

Lolita: So say your full name.

Flowers: [Nathalin 00:00:04] Flowers [inaudible 00:00:06].

Lolita: Okay. And first question is what has been the impact of HIV/AIDS in your life?

Flowers: HIV/AIDS has impacted me in that I've lost good friends. I've lost artists, people who should be here creating. People who should be here being and for the fact that the stigma that was attached to it. When my best friend who lived behind me died and they didn't tell me until after his funeral, I was here in New York and he had been living in New York. He was like the first shampoo boy in my sister's shop. My sister had a beauty shop in Scranton.

Lolita: Got it, okay. You said in Scranton you said?

Flowers: In Scranton.

Lolita: Okay.

Flowers: Right, where we grew up in Pennsylvania.

Lolita: Oh okay.

Flowers: And he was like the first shampoo boy and he had gone to beauty school. But it wasn't a far stretch, his father was a barber. But I'm saying my mother was a bootleg hairdresser, my father was a bootleg barber.

Lolita: Barber.

Flowers: And on the weekends, Friday and Saturday our kitchens were full of hair being done on both sides. And then behind us was Stanley and his father doing hair who had a real barber shop.

Lolita: You said Nelly?

Flowers: Stanley.

Lolita: Stanley, okay.

Flowers: Stanley. So when he came to New York, rather than shaming his parents because he came out in New York, he used his middle name. So his professional name as a hairstylist was Stanley James.

Lolita: Got it.

Flowers: But he was Stanley James Smith.

Lolita: Got it.

Flowers: And he was very good. He was one of those black hairstylists who opened shops in midtown with a John Atkinson. And he was one of that group of the other part. And they became known, the fact that they were doing celebrities and other people. He was the hairstylist for the [inaudible 00:02:02].

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And another one, not [Pearly 00:02:08], the other one, Raisin.

Lolita: Raisin in the sun.

Flowers: Raisin. And so she was on Broadway and I would run into them every once in a while because I was in show business. But it was like this big stigma.

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: And I couldn't believe when my mother goes, I went to Stanley's funeral the other day. I'm like, and you didn't tell me?

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: From then to now, number one, our families always tried to teach judge people by their character. And if I'm not in your bed, what do I have to do with who you go to bed with?

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: And I never could understand that whole thing about judging people because they're gay or guess what? Are they nice? Are they kind?

Lolita: Right, right.

Flowers: Do they act like Christ? Christ loved everybody. And if God made you, God loves you. And that's the bottom line to me. And that made me so upset that it was like, my mother goes, I went to the funeral but you couldn't touch anything and blah, blah, blah. And they sprayed stuff all around and I was like, why? She goes, it, he had it. And I'm like, it? She couldn't even tell me.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: What it was. So beside the fact that I'm in show business and half or more of the people I work with are gay, nobody ever asked them.

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: Nobody ever judges them for it.

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: And I really love the fact that show business seemed to treat everybody pretty equally. And unless ... And I did not like it when people, what they did with Ryan White. What they did with the kid they killed out in the desert and tied to a fence.

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: But so it was always a protest in my ...

Lolita: Matthew Shepherd.

Flowers: Yes, Shepherd. Always a protest of mine that you don't treat people like this. And I'm not going to be part of you treating people like this. And I'm always going to fight you on it.

Lolita: Got it. Got it, okay. Excellent. And second question, let me get my glasses back on. Has HIV/AIDS been a transformative force in your life, and if so, how?

Flowers: I'd say it's made me more proactive. It's definitely made me ...

Lolita: In what sense?

Flowers: Made me more proactive in that for instance, if someone said ... My sister and I marched in every gay pride parade.

Lolita: We probably crossed paths.

Flowers: And because she'd take me to the parade and then we'd jump in the parade after one of the bands and march down.

Lolita: Yeah, yeah.

Flowers: Every gay pride parade my sister took me to, and we went because she was a [inaudible 00:04:56] nurse and a lot of her patients were former users. And a lot of her friends were former users. So she was like, no we have to go support them. And I was like, my point was, when you come march with me, you don't ask me what is my ... Who do I speak with?

Lolita: Okay, right.

Flowers: You don't ask me anything. You say do you support me, or don't you support me? And since they've always supported me, I'm going to support them. Yeah let's go.

Lolita: Let's do this.

Flowers: [inaudible 00:05:27] every gay pride parade and marched to the end and partied at the end. And we used to stay in a hotel on Christopher Street.

Lolita: Wow. The night before, or the night of or both?

Flowers: No, just when we needed a night out.

Lolita: Oh, nice. Nice, nice.

Flowers: And there's a real cheap motel down there. I think it was \$10 a night in the '60s or '70s. It was ridiculous. So yeah, we'd go down there and we'd look at this fleabag, oh this is what they mean by a fleabag. I got to the fleabag. Yeah flop house, yeah.

Lolita: I love it.

Flowers: And I just think that we should all be judged by the content of our character. I was at the march on Washington in '63 with Martin Luther King Jr.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: There was two of us, me and Cameron. When we did the march to Gracie mansion we were carrying the banner. And Hannah was running in front of us interviewing us. And she was asking us something. I was like, yeah I was at the march on Washington. And Cameron goes, I was at the march on Washington. I was seven years old. I said, I wasn't seven, but I was there. So what are the odds that the two people carrying the banner to Gracie mansion were at that march?

Lolita: Yeah, were at the same place. Wow.

Flowers: It was like, yeah, you ought to meet Cameron.

Lolita: That's great. That's great.

Flowers: And I'm definitely an advocate for everyone's right to be themselves.

Lolita: I love that.

Flowers: And as I think Malcolm said, injustice to one is injustice to all. I will fight for your rights and justice. And Martin said, judge a person by the content of their character.

Lolita: Yes.

Flowers: Not by the color of their skin.

Lolita: Their skin.

Flowers: Marley, when you judge a person by the color of their eyes, then you can come talk to me. But you don't [inaudible 00:07:03] from mental slavery. Nothing but yourself can free your own mind, your assets and everything else. And I really cannot stand injustice at any level. If someone bullied by friend, I'd go fight with the bullies in school. You made my friend cry? [inaudible 00:07:22] make them cry again. I'm going to get you. I was always the smallest thing.

Lolita: I was picturing this, yes.

Flowers: And I was like ...

Lolita: You're very fierce.

Flowers: You're not going to make my friend cry and get away with it.

Lolita: I love that.

Flowers: Yeah so.

Lolita: I love it. Okay.

Flowers: Basically the work we do in here is for everybody. It's against homelessness, HIV/AIDS, opioid drug overdose and mass incarceration.

Lolita: So what exactly do you do?

Flowers: That's local. Local I am right now, they say I'm a vocal leader. I got promoted. I'm like, what?

Lolita: Aw congrats.

Flowers: And before this I was the vocal activist and a volunteer and she's so vocal, which is an all women's group that Elizabeth Owens started.

Lolita: Right. Right.

Flowers: And basically I've been coming out, I've been marching, I've been speaking, I've been representing. I've become the voice of [inaudible 00:08:19] and the face of the homeless in New York because of confronting the mayor.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And going up to him at the gym and they were like, and you were so mean to that nice little lady. Why were you so ... And everybody jumped on my side. So then after that, every time we came out we went to the mayor's mansion. Was the mayor there? No, the mayor doesn't come, the mayor runs. Then so he kept saying he was going to meet with us but he sent his people to meet with us. We went to his office.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And then of course we marched on Gracie mansion and Marsha Kramer comes and runs across the street. She goes, the mayor just drove out, did you see that? And I'm like, no. And she goes, how does that make you feel? I said, I'm really sorry I voted for him. I'm very disappointed. I wish he'd be the man i voted for.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And I have a feeling that if his kids were here, he wouldn't be acting the way he does.

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: He has totally changed his tone since his kids aren't here to ask him. Because I know my kids would be saying ... There's a woman named Jane who works with us and she works with the youth homeless. And she says, you know what my daughter said the other day? Mommy, you're not doing your job very well. On the way to school I saw like seven homeless people. And she's like ... I tried to explain to her, I work with homeless youth and blah, blah, blah. That's not my job. She goes, you're not very good at your job mommy. I'm like, wow.

Lolita: Wow.

Flowers: But that's what kids do. They have no qualms about saying ...

Lolita: No filter.

Flowers: But if there was a dog there, somebody would come and take him and bathe him.

Lolita: That's true, yeah.

Flowers: And give him a warm bed and give him food.

Lolita: That's true.

Flowers: How can you leave a person on the street in this weather?

Lolita: Right.

Flowers: Anytime of the day. But in this weather, how can you leave a person on the street? And kids don't let you get away with that.

Lolita: No, they will call you on that.

Flowers: They're like, but mommy, you said treat everybody equally.

Lolita: They will call you.

Flowers: And that's not being equal, that's not being fair.

Lolita: Right. Right.

Flowers: They will say, that's not fair. Not it's not. So I have a daughter and I taught her to treat everybody equally and that's the tune I march to.

Lolita: Okay, excellent. Excellent.

Flowers: Be real.

Lolita: Yeah. Yeah.

Flowers: Be nice, be kind, everything you need to know you learned in kindergarten.

Lolita: You learned in kindergarten. I was just going to say that. Absolutely, absolutely. All right, this is great. I'm going to end it right here.

lolita: Recording now. And I'm going to ask, who in your life brings you the most joy, and why?

Flowers: I'd have to say my daughter.

lolita: And why is that?

Flowers: Because I'm so proud of her and I'm proud she's happy. I'm proud she's fulfilled. She lives in Portland, Oregon, where it's clean air.

lolita: What's her name, if you don't mind?

Flowers: Courtney.

lolita: Courtney. Okay.

Flowers: Made sure I gave her a name that was both. My real name is Nathaniel.

lolita: Oh, interesting.

Flowers: I'm named for my grandmother, who was named for my great-grandfather. And I've seen the tombstone saying, "Our beloved Mother, Nathaniel Jones Smith," so I'm Nathaniel Smith Flowers. And my Mother said the white nurse wrote Nathalyn.

lolita: Good. Oh.

Flowers: But I was named for her mother who was Nathaniel.

Iolita: Oh, okay.

Flowers: My sister, Precious, is Willie. She's the third-born from my Father. She named her Willie because my Father's name was Willie.

Iolita: Willie, right.

Flowers: Louis is named for one of my grandfathers. And, it goes like that. Mary was named for the twins that died from my Mother. It was Martha and Mary.

Iolita: Wow.

Flowers: So Mary, then Louis, then Willie, and we called ... She called her Precious, we called her Precious.

Iolita: Nice.

Flowers: And then my younger sister's AJ, Alan Joyce. So they know Southern people do this.

Iolita: Big, big ... Yeah.

Flowers: Like Billie [inaudible 00:01:20] Jo. So I wanted her to have a name that wasn't either or, that was either or. I knew a little girl who I loved at a church camp. Her name was Courtney. I said, "If I have a little girl." I was her big sister, she was my little sister. I said, "If I have a daughter I'm going to name her Courtney."

Iolita: Nice. That's a nice story. Can you tell me a little more about your relationship with your daughter?

Flowers: Yeah. It's basically I taught her to pray and spirituality. And we had many kinds of classes in crystals and we built pyramids together.

Iolita: Pyramids?

Flowers: Yeah. The pyramid master lives here. His name is Lester Loving. He used to do shows on BLS and he'd come on Numbers and You. They'd say, "He's lighting a light bulb here. There's no wires. He's using pyramids. And where's his power coming from?" Really. He lives here in Queens. And so we had classes with pyramid master on 125th Street. And like I said, I got to take her to church and I got to help her learn and teach her to pray. And that's the difference I feel in her and her brother, who they didn't take to church, and his life was totally different from hers then.

Iolita: Okay.

Flowers: Right now, she's just came because her father's in rehab for, they say it's cancer of the liver.

Iolita: Wow.

Flowers: He keeps telling her he's gonna die, and he took the last rites and all that stuff, and I'm like, "Aren't we glad it's not up to him? Did I not put him on the prayer line?" Friday before she got here, she was coming Monday. "I'm afraid he's going to be dead." "No, he's not. We're praying for him." "Is he alive?" "Yes." "Is he still alive?" "Yes." "Is he still alive?" "Yes." "Is he better?" "Yes." "Is he coming to rehab from the hospital?" "Yes." He's better. But, he won't take treatment. I'm like, okay. We went and just rearranged the whole house so the hospital bed can come in and he can have hospice at home.

Iolita: Right.

Flowers: She says he refuses treatment. And I said, "I think he's tired." And she goes, "How'd you know that? He said that to his neighbor." The neighbors had to call her each time to say, "Your father's in the hospital." But, basically, I'd say I feel I've raised a woman. I feel my obligation to this society is complete because I had a daughter and I raised a woman who can always create a nation.

Iolita: Wow. That's beautiful. That's a beautiful thing to say about your child. Nice. Thank you.

Flowers: Well, she's wonderful.

Iolita: Yeah, clearly. Clearly. Second question-

Flowers: And she's loved. That's what I wanted to her to be: loved, lovable, and have her own mind and be independent. And she is.

Iolita: Nice. You sound like my mom.

Flowers: You can't ask for anything more.

Iolita: That's exactly what my mom would say about me. Wow. I love that. That was a great answer. Thank you. Second question, what's the best thing to happen to you lately?

Flowers: The best thing to happen to me lately was I got to stop Amazon.

Iolita: Tell me about this.

Flowers: Okay. When Amazon jumped up with their crap and ... No, not Amazon. When the mayor and the governor went behind closed doors and made that deal, we read in the paper. We said, "Say what? Oh no, you didn't. And furthermore, we're not having it." So that very day, the next day, we went to the Amazon bookstore and had a demonstration, a rally-

lolita: The one on 34th?

Flowers: Mm-hmm (affirmative). A rally, a demonstration, and the guard was like so cool. He was like just watching us. He didn't put us out, nothing. We did the whole rally in the store.

lolita: In the store?

Flowers: In the store. In the store.

lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And then as we were marching out with our signs with the Amazon smile turned down because that's the way our signs were, there's a ... One of them, Amber mentioned the next day, I think it's AM New York, there's a picture of me shouting, marching by with my sign-

lolita: Oh, in AM New York Newspaper?

Flowers: Uh-huh.

lolita: Got it. Love it

Flowers: Shouting and marching by. And then that night, Polly says, "Okay, I'm going to give you to Jake. Jake, this is Flowers. There's a demonstration tonight at where they're going along on the city." I was like ... I can walk there from where I live.

lolita: Ah, you did tell me you live in Long Island City.

Flowers: That's how close it is. And they're going to do what? They said, "At the demonstration tonight," He says, "Flowers' going to get there, she's going to take care of you. Get you up to the front because you're going to speak."

lolita: Who is this?

Flowers: Jake.

lolita: Jake. Okay. And who's Jake? For the interview, who's Jake?

Flowers: Just a guy Paula had introduced me to who's another activist who's going to be there because she was going to be there.

lolita: Oh, okay.

Flowers: And I was like, "Okay." We go, it's pouring rain. We're in the pouring rain. But the City Councilman [inaudible 00:06:20] came and I think someone else came. But we had this huge demonstration in front of the City Tower where the guy says ... Where it says city's going to be the word Amazon. So this huge glass skyscraper. It's so gentrified out there you ... It's full of Buppies and Yuppies, trust me. It's hard ... I've been looking for a place out there for almost two years.

lolita: Really.

Flowers: Very hard and now it's all condos and co-ops and just glass structure after skyscraper and we're like, "How much more can you develop this place? And then every other day there's something wrong with the train? You need to take that two billion, three billion and put it in the subways."

lolita: In the train. Right.

Flowers: So that we can ... But at the same time the seven train runs every five minutes, every seven minutes. I'm like, "This is the best train I've ever seen in New York."

lolita: It is. It really is.

Flowers: Oh, so they love Queens. Okay. Got that. We went out there, we stood in the pouring rain, we demonstrated, we talked. And then one of the last people to speak was a worker from Amazon Warehouse. He said, "It's horrible. They won't let us unionize. I barely have time to eat. I work 12 hours a day. They won't let me eat, I can't get a break for lunch." It's like ... They just treat people horrible.

lolita: Wow.

Flowers: And he said ... And it's like take it or leave it. That's their attitude. We're Amazon. Sister, no they didn't. Furthermore, we're not having it. Then, like the following week, I got to go met Senator Gianaris, Michael Gianaris. He's a state Senator who is definitely against Amazon. Then my City Council member is Jimmy Van Bramer. He was against it. So the Council member for the district and the Senator for the district were against it. And then ... So we go to meet him in his office and I said to him, "Are you willing to go to an injunction? Are you willing to go to court? Because we're willing to fight to stop them. All the way." He said, "Yes, but guess what? That's the last thing we'll have to do. But I'm willing to do it. And thank you for [inaudible 00:08:23]."

lolita: Wow.

Flowers: That's the last thing you would have to do because there are many other ways we can stop them before that. And I'm like, "Let us know, we'll be here."

lolita: We'll be there.

Flowers: And fight, fight, fight. We're not having it. One, you're not going to pay taxes. Then, I told them about the people we met when we were at ... What's it called? Uprising. We were at a movie premier, which was a movie about activists. Activists Uprising or something.

lolita: Okay.

Flowers: It's a documentary.

lolita: Okay.

Flowers: And one of Jowanza's films was in it.

lolita: His films was ... Oh, it was part of ... It was a film festival?

Flowers: Was part of the documentary. No, it was part of the documentary.

lolita: Oh, I see. [crosstalk 00:09:05]. So his footage.

Flowers: Right. It was him, Act Up. It was Vocal, the stuff he'd done on Vocal, Act Up. Stop, stop, stop erasing black people ... Or but it was the-

lolita: The [inaudible 00:09:22]?

Flowers: Tacoma, Tacoma action project, or something like that. They were all young people like in their early 20s. And they said, "Tacoma is to Seattle as Fort Lee is to New York. And we're getting all the overflow for people-"

lolita: Fort Lee?

Flowers: Fort Lee, New Jersey.

lolita: Oh, New Jersey. Okay.

Flowers: To New York?

lolita: Oh, I see. Got it.

Flowers: Tacoma is to Seattle. And I'm like, "Really?" And they said, "We're getting all the overflow and the push out of the people, the residents." Because not only did they lose their housing, housing is sky high. They can't afford it anymore. They didn't get those jobs that were promised because Amazon brings in people from around the world to fill those jobs. And now we have tent cities and people living in cars with their families. And they never had that in Seattle. Seattle used to be one of the best places to live.

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And now they've got all this homelessness, all this homelessness, all these people pushed out and no jobs as promised. And then as we were in Vocal and Scott told us, "Read The Great American Job Scam." The Great American Job Scam. Not one company who's promised 10, 15, or 20, or 25 thousand jobs, not one has panned out. Not one. Not one has ever come through because as they say. So who's going to get this job if the average wage at Amazon is 150 thousand, how many can New Yorkers get those jobs? Very few. That's what happened in Seattle. And so these young people told us the only thing you do at Amazon ... Oh, and then they went to the City Council, the City Council asked them to pay \$275 per worker, a tax to the city because they don't pay taxes.

lolita: That's right.

Flowers: They refused and said, "No, we're Amazon. And we're not doing that either." So not only, they said, did they take over the community, pushed the people out, so everybody lost ... Where they came in, those people lost their homes, pretty much. And/or were foreclosed because they lost their jobs and where they used to work. Whatever. But the point was they pushed out the community and then they took over the government and refuses to pay taxes. [inaudible 00:11:38].

lolita: That's too much.

Flowers: They said the only thing you can do with Amazon is stop them. Don't let them come. Because if they get in here they'll be like-

lolita: That's it.

Flowers: We're Amazon, you're not.

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And we're going to do whatever we want because-

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And so I said to him, "What does the richest man in the world and the richest company in the world need with our tax dollars? Furthermore, last year Amazon made a trillion dollars." They have it. They said we're back and forth with, I don't know, Google, somebody. They say they went back and forth and who had a trillion this time, but at one point they made a trillion dollars last year. It's ... You're the richest man in the world. What do you need my money for?

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And why won't you pay taxes?

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And why won't you let people unionize?

lolita: Right.

Flowers: And why won't you give them fair working conditions? Why must they work under slave labor? What? And then there was a headline that said, "Bezos, richest man is also the cheapest." That headline came out. Did you see that?

lolita: No, I didn't.

Flowers: It was one of the few papers, because that's all I ever pick up.

lolita: Me too.

Flowers: But richest man is also the cheapest. And then his wife said, "I want a divorce." And we're like yeah. No more for you. It was like ... That was so, so great. And when they tried to say ... They put a picture of Gianaris on the cover of one of the papers saying, "Amazon Killer."

lolita: Wow.

Flowers: I'm like yeah, and we helped. It's shake and bake and we helped. But the best part was that everybody said no. The community said no. When they say ... These two polls, Quinnipiac and another one, there's like 700 people.

lolita: Oh.

Flowers: And oh 57% said yes and over here not one of them had like 5000 people in the survey. Not one of them, I think, even had 1000 people in the survey. But they were like, "These are the polls that show that the community is for it." Oh really? Are you really ... Do you really think we're that stupid?

lolita: Skewed. Right.

Flowers: You really think we're that backwards? You really think we're that unorganized? If in one day we can march on your butt twice and march through your store and get the press, do you think we just going to stand by and take this?

lolita: Right.

Flowers: We're not taking this. So-

lolita: Excellent. Excellent.

Flowers: We got to meet him and Corey Johnson's against it too, the Speaker. We just stood with him at the HIV/AIDS memorial last week. That's the picture Jason was talking about.

lolita: Yeah.

Flowers: I haven't seen it. But we went to stand with them because this is ... It's avoidable, it's preventable. The best thing happened last year, also, was not one child was born with AIDS.

lolita: You're the second person to tell me that. Yeah, Charlene Cooper told me that.

Flowers: Yeah. Not one baby was born with AIDS or HIV.

lolita: Yes. Nice.

Flowers: So New York is setting the tempo, we hope.

lolita: Tone, yes.

Flowers: And then we'll continue and we, African American women, are the highest rising group of people with HIV/AIDS. That's crazy.

lolita: It is crazy.

Flowers: Because of what, [inaudible 00:14:45] or whatever? But the point is I have female condoms in my bag. Where's yours? We have to take responsibility for ourselves and stop ... Oh, he doesn't like them. He doesn't like condoms. What?

lolita: Yeah. I'm going to stop, I'm going to stop right here.