

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Legendary Father James Icon

Interviewed by Joseph Plaster

May 9, 2019

Interviewee: Father James Icon (JI)

Interviewer: Joseph Plaster (JP)

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JP: Let's see recording. This is Joseph Plaster. Today is May 9, 2019. We're here at the Peabody Library, and why don't you just start out by telling me your name, your house, what categories you've walked, that kind of thing?

JI: So, my name is Father James Icon, and I am Legendary for Butch Queen Realness. So, I've walked Realness, and I've walked Performance, the category of the Old Way.

JP: Okay, and do you wanna go ahead and just give a little bit of background of where you were born, where you were raised, that kind of thing?

JI: Sure, so I'm a native New Yorker, born and raised in Queens, New York, went through the Catholic school system from kindergarten to twelfth grade. I'm the youngest of 5 children between my mother and father. I came out into the scene about, in 1988 when I turned 15. I found the New York City Greenwich Village.

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And was amazed by all the people that were like me in one area, and during that time I discovered ballroom. A lot of my friends that I had met during that time were actually involved in ballroom. I didn't know that they were going to balls. So, that upbringing changed my life when I discovered ballroom.

JP: When you say "people like me" what do you mean?

JI: People that were gay. Men, women, old, young. This is where everybody that was gay hung out at. I've always heard about Greenwich Village. I just didn't know where it was, and the funny thing was my mother worked for the New York City Transit Authority, and she would never tell me how to get to Greenwich Village. A cousin of mine and I actually found it one summer afternoon in 1988. It was like we discovered gold, and it was like, "Ahh!" and we was there ever since then and never left.

JP: So, can you – let's back up just a little bit because we're talking about finding gay community.

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How did you identify when you were in your early teenage years?
What was that like coming of age as a gay man in the 1980s?

Jl: Well, that was hard because being a product of the '70s because I was born in the '70s, growing up, you couldn't really display the fact that you were homosexual, especially in the black gay – black community and black families. It just wasn't accepted.

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There were people in your neighborhood or people that you grew up with who were overtly gay because of their feminine ways and stuff. Those people got ridiculed and teased, but not as much because I think that people understood that naturally, that's who that person was. For me, my look didn't go in accordance with my sexual identity by society rules, of rules at that time, you know? The only time that you could – really tell I was gay is if I spoke because I had such a high voice or whatever, but even then you wasn't really sure and stuff, and I had girlfriends naturally, like not for a cover up. They were my real girlfriends. I was attracted to them. So, growing up then, and then in the '80s as I got older, I guess more of myself started to shine on the outside than on the inside. So, the name-calling started and the teasing started, so then the fights started to happen because I was the type of person who didn't tolerate disrespect from anyone.

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So, if you called me an obscene name or derogatory name about my sexuality, yeah, I fought you.

JP: Would you say that you were out of the closet in high school or –

Jl: Yeah.

JP: – was this something different.

Jl: Mm-hmm, I was out of the closet in high school, and the funny thing was we call it “getting spooked.” So, I had a boyfriend. Throughout freshman, sophomore, junior year, they all suspected. Like I said, I had a couple of fights for boys calling me a faggot or something like that

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But it was one particular time I was dating this guy, and a girl from my class had asked us to come join her church for a competition, and voice was a class for me in school. So, I said, “Yeah,” and he actually followed me there, and as we’re rehearsing, he’s standing in the doorway and he signals to whomever that he’s waiting for me. So, I turned around and I say, “Oh wow.” So, I leave and I never come back. The next day, the whole school is saying James –

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brought his boyfriend to choir rehearsal. What was amazing was what I was afraid for people to really know for sure was I gained a lot of support, especially from my classmates –

JP: Oh, really?

JJ: – about being gay. A lot of boys was like, “Well, about time that you admitted to it,” and the girls were like, “So what? Don’t hide it.” So, after that, it was – me and my best friends, Jessie and Everett, who we went to school together, we became like the queens of the school in a sense or whatever.

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And they were okay with that, you know?

JP: I wonder how much of that had to do with it just being in New York, sort of a liberal place with a lot of gay people.

JJ: Well, and also, New York could be very harsh though, you know? It was a lot of gay bashing going on in New York, whether you were – no matter what color, and no matter if you was male or female. I think females kind of got away with it a little bit more than males. But if you were transgender or you were a gay male, yeah, you would get attacked or you would be ridiculed. I can remember walking down the block with some of my friends in my neighborhood that were gay –

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and people throwing bottles at us, and we had to turn around and throw bottles back and run because it was only 4 of us. It was like 20 of them, but *[laughs]* it was hard. It was definitely hard.

JP: Okay, so mixed reaction. I guess also at this time in the 1980s, that's when AIDS is in full swing.

JI: Right.

JP: So, how did that affect you?

JI: So, I first, actually, I first learned about AIDS through watching Eddie Murphy's stand-up comedy *Hilarious* – "Delirious." He mentioned it, and I'm like, "Whoa."

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"What's AIDS? What's HIV?" My cousin, my other cousin who was straight at the time, he knew I was gay. He looked at me and said, "You've gotta be careful," but I wasn't having penetrational sex then or whatever like that. It was just more kissing and what we call dry humping and all of that back then, right? So, I was like "Well, I'm okay because I'm not having penetrational sex or whatever like that. I didn't even know how to at the time. So, when I came out and discovered the Village and started gaining friends –

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and started learning about different things and really starting to learn about sex, it was like, "Whoa, wait a minute. We have to slow down. Pump your brakes, James. You're a little young and you're hot in your pants. So, you gotta figure out what it is that you like, who you like, and how you gonna do this," because especially in New York City they had something called – well, we used to call something called cruising. So, they had a lot of spots where you can go and have unelicited sex with a stranger and just go on about your business.

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They had the peep shows. They had the parks. They had the bathrooms, which I never knew. Like I said, my mother worked for Transit, and I used to go visit her all the time in the token booths, and lo and behold, upstairs in the bathroom men were having sex. I didn't know that. So, that was one place I never would want to go because my mother worked there, and God forbid, anybody saw me and went back and told my mother. Wasn't happening.

JP: Did you come out to your mother?

Jl: Yeah, I didn't – I waited until after high school to tell. Once I graduated, I told my whole entire family.

JP: Okay, so one other question before –

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we get to ballroom. How do you think – and this is a hard question to answer, but how do you think the experience of being gay was different for black communities versus white communities or Latinos and that kind of thing?

Jl: I'm not sure because when I speak to – well, between the Latin community and the African-American community, I don't think there was much difference. I think the same core values of family values and how men were raised and what men should do were kind of the same. I had a lot of Caucasian friends –

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growing up and stuff as well, but none of them were gay. So, I wouldn't really know by only what I saw on television or read in a magazine or hear somebody's experience out in the street, and it seemed like it was the same. Some people were thrown out of their homes once they found out that their child was gay, or some children just ran away because they wasn't sure about how the family was going to act with it. Fortunate for me that I come from a family where though my parents didn't agree with it –

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but my parents didn't throw me out. So, that's the best way I can explain it.

JP: Okay, so fast forward. It's your first day going to Greenwich Village. So, tell me what that scene looked like. Paint a picture.

Jl: So, it's the summer. We're walking down the block, and the blocks are long. So, and on each side of the street, there are people, men, mostly men, hanging out, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer or standing in front of a bar.

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It's, say, from – so, we get off the E train at West Fourth Street, which you're on Sixth Avenue, and we come around the corner

onto – is that Christopher? I think it's Christopher, but it changes to something else. So, you come around the corner from Sixth Avenue to the left, and you walk up the block, and you're on Seventh Avenue and Christopher, right. That right there – let me back up. When you got off of West Fourth Street –

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Up the block straight ahead when you got off was Washington Square Park. We had walked up to Washington Square Park first, and that's when we discovered that a lot of people, a lot of gay kids were hanging out at. There was these two guys that we were attracted to, my cousin and I, and we followed them. We followed them down Christopher to Seventh Avenue. One we crossed the street by the one and two train on Christopher, we realized that this was a whole separate area.

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And we followed them about five more blocks, and they reached the Westside Highway, and we could see across the street that there was a multiple of people just standing around having fun. Cars parked, jump rope, people running around, just a gang of people. We crossed the street, and we realized that this was the area that most of the gay men hung out at.

JP: Was that the piers?

JJ: The piers, exactly.

JP: Okay.

JJ: Right. Right on Westside Highway, and so it seemed like it was gay pride that day. It was in the summertime. It wasn't even gay – We didn't know when gay pride was, but I know I was around May or June. So, it was close to gay pride but we didn't know, and it was 1,000 people had to be out there. Cars were parked. They were playing music. Then we seen the cardboard boxes on the floor, like when they would breakdance and stuff. But then we started seeing people do voguing. At the time, we didn't know it was voguing. We thought they were still just breakdancing, and we was like, "Wow, this is cool." A couple of people on the left was playing Double Dutch. Even some people was playing "Red Light/Green Light, 1,2,3."

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So, it was people outside just having a lot of fun and just doing them.

JP: Is that where you found out about ballroom?

JI: That's where I found out about ballroom.

JP: That same day?

JI: No, no, no. So, that day, we just kind of walked around and stuff like that, and people were very friendly. They would say, "Hi," or "What's up?" Both of us at the time, we're at this time, 15. We're both 6 feet. I'm 6 feet. My cousin is like 6'2", 6'3" at the time. So, we don't look like 15-year-olds. So, people –

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are looking at us, kind of hitting on us in a kind of us in a kind of sense or whatever like that, but not being too aggressive because they couldn't tell if we were gay or straight or whatever because, again, on the pier, there was a mixture of people.

JP: Mm-hmm.

JI: So, what they call the trade – they was trying to figure out if we were butch queens, which was the gay guys, or was we trade, the straight guys that either hung with the gay children or like having sex with just gay children, but that was the name for it. So, but we kind of realized what was going on, and we made a joke out of it.

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So, we didn't use our real names. My name was Eric. His name was supposed to be Michael. He was telling people his name was Eric. So, when we separated, we both were saying Eric, and my cousin is down here. He comes up with some guy and he said, "Oh, this is my cousin," and I was like, "Hey, how are you? I'm Eric." He was like, "Oh, both of y'all name are Eric?" I'm like, "Oh my God. You fucked up. I mean, you messed up." So, but we made friends, basically. That's how we made friends.

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So, we went out the next night and the next night and the next night and the next night. We would go out and stuff, but we were

going out during the day. Then we realized that a lot of people hung out at night. So, on Saturdays, we would go down at night, and we were in a club, a bar club called Two Potatoes, first bar club we ever been into. There was drag performances, dancing and everything going on, and people were talking about going home to go to sleep to come back to the club later on that night.

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Now, we're eavesdropping, and we're trying to listen because we're trying to find boyfriends really, you know? We're like, "Hey, you know?" So, I asked this one guy, I was like, "So, where you gonna go after this is done?" He was like, "Oh, well honey, we go to the balls." I'm like, "The balls?" and he was like, "Yeah." I paid it no attention. I was like, "Okay, balls." I'm thinking he's talking about genitalia or whatever, so I pay it no mind. So, fast – so, this is a process over a year or two that we're not realizing that people are going to a ball.

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Because one Saturday we would go hang out, and it would be everybody. Another Saturday it would be a ghost town. So, we're like, "Well, where everybody go?" or whatever. We were sitting on the pier one night, and we had met this group of kids, and the same guy I told you who got me spooked at school, I had met him this night too. But it was a group of other people, and it was this one particular person who was standing there with jean shorts on, a white t-shirt, and some Skippy sneakers and a bandana tied around their head.

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They were spinning around in a circle, and I kept saying, "Why are they spinning around in a circle like that?" Now, growing up, I went to dancing school. So, I was just trained, dancing at a young age. So, I recognized this technique and style of dancing that the person was doing as they were spinning. So, I said to the person, "Are you a ballerina?" and they said, "No, I vogue," and I was like, "Well, what's vogue?" She was like, "You don't know what vogue is?" and I was like, "No."

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She was like, "Have you ever been to a ball?" and I was like, "A debutante ball?" and she was like, "Debutante ball? Where you

from?" I was like, "Queens." She was like – I was like, "Where you from?" and she was like, "The Bronx." I was like, "Oh." But I was like, "But is it a debutante ball?" She was like, "No, a ball is a competition." So, it was a Tuesday. She said, "I can't explain it to you no more. Come with me." I'm like, "Well, where we going?" She was like, "We're gonna go to the club." So, me and my cousin were like, "Well, wait. We ain't got no money." We just got money for like sodas and potato chips and some pizza and to get home. "How much is the club?" They was like, "It's free." So, we walk about –

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about 9 – no, about 10, 11 blocks to Nineteenth Street and Westside Highway, and we wound up at this club called Tracks. What it was is that the first 100 people free – first 100 people in line got in for free.

JP: This was a Tuesday night?

JI: This was a Tuesday night.

JP: Okay.

JI: So, we go. We stand in line. We get in for free, and this is Tracks. When I walk in, everybody is doing the style of dance that this person particularly was doing. So, she started to explain, like, "This is where we come for the clubs and –

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ballroom shows and the houses and whatever. I'm like, "Houses?" I was like, "I got my own house," and stuff, and she's explaining it to me. I'm like, "What are you talking about?" or whatever. But we hung out with them all night long. It so happened it was a mini-function that particular night. So, we got to witness what she was talking about, and the person I'm talking about is Christina Richards, who is Legendary Fem Queen Performance from New York City. She became one of my best friends, and after that night, she had disappeared.

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So, when I seen here again, maybe two or three months later, she had transitioned into Christina, because I met her prior to being Christina. So, it was like, "Wow, okay. This looks like a lot of

fun.” So, we go to the club every Tuesday night. We start to meet more and more people and stuff like that and all that. So, I have a friend who eventually becomes my godson, named Emiel. He takes me to my first ball, the Elite ball and –

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JP: Was this ‘89/’90 do you think?

JJ: No, this is – now, I said this is over the course of two years. So, this is like ‘90 now.

JP: Okay.

JJ: So, he takes me to my first ball, and I’m ecstatic. I’m like, “Wow, this is whoa, whoa.” So, I start to see more and more of the trans women in the community and stuff like that. Now, I was seeing them in the village, but not knowing that they were trans women. I just thought that they were women. So, I didn’t know the difference, you know?

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I’m seeing them walk different categories and stuff, and I’m like, “Wow, this is amazing.”

JP: Well, can you – so, I’m imagining that someone in the future will be listening to this. They’ll have no idea what a ball is. Could you kind of paint a picture of that? First of all, what did it look like? Where was it? What did people look like?

JJ: Yeah. So, we went to the Masonic, so the Elite ball we had went to, and it was at the Masonic Temple, downtown Brooklyn. Now, the Masonic Temple would look like more like a hall with a balcony, a balcony that wraps around, and it’s a wooden floor with a stage –

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with stairs that leads to the stage or whatever. On each side of the floor, there are tables where houses would sit to watch the ball or get ready to participate. We were sitting in the balcony, which I guess you would kind of associate with bleachers in a sense. So, we were in the balcony, and we were looking over the banister, and we was watching the ball. The people walk up and down. They create a runway. With the separation of the tables from left to right,

they create a runway, and the people are walking up and down that runway. Whether they're voguing –

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whether they're imitating runway, or the category Realness where you look like your straight counterpart or for trans women who looks the most like a natural born woman or somebody like Fae where they will walk and see who is the most prettiest or most beautiful, or evening wear with who had the best gown and suit on. So, it was a multiple of categories, and we were trying to look at it and trying to figure out what's going on. But I'm just so mesmerized by the people actually performing different categories and hitting the floor.

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And how they would – how the crowd applause would be when a particular person walked onto the floor to present for the category that they were competing in, and the crowd's reaction to that person's look or just the person even being there was like they're a superstar. So, imagine when Beyonce steps on stage and the crowd goes wild. Whoever was the big gun at that time or the legend at that time, and they was getting ready to walk, and they hit the back of the runway, the crowd would go crazy

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So, all of that was exciting to me. So, I was like, "Wow, I wanna be a part of this."

JP:

Why? Why were you mesmerized by that? What did want?

JJ:

I wanted – because I wanted the popularity. You know what I mean? *[Laughs]* I wanted to be known like they were known. I wanted to be the big wig. I thought – and it looked like they were having a lot of fun. So, I definitely wanted to have fun, and back then, it was all about the trophies. It wasn't really monetary as far as the wins, but it was all about the trophy and bragging rights.

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Coming from my neighborhood or my school and stuff like that, being a big man on campus meant a lot. So, at school, you always wanted to be the popular kid at school or whatever, or you wanted to be the captain of the basketball team or the football team and

stuff to be popular. I wanted to be popular here too because there were a lot of handsome guys there, and I wanted them to know my name. So, it was like – *[Laughs]* so that was one reason selfishly –

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reason why I wanted to be known so much.

JP: So what happened then? Because how did you start becoming part of the community, I guess?

JJ: So, still going out to the clubs and stuff like that. Again, back to my friend who became my godson, was in the House of Revlon at the time. The people that I was meeting best known to me were already in houses. So, a lot of the people that I had already met were Revlons. I didn't realize that until I realized what ballroom was.

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So, one Halloween, I say like '91 Halloween, we was outside, and we was in the village. Halloween is a big celebration in the village in New York. So, we all there, and the House of Revlon, most of the members are there. Now, half of them I know, half of them I don't know, and I was hanging out with this one, in particular, named Alissa. So, Alissa was introducing me like as her boyfriend, like most of the women I've seen do when they attach themselves to a guy or a masculine guy, you know?

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They become quote/unquote their "husband" or their boyfriend, but really it's nothing going on. It's a very platonic relationship. So, she's introducing me as that or whatever. So, they're saying, "Oh, we know about him. We see him in the clubs, and he hangs out with Egypt." That's my godson at the time. So, "He hangs out with Egypt and stuff like that." But me being me, I'm very abrasive.

So, I start to kind of haggle them a little bit, make fun of their name. "Oh Revlons? I call y'all the raviolis," and whatever, whatever. So, a couple of them are getting upset.

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But they had a reputation for being kind of notoriously – they weren't bullies. They were notorious for a good fight. Let's put it that way. So –

JP: You say a good fight. What do you mean by that?

JJ: If they fought, you wasn't gonna win. They handled the situation, like they were kind of bossy. Not bullyish, but bossy in a sense. So, and if it turned into a physical altercation, they were going to win –

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– they physical altercations, and they were very known for that. So, me being me, I said, "I'll line y'all up, and I'll fall y'all one by one. I'm not scared of y'all," or whatever. They're like, "Well, how old are you?" So, at the time, I'm 17. "I'm 17, I don't care." They was like, "Get this kid out of here." They was laughing and joking. They was like, "Yo, he's funny." The next week, one of the leaders of the house named Stuart was in the club, and he taps me on my shoulder, and he says, "You, we're having a meeting and you are to be there. You got it?"

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I was like, *[laughs]* "Okay." Now, I'm 6 feet. Stuart is like 6'4", and I'm like "Uh, uh, okay. No problem." So, I turned to my friend Emiel, Egypt, and I say, "Well, what was that about?" and he was like, "They want you to join the House of Revlon," and I'm like "Why?" He was like, "I don't know. Maybe they – because you're not bothered by them," meaning that I'm not scared of them or whatever. So, I was like, "Okay." So me, my best friend, Deondre, and my best friend Trina, we go to the meeting to join the House of Revlon and stuff.

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Along with, at the time we met these identical twins that were there, and this kid named "Chris." So, the six of us are there to audition for the House of Revlon.

JP: Okay. So they didn't invite you in? You had to audition.

JJ: You had to audition.

JP: Okay.

JI: So, yeah, invite was to come to the meeting.

JP: Okay.

JI: Then you had to audition for the house. Now, if you are selected – what made you special though is if you're selected. We were selected to come to the meeting, so that made us special. But if you ask to join, not so special.

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You had more to prove than what you had to think, but the funny thing is at the meeting, everybody voted yes except for three people, and one of the people was the father of the house, Tony. He voted no.

JP: For you?

JI: For me.

JP: Yeah.

JI: So, we can hear them downstairs arguing and stuff like that, and we're all looking at each other like, "Child, forget this." But as we get ready, get up to walk out, they come back to us to give us our decision.

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So, they jokingly was like, "Well, none of y'all made it." I started cussin', you know, like, "Blah, blah, blah, blah," all this profanity to them and stuff like that. I'm walking through the – getting ready to walk out the door. The mother of the house, Danielle, stops me and says, "We're just joking. You all made it," and stuff. I was like, phew. In my heart, I was crushed, but I wasn't gonna show them on the outside that I was crushed. I was gonna let them know that it didn't bother me at all, but inside it bothered me like, "Damn, I didn't make it, "Ugh, ugh," but *[laughs]* I made it.

JP: What did you have to do for – to audition?

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JI: Well, we had to answer a whole bunch of – well, see, since I wasn't a voguer, so my category would have been realness, I had

to answer a lot of questions. Now, what was bad was I couldn't answer none of the questions because I wasn't knowledgeable about ballroom.

JP: What were they asking you?

JJ: So, they asked me – so the category, they was like, “Well, what do you wanna walk?” My friends had told me to say Realness. So, I said, “Realness.” So they was like, “Well, what is Realness?” and I'm like, “I don't know.” You know?

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So, they, like, they tried to give me examples, and I'm still like, “I don't know.” So, they look at one of the twins and they say, “Is he real?” So, my concept of it, I say, “No.” They say, “Why?” I said, “Because he looks like a faggot. You can tell he's a faggot. He's gay,” or whatever. They like, “Ah.” They was like, “Well, name somebody in ballroom that you know walks Realness.” I say a name. They all laugh, and they told me, “If you get in the house –

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that person is going to be your biggest rival.” I was like, “Whatever.” You know what I'm saying? Because one of the people in the house at the time, Roy Revlon was the top Realness person of ballroom, and I didn't say his name because I didn't know him. I only said the person's name is because I had read a flyer the night before and seen the person name that I mentioned or whatever associated with the category. Me and that person did become the biggest ballroom rivals for our category for Realness.

JP: Okay, but you couldn't answer the questions.

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But they must have seen something in you. So, what do you think they saw?

JJ: I think they saw that I could – I think they thought that I was real, like realness as far as if he stands there and doesn't say anything, we wouldn't be able to tell that he was gay. So, I emulated my straight counterpart, and that's what they saw. I have to say for myself, having three older brothers and an older sister, style of dressing was kind of kind natural for me because I would copy them –

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and stuff. So, they bought the latest gear, the latest sneakers, and wore their hair a certain way. So, I would mimic my brothers and sisters. So, they liked my style, or as we say today, swag. Excuse me. I think that – and not to mention the fact that I pat myself on the back, I was very handsome. *[Laughs]* So, I think that worked in my favor too, so – *[Laughs]*

JP: So, then okay you got into the house. How did you learn how to do Realness? Who taught you? How did you learn?

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JJ: At that point, Shawn, who was another member of the House of Revlon, and Roy instantly took me under their wing, and they became my big brothers. So, they showed me the ropes. They showed me what to do. They showed me how to – how I should present myself when I'm walking the category and stuff like that. So, it was all about make sure your clothes are clean. Make sure you got fresh shoes on. Make sure you got a fresh haircut. If you wear a hat, make sure you have nothing out of place. Think about what we looked at, at the time we looked at the –

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highly paid rug dealers of the '80s and the '90s at that time. So, that's the image that we emulated when we hit the floor, or the boys standing on the corner that drunk 40s and smoke marijuanas. I didn't smoke weed then. But we emulated them, but again, I had older siblings who did the same thing. So, that was easy. Only thing I had to do was either take one of my brothers' outfits and wear it or something like that, or just ask them to buy me something like theirs so I had it.

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So, for me, it worked out easily.

JP: But it wasn't just the fact that you'd probably seen your older brothers, how they moved, how they –

JJ: Everything I do in ballroom when I walk Realness, I emulate my brothers.

JP: Hmm, okay. So, tell me again. I'm imagining somebody listening to this 50 years from now. They don't know anything about ballroom. How would you explain Realness? Why do you think that is a category that people compete in in ballroom? What's the point of it?

JJ: I wouldn't be – I think because –

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balls derive from transgender beauty pageants, right? So, those categories were created for the trans women more so. So, the realness for them was emulating a natural born woman. Who looks the most like a natural born woman? So, which all of the categories for the trans women were duplicated for the guys –

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who came to balls and watched. So, to allow them to compete, they mimicked the categories over to them. So, Realness happened to be one of them, and though a lot of straight men came to balls and wanted to participate, they would walk something like best-dressed man and stuff like that. So, they created the category for the guys that were gay but didn't look gay. That was we got Realness. So, it kind of – I guess, in a sense, it was a category to keep your –

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masculinity in a sea of femininity.

JP: Mm-hmm. So, did it feel like at that time ballroom was dominated by trans women?

JJ: Yeah, for a long time.

JP: Okay.

JJ: For a long time. Trans women in ballroom, we honor them. We hold them up to such a pedestal. If it wasn't for the trans women, there would be no balls. So, we held them to a high end, especially back then. They would open the – they would treat them – well, they were women, and then you treated them as such. You held the door for them.

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You pulled out their seat for them. You helped them with their coat. You helped them with their hair. You went and got their drinks. You went and got their meals and stuff like that, and then also at the time, trans women were the money makers. They had the most money. So, if you were in the circumference of a trans woman, you were very close to her, she nine times out of ten, footed the bill all the time. So, you did your service in return for her frontin' the bill all the time by treating her as such –

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and doing, running errands for her. Not really being a servant-boy, but being very helpful and showing your gratitude for somebody helping you out financially, and it didn't mean sexual favors or nothing like that. It was just a natural thing, like, "I got you." Like you would do for your mother or your sister.

JP: Right. You're almost like guardians or protectors?

JJ: Exactly.

JP: Yeah.

JJ: You're right, exactly.

JP: So, you mentioned that Realness at that time, you were emulating the guy on the corner. So, can you talk about that? What did the guy on the corner represent?

JJ: So, the guy on the corner represented –

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in the black community, the guy on the corner represented the hustler, the pimp, the drug dealer, the bad boy, you know? So, you're standing on the corner with your brown paper bag with your 40 ounce of Old English, and you got your joint rolled up and your boys are playing dice on the corner for money or stuff like that, or you're hollering at the girl that's coming down the block, trying to get her to be your girl or trying to have sex with her or whatever the case may be, or you don't like somebody just because –

[0:31:30]

and you're picking a fight with them because you wanna show alpha male and everything like that. So, that is what emulating your straight counterpart was in ballroom.

JP: Okay. So that would have been like the most masculine figure you could imagine?

JJ: Right, or rappers, like Run-DMC or Kujay, Kurtis Blow at the time and stuff like that. We didn't wanna look like Mayor Koch or Donald Trump or – who was a very popular male figure back then in the '70s?

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We didn't wanna be Magic Johnson. We didn't wanna be Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. We didn't want to be them. We wanted to play ball like them, but we didn't want to look like them.

JP: So, tell me, you became part of the house. What else did it mean to be part of the house?

JJ: So, being a part of the house is that you've adopted a new family now. So, as you know, a house consists of the mother and the father and the members who are considered the children. In some houses back then are also the older people that were older than the mother and fathers –

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would become the grandparents and stuff like that. So, being in a house was just like being at home. You did what your mother and father said. You communicated with your brothers and sisters, and y'all planned how to go into the next ball and win as many categories as you could. That was the plan. So, we would have meeting every month or every couple of weeks to plan out what we were doing for the next ball, who was walking what, who was doing what, get money, collect dues –

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for tables and stuff, make sure everybody had their entrance fee. Make sure the girls' hairs was done, make sure outfits were made correctly and everything and make sure everybody had what they had. So, that's what we were doing when we were in the houses. You gain, like I said, you gain new family, but you create bonds that way with people. Inside and outside of your house because

back then it didn't matter what house you were in. Everybody was friends. So, you I could be a Revlon; you could be an Ebony, but me and you could be best of friends.

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When I joined the House of Revlon, I didn't want my friends who wasn't in houses to know just yet because at that time, ballroom had a very bad name. So, in the gay culture, we was kind of the bottom of the totem pole if you were in ballroom. You were looked at as a thief, a bum, just not a good person.

JP: Why was that?

JJ: I don't know why that shadow was held over ballroom. There was people in ballroom that did some shady stuff and all of that.

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But who didn't do shady stuff that were in and out of ballroom? It's just that that kind of dark shadow lingered over ballroom for a very long time, and so people didn't wanna be involved with you romantically if you were from – if they knew that you were from ballroom. Some people didn't wanna be your friends. But so happened – because it was like a crew of a whole bunch of us that hung out during this time. During that '89 to '91 time, it was at least 20 to 25 of us that were really good friends, and we hung out. But lo and behold, everybody –

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was joining houses, and we all were keeping it a secret from one another until one day I was in a village, and I was with two of my other best friends who weren't in ballroom, and somebody across the street yelled out "Revlon!" You supposed to respond when they yelled it out, and I yelled back, "Revlon!" and my two friends was like, "What? You're a Revlon? Oh no, this is not gonna work," or whatever. But we got through that and everything. It was cool.

JP: *[Laughs]*

JJ: It was cool.

JP: Wait, where was I going with that?

[0:35:00]

Okay, I guess that surprises me. I didn't – I haven't heard from a lot of people that ballroom had a really bad reputation at the time.

JI: Yeah, yes it did. It had a very bad reputation.

JP: Okay, and then what kept you coming back? You kind of talked a little bit about what appealed to you at the beginning, but what kept you part of it?

JI: Well, I would say this. Ballroom can suck you in because of the adulation, the fun –

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the competition. It keeps you coming back for more. It really, really does, and it can become addictive like a drug. It can, and also it affords you the opportunity to travel to places that you normally probably wouldn't travel to on your own unless you went on a family trip, you know? So, you got to meet a lot of different people from different walks of life, from different areas and different states. So, you took advantage of that. Being young, 18, 19 years old, I'm –

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going to Philadelphia. I'm coming down here to Baltimore. Wow, the only time I really travel is when I go to Virginia or Georgia with my parents or stuff, and I'm in the country. I'm not really going anywhere. I'm discovering a whole new world. That keeps you coming back for more, and also, I want this name, this fame in ballroom. Until I achieve that, I'm going to keep coming back and keep coming back, keep – and when you become, in any competition, you develop rivalries, right? So, you wanna keep having that rival.

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Either you win or lose, but you keep wanting to – you want to keep on battling that person or people and show them, "I'm better than you." So that keeps you coming back from ballroom, well, especially for me, you know? *[Laughs]*

JP: How, I mean, how did you do with the competitions?

Jl: Oh, I did really great. Now, the first year, I'll say – so, I joined the House of Revlon towards the end of '91, and I had just graduated high school. So, they was big on that too, making sure that you finished school or you was in school. So, I graduated high school.

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Then '92 came. My friends and I decided that we was gonna start walking or whatever. First ball I went to was a mini ball, and I got chopped. I didn't understand what the chop was. I didn't understand why, and then my house brother at the time, Roy, walked and he won. But the category was, "Bring it Like Roy Revlon," which he – that's Roy Revlon. What they mean is, again, emulate a style of the person that they're asking you to. That's when I started to read the flyer –

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and get a better understanding of what they are asking you to bring when you walk the category. So, that was a better knowledge for me. So, it took me a year to really grasp that concept, and back then, it wasn't so many balls as it is today. There wasn't a ball every month or week or something. They were kind of spaced out. In that time, I met who would become my first love, and his name was Kenny. Kenny was a Dupree.

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So, we roll it into '93 now, and Kenny kind of was very instrumental in creating a style or James Revlon a lot because he changed – I used to walk, and I used to always wear button-down shirts, but I would leave them open so my tank top could show or my sneakers and my baseball cap. But I used to always wear shower to shower powder. So, you could see the powder on my chest. I just liked to smell good, you know? But I would win from time to time.

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But he told me to stop doing that, and I was a really skinny kid at the time. He was like, "If you gain ten more pounds, and you wore sweatshirts and sweaters and stuff, and you change from sneakers to Timberlands, I bet you you would win more." I didn't gain the weight, but I changed the sweatshirt – from the button-down shirts to the sweatshirts and the Timberlands, and he was right. That whole year of '93, I won undefeated.

JP: Why was that? What was the sweatshirt that did it?

JJ: I guess it gave me more of an urban look.

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More of that, like I talked about, the street corner boy or the gangster or the pimp or whatever like that, or the emulation of the video – because now we’re moving into a time where we start to emulate the people in the music industry. So, we were looking like the rappers and the singers that were quote/unquote “hardcore” and really rough and rugged. So, and that was their style, the sweatshirts, the hoodies, the baggy jeans, the Timberland boots and all of that.

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That worked, it worked.

JP: What – I mean, other than learning how to walk your category, what do you feel like you were learning about yourself or other things through ballroom those first maybe five years?

JJ: Well, I’ll tell you this. What people don’t believe is that I’m a very shy person. So, ballroom taught me confidence. It taught me accountability. It taught me teamwork.

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It taught me leadership. It actually taught me communication skills. It taught me how not to be afraid of something. It taught me how to go for what you want out of life. It taught me to stand up for myself. It taught me to be outspoken more and not be afraid to say what’s on your mind because now I’m an adult, and this is what adults do. They speak their mind. They live their life. They don’t hide behind anything. It showed me to be proud of my sexuality and who I was and stuff like that.

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And not be afraid of it, being gay and living in New York City where it’s rough and tough. It taught me all of those things. It taught me family values. It taught me friendship. It taught me love. It taught me hate at the same time. It’s taught me a lot of stuff.

JP: When you say it taught you love or family values, what does that mean?

JJ: Well, I come from a family of love. What I learned at home, and I tell everybody, everything that I learned at home, I transferred it over to ballroom as well, my ballroom life as well. So, how I was in ballroom is how I was at home, and how I was at home is how I was in ballroom.

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So, it taught me – when I say family values and love and stuff like that, it taught me commitment to your family. Me being the youngest in my family, didn't really have to do anything. Everything was already done for me because I was the youngest, being a momma's boy and being my father's youngest son, and I've got three older brothers and an older sister. Everything was done for me, or I do whatever was told to me to do, okay? So, here in ballroom, I learned that we are equals.

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No matter your age, no matter your race, we're equals. So, it's give and take. In order for us to coexist, if I give you love, I expect love back. Not that that wasn't taught because my parents taught me very good values and stuff, but to hear it from a peer or see it from a peer was a different aspect and different understanding of how to be a good friend, how to be a loving friend, how to be a loving boyfriend and stuff like that. So, that's what it had taught me.

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JP: When you say it taught you leadership, can you talk about that?

JJ: So, watching the leaders of my house, Tony, Danielle, Stuart, Chris and all of them at the time, how they ran the house, how they conducted the house – Garnet, Lisa – how things – Buck and all of them – how things are structured, how you catered to the people who – excuse me – follow you and be very careful in how you speak or what you say to a person because some people are hanging on –

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your every word, and not to mislead a person down a dark path because that would sit on your mind forever, and I've learned that by watching them and having personal conversations with them

individually on and on. They would teach me, and they would say to me, “James, you’re different than everybody else,” and I really didn’t understand what they meant by that. But they always used to tell me that they felt that there was something very special and unique about me, and that’s why they felt like they always would pull me to the side –

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and have conversations with me, and a lot of people in ballroom did that. There was a particular person named Barry, who also was AKA Cabbage Ebony, always would pull me out of sticky situations. Whether it was somebody that I was flirting with and they weren’t good for me, and he would see it from across the room, and he would come and he would snatch me and be like, “Don’t you talk to him, nah, nah, nah. I told you to stay away from them people.” So, it was a lot of, I like to say, guardian angels around. So, they taught me a lot of that and taught me –

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going back to the leadership thing, the private conversations was – because I never remember, a question was asked to me at the meeting when we joined the House of Revlon. They asked me if everybody left, and there were only five members left, what would you do? I said, “I would stay.” You know what I mean? Because I’m dedicated to who I’m dedicated to and stuff like that. That, to me, start [*snaps fingers*] my knowledge of being a great leader because you had to learn dedication.

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JP: So, but did you stay? Because you’re –

JJ: I stayed, I stayed for ten years.

JP: For ten years?

JJ: I stayed for ten years, and I only left to start my own, which is okay in ballroom.

JP: Tell me about that.

JJ: So, when you grow up, people – you tend to start to have different ideas and wanna go in a different direction, and you try to bring those ideas to the formation or establishment that you’re already a

part of. Sometimes it just doesn't – you don't agree, and it doesn't work out.

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Unfortunately, in our situation, I was supposed to become the leader of the House of Revlon, me and who was my daughter, also my best friend, Sabrina, Icon. We were supposed to become mother and father Revlon, and that was by request of the mother of the house, Danielle, who was also one of my gay mothers and stuff, and Tony, who was my gay father. They were going to step down, and we, Sabrina and I were going to become the new mother and father of the house. Unfortunately, a month before it was –

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supposed to happen, Danielle passed away. So, out of respect, we didn't do it, and we were going to wait. But there were some things transpiring that we didn't like within the house. Like I told you about my other best friend, Trina, that I joined the house with, her and one of the elders of the house kept getting into a physical altercation a lot at the meetings and stuff and a lot of arguments and stuff. Trina was telling us that we should leave, or we should start our own house. I'm like, "No, no, no, no –"

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no, no, no, no." I was against it and stuff like that, but then I just started to hear a lot of negative things that were happening, and my position that was promised to me was being offered to other people in the house, just as Sabrina's position was being offered to people outside of the house. We found that to be a great disrespect. Another good friend of mine, Ashley, who was in St. Clair at the time called me and told me that she was leaving the house. Well, she had a friend of ours, Nicole, call me –

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and tell me that she was leaving her house, and she wanted to start a new house, and she wanted me to be the father. Being happened that Ashley and I basically came out together, we had that bond, I instantly just said, "Yes," without any hesitation, but I needed to put a twist on it because I couldn't leave Sabrina because that was my best friend too and my daughter, and we had planned on becoming mother and father Revlon. So, what we did was – and

Sabrina and Ashley were ballroom rivals, but they weren't enemies, you know?

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They were just ballroom rivals for the category Realness and Fem Queen performance. So, I said, "How about we combined all of us together, and we do something different? We'll have one father and two mothers." They both said, "Yes." I said, "We will dominate the Fem Queen categories." Now, I gotta go back. For ballroom for me, everybody knows that I love the women of ballroom. They are my everything, my all, and that's because of my relationship –

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with my mother, my own mother and my sister. I adore them. Never wanted to be a woman. Never wanted to dress like a woman. Never wanted to get in drag, but I adore women. So, these two who were two of the prettiest, two of the realest women in the scene and stuff along with my best friend, Trina, wow. So, let's do this. Let's combine us together. Let's start this house, but let's make it a Fem Queen house, meaning that we'll have mostly all trans women. They did it a long time ago with the House of Continental –

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when we first came out, and they were all beautiful women and cis gender women. Oh my God, they were gorgeous, but the guy, I guess, who was the father, I always would see him. When he walked in the ballroom, he always had two women on his side, and one of the women was Carmen Extravaganza, who was a Continental at the time, and another woman, and I always thought that Carmen was the mother, and the other woman was the mother too. It was always them three. They was always leading the pack, and I wanted to emulate that and have –

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So, we did that, and we also incorporated trans men as well, and we had very few guys, butch queens like myself in the house, but it was mainly all trans women, and that's how we set it off to start the House of Icon.

JP:

Because it seems like each house has its own character, but also each house has its own favorite category.

Jl: Mm-hmm.

JP: So, is that what you were doing?

Jl: Right. So my – well, I didn't have a particular favorite category. All the Fem Queen categories were my favorite category. So, I wanted a girl for each category.

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I wanted to dominate the Fem Queen categories of ballroom.

JP: All of them?

Jl: All of them.

JP: Okay.

Jl: All of them.

JP: When was that that you started House of Icon?

Jl: We started in December of 1999, and we debuted it – well, Ashley debuted it in January of 2000.

JP: That was in New York?

Jl: New York, mm-hmm.

JP: Okay, okay. Well, so when did you move to Baltimore? What year was it?

Jl: The first time or now? *[Laughter]*

JP: I guess the first time.

Jl: So, I've been hanging out in Baltimore since 1992

JP: Okay.

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Jl: I moved down here in '95 for a few months and detoured to Philadelphia for 3 years, went back to New York. So, I officially moved back down here in 2012. I was offered a position with a

nonprofit organization called Women Accepting Responsibilities to work on their transgender project because of my affiliation with the transgender community, and I accepted it. From there, I made the transition over to where I'm at now, Chase Brexton Health Care.

JP: Okay.

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In Mt. Vernon?

JJ: Mm-hmm.

JP: Okay. I live right by there.

JJ: Oh cool.

JP: Wait, and so the first job you said – what kind of transgender position was it?

JJ: So, it was a program at the Women Accepting Responsibility called Beautiful Me, and what it was, it was a program designed for trans women so to teach them – it was an intervention and prevention for HIV and AIDS and other STIs. So, we would teach them life skills about how to protect themselves, hormone therapy, not sharing needles and stuff. We had a weekly transgender group –

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For ones that were either HIV positive or HIV negative, and we kind of combined the two groups because separating it kind of let you know who was positive, and we didn't know people to know of other peoples' statuses. So, we combined the groups together, and just taught the curriculum as a whole. We helped them with resume writing, job interviewing, housing, did a lot. Of course, testing and everything like that.

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So, that was a big part of my – and I drove the van at night around Maryland to provide free HIV testing. So, that was a part of my job.

JP: It seems like there is a lot of overlap between ballroom and HIV education and social services, that kind of thing.

JJ: Yes, they go hand in hand because in our community, going back to the '80s, late '80s, early '90s and stuff like that, my friends or people that I knew weren't making it to 21 or 25.

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They were succumbing to the crisis that was going on, which was HIV and AIDS. Us not really being knowledgeable on it at the time, we thought that they were dying from HIV and AIDS. Not realizing that everything else that they were doing, like drug intake and everything or alcoholism or prostitution was really impacting their lives and causing them to gain – contract other infections, which caused their early demise. So, it goes hand in hand because I guess that –

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the CDC, the government, and people in power, even people in our community saw that there was a need for help in this particular community, and not ballroom itself, but LGBTQAZ – it's so many letters now – community now that weren't being serviced. This population of people need these services so they can sustain their livelihood, and what can we do to help them? So, that's when the grants and everything were being written for –

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housing, for medication coverage and stuff like that, and then the education piece started to come in because I felt like, as the government stated to learn more is when they started to release the information to the public to learn more how to do it. So, then we realized that just because now we know that the reason why people look so emancipated when they were impacted with HIV is because they have contacted it so long ago, and the tests weren't sophisticated enough to gain early detection. So, by the time a person realized it, you –

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probably had zero T cells, and you had other opportunist infections, and it caused your early demise. Now the knowledge we can share into the community, and we can help each other and get the person into treatment or into prevention or let the person

know that there's prevention, condoms and everything like that and everything to prevent you from contracting HIV; or there's medication to help you sustain your livelihood as you're dealing with HIV and AIDS. So, that –

JP: I guess in ballroom, those social networks are already in place.

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So, if the father of the house knows it, they can share it with the entire house.

JJ: Share it with them, with their entire house. The father, the mother, the person in the house that is in that field or has studied it and stuff like that. That's why me working in the field, it comes naturally because professionally, I've been doing it for seven years. Realistically, I've been doing it for 31 years.

JP: Mm-hmm.

JJ: You understand? So, and I think that that's what gained the attention of Mrs. –

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Lawrence Stokey Brewer [sp?] who offered me my first job down here to say, "Hey, I think we should bring him down to assist us with this program, with this project," and it worked.

JP: Because you had already been in a leadership position. You'd already been working with –

JJ: I'm bossy. I'm bossy. I'm a Taurus, so I'm bossy by nature. Starting little groups as a kid, I always wanted to be the leader. Watching the movie *Warriors*, I wanted my own warriors. So, I've always been a natural-born leader, always took the lead in everything.

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So, growing up and then going into ballroom and stuff like that where I could be a real leader, I felt like, it took notice to a lot of people like, "Hey, that kid, yeah, I think we should mold him, watch him. I think he's the one that can help us figure out what it is that we really need and want."

JP: Mm-hmm. So, Baltimore, what do you think is specific about ballroom in Baltimore versus New York or other cities?

JI: Um –

JP: Or is there?

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JI: Well, we used to say back in the days that Baltimore had the realest girls, meaning that the Fem, the Trans women here looked the most like cis gendered women than anywhere else that we would go. That was where we always felt there was something in the water here that the girls just came out beautiful.

JP: I think other people have told me that too.

JI: *[Laughs]*

JP: Let's see.

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You touched on most of these. Just a few follow-up questions.

JI: Mm-hmm.

JP: Actually, this is one of the questions that Marco suggested. How do you think ballroom has changed over the past ten years?

JI: Over the ten years?

JP: Or even longer?

JI: Yeah. Ballroom, well, one, the trans women don't participate –

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as much as they used to. They don't even really attend the balls as much as they used to. So, that's a big change in ballroom, in my opinion.

JP: Other people have told me that too.

JI: Yeah.

JP: So, what – how do you account for that?

JJ: It becomes, I guess, a takeover. You know what I mean? As time went on – again, this will explain the difference in ballroom.

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As time went on, people changed. Evolution, I guess, as we would call it or whatever started to come into play into ballroom too. So, more categories were added. More states and cities started to compete. More people came into ballroom. So, with that, it became more guys than girls. So, when it became more guys than girls, then a lot of the guys became disrespectful in a sense.

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That respect factor was slowly but surely leaving ballroom. They were getting to the point of disrespectfully calling the women out of their name and out of their genders and stuff like that, which would cause one or two of them to come out of character and revert back to their former gender to defend themselves. So, that became an ongoing joke or ridicule of trans women and stuff like that. So, they started to feel like, “Well, I’m not gonna come –

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if this guy is going to attack me or talk about me like this or down me, and nobody is going to protect me. I’m gonna stop coming.” That’s what they eventually started to do. They stopped coming because you can still see a presence of them, but not how it used to be. So, the disrespect is what caused it to change a lot.

JP: I have a question related to that. Maybe we can talk about it later, but this year for the Peabody Ball there was a core group of five people. There was one trans woman. It was London.

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But if we do this this year, and I think we will, I wanna bring more trans people.

JJ: Mm-hmm.

JP: So, maybe if you have suggestions?

JJ: Yeah, definitely.

JP: Incorporate –

JJ: Definitely, definitely.

JP: Then, okay, what are two or three things that you would want the younger generation in ballroom to know about the history of ballroom?

JJ: Well, I want them to know that the history of ballroom is that it was always fun.

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Balls were very fun. I think they still are fun. Everything has a dry spell, but they were very fun. I would say do your research. What we used to do was if you came into ballroom, we sat you down and we made you watch *Paris is Burning*. *Paris is Burning* we looked at like the ballroom bible for a while. So, watch that because – and watch it a few times because you learn something each time that you watch it, and you get a sense of what ballroom is. It doesn't tell you everything.

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But you get a sense of it, so if you coming into it, you kind of know what you're walking into, and the best thing to do is to sit back and observe for a while and figure out what you wanna do, who you wanna be and what group you wanna belong to. Don't always go with the masses and the most popular because it doesn't mean that you fit with them. Figure out your own lane in ballroom because that's what it's about. It's about you. It's not about the conglomerate. It's about you. It's about you finding –

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yourself, you discovering yourself, and you discovering your talent, and you harboring on that talent, and you advancing that talent to be something more successful. There was a time where people would say, "You can't put ballroom on a resume." That's a lie because ballroom got me down here, right? Ballroom got the Peabody to throw a ball, right? Ballroom has been able to turn children's lives around when children were homeless out on the street and stuff like that.

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They have turned their lives around and have went on to school, have gained their bachelor's, their master's degree, or gained their apartments. They are stylists. They are singers. They are rappers. They are dancers. They are all engulfed into everyday life, but that's something you would have been doing anyway had you not left home, and you continue to get education in school, like we are supposed to in society rules. We still would have did the same thing. We just had a delay, and now you're back on track, and that's because of ballroom.

JP: Mm-hmm. So, you mentioned the Peabody Ball. So, I'm really curious to hear – how that ball fit into this longer history of ballroom that you've been a part of.

JJ: Wow, well, history being the key factor, the Peabody is a library, a source of information, a source of history, right? So why not combine the two. Ballroom is a place of history. There's history in ballroom. There's knowledge in ballroom and stuff like that. So, to have it – and ballroom likes everything elegant.

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The Peabody is an elegant establishment. It's an elegant place to come to, just the structure alone. Like I was telling somebody it looked like I was in a Harry Potter movie. It's extravagant that that's ballroom all in this. So, the combination, to combine the two was a great idea, and it was a successful idea because it emulated what ballroom is.

JP: Okay, I'm gonna ask you to go deeply into a few things that you just said. So, you said that ballroom is about –

[1:01:00]

history and knowledge. Can you tell me what you mean by that?

JJ: So, ballroom is about history and knowledge, meaning that you learn about people. You learn about things. You learn about life. You learn about how things work and how they can be and what they become. So much like history, it's story. So, ballroom is a story. There's a story within ballroom that people – so, when you come into ballroom it's like yourself. If you just learned about ballroom –

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you want to know everything about it, right? You wanna know about the history. You wanna know about the people. You wanna know how it's conducted and stuff like that. In order to do that, you have to do the research, and you have to study, and you have to gain the knowledge of the history of ballroom. A library is a place that you come to, it's a resource place that you come to to learn about something that you are interested in or something that you need to know. Absolutely the same.

JP: How do you – another just kind of follow-up question.

[1:02:00]

Say somebody came to you. They wanted to learn. They wanted to become ballroom. They wanted to learn about it. How would that person learn the history of ballroom, and what would you tell them?

JJ: Again, I would first have them watch *Paris is Burning*, okay? [Laughs] Then I would tell them, "Pick a couple of balls to go to, and sit in the audience and watch the ball. Listen to the commentator. Watch the people walking, performing. Look at the judges. Pay attention.

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Study what is going on around you, what is being said." Then now that we have easy access because before we would have video tapes, VHS tapes. Somebody would have a camcorder, and one person would have the copy and would circle it around to every house. If you had a double VCR, you could copy it, right?

JP: Mm-hmm.

JJ: But now, we have the internet where it's uploaded. Watch those videos because now you can see the videos of the past. So, you can see where –

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a person might have started from to where they are today, and you can see that evolution all on video. Study that. Research that. Watch it till your heart's content so you can understand what is expected because there's an expectation with a lot of things. Especially in ballroom, the expectation is that you be good in

which you do, right? So, in order to be good, you have to research, practice, and understand what it is that you're doing.

JP: Hmm, okay, yeah.

[1:03:30]

So, I mean, okay, and then one other question. You mentioned that ballroom is about extravagance and opulence. So, tell me more about that. Why is that? Do you –

JJ: Again, that drives from the world of pageantry when ballroom transformed into pageants to balls and stuff like that. So, the trans women with they gowns and the feathers and the beads and the hair, the makeup, and you looking like your favorite movie star or your favorite –

[1:04:00]

TV star or your favorite model. You put on extra, or we have something called Bazaar and Haute Couture, one of a kind. So, Designers Delight was a category where the designer would make something so outrageous or unique that when he hit the floor, everybody wanted that one particular piece. So, it's extravagant, and it's exciting because it's such an excitement. It's such a rush when somebody hits the floor, one of your favorites –

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or to see them battling for runway or performance, it's like, "Ah, yes. Get them, get them, get them, get them," or somebody just dressed up in such an outfit that's like, "Wow," like the Met Gala. Very the Met Gala. You know, that's how a lot of the fem queens used to bring it back in the days where they wore extravagant gowns and dresses and hair and, oh, it just be – *[claps hands]* Yeah.

JP: Okay, okay. So, you described perfectly –

[1:05:00]

my motivation for doing this. Over the summer, I had a friend who organizes balls in Europe. He has his parties called Opulence.

JJ: Mm-hmm.

JP: So I went to these parties.

JJ: Right.

JP: It's just like over-the-top, extravagant, opulent. I walked into this space for the first time, and it was like – it feels like this space was made for ballroom.

JJ: Right.

JP: Right?

JJ: Right.

JP: But then I started thinking a little bit more, and I learned a little bit more, and I learned a little bit more about ballroom, and I'm like, "Oh, ballroom is a repository for knowledge –

[1:05:30]

and history, and it's the same way for a library."

JJ: Right.

JP: So, why not bring them together –

JJ: See, you got it, right.

JP: – and see what happens?

JJ: Absolutely, absolutely.

JP: But what does that do? I mean, when you bring these two repositories of knowledge and history together, what –

JJ: I think it opens a person's mind up to anything is possible. Who would think that you would have a ball in a library? We're used to gymnasiums and halls, some clubs to have a ball in because you can mess all of that up.

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You can have your papers, the sheets and everything all around, and the clean-up crew is gonna come, so we're not worried about it, right? But at a library of this magnitude, it's like, "Wow, this is really nice. This is chic. This is, hmm, opulence," like you said.

This is extravagant. So, we come and we be very careful in not touching anything on the walls and everything, and we're very careful as if we're at our grandmother's house, and she's saying don't sit on her plastic furniture, you know? *[Laughs]* So, we take it like that.

[1:06:30]

So, the combination was great.

JP: So, one last question, if this happens next year, what would make it even better?

JJ: Hmm.

JP: It could be anything.

JJ: A higher runway.

JP: A higher runway?

JJ: Elevate it a little bit higher.

JP: Okay, and then I mean, but just in terms of the collaboration too. What other events leading up to the ball –

[1:07:00]

might be interesting or worth – or of benefit to both the library and Baltimore?

JJ: Well, it depends upon when you would have the ball. Then you can see, figure out what events are surrounding or leading up to the ball. It's all about timing. That's the one thing that's very important when you're throwing a ball. It's about timing of when you would have the ball and stuff. So, it doesn't coincide or collide with another person's function because when y'all had the ball, somebody else was having a ball too.

JP: Hmm.

JJ: Right, so that splits –

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the crowd into where to go because even though this one was free, and it was in Baltimore, you had another ball somewhere else where they were giving out a lot of cash and stuff. A popular person was throwing it, so a lot of people had went there instead. Even though they had to pay, that's where everybody – people follow the masses, you know?

JP: So, when would be a good time?

JJ: It depends. Never have it in June though – gay pride, I always tell people, “Never have a ball around gay pride. That is taboo. It's cliché.”

[1:08:00]

Don't do it. *[Laughs]* But have – so, this one was – when was this? March? April? I thought that that was really good. I thought it was good. You just gotta figure out and make sure nobody is having a ball around that time. So, you would have to stalk the Facebook pages and the groups and stuff like that. You got a crew who can do that. So, they can monitor, and somewhere along the lines – I never follow it – there's a ballroom calendar of all the dates of balls and stuff. Even coming up next year, 2020 –

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like ours – shameless plug – the House of Icon 20th anniversary will be in January. We will be throwing a ball. No, it's gonna be in New York.

JP: Okay.

JJ: It's gonna be in New York. I hope you come. It's gonna be in New York, and it's going to be – we haven't had one in a long time, and when we started to have the Icon balls, they were slated as the first balls of the years in the early 2000s. We stopped for at least almost 9 years now. So we wanna get back to that, just one good, one more time for our 20th anniversary.

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So, something like that, it's already predicted. So, you can look at what's coming up to plan your ball, your next ball.

JP: Okay, yeah. Let's stop there.

[End of Audio]