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Religiosity and Midwestern LGBTQ+ Homeless Youth

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RELIGIOSITY AND MIDWESTERN LGBTQ+ HOMELESS YOUTH

Honors Program Senior Thesis

University of Nebraska–Omaha

Submitted by

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Abstract

Previous investigations have focused on the intersections of LGBTQ+ youth and religion, homelessness and religion, or homeless LGBTQ+ youth, without recognizing the multiple intersections that make up each LGBTQ+ youth's identity. The purpose of this study was to gain more insight into how being homeless, identifying as LGBTQ+, and growing up with some religion played a role in transitional-aged (ages eighteen to twenty-five) youths' lives. After working with Youth Emergency Services (YES) in Omaha, Nebraska, and conducting interviews with LGBTQ+ youth who were previously homeless, similar topics emerged among participants. Three participants were evicted from their homes because of their gender and sexual orientation. One participant aged out of the foster care system and became homeless. Participants saw religion negatively because of past experiences with religion and no longer considered themselves religious.

Key words: LGBTQ+ youth, homelessness, religion, abuse, coming out, couch surfing

Introduction

Many Western religions view LGBTQ+ identities as sinful and, on occasion, so do some parents of LGBTQ+ youth. In response to youth coming out, parents may evict their child from their home. Anywhere between twenty percent to forty percent of the homeless youth population in the United States identifies as LGBTQ+ even though people who identify as LGBTQ+ represent eight percent of youth in the United States (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016; Norman-Major, 2018; Powell et al., 2016; Prock & Kenndy, 2017; Robinson, 2018). LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the United States homeless population. These youth also report that they experience sexual victimization, mental unwellness, and substance use at higher rates compared to their cisgender, heterosexual homeless peers (Prock & Kennedy, 2017).

LGBTQ+ homeless youth experience higher rates of comorbidities than their heterosexual, cisgender peer. These comorbidities may include major depressive episodes, post-traumatic stress disorder, loneliness, psychological problems, suicidal thoughts and attempts, substance abuse, and more (Powell et al., 2016; Prock & Kenndy, 2017; Rhoades et al., 2018). Even though LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population, service providers are not able to work with LGBTQ+ homeless youth because services are often catered to heterosexual, cisgender homeless youth (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016).

When looking at how religion can be involved, it can be a positive source for youth. However, LGBTQ+ youth may face bigotry and stigmatization in certain religions. For example, Christian LGBTQ+ youth sometimes must go through a process of resolving their “socially conflicting identities” by either leaving their church, finding a church that supports the LGBTQ+ community, or pursuing a more personal relationship with God outside of standardized religion (Schmitz & Woodell, 2018, p. 983). Most Christian denominations have condemned the

LGBTQ+ community over the course of history because leaders of the churches viewed same-sex attraction and acting on sexual behavior to be immoral and sinful. Therefore, tensions have risen between the LGBTQ+ community and religious organizations (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). To better understand the intersection of youths' LGBTQ+ identities, religious identities, and homelessness, more research is needed to find any overlapping themes and patterns.

Literature Review

There have been articles published about the intersection of religion, gender, and sexual orientation. However, there has been limited research published about the intersections of religion, sexual and gender identities, and homelessness among youth. The literature that has been published pertaining to religion and homeless LGBTQ+ youth shines a light on similar themes and topics. According to Chan (2017), spiritual development is typically generated through social contact via “modeling and passing of spiritual values from family members and communities” (p. 149). Religion can have a positive effect for cisgender, heterosexual youths' welfare. However, LGBTQ+ youth may face stigma, discrimination, and religious abuse within some Western religions (Schmitz & Woodell, 2018; Higa et al., 2014; Chan, 2017). Schmitz and Woodell (2018) found a shared theme of common religions and their followers creating a social stigma for homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

Religious abuse can change “experiences, engagement, and navigation of spirituality and spiritual development” (Chan, 2017, p. 150). Religious abuse is defined as “abuse that occurs within religious or spiritual communities” (Heyl, 2022). It can range from a pastor condemning a church member for their sexual or gender orientation to a pastor sexually abusing a church member (Heyl, 2022). Along with potentially experiencing religious abuse, LGBTQ+ youth may also be less spiritual if they are rejected by their family because of their gender or sexual

orientation. Though, family members who gave the youth warmth and support often helped increase the youths' spirituality (Chan, 2017). According to Schmitz and Woodell (2018), negative religious experiences tend to have a negative impact on LGBTQ+ youth compared to positive religious experiences. Also, LGBTQ+ youth who grew up in a religious household had more suicidal thoughts and attempts compared to LGBTQ+ youth who grew up in a secular household (Schmitz & Woodell, 2018).

Methodology

Previously, studies have focused on the intersection of religion and LGBTQ+ youth, religion and homelessness, or LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, without recognizing the multiple intersections that make up each LGBTQ+ youth's identity. The purpose of this study was to gain more insight of how being homeless, identifying as LGBTQ+, and growing up with some religion played a role in transitional-aged youths' lives.

Participants

To be eligible for this study, participants needed to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other gender or sexual identity. They also needed to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and had grown up with some religious influence, along with previously facing homelessness. The participants that were involved are a part of YES's Transitional Living Program (TLP) in Omaha, Nebraska. The youth involved in the study were between the ages of eighteen and nineteen.

Procedures

Participants were recruited during YES's monthly Youth Council meetings. Although they were not required to be out to others, informed consent was required because the interviews

were going to be recorded. Interviews lasted between ten and fifteen minutes depending on how in-depth participants answered questions. They were asked to share their answers in a narrative style to allow more in-depth discussion. As an incentive to participate, the youth were each given a twenty-five dollar gift card.

Questionnaire Measures

Participants were asked basic demographic questions. They were also asked about their gender and sexual orientation and coming out story if they had one. Because the participants were previously homeless, they were asked about their relationships with their family and if they were still in contact with their family. They were also asked to explain in detail how religion played a role in their lives when they were younger and currently. They were asked how YES has been helpful and their plans for the future. Lastly, they were asked how Omaha could better help homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

Demographic Information

The demographic information gathered from the participants included their names, ages, pronouns, educational status, and past and current familial relationships. There were four participants. Amir and ZaNya were eighteen, and Justin and Sade were nineteen. Justin and Sade use they/them for their pronouns. Amir uses he/him pronouns, and ZaNya uses she/her pronouns. ZaNya, Justin, and Sade graduated from high school. Amir dropped out of high school but is planning on getting his GED. Sade and Justin are currently taking college classes.

When discussing past and current familial relationships, three of the youth reported experiencing abuse when they were younger. When asked about their past family, Justin, a nineteen-year-old transgender female, said,

My mom would beat me. Mental abuse, physical abuse. When I was fourteen, she got deported, so I would go house to house. It was kinda a weird childhood, I guess you could say. My mom doesn't know that I'm bi or trans or anything.

Sade, a nineteen-year-old nonbinary youth, also spoke about the abuse they experienced, "... I'm from Boston. I came here to flee an abusive situation, and I was a former foster care youth. I didn't really have support because I'm in foster care..." Amir, an eighteen-year-old male, also stated that his family was abusive.

When asked if there were still any familial connections, all of the youth stated that they had zero to little contact with their immediate family. However, ZaNya, an eighteen-year-old female, said that she and her mother don't speak anymore but she said,

"I talk to my dad sometimes. He was never really around growing up. I know who he is. We're cool when we do talk. Just certain situations with how my mom and my dad were with each other kinda caused my dad to be distant from me. My dad's side of the family though, I'm really close to them. I'm always around them. My paternal grandma– I'm really, really close with her. Along my mom's side of the family, I've always just – growing up I was close to them..."

Sexual and Gender Identity History

When talking to the participants, they were asked about their gender and sexual identities, and their coming out stories. When asked what their gender identity was, each participant had a unique way of responding to the question. Justin was not sure if that would be "trans male-to-female," but after learning that gender identity is how someone views their own gender, Justin

affirmed that they identified as female. Sade identified as nonbinary. Amir identified as male, and ZaNya identified as female.

When asked about their sexual identities, Amir and Justin identified as bisexual. Sade was questioning their sexuality, and ZaNya doesn't label her sexuality. Each participant had a unique coming out story. When asked about their coming out experience, Justin said

"I really only came out to close friends, and they were cool with it 'cause there are some that are bi, some are straight, but they're cool with it regardless. The only adult person I ever came out to was my probation officer. I actually did that yesterday, and she was very supportive about it. She even pointed me out to the PFLAG program, or something like that. I haven't had a bad experience."

When asked why they had not come out to their family, Justin said that they had not come out to family members because

"There's been small mentions to my mom where I'm like, 'Oh maybe I'm into guys and girls.' She's like, 'That's not possible because guys are supposed to like girls.' She'd have conversations about it all the time, and it always sounded like she didn't want me to be bi. It was like that was bad."

Amir also came out to friends at first.

"I came out to everyone, and everyone was like, 'OK.' I already knew that. My friends were just like, 'From freshman until junior year, you were really gay.' I'm like, 'No, I'm not. I like women.' And they were like, 'You can like women and still be gay.' And a month later, I was like, 'Yeah, I might as well.'"

Amir did not come out to his family because of his family's reaction to his cousin coming out as gay. His family was not receptive toward his cousin, and his cousin was beat by his uncle. Sade brought up similar events when they came out to their family. They said, "My dad tried to kill me. I was outed and got into a violent encounter with my dad. He told me he was gonna kill me, so that was my experience." They are not closeted, but unless asked, Sade does not openly say that they are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. They said that others had been accepting of their identity when they did come out.

ZaNya came out multiple different times to her mom, but her mom did not accept it any time. She went on to explain what happened.

My coming out experience took years actually. The first time I ever got in trouble for talking and having an interest in girls in, like, the sixth grade. My mom went through my phone, just seeing a whole bunch of stuff with me, like, you know, interacting with females in different kinds of ways. She actually kicked me out that night, like, the first time. I went to stay with my grandma for a while. Then after that, you could say I wasn't like that anymore. I was straight or whatever. Then it happened again in seventh grade, the same thing. She went through my phone. She ended up moving me schools, like, it was a whole big deal. My freshman year of high school, one of my cousins had me on social media, and I had posted pictures with my girlfriend, and they told my mom or whatever. She, like, came home and tried to go through my phone, but obviously she was coming home, so I had time to clean my phone out and like, you know. My "coming out" coming out was junior year again. My mom found out I was going on a date with my girlfriend, and she was, like, so mad about it. We got into a fight, like, physically, and I stayed away— like, I was at my auntie's [house] for a couple of days, and then, she was

just like, “You know, I’m not even mad. I should’ve known,” you know, because of the recent— the previous incidents, but she was just asking me, “Are you gay? Are you straight? What is it?” She kinda got over it, but, like, I don’t think she fully accepted it.

She continues to go on, explaining that she has not “formally” come out to anyone, but she says,

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not, like, one of those things that where I sat down and was like, ‘Hey. I like girls,’ but it was just like, you know, how parents be, and they tell certain members of the family, and they come ask, and you know, I’m like, ‘Well, yeah. I like girls.’ Or, like, people will assume like, ‘You don’t have a boyfriend or anything.’ I’m like, ‘Who said anything about a boyfriend? What about a girlfriend?’ And they’re like, ‘Oh.’ So, yeah.”

Homelessness History

The participants were asked to discuss what led to them experiencing homelessness, what they did to make money and get food, how YES has been helpful, and future plans for self-sufficiency. When talking about what led the participants to experience homelessness, Amir and ZaNya were evicted from their homes. Amir was evicted from his home when he was sixteen years old because he snuck out of the house too many times. ZaNya was evicted from her home because of her sexual identity. When Justin was asked about their experience with homelessness, they said that their mom was deported when they were fourteen years old, so they would go from house to house and eventually entered the foster care system. Sade ran away from their abusive home and the Massachusetts foster care system and became homeless.

While experiencing homelessness, the participants mainly couch surfed at other family members' homes or with friends. To make money, Amir, Justin, and ZaNya had various jobs at restaurants and retailers. Sade said that they were involved in sex work to make money and buy food. Whilst couch surfing, Amir, Justin, and ZaNya were able to eat some of the food at the houses they were staying at. Other times, they needed to buy their own food or eat at their jobs if they worked at a restaurant. That is what Amir did. He would also go to a food pantry to get non-perishables.

Along with understanding what the participants did to make money and get food, they were also asked how YES has helped them so far. Justin said,

“They helped a lot. They helped me get my first set of groceries for when I moved in. I get the room, obviously. It’s nice that you don’t have to pay for the first two months, so I’ve been saving up quite a bit... The first two months of staying at TLP are free. Then you pay a little bit more each month. It gets higher and higher.”

Amir talked about how YES is helping him become an adult.

“They helped me get my ID actually, and it’s coming in the mail. They’ve helped me get food stamps. They helped me get Medicaid, which I needed really bad. I haven’t been to the doctors for four years. They’re helping me get all my life in order and pushing me to do better for myself. They’re trying to teach me how to be an adult. I’m pushing my own boundaries out there, and they’re trying to respect it.”

Sade and ZaNya talked about how important housing is to them and that YES was able to find them a room at one of the Transitional Living homes. Sade also said, “My case manager is

really supportive, and it's nice to have someone, at least one person in this whole entire world, that I know sees me as, like, a person and understands." ZaNya agreed with Sade,

"My case manager has just been really good with checking in weekly with me and, you know, introducing me to certain stuff that I need. Therapy and stuff, you know, and she wants— she's really been pushing for me to be very active within YES, you know, with going to the group meetings and meeting the neighbors and all of that stuff."

The participants were asked what their plans to become self-sufficient are. Justin said that they were saving up money to buy a car through Opportunity Passport. Opportunity Passport is a program that helps youth in foster care save money. The program matches an amount of money that youth have saved for a vehicle, college tuition, and investments ("Opportunity passport: financial and family well-being"). Amir was also planning on getting a car to become more self-sufficient along with finding a job.

When asked what their plans were, Sade said, "I am going back into school, and I'm trying to explore the different avenues of careers, so I can be happy with what I'm doing." ZaNya said,

"I just want to be more prepared for adulthood 'cause I was always like, 'I can't wait to move out. I can't wait to do this and that.' There was so much I didn't know. Credit and all this other stuff. I just wanna be more financially smart before I officially get my own place and put my name on a lease and all that stuff. I just wanna be more prepared."

Each participant had some set goals that they wanted to achieve while in the TLP. The overall consensus was to learn how to be more successful as a young adult living on their own, whether that means getting a car, going to school, or becoming more financially secure and smart.

Religious History

The participants were asked to discuss if they and their families were religious when they were younger and if they are religious now. They were also asked how they felt about religion at this point in their lives and how religious experiences or others' perceptions of their identities made them feel. When they were asked about if their family was religious when they were younger, Justin said that his mother and grandmother were extremely religious, and that is why they had not come out to either of them about their gender and sexual identities. Amir said that his parents were religious, too.

When Sade was asked if their family was religious growing up, Sade said, "My parents are extremely religious. My mom would go to church several times a week. My dad's, like, a pastor, or he became a pastor recently, but he's pretty involved in the church, too. They're pretty devout Christians." When ZaNya was asked about religion in her family, she said that religion did not play a big role in her life. However, when ZaNya came out to her family, she said,

"They were always like, 'You gotta find God.' It was crazy to me because none of my family, especially my mom's side, they're not religious, so when I was like, 'I do like girls.' They were like, 'No, that's a sin.' You know what else is a sin, like you know? I feel like they were trying to use that as a way to justify judging me, but you aren't a perfect saint either, so it was just kinda hypocritical."

When asked if the participants were religious now, all the youth said that they were not religious. Sade and ZaNya considered themselves more spiritual rather than religious. When asked to expand on that, Sade said,

“I think I’m pretty estranged from Western faith, specifically. I have my own relationship with spirituality from my background of Afro-indigenous Brazilian... Both my parents are from Brazil. My mom is Afro-indigenous, and my dad is Afro-Brazilian, from the slave trade in Brazil. Umbanda is the Afro-Brazilian religion. It’s a major faith and people, you know, suffer, like, a lot of prejudice from in Brazil still just because it does have that background, but to me it’s been pretty healing, and I identify with it a lot.”

ZaNya said, “I feel like religion has a lot of rules and regulations. I’m not saying people can’t redeem themselves, you know, and transform. I just don’t think that’s something I see myself doing.” This is her reasoning for identifying as spiritual over religious.

When they were asked how they felt about religion at this point in their life, Justin said, “I really don’t mind it cause I know that there are people in religions that respect other religions or who aren’t in any religions or who are bi or LGBT. They respect them no matter what, but then there are also those who are like, ‘This is what the Bible says, and you’ve gotta do what the Bible says.’ It depends on who you talk to.”

Amir brought some interesting insight about how he felt about religion,

“If someone goes like, ‘Yeah, I believe in God.’ I’d be like, ‘OK, that’s really cool.’ One of my friends actually, she’s Muslim, and we talked about it, like, a week ago. It was a very in-depth conversation. It was very productive. I learned a lot of new things about it... I don’t think that I agree with God and things like that because God if he exists, and she also said that God is a very cruel person if he exists. I was like, ‘Yes, I agree God is a very cruel person.’ He doesn’t put effort into shit if he wants us to succeed, and he puts us in damnation if we make a mistake, if we’re gay.”

Sade and ZaNya discussed how they were more spiritual rather than religious because of how they felt about religion.

The last question that the participants were asked was how they felt others' perceptions or religious experiences affected their identities. Justin talked about how they were rebellious and not wanting to listen to authority,

"I was a very rebellious child. I was always getting suspended, doing drugs and stuff, going out, sneaking out the house, and sometimes it was with other guys. I would, you know, go hang out with them, and do things with them. When someone tells you, you can't do something. You wanna end up doing it. Don't eat this. You wanna eat it. Don't do that. You wanna do that. When my mom got arrested, I was put in a house with one of her friends, and it was worse than when my mom was there. I was rarely ever home, going out with other guys and stuff. It was an experience, I guess you could say, just because I had the freedom to express how I wanted to be, without anybody telling me what to do. It kinda shifted up to me wanting to go trans."

When Amir was faced with this question, he talked about some of his intrusive thoughts, but he also pointed out that he has not done terrible things,

"I have a lot of thoughts that I'm a terrible person, but at the same time, I'm like, 'No, there are a lot of worse people out there than me.' The things I do are like cannon fodder compared to the atrocious things that humans do to each other. I'm like, 'I might make mistakes, and even if God judges us for our mistakes, I'd rather burn than be judged.'"

Sade said that they are ashamed of their gender identity sometimes because of what happened in their past and the abuse they experienced as a child. They feel estranged from themselves and

guilty. ZaNya talked about how she felt her family was hypocritical because they said that her sexual identity was a sin, but she said that they aren't saints either.

Discussion and Conclusion

These interviews provided insight about what youth may go through after becoming homeless. Three of the four participants came out to their families, which resulted in being evicted from the home or running away. One participant did not come out to their family because they were worried about how their family members would respond because of how religious their family is. All four participants viewed their religious upbringing negatively because of how their family members used religion against them when they came out. Currently, all four participants do not view themselves as religious, but two participants say that they are spiritual. While the participants experienced homelessness and couch surfed, they managed to make money and get food.

The research conducted exceeded the expectations set by the researcher. The information gathered gave great insights into how the participants felt about religion, their gender and sexual orientation, and their experiences of being homeless. Patterns emerged from the qualitative data collected. The first pattern that emerged was that participants had zero to very little contact with their immediate family. The most common reason why was that they experienced abuse or trauma.

The second pattern that appeared was that the participants were evicted from their homes because of their gender and sexual orientation, or they ran away from an abusive home. Once the participants left their homes, they often couch surfed at friends' houses. On rare occasions, they stayed at extended family members' homes. Another pattern that emerged was that two of the

participants were in the foster care system, but they aged out or ran away once they reached eighteen years old. The final pattern that was noticed was that none of the participants are religious after what they experienced in their childhood. Two of the participants considered themselves spiritual.

Implications

Although there is limited research easily accessible, the findings of this study show valuable information and are similar to those described by Schmitz and Woodell (2018) in their research. Participants had negative religious experiences and potential religious abuse, which in turn made the participants leave organized religion altogether. Participants' family members often used religion as a way to condemn their child's sexual and gender identity, which contributed to the participants' religious trauma.

The data collected from this qualitative study supports the findings of other published research that investigated religiosity and LGBTQ+ homeless youth. These findings support the intersecting identities of identifying as LGBTQ+, being homeless, and rejecting religion. Also, these findings support that family members made participants less religious and identified as atheist or spiritual.

Limitations

While this study can contribute to better understand how religion can change how homeless LGBTQ+ youth view themselves, it is not without limitations. The number of participants was small, with only four participants who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to be interviewed. There was also a limited amount of time for interviewing because participants needed to be leaving from the original meeting to go home for the night. Even

though there were a small number of participants, the findings of the research showed similar patterns. Lastly, during the interviews, race was not discussed at length. All the participants did not know what religion their families followed or were exposed to. This study only shows a snapshot of Midwestern LGBTQ+ homeless youth in a medium-sized metropolitan city. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to capture similar experiences of LGBTQ+ homeless youth across the United States.

Recommendations

More research needs to be done to gain a better understanding of the intersection of religion, gender and sexual identity, and homelessness among youth. There is a limited amount of research readily available about this topic. However, there is plenty of research that investigates religion and LGBTQ+ youth, homeless LGBTQ+ youth, or homeless youth and religion, but not many articles investigate all three topics together. If this study was repeated, results may vary because of the small number of participants in this study. A different location may result in different findings. The youth were asked what Omaha could do to better assist the LGBTQ+ homeless community. All the youth had similar ideas about what could be done. The main idea was more housing for LGBTQ+ homeless youth or safe spaces at shelters. ZaNya said that there needs to more awareness about shelters, like YES, can help LGBTQ+ youth find a safe shelter.

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Appendix A, Interview Questions

1. What is your name and pronouns?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender identity?
4. What is your sexuality?
5. What was your “coming out” experience like?
6. What kind of relationship do you have with your family?
 - a. Are you still in contact with your family?
7. What led to you becoming homeless?
 - a. How old were you when you became homeless?
8. What do/did you do to make money and find food?
9. What is your educational status?
10. What role did religion play in your life growing up? What about now?
11. How do you feel about religion at this point in your life?
12. How have these experiences or perceptions affected your identity? Your “coming out” process?
13. How has YES been able to help you through your experience?
 - a. What resources/services could help you and others find a place to stay/live?
14. What are your plans to gain independence and self-sufficiency?
15. What can the community do to support homeless LGBTQ+ youth?

Appendix B, Interview with Justin

Interviewer: OK like so I've got about 18-ish questions, so my first question is what's your name and your pronouns.

Justin: Justin and them/them.

Interviewer: All right awesome so we make sure everyone gets treated at the same respect obviously, and how old are you.

Justin: Nineteen.

Interviewer: Nineteen, and your gender identity?

Justin: Would that be trans male-to-female?

Interviewer: Well, your gender identity is more of what you feel on the inside.

Justin: I would say female.

Interviewer: You would identify as female?

Justin: yeah.

Interviewer: OK, perfect, and then you said your sexuality is bisexual?

Justin: Yeah, bisexual.

Interviewer: My next question is what was your coming out experience like if you had one?

Justin: I really only came out to close friends, and they were cool with it cause there are some that are bi, some are straight, but they're cool with it regardless. The only adult person I ever came out to was my probation officer. I actually did that yesterday, and she was very supportive

about it. She even pointed me out to the PFLAG program, or something like that. I haven't had a bad experience.

Interviewer: What kind of relationship do you have with your family currently?

Justin: So, I'm the only child, and most of my family is in Mexico. It was an abusive relationship. My mom would beat me. Mental abuse, physical abuse. When I was fourteen, she got deported, so I would go house to house. It was kinda a weird childhood, I guess you could say. My mom doesn't know that I'm bi or trans or anything.

Interviewer: Are your mom and dad in Mexico, then?

Justin: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, you're the only one from your family up here?

Justin: Yeah.

Interviewer: What part of Mexico do they live in?

Justin: Chihuahua.

Interviewer: Are you still in contact with any of your family members?

Justin: I'm in contact with my mom, but if she calls, I don't really answer.

Interviewer: It's limited. You try not to, and I don't blame you. So, your experience with homelessness right now, you're living in transitional living, right? What led to you living in transitional living or becoming homeless?

Justin: So, I was arrested in 2021 for possession with intent, and I was put into a foster home. It was basically my best friend's older brother, and I only had 'til nineteen to live there with them,

so I was saving up while living with them. I didn't get the chance to get a car through the Opportunity Passport program. There weren't really any apartments I went to go look at. None of them would respond back or I wasn't paid enough to let me move in. There were a lot of requirements to it, and I didn't have a credit score. [They] (foster family) told me, "You have another month." They let me stay 'til June. My birthday's in April. "You got another month to move out. You gotta find somewhere." I talked to my probation officer about it, and she gave me the transitional living program.

Interviewer: OK, so, that makes sense. It's good that they let you stay there a little bit longer. How old were you when you became homeless?

Justin: In June. Nineteen still.

Interviewer: Nineteen still. I wasn't sure. I can't do math. When you were looking for places to live, what did you do to make money or find food?

Justin: I went and worked at Amazon, and I had friends who would let me stay at their house.

Interviewer: So, you couch-surfed a little bit?

Justin: Yeah, basically. I didn't have any of my belongings except my phone and stuff. My friend that let me stay at his house, his dad's pretty wealthy, so he'd ask his dad to get me groceries and gave me a little fridge, too. I was there for about three weeks, and that's when I talked to my probation officer about the transitional living program. That foster home is kinda what led me to really wanna leave. Even if I had to be homeless, I had no access to WIFI. They would shut off the WIFI. Basically, I was forced to go to work, stay in my room, and do chores. I didn't have access to anything. It was mentally draining. When you wanna leave, but you really can't because you'll end up being homeless, it's a dilemma.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. What's your educational status?

Justin: I graduated high school.

Interviewer: OK. You did graduate high school, but you're not currently looking into doing higher ed?

Justin: I'm enrolled for September courses at Metro. I'll only have two classes.

Interviewer: That's not bad. That'll make life easy. What role did religion play in your life growing up?

Justin: My mom and grandmother were Christian, and that's why I'm kinda scared to tell them that I'm bi and trans. My grandmother passed away, and that's what made my mom very religious after that, just because it was her mom. It kinda sucks. There's been small mentions to my mom where I'm like, "Oh maybe I'm into guys and girls." She's like, "That's not possible because guys are supposed to like girls." She'd have conversations about it all the time, and it always sounded like she didn't want me to be bi. It was like, that was bad.

Interviewer: What about now? Are you religious?

Justin: No.

Interviewer: So, atheist or agnostic?

Justin: Atheist.

Interviewer: How do you feel about religion at this point in your life?

Justin: I really don't mind it cause I know that there are people in religions that respect other religions or who aren't in any religions or who are bi or LGBT. They respect them no matter

what, but then there are also those who are like, “This is what the Bible says, and you’ve gotta do what the Bible says.” It depends on who you talk to.

Interviewer: That makes sense. It’s always interesting to think about. My family is also religious, but my mom is one the most accepting people I’ve ever met because I’ve come out to her a few times. She gave me a pamphlet from a church thing that she went to, and she was like, “People are accepting.” I was like, “You have to find the right people, though.” Some things just don’t click. It is what it is. How do these experiences or perceptions from religion affected your life? Or your identity, not life. My bad.

Justin: I was a very rebellious child. I was always getting suspended, doing drugs and stuff, going out, sneaking out the house, and sometimes it was with other guys. I would, you know, go hang out with them, and do things with them. When someone tells you, you can’t do something. You wanna end up doing it. Don’t eat this. You wanna eat it. Don’t do that. You wanna do that. When my mom got arrested, I was put in a house with one of her friends, and it was worse than when my mom was there. I was rarely ever home, going out with other guys and stuff. It was an experience, I guess you could say, just because I had the freedom to express how I wanted to be, without anybody telling me what to do. It kinda shifted up to me wanting to go trans.

Interviewer: Do you start transitioning soon?

Justin: Yeah.

Interviewer: That’s good. It’ll definitely help. So, the only reason you didn’t come out to your mom is because of the religious aspect?

Justin: Yeah, because I know she isn’t accepting about. She’s had gay friends before. It was just like one or two guys. When you’re a mom that’s going out every weekend to concerts and stuff

like that, there are a lot of gay men that go to those concerts because I've been to some of them, and they are, like, full of them. When you only have like one or two [gay] friends, it's iffy. Now that she's in Mexico, she hasn't talked to them, and the only people who I know still talk to the gay guys are two of her friends. Her dad is also in Mexico, and he is very religious as well. That's also another thing I'm worried about.

Interviewer: OK. How has YES been able to help you through homelessness?

Justin: They helped a lot. They helped me get my first set of groceries for when I moved in. I get the room, obviously. It's nice that you don't have to pay for the first two months, so I've been saving up quite a bit. I'm just waiting for Opportunity Passport to help me get the vehicle I want.

Interviewer: What do you mean you don't have to pay for the first two months?

Justin: The first two months of staying at TLP are free. Then you pay a little bit more each month. It gets higher and higher.

Interviewer: Oh, gotcha. I wasn't aware of that.

Justin: It's nice because those first two months. I'm still in my first two months, actually.

Interviewer: So, you don't have to worry about many finances at the moment, which is nice.

Then you're doing Opportunity Passport to get a vehicle?

Justin: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's that?

Justin: Basically, they ask to save up two thousand dollars, and they give you a three to one match to help you get a car. I need to save two thousand, so they'll give me six [thousand] for the

vehicle. They also give you rent matches, but you'll only get sixteen hundred in total, so it's not that much to help you with rent, but I think the car is more valuable.

Interviewer: I think a car is valuable in Omaha. We've already talked about resources and services, because did YES tell you about Opportunity Passport, or how'd you hear about that?

Justin: My attorney basically told me the Opportunity Passport and the First Independence programs. Any program that I was in, I was in before I got to TLP.

Interviewer: How long to plan on staying in TLP?

Justin: I honestly don't know. It's a matter of finding an apartment, and I have a friend that wants to move out because he lives with his mom. It's just up to him as well because the whole plan was to move into an apartment together, but we haven't talked about it in a while. I think the max I'll stay is a year just cause with me starting my transition, I kinda want more privacy.

Interviewer: I get that. Have you learned any skills about how to self-sufficient since you've been here?

Justin: Oh yeah. I've been in budgeting classes, cooking classes, wash my own clothes, go shopping, clean the kitchen, clean whatever I need to clean.

Interviewer: How many of those skills did you come in with?

Justin: Probably most of them.

Interviewer: Has YES given you more resources, more opportunities to learn?

Justin: They've given me stuff, like the meetings that they do here or stuff they do at the Outreach Center, like the art class last night. I wasn't able to go because I had a meeting

yesterday, but they're talking about doing cooking classes and stuff like that. Learn some new recipes.

Interviewer: I think learning how to cook for yourself is beneficial just because growing up in a rural town, there's no fast food, so I had to learn how to cook for myself at young age. When I moved to Omaha, that's all that my partner wants to eat, so I'm teaching him how to cook. It's a hard process, but it's worth it. What can YES or Omaha as a whole do to support LGBTQ+ homeless youth?

Justin: Expand YES in a way because I know that there's a limited amount of homes, and there's quite a bit of people out there that are homeless. Especially with the youth who get kicked out of their homes. They're the ones who need it the most.

Interviewer: I think getting more houses would be beneficial because I'm not aware of how many YES has.

Justin: I don't know either. I just know that it's very limited. There's three around where I live.

Interviewer: Oh gotcha. I mean, I saw a staff member wearing a YES pride shirt. They're very accepting people. They kinda have to be.

Justin: My PO was telling me about that. She's like, "YES is very accepting about LGBT."

Interviewer: One thing that I like that they do during their intake process is that they don't ask. You can tell them as much or as little as you want, and I think that's cool. If you think they should know this, OK.

Appendix C, Interview with Amir

Interviewer: What is your name and your pronouns?

Amir: My name is Amir [last name redacted], and I am a he/him, I guess.

Interviewer: All right. How old are you?

Amir: I'm eighteen now.

Interviewer: What's your gender identity?

Amir: I'm bi.

Interviewer: You're bisexual. Do you identify as a man, woman, or nonbinary?

Amir: I don't care. I've been called woman, male. I don't care.

Interviewer: You don't have a preference? What do you identify on the inside? A man, woman, nonbinary?

Amir: A man, I guess. I present more like a man.

Interviewer: You may present more like a man, but you feel everything.

Amir: Uh-huh. I'm very comfortable in my body.

Interviewer: What was your "coming out" experience like? Have you come out to anybody?

Amir: I came out to everyone, and everyone was like, "OK." I already knew that. My friends were just like, "From freshman until junior year, you were really gay." I'm like, "No, I'm not. I like women." And they were like, "You can like women and still be gay." And a month later, I was like, "Yeah, I might as well."

Interviewer: Nobody was, like, really mean towards you when you came out?

Amir: Oh, definitely. I had to physically get into an altercation with someone.

Interviewer: How did your family react? Have you come out to them at all?

Amir: No. I don't live with my family or talk to them anymore.

Interviewer: You don't talk to them anymore? When you did [talk to them]?

Amir: I didn't.

Interviewer: You didn't come out to them. Why's that?

Amir: My little cousin came out as gay when he was fifteen, and then my uncle proceeded to beat the living [shit] out of him.

Interviewer: OK, so your family was not receptive, basically.

Amir: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, you just answered my next question. I was gonna ask what your relationship with your family was, and you just said you have no contact with them.

Amir: Yeah, zero. Not even in the future. Nope. No chance.

Interviewer: Is that because of something that happened in the house? You don't have to disclose any information to me.

Amir: No, no. I talk about this openly. I have a long, extensive line of abuse.

Interviewer: OK. That makes more sense. That was kinda the vibes I was picking up, but [I] didn't know. Did you choose to leave your house, or were you kicked out?

Amir: I got kicked out when I was sixteen.

Interviewer: No rhyme or reason?

Amir: I got kicked out because I snuck out the house multiple times, so yeah.

Interviewer: How long have you been living in transitional living?

Amir: Like, half a month. It's gonna be, like, a month in a couple weeks.

Interviewer: What did you do? Were you, like, on-the-streets homeless?

Amir: Yeah. I was living on the streets for like two months. My friends offered a house. I moved in with my girlfriend after that, and then I moved into her mom's house. I lived at her mom's house for a little bit until my school counselor was like, "We have a YES program. Here's the link."

Interviewer: What did you do to make money during that time? Did you try to make money?

Amir: I worked different jobs, like, mainly fast-food restaurants: McDonald's, Wendy's, not Sonic, Stokes—Old Market. I also worked at "garage grill." What's that called? Smitty's Garage grill.

Interviewer: Smitty's or Sickies?

Amir: Smitty's. I just worked at a lot of fast-food places.

Interviewer: Along with that, what did you do find food? Would you eat at your job?

Amir: Yeah, eat at my job or sometimes literally go to a pantry and just get food there.

Interviewer: Are you currently in high school still?

Amir: No. I dropped out.

Interviewer: You dropped out? OK, I was just curious.

Amir: I'm planning on getting my GED in the next coming months.

Interviewer: So, soon, yeah. What role did religion play in your life growing up?

Amir: It was very –like not generalizing all Christians– but Christians usually use God as an excuse to beat their kids or abuse their kids. They're like, "Oh, God wanted me to this." No! It played a lot into the abuse that they did. They're like, "Yeah, I'm doing this because God told me to." Blah blah blah. They justified their actions by saying that – their justification for doing that cruel thing.

Interviewer: Were your parents very religious?

Amir: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: OK. Any specific denomination or belief system?

Amir: They believed in Jesus

Interviewer: Were they Christian or any specific—

Amir: They were Christian, and then they became Islamic, I think, or whatever they call it. They started calling Jesus, "Jehusha," or something like that, which I don't understand.

Interviewer: Jeshua, maybe?

Amir: Yeah, I don't know.

Interviewer: I was just curious. So, what about now? Are you religious at all?

Amir: No, atheist. I think religion is a cult.

Interviewer: It can be seen that, yeah.

Amir: But, I don't think it's all bad. I don't trash on people who like religion.

Interviewer: So, you don't believe in *a* God?

Amir: Yeah, but if God came up to me right now and was like, "Bro, I exist." I'd be like, "Um, no." I'd rather go to hell. At least Satan's honest.

Interviewer: We've kind of discussed this, but how do you feel about religion at this point in your life? If you find the right people, does it matter?

Amir: If someone goes like, "Yeah, I believe in God." I'd be like, "OK, that's really cool." One of my friends actually, she's Muslim, and we talked about it, like, a week ago. It was a very in-depth conversation. It was very productive. I learned a lot of new things about it. I was like, "That's a very good perspective." I don't think that I agree with God and things like that because God if he exists, and she also said that God is a very cruel person if he exists. I was like, "Yes, I agree God is a very cruel person." He doesn't put effort into shit if he wants us to succeed, and he puts us in damnation if we make a mistake, if we're gay.

Interviewer: How have these experiences or perceptions that you've told me about affected your identity or what you believe about yourself?

Amir: I have a lot of thoughts that I'm a terrible person, but at the same time, I'm like, "No, there are a lot of worse people out there than me." The things I do are like cannon fodder compared to the atrocious things that humans do to each other. I'm like, "I might make mistakes, and even if

God judges us for our mistakes, I'd rather burn than be judged." I don't know if that's the proper answer.

Interviewer: I honestly don't know. I'm looking at this question like, "Why did I write this question, but I'm gonna ask it anyways." Even though you've only been YES for a short time, how have they been able to help you?

Amir: The TLP?

Interviewer: Yeah. How have they helped you in general?

Amir: They helped me get my ID actually, and it's coming in the mail. They've helped me get food stamps. They helped me get Medicaid, which I needed really bad. I haven't been to the doctors for four years. They're helping me get all my life in order and pushing me to do better for myself. They're trying to teach me how to be an adult. I'm pushing my own boundaries out there, and they're trying to respect it. Not bad boundaries, just like, don't tell me to wake up at one o'clock in the morning cause I'm not gonna wake up 'til like two because I had to work at three and going and being productive all day until like twelve o'clock at night. That's what I do usually.

Interviewer: They've given you resources and services to help you be more successful and self-sufficient, even though you've been somewhat self-sufficient?

Amir: At least I've been trying.

Interviewer: You've been doing what you can. How long do you plan on staying at TLP?

Amir: Probably for the full eighteen months, until I get good savings, try and get a car. If I don't get a car, then I'll be fine. I won't attack myself, but if I do get a car, it'll be very, very nice.

Interviewer: Do you plan on getting – do you have a job currently?

Amir: I'm looking for one.

Interviewer: You're looking for one? I was just gonna ask what your plans are to gain independence, but it sounds like you've got a good plan.

Amir: I try.

Interviewer: What can Omaha do to support homeless LGBTQ youth?

Amir: Omaha is a better place for people that identify as whatever they want. They won't attack, but at the same time, there aren't a lot of groups and services to push us forward in a better society. There's still a lot of homophobia around. A lot of people aren't educated. Our education system is plummeting right now. If you didn't know that, it is. Right now, there are abortion laws against abortions and all those things. Omaha was like, "You know what, we're not going with that. You can get your abortion if you want." You can go to Planned Parenthood and get an abortion if you want to. They're not gonna force you not to. You can still legally get abortions in Omaha, which is really cool. Omaha isn't a bad place for people.

Interviewer: But, there's some steps they could take—

Amir: —to do better.

Interviewer: Yeah, I agree.

Amir: In most places, it goes like that.

Interviewer: Well, yeah, but I agree that there's not a lot of support, in my opinion. People just tend to ignore the homeless population.

Amir: I used to be homeless. I was homeless from, like, when I was born until I was eleven.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's just the shitty thing. People just choose to ignore it, and that's why we're not doing so hot.

Amir: There are a lot of ways to help homeless.

Interviewer: There are. There's more than just giving food or money. It's just giving them resources.

Amir: One thing I like to think about [is that] there are literal ghost towns that we could break down and remodel, I guess. Even if you don't want to do a ghost town, there are a lot of abandoned houses and a lot of places that we could remodel. Roads that can be put better. A lot of different ways to help the environment and animals and things. Put more awareness, like, "Don't step on raccoons," or something. "Don't put them in a trash can." Our trash is a really big thing right now in Omaha actually. There's a lot of trash downtown, but they're slowly doing better on that. I've seen people sometimes going around picking up things. I have a thing. If I find something cool on the ground, but it's not what I thought it was, like when I was walking with my friend, I found, like, a glass bowl, but I thought it was something else, so I picked up the glass bowl and was like, "Damn, I already picked it up. I might as well throw it away." That's what I usually do.

Interviewer: Well, hey. You're helping the environment.

Appendix D, Interview with Sade

Interviewer: What's your name and your pronouns?

Sade: My name is Sade, and you can use they/them pronouns.

Interviewer: All right. They/them, and how do you pronounce your name?

Sade: Shaw-day.

Interviewer: Sha— OK. Say it slowly.

Sade: Shaw-day.

Interviewer Shaw-day. OK. I thought I heard an "r" in there, and I'm like, "I don't wanna say your name wrong." Because then I'll feel bad. So how old are you? You're nineteen?

Sade: Yeah.

Interviewer: What is your gender identity?

Sade: Trans masc. nonbinary.

Interviewer: Trans masc. nonbinary. That perfectly answered my question. I don't know how to explain it [the question].

Sade: That's OK.

Interviewer: What's your sexuality?

Sade: Questioning.

Interviewer: Questioning, question mark, got it.

Sade: Question mark.

Interviewer: If you had a “coming out” experience, what was that like?

Sade: My dad tried to kill me. I was outed and got into a violent encounter with my dad. He told me he was gonna kill me, so that was my experience.

Interviewer: If you’ve told anybody else, they’ve been accepting I’m assuming? I mean if you’ve told anybody.

Sade: Some people have [been accepting]. [I’m] not closeted, but it’s not volunteered information that I give out. I try to be careful with who I’m open with my identity with.

Interviewer: No, that makes sense. What kind of relationship do you have with your family, or did you?

Sade: It was an abusive relationship. I’m in little to no contact with them.

Interviewer: All right. That answered my next question because I was gonna ask if you had contact [with them]. What led you [to] become homeless or living in transitional living?

Sade: Right, so I’m from Boston. I came here to flee an abusive situation, and I was a former foster care youth. I didn’t really have support because I’m in foster care, so I’m homeless.

Interviewer: So, you ran away?

Sade: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: How old were you when you ran away?

Sade: I was eighteen.

Interviewer: So, it’s pretty recent?

Sade: Yeah.

Interviewer: Just to clarify, you ran away/became homeless because of the abusive situation?

Sade: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: OK. How long have you been staying at the transitional living?

Sade: Eight months.

Interviewer: Eight months, so before then, before you came to transitional living, what did you do to make money and find food?

Sade: I was involved in sex work. I slept at the airport for a couple of days, and I was, like, couch surfing with people who I'm no longer in contact with. They were, like, my only support.

Interviewer: OK. What's your educational status?

Sade: I graduated college— not college— graduated high school, and I'm in my first year of college.

Interviewer: You're starting your first year?

Sade: I took a medical leave after a medical emergency and stuff, so I am returning this semester.

Interviewer: Oh, OK.

Sade: Like, online.

Interviewer: Through Metro, UNO?

Sade: I'm online through Mass Art [Massachusetts College of Art and Design].

Interviewer: OK. What role did religion play in your life growing up?

Sade: My parents are extremely religious. My mom would go to church several times a week. My dad's, like, a pastor, or he became a pastor recently, but he's pretty involved in the church, too. They're pretty devout Christians.

Interviewer: Do they have a specific denomination?

Sade: I think my mom was Pentecostal, and I'm not sure what my dad was. I think he was Baptist.

Interviewer: I just wasn't sure if you the specifics.

Sade: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: What about now? What is religion in your life? What is that like now?

Sade: I think I'm pretty estranged from Western faith, specifically. I have my own relationship with spirituality from my background of Afro-indigenous Brazilian. I have been connecting more with that, but religion has been a big source – specifically Western religion like Christianity – has been a big source of guilt and shame for me, and I've been work out of that. Maybe it'll improve with time, but right now, it's very strained and is very triggering for me.

Interviewer: So, you're more spiritual than you would say religious?

Sade: Yes.

Interviewer: OK. Can you go more into the Afro-indigenous Brazil?

Sade: Sure, so both my parents are from Brazil. My mom is Afro-indigenous, and my dad is Afro-Brazilian, from the slave trade in Brazil. Umbanda is the Afro-Brazilian religion. It's a major faith and people, you know, suffer, like, a lot of prejudice from in Brazil still just because it does have that background, but to me it's been pretty healing, and I identify with it a lot.

Interviewer: So, you've been going back to, like, your familial roots?

Sade: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: OK. That's interesting. How have the experiences throughout your life, or like the perceptions other people put on you, affected your identity?

Sade: It makes me very ashamed because with the form of abuse in my life and, like, who did it and stuff. It affects my identity as queer and my attraction to other people. It makes me feel very estranged from myself and just guilty. I would say guilt and shame are the biggest factors.

Interviewer: Yeah, no. I get that. So, self-identity has sometimes been an issue?

Sade: Yeah, I think. I'm autistic, and so I think that plays a role of societal expectations, too, because I don't experience interactions the same way, so my sense of self has also been different, so I have to look for different signs in terms of my identity, which has been, you know, a little harder to understand and find other people who are like me, in that term.

Interviewer: No, that makes sense. I don't know if I'm on the spectrum, but sometimes I feel like it makes introspection a lot harder. I don't know what I was gonna say after that.

Sade: Being assigned the gender that I was at birth, I think, you know, raised in a certain way, and so, sometimes it is hard to differentiate my feelings with, like, growing up autistic and assigned the gender I was versus being someone who is not autistic or who doesn't have that neurodivergence and growing up in a body that didn't fit you, or a body that isn't seen the way you see yourself, or isn't representative of your identity or expression.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. That would make sense. I appreciate you telling me all of that because I like getting different perspectives that I may not have thought about. How has YES been able to help you through?

Sade: Well, they provided me with housing, which is nice. Housing is pretty important. Exiting sex work has been pretty hard because growing up in foster care, I've been in it since I was, like, thirteen. Being in foster care, [you] don't really have that stability, and, so, coming here has its ups and downs, and obviously, you're not there all the time. My case manager is really supportive, and it's nice to have someone, at least one person in this whole entire world, that I know sees me as, like, a person and understands.

Interviewer: Have they been able to offer you different resources and services to help you become more independent?

Sade: Yes.

Interviewer: What have they offered, or what have they helped you with?

Sade: Right, so they have been helping me get set up with Medicaid insurance and EBT, SNAP, and stuff. They also provide support groups, and there's, like, this trans closet that [case manager] has taken me twice to, now. That has been really helpful. They also mention support groups, but now there are art groups going on, which is helpful.

Interviewer: Do you have any specific plans to be more self-sufficient?

Sade: Well, I am going back into school, and I'm trying to explore the different avenues of careers, so I can be happy with what I'm doing. Yeah, just exploring my options, I guess.

Interviewer: OK. What are you looking at to try and study, I guess?

Sade: Sure, so I'm in art school, but I'm also a writer. I wish I was in a fellowship for writing, so I'm looking at becoming a journalist, specifically in terms of liberation of Palestine and stuff and report on those topics and provide a perspective that isn't seen often.

Interviewer: That's really cool.

Sade: Thanks.

Interviewer: What can Omaha do help support the homeless LGBTQ youth?

Sade: More housing.

Interviewer: More housing?

Sade: More housing. Granted Omaha's probably more liberal than— it's definitely more liberal than, like, other parts of Nebraska, but it's still the Midwest. Like I was internalized recently, and you can just tell when you're not welcome somewhere, or like, people see who you are, and they don't appreciate it. I have often not only felt unsafe because of my race and stuff, but I'm autistic and I have the same social interactions and also because I— sometimes people can tell that I'm queer, and that makes me— I think it's hard because— I was gonna say like, “Oh, maybe there should be a queer house or something for people who identify within that umbrella can be safe and have staff that they need, support groups, and resources.” But I think that can also be a little dangerous considering the area that we're in, so I think that I would have to give it more thought.

Interviewer: Yeah, no. I like the idea of housing for specifically LGBTQ homeless youth, but then, like you said, safety is an issue, but I think it also depends on what city you're in or what state you're in because some cities are gonna be like— it's gonna be easier to do that than others.

Sade: Right.

Interviewer: Omaha is hit-or-miss depending on the area definitely.

Sade: That's what I mean.

Interviewer: I think that's interesting. That's all I had.

Sade: Cool. I hope that was helpful.

Interviewer: It definitely is. It's better than just two people.

Appendix E, Interview with ZaNya

Interviewer: What is your name and your pronouns?

ZaNya: My name is ZaNya [last name redacted]. My pronouns are she, her, hers.

Interviewer: All right, and how old are you?

ZaNya: I'm eighteen.

Interviewer: You're eighteen. What's your gender identity?

ZaNya: Female.

Interviewer: Female. What is your sexuality?

ZaNya: I don't like to put a label on it, but I do not discriminate between boys and girls, males and females.

Interviewer: That's fair. I'll take that. I was just wondering. A lot of people I've already talked to were just like, "I don't know," and I'm like, "Fair, fair." What was your coming out experience like if you had one?

ZaNya: My coming out experience took years actually. The first time I ever got in trouble for talking and having an interest in girls in, like, the sixth grade. My mom went through my phone, just seeing a whole bunch of stuff with me, like, you know, interacting with females in different kinds of ways. She actually kicked me out that night, like, the first time. I went to stay with my grandma for a while. Then after that, you could say I wasn't like that anymore. I was straight or whatever. Then it happened again in seventh grade, the same thing. She went through my phone. She ended up moving me schools, like, it was a whole big deal. My freshman year of high school, one of my cousins had me on social media, and I had posted pictures with my girlfriend,

and they told my mom or whatever. She, like, came home and tried to go through my phone, but obviously she was coming home, so I had time to clean my phone out and like, you know. My “coming out” coming out was junior year again. My mom found out I was going on a date with my girlfriend, and she was, like, so mad about it. We got into a fight, like, physically, and I stayed away— like, I was at my auntie’s [house] for a couple of days, and then, she was just like, “You know, I’m not even mad. I should’ve known,” you know, because of the recent— the previous incidents, but she was just asking me, “Are you gay? Are you straight? What is it?” She kinda got over it, but, like, I don’t think she fully accepted it.

Interviewer: So, she kicked you out two or three times?

ZaNya: Almost every time she found out, so yeah. I’ve been kicked out multiple times.

Interviewer: So, you’ve only come out to your mom. Have you come out to anybody else?

ZaNya: Yeah. I mean, it’s not, like, one of those things that where I sat down and was like, “Hey. I like girls,” but it was just like, you know, how parents be, and they tell certain members of the family, and they come ask, and you know, I’m like, “Well, yeah. I like girls.” Or, like, people will assume like, “You don’t have a boyfriend or anything.” I’m like, “Who said anything about a boyfriend? What about a girlfriend?” And they’re like, “Oh.” So, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. What kind of relationship do you have with your family, if you have one?

ZaNya: Me and my mom do not speak. I haven’t spoken to my mom since— when was that— early August? She kicked me out June, like officially for the last time, on June first, and then after that, we didn’t talk. We talked early obviously because we went to court. Even then, we didn’t talk directly to each other. June basically was really the last time I had a face-to-face conversation with my mom.

Interviewer: Are you in contact with any other family members?

ZaNya: I talk to my dad sometimes. He was never really around growing up. I know who he is. We're cool when we do talk. Just certain situations with how my mom and my dad were with each other kinda caused my dad to be distant from me. My dad's side of the family though, I'm really close to them. I'm always around them. My paternal grandma– I'm really, really close with her. Along my mom's side of the family, I've always just – growing up I was close to them, but over the years, [there was] just too much family drama. I kind of just distanced myself.

Interviewer: We kind of talked about it, but so your mom kicking, did that lead you to become homeless?

ZaNya: My mom kicking me out, yes. I was never, like, on the streets or anything, like having to sleep on the corners or anything, but I did bounce around from, like, family members' house and close friends and stuff like that. I was couch hopping for, like, two-ish months up until I got into the TLP program.

Interviewer: OK, just couch surfing basically, so it's only been like three-ish months roughly.

ZaNya: But before that when my mom kicking me out, I would go back and forth between places.

Interviewer: Were you just eighteen still when you became homeless or had you–

ZaNya: I was – my mom kicked me out on June first, the most recent, the last time, I was still seventeen cause my birthday, actually, this year is when the whole situation happened with my mom and I stopped talking. I was on the verge of eighteen, basically.

Interviewer: During the time when you were couch surfing, what did you do to make money and find food?

ZaNya: I always maintained a job. I've had a job since I was fourteen, fifteen years old, so I've always maintained a job. You know, the people I stayed with obviously— I mean, they had food and stuff, so there wasn't ever, like, a time where I was like, "Damn. Where is my next meal coming from?" You know, sometimes I would have to get my own food, pay for stuff, but if nothing else, I've been able to maintain a job.

Interviewer: All right, so that's just been a steady source of income for you?

ZaNya: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: What's your educational status?

ZaNya: High school graduate. I graduate five months ago.

Interviewer: Nice. OK. Are you looking to go into college or are you just waiting a little bit to become more stable?

ZaNya: Waiting to get more stable. I knew I didn't want to go to college right out of high school, but with the way my life played out after high school kinda threw a wrench in my plans. Ideally, in a perfect world, I would like to start college in December, but just depending on where I'm at financially and how my housing is going and stuff, I might have to wait.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense. I know it's always difficult for everyone.

ZaNya: College is expensive. I don't wanna be in debt.

Interviewer: Yes. What role did religion play in your life growing up?

ZaNya: Very small to little. My god mom [godmother], I have a god mom, very active in the church and stuff. My dad's side of the family is kind of religious, but I just feel like the older everyone got, the more we stopped going to church. I haven't been to church in years. I never considered myself religious cause I'm not quite sure what it is I believe in. I wouldn't identify with one specific religion cause I'm not a religious person, like, I don't practice anything, so yeah. I do believe that there is a higher power, so yeah.

Interviewer: You would say you're more spiritual rather than religious?

ZaNya: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's an easier label.

ZaNya: I feel like religion has a lot of rules and regulations. I'm not saying people can't redeem themselves, you know, and transform. I just don't think that's something I see myself doing.

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. That answered a lot of my questions, so that's pretty cool. So, you've only – how have these experiences or perceptions that people put on your identity affected you?

ZaNya: Well, my whole coming out experience, I guess. I felt like – cause, you know, like, my family, like, the whole gay, bisexual, and trans and just the LGBTQ+ community, it's just not something we talked about. It wasn't something that was OK, so I felt like they're were trying to corner me like, "She likes girls, so this is what she's– this is how she is." They were always like, "You gotta find God." It was crazy to me because none of my family, especially my mom's side, they're not religious, so when I was like, "I do like girls." They were like, "No, that's a sin." You know what else is a sin, like you know? I feel like they were trying to use that as a way to justify judging me, but you aren't a perfect saint either, so it was just kinda hypocritical.

Interviewer: I know you've been at YES for only a month, but how have they been able to help you so far?

ZaNya: Housing. It's just a major thing because my housing before was really just going back-and-forth between places. I had stuff here, and I had stuff there, but most of my belongings were in a relative's basement. So, housing was a big one. What else? My case manager has just been really good with checking in weekly with me and, you know, introducing me to certain stuff that I need. Therapy and stuff, you know, and she wants— she's really been pushing for me to be very active within YES, you know, with going to the group meetings and meeting the neighbors and all of that stuff.

Interviewer: Is this your first youth council meeting?

ZaNya: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you find it helpful?

ZaNya: Yeah, it was good to hear from the maternity group housing girls and just other people in the program. It's just nice to know what you're really in cause I didn't know much about YES or this program before I joined it. I kind of got in it off of faith, just hoping, you know.

Interviewer: I've already talked to quite a few of them last month, and they're very vocal about what they need.

ZaNya: Cause I really— like I said, I found this program through Google, just searching for something. Nobody introduced me to anybody.

Interviewer: Other than housing and the group meetings, have they started helping you find resources or services you may need.

ZaNya: Yes. My case manager gave me the info to a Black therapist cause for my therapy sessions, I said I would prefer someone African American or a person of color, and she gave me the information to a Black therapist that she said I would get along with.

Interviewer: That's good. What are your plans to gain independence and, like, self-sufficiency?

ZaNya: I just want to be more prepared for adulthood cause I was always like, "I can't wait to move out. I can't wait to do this and that." There was, like, so much I didn't know. Credit and all this other stuff. I just wanna be more financially smart before I officially get my own place and put my name on a lease and all that stuff. I just wanna be more prepared.

Interviewer: Yeah, and they definitely don't teach that in school.

ZaNya: Yeah. It's good to have someone to talk about it with.

Interviewer: And what— I know you've been experiencing homelessness for just a shorter period— but what can Omaha do to support homeless LGBTQ+ youth?

ZaNya: Putting these places, such as YES and other homeless services and youth services. Just putting them out there, giving them exposure, putting them in the news for what they did good cause like I said, I didn't know anything about this program before I started and had I wasn't looking on the Internet, I probably wouldn't have found it. Shedding more light on the more positive things, like this, that can help you. You know, people are always talking about it, but nobody is talking about they're doing to help it.