

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Toya Jones
March 21, 2021**

Interviewer: Alexis Ebbrecht
Interviewee: Toya Jones
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0:00
Alexis Ebbrecht: Alright...and can you still hear me?

0:04
Toya Jones: I can. Yes.

0:06

AE: Wonderful. Okay... The following interview was conducted with Toya Jones on behalf of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project. It is 4:11 on March 21, 2021 and we are meeting virtually via Zencast. The interviewer is Alexis Ebbrecht. So, starting from I guess the very beginning, Toya, could you tell me about your childhood and where you grew up?

0:38

TJ: Uh yes. I grew up mostly here in Roanoke, Virginia. As a child, we moved away to Virginia Beach for a little bit, but it was only for about 3-4 years and then we ended up back here in Roanoke, Virginia so for the most part, I am from, Roanoke, Virginia. And as a child, I mean I've had, you know, a pretty good childhood for the most part. Lots of good memories.

1:17

AE: What's one of, like, the best memories from your childhood?

1:21

TJ: Oh wow [*chuckles*], there's so many of them. Um, I would say, probably, you know, as a child we all stayed active outside, and we grew up with a big family, even though there was five in my immediate family, my grandmother had nine kids, and then those kids, you know, so there was a total of thirteen grandkids. So, I just remember summers playing, you know, with my cousins outside until the streetlights came on and catching lightning bugs and all that kind of good stuff. But, also too, you know as a family we would take family vacations every year to different locations. So, pretty good memories.

2:17

AE: Yeah. Would you say then the relationship with your parents and just your whole family was pretty positive?

2:24

TJ: Yeah it was, for the most part. I mean, you know, my parents were married, now divorced, but they were married [for] 35 years. But they didn't get divorced until well after we graduated, you know, all of us graduated from high school. But, for the most part, yes. I grew up in a working-class family, you know, my mom went to work everyday and my dad was self-employed. So, for the most part yeah we were pretty normal.

3:08

AE: [*Laughter*] So, did the fact that your parents both worked, do you think that influenced you wanting to be a business owner, and like wanting to stay in Roanoke?

3:17

TJ: Um, I don't know. It's weird because like people that I went to school with are surprised to see that I am still in Roanoke [*laughter*]. They thought that I would have moved away to a bigger city because I am drawn to bigger cities. I've tried to get away every chance I get to larger cities. Um, but yeah, I mean I guess. You know, I've always had a really good work ethic. I don't know where that came from, but I guess I could even label myself as a workaholic, which is a good thing and it could be a bad thing as well. But, you know, I've always worked for health

management positions with different companies until I decided to start working for myself. So, for the most part I've always had a good work ethic.

4:20

AE: And, since you did grow up in Roanoke, I feel like you could give us a bit of a unique perspective on how you think Roanoke has changed the most throughout your years here.

4:29

TJ: Hmm...It's slowly progressing, I think. I feel like it should be a lot farther along than what it is. But I definitely think it's slowly progressing. Especially when it comes to the LGBTQ group. I'm just thinking back like on some little incidents that I, you know, came across when I was younger versus the acceptance now. So, I definitely think that Roanoke has definitely progressed. For sure.

5:15

AE: And when did you start to form and accept your identity, like, within Roanoke or how do you think that that impacted your identity?

5:26

TJ: Um, it's one of those things I've always known, like I know people say this all the time but like I've always known that there's something, you know, different about me. But you know, of course, at such a young age you can't really label it, or you don't know what it is, you just know that you feel different. But... I'm sorry, what was your main question about that?

5:56

AE: Just how do you think that living in Roanoke City came to help you accept or form your identity?

6:04

TJ: Honestly, I can't really say that Roanoke has helped me form my identity. I just live my life, you know, I mean I surround myself around supportive people, and even when I was in high school I didn't really feel like I had that support system, but it wasn't until I was 21 where I actually started to... that's actually when I came out to my parents as well but it wasn't until 21 when I actually started realizing that, you know, there's people like me. And that's when, you know, I met people and became friends with them and it kinda just like progressed from there really. But, I can't say that Roanoke has helped form my identity.

7:09

AE: How did you begin... I know you said that you have found friends that relate to you and your experiences, how did you begin to find that community, to kind of help you feel a positive attitude?

7:21

TJ: It was mostly through work. Like I said, when I was in high school, it was kinda like one of those subjects that were not talked about, and now it's definitely changed for sure. But, yeah, just through work. I remember specifically, when I was working at a customer service job and I

met—we've been friends for like 25 years—but I met this particular person and we immediately became, like, the best of friends and, you know, he was gay and I was gay and we formed that bond and, you know, just doing things or going places where we could feel comfortable. We would go to like the night clubs and stuff like that in the area. But yeah, just basically finding friends at work that could relate.

8:35

AE: Mhm. When did you start building this community that you've made for yourself?

8:41

TJ: You know it really wasn't until—it probably was around when I was 20 years old. It was just really weird. It was like, you know, I grew up in also a very religious household, so, and [I'm] not sure if you're familiar with Pentecostal Holiness but that's what my mom was, so I grew up in the church environment and a very strict upbringing when it comes to religion. [They] were very strict and so I feel like, yeah ... we just had a very strict upbringing when it comes to religion and so it wasn't until I was 20 [or] 21 until I was able to really start to be myself. But that was also, too, then a couple years after I decided to leave the church, as well, that I was raised in. So, I think that kinda like helped me along to come into myself.

10:00

AE: What was kind of the tipping point of why you chose to leave the church that you grew up in?

10:07

TJ: Well, as a Pentecostal Holiness, you know, there was evangelists, they believed in speaking in tongues and, you'll have to—if you're not familiar with it you'll definitely have to research it. But you know, as far as the upbringing in the religion itself, like you know, we weren't supposed to wear anything 'pertaining to a man' because that's what they said the Bible said. They didn't want us to get our ears pierced. You know, you couldn't wear make up, which I never had a problem with that anyway because I'm not that kind of girl, but, you know, the thing that really, I think, caused me to feel so out of place is because the women couldn't wear pants. Like, you had to wear dresses and of course they had to be ankle length, you know, below the knees. So, there's a lot of strict dress codes and beliefs and things like that, that when I turned 18, I was like 'yeah I gotta go.'

11:30

AE: So, can you talk more about, like, the intersection of growing up in a very religious household and that not really allowing you to express yourself in the way that you wanted?

11:45

TJ: Yeah, it was really hard. It was definitely hard. First and foremost, like, you know, the pastors, the preachers would speak against homosexuality so much, to where it was like that alone made me feel uncomfortable. And like I said, I grew up in the church. I attended it until I was probably about 18 years old, but that alone, preaching against homosexuality, like Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, and it wasn't even just Sundays it was like, we attended church on Sundays, we went to Sunday school and then we had day service on Sunday and then we had

night service on Sunday and then on Tuesdays and Thursdays we had service. But then also there was like 12'oclock prayer that, during the summertime, you know, [we] would be forced to go to, so it was like everything was like church, church, church and of course hearing the pastor screaming out, you know, clear to me in a very derogatory term, it was definitely hard for me to even try to be myself in an environment like that.

13:19

AE: Yeah, I'm sure it was. How did you learn to accept yourself as who you are and like how you want to express yourself?

13:36

TJ: Yeah, it was just one day, it was just one day. You know, I was actually working at...let's see... I was actually an office manager at a job for the government. And funny story is my mom actually worked there as well. I was the office manager and my mom worked in a different department, and there was one woman there who [*laughter*] was clearly gay, and we had different conversations about it. You know, about life in general. She kind of understood me and, you know, she knew—obviously she was much older than I was at the time, but she kind of probably knew what I was going through or what I was experiencing. It was just a mutual thing like, we were really friendly, she was very friendly, and I remember one day I hadn't even come out yet, but one day, she brought me this magazine and it was an *Out* magazine for gay and lesbian people, and she just handed it to me. And I remember specifically a couple weeks later, I was like, you know I was tired of hiding, I was tired of lying to myself, I was tired of lying to my family, and so it was just one day, it just hit me and I was like, you know, I can't do this anymore. And I wrote a letter to my parents and left it on their pillow, and I went to stay with a friend for a couple of days to see how they would respond to it and that was my coming out letter.

15:50

AE: How did they respond to it?

15:52

TJ: Um, it was definitely not what I expected. I've always felt like, you know, for some reason and I don't know maybe it's just kind of like my upbringing, I was felt like it was harder, you know. You know, I had a lot of Caucasian friends and I kind of, I would spend a lot of time with them, at and in their households, and when they came out to their parents, you know, their parents were so accepting of them, and it was kind of like nothing changed. You know, it was great, but I always had this fear that my parents just would not accept me. You hear stories of like people, you know, parents kicking their kids out or just like disowning them, which I've had a few friends whose parents disowned them as well. But yeah, I mean it was definitely different. They didn't respond how I thought they would. My mom never mentioned a single thing about [it], even 'til this day, and this was like 22 years ago, my mom has never mentioned a single thing about that coming out letter to me, and I kind of felt hurt because I thought out of all people that she would come to me and try to have that conversation with me. Instead, it was my dad. I was a little more close to my mom than my dad, but instead, it was my dad that called me, after receiving the letter and said, you know, "whenever you're ready to come home and talk, let's talk." And, then I went home a couple days later, and we went down to his office, and, you

know, he basically said, “I just want you to know that I love you, I’m gonna love you regardless.” And that was kind of really all he kind of did, you know, “well what made you decide that you want to be this way?” Of course, you know, he didn’t understand it, but I kind of explained to him that nothing happened, or I just didn’t decide that I want to be this way, but the conversation was had, and he basically said, “I love you regardless,” and that was kind of it, like they never really talked about that particular letter again. And it still to this day my mom, like I said, she’s never mentioned that letter at all.

18:57

AE: Wow. Do you wish that she would have responded to it?

19:01

TJ: Oh yeah, of course. Yeah, of course. I mean, I feel like, you know, we’ve always been a close family, and so like I think any response would’ve been a good one at that point. It was just weird that my dad was the one that had that conversation with me because I was so close to my mom and I felt like, I would’ve loved to have heard that from her. But yeah, I feel like any response would’ve been a good response at that point. Just to have the conversation and have it open and for discussion.

19:51

AE: Do you think that was kind of like the turning point within your own life? Like, how did that response from your parents and being able to come out to them, how did that change you and your ability to kind of accept being gay and...?

20:11

TJ: It was mainly because, you know, I just think when you just reach a certain [point]... I think everyone is different, you know? I still have some friends, that still have not come out to their parents and, you know, they’re like 30 [to] 35 years old. But I think just everyone is different. I feel like, you know, every person’s story is different, and of course every family is going to respond differently, so you can’t... I don’t know, I don’t know, I just... sorry, I feel like that I’m sitting here rambling. I’m so sorry, I’m rambling, and I forgot the question. I’m so sorry. [laughter] What was the question?

21:11

AE: [laughter] Oh you are okay.

21:14

TJ: I’m so sorry what was the question again? [laughter]

21:16

AE: [laughter] I think you kind of answered it, throughout it, but it just [was] kind of how that experience, like with your parents, kind of made you come to terms with yourself. Just...

21:33

TJ: Yeah, yeah. I just think I was ready. I was again just tired of lying, tired of pretending to be someone that I was not. And again, like I said, I think everyone has their own time, and I guess that was just my time, you know?

22:03

AE: At that point in your life, did you have any friends in the LGBTQ community?

22:12

TJ: When I came out yes, I did. Then through work, and through their friends, and then meeting more friends within the community it kind of grew from there, and it definitely made it a lot easier to have, you know, that supportive group of friends that kind of understood you, you know? So, yes.

22:43

AE: Did you come out to your friends before you came out to your parents?

22:48

TJ: [*laughter*] Oh yeah, they knew. Yeah, they knew. So, it wasn't like I didn't really have to come out to... I be honest with you I've never really [*laughter*] had to come out to any of my gay friends because like they just knew, it was clear [*laughter*].

23:05

AE: Mhm [*laughter*]. So, like, going from one comfortable environment with your friends and then going to your parents' house? Like, did you notice anything about you that would like change or like the way that you would carry yourself?

23:28

TJ: You know, I would be a little more careful around my nieces and nephews, but other than that, you know, I didn't really change much. I just think people just... the more they come into themselves the more they find themselves, and then they change that way, but as far as like, you know, of course I would never... It wasn't probably until a couple years later until I actually brought a girl to meet my parents. But, as far as like my change in character, or anything like that, I didn't really change much. I just, I did kind of like try to keep that part of my life away from like my nieces and nephews because I didn't want... you know, and the way that my parents thought, some people think that if you touch someone you'll be gay or it can rub off on you or it's contagious and so, you know, like I would have things like that, you know, in my mind so I kind of like, I definitely tried to hide that part of my life from my nieces and nephews when they were younger. But other than my character change, I didn't really change too much.

25:02

AE: Would you say that you're very involved within the LGBTQ community within Roanoke?

25:12

TJ: Um, not as much as I would like to be. You know, when I came out I was very, very, very gay and like I attended all of the pride events and like everything they had gay related or LGBT I was there, but, you know, life happens and then I started working for myself, and then of course

that takes a lot of time and then before you know it's just kind of like, it's just basically work, work, work, work, work. So, no, currently, I am not actively involved in a lot of LGBT things.

25:59

AE: Yeah, and it sounds like work is really important to you, so would you mind like sharing a little bit, you know, with how you got started with your business and how you got started like being so involved within your working life?

26:20

TJ: Yes, I started working for myself about 12 years ago, it's been 12 years, and I had the dream of opening a coffee shop, owning a coffee shop slash bookstore, and, you know, I tried opening a coffee shop 12 years ago and it kind of, the economy was like really, really horrible, and, so, I failed, you know, and I had to close it down. But then I opened a property maintenance company. I still had that dream, you know, that goal that I was trying to achieve. So, I actually opened a property maintenance company, and I picked up some contracts from a lot of real estate companies here in the area, and that caused my business to grow, and with that business, I purchased a food truck. And we won a lot of really nice platinum awards with that so, I've had that for about five years. And so then from the food truck, I then decided to try [a] brick and mortar location again, and so that landed me to Morning Brew Coffee. I'm going in my fifth year of running a coffee shop.

27:55

AE: And is that in downtown Roanoke? Your coffee shop?

27:59

TJ: It is. Yes. I started out in Roanoke County, and then, I was presented an opportunity to move into the downtown Roanoke location, so my coffee shop is located inside of the Taubman Museum of Art.

28:12

AE: Very cool. Kind of why did you get started, or why did you choose to locate your business in downtown, did it just kind of happen or was it targeted for that area?

28:25

TJ: Well, you know, I was actually against it for most of the time because I would see a lot of coffee shops. I am an avid coffee shop hopper so anytime, any chance I get whether it's here locally or away, that's like one of my favorite things to do is just like check out indie coffee shops. But you know, there's been a lot of coffee shops that came into the downtown Roanoke area that failed and so for me, I was always against the idea of trying to put my coffee shop in downtown Roanoke, so it just happened by coincidence really. One of my food truck fans that would frequent my food truck every weekend came to me and was like, 'Hey I know of a space in downtown Roanoke that—her mom was actually a volunteer with the museum—and they are trying to get it filled. Would you be interested or consider moving to downtown Roanoke?' And it was a really hard decision, you know. I thought about it for weeks and weeks, actually until probably a month, and I finally decided to meet with the museum director and have that

conversation, meeting after meeting after meeting. It wasn't [until] then that I finally decided to give it a shot.

30:18

AE: Would you say that that's kind of your biggest accomplishment in your life, is starting this business for yourself?

30:27

TJ: Yeah, I mean it's definitely one that I'm proud of. You know, we didn't grow up rich by any means, we were just a middle-working class family. But yeah, because it was the ultimate goal. Well, the ultimate goal was to have a coffee shop with a bookstore inside of it, but it was the ultimate goal and just to be able to achieve that. I think that it actually exceeded my expectations like being here—the museum that my business is housed in, it's like a 66-million-dollar architectural project and it's actually one of the most expensive buildings in downtown Roanoke. Did I ever imagine myself being here? No, but, you know, I'm here and I would say that it's definitely a major accomplishment [and] achievement for me.

31:42

AE: I know you mentioned earlier in the interview that you liked to travel. Do you travel a lot for work you would say?

31:49

TJ: No, I don't travel a lot for work. I wish that I did. Yeah, mostly my traveling has been with my family, but I do like to frequent bigger cities from time to time. I have a hobby of writing, so I do like to get away for that so a lot of times I have my favorite little locations I will travel to, to write. But as far as work related, when I worked for other companies, yes, I would travel a lot to have to go to meetings and stuff, but right now like traveling [for] work basically consists of just seeing what's out there. Seeing, you know, studying other coffee shops. Seeing what works for them and possibly checking the market, the retail and commercial market in other locations. I would like to expand one day.

33:10

AE: Can you name any or a couple of places that you really like to travel to?

33:17

TJ: Well, my favorite—you know, they're not very far away. It's kind of like my little home away home. Charlottesville, Virginia is like my little go to place when I need to get away from Roanoke. It's not a very long road trip so I like to go to Charlottesville, Virginia, just hang out in their downtown little civic mall area. They have a lot of cool coffee shops there that I like to visit, just sit and write or I'll catch up on emails from work or do paperwork and stuff like that. So, Charlottesville, Virginia is my little home away from home. I do like Virginia Beach, too; Virginia Beach is a nice little gateway. It's a little bit longer drive, but it's definitely worth it.

34:13

AE: Do you have any standout memories from your travels?

34:19

TJ: Not really. You mean as a kid or...?

34:27

AE: Just anytime, like anything that you can remember that's kind of like a core memory for you?

34:35

TJ: I will say, I am definitely looking forward to... like I got my passport for the first-time last year, so it's been one of the things on my bucket list to do and I finally was able to get my passport before the pandemic hit. So, I definitely am looking forward to using that. I have never travelled outside the country at all, so I definitely have plans to do that. But as far as like travelling, places like Atlanta, D.C. I will say that Atlanta probably stands out the most. But it was a family trip that we decided to take, to Atlanta, it was like mid-July. And I don't know if you've ever been to Atlanta in July, but it was like 120 degrees. It was so miserable and like my Dad was wanting to see the stadium—the baseball stadium—and all these places. And here we are, walking the streets in Atlanta and it's like 120 degrees, it was just so hot. I will never forget that, but were we also able to do some stuff, like see the house that Martin Luther King grew up in as a child and we were able to do some stuff like that. That memory stands out a lot.

36:13

AE: I feel as if you hold a lot of identities, being a business owner, being gay, growing up religious—now not so much anymore—but like the intersection of that all, do you have anything to add onto that... like how all those identities have kind of come together for you?

36:41

TJ: You know, it's just the ultimate goal is to be happy. And you can't... you're right, I am African American, I am female, I am a business owner, I am gay, so I feel like I have like all of these things, kind of like these hurdles. But ultimately in the end, I'm a people person even though I don't want to be. It's weird. I am an introvert, like hardcore. I'm a very shy person and I always end up working in the public eye and so it's just so weird how that all happened. But it's just like the ultimate goal is: life is too short you have to be happy. I believe in self care, like the older I get you have to take care of yourself and everyone doesn't know what's best for you. You just have to kind of like step out there and be you. Yeah, I don't hide it, I don't hide me being gay. I'm very open with it. But you just have to be yourself. I've just basically reached that point where like I'm all about my business and being happy and those things are the most important things to me right now.

38:35

AE: Thinking, you know, you grew up in Roanoke, it's kind of the South in a way. Do you think that has impacted you at all?

38:46

TJ: Yeah, because in visiting cities like D.C. or larger cities in northern Virginia, D.C., Dupont Circle. Dupont Circle is this whole gay community in D.C., and I would frequent there. But yeah, it definitely has impacted me in a small way growing up in the South and being gay. If I

have time, it reminds me of a story of my very first serious girlfriend. We dated for six years, but we were actually holding hands in one of the shopping malls in Roanoke and a security guard—keep in mind this is like in the early 2000s—and a security guard approached us and he said, ‘Hey you can’t do that,’ and we looked at each other and were like, ‘Do what?’ And he’s like, ‘You cannot do that,’ and he pointed down to our hands. And he told us, you know, my girlfriend at the time was Vietnamese and of course I’m Black. And he pointed down to our hands and he said, ‘You can’t do that,’ and he was implying that we were not allowed to hold hands. And I’m [a] pretty cool, laid back, calm person—like I said I am really shy, easy going. I wasn’t expecting my at the time girlfriend, it kind of like really set her off the wrong way. And she was from D.C., so she wasn’t really used to that either. But yeah, just things like that. Growing up in the South and being in Roanoke, it’s definitely a lot different, even from cities just four hours away in northern Virginia. It has definitely kind of like opened my eyes to a lot.

41:12

AE: Yeah, I’m sure it has. That’s horrible.

41:16

TJ: Yes, it was weird. It was a very weird situation.

41:20

AE: Yeah, would you say that Roanoke has gotten better in terms of acceptance?

41:27

TJ: Yeah, I think so. Oh definitely, I think so. Oh, for sure. Yeah, because now I have friends that have kids. They are same-sex couples that have adopted kids from foster care and then into final adoption. So, I definitely think that Roanoke has definitely progressed for sure. We do have a long way to go, we really have a long way to go, but we have definitely come a long way if that makes sense.

42:04

AE: So, what kind of made you decide that you wanted to stay in Roanoke, I guess, like, what are some of your favorite things in Roanoke or about Roanoke?

42:17

TJ: You know, I guess, Roanoke is like... It’s nice to get away, like I’ve tried living in D.C. and I’ll be honest with you even though I love visiting bigger cities, I love to get away. I actually tried living in D.C. I tried moving there with my girlfriend at the time and I cried. I literally cried. And she’s like, “What wrong with you?” and I’m like, “I wanna go home.” And so, we finally moved back here to Roanoke. It’s nice to get away, but Roanoke does that, you know, it’s a smaller city, but it’s not too small. It kind of reminds me of Charlottesville in a way. It’s kind of one of those things, the people are nice for the most part. And I’m sure any place you go to has its pros and cons, but for the most part I do like the area. I live in the downtown area so I can walk to work if I want to, ride my bike to work. I kind of like the whole ambiance, it’s definitely progressing, Roanoke is definitely progressing for sure.

43:30

AE: Would you say that your identity as a gay woman is kind of, like, a defining feature for you and your life or do you think is more of an afterthought?

43:40

TJ: You know, there was a time when I was like... it's nice to not be able to hide it. So, you know, every chance I get, I don't go screaming "hey, I'm gay, I'm gay," you know? But I don't hide it. You know, I hid it for so long—well, long enough—to where it was to the point to where, like... it's weird, it's kind of an afterthought, you know? 'Cause like, it's just, I am who I am, but at the same time, I mean, it does kind of define you in a way.

44:31

AE: Yeah. I know you mentioned the story earlier about one of your coworkers, like, handing you that magazine, but when did you kind of start to realize that, you know, your identity was a lot different than the people around you?

44:49

TJ: Oh, gosh. Honestly? I was in second grade and I had... I could say it was a crush now. I didn't really know what it was back then, but I was in second grade and I was just, like, you know, I had this crush on my teacher. It was so strange, and I know you say, "it's just second grade," but, like, I remember looking at her, and being like "oh my gosh, she's so pretty" and I would volunteer, like, pass out papers, I would always be the one to volunteer. Like, raise my hand to help pass out papers or collect papers and do little stuff, it was so weird. Now that I think about it, it's really kinda weird [*laughter*], but yeah. I was in second grade and I remember, like now thinking, you kinda think "am I supposed to be, like, feeling this way?" And, of course, you don't know anything about, you know, sexual identity back then. Like, at that young age, but it was in second grade when I had this crush on my second-grade teacher and from there I just knew that there was something different about me. Like, I knew that I was attracted to girls. Like, you know, even in elementary school and middle school and, yeah, I just always knew. So, second grade was my first memory of, like, feeling different.

46:41

AE: And when, like, how soon after that [was it] when you started to, like, realize, more that it was, for sure? Was it in second grade or was it after?

46:56

TJ: No, it was probably... I was in, I went to Huff Lane Intermediate School, so it was... No, I'm sorry, it was Virginia Heights, in Virginia Heights Elementary School. We went on a field trip to the planetarium. Which, well I don't even think it exists anymore, but it was here in downtown Roanoke and there was this girl who, you know, asked if she could sit beside me on the way to the field trip and I was like, "yeah, that's fine." So, we sat beside each other on the bus going to our field trip. So, we got into the planetarium and I think this was, like, fourth grade. So, we got into the planetarium and then she's like, "you wanna pretend like," I don't remember the term that she used, it wasn't boyfriend/girlfriend, but she's like "you wanna pretend like we're a couple?" And so, you know, I'm so shy, and I'm still shy. So, but yeah, she was like, "let's hold hands" and I remember, like, holding hands in this planetarium and then I knew that, of course, it felt a lot different from second grade to fourth grade, but then I knew

that, okay, you know, “I think this girl’s cute” and so, it became a little bit more than that. And then it wasn’t until my freshman year in high school when I actually experienced, you know, girls hitting on me and, so yeah. It wasn’t really until my, I guess, freshman year of high school when I actually knew for a fact that, “okay, I am gay, this is who I am.”

49:19

AE: Do you think from, like, second grade to your freshman year of high school, why do you think it took so long to come to that realization?

49:30

TJ: Well, you know, a lot of things. You know, again, like, my strict upbringing in the church. You know, these were thoughts that always were feelings that I had to suppress because, like, growing up in a church that preached against it and condemned you to Hell for having those thoughts. I think that probably aided in it. But yeah, I mean, that’s the only thing I can think of why it took me so long to finally, to say, “oh, this is who I am.” So, I get it. I mean, and too, I will say my uncle was also a teacher at my junior high school as well as my high school, so I didn’t really want anything getting back to him, because I would always be afraid that he would then, like, tell my mom, you know, tell my family. So, I think that was part of it too.

51:02

AE: Can you think of any, like, defining moments, since at that point in your life ‘til now, like, any defining moments that kind of... I know you said your goal in life is to be happy, so is there any moments that just, like, bring you a lot of happiness?

51:15

TJ: Just in general?

51:17

AE: Yeah.

51:21

TJ: Yeah, I mean, like, just my accomplishments. I’ll say again, I know I mentioned I’m a workaholic, but, you know, one day I would like to not be able to work so much and be able to separate, and have a little balance, you know? Or being able to step away from working so much to actually, you know, doing more things that I enjoy doing. But, yeah, I mean defining moments is just, like, where I came from and to where I am now, is just, in general, like a big achievement for me.

52:10

AE: Yeah. Do you have any or can you think of any trials that you have faced as a business owner through your years?

52:20

TJ: Oh, yeah. Well, yeah, I mean, everything is a trial as a business owner. Just, the risks, the risk that you take, in general. You definitely have to have, I think, a strong backbone for it and you definitely have to have the will to wanna be in it. You know, I mean, just a business owner

in general is... it's a trial, but, you know, you just have to surround yourself with people who believe in you and believe in the dream, that definitely helps a lot, you know. Again, to have a support system of people who actually believe in your dream just as much as you do. Granted, no one is gonna want it as much as you, but, like, at the same time, it's good to surround yourself with a group of people that definitely believes in the dream as well.

53:34

AE: Would you say your support system is, like, both your family and your friends? Or is one kind of more important than the other?

54:06

TJ: I think, you know, family is definitely a good support system. You know, like my nephew. He's been working for me for seven years and, you know, and I do have a good support system, you know, with my sister and my nieces and and nephews, so yeah, like, I mean, I think that it's important. Yeah, family is definitely important to have as a support system, but, also too, people don't always have that and so, just because it's not blood doesn't mean it's not family. You know what I mean? So, just a good support system, in general, to me. It doesn't matter if it's you're family or friends just as long as your support system is strong.

55:01

AE: Well, I guess our time is almost up, is there anything else that you would like to add before we end this interview?

55:08

TJ: No, I can't think of anything else.

55:12

AE: Okay, well then, thank you so much for being a part of this recording.

55:19

TJ: Yeah.

55:20

AE: Yep, thank you.

55:23

TJ: ... for allowing me to be.

[END]