behind you, and you don't even realize it. You're making it easier for the next generation."
And I had this—it took me back, just in Walmart walking, and I was walking through the aisles saying—and then she said too, before she walked off, she said, "I hope they appreciate you." I said, "I'm going to be honest with you, two people have told me, they thanked me for what they know that I do, and the platform I stand on. That's enough for me. That's enough for me." And she said, "Wow." And you know she went her way.

But as I was walking through Walmart, I'm sitting here like, thinking about now, I'm thinking about the interview today and I'm just like—I don't know why, God created me and put me on the path that He has, but I'm thankful. I really am. Because of all the cities I could have chosen to live.

My sister who passed away, this is how I got to Charleston. My family's originally from St. George, South Carolina. That's where my mom and dad was born. So my roots lie here. But my mom spent fifty years in New York, plus. So her plans was not coming back to the South.

But my sister, my oldest sister and I made a pact that we were coming back because we would come home, you know like my mom brought us back home every now and then to see the family and things. But they always brought us to Charleston. Because they was like, "We know y'all city folks, we know y'all, in the country ya ain't going to make it." So they was like, "Let me take you to Charleston."

So we got this love for Charleston culture. My sister was a big crab eater. I'm allergic to shellfish but I love fish, but I was like, you know. But she was like, "Regina, you know what, we need to take Mommy back." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" She was like, "Cause Mommy didn't grow up with her siblings, and I know she misses them. She raised us. You know now we're older, I think we need to get a house and come and move back to Charleston. Move to Charleston at least. Mommy would probably like it."

So in 2008, my sister died. And I knew this dying wish, before she died, that she wanted this to happen for Mommy. I moved back in with my mom with the kids, and my relationship had just ended from five years of being with my ex-fiancé. So it was like my whole life was already crumbling. I got out of a five-year relationship, the same time I lost my sister, who was like my second mom, raised me. So I had to refocus, and coming back home because my mom lived in the same apartment I was born and raised in that same one apartment, thirty some years before, and that was a big attachment, this attachment for my mom too—if I moved her, you know. So I went back home, we doubled up, but you know the
kids had their room and I had my room, and my mom you know, and my brother was still there.

RD: But, I saved everything. I had my stuff in storage from my home I was living in and the next summer—I mean I was at a good job making great money, I was a community coordinator. I had my bachelor's degree, and I was living fine. I was, like once I get my mom situated and everything, we're moving back on out and I'll be okay.

RD: God had other plans. So I just said, "You know what?" My brother, he laughs to this day. "When Regina says she's going to do it, she's going to do it, and nothing's gonna stop her." So I started talking to my brother like in April saying, "Greg, I'm moving." He was like, "You sure, Regina?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm moving." He said, "Alright." I said, "By this summer I'm out of here."

RD: He was like, "You got a good job, you know you got a 401(k)." I said, "Greg, I don't even care about that." I said, "I'm going to withdraw my pension, I'm going to withdraw everything, and I'm moving. Me and the kids, I said the kids, the older ones was getting ready to start high school and I did not want them to do high school in New York, because I didn't go to school with metal detectors and I felt that that shouldn't have been the lifestyle for them.

RD: So I got in contact with my godmother who had lived here in Charleston and moved back up, and she gave me her landlord's number. He told me the house that I've been in—that house. He said the house that she was living in is still sitting there, no one's been—for two years no one's moved in. It was a mother/daughter home, so they had a back entrance and a front entrance, separately.

RD: I didn't go back and see it since the last time I saw it was probably was three years before that. I told him, "I'll be down August 2nd to give you the money to move my things in, and I'll be back, to come back to New York because I'm leaving the kids because I want them to finish summer camp." So I came down. I told my—I gave my job two-weeks notice. They did not want to let me go. They were even—up until the day they was just like, they didn't want to sign my release papers. They were trying to offer me more money. And I told them, "I have to do this now."

RD: So it was August 2nd of 2010, I packed everything up, got me a truck, and I drove, and then somebody drove the truck and came on down. Moved in. And then September 3rd, I went back up, that weekend I went back up. Left everything, locked up the house. September 3rd I moved the kids down. And I was still on New York time, because I thought school started
after Labor Day, so the kids was actually two weeks late starting school, but it worked out great.

RD: So, my mom started to just come down for maybe like three weeks, go back, come back, then go back and forth, back and forth. Nine months the landlord did not let no one move in the front house. He told me to put curtains in there and if someone came by just tell them that the house was rented, because I had told him that my mom was still deciding, and I didn't want to rush her.

RD: So she decided to move nine months later here, and live in the front house. And kept my sister's dream alive.

RD: Then I started thinking about them, my brother and my sister who lived the underground world, of their life. And I just felt like Charleston was the same way. It was just that it wasn't two people, it was a whole community.

RD: And then after being here six years, and starting hearing so much people and seeing that, like the gay bars closing. There wasn't too much diversity going on. I was just like, "Well, how do I get involved?" Someone was like, "You know they have Pride board." I was like, "What?" They was like, "Yeah." I said, "I'll send my application."

RD: First time my application, didn't hear nothing back. I said, "Oh, okay." So I went to a board, a meeting that was about LGBTQ of color against Pride. We had a actual face-to-face meeting. We asked some tough questions to the board.

RD: So I'm not a talker, I'm a doer. So in the midst of it all, I said, "You know what? I can't talk any more in here. How do I sign up? Then I can help in a lot of this back and forth that we're having the problem with, because no one's on your board I see, of color." And then they try to say, "Well, yes, there's diversity." I said, "I'm going to tell you right now, take everyone that just came to this meeting out of here and now you tell me that same response." And then they understood what I meant by there was no diversity. Diversity, I've told them stop looking at women, because it was a male board. You see, they thought they met some of the quota. They didn't.

RD: And, Chase Glenn I remembers at the table, texting me the application, and emailing. And the next day I had my application turned in with my resume attached. Because they're also a prestigious board. People don't know that, but they are. So they look at if you, you know, not only community affiliations but they look at your education and what you're doing.
RD: So luckily, I'm working on my doctorate, so they couldn't hold me back from there. I have a lot of community engagements in Charleston and in New York from being student government president of college, and ethnic diversity president in college up in New York, all kind of community organizing and things that I do here. I did PTA president here, so it was just like—the odds they couldn't not accept me to be. There was nothing that could, that they had on the application that didn't look attractive, that I could fill in and give to them to say they couldn't not take me. And they did. I interviewed and unanimously I was voted on the board. And they was so happy to tell me that too, because you know they didn't have to disclose it but they was just like, they were blown away from the interview, and just how I am, you know what I'm saying?

RD: And I can understand where you can be apprehensive, you know, about, you got to, we got ten months more to work together and plan events that's going to be socially engaging for the whole Charleston, and others, because it's open. We can get people from Columbia, Hartford, wherever. And it's basically making sure that we can work together during all kind of situations. And I stay for, I liked about it because they let me stay for a board meeting too, after the interview, so you get the feel of how the realness of people are.

RD: And it's not as prestigious as [laughs]—but it was great, you know. It was interesting. And then after that I got a call back to like, two days later, just like, they were just so like, open and welcoming to have me on. And that was monumental. You know it was just like for Charleston, and for Charleston Pride.

RD: And then with my poetry and me speaking whatever I have to speak, and who I—and let them know who I am here. That also changed a lot. The fears of course, people tell me, you know this is a at-will state, you can be fired from your job because if you disclose, or if you, you know talk about it or anything, especially with teaching. I'm willing to take it on. I may not enforce it to the students to say anything, but I'm willing to take it on if anyone feels the need, that they have to let me go because of my affiliation or who I am.

RD: And then, I hope they ready to fight, because I'm not going down easily. Because I don't care that you're at a at-will state, I am worth so much, and I bring so much to the actual organizations that I'm at, so I'm more an asset than for you to ever have me as a liability. You got to know your worth.

RD: So I see Charleston as trying to change but it's not changing at the rate it should be, and I actually give a lot of kudos to We Are Family, because if you can stir up the youth, the youth usually are the ones who are the game
changers, even all throughout all movements. They were always on the forefront, or there always was, the mission to fight was for the children, even Martin Luther King spoke about it. "I hope that my four children will one day be able to—" that was his whole mission. He didn't talk about the past generation, because we've lived. He's making sure that those that come behind. Like we passing this torch to those that's going to be able to carry it on.

RD: And I be—to be honest with you the next generation is going to be that much better and equipped, you know why? Because they have, we have lived through all of this. Now, they're moving to non-binary. You understand? So, it ain't even going to be a thing of LGBTQ because everybody's going to be free spirited. I see that. So it's like the generations to come ain't even going to be, they're going to be like baffled that this even existed, because they're going to be like, he ain’t even, some don’t even want to associate boy girl no more. So this is what I'm saying. Those living out of the boxes, getting ready to totally be blown out, and the change is going to be an abundance of love.

RD: And that's what I love about society when I hear, love wins. Because love will win. We won't live in this world. And that's going to change race relationships. And it's going to, saddening to say, the LGBTQ community I feel is going to be the ending of race relationships, because you are going to accept me for who I am and not what I am. And I'm so looking forward to it. I may be eighty years old, but once, I don't care. Once I see the change and hear the change, I'm going to be pleased. Because we can't go any further back than we are.

RD: And we are further ahead, because I look at, in the '80s and the '90s when my brother and sister was alive, and the way, it was like, you were butch or he was a faggot or you know, those are not some of the bigger terms now. It's still used but it's not as colloquial as it was. You know, there's parades and celebrations and you're getting embraced.

RD: Another big monumental that happened here in Charleston, I was glad to be a part of. The Martin Luther King celebration, Pride was a part of it. We signed right up. Marched right in the parade. I had my music, and I was coming down King Street. I loved it. Last year was my first time being in the parade, and I was on AFFA’s float, and I was in the front, and I came down and I had the Pride flag but the Philadelphia Pride flag. So with the brown and black stripes.

RD: And like I keep telling people, "You know, you don't understand these little things mean a lot to you until you actually have to experience it." So when I was, come to the Pride board and say to them, “I want to see the
brown and the black flag, Philadelphia flag, as many places as possible throughout our festival. I don’t want a problem.” Because I said, "In everything, and we may not want to always accept it, but visibility matters." Some time that what you saying out of your mouth. That's why people say, you know, your actions is what I'm looking at. You can tell me you love me all you want, but if your actions doesn't speak it then I can't believe you.

RD: So, that's how we bring it all together, and even, I mean moving to having the Trans flag up. I mean, but the—what people don't seem to understand is, that color, that we can't avoid, and we can't act like it doesn't exist. That color, that race relationships is the—because it is black and white. I'm sorry. Then, however, we can combine it and make that unifying connection, that's how we build people, and bring bridges together. But if we keeps acting like you don't see color, that is a racist statement. Because you're not acknowledging me and I can't acknowledge you.

RD: And it's okay to be different but it's not okay to say that I don't see color in a world full of color. That doesn't even sound right. So just waiting for that day and that change. And being a part of this is going to make that change, because they're going to need data, and archives to turn back to and see what happened in Charleston in 2018 and who helped the transition and the change.

RD: And there's going to be someone like me that's going to be exploring it. Getting ready to write their thesis, and going to need some old data, and they're going to be like wow, there's someone I can relate to.

RD: That's why I'm doing it, because I'm not the first black person that’s, want to explore something, and I won't be the last. And we need that. So I'm also, you know, like I say grateful and thankful that this is actually being done. Yeah.

CS: I think we're winding down with this portion, is there anything else that you wanted to add?

RD: I just say that if we keep being open- minded and free-spirited we have a chance of changing our world to being the way that we actually want it to be. And that’s it.

CS: Thank you so much.

RD: You're welcome. Thank you.

End Recording.