

LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
LGBTQ-OH-011

Interviewee: Robert Arrington (b. February 18th, 1960, New York, NY)

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Begin Recording

GM: Robert Arrington is from New York City, neighborhood of—by way of Harlem. In 2009, Reverend Arrington was commissioned to open Unity Fellowship Church in South Carolina, UFCCSC. Reverend Harrington was ordained as a pastor of UFCCSC in 2010. Today, Robert Arrington identifies as a same-gender loving expression of an African American male and has been in a wonderful relationship with his soulmate, first gentleman Theodore Robinson Arrington. The couple held a holy union ceremony in Charlotte officiated by Bishop Rawls in 2005, and on

Valentine's Day in 2015 they were legally married in the state of South Carolina by Pastor David Merrick Shaw.

GM: Arrington calls himself a “hub-wife” because he's half husband and half wife. They also have a goddaughter and two special teenagers as another goddaughter in their life. He loves to cook, spending time with his husband, and reading. They have a fur baby animal, Angel, fourteen years old. You could turn that music up and give Pastor Arrington some love everyone. Thank you. [Applause]

SB: Please, please show your love for the Reverend Arrington one more time y'all. Yes, holla, yes, yes, yes. If you're having a good time today say yeah.

Audience: Yeah.

SB: If you're having a good time today say yeah.

Audience: Yeah. [Louder]

SB: All right now, 'cause y'all looking mighty quiet y'all, mighty quiet. I'm feeling like I'm at the Metropolitan Opera House, baby. I got to sit with my teeth tight and my legs crossed, but you know, honey, I don't cross my legs because if you knew what was going on ha-ha-ha. [Laughter] All right, all right, all right, all right. Now, I'm going keep this as—whoo.

Audience: It's all right.

SB: Let me first give you a little more introduction to myself. I'm Symone N. O' Bishop. All of the capital letters, they spell snob. They stand for something. I can be sassy, nasty, or very, very itchy, okay? Now, since I'm talking to the good Reverend, I'm going to make sure I keep up with my Ps and Qs, okay? Y'all let me know if I get—y'all do one of these numbers. Give me an okay, now, if I go a little left, then I'm going to swing back to the right, okay?

SB: Pastor Arrington, I am so happy that I get an opportunity to talk to you and bring you to the snob corner. I don't know which of you know this. This is the snob corner, baby, only snobs allowed. If you want to be with us, you got to be a snob about something and that's always a good thing.

SB: The first thing I want to know is, outside of this introduction that Gina did, I want to know more about you. What can you tell us about yourself outside of being a man of God? Tell me some more about that. I want to know the real you.

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- RA: All right. It's very, very hard to give all of the essence of my truth. One of the issues is that most people get stuck on just—collar, and don't understand that there is more to a Reverend Robert Arrington. Real quickly, I want to first and foremost unashamedly say that on October the 11th at 2:30PM [ed.: 2018], I will be HIV-positive for thirty years, and it's nothing but the grace of God that I am still here. [Applause]
- Audience member: Yes, yes.
- RA: In 1988, when I was diagnosed, I was in Fayetteville, North Carolina and collapsed at work and died twice. I was on the life machine—
- SB: Wow.
- RA: Then, they found out that I was HIV-positive and gave me five years to live. I praise God that both doctors who gave me five years, one died end of five years, and the other one died in fifteen years.
- SB: Now, see, this just goes to show you that our math and his math ain't the same math, baby, okay? Because if anybody puts a limit to my life or restrictions on me and says, "You have just but five years to live," I'm like, Hon, I want to go back. I want to go back to that doctor. I want to go to his grave and say, "You said five years, but look at you now. Look at you now."
- SB: That's just me. I can be a little boastful, but I stay close to the man of God, and I stay close to God, period, and am a man of God so that I can humble myself. I firmly believe that, and I think Pastor you can agree to this, that humility is key to your success and to your health. Is that right?
- RA: Yes.
- SB: Now, you got diagnosed back in the day where they gave limitations on your life just because you said that you were diagnosed as HIV-positive. Five years. Five years have come and went, and come and went again. You're still here, but what is still lingering on is a stigma attached with being HIV-positive.
- SB: Myself, I'm going to give it to you, but myself, I live with that stigma, because it took me years to even, one, accept the fact that I was HIV-positive. And then it took me even longer, especially once I decided I want to be a full-time drag queen. I want to live my life being glamorous and fabulous, then to admit, while in drag, two people that I frequent on a day-to-day basis that I'm HIV-positive. Bu long story short, there's a stigma attached to that. I want to know what are your feelings about that stigma,

and what are you doing to help change that stigma, especially here in Charleston?

RA: Well, before I get to the stigma, because it's very funny, Symone, that you talk about stigma. Also, outside of being the HIV is also at seven years old my mother and father was told that I was mentally retarded, and I was not going to be able to function like anyone else. So, that's another stigma. I have a learning disability, and they took it to another level. Also, I'm a product of a father who did not know how to love me, so I'm a product of physical and verbal abuse. Those are stigmas.

RA: Now, when we come to HIV, I still cannot believe is—I have to figure I've been here with my beautiful husband, we've been here since we opened the ministry. I don't like to use the word church, because church is, in Latin, means people. We use the wrong terminology. We don't go to church on Sunday, we go to God's house.

SB: Right.

RA: Sorry, I just had to go there.

SB: Nobody's stopping you.

RA: The thing is the stigma here is ridiculous. I came by the way of Rochester, New York and moved here, and I was sharing with a young man I was hoping to get to know very well that I shared my status when I first moved here. I had a couple people come to me and say, "Boo-Boo, you not from here, honey?" I said, "No." "You don't tell people you're HIV-positive," and I said, "Well, Boo-Boo, that's not true." The stigma is ridiculous here, and it saddened me that in the almost nine years I've done two funerals and one memorial for three young men who was less than twenty years old.

SB: Wow.

RA: It's ridiculous that one got tested too late. He already had KS and other issues. The way that I'm helping remove the stigma is trying to do things like this. I've been knocking on doors to get out to help especially long-term survivors as myself and young people who—there's a need, but the doors are locked because of our skin color. I have never seen anything like this in my life.

RA: I have asked people have I moved to a time warp? Amen. [Laughter from audience.] The thing is we don't have any community here, and we don't know where we are. It's like everybody's underground or in separate

closets. You just walk in one closet and they holla and say, "Keep on coming back again."

SB: I can totally relate to that, because I'm not a native of Charleston but I'm a native to the lowcountry. I know many, many lowcountry families that believe this concept that what goes on in my house, it stays in my house. You catch anything, do anything wrong, it stays inside the house. Even if you meet somebody on the street that is in need—they need that comfort because they are newly positive, or they are scared of getting tested, point blank, period, they're just scared to get tested, but you know—I'm guilty of this. I knew that I was positive, and I heard people's stories and they lashing out, but that wall, that keep it on the inside, don't let it out at all even if it results in harming somebody else.

SB: I'm glad that you're here talking about that, because it absolutely is proof positive that there is healing in transparency. [Applause] There's a healing in transparency, you know? Unless you open up your mouth and explain your truth like you have when you came here, what took me so long to do, you won't know how many other people are like-minded individuals that you can help grow and build with, right?

SB: Now, as I like to say—excuse me. Y'all forgive me. My cheat sheet is electronic, so I got to work on its time. You got here, and you went against the grain, and you explained your truth, and people in Charleston community said, "Baby, you don't do that." You did it anyway, and you're also a man of the cloth.

SB: Now that's one of those closets that you mentioned. There's the black closet, there is the religious closet, there is the gay closet. Honey, if you were me, there's the drag closet. That closet is something sickening, but I will stay in that closet. As a black pastor, especially for our community, the LGBTQ community, what resources do you have to help eliminate it and alleviate that stigma that I can't say I'm going to church, but you are the same-gender loving man of the cloth, of God? What resources do you use to bring those two random entities—excuse me, y'all—those two entities together?

RA: The thing is, basically, when I opened the doors to this ministry, which has been very, very rough in Charleston, the resources that I'm trying to use I had to change. I went out in the community and this was before me and my beloved had a car. We didn't have a car, so I had to did this crazy bus system that I have never seen in my life where you have to take seven buses to get to one place, and then they tell you—

SB: I remember that life, now.

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RA: Yeah, and so I was meeting different people, and I was saying I'm opening an open and affirming church, and they did not understand that terminology. I don't like teaching that we a gay church. In Christendom, in the kingdom, there is no church any way. It's all one universal. Man has made it to be all these different denominations, so I try to explain to them that I'm a pastor who is openly gay.

RA: The response I get is, especially from my young males who's in their twenties and everything, is then you are not a real pastor, because a real pastor cannot be gay, and have a husband, and there is no such thing as a gay church. I said, "Well, it sure it ain't, Boo-Boo, 'cause I don't have—it's not a gay church." [Approving audience comment] We are just a bunch of people who is unapologetic of who we are. I open these doors to everyone. Anyone can come to Unity Fellowship Church, anyone, white, black, and everything else. Unapologetic. I'm Pentecostal, so if you ain't used to some hollering' and cartwheeling, you might not do well in our ministry. Amen. I have my church members saying Amen here.

SB: Amen, Amen.

Audience: Yes.

RA: We open to everyone—but getting them to even come through the door is hard. One, most people have—I spoke to a lesbian about three months ago, and she said she's not out, all the families in Charleston. She said, "If walk through your doors, I know somebody's going to call somebody in our family and tell them it is." That's why my congregation is very small.

RA: It's very hard for the resources with me trying to get it out. I've been trying to—I've been in the newspaper twice, but it had nothing to do with my sexual orientation. It had to do with when marriage was legalized and also around sexuality in the church. My resources, I use myself. What I call myself is an example, an evolution to this community. I'm trying to be utilized in many ways but, because of my skin color and who I am, the doors has closed on me.

SB: I hear you. I totally hear you. Side note, I'm asking questions, but if you happen to have a question feel free, raise your hand for the Pastor, 'cause this is a conversation. This a long overdue conversation that needs to happen in Charleston. I don't want to be the only one asking questions and monopolizing the time. Ooh, okay—I don't want to be the one, you know, monopolizing the time. If you do have a question, pop your hand up, and we can turn this to a good old talk show, okay?

Audience: That's right.

- SB: What I'm hearing is something similar to my mantra, and I'm glad for it, is you're using yourself as an example. That's the best resource especially in matters like this, using yourself. The Bible Belt, as we are affectionately known as right here, there has to be more resources.
- SB: Let me ask you what blessings or what obstacles. Back in my old Missionary Baptist church we had devotion, and every part of devotion was testimony. You had to testify on what God has done in your life. I don't want you to be like some of them 'old blue haired ladies and tell me about the rice that they had, and overcooked it, but God made it so that the gumbo still taste—I don't want that testimony, honey. What blessings, in your time here, what blessings can you share with us, or even what obstacles that are still challenging you, specifically, because like I said, our key to healing is transparency?
- SB: Since you are a “come here”, and not a “been here”, I don't know if you're familiar with that phrase, us Geechee people, us Gullah people, Geechee people. If you was born here, you's a “been here.” If you came here, you's a “come here.” Since you a come here, and you done been here long enough to been a “been here”, but you still a “come here”, so there's still some secrets around here. I'm just going to push for transparency, but the blessings that you've dealt with and—or the obstacles that you've overcome by being here in Charleston?
- RA: I first was thought with the obstacle—it's very challenging, because I'm learning that in this Bible Belt; and I tell people that I'm not in the Bible Belt, I am the belt buckle in Charleston.
- SB: All right. All right.
- RA: Basically, what the issue is, they will sit under the oppressive pastor and stay there, because it is where they was born, where their grandmother is or their uncle is pastor, and they will not come to this church. When you're building a ministry it's hard. I've had some folks who had to move on who didn't understand that we was not building a nightclub or a social group, but we was building a ministry. I thank God for my second generation who understands that we are building a ministry and a place where all of God's kids can come.
- RA: Trying to get them to come out of where they have been. One guy told me, he's like, "Boo, honey, the pastor only preach every other, maybe, once a Sunday or maybe two Sundays about homosexuality, but it's okay." I looked at him, I said, "Well, Boo-Boo, you ushering?" He said, "Yeah, I usher." I said, "You pay your tithes and all?" He said, "Yeah, honey." I'm like, "So, you ushering under a man who does not honour the essence of

who you are?" He says, "Well, there's nothing else," and I said, "Yes, there is. There's Unity Fellowship Church."

RA: I also met some couples who go to a prominent church here in Charleston. They do not go in the same car, they drive separate cars, they do not even sit in the same row. They, basically, go to the church, and they meet at a restaurant for dinner, and then hook up together. I'm like, "Why do you do this?" The thing is I don't have a choir. Amen. I have a few singers in our congregation. We have us praise in there.

SB: All right.

RA: What the children of God is coming to church for, now, is for entertainment, and they wanna be entertained.

SB: Hold on, say that again.

RA: They want to be entertained.

SB: All right.

RA: They do not want to be teached or put a hedge of protection around them but understand how to be set free. When you come to Unity Fellowship Church you got to bring your praise with you, [applause]. Amen, and you got to get it. If it comes through a CD, like we do play, then you got to roll with it. I think that turns people off when they come in and they say, "Well, honey, we couldn't stayed home if it was a CD." I said, "There's a difference with this CD, because with this CD is the anointing and the Holy Spirit with like-minded people. If you open yourself up—

SB: —to be there for His name, honey.

RA: The blessing I have to say real quick is really the blessings—because I was about to close the church in three years ago. It was a very rough personal things that was happening and everything else, and I praise God that I did not close and I did not shut the church down. One of the blessings that me and my husband and isn't he beautiful y'all. I just have to acknowledge him, Amen. He is—

SB: That is a special thing. You better acknowledge a good thing.

RA: Yeah, that's—

SB: You don't give acknowledgement to the good thing it'll turn into a bad thing real quick. [Applause.]

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- RA: He's been dragged from Charlotte, North Carolina to Rochester, New York. He looked at me, he said, "Baby, we ain't moving no more." With God has blessed us in spite of all the obstacle. Also, I must say I am not a paid pastor. I, basically, am a pastor who receives whatever my loving members could give me, 'cause I'm not in this for the money. God writes me a check every time I show up in events like this and help other people.
- Audience: All right.
- RA: One of the blessings God wrote is that, we could not still believe, is that three years ago we was blessed to have a Habitat house on James Island.
- SB: Hey.
- RA: We have a three-bedroom house now. Under Habitat, we was the first open and gay males of color to get a house. Some other people got houses, but they told them they was roommates or they was BFs [Ed: Best Friends?] or whatever it is, but we basically told them—
- SB: You told the truth?
- RA: I told the truth, Amen.
- SB: You told the truth.
- RA: Yes, a top-five rule. Even when I was married to a woman I told people I was never in the closet. I just put a cute little curtain up for a little while until I decided to take it back down. Amen.
- SB: You better take the curtain down because, honey, I'm going tell you right now, you talking to the queen of curtain couture, baby. I will take that curtain off for ya and make an old nasty gown. [Audience approval] I will do it. I will do it.
- SB: You are stepping on—you ain't stepping on my toes. I'm standing in the [guest spot?] [inaudible] for a few people. What's really, really crucial that I heard from you is that there are many of us going to church just because that's momma's church and, you know, momma told me to go to church, and this the church I'm going to knowing good and full well that you're not comfortable there. You can't be a pastor because you're gay, but you serving—but you go to church where the pastor is sleeping with his congregation and the first lady is there.
- Audience: Watch it. Watch it.

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- SB: I firmly believe that there is no sin greater than that loving'.
- Audience: Ooh, Watch it.
- SB: You can't fault me for the way that I sin, because if you just made a judgment, you just sinned right there.
- Audience: All right.
- Audience: Watch it.
- SB: If you have an opinion about what I do, and you wanna bring it to my attention, and in a condescending fashion, baby, you just sinned too. We got another question. I don't want her hand to fall off.
- Audience: Call me now.
- SB: Tell us your name, dear, and give us your question.
- Vanity Reid: My name is Vanity.
- SB: Oh, no, no, no, no. Stand up, honey. Stand up, stand up. Yes, yes, yes. I almost want to tell you to sit down, because you're too tall. You're too tall, you're too tall, you're too tall. All right, tell us your name again and what's your question, baby.
- Vanity Reid: My name is Vanity Reid. My question goes to Pastor Arrington. As a millennial, HIV-positive but undetectable, transgender woman of color, sometimes those letters, I feel, bear the same impact on my life as does the scarlet letter. I've done a lot of work about HIV law, HIV law reform for the state of South Carolina. What advice could you advise those young people, like myself, twenty-four years old, who are living with the virus but healthily and happily, undetectable, who have given up on the concept of monogamy and monogamous love?
- SB: Ooh, good question. Come on Pastor, we got you on the hot-seat, honey.
- RA: Yeah, it is hot right here. The thing is—is 'cause that is such a broad question. One of the things that I did is in my tribe 'cause that's what I call—I'm from a very huge family in Durham, North Carolina. That's where I was dragged to when I left Harlem after my father was killed in 1974.

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- RA: My family had the premises where what stays in the house, stays in the house, and I was not that way. When I went against the grain with my family is that I did a full-fledged news article on me being HIV-positive. My mother didn't speak to me for a month. My family was kind of isolating me.
- RA: One of the things that I can share, and this is why I want to work with people who are down here, is, first, you're going to continue to live if your mind says if you're going to live. If you're going to say that I'm going to die, then you will die, because what you speak inside of yourself will manifest.
- SB: Amen.
- RA: What I did was I manifest that I will live. Now, I lost my mind. I messed up credit cards, went through men, did everything else—
- SB: Yeah.
- RA: When I thought I was five years. The second year, my big boss up there said this, says, "What year is this?" I didn't understand what it was and I was like, "Year seven." I understood that I had to live.
- RA: To your question, is you have to continue to live as you're normal. I don't think about my HIV, really, to be honest. I take my medicine. I done got used to it. When I do remember it is when I get in the company of ignorant people who don't understand.
- RA: The thing that also is that I want to speak to my young people is never be ashamed of being HIV-positive, and I know that's hard to say. I'm unapologetic. My congregation knows I'm HIV-positive, the world knows I'm HIV, and it's a bold place. Everybody can't do that, but if we are going to eliminate the stigma more of us is going to have to stand up and boldly say, "I'm HIV-positive," or "I'm full-blown AIDS," unapologetically. The other issue is we don't have a support team here either, and I want to start a support for just people who just ask questions as yourself.
- SB: Good. I know Miss Vanity, uh-huh. That's a good kiki girlfriend right there, but see what I know she trying to get at is she trying to get where you are. See, there go your first husband right there, and she waiting on her husband. The issue is, here, in Charleston, uh-huh, well, then we go back to these closets, you know?
- SB: For Vanity, add the trans closet because, amongst this community and the world, my transgender sisters are fetishists. They are just pretty faces,

beautiful bodies that you can use and abuse during those booty call hours, them hours of 3:00AM to 5:00AM, those hours. She's looking for advice on how is it being unapologetically HIV-positive? What advice can you give her, so that she can get where you are and have her good thing next to her?

RA: The thing is my honey is—I believe in and I'm not going be unapologetic with all my spirituality, because I am not religion at all, but I am a pastor. One of the things I prophetically believe is that me and my husband have already met. Before we became flesh, we were spirits, and I was just lucky enough to meet the spirit that was with me before I was sent down in my mother's womb. The reason why I say what I just said is love will find you. Love will overrule anything that you have. If you don't have a leg, a arm, and a head, somebody will look down and say, "I still love you."

SB: Hey.

RA: It doesn't matter of your HIV status, love is bigger than anything is. I fell in love with this man because of simply because of who he is. Amen. He fell in love with me, and I was a little smaller, and he has hung in there with me with all of the different changes in the name of Jesus. That's happiness when you get thick-legged. [Applause]

SB: Hey, hey, that's—right there.

RA: We've been together for 18 years and he hasn't left yet. Amen.

SB: Amen.

RA: What I wanted to say to Vanity is you wait on the Lord. The Lord sends everything and everyone. You cannot get on the internet and continue to order a mate, Amen. You cannot go on the side of the road and thinking that you was going pick up somebody who just want to hit your booty or sit on your front and be your partner. You got to find somebody who wants to be with you when you're looking rough, when you're sick, when you're down. That's true love, and love doesn't happen overnight. It's a working process.

Audience: Yes.

RA: What I find with my young gay males of color, they want a instant mate. As long as everything is wonderful, and we kissing and we doing it from the living room to the kitchen to the [inaudible], it's wonderful. When a little hell break loose, Amen, when all the men breaks out, Amen, then we

want to end the relationship. We do not know how to work on relationships.

SB: Let me ask you this. Would you agree to say that a relationship is work? That's another job that you have taken on for yourself?

RA: Yes, yes, and it's harder for us who are same gender. Amen.

Audience: Right, right.

RA: My husband is a male. I'm a male. The woman does come out, and she's out a little bit right now but, at the end of the day, I'm still a male.

SB: All right.

RA: You get two males together and sometimes we bump heads in the name of Jesus. It's the same thing as two lesbians, you know what I'm saying? We don't understand that, and we don't want to do the work, but we want the relationship. We want the benefits of the relationship, but we don't want to hang in there when things are rough. We all want to pack up our suitcases long as it is. The fireworks is not always going to stay there. What I tell someone is—

SB: Hold on, I need you to say that again, because, see, you ministering' the real. What about the fireworks?

RA: The fireworks is not always going be there. If you're there just for the fireworks, when the fireworks go, you will pack up your bag and say, "Sashay," and walk away. Love calls something greater, Amen.

SB: Right.

RA: Me and my husband has been through some rough times, but we have made a vow that divorce is not the option. I already told him I might have a little limp now because of pre-conditions and stuff, but I said, "You're not going to make it through the front door anyway." Amen. I basically told him I'm too old to start over with some of these fools out here right now so, you know what, it's just best for us to work this thing out, get on our knees, take it to Jesus, hold each other now, praying and speaking in tongues, and get up and say, "Now, I love you and let's move on." That's really what it is.

RA: You have to—the other thing is—I don't know who needs to hear this, but here's what I'm going say. You got to let the person know the real you. Stop meeting people and you are Takika and you really is Bob or you

really is Bob and you say you Jamakoff. You really got to let your person know the real you when you meet them. When you meet them and give them the transparency because what happens is—let me ask how many people. How many's been in relationships and you didn't know the real person until about three months or four months down the thing, they showed up? Okay.

SB: Been in that— [audience agreement and talking]

RA: You're sitting at the table asking what happened to the other person, but if you come to the table just as you are, you come to the table with your baggage, let them know that I'm not right upstairs and sometime I might flip, but if you still want to hang with me we can do it. That's the way it is, so Vanity what you have to do is wait on the Lord. Sometimes what God does is doesn't give us a mate, because we need to grow up, we need to mature ourselves, and we need to prepare ourselves for the real relationship.

Audience: Yeah, right.

RA: I'm looking at some of you and I have to say you're beautiful. I'm looking at some of you and you're all like, "Oh my God, does that man got a collar on? Is he really saying this?" Let me tell you something, even in the pulpit, and my congregation can tell you that I'm real. Amen. I take it to the street, I've been there, I done everything there is. I'm going to give you another shock and say this. For two years I was a drag queen, Amen, and won one crown, Amen.

Audience: Laughter! What?

SB: Listen here, we got the same foundation colour, honey girl. I'm sitting back. I'm taken back, honey.

RA: I did it for the wrong reason. I did it because I am a person who was looking to be accepted. I was looking for love in all the wrong places. When I put on my illusion as Labelle, it was basically—hello.

SB: Come on House of Labelle. Yes. Mess around. Stick with me, honey. We re-birthing that house, honey.

RA: I found out really seriously it was not me, it was me with my low self-esteem and my confidence was down. One day I just came off because, and not saying anything offensive through the entertainment of drag, but it took me in some places. I started using cocaine, I did crack and acid, I was on stage so high some time I didn't even know who I was. It took me into

a dark world, and God said that is not who I brought you into the world. I put my dress down, and I now put my dress on as robes, Amen. Hello, congregation. (Laughter; applause from audience.)

SB: I know that's right.

Audience: That's all right.

SB: Vanity, you just got to wait. I also, I heard this, and I believe this, too, because while I'm not married, hopefully sooner or later I can take this decoy off and really blind you. When I made the decision to be true and be transparent, the Lord blessed me with this un-describable boldness that I bring to the stage. I bring it off the stage. You pull on me on the side—I get told so often, "You were so confident. How did you be so confident?" I'm like, "Well, you don't have enough time for that, but it is speak it into existence."

SB: You may not have your mate now but if you speak as if your mate is right down the street, he'll hurry up, she'll hurry up, you know? All too often, I think we get caught up in the dark space that Charleston has been in and sometimes lingers on, and we start being that product of that environment. If we step out on faith and say, "Look, I know what I want. I know I'm doing the best that I can, and I'm honouring my God the best way I know how," He has no choice but to give you the desires of your heart. But, He's going to put you through the waiting period to test you to make sure that what you say you want you actually are fit to have. So, honey, speak it.

RA: I want to say one other thing, too, is something else is, since Vanity brought this deep question up, stop writing on a paper of what you want your mate to be. Everything that man over there was was not on my paper. What God did was took that paper, balled it up, and said, "This is who I'm giving you." I had to accept that's who it was, because I ran from him for about six months before I committed to being—dating him, and then ended up being engaged, and everything else. What I found is I was writing down all of these things that I want in my mate or in my man that I wanted to be, and he's the opposite of everything, but he's like my shoes. He fits me and he carries me where I need to go.

SB: Hold on here. What kind of shoes, now? What kind of shoes, 'cause, see, I got a few pair of shoes, now. I used to use this analogy, too, and I had to stop, so let me hear it. Now, what kind of shoes is you talking about?

RA: The most expensive, baby, 'cause my husband, he's a Fifth Avenue man, so those are the kind of shoes I'm talking about. We need to really seriously stop writing who you want. Many people miss their soulmate,

because it's not in the packing that they want it to be, and you miss it so very much. I've seen people do that.

Audience: That's right.

SB: I got you. I got you. I got you.

Speaker 3: We got a question. We got a hand over here.

SB: Oh. I'm wearing my good shoes, honey. I could almost run in these.

Kay Dave: Okay. My name is Kay Dave, and I'm a member of Reverend Arrington's Church. My question tonight in this is a wonderful start to battle that really needs to be had here in Charleston and in South Carolina, period. How do you feel for or think we all can get together, and I mean the agencies? I work at DHEC [ed.: South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control] and they should be here along with a lot of the young LGBTQ community that's kind of like underground.

Kay Dave: MUSC, Roper, we all want to get the LGBT community, especially the MSM, the black young MSM to be able to come in, get tested, feel comfortable. The trans community to be able to walk into the health department and feel like they belong and they can get tested. We are not seeing that, and there's a division with the community-based organizations, the agencies, that we're trying to do the same thing, but somewhere the link is broken. You know what I'm talking about, Pastor. Talk to people about—

RA: See, the thing is what we are starting today is—and I'm glad for Dr. DaNine J. Fleming back there, hey sweetie A powerful ally. The thing is ... and I want to also say real quickly is I'm overwhelmed, because I really didn't think that I was going to see anybody that look like me tonight. I thank God for the people of color throughout the room [Applause] could come out. Sadly, is that the room should be packed, it's not.

RA: That's a hard question. It is. Agencies here in Charleston has to open their doors, and they need to invite us to their table. We are not being invited to the table. If we are not being invited at the table, then we cannot raise our voice up and say what we need. That is one of the issues that is in ... It's a lot of hard work, because Charleston has the atmosphere of oppression. I believe a lot of the community has accepted that things are the way it is, and there is no change. I am here as an evolution and understanding that I came on assignment to shake up stuff in Charleston and to show them that it is a change.

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SB: Absolutely. Thank you, Kay Dave, you asked the question that I would've asked, and thank you, Pastor. I got one more question for you.

Kay Dave: Before you go, I just got a question I just want to ask you. When you stated that we need to be invited to the table, try and be invited to the table, 'cause some of the things that I think all went to the table or we make a table. We bring them to our table, because if we keep waiting, we going to still be where we at. So sometimes we may have to find out who we need to contact, and want to contact, and go to them. Set up a meeting with them and start telling them what it is that we want in change.

Kay Dave: This is part of how this also got started tonight. We wasn't—a discussion that we decided that we were no longer going to do anymore and just sit back. We were going to get things moving and rolling, so this is just the beginning of many things that's coming. I'm glad that you all got out here, because we do have the executive president of AFFA here. We do have the president of Charleston Pride here, so we do have groups and linkages to organizations that should be our supporters and our movers and shakers to get us to those questions that you're asking and others may not be asking, that I know I ask all the time. We're going to get those answers.

RA: Let me say one thing else. I have to share this one thing is, and my members know where I'm going, I have a vision of building something bigger, and I am going to do it before God closes my eyes. My church just became 501C. The vision that I'm working on, I want to build a Nehemiah Social Justice here in Charleston, South Carolina.

RA: We will be just for the LGBT community. I want an HIV clinic in it, I'm going to have a drop-in center, and I'm also going to have a literacy program for people like me. I have a vision. To your thing about the table, I'm tired of asking, so what I'm doing is asking God to send me some carpenters so that we can begin to build our own tables and build seats, and then we will teach the community how to invite people to sit in the chairs.

Alesia James: I just wanted to piggyback on both of you is that we, as the LGBTQ community, we're going to have, like you said and like you said, we got to make the table, and we have to bring out our lives to the table. When they see us starting up different forums, and starting different town hall meetings, and discussing the things that matters to us, and also don't forget about the ones that are advocates for us and that are affected as well as infected, then they're going to have to open up some communication and some monies that will be able to be poured into the rural areas that has been just falling off the maps, so to speak. We've got to be the one to take the ball by the—the goat or whatever it is.

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Alesia James:: It's by the horns.

SB: Take the ball by the chain, take the goat by the horns, honey. In this community, we are very, very famous for broadcasting our opinions and everybody got an opinion, but the thing that I pay attention to, are you following up your opinion with action? It's not an action of keeping the opinion going on and start the rumor mill. Are you actually physically getting up and doing something, you know?

Audience: Right.

SB: When I got asked for this event, never once did I bother to ask about money. I'm not looking for money. I want to use my talents, my platform, and add some visibility, because your former Miss South Carolina Pride, she's an HIV-positive drag queen. I have had a nasty past. It'll leave when I'm good and famous, but right now I'm taking advantage of my platform now.

SB: There is a problem in this community and, instead of me being a bunch of the other people that were probably not here today that got so much to say about what's right—not even what's right, what's wrong with Charleston, they're not here. They're not a part of trying to come to a solution, so make sure that you come up, show it to the table, and you're ready to actually do something. I'm not going to keep you here long. I'm not going to keep you here long. I got one more question for you, and we can still entertain more questions, but going along with your vision for the future, Pastor, how would you envision Charleston in the next ten years in terms of this community, in terms of your ministry, and so forth? How do you see the world?

RA: I basically have to say this really quickly, I am hopeful. I do see a evolution happening in Charleston. I believe that our community in 10 years will be more visible for us who are boldly walking and saying who we are. I feel even for my ministry, with much God's blessings, will be bigger.

RA: We are now sharing space at Metropolitan Community Church, and I'm glad to see the pastor come out and support us tonight. [Applause] We share space with them. They have their services at 10:30, we have ours at 12:30, and we thank God for them. I see that, eventually, we're going to get our own space. We want to start a food pantry. We want to do stuff that is for the community.

RA: I believe if one of the things that could change in the ten years if we start supporting us and start supporting other people. The sad thing is no one's

supporting Robert Arrington, no one's supporting Unity Fellowship Church. It's sad that people still don't know that there is a Unity Fellowship Church here. It's sad to not to know that there is a open same sissy preacher, Amen, whose doors is open for all God's children, and that's going to change. I believe the change is coming, and I see it, I feel it.

RA: When I first moved here, Pride started and I was very thankful for it, but Pride has to be a little bit better in diversity and inclusiveness for all of us to be. Last year was the most inclusive I've seen Pride. For them to bring my love, Amen, came and performed. What's his name?

Audience: Freedia,

RA: Freedia; yes, yes. I'm too old now. My hips don't move that quick anymore, but I thank God for that then. In ten years, I believe that we're going to have more Vanitys, we're going to have more of you, and some of you here who are shakers, and who's not wanting to allow Charleston to stay the same. The sad thing is, I want to put this in here real quick, in Charleston, South Carolina there is nothing minority-owned at all, nothing. Every organization is run by Caucasian people, and the sad thing about it is that we don't give credit to Unity Fellowship Church. We're the only thing of color here in Charleston, South Carolina, and I want to change that.

RA: I don't think there's nothing wrong with that, but the thing is we cannot continue to allow our voices to be spoken through an interpreter. It's time now to put the interpreter down and allow everyone to hear our own voices [Applause] from our own mouths not assuming what we want. When you sit there and you refuse to speak, they're going to speak for you, and until you open your mouth and tell them what you want. That's the difference with the Nehemiah Center is, before I even open those doors, I'm going out and do focus groups like this and ask the community what they need. That's the difference.

RA: No one is asking what we need. They're just giving it to us on the table, and we'll walk away and saying, "Yes, sir. Thank you, ma'am," and walk away. We're going to have to put it down and say, "Boo-Boo, that's not enough. We need something different." That's where I see the ten years.

RA: I pray that Vanity doesn't leave this area, because I've seen powerful African American trans, MSMs, I'm looking at this brother here, powerful. I just pray, young one, because what happens is you get tired of all the politics, and being rejected, and you just go. You go to Atlanta where they just accept you, you go to Washington, DC, you go to 222 whatever, and

get out of Charleston. We need you to stay over here, and stand beside me, and begin to fight so that we can make it better in the next ten years.

SB: I agree. I totally agree. In our next ten years, what I'm hearing from Pastor is that we, A, need to be bold. We need to be transparent, we need to maintain our faith, and be willing to work. How you want a relationship with another individual romantically, you have to remember you have a relationship to this community already.

SB: I'm preaching to myself. Beaufort is similar to Charleston, but it's completely different. I'm not in Beaufort because the opportunities to actually jumpstart my platform are here. I'm going to maintain this platform here in this community and take it on back to my hometown, because I have a relationship with my hometown and that relationship requires work. If we want Charleston to change, we have to set ourselves to work for that change.

SB: When the fireworks of Freedia's performance from Pride is over, and your booty is done shook its last little turn, its last little twerk, and Pride is over with, what are you doing, still, to maintain it? Pride ain't just a once a year type of festival. It's something that should be three hundred sixty-five days a year. When you are blessed to have life, what are you doing to work for the change? That's my small moment. Are there any more questions for Pastor Arrington?

RA: The thing is all of you sit here looking at me stunned. I know some of you probably going go home and call your mama and say, "Mama, I just saw a man of God, and I'm terrified at the things he was saying."

SB: Good.

RA: This is a moment that we really—if I don't—wan to take a few minutes just to make sure that you don't have any questions. Now, if that little hand is raised, and the mouth opens up and it has a question, you already seen that I'm going to deliver it, and it might not be in the way you want me to deliver it. If anybody have any other questions before we close out then I can. Yes?

Audience member: Good evening, everyone. Okay, so my question is to the leader of this event, everyone has asked. I've haven't heard the question that I think are important but today's meeting. We are here in 2018. This, the year of eight, is the new beginning. We are beginning tonight, so I think it's after tonight, what is the next event?

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Audience member: If there is not another event as planned, all of these people here, we're not going to have anything to participate or to join in. So, what is the next thing that is going to happen after this event, so that we can come and show that we really are together, we are united? That's what I want to know. I don't mind coming out to events, but if I didn't have someone to tell me about it, I wouldn't even have even known about this event. I just want to know what's the next thing, so that I can come and—

RA: Let me answer that question and Chase—I have to say something to this before we do anything else to mess with. I want Chase to stand up. I want everyone to give him a round of applause, because he allowed this to happen. [Applause] We do have a plan. What we want to do is living room conversations around Charleston. We want to start opening dialogues about different things that the community, especially the community of color. We're going to be going to Dudley, we'll be going to maybe some coffeehouses—

SB: Tabbuli.

RA: Tabbuli. We're going to have discussions about what do the community want, and we going to have more of these happening around here. Even my ministry, we're going to start having on Sundays, to be radical and different, not a service but we going to have a focus group where you can come in and sit down and have a conversation, not just around spirituality. So, there is a continuously that is going to happen. What we're going to have to do, as the leaders in planning, we're going to have to get it out more, let y'all know what's happening, where the next event is. There is something coming, because this is an evolution.

Chase Glenn: I would say, foremostly, make sure you leave your email in the back, so that we can get the word out. We will put it on Facebook. I 'm just here to support; I didn't say that very well in the beginning, but I didn't come in and say I know how to do anything, I just want to help support, [inaudible]. We'll collect email addresses, and we'll put it on Facebook, Instagram, and get the word out.

RA: What it also is if any of you have any ideas of things that you want, let us know. Again, I'm saying is we can, as a planning committee, meet who is the leader in this community can servant y'all stuff. If you don't tell me what you really want, what things you want discussed, what things you want to talk about—we want so to be better be able to feed you in some ways. We need for you to tell us through emails, Facebook, inbox, however you do.

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- Audience: Surveys.
- SB: The survey. I was just about to say that.
- RA: Survey. Tell us what you want, and we will serve it for you.
- GM: You can find me on Facebook, Gina Mocha. If you inbox me, you have an idea for something that you would like to see happening, we can do our hardest to try to make it happen.
- SB: Absolutely.
- RA: I'm also on Facebook, too. If you see Robert Arrington the Rev, Revvie Rev, just you can inbox me, and some of you have already done that. You can also let me know, and we will get the information out.
- SB: All three of us up here are people you can come to—to vent, to express your ideas, and/or ask what's next. I can tell you myself, if I don't have the answer, I will get you the answer, or take you to a person that can get you the answer. To answer what's next, first, before what's next is make yourself known. Fill out the survey, get your friends to fill out the survey, because the same people that have this to say, they are literally unknown when it comes to paper. They're only known when it's time for Facebook and commenting about who did this, or who performed that, or why so-and-so wasn't here. That's when we open our mouths, but when it comes to the simple act of complete a survey, let us identify you, we don't do that.
- SB: When it comes to these great organizations like AFFA, Charleston Pride, all of the non-profit organizations that are here to benefit us, we need to make ourselves available to them. Not wait for an invitation but, "Hey, you having' a meeting? When is your next meeting? I'm going to be there." Not even setting up for the opportunity of, "Oh, this is just a board meeting." "I didn't ask you all of that. When is your next meeting, because I want to be there."
- SB: Unless we show the same type of urgency that we have when we so want to communicate our ideas and our opinions, if we don't have that same urgency when it's time to work to better the community in which we are complaining about, it's null and void. It's null and void, so I say make sure you show yourself a proof and show up. Let us know who you are, all your circle, your circle, your circle. Even though I'm looking at people that I done come across many times before, I know when we part ways you have a circle that I don't know about, you got a circle that I don't know about. So, we need to spread our circles together and make one big circle.

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- SB: I'm going to get off my platform, y'all. I hope you enjoyed yourselves. If you enjoyed yourself give me a yeah.
- Audience: Yeah.
- SB: Uh-uh, if you enjoyed yourself give me a yeah.
- Audience: Yeah.
- SB: All right. If you're ready to work give me a heck yeah.
- Audience: Heck yeah.
- SB: I live. I live. I'm going to give my microphone to my good friend, Miss Regina, and thank you.
- GM: Thank you, thank you. [Applause] Thank you for this wonderful, wonderful opportunity. I applaud you, and I love you, and I appreciate you. Pastor A., wonderful job. Thank you all for coming out. At this time, I want to turn the mic over to Chase Glenn who pays our bills, the executive president—executive director, sorry, of AFFA.
- Chase Glenn: I just have one other quick announcement. I love this program in particular, because it's about hearing someone's story, and I think our stories are so powerful. Another group that is collecting stories, and if you haven't heard about this project it's really amazing. The College of Charleston launched an initiative to document LGBTQ life in the lowcountry, and they are documenting both past and present stories. They're looking for people like you, like me, like all of us to tell our stories. They record them and they do something really cool that I don't even know yet, 'cause I haven't done it yet. But, Vanity is going to tell us briefly about her experience with this project.
- Vanity Reid: One thing before we go. This is the oral histories project in collaboration with the College of Charleston. I'm a student with the college currently, right now. Oral histories has been a pilot program throughout many cities, if I'm not mistaken, and they are going to be underway for the next eighteen months, is it Chloe? Eighteen months?
- Chloe Stuber: Hopefully indefinitely.
- Vanity Reid: Hopefully indefinitely for the Charleston and little country area. Oral histories will be recording the stories of LGBT individuals who might not have had the opportunity to tell their story in the past. Once their story is recorded it will be transcribed into words, a written format, so that when

anyone searches LGBT or trans-woman or bisexual or anything within that umbrella term in relation to Charleston, our stories will come up as search results as sources, indefinitely, for the time being. This is a very important opportunity to have voices that have typically been silenced amplified. I think anybody who has a story or knows of someone who has a story to share this is definitely a project you should be a part of.

Vanity Reid:

I met a sister today who did not know what *Paris Is Burning* is and it made—right, I almost fell out. It made me a little shocked, because that was some of the first exposure I got to black and brown, queer and trans people. Thankfully, one of the events that I'm doing for Charleston Pride this year is a mass screening of *Paris Is Burning*, and I'll be speaking with the original commentator from the ball, Junior LaBeija, about what the ballroom scene was and what it is today. I think it's very important for us to gain and put out as much exposure, as people of color and as members of the LGBTQ community, of our stories and the stories of those that we've known and of loved ones who may have had their stories silenced. If you are interested or if you know someone, please see Chloe Stuber or please see the sign-in at the back about oral histories and their collaboration with the College of Charleston.

Chase Glenn:

Thank you so much. [Applause] Yeah, there's a sign-up on the table in the back where you can sign up with oral stories. Also, there's that place you can sign up with your email address, so we can keep you in the loop. All right, we're done talking. Thank y'all so much for being here tonight. Thank you.

GM:

I just want to give a last thank you to Unity Fellowship Church. Y'all, please stand, and thank you all for coming out tonight. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. Thank you, and I'll be back. I will be back. Thank you. Thank you all for coming out tonight. Oh, we have one more ... one more?

Baby:

Just before y'all leave, I do this at every event. I know everybody loves to take selfies, right? I'm the selfie queen, I take them all day, so I want everybody to get out their phones. I don't care which social media platform—I'm Baby, by the way. I'm the back, working in the back part of this event. I'm not the frontline of them. I don't care to be frontline. As long as I can see change happening, I'm okay with that.

Baby:

If everybody got their phone out, I want to take a selfie. If I can get everyone in here. Y'all ready? One, two, three. What I want y'all to do is I want y'all to post that picture right now. I don't care what social media platform, and I want y'all to hashtag #IWillNotHide, #UnityInTheCommunity, #IAmHumanToo.

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Baby: Okay, and we're done. No, I'm done.

GM: Please hashtag I will not hide. I will not hide. #IWillNotHide.

Baby: Thank y'all for comig' out. Don't forget about the surveys. That's the only way we're going know what y'all want.

End Recording.

