

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project  
Oral History Initiative  
The QTPOC Project: Representation Matters**

**Interview with Anton Black --- in three parts  
February 22, 2018**

Interviewer: Caitlyn L. Lewis  
Interviewee: Anton Black  
Date: February 22, 2018  
Location: Anton Black's Home

Transcribed by: Caitlyn Lewis

Duration: 66:22

Part One (37:59)

0:00 = childhood experiences and family dynamics; nerd/geek identity; gender and sexuality (1973-1980s)  
4:28 = influence of 1980s music and pop culture; music and fashion; androgyny (1980s)  
8:49 = attending Woodrow Wilson Junior High School (1983-1986)  
9:58 = religion and going to church; having a son  
12:00 = involvement in outreach program for church (1990-1991); views on religion  
14:38 = experiences inside the church as a queer family (2016)  
17:08 = first time going to The Park (c. 1993-1994)  
18:48 = meeting his current partner; marriage (1991/1992); visiting The Park  
21:52 = agoraphobia (fear of crowds); battling agoraphobia (2012)  
25:05 = Black family involvement in Roanoke Pride and PRISM Foundation (2013-2018); plans for LGBTQ clothing closet project  
31:27 = what it was like coming up; lack of mentors

Part Two (20:51)

0:00 = Anton's drag journey (2012-2018); discovering his trans identity through drag performance; the power of music and drag to touch people's emotions  
10:01 = his uncle who died of AIDS; marriage & family  
12:14 = activism in the LGBTQ community; issues facing LGBTQ youth today  
17:27 = the Black family (2013-2018)

Part Three ( 7:32)

0:00 =the Black family (2013-2018)  
3:15 = The Park closing briefly in 2013; titles held at The Park  
4:21 =discussing hopes of visibility for queer, trans, people of color in Roanoke area

Part One (37:59)

0:00

CL: Alright so I am Caitlyn Lewis and I am here with Anton Black. Today is February 22, 2018. We are at Anton's home in Roanoke, Virginia. This is an interview for The QTPOC Project: Representation Matters for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ Oral History Project.

So Anton, you can go ahead and start off by telling me about your childhood. Like where you grew up. You told me a story about when you were six and so I think that was a good age to begin remembering things.

0:45

AB: Well, I grew up... I was born here in Roanoke, but then we moved to Colorado. My father was in the Air Force. So, I have a little of that in me. Just being outside all of the time. Enjoying myself at like the Rocky Mountains, White Peaks, things like that. But when I came back to Virginia I was five. And I always knew I was different. From the second I stepped into the classroom. I had different interests; male interests typically, things that you would associate with boys. Football has always been near and dear to my heart. I didn't understand why I could not play with the boys, the teacher would not let me. At one point I wanted to be a pro wrestler. Because I thought that was just the best profession anybody could be in.

But, probably the time I really started getting the thought in my head that I was different for a specific reason was around the age six or seven. I was at my grandmother's house and told her I felt like a boy trapped in a girl's body. And she immediately, even though we have a bible on this table, ran to the bathroom to get the bigger print bible and told me how wrong that was, and I couldn't think like that, and please don't say that in front of anybody because I would embarrass her and the family. And, that is pretty much how that moment went and it did define me for a little while. Because then I felt very ashamed that I even thought this way. So that defined me for quite a bit.

I did live in a house where my parents did not get along, they did not divorce until after I had grown up and left the situation. But, while we didn't go to church as a family, we typically didn't. It was very... the homophobia was evident in some cases. I didn't realize that my uncle had a homosexual relationship because nobody talked about it. Yeah, so, I actually thought I was the first [*laughs*]. And they informed me that he had one and it was a bad relationship. So I am assuming my general family got a bad taste in their mouth from that relationship.

But, my childhood... I'm a geek. I was always a geek and that never really changed. I am into Star Trek more than Star Wars, you know. I had fun. I was the geeky kid with the guitar roaming around campus in high school. Singing peace songs and whatnot. It's who I am. It's not for everybody, and it was definitely odd for the little... Black nerds were not a thing! When I was growing up, it was just

not a thing. So I guess people may have seen me as different anyway just for that, but I didn't know how to express myself. Sexually, as far as who I was, and sexual identity, I think I just got lost in my nerd scope... big science fiction fan and I kinda stayed there because sexuality wasn't as important in those types of movies and books. That's really my childhood. Geeks and very confused about my orientation. *[laughs]*

4:28

CL: So do you think that had a lot to do with growing up in the [19]70s where it was, kind of a cusp (cusp-like) type of era where things were changing, but also were drawing back on the past and the tradition of things. Like we were talking about the black church and the bible on the table but also the one in the bathroom *[laughs]*. Do you think that had an effect on, I guess, the confusion or the thought processes you were going through? And the lived experiences, trying to figure out where you were?

5:02

AB: I think that the '70s in itself, cause I was born in [19]73, so I was more of an '80s baby, and I think, honestly, the androgyny of some of the '80s helped out. I do remember going to school, my grandmother, the same one who was very upset about the the boy in a girl's body... "Family Ties" was on with Michael J. Fox and I for some reason I loved that character, and I wanted to be like him. So we went to JCPenny's and we got me a blue pantsuit. And I had a little briefcase. And I was roaming the halls of Woodrow Wilson [Junior High School] thinking I was it! Cuz you know, I was dressed in my business attire. So, you know there were pop culture things that did influence me in the '80s. Not necessarily black. Culture club. That androgyny that came out... So a lot of that music helps you feel like it was okay to be you, but I could only be me in my bedroom, with the door closed, and the vacuum cleaner as my microphone and the tennis racket as my guitar. And boy was I pissed if somebody opened that door. I could be me in that aspect and I didn't see a lot of role models for me at that moment. The androgyny didn't really cross the other line. Michael Jackson was there but there was not an androgynous component to it. You know. Little Richard was as close as I could get to having a remotely androgynous... but that was just because he didn't want people thinking he was trying to date women. For me it was a strange period. As far as the '70s I was just very very young. Disco was dying by the time I started listening to music. But I do remember, my parents were really huge into music. Played Roberta Flack and all the old stuff. Aretha Franklin was big in our house. Stevie Wonder was big in our house. But as far as that, that helped me to identify love. And peace and beauty and art, but it didn't help me to identity within myself. Not that the '80s did either! *[laughs]* It was just the androgynous complex. It wasn't so hard to be androgynous. In fact I was in high school when I was asked directly if I was gay. And I said no. I said "nooo!" I even dated boys to prove I wasn't gay. Oh god. You know, sometimes I dont think kids realize how lucky they are today. And in some cases it's back tracking. They were lucky under the past administration [Obama] because people's ignorance and their anger couldn't show through as much. So now it almost feels if it's backtracking to where you don't necessarily feel as safe as you used to. Or that you can be as open about your life as you used to.

Okay, did I answer it? *[laughs]* I told you I was a rambler.

8:28

CL: Yeah you did. No you did! No, it's alright. I like rambling for the purposes of us talking for an hour. I am down for it.

8:37

AB: Cool.

8:39

AB: You talking about the blue suit, and the suitcase at Woodrow [Wilson]... was that still in middle school?

8:49

AB: Oh yeah , it was a junior high at the time, it is a middle school now. But people knew. I knew. In middle school, in junior high. It wasn't really a question. In fact, I went by "T" because I was so masculine, which was the point. And Mr. T, even though he had been out the the picture for a little while but people were like "Mr. T don't like green(?)," ya know. Like "what?" That Mr. T reference was still there. And I guess that was as much as it was acknowledged. But boy, did I fight that rumor in high school like nobody's business that I could possibly be gay. Because let's face it, black churches, wooh! '70s, '80s, '90s, '2000s, they had no part. And they talked pretty openly about their disdain for gays. So when you have family members, you know not my immediate family members, but my other family members went to church... We apparently went like Easter and Christmas...

9:58

CL: So y'all were like the holiday ones? *[laughs]*

9:59

AB: Yeah, the holiday visits. "We haven't seen you before!" "A lot of new faces in the crowd!!" Thank you very much. Ya know, but for the family that did go to church, especially the older family, there wasn't no way I was going to some of my grandparents and saying "I am gay." Or their sisters or brothers. It just wasn't going to happen. So you live your life as a lie and that sucks so bad. I lived my life as a lie so hard that I convinced myself for a period of time that "hey maybe I could be straight!" Ya know, I got married! Had a kid! I am thankful for the child. He is an excellent young man. And had I not gone through that phase, I wouldn't have him. And that aspect, great. But I still lived part of my life as a lie. And thank God he is such an open minded young man and he understands, and he is a true ally, because he is straight in every sense of the word, but he's a true ally... he's helped me deal with the things that come. He let's me know that it's okay. He was there for me when I decided I was going to transition which was a long time coming. He is a great ally to the community... but, again, I was never straight. And I think there are a lot of people who go through that. I'm not the only one. I just came from an earlier era where a lot of us tried very hard to make our parents happy. Mamas will gripe about grandbabies, they want grandbabies, and it's very hard for them to come to terms with maybe you're not getting a grandchild out of this

particular daughter or son. So I can understand that, but it wasn't my truth at the time. Out of it came a beautiful young man, but it wasn't my truth. And so now, at 44, I am determined to live my truth.

I don't know if I answered the question or not.

12:00

CL: You did. Trust me, if you don't, then I will go ahead and go back like, "So! Once again... Let me just ask you this question!" but no, I think you touched on it. What denomination were you raised with or brought up in...

12:14

AB: I can't tell you. *[laughs]* I really can't tell you, because it was, really, we just showed up at church when somebody invited us and they hounded us about it. Ya know, when I was early early adult I was baptized Baptist but I heard some very disturbing things come... We had an outreach program and we went down to Salem Avenue to The Samaritan Inn where we served food... We were out during the day and there were some women of the night so to speak that were walking on the corner and the pastor who was on the bus that took us there he said something about "the little misguided children..." I mean he was very negative. That was the most positive thing he had to said and it clicked with me right then, "is this really where I wanted to be?" "Am I a Christian? Yes." That hasn't changed for me; it won't change for me. I am not an organized religion person because I find so much of that within organized religion. I also love some Buddhist principles. I try and live my life right. I try and be good to other people. And I think that means more than a particular denomination or anything else. Because my grandmother she took me to church one time, my great grandmother, and there was screaming and dancing and somebody caught the Holy Spirit. I'll be honest, I was ten and I was petrified because I didn't know what was going on. But it's just one of those things for me, organized religion didn't really follow what I was doing with my life. Some of the things that come out of preachers' mouths scare me.

14:13

CL: Did you ever confide in, while you were in the youth, you said, outreach program? Or like any other church affiliated... Christmas time, Easter time, whatever conversation you would have had with other church members or congregation members... Did you confide in anybody about these feelings that you were having, or did it just stop there at ten saying "I just can't talk to these people."

14:38

AB: Well, see at ten, it was still just one of those "come along for a holiday" things. And that was the way it was during my life and I never really confided in anybody in the church. I wasn't close to anybody in the church. Ya know, I was only there two times a year.

That incident with the Baptist church happened when I was 18. And I wouldn't've confided in anybody because of the other comments that went around on the bus. It made me literally so uncomfortable that I think I went back one more time and then I stopped. And then our youngest

child went to a church in Roanoke last year... two years ago is when he went, and he invited us to come. And so we went to the church with him. And the pastor deliberately went after the fact that we were gay. From the instant we sat down. Because we had let him [Anton's son] go with a neighbor. I've always believed in letting my children figure out the path for them as far as spirituality and religion. My partner's Catholic, or was born Catholic. So, I didn't want to force anything down anybody, ya know? Especially my kids. You find your way, your path, that fits you. I guess that came from me being pushed into a path. "Let's be straight! So everybody's happy!"

But, ya know, it was really, really hard to sit in that audience while that pastor deliberately demeaned us. Cause he said, "I had something else to talk about today." "Oh really?" So we left and my son at that moment said, "I am never going back" and he hasn't been back. But that was his decision. I also did not tell him he could not go back, it was his decision. He felt that what happened was completely inappropriate and wrong in the spirit of God, so he chose not to go back and I respected his decision. I'm not sure how I would have felt if he wanted to go back, but luckily he came to me before that time and said, "I am just not going back."

I have no idea what the question was [*laughs*].

17:08

CL: [*whispers*] I don't either, it's fine.

So, let's see. You said 18 was about when that incident happened and we kept trucking along and talked about your son and how recent that kind of conversation was about "the gays" and what that means and about how even today in society, like in 2018, where that's a common word and understanding like people who are gay in your community and even in your family, but it's still even recent today down the street, going to the church on Sunday...

[I have a] question about when you started going to places, I guess on the flip side that did support the feelings that you had... Ohhh, there's a smile! [*Acknowledging that Anton began smiling*] So the feelings that you had about who you are and you trying to figure that out in the spaces that allowed you to actively do that. So I know that The Park was founded in '78 (1978), which was a few years after you were born so you clearly weren't there hanging out with people, but how was that happening?

18:14

AB: The truth is, as far as places that were defined as "safe," The Park was the only place that I knew of. However, I had gotten married and I had a kid. And it wasn't until I was 20 or 21 before I even stepped in the door of The Park. Keep in mind, I hadn't been to nightclubs. I had a baby.

18:48

CL: When did you get married?

18:48

AB: I was 18. I was going on almost 19. So for me, to step into The Park, I think I had a two year old son, and it was... Wow. It was huge for me because I had never been to a nightclub. Ya know? "Did you go here, or here, or here?" I hadn't been in any of the nightclubs. But my mom was watching my son for a weekend and I was like, "okay, well I'll go out!" And strangely enough, my partner now is who took me to The Park. It was three of us. It wasn't like it was a date or anything, but she took me. She had to explain the ins and the outs, ya know. Because, I didn't know! I thought sometimes when people asked you to dance that was all that was! But, ya know, I went there and there was this music just thumpin, this whole atmosphere of fun, let go. And then that's when I realized that's what people go there for. It's the one place they can be themselves. No retribution, no judgement. Ya know, because I saw men in dresses with beards, which, I was like "wow!" Because coming out of this straight relationship I saw drag queens, I saw DJs just getting it in the booth, and I saw people on a quest to have fun and be themselves and not be scared. So that was a beautiful thing! It was nice to have that space where I could just be me, because up until that point, I had not experienced it, ya know? So I owe a lot to The Park. And that was when I was young, just so I could figure out it was okay to be me. It's nice when you're surrounded by people who have similar interests, especially in lifestyle.

There was a big period of time when I was away from The Park. I had kids to raise, ya know. We have four so that's a lot of kids. At one point my niece was involved with us too, she was living with us, too, so that's five, so that's a lot. I didn't start going back until my youngest turned 13. But again, I was a shut-in for a very long time. Can't tell you about other bars, because I never went. I was a shut-in, because of the agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is Greek for "fear of the marketplace," basically means you can't stand to be in crowds. I have severe panic attacks, tra-la-la-la. Um, but, after that... [directed at Caitlyn] Did you want me to go into that now or later?

21:49

CL: If you wanted to go into that now, you are more than welcomed to.

21:52

AB: In 2012, my partner was very tired of not doing things together...

22:03

CL: And this is the partner that brought you to The Park?

22:05

AB: Yeah. No, she wasn't my partner at that time, but we ended up getting together in 1995. And she wanted us to do things together, out in public. But of course I had the issues. So she convinced me, "okay, we can't go to Pride In The Park. Can we just go to The Park after?" And I was like "okay, we can go to The Park." And you know, I had to take a Xanax because I knew I was going to flip out. And that's the one thing you don't want, is someone having to call the ambulance, and people all gawking at you and everything. So we went in and that bar was filled with people, filled with love, it was the last day of Pride weekend, it was fantastic. And while I missed Pride In The Park the festival, as soon as you walked in there was this feeling of love and encouragement. "Come in, be

yourself.” So we went that night and it was the first time that I had been out in public that I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid of a panic attack. I wasn't afraid that anybody would say anything to me or directly about me or be horrible to me in some way or judge me in some way. So that was really the turning point for me and I owe a great deal of that to that bar. And it's not about the alcohol... Back when I went, they didn't even have the alcohol. They had beer and that was it. There was no mixed beverages. It was just nice to be in a room full of people that all felt we deserved to love who we wanted. So that was special for me. And that was really the turning point for me, that was my established place where it was like a second home, and it still is to me to this day. It's the one place that I know that outside of these four walls that I know I will be loved and accepted for who I am. So yeah, it's extremely important to me. That is why I joined Pride, to do my part. Because there is a community out here that needs us, and they need us in several different ways. Roanoke Pride is not just about that festival. Yes, the festival is huge; it's got to be. Because that's where people from all over Southwestern Virginia come to celebrate who they are together. And our allies because God knows we love them. That's why that day is so important, but we do so much more than that. So, for me, that's me giving back to the place that gave to me.

25:05

CL: When did you start being a part of the Pride process? Whether it be inside The Park or at the park where the big Pride festival outdoors [happens]?

25:18

AB: Um, that's a strange question and it has a slightly lengthy answer. I told you I came out of the house to The Park in 2012. There was a cancer benefit March 9th of 2013 and I participated in that with my youngest daughter and that was the first time I was on stage. And because we were raising money for cancer, I said “you can get past the agoraphobia for this moment.” Or at least I thought I could. Again, I had someone else on stage with me so that was beautiful and helped me in that moment. But, raising the money for cancer we did the song by U2 “Together” with Mary J. Blige and the reception was really good for that. It was my first time on stage. And that let me know that I could be... I could focus on something different. Yes, I'd be the first one to admit that the vacuum cleaner and the guitar... ya know, I think everybody has that want when they are young. But drag helped change the way I looked at things as Anton. So, ya know, I went out for that and then my drag father said why don't you do this trailer park show or trailer park pageant. I did that and I won that, so I was like “oh, cool.” That started me being at The Park more. That was still five years ago. I didn't really jump into Pride because I won Mr. Roanoke MI in 2013 also, or Mr. Roanoke Pride MI...

27:23

CL: Could you specify what MI means?

27:26

AB: It's Male Impersonator. I won that in 2013 also. I didn't really help out with the board, or a lot of stuff, but for the last two years... last year... my family... I have a drag family named the Black family and part of my belief is that you have to give back to the community. So that's extremely important to the members of my family because it's a requirement; that's just part of being a Black. So we



started going, if there was a big event outside we would put up the fencing, things like that. We didn't so much become involved with the board or with Pride and PRISM until this year. We helped out with the angel tree last year and we helped with the angel tree this year, but for the last two years a lot of our focus has really been on Roanoke Pride and PRISM in particular and seeing what ways we can help the community. Right down to a project that I am extremely excited about; it's a clothing closet. LGBTQ clothing closet and the reason I am so excited about it is because we have this moment where unfortunately the political elements are kind of drifting backwards where we had some recognition and some openness and actual love being shown to us up until 2016, some of that's changed. But we do still have transgender members of our community. And these people need to get jobs. If they're FTM [female-to-male] they need binders, ya know. If they are living their life, we feel like we need to help them. And binders are not inexpensive. They cost around \$40 typically, give or take. Wigs that you can wear to work are not inexpensive so for MTFs [male-to-females] we are gonna need wigs, makeup. We have people who are willing to do seminars with them so that they can feel comfortable in the body they are in and get the job that they want and desire. We are also talking about doing seminars to help people interview, ya know these are things that directly give back. We need to help the youth in the community; we need them to feel good about who they are. So the clothing closet is huge in that aspect. Also business clothing. Hopefully we will get really good results and have people be able to be their best selves as they pursue whatever that job they are looking for in the workforce. And we are always open to other ways we can help. That's a good thing. Because there are things we haven't thought of or kicked off. We are also talking about a food closet; those plans are in action because let's face it, there are plenty of LGBTQ people who are in need. And the way things have been going recently, they don't necessarily feel comfortable going to the churches that they would have gone to previously, or the other organizations. So we want to take care of our own and be good to people. Did I answer the question?

30:58

CL: You did. No you did. I'm telling you, I will bring it right back home. So you were talking, and you got super excited. You put down your cup, you sat up a little bit, you're like, "here is this clothes closet." So do you think that as a trans man that you would have benefitted from that? So say that this existed ten years ago, do you think that that would have helped you with your Anton life?

31:27

AB: God, yes! See, the funny thing is, at one point when I was much younger, when I went to the bar, I saw Rosa Parks... no, Rosa Lakes, I'm so sorry. She was a drag queen. She wasn't the prettiest, and unfortunately she had been, according to what I heard, had been beaten very badly at some point by some men who didn't appreciate her. She held her head to the side. The one thing I remembered is she would always, "It's my birthday!! You gonna buy me a drink?!" She was a short, little, black trans woman or... it'll probably be just "transvestite" in that aspect. But I remember her being on stage... she was not the most fearsome drag queen by any means, but she let me know in that instant, because she was the first one that I had ever seen on stage, it's okay. If she could be up there... she wasn't decked out in jewels or anything but she was having her moment on stage and you couldn't tell her nothing. She thought she was Diana Ross on that stage. And she let me know it'll be okay.

And the only thing I could think of was, “damn, why can’t guys do this?” But it was just because I hadn’t seen it. So that thought was probably in my head since 21, but I still hadn’t seen a male lead. And apparently I missed a lot of male lead for the years that I was out... what was your question?

33:32

CL: I was asking if the closet that you were talking about would also have helped you. So you started talking about, I remember the name that you were...

33:35

AB: Rosa Lakes!

33:35

CL: Rosa Lakes! You were talking about Rosa Lakes...

33:40

AB: Now I remember where I was ... it’s a circular transition. Um, for me, it would have helped. It would have helped to have somebody to talk to. And that’s another thing we wanted to provide for people is to have somebody to talk to. Because if you don’t have anybody to talk to, you don’t know what the hell you are doing. Binding and binding daily, ya know, there are things that are important. Some of these youngsters are out here and they are damaging themselves using Ace bandages. We want them to do it the proper way. Where, when they, if they, elect to have the surgery, that the doctor doesn’t have a harder time. Or that they don’t damage the breast tissue they have. It’s important for them to have somebody to talk to. I didn’t have that in this whole thing... I’m sorry [*was reacting to Caitlyn asking him to not tap on the table*] I’m tapping the table?

34:40

CL: No you’re okay! We have it on the big little box thing, but also [*referring to the book the recorder is sitting on*]. Thank you, Kitty.

34:45

AB: Got you, thank you. Um, ya know. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to to help me through certain aspects of it. Now, you can learn certain aspects of it through drag, which is where I did learn it. But as far as a transitioning person... they need someone to talk to. Someone to walk that line with them, someone to call. Because it’s hard, I don’t care who you are. You are going to have family members that are cool and you’re gonna have family members that absolutely detest it; you’re gonna have family members that talk shit... it’s a big range of things, ya know? And I think that’s why The Park is so central. It’s because at least that’s the one place where your cousins that you grew up throwing water balloons with and playing water guns and hide and seek and duck duck goose, all of a sudden they want nothing to do with you. “Oh, oh, cause you’re like that...” Facebook is awful, in some cases, because that’s where you learn some of your family members they agree with the bathroom bill, and you’re like, “oh, did you forget I am trans?” “We gotta protect our children!” Stop. Stop. There have been no trans bathroom incidents, ya know? It’s hard. It’s hard, and The Park is that place where I can be me. The least I can do is help other people to be

themselves. So I think that's what I am getting back to, yes. I wish that had been there before for me. The trailblazers did so much. They couldn't cover every angle and every aspect and nobody knew that being trans would come to the forefront during Obama's presidency. Trans people were like, "what? What's going on?" It's a process of learning together, trying to be there for one another, and being represented. That's the other thing. I don't know a lot of other black trans men. But I do know other trans men. But in my experience, being black, growing up in a black household... luckily I didn't have the church everyday. I know a lot of black trans women. I didn't have the constant church thing so I didn't get berated on the church side. I didn't have to worry about that. But I did have the Bible thumpers in my family who were more than happy to berate me at home or if I went over to their house or something like that. Times change, but as we can tell from the current political climate, some things stay the same.

37:49

CL: Alright, so we are at like 37 minutes, you said that you wanted to maybe take a break. Would that be good for you?

37:54

AB: That'd be fantastic.

37:58

CL: Cool, so we will take a break and we'll be back!

[END OF PART ONE]

## Part Two (20:51)

0:00

CL: So we are back now after our little break and conversations on the porch, which I enjoyed. So last we talked about The Park and drag and how that was kind of your pivotal coming out, well another pivotal point because [19]95 you going there was a pivotal point where you saw people just having fun, wanting to be there, enjoying their lives, living their lives as they want to and as they could try to. Tell me about your drag experience and your journey in drag and how that came about.

0:39

AB: March 9th, 2012, I decided to be in the cancer benefit because I have lost a lot of family members to cancer... and friends. So for me it was, "go ahead and do this this one time. This one time just go do it. Knock it off your bucket list." Because honestly The Park was the only place that I felt safe. So I went up there, I had my daughter with me, we did U2 "One," and we got great feedback from the crowd. The crowd really liked it. That was my first time on stage so I was not quite sure. I was as boogerfied as they come, but the reception from the crowd was incredible. And that love that

I felt coming back to me, giving me energy, making me want to give them more... that was the bug that bit me. Now I'm not going to act like it bit me instantly. I felt great that night, but the next day I was like, I am never going back on stage! It's just not happening. I don't know why anyone would think about it! But a friend of mine, who ended up being my drag father, looked at my performance and said, "I think you oughta go and try the trailer park." I don't know what the trailer park is...

1:58

CL: And was that 2013?

2:00

AB: No, that was still 2012.

2:03

CL: Okay.

2:04

AB: Um, hold up. Maybe it was 2013...?

2:08

CL: You mentioned something about the trailer park, and I imagined what you said. You were crowned and I think that was 2013. But also, that was your life, so don't let me...

2:17

AB: It was neat because they looked at the video from my performance and they were like, "you gotta do the trailer park. I'll draw you up a talent and everything. I'll practice with you. You just go in there and do it." "Okay." They drew up the talent, great talent. And they drilled it into me how to do it. And we did this cutesy little thing where I was in a chair and I was acting like I was driving and we did these lines from "The Great American Trailer Park Show." It's an off-Broadway show. And it was a hit. It was fantastic. I was crowned King of the trailer park. And you get trailer park gifts...in fact... [*Anton walking over to a china cabinet with crowns inside*]

Right here, I know people can't see it, but right here is my King of The Trailer Park crown. Which was really really interesting and really really fun. That's part of what gave me "I am actually pretty decent at this." Ya know, when you do something and you feel good about it, even if I hadn't won I would have felt good about it, because of the audience reception. I was like, "I can maybe do this." I like performing, I like giving something to the crowd. For me, I am supposed to make the audience forget for 3 ½ to 4 ½ minutes about their bills, about their husband problems, their wife problems, electricity is about to get cut off... whatever the issue is! About their crappy boss... I need to take them somewhere else for 3 ½ to 4 ½ minutes or however long my song is or number is. And before that, I wrote a lot. I don't write as much anymore, but I wrote a lot. Because, that's how I express myself. Now, drag is really where I express myself.

4:19

CL: Were you writing plays, or poems, or songs...

4:22

AB: I was writing novels. I have two!

4:24

CL: Oh! Books?! [*laughs with Anton*]

4:25

AB: Still too chicken to frickin send them off! Drives me crazy. Two. Two. Of course, I am a geek, so one is paranormal and the other one is just science fiction. So I guess that is the best way to say it. I have these passions and when I get passionate about something, it gets scary because then I lose my mind. And part of that is that I have a hard time staying focused after the strokes [*laughs*]. I am going at different directions. But if it's something that means a lot to me, I'm gonna give it my everything. Just like as far as drag performances.

I had a stroke. I have a very hard time remembering lyrics, so if it means something big to me, then imma do it. If people ask me to do a song or if I feel there is a song that needs to be done, like "Not Afraid" by Eminem. I have friends who are drug addicts, I have a daughter who has some issues. That was huge for me to learn all those lyrics. I have to learn them, not only do them correctly on stage, pronounce them right, do everything right. But I'm not just standing there. I have to be interactive with the lyrics and the audience. So I practice a lot typically, but that's just so I give the audience a good show.

Drag is also where I rediscovered that trans—the true part of me. Because I had buried that deep after that whole Bible thing with my grandma, I buried it really deep. But I realized when I was putting on beards and looking in the mirror, "this is who I am." And Anton who you see on stage is truly who I aspire to be. I'm not that comfortable in real life. I am awkward and geeky. He is kind of suave and he can be thuggish from time to time for a song, but it helped me recognize that was the first time I felt comfortable in my own skin. With a beard and a binder. What am I going to do? I walk like a dude, typically talk like a dude. Love sports, and get obnoxious, like a dude. Typical, quote-unquote, and not trying to say anything against gender fluidity or anything, but I was born in [19]73. I know how dudes do things, I know how women do things. I have no interests... don't ask me about heels... people be talking about "have you seen my purse?" "What does it look like?" "Oh, it's a Michael Kors." "That means nothing to me! Is it brown?!" [*laughs*]. I don't know what you're talking about. And it bites... I have no interest. I never have. And honestly, my family would sometimes get me girly presents. I did not know how to acknowledge them. They're like, "oh here. I got you this for your birthday." "What am I going to do with this sweater because I am never going to wear it!" I wore a dress once in my life and it was graduation. They painted my face, they stuck me in some heels that I could not walk in and so they got me some smaller heels. I graduated in a dress. Don't come at me with a dress for my funeral. I did not live as a woman. I am not gonna die and be put in a box as one either... now that I am off topic [*laughs*]... but seriously, drag helped me figure a lot out. It helped me learn to connect with people, because I had trouble connecting with

people. And music is always this beautiful thing that crosses every boundary. It doesn't matter. I have neighbors on both sides who play Spanish music all the time. I do not know a single word that is in those songs, but I understand and appreciate the music. And everybody can understand and appreciate music, so for drag, that's just me dressing up, putting on a show, with the one medium that connects everybody. I used to think it was math, but really it's music [*laughs*].

8:58

CL: Isn't there math in music too? Because there is always... both.

9:00

AB: Oh yeah! Absolutely! Absolutely. It's the one thing. If you're upset, you listen to the radio or Pandora, or whatever people listen to. But there is always music. You hear about people jumping in their car and driving and just listening to music. It touches us on such a primal level. That's one of the reasons I love drag. We can get that emotional. We can... Sometimes our audience cries. I've made people cry before and have to go out after the song and hug them and they tell me their story why it made them cry. I've had that happen to me in [19]95. A queen did "Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me"... it meant a lot to me. My uncle had died of AIDS and it was relatively recent after that and you can just touch people in special ways. You can hype them up, or you can make them cry, or you can just make them smile. There are so many ways you can go with it, that's why it means a lot to me.

10:01

CL: Was that the uncle who wasn't really talked about? That had that bad relationship or was that a different uncle?

10:07

AB: Oh no, that was the same uncle. Now, he did... while he had the gay relationship, he ended up having several hetero relationships and had kids in those relationships but nobody ever spoke about the gay relationship. It was just this hush-hush thing. But we get Christmas cards from some of my family, and from my girl's family... we get Christmas cards from them. Almost 23 years, we're not a phase. We're gonna be together. And regardless if you like it or not, that's just how it's gonna be. I think because there wasn't this jump to another relationship, because we all know the adage [about] lesbians and U-Hauls... they say it all the time. And sometimes it still happens to this day. But for me, having a loving and affirmative relationship with the same person means the world to me. Because nobody else will put up with me [*laughs*]. I am being really honest. I am a mess. Truly a mess. I'm okay with that! I try to get better everyday, but there are aspects of me that while they may slip their phone number in with that one when they hand it to me on stage, they do not want to bring me home for any reason. I am needy, [*begins laughing*] I am whiney, I'm a mess.

11:44

CL: You are also this amazing, from what I am hearing and I am labeling you as this so take it back if you need to and we can talk about it, but like an activist in the community to a certain level [by] creating space. Do you feel like you're an activist? Is that a word... Because I know that is a

conversation now like, “okay, I am a feminist, I am an activist, I am this X,Y,Z” that also has all these other connotations to it so you may or may not identify as that.

12:14

AB: I don't know if I identify as an activist. I identify as this one messed up person trying to make this corner of their world better. I don't do well with crowds, so as far as me being out there on marches or anything like that... ahhh [*sound to convey uncomfortability*]... that's who I view the activist as. They are down there and they are doing the nitty gritty. I do things behind the scenes a lot, except for the drag part. I don't identify as an activist. I wish that more people would just try and clean up their corner. And I think that if we can get together and do that, we could make Roanoke a better place, this spot a better place. We have colleges that we were contacting in reference to setting up booths for Pride, who no longer have LGBTQ groups. I went, “what just happened?!” I think that stunned me so much, I didn't know what to do. Because people thought we were getting complacent once Obama was openly recognizing us and that places were talking about “we're LGBTQ friendly.” I think people got complacent, because I heard comments like “why do we even need gay bars?” And I was like “Hold the damn phone!” Because I know how things work. While Obama's in office, things are getting better, but I do not know who takes over after him. So we don't know if this is going to continue, and we don't know if this will get rolled back, and the truth is it got rolled back. There's reports all over the place, if people would dare to look, where LGBTQ rights are being taken away. So, I don't know. Maybe activist could be in my future, but, I have way too many panic attacks [*laughs*], ya know? You can't call a big gathering and get carted away in an ambulance because you had a bad moment. And everything is on Facebook and Instagram... I really don't need that going out to the world. I just believe in making the world a better place.

Right now my focus is for LGBTQ youth and adults... we've got to do better. And that's not taking anything away from the people who've paved the way, because it used to be a lot worse than it is today. In fact, two years ago it was better than it is today. So, ya know, we've got a lot of work to do. And as long as we continually plug away at doing the work, we can help people and we can see that suicide rate come down, because LGBTQ teens are five times more likely to try and commit suicide. The numbers are staggering and we don't have... back when I was growing up it was Matthew Shepard. His mother started a foundation, but we don't have that right now. Another horrible tragedy. We had Pulse, and it seems like that happened, we acknowledged it, and we were all very hurt by it, but it seems like as a country we've moved on, and that hurts my heart, because those people died. I haven't moved on from it. They wanted to dance. When I went to The Park, I wanted to dance... and to go in there and be shot up and killed and to be wounded for life, the ones who made it out... they're wounded for life psychologically. For the ones who are wounded, they're still wounded for life. I just think that have to take steps to avert these horrible things from happening, especially in this climate. And, we have to take care of our brothers and sisters; that is primary. We have to make sure this kids have a place to go, we have to make sure these adults have a place to go. And they can always make themselves better. I hope the community can get behind that.

16:34

CL: So we are kinda creeping up on an hour. I have maybe two or three more questions to ask, but you are definitely taking it and running with it, which is great. It's not at all a bad thing, but I just wanted to be sure we have enough time and want to be sure that it's okay with everybody in the room that we keep going for those two or three questions. Cool? [*received confirmation from Kitty and Anton*]. Cool.

So, we were talking about family a little bit, and you said that you have the Black family, which is your drag family, and y'all's mission statement or what y'all are about (like be about it, you bout it), is to help people who are like you. To help the people that are in your community and finding different ways to do that, but my question I guess is how did that family start? I know that you said you had a drag father... well, I guess he's still your drag father for all eternity...

17:26

AB: Yes.

17:27

CL: So, I guess tell me the family tree, or the steps or whatever you want to tell me about the Black family.

17:35

AB: I'm the patriarch of the Black family. I have been in drag for almost five years. For me, it was... there are other families in Roanoke and drag means different things to other families in Roanoke. For me, it was we are kind of the misfit toys. Imma be as honest as I can be. The Black family, in itself, we all have some issues. Which I think is fantastic, and I am being honest, because none of us think we are better than anybody. We all have some of those issues of self doubt, self worth. As a family, we come together and we help each other... we pick each other up. Now, sometimes, as the patriarch, I have to clamp down on somebody and sometimes they get butt-hurt about it, I'm not going to lie. It's about becoming better. And they push me to be better. If I don't do something I am not supposed to... if I don't handle something I am supposed to handle they let me know, "Pops! How about this?" ya know? So, for me, I've raised kids, I am very proud of my kids... even the one who has some problems. I am proud of all of my kids. I am the same way with the family. They have become integral with Roanoke Pride this year. Not every member of the Black family, but yeah some of them. And they want to help out, because that's what we preach. You help out. It's not about just getting on the stage. Even if you never get back on a stage, you still gotta help the community. We just want to give back. They have the same ideology I do. We know that we have people in this community that are hurting, and I know because my kids spend a lot of time talking to them. A lot more time than me, I'll be honest. They are much better on the phone I am, and text. Wanting to help your community should be in everybody. I don't care what community it is. Of course in this community we rely on other gay people, lesbians, bisexual people, transgender people, and allies. But everybody in every community should want to help benefit everyone else in some way, shape, or form. So, the Black family came from me deciding I wanted to start a family and encouraging them to be the best they can be on stage, be the best they can be in their real lives— jobs, work, everything—and be the best they can be for their community. And those are basically



the pillars. I didn't want anybody coming into the family who only wants to go on stage and that was their life. "I was on stage for 5 minutes and it was everything!"

20:44

[addressing an audio disturbance ~ 7 sec.]

[END OF PART TWO]

Part Three (7:32)

0:00

[Getting back on track ~ 20 sec.]

0:20

CL: So, your biological—through marriage—partnership... the four, kind of kind, children including your niece, and then the Black family... do they ever mesh? Well, not mesh, but like do they see each other, exist in the same room, in the same realm?

0:40

AB: Well, the Black family [*laughs*] ... my daughter Brooklyn Black, that's her stage name. Maggie and I raised her together. She is my partner's child. Brianna, she's the one that just walked in from work, she's a part of the Black family. She's Jersey Black. She's dating my 17 year old son. My 25 year old son has yet to hit the stage. Victor Black, very close friend of the family. Usually Thursday nights we have get togethers. Grayson Wild is part of the family... Everybody comes on Thursday nights and we sit down.. The kids that I raised, for the most part, are in the Black family. We do have other outside kids who are in the Black family, they come down Thursday nights. We practice, we work on stoning vests or whatever, sit down, talk about ideas. Sometimes it turns into a mini-PRISM meeting, ya know, that type of thing. Because they're involved. They want to be involved. I do require it... but they just want to be involved [*Anton and Caitlyn laughing*]. I could push them, they are young. Courtney is like 23/24, so a lot of times, these are really young kids. And if we show them how to be involved in their community, they can take the reins later after the oldies, like me, move on into the sunset and graze in the pastures. I do want the youth, the gay youth in particular, to get it. Somebody did pave the way for you, learn that history. And make sure that we don't have to repeat it. Right now, some things feels like we we are repeating and that's just because of the political climate. The bar did close at one point and a lot of us, in particular me, felt very very out of it, because there was nowhere for me to go...

3:14

CL: When was this?

3:15

AB: That was 2013. That was while I was reigning as Mister—M.I.S.T.E.R., that’s for MI [male impersonation]. But this year, I am the first transgender Mister—Mr.—Roanoke Pride. So, for me, that was huge... and for some trans men, that was huge because that didn’t happen before. It actually made me nervous, so nervous, going into the competition because I was like, “oh my god. I’m running this as my life,” and it was really the first competition I was able to run as I lived. And I did Ray Charles and I won, so I was really happy with that [*laughs*].

4:00

CL: I think I saw that. I remember seeing that. I was like, “what?! There’s a Ray Charles on stage!”

4:05

AB: Yeah. It’s a lot of fun. As far as being in drag, it’s a lot of theatre, but I have a lot of fun with it. Okay.

4:17

CL: I guess this could be our wrapping up question.

4:20

AB: Okay.

4:21

CL: I really like the cheesy wrapping up question, so I guess what do you hope to see in terms of visibility [in terms] of queer/trans people of color in the Roanoke, Virginia area. We were talking about it, this is how I know you. Me going to The Park and I was like, “wow!” That one brown person, or face, or body that I saw in the whole place that one night that I went. And that stuck with me so much that I was like, “Cool! So I gotta find this person when we do our interviews” or “I think he’s very important to be a part of this project.” What do you see happening, or hope to see happening, with visibility, whether that be your own visibility or somebody else?

5:11

AB: I’m not that concerned with my visibility except that, in the aspect of I hope people realize, “oh! That brown person hosts a show every third week” and they come out because there’s someone that they can relate with, just in that aspect. Yes, I’m gay and yes, I’m black. The A-List with Anton has everybody. The crowd is everybody. I want to see more faces in the crowd like mine. That would be great! They don’t have to get on stage. Come out. Celebrate who you are. What I want, as far as visibility, is just people to feel encouraged to come down to the bar, because it’s so much more than a bar. It is a hub of activity. If we get more lesbians to come out, if we get more trans people to come out, and more people of color to come out, then we can serve that full community. If I don’t know people are hurting in one area or another or they need help in one area or another, I can’t do a damn thing about it, but if it’s brought to me, then I can look into it. So that’s the reason why when you came to me with this... this concept is absolutely beautiful. We don’t have a lot of people of color that are currently in those positions. We’ve had people of color on the stage before: Carolyn Sue Wilson, Rosa Lakes, Christina Kelly—who is now big up in D.C.... We need more

representation across the board. I fully believe that with any group. Represent all of your members. So, yeah, come out and be part of the community. Help out. Join Roanoke Pride. Join some group. That's why I am so glad that you guys are doing what you're doing. There's a big community out there that needs us, so some of us have to be willing to step up to the plate. Thanks.

7:27

CL: Cool! Thank you!

[END]