

Renee: A caravan coming to get me at 11:15.

Producer: Okay.

Renee: Yeah, I have a cardiology appointment today. I don't know, with my women's group, and some of the same ladies belong to CAB, the Consumer Advisory Board for us, but VACAB for the groups as a whole, because each different locality may have a VACAB group. This training that I'll go to on October 22nd is supposed to help me work better with the clinics and stuff like that, and we have two advisory people who actually work for the clinics. Our particular one, they come from the ID clinic at MCV. We respond to certain things, and then right now we're working on a compilation of resources for people that may be new to Richmond, and will want to meet some type of services. Sometimes they are people that are on the edge of homeless, or they are homeless, and we want to provide them with a place to get food, where they serve hot meals and things like that.

Renee: I've heard in the works, I missed the last CAB meeting, that we're doing a calendar, too. On each month, it will list things that are actually going to go on that month, certain groups, things of that nature. I'm going to leave it to y'all. Y'all ask away.

Interviewer: Well, our first question is super simple, and it's just, tell us something about your family and how you grew up.

Producer: Can you tell us your full name, so we have it in there?

Renee: Sure. Tania Renee Brooke. I'm 62 years old. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1957. That makes me 31. I told you, Tania was a liar. I was born in the Navy hospital. My biological father went to prison when I was three, and I was raised by my stepfather, who was the best man God ever put on the planet. He loved me like I was his child, and you couldn't tell him I wasn't his child. I have pictures sometimes, I'll show pictures and they go, "Oh, you look so much like your dad." And I don't have the heart to tell them that he's not my dad. If I didn't know who my biological father was, I would be suspect, you know? I was raised one of, I'm going to say this, one of three boys. My youngest brother died in an automobile accident, September 28th, 1968, so it just has been 50 years that he passed away.

Renee: So, it was just myself and my older brother, and I then became the baby, which made my mother latch on a little more, you know? She actually buried another child, had an infant death, a crib death back in the early '60s. Watching a parent mourn over a child that died is the most horrific thing. Parents are not supposed to outlive their children. I mean, it's in the grand scheme of things, but my mom and dad became alcoholics for about five years. Then they straightened up and became very, very devout Christians. My dad died at 46. My mother died at 56. My mother had metastatic brain cancer, and my dad died, he had a light stroke.

I was working on an associate's degree in nursing, because I've been an LPN, I'll tell you the story. I've been an LPN, but I was going to J. Sargeant Reynolds to work on my Associates Degree to become an RN.

Renee: It was 1985, and I had one day a week where I took an evening class. That day, I just decided I really didn't feel like going to that class. My roommate, there used to be a restaurant on Grace Street called Lum's, and her and my godsons, and their mother were going to go to eat dinner. "Come on, go to Lum's with us. We'll treat." I said, "No, I'm going to stay home." They had been gone five minutes, and my phone rang and my mother said, "Your father had a light stroke, you need to come home." Before I called my brother in Tennessee, he was dead. He aspirated on his own vomit, and it was the greatest loss I ever had. I mean, I lost my brother, but my dad, my stepdad was the greatest dad in the world.

Renee: When I legally changed my name from what it was to this, I took his last name. He tried to adopt us, but my biological father would always contest the adoption. My biological father was a sociopath, literally. He went to prison for murder, and it seemed like I spent my whole life trying to claw up from not to be anything like him, you know? I legally changed my name when I got to an age where he couldn't do anything about it, but with all this going on, I was transgender, you know? I knew that I was transgender from this big. My aunt used to tell my mother, "There's something wrong with that child." And she wasn't meaning it like, mean-spirited. It's because I was different from other children. As parents are, we refuse to believe there's something wrong with our children, you know?

Renee: We don't always see what other people may see, because they're our child. Anyway, I have to backtrack. I lived in a place called Edenton, North Carolina, right on the water. I mean, I could go out my house and go that way or that way and be in the water. When I was 16, I moved to Washington, DC, because of transgender stuff. My biological father thought I was gay, and there was nothing further from the truth, because I didn't see myself as a man with men. I saw myself as a woman with men, and this, to me, was like the horrible trick to play on a child, you know? I just wondered why this type of stuff happens. I could say, "Well, my mother had three boys, and she prayed, and prayed, and prayed for a girl, but just not the authorized method of getting one."

Renee: And so, I moved to DC when I was 16, with my cousin, who was gay. He was considerably older than me, but I moved because the psychiatrist that I was seeing told my parents that they should probably let me go, otherwise I might run away from home and not be seen or heard from. My parents agreed, but I always worked. Even as a young person, I worked in tobacco fields, and worked in different places. I moved to Washington, DC, I was 16. I lied about my age, got a job at the phone company, C&P Phone Company. If I had stayed with C&P Phone Company, that was 1973, I could have retired several times over, and with a nice pension. I would have been able to retire with 30 years at 46. Of

course, about six months in, when you work for a company and they have retirement benefits, you have to have proof of your birth, you know?

Renee: They kept pushing me and pushing me for a birth certificate. I finally had to fess up and tell them I was 16, which surprisingly, they were cool with. Back then you had to have a work permit, and I went and got a work permit and continued to work at the phone company. I'm sorry. The very, very month that I left home and went to DC, I started cross-dressing. Not all the time. There was a point in time when I actually had three wardrobes. I had a boy's wardrobe, I had a girl's wardrobe, and I had a unisex wardrobe. Then, I stay in DC, I work, and then people are on me to have a different lifestyle. So, you try to please. You try to do what other people want you to do, even if it's not in your best interests. So, I joined the Navy when I was 19.

Renee: I had been taking hormones. I started taking hormones when I was 16. Not a whole lot happened to me from 16 to 18, when I went in the service, or 19. I stopped taking while I was in the service, and then once I got to a permanent duty station at Bethesda Navy hospital, because I was a corpsman in the Navy. Once I got to that permanent duty station, I started taking my hormones again. Then, in 1980, I just finally said enough was enough. It was enough. I threw away all the boy's cloths, and all the unisex clothes, and had one wardrobe. There wasn't any turning back at that point. I legally changed my name to Tania Renee Brooke, and it's been a rough thing, because in the '70s, I didn't know any transgender people.

Renee: I mean, I had read about two. Christina Jorgensen, who was in the military, and went to Sweden, or Norway, or some place and had a sex change in the '60s. Was a private in the United States Army, and then of course in the '70s, we had Renee Richards, the tennis great. So, I didn't know any transgender people, and I thought, "Maybe I am gay." And then I thought, "No, but I don't see myself as a man. I just see myself as a woman." I would have terrible, terrible nightmares, and in my dreams and nightmares, I would be a woman, you know? And really just had a hard time accepting.

Renee: But like I said in 1980, I just had to take a leap of faith, which was odd by itself, because one of my ponders, or one of my questions was how would this be perceived by God? I started going to the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches when I was 16. I actually was baptized in a Metropolitan Community Church by the Reverend John Barbon in 1973. I have had a long history. We have an MCC here, but I don't get to go as much as I would like to. In 30 years of being here, I go and I sit in the very same pew, in the very same spot that I've sat in for 30 years. Nobody wants to be in the second seat on the left, you know? It's a bit awkward now, because I don't really have a place to put my rollator, and my ability to walk without it is very, very... I don't know what the word is I'm looking for.

Renee: It's hard to do, because I have this disease called avascular necrosis, and it has eaten up the cartilage in my hips. The ball in my left hip, top half of the ball is disintegrated. There is nothing there. It's bone on bone. The end result is, my left leg is about that much shorter, and I'm going to have a hip replacement surgery soon. But he's got like, all these limitations, you know? You've got to be able to do this, you've got to be able to do that. Al Roker had a hip surgery, hip replacement last week, and he's back on the show, you know? This doctor is telling me I'm not going to be able to do stuff for six weeks. Al Roker walked on a cane the very first day he had this hip surgery. He says, "You'll be on crutches for a few weeks, and then you will go to a walker, and then you'll go to a cane." I said, "Really?"

Renee: I had open heart surgery, and only stayed in the hospital five days. Really? But anyway, coming to grips with being transgender, I finally said to myself that God is a perfect God that doesn't make mistakes. There is a reason for me to be the way that I am. I may not understand the reason, but I know that as a boy, I would have probably been suicidal. As a young person, I was suicidal. Again, I'm going to go back to, I just didn't understand how you could play this trick on a child, you know? I knew physically that I was a boy, but I knew mentally that I was a girl. It's very, very hard, especially in the '70s, you know? I can sit here and say, "Hey, I've lived in seven different decades." You know?

Renee: Nowadays, we're flooded with information. The number of transgender people is huge. I mean, it's literally huge, and with people like Caitlyn Jenner coming forward, I think that a great portion of people know somebody that's gay or transgender. You know? I know professionally, as a nurse, that the suicide rate among gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people is very, very high. I thought about suicide, but then I thought my mother couldn't bury another child. It would just ruin her. I couldn't do that to her. My mother died in 1992, and I worried that my safety valve is gone. If I get depressed, and have issues, I have to worry about worrying her. I had in and out stints in behavioral health units, but fortunately, I had the greatest mental health therapist in the world.

Renee: In 2017, I was in and out of mental health, of behavioral health units probably about five times, in severe retreat. I had been seeing, I've known my mental health therapist for five years. She used to be at Fan Free Clinic, which was Health Brigade, is now Health Brigade. She was my case manager. She has all the documents. You know, the education to be a mental health therapist, and she is also a licensed clinical social worker. But I see her every Wednesday, come rain or come shine. It's the highlight of my week, because not only is she a mental health therapist, she's my friend. I have her number, I text her back and forth, like I've picked this out. Something will enter my head, and I will text her a message, and she will text me back. She did this when I was in and out of the behavior health unit. She said, "You know, you need to be able to contact me before a mental health crisis occurs."

Renee: And so, I firmly have committed to memory her phone number and her cell phone number. Our cell phones have made us so lazy, we don't want to remember phone numbers. I just make it a point to remember the important ones, you know? If you don't have your cell phone, you feel like, "Oh God, I'm lost." I've got mine in my pocket right now. Anyway, she's a really great lady. Her name is Janae, and there isn't anything that I don't share with her, because I found out a long time ago, in order for mental health therapy to work, you have to commit yourself. And I'm thankful to say that from 2018 and 2019, I have not been hospitalized for mental health crisis. I owe that, in huge part, to Janae, and I also, my own emotional well-being has improved. I used to think that psychiatrists or therapists were for people who didn't have friends.

Renee: But then I realized, there's some things you can't talk to your friends about, you know? When you go to these different units, they want to refer you to RBHA, Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, and I know people that are involved with it, and I just don't like their procedures and schemes, and things that they do. I say that I'll seek mental healthcare on the outside, my own private ones. Because once you get affiliated, they want to control what you do, you know? I am living with so many different issues. In 2007, I suffered a heart attack, and found out that I had a genetic birth defect in my heart called a myocardial bridge. When I was in the hospital for this, the nurses on the heart floor didn't know what a myocardial bridge was.

Renee: On the front page of my charts, they had Wikipedia, and it told what it was. You know, your arteries come away like this around your heart. One of my arteries was tunneled into the center of my heart, and when my heart was supposed to relax, it was squeezing, and when it was supposed to squeeze, it was relaxing. The exact, and so I was having syncope. I lost consciousness in the middle of Chamberlain Avenue, in rush hour traffic, which was a big thing. I went, they sewed that up. The next day, I couldn't move. I went back to the emergency room, I had a fractured collarbone and two cracked ribs. So, in 2009, back to October 9th, 2009, they put a defibrillator in. I am very, very fortunate. It's a defibrillator and a pacer.

Renee: It has paced me, but it's never shocked me. They say that it will shock you with 26 joules, and I don't know what 26 joules feels like, but I'm sure I don't want to find out. I have on my night side table a latitude monitor. Have you ever seen one?

Interviewer: No.

Renee: Technology is so grand. Every three months, the monitor comes on, talks to my defibrillator. The defibrillator talks to it. It sends a report to my doctor's office. If there's any issues, the doctor's office will know the next time you're in the office, calls me to say, "You need to come in." The last time I saw, the doctor that does this is called electrophysiologist. I saw him a year ago, and I was doing so well he said, "Well, come back in a year." So, I will see him sometime in this

month, October. Every 91 days, the machine comes on, and I find my hearing aid comes on. It will have a flashing light on it, so that when I do get home, I just press the button and then it will proceed. It receives information, and then you see the arrows going away where it's transmitting information, and when it's done, it turns green. It's yellow, red and green.

Renee: The technology, they just haven't had it where it would work with cell phones for a while, but they had it now, because I don't have a landline phone. But early on, you had to have a landline phone in order for this to work. Now it works just like any other telemetry, you know? I have a thumb drive that attaches to the back of it, and it just does this, and it's put out. My defibrillator is put out by Boston Scientific, and so I carry one of those little medical device cards. I don't go through X-ray machines. I mean...

Interviewer: Security.

Renee: Yeah, the security machines where they're magnetic things in there. They say it could suck it right out. Yeah, that is why I can't. That was in 2009, I had the defibrillator, and I kept having issues of syncope, falling and hurting myself. One night my heart was racing so bad, I had to get out of bed and go to my front room, and just be in front of the air conditioner because I felt high, and just trying to cool off. My brother, who was visiting, he was asleep on my sofa, and I went into the front room. I lost consciousness and fell on top of him on the sofa. When I lost consciousness, I lost my bowels and my bladder, and this happened several times. So, I went to the hospital, in MCV, and I could feel my heart racing. I mean, it's racing so hard I can't count it.

Renee: And having been a nurse most of my life, I lean back like that and look at the monitor, and my heart rate was 226 beats a minute. I start screaming as loud as I could possibly scream, and the nurse goes, "What are you screaming at? What's wrong?" And I said, "My heart, my heart." She looked at the monitor, and she went, "Oh my God." And she screamed, "We need doctors in here." They came with a crash cart, all the paraphernalia that goes with a code. They have this thing, if you're awake or they can get it on you, they have this vest that they can put on you. It will shock you from both sides. They put the vest on me, and I said, "You're not shocking me. I'm wide awake." No, no, I wasn't having any part of it. Good morning.

Neighbor: Good morning.

Renee: How are you?

Neighbor: All right.

Renee: That's my neighbor lady's boyfriend. I told them, "Wait a minute, wait a minute." Deep breathing stuff. They give me some magnesium, and something off of the cart, and brought my heart rate down to a normal limit. But I've

actually coded in MCV, two different times. When I came here, as a nurse, 1982, I guess, MCV was owned by the state. It wasn't a very good hospital. I used to tell people, if I'm dying, and I'm laying on their steps, do not take me in. Just let me die. Nowadays, MCV has saved my life on four separate occasions, and I have a sister, I call her a sister. She's really my cousin, but we were raised in the same house. She lives in Daytona Beach, Florida. "Come and live with me."

Renee: I think about it, and then I go, "No. My medical care, my health is precarious." I mean, I'm healthy. HIV-wise, I'm undetectable and have been for a very, very long time, and my last CD-4 was 800 and something. But I had that defibrillator put in, in 2009, and then I kept two or three times a month, I was ending up in the emergency room with unstable angina. One Friday night, I had angina all night long. It took, the rule is you take a nitro, wait five minutes, if you still have pain, take a nitro. When you take the third nitro, you're supposed to call rescue. And I said no, I don't want to go to the emergency room.

Renee: So, in the morning, it was just so bad, I couldn't tolerate it anymore. I called rescue. I went in, and when you come in with heart issues, the first thing they do is run a 12 lead EKG on you. I've done this so many times. Usually the nurse looks at it, or whoever is administering it looks at it, and they'll set it down on top of the EKG machine for when the doctor comes in. The nurse looked at my EKG and ran out the door. She literally ran out the door. In the next minute, there had to be 20-some people in my small space. I had one IV in, they put another IV in, rushed me upstairs to have a cardiac catheterization, and no blockages. I have never had blockages. I have small vessel blockages, but you can live with those. But they did the angioplasty, and checked, and I didn't have any blockages. I've never had this happen.

Renee: Usually, you go up and have tests. They have a transportation person take you up, bring you back. Four doctors went with me. They were pushing the gurney, and I thought it was really weird, something is really wrong. They did the angioplasty, and then the doctors come back in and start wheeling me back. I said, "Where am I going now? Back to the emergency room?" Oh no, you're going back to the critical care unit. I spent five days on the critical care unit, and then spent three days on the step down. They played with my medicine, and played with my medicine, and I was taking 25 milligrams of a medication called carvedilol. The day I was supposed to go home, I got up from the bed, wanted to go to the bathroom and almost passed out.

Renee: I said, "No, something's wrong." I sat back down on my bed, I called the nursing station and I said, "Something is wrong. I've got to go to the bathroom." My head was so light, and I was scared. I sat back down, took my blood pressure, it was 60 over 40. So, they kept me another day, and changed the 25 milligrams of carvedilol to 12.5 milligrams of carvedilol. All in all, I take about, in the morning medicine stuff, I take about 15 pills. In the evening, I take about nine, but that 15 pills doesn't account, I take my vitamins and stuff, too. My HIV doctor insists that you take a multivitamin, and I take vitamin D, and iron.

Interviewer: Were you diagnosed with HIV back in the days when you had to take the whole cocktail of drugs?

Renee: No.

Interviewer: When were you diagnosed?

Renee: 1997. I was with a guy, that I had been in a long-term relationship with for seven years. He was bipolar, wouldn't take his medicine, would flip out and do all sorts of crazy stuff. So, one Sunday, I came home from church and my sister, who lived in the house, bought a new house. She had a brand new refrigerator in her old house, and I had a huge garden. I mean, a huge garden, and she knew that I put stuff up and canned stuff. So, she brought this brand new refrigerator and set it on my side porch and said, because sometimes I put vegetables in there, and then I give them to my neighbors and friends. So, I got home from church and he was out there. He started chasing me. I ran across Williamsburg Road, and there was a 7-Eleven that used to be there, I think Parker Street.

Renee: I ran towards the 7-Eleven, because if he catches me, he's going to beat me up. He had done so many times. As I was going in 7-Eleven, a policeman came out, and I said, "Please help, this guy is chasing me. He's going to hurt me if he catches me." And as he got up close to me, the policeman said, "Hey, buddy." He slugged the policeman. The next thing I know, he's face down in the pavement. The policeman was putting handcuffs on him, he went to jail. Got six months. While he was in jail, he had put down on his paperwork that I was his wife, and that they should contact me in the case of any emergency. So, I got a call. He's at MCV, with pneumonia. I didn't think too much about it, and then a day or so later I got a call from a social worker. She said, "Miss Brooke, I'm a social worker. I'm working with Lee Patello," and so on and so forth.

Renee: She said, "You need to go and get yourself checked, because he is HIV positive." Now, here's the kicker. He had been HIV positive for 15 years. Never told me. He didn't take any medicine. Never, ever told me. That was in '96. I worked two good jobs, I worked at University Park, out at the west end. It's called University Park at the Laurels, or the Laurels at University Park now. Then, I worked a full-time job with Waffle House. I knew how the law worked, and HIV was not a thing that people were willing to cover, so I made sure all my insurances were all together. At the end of October, October 14th of 1997, I got the test results. I waited a whole year, and I knew it was going to be positive, because I knew I had been with him on many, many occasions.

Renee: And so, the day that I went, the old City Hall on Broad Street, there used to be a place called... I forget what they called it then. I went and got my test results, and it just so happened that same day I had an appointment with my primary care doctor. So, October 14th, and they gave me a little card to take to your health. Once they gave me the card, and it said I was positive, before I left their offices, I called Bob at the IV clinic.



Interviewer: Bob Higginson?

Renee: Yes. I called Bob, because I had a history with him for other things, and set up an appointment to see him. So I got to my primary care doctor and I said, "Lynn," she looked at it and went, "Oh, we have other things to worry about other than your blood pressure." The reason I was going, I was having a blood pressure issue. I told her, I said I scheduled an appointment with Bob Higginson at the IV clinic. And she said, "Oh, I know Bob. He's a patient of mine." She was his primary care doctor. And she said, "I know what tests to order. I'm going to order them today, and then when you get to see him, he will already have the numbers." This was October 14th of '97, and I got my first appointment with Bob, and I had a nephew and a roommate who had died from complications related to AIDS, but they started out with an AIDS diagnosis. It was never HIV.

Renee: So I got to Bob and I said, "Bob, what is my viral load?" He said, "238,000." I said, "Bob, you mean 2,380, right?" He said, "No, 238,000." Within three months, Bob had me undetectable. I came at a time when the medicines were getting to their best point, and even now, we've even progressed past that. Now, I still take four HIV medicines. Bob might want to switch me to something that's just one of. My thought is, "Bob, it's not broke, let's not fix it," you know? And I said, "Bob, I don't want to keep going from medicine to medicine. One day I'll run out of medicines to choose from." He said, "That's never going to happen."

Renee: But I take Centris, Resista, Norvir and a medicine called Vemlidy. Vemlidy has one of the medicines that Truvada has in it, but I was having lactic acidosis, and that medicine, they said was causing the lactic acidosis. I believe it was drinking, because I drank excessively. I mean, large, large amount of alcohol. And thanks to the mental health therapist, I only drink once on the blue moon. I mean, I have a beer in my refrigerator now, and it's been in there probably weeks. I will say that I was a terrible alcoholic, but I hadn't been drunk in over 30 years. I have a very high tolerance, but I was having so many health issues, and with all the other stuff, I said it was time to quit drinking.

Renee: There are those people who say, "Well, you've got to go to a support group. You've got to go to Alcoholics Anonymous." I didn't have to do any of that. I have the ability to do that by myself, you know? And I have done that by myself. Janae tells me frequently, she tells me all the time. She says, "And you've done this on your own terms." And I'm brutally honest with her, you know? I'll tell her, like when I saw her last week on Wednesday, I had just returned. I mean last week on Friday. I usually see her on Wednesday, but I was out of town for a statewide housing conference in Fairfax. That's why I saw her on Friday, and I said, "The first night at the conference, they put me up at this elaborate hotel room at the Marriott Residence Inn."

Renee: I mean, I had a kitchen, I had a bedroom, I had a sitting area. The kitchen was better than the kitchen I have in this house, you know? The only thing it didn't

have, it had a two burner stove and a microwave. It didn't have an oven, and I love to cook. But with Janae, I said, "Janae, the first night from 5:30 to seven o'clock, they had a little complimentary wine or beer thing. Then they had little hors d'oeuvres, and I have to tell you about this." I read a sign and it says cheese and bacon spread. I didn't think too much about it, you know? And they had these little crustinis that you could put it on. I just had dinner, I wasn't hungry, but I'm going to get some of it and I'm going to take it up to my room because I like to have something late in evening.

Renee: We sat down, I had two glasses of beer with my cronies, and there were other people from the hotel that were there. And so, I'm having these beers, and a couple people have their laptops there, because I was registering for my VCAB, and then registering for, are you familiar with the Priceless Powerful Women's Group Home? We're having that up to the 25th and 26th. It's about women living with HIV, and they're having a conference out at Embry Mark Suites, out by Glenside and Broad. So, we were there registering for different things, and I had two beers. I saw Janae on Friday and I said, "I had two beers, Janae." So I tell her. Bob used to ask me when I drank heavily. "How much did you drink?" Too much, I would say. He would say, "Well, exactly how much is too much? Four? Five?" Okay, that sounds good. Generally way more than that.

Renee: And so, I'm a firm believer in your doctors can't treat you accurately if they are not aware of all the problems, you know? You have to be honest with them. Sometimes, honesty is your enemy, but I felt a long time ago that having been a nurse for so long, you've got to be upfront with them, and let them do what they think is best. I love Bob. Like I said, he took care of my nephew and my roommate, but they started out with an AIDS diagnosis. Early on in this, all of my friends who had got it died within 18 months, and October 14th, I'm a 22 year survivor. HIV-wise, I'm as healthy as a horse. It's all that old age crap that's killing me.

Interviewer: So, Renee, I've got a million questions for you, because every time you say something...

Renee: Something else comes up.

Interviewer: Something else comes up, yes.

Renee: And you should do that. You had said to me that you are going to send me some questions, and I really thought spontaneity was the best solution.

Interviewer: It's great.

Producer: Yeah.

Interviewer: But, can I just throw like five different questions at you?

Renee: Oh yeah, please.

Interviewer: And you can answer them how you want, where you want, when you want.

Renee: Please. I would appreciate that.

Interviewer: So, you grew up with eventually the only surviving brother, right? So who is your sister?

Renee: She is not actually my sister.

Interviewer: Okay.

Renee: She is my best friend of nearly 40 years. We met on [inaudible 00:49:18], when I was buying an outfit with a brooch in the East End. Her mother and I became great friends. Her name was Jean. And so, then Carol got pregnant with who I call my son, and had him. My brother was kind of like an adopted dad to him. Carol and I had been friends for 40 years, and she even says this now, like yesterday she told me, we were talking about my son, "You raised him, he's your son." And I did. His grandmother and I raised him.

Interviewer: Was she imprisoned for a long time, then?

Renee: Six years, seven months and seven days.

Interviewer: Wow.

Renee: I only know that because she told me last night. So, anyway, our son doesn't live that far from here, and he calls me mom, sometimes he calls me auntie. My granddaughters call me yaya.

Interviewer: That's what I call my grandmother.

Renee: Yaya?

Interviewer: Yaya.

Renee: In some languages, it does mean auntie.

Interviewer: Yeah, she was Greek.

Renee: In some languages it means auntie, but my oldest granddaughter would never let me hold her. Never ever. One day, the kids came and had granddaughter, and they were going to was close at the laundromat. And I said, "Well, here, let's go by Burger King and we'll have something to eat, and then we'll go." And so, she's sitting in the high chair, and I get up to take my tray and empty it. I

don't know why she won't let me hold her. I came back to put my tray up, and she had her arms out. "Yaya, yaya." So, I picked her up out of the high chair, and it was the beginning of the end, because we had to wash clothes. Unfortunately, she wouldn't let me put her down. But it was really hard, because I was dealing with this hip, and I wasn't using the walker all the time. But they're five and three now.

Interviewer: So, you had your kids in the '80s, then?

Renee: Well, my son was born in '87. My oldest daughter is... Actually, I was in the Navy. While I was in the Navy, I hooked up with this girl that was a lesbian girl, and she, there was a thing called Don't Ask, Don't Tell. So, we lived together to pretend that we were just a couple living together. One of the three times that we were intimate with each other, we conceived a daughter. My youngest daughter, her mother was another good friend of mine, the mother was the next-door neighbor, just liked us. Her mother was my next-door neighbor. Her mother was going to jail the time for, I mean the police would come and kick the door down, and they would take the children away and send them to children protective services.

Renee: After this happened three or four times, later that night, she called me and I said the kids could stay with me, just let them stay with me. And they agreed to do that, and again I later adopted my daughter from that situation. And my son, like I said, is my sister's.

Interviewer: So, a very blended family.

Renee: Extremely, yes. I've always considered that my granddaughters have her complexion, and my son is actually Hispanic. His biological father is Hispanic. He's got dark hair and dark eyes. He's a good looking boy. I wish he would get his act together. He's 32, and he's going on 19.

Interviewer: Sorry, go ahead.

Producer: There are a couple of things I had as questions. One, what did it mean to be transgendered in the Navy? Because that's a whole different experience.

Renee: Well, because they didn't know.

Producer: Okay.

Renee: Yeah, they didn't know.

Interviewer: But you were taking the hormones then.

Renee: Yeah. I stopped taking them when I went in, but once I got to a permanent duty station.

Interviewer: You started again?

Renee: I started again. Part of my discharge, I spent 11 days on the behavioral analysis unit. They didn't call it that then, they called it the psych unit, at Bethesda Naval Hospital, which was where I was stationed at. At the end of the 11 days, I had this report. I had served almost four years at that point, and the doctor said I had immature gender identification, and that there was a lot of other medical jargon in there. He suggested that I be separated administratively for the pre-existing conditions, that preexisted my military enlistment. Then he told me what I already knew, I had a boy's body and a woman's mind. I said, "I told you that when I got here. We could have saved us 11 days, if you just listened to me."

Renee: And I've been known as a lot of things. He said I had immature gender identification, inadequate personality. Well, I am a lot of things, but having an inadequate personality is not one of them, you know? I am extremely self confident in myself, and I hadn't always been, but I am my own biggest hero, you know?

Producer: So, then you separated from the Navy. How old were you at that point?

Renee: I went in at '75. It would have been '79, late '79. Almost 1980. Actually, it was Thanksgiving, near Thanksgiving of 1979.

Producer: And then what happened?

Renee: I got out. I was a corpsman in the Navy, I lived in Washington, DC. At that time, I lived in Alexandria. I challenged the state boards and became an LPN. You can't do that now. But I challenged the state boards, and because I lived in the DC area, they allowed me to challenge the Maryland boards. So, I could work in Maryland, DC or Virginia. I worked at several nursing homes. I went to work for a place called Northern Virginia Doctor's Hospital in Alexandria, and I floated. They would call my name over the loudspeaker and they would give it an extension, and I would respond to whatever that extension was. I only worked in the SSE, the CCU and the emergency room. Wherever they were having a crisis.

Interviewer: Were you already identified as transgendered, or?

Renee: No, I stopped working for a short period of time in 1981, I think. I had worked at a nursing home for a woman named Margot Sager. I had legally changed my name, so they were calling me Renee, even as a boy, you know? So, I took a leave of absence, or I actually quit, really, and I wrote Margot Sager a letter and told her what I had done, that I was on hormone therapy and all this stuff. I said,

"I would like to come back to work." She called me and said, "Miss Brooke, when are you ready to come back to work?" Now, she was a lady from Ireland. She had this very thick Irish voice, you know?

Renee: And so, I went back to work. I remember the first time, back then nurses did not wear slacks. We wore skirts, or dresses that came down to here. We wore white stockings, and if you graduated from a certain school, you wore a cap. I'm not big on hats anyway. Then, when I left there, I went to work for GW University Hospital in DC, in their emergency room. I came here, I got trapped here, for lack of a better word. My father was sick. This was right before he died, and so, I left my job at the nursing home on a leave of absence to go help my mother take care of my dad. Well, they decided in the midst of all this, they lived in Dinwiddie County, that they were going to move back to North Carolina where I grew up at. And so, they moved, and I came to Richmond. I wish I had gone back to DC.

Renee: In the late '70s, early '80s, this place was so narrow-minded, you know? This is going to be hard, because I came from DC, and I'm used to, people are more informed about some things. And people are afraid of things they don't understand. I mean literally, they are, but so I've been here since 1982. That's a long time. A very long time.

Interviewer: So, how was it? In terms of thinking about, when was the first time you learned about HIV and AIDS, and how was the scene?

Renee: I knew about it. I had a friend in 1983 or '84, her name was Marlo. She actually was Marlo Thomas, not the actress, but she performed at a club called The Barn, where she was a female impersonator. Hairdresser by day, and a female impersonator extraordinaire by night. She got sick, and we did not have a name for this at that particular time. To me, that was the first I had ever heard of this, and I didn't really think anything about it, because I wasn't gay. Most of the men I slept with were predominantly straight, you know? So, I didn't really worry about it. I know some of the guys were bisexual, but I didn't think anything about it. But being in Richmond, my nephew lived across the street from me, and his roommate come running over one day and said, "Charles," she was Puerto Rican. "Charles is very sick. He wants you to come over."

Renee: And I went over, and he was cyanotic. His lips were blue, his face was turning blue, and I got a flashlight and looked, he had thrush all in his mouth. Bob was his doctor. He made up his mind that he was going to die, and he did, in 18 months. My roommate, Robin, who I was roommates with her for 22 years, she died. She got under 100 pounds, because she was tiny. She was like 5'3", 5'4". Got under 100 pounds. They told me in September, "Have an early birthday, and don't count on Christmas." In a month, I had her up to 126 pounds, and she did live for seven years. When they were diagnosed, I had to become a quick study, because I knew nothing about this disease. I bought a little book, it was a very small bound paperback book called The AIDS Factbook.

Renee: And I read it, and read it, and reread it and so I could almost memorize it. So, I knew about it then, and then when I was actually diagnosed, I really had to do more and more in-deep study. I'm not afraid to ask questions. If I don't know something, I'm going to ask Bob. He's one of the smartest people I know. I was at my eye doctor not long ago, she said, "You're doing well. Your HIV, you're undetectable." I said, "Bob takes very good care of me." And she said, "Bob takes care of everybody." So, I'm very thankful to have him in my corner.

Interviewer: So, how was the morning? I guess I'm trying to picture Richmond and the community living with HIV and AIDS.

Renee: Let me tell you, I found out a long time ago, you hang around a bunch of gay people and drag queens, you're always going to end up in some shit. I didn't like it. I don't like drama, and so I didn't hang. Now, I have some gay friends, but there are very, very few, and I have a few transgender friends, but I don't hobnob. I don't get on the phone and gossip with them. It's just not my scene. I told Janae last week, I said, "I know more about a woman's body than most women know about a woman's body." Studying, I ideally would like to learn something new every day. I don't always achieve that, but I am happy when I do. I belong to this thing called Word Genius, have you ever heard of that?

Interviewer: I do, too.

Renee: Word Genius, it's like I can learn something new every day.

Interviewer: So, Richmond, when you got here in 1982, you've been used to being in DC, which was a much more...

Renee: Progressive, yeah.

Interviewer: Progressive space. What was your day-to-day life like here?

Renee: Well, when I came here, I got myself a job as a barmaid at a place called the Celebrity Room. There used to be a big one out on Brook Road, and there was a small one at Chamberlain and Azalea, the little Celebrity Room. I worked there as a barmaid, and went to college at J. Sargent Reynolds. I was in, back then we were on quarters, we didn't do semesters. I was in the first quarter of my second year, when my mother called me and said my father died. I blamed very, very bad doctors for my father dying.

Interviewer: It sounds like it.

Renee: He had a triple coronary bypass, and they had him on 40 milligrams of Valium a day. 10 milligrams, four times a day. As a medical person, I thought there is not any reason for someone to be on 40 milligrams of Valium a day. It's a depressant, and he is in cardiac distress. I believe that's what caused the light stroke. If I could prove it, I would sue the hell out of them, but after my dad

died, I literally cried for two years. Every day for two years. Even now, November 3rd, when his birthday rolls around, I will be weeping all day long. He was the greatest dad in the world. I was very fortunate to have him.

Renee: Anyway, Richmond is very narrow-minded. I used to smoke weed when I was young, and I would go to Church Hill to buy my weed. Church Hill now is not the way it was then. There were no white people in Church Hill. My friends would go, "There ain't no white people in Church Hill." I said, "Look, if you act like you belong somewhere, people will believe that you belong there." If you go in there, you are already a victim, already. I wasn't going to be a part of that. Never. I don't hesitate. It's like, 95% of the women in my group, and 95% of the people in my CAB group are black. You know? I don't have those kind of issues, and I feel bad for people that do have those kind of issues. I found out a long time ago that I have to march to my own drum, and that's what I do.

Interviewer: What's the legacy that you want to leave behind?

Renee: I'm at an age where...

Interviewer: What you plan on creating, I should say.

Renee: Because I plan on being here for a long time.

Interviewer: Exactly.

Renee: My legacy, to me, would be for all people to be a kinder, gentler soul. People say, "Well, that's easy to say," but as I've gotten older, that kindness is its own reward. Being mean, mean-spirited or angry is very exhausting. It requires a lot of energy, and it drains you. Being kind and gracious is uplifting, and makes you feel good about yourself, and makes other people feel good about themselves. It's like that saying, people will forget what you did, they will forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel. I'm a firm believer that I would like my legacy to be kindness to all people. I couldn't stress that enough, and these days, it is so hard to find what... I found that there are people, where I have my rollator, who will not even hold the door open for me, you know?

Renee: And I struggle. I'm very good at it now, because I've been doing it for about two years, but sometimes I find myself holding the door for another person that has mobility issues, you know? I just don't want to be caught up in a bunch of crap all the time. I just live my life, I go to my groups and my support groups, and that's another reason why I've been able to maintain my sobriety. It's because I have these ladies that I can call any time, day or night, and they will always uplift me, you know? Especially Willamette.

Interviewer: She's amazing.



Renee: Yeah, she is 69 years old. We've got several ladies in our group that are in their late 50s, early 60s, but most of them are considerably younger, and most of them refer to Willamette as Mama. When she talks to people, she'll say, "Well, my girls." When you're talking about groups or experiences that are coming out she says, "I'll talk to the girls." Sometimes, we go out in mass force in support of something, and that's a good thing.

Interviewer: We have, as part of our class, we've done a tour at the Health Brigade, and learned about the role of the Fan Free Clinic here in the beginning. How has it been in your role for you at the Fan Free Clinic? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Renee: Yeah, my roommate Robin was a client at Fan Free Clinic. She ended up having HIV in her eyes, and got a disease that caused her to be blind. Her and I, we were only roommates. It was not an intimate relationship. We were buying a house on Williamsbrooke Road, and my real sister, who actually is my cousin, but to me she is my sister, was having a baby. My sister and Robin were very, very close, and Robin said she just wanted to have her sight long enough to see the baby. One day later, after she saw the baby, she was totally blind. I had to give up my house, because it was a two-story house, and Robin did not have blind people skills. I moved into a house that was all on one level, and at that point, I had to have an aid come in every day while I was at work.

Renee: I was off on Sundays and Mondays, Sundays because I went to church. I had an aid on Sunday, they call it respite care. I could go to church, and then I would schedule all her appointments on Mondays so that I can go with her. Having had my nephew and her gave me an education into this disease that I did not have before, and then of course becoming positive myself made it even more, I had to study even more.

Interviewer: How did your diagnosis change your life? How did it change your relationships with others?

Renee: Well, all my family that means anything to me, I told immediately. I have several nurses in my family. My aunt had four girls, and my mother had three boys, but I was raised in the same house with my girl cousins. So to me, they are my sisters. One of them, there's only six months between us, I'm May 10th. I was born on Mother's Day, 1957, and her birthday was October 24th, so there's just six months and a few days between us. We're like this, and I can not talk to her for three or four months at a time, and we get on the phone and we will spend three or four hours, the battery will go dead on my phone before we finish. I say, "I'm going to charge my phone up, and I'll call you back." I had always been very guarded about who I let know about this, and there are still people who don't know, and [inaudible 01:16:57] because there are still people who don't know.

Renee: All of the girls would be around you, and that something would happen to you, you know? Stress is a silent killer, and I'm just not going to do it. I just can't. It made me more cautious about, they're actually saying that undetectable can translate into not transmittable. I like that theory. I'm still not a part of it. I still think a condom is necessary, I don't know, just on a freak accident anything could happen. And so, I would never want to. Of course, everybody is not going to have my tenacity. I'm a Taurus, and to say I'm headstrong would be an understatement. 30 years ago, I could destroy a house in 15 minutes or less. I got tired of fixing all the stuff I would tear up, and so now I can't do it.

Renee: The people who are HIV positive, [inaudible 01:18:31] at some point in time. If they're not going to be [inaudible 01:18:40]. I love my friends. I have a lot of close ones, and unfortunately to say I've had many friends over the years who have died. They began to live three, four, five or six years, [inaudible 01:18:59]. With my youngest daughter it was like, "Oh my God, I thought you knew." I never sat down and told her that I was, because Robin told me HIV [inaudible 01:19:30]. And my daughter came to the house one day and she said, "Why didn't you go to work today? Are you feeling all right?" And I said, "No, the HIV." "What?" And I said, "You know, sometimes my HIV medicine makes me sick."

Renee: The look on her face told me that she didn't know. I think at that point, she had some quiet moments with herself to process all of this. She came back the next day and she was the same daughter I had known forever. Unfortunately, as I had grown with this disease, my children had to grow with this disease. I'm going to live, live, live until I die. I'm not trying to rush it along, and my one, only real brother is 65. He just had back surgery, and was out of work for six weeks. I told him on the phone yesterday, I said to him, "You're 65. We're not spring chickens anymore." He said, "You're not. I don't know why you're talking to me." It always gives me great pride to say that you're three years older than me, JD. Let me explain the math to you. I know the new math is hard to understand, but let me explain it to you.

Interviewer: If you could say anything to people in Richmond who don't really understand our high HIV rates, don't really understand the disease, what would it be?

Renee: I'll have to think about that for a second. To try and put yourself in that person's shoes. Knowing that you're living with a disease that actually can cause your death, even though these days people live, I have friends that are 40 year survivors. To not be quick to judge. I was in a committed relationship. It's not like I was a slut, you know? When I was a teenager, I was a slut. But I knew certain people that were infected, and I knew that Robin was infected, and I knew my nephew was infected. I knew people that they had been with, and so I would steer clear of those kind of folks. I just wish people would examine themselves and say, "This person doesn't change."

Renee: Physically, they don't change. They may eventually change, but it is kind of a constant, you know? The best thing is to surround yourself with people that are

not only HIV positive, but are positive people. I don't know. I would just ask that they be patient, and try to put themselves in somebody else's, in that person's shoes. Then have the tenacity to want to know more, you know? I think education is lost these days. People don't care to learn anything, and so they don't. I would love to get my hip replaced and go back to work, because nursing is something that I dearly love. I've got a valid license at least through May of next year.

Interviewer: You just need to stay involved regardless.

Renee: Yeah. I made up, when I was spending too much time in the behavior counseling, and I was drinking way more than any person should consume. I was in the emergency room and the doctor came in and said, "You know, your alcohol is four times the legal limit." And I said, "Well, it's a good thing I'm not driving." It wasn't funny. It just wasn't funny. In order for me to not only keep my sobriety, but to keep my mental well-being in check. Getting out and being with my friends. I had made myself a shut-in, and I don't know how much [inaudible 01:25:04]. My calendar is so full of stuff, I can't imagine how I'm going to fit it all in. Today, I have the [inaudible 01:25:12]. One thing that I have decided, that I don't want this rollator to hold me back. I do whatever I want to do. I went to the housing conference in Fairfax last week on Wednesday and Thursday.

Renee: They would put my rollator under, on the changeover bus. When I would get on the bus, put my rollator under the bus and I would get on the bus. There is no shortage of people in my group, brothers and sisters, who are willing to help me if I need assistance. So, there are a few people in my group that I'm not too close to, because I learned that they like to gossip and stuff like that. I just don't let myself do it. Somebody comes to you and says, "Well, Tania says," they're lying, because I just don't spend my time talking about other people. It's not in my nature.

Interviewer: So, why did you go to the housing conference?

Renee: It was put on by the Virginia Department of Health, because they have found a correlation where people that are infected with HIV or AIDS and the homeless. I went to the housing conference to hear all these speakers, about how to attain housing, and how to make it sustainable, where you're not living with the fear of being put in the street, you know? I know quite a few people that are currently now homeless and live with HIV. Again, I look at it as an opportunity. I have to learn something, and I don't know. I'm going to ask them.

Producer: I think we have a lot to work with, Renee.

Renee: Thank you so much.

Producer: Thank you so much.

Interviewer: Thank you. Is there anything, any last words?

Renee: Other than the fact that both of you are very beautiful, and if my mother were alive and she would hear that you [inaudible 01:27:59], "I just don't understand you. I don't understand you." Just because I'm transgendered, for men, doesn't mean I don't find women extremely beautiful. I have the ability to see beauty in whatever, and both of you have those beaming smiles, and puts you at ease. Now, 10 years ago, I might not have been this at ease, but y'all made me feel comfortable. Even last night, you made me feel comfortable. So, I'm sorry that we couldn't go inside.

Interviewer: This is great.

Producer: It's a beautiful day out here.

Renee: Yeah, it is, and I'm hoping she's getting ready, because when I go to the doctor, she's got to go. She gets her check today. She needs to go out and deal with her affairs. I love her dearly, but she gets on my nerves. And I'm sure that I get on her nerves. I get on your nerves too, don't I, Carol? But having been friends for all these years, and in some instances we get along so good, she is actually dealing with some stuff right now. She was staying some place, she came here yesterday because she was at a hotel, and her time was up at the hotel. So, I do what I can, but I can't violate my beliefs, you know? Because for so long, about being in trouble.

Producer: I hope you're going to join us at the Cascading Workshop.

Renee: Yes, indeed.

Producer: Wonderful. I don't know, I don't think we've talked about this yet, but we talked a lot with Willamette, and Lindsay, and Eric about having the group participate in acting in the play. And when I say acting, it doesn't mean you have to be getting up and moving around. It's more like a stage play.

Renee: Yeah. Let me tell you, I was the only student in my high school that attended a two year. The first year I was in high school, they started a drama department, and then I moved to DC and I went to school part-time at TC Williams High School. I was in their drama department. My drama teacher, her name was Sandra Boyce, in Edenton, North Carolina. She had studied in New York, and had been around gays and transgender people and things of that nature. So, she cast me in a play as Beverly Carlton, in The Man Who Came to Dinner. Her words were, "I want you to camp it up." I didn't know what in the hell she was talking about. She knew that I was different, and she was okay with it. I was there, back in 1973, this movie came out with Hal Holbrook called That Certain Someone, and it was about a gay man, sharing with other people his life.

Renee: Anonymously, an envelope was put in my mailbox. It went through the mail with just the clipping out of the TV Guide, telling me that this movie was coming on, and I made a point to make sure that I got to see it. Sandra was a very unique lady. Her husband actually later became the principal of my school. So, theater and arts, I took public speaking and debate, because I used to be kind of reserved. I was kind of an introvert, and now I'm so extroverted, you know? And I think I have a good command over the English language. I don't think in perfect sentences, and things like that nature, but I like to think that again, being a study, a student of life in general, just all the time. There's always something new to learn, and with technology, I'm not tech savvy. I'm just not.

Renee: My granddaughter set up my Facebook account. She's five. "Yaya." She's good at showing me what to do, but she's not good at explaining what it is and stuff.

Interviewer: We have one of our students is going to be giving you a call today.

Renee: Oh, that's fine.

Interviewer: But I'm curious, what are you thinking of bringing?

Renee: I really haven't had a lot of time to think, because I got home last night, and was dealing with my sister coming, and stuff like that. Then about a year and a half ago, the doctor put me on seroquel and trazodone, because they treated me for insomnia for 20 years. When you work all this shift work like I did, it messes you up. I take my seroquel and my trazodone. I took it at quarter to nine, 9:30, I'm out. I slept until the clock went off at 10 minutes to seven. I get up at 10 minutes to seven so I can turn on the Today Show. I'm always looking to learn something new.

Interviewer: Well, it's going to be wonderful having you in the play, and we're so excited that you're going to be part of the Cascading Book Workshop.

Renee: Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate that.

Interviewer: And the play is going to be actually all docu-drama. So, it's based on the oral history, introduced and research that the students have done, but it's all supposed to come from your stories.

Renee: Yeah. That, in itself, is educational, because there are people that will see this and maybe learn something that they're learning for the very first time.

Interviewer: That's what we hope, for sure.

Renee: That would be my biggest wish, is that people would learn something. Walk away with some important message that says, I'm really no different than anybody else.

Interviewer: Well, that's the goal of the play, and that's the goal of the exhibition. That's why we think having the group create these cascading books is going to be so important.

Renee: I agree.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much.

Renee: You're most kindly welcome. Like I said, I'm glad you didn't send me any questions. I like the idea of just thinking about it on the fly, you know? I don't want anything to actually be rehearsed. It has to be real, and it has to come from the heart.

Interviewer: Come from the heart.

Producer: We appreciate that. Well, this is a consent form, just to make sure you're giving us permission that we can use your oral history, for the museum exhibition.

Renee: It's October 1st.

Interviewer: I know, can you believe it? It's insane.