

Shonda Alexander interviewed by Tahje Wright
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Harlem, Manhattan

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

NYC, community, protest, people, neighborhood, homelessness, mental illness, gentrification, hobbies, experience, racism, feel, systems, elderly, rent, impacts, family, arrested

Tahje Wright: My name is Tahje and I'm interviewing Shonda in Manhattan on May 15, 2020. Do you give me permission to record and make this oral history public?

Shonda Alexander: Yes.

TW: Okay. Reminder, you do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. So please share as much basic information as you are willing to share. Name?

SA: Shonda Alexander

TW: Age?

SA: 53

TW: Occupation?

SA: I own my own juice bar.

TW: Neighborhood?

SA: Manhattan, Harlem.

TW: Place of origin?

SA: Harlem

TW: First language?

SA: English

TW: Ethnic identity?

SA: African American

TW: Gender identity?

SA: Female

TW: Sexual orientation?

SA: Married.

TW: Okay. Are you and your family from NYC? If not tell me how you and your family ended up in New York City.

SA: I was born and raised in Harlem.

TW: That's includes like your mother?

SA: My mother is from Brooklyn. My father is from Virginia.

TW: Okay. That is good to know. so how do you get around in it in the city?

SA: I drive.

TW: All right, and even though you drive, I'm assuming that you took the train once or twice before? Right? Or a bus? Maybe?

SA: Yes.

TW: How would you describe your experience on public transportation?

SA: I don't like it.

TW: Why?

SA: Because of the people, we have a lot of people that [have] mental issues. And they ride the train.

TW: So, do you have any wild stories from being on a public transportation system in New York City?

SA: No.

TW: No? Okay. And do you feel safe in your community?

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. And what would or does make your community safe?

SA: The people because I've lived in this neighborhood for over 40 years.

TW: That's a lot. How does law enforcement fit into your vision of safety in NYC?

SA: Well, I own a juice bar in my neighborhood. So, they come to the juice bar and I know a couple of [people].

TW: And how does concern for safety in your community shift? How [does] that community function? Like how safety [it is] in your community? Okay...

TW: So, what is it like living in a city that has people from all over the world?

SA: It's nice.

TW: So how have you benefited from NYC diversity?

SA: Well, it's a good feeling. By them being diverse I get to learn where they from, they get to learn where I'm from.

TW: Would you consider NYC generally in your neighborhood specifically to be racially segregated? Meaning not diverse.

SA: No, no,

TW: Okay. Why or why not?

SA: Because we have Africans, we have the French, we have Chinese, we have Jamaican all in this community.

TW: What have been your experiences with the NYC public education system as a student, parent, or an observer?

SA: Well, from now, on this point I think that they don't teach our kids enough about the background stuff.

TW: Do you feel like more was taught in your generation about our background?

SA: Yes.

TW: Why do you say that?

SA: Because [they used to teach] the kids.

TW: So, have you experienced segregation either in all one ethnic group or having an ethnic group missing in the school system where you went to school?

SA: Say that again.

TW: So basically, have you ever experienced segregation, either all one ethnic group or having an ethnic group missing in the school system? Like what was your experience like as a child in school?

SA: Well, my mother, she moved out to Long Island. So, it was like a little bit of racism going on out there.

TW: And if so, what do you think are the consequences of that segregation?

SA: You just know who is who. And you don't be around that way.

TW: So New Yorkers are known for some certain personality traits. What personality traits do you think New Yorkers are known for?

SA: Staying up late. Partying...

TW: Anything else?

SA: Hustle and bustle.

TW: Okay, so [now we are going talk about] housing. Again, you don't have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. How well do you know your neighbors and the people in your community? And you answered that before.

SA: Because I've been living in this building [for] over 20 years.

TW: And do you have any public support systems in your community?

SA: Yes

TW: What are they?

SA: Well, [there are] different people that I can go to get support. We got different business owners that I can get support from...

TW: So, the help is from both from the government and from the community? I guess you can say, or just from the law and from the community?

SA: It's through the community.

TW: Okay. And also, are there others that aren't available in the community? So, what support systems do you want to be available in your community that aren't available currently, right now?

SA: Centers for kids

TW: Anything else?

SA: Things for the elderly.

TW: There's a lack of housing or homes?

SA: No, there is lack with what the elderly can get. The youth to help them pick up groceries, help them to do things like that.

TW: Okay. So, systems [for] the elderly.

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. So, what does good housing mean to you in terms of neighborhood, space in apartment, public spaces and area, food and area, safety, transportation, neighborhood resources, affirming your identity?

SA: Good housing to me. You gotta have space. [There has to be good people around you to keep your community up. You can't have people that just come into your community and tear your community down.

TW: Okay. Throughout the years, have you ever experienced that in the past?

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. How did you deal with that?

SA: I told them that I live around here, and they are not going to tear down my community.

TW: And have you ever been worried about not being able to afford rent?

SA: Yes.

TW: If so, can you explain the experience? You don't have to answer if you don't want to.

SA: You know, it was sometimes that I could not make my rent. So, I had to go to public assistance to assist me.

TW: What impact does gentrification have on your neighborhood?

SA There is a big impact or not. But change is good for me.

TW: Why do you say that?

SA: Because I see which way [it] is going. So, it makes me go harder. And when I say harder, work harder.

TW: Since you're a business owner, and gentrification is coming to the community, do you personally feel like it's sort of maybe trying to push you out of the community in a way? Like the bigger companies [are] trying to take up your space? If you get what I'm trying to say.

SA: No, because my space is in a block. And I got my space at a time where rent wasn't so crazy. You know what I'm saying? [In] some of these places, the rent is crazy. It's ridiculous. So, you just got to get in where you fit in.

TW: And how do you feel about the homelessness crisis in NYC?

SA: It is terrible. And we really need to have a place where they can go, because it's not only homelessness, is mental illness.

TW: Back to the question that I asked you before about there being support systems in the community. Do you think that supports are down or maybe like wanting to support systems in the community is like [having] to deal with homelessness or mental illness like you said before?

SA: We have it in the community. We have a clinic right next door to us. They deal with mental illness. But it's a lot. If they don't want to take the medicine, they don't have to take the medicine. So, it's laws.

TW: What do you see as the cause for homelessness,

SA: Drugs and sometimes rent is too high for people.

TW: And also, what should society and the government do to basically help these crises?

SA: They should come up with a plan for mental illness.

TW: What plan exactly?

SA: Like talk to them, find out you... You know what I'm saying? House them from off the streets. [There] is a place called Woods Island...

TW: What is that?

SA: It's a clinic for mental ill people. It goes over 125 Street. It's a big building. I don't even know if that's open anymore. But it was a place over there.

TW: Okay, so the next set of questions I asked you is gonna have to do with the Black Lives Matter protests. You don't have to answer any of these questions if it makes you uncomfortable again. So how do you feel but the Black Lives Matter protest?

SA: All lives matter, not just black lives matter. All lives matter.

TW: Okay, so explain to me how you think these anti racist protests erupted particularly strongly in NYC?

SA: Say that again.

TW: how do you think the Black Lives Matter protest was created? Like why do you think it was created? What caused it basically in New York City? Because in New York City Black Lives Matter you see [how] on the news is usually always in New York City.

SA: Because they [were] killing so many black young men and black men. So that's how I think that became.

TW: Okay. What do you think activated protesting black Americans and then nonblack allies to challenge cult structural racism in the United States?

SA: Because they got tired of it. They got tired of their sons, and their kids being killed.

TW: Do you have any stories you want to share about the encounters you had with racism?

SA: No, I probably [have] seen it. But I didn't see it in New York.

TW: So, you never seen racism in New York before?

SA: Yeah, never experienced it.

TW: Okay. And have you in the past had any negative encounters with the police?

SA: Uh-huh

TW: Okay. How was that like?

SA: They arrested me by someone word. And I went through the system. But I went to court like three times, and they threw it out.

TW: Did that negative experience that you had with the police officer [shaped] the way you view police officers in the future? Because that negative experience that you had with law enforcement?

SA: It just taught me that anybody can say someone did something and they will take their word.

TW: Okay.

SA: So, it just made me smarter and wiser.

TW: And how about the way race and racism in policing is covered in the media? So how do you think about the way the racism is covered in the news, or on social media? What do you have to say above that?

SA: The news? That's their job, to make it seem worse than what it is. So, they're going to portray it to be so so bad.

TW: So, do you think that the news tells the truth or like they tell the exaggerated truth?

SA: They tell exaggerated truth.

TW: Okay. Do you think any changes should be made with the way the NYPD operates given the events of the last two years?

SA: Yes.

TW: What changes?

SA: They need to really clean up these corners.

TW: Can you further explain?

SA: Like you have guys on the corners just doing what they want to do. You know what I'm saying? Selling drugs... Just hanging out on the corners. They need to clean up these corners.

TW: Do you feel that there's a way to go about it? Like, I know you said that there in the past somebody basically said something about you and got you arrested. Do you think that there's a certain way to go about arresting these people or maybe taking action for the NYPD to take action against them?

SA: Yeah.

TW: What is the way?

SA: I think that if you come in the community, or you learn the people that's in the community, you can handle it a certain way.

TW: Okay. So, were you active in the protest at all in the digital or in person way over the last two years? So, [were] you present in the protests, or maybe you [were] online and digitally saw it?

SA: I seen it on TV. But I didn't go out there and protest.

TW: Okay. So why did you decide not to get involved?

SA: Because it's dangerous. It was arresting people. And I wasn't willing to stand up there and get involved in there.

TW: So, the next section of questions has to do with COVID-19. And again, if you don't feel comfortable answering the questions, you don't have to answer them. So how has your life changed financially since COVID-19?

SA: it slowed down for my financials?

TW: How would the working conditions at your workplace before COVID?

SA: It was good.

TW: Like, what was the under shift in your workplace since March 2020.

SA: So we use the open up from eight to eight. Now, we open up from eight to six.

TW: Why do you guys do that now?

SA: Because of the COVID. Now, it lifts up a little bit, but you never know. It gets off at a certain time. You never know if anyone is [going to] come in here and rob you. You know, you got a lot of mental illness people on the streets, so I'd rather not jeopardize myself or the workers.

TW: Okay, so we already established about your work but did your work life change due to COVID-19? So how [has] your personal life changed since COVID-19?

SA: My personal life now makes me go harder. It makes me think about different things that I can create. But another money extreme.

TW: Are there any new hobbies you're taking up?

SA: Yes. Right now, I want to do training. Like trying people. Give them like, nutrition. I want to [be a] nutritionist. And stuff like that.

TW: Okay. So, since you also have new hobbies that you're taking up, do you have old hobbies that you lost interest in due to COVID-19?

SA: No.

TW: No? So other hobbies that you had before [are] still the same?

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. And how have your relationships changed with your friends, neighbors or family due to COVID-19?

SA: It really haven't.

TW: So how has COVID-19 impacted your health and the health of your family?

SA: Some of my family members got sick. But since I'm in the health field, as far as with juices and stuff like that. You know what I'm saying. I have different things to get them back on track.

TW: Okay. So, you saying that your business basically helps people?

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. What, if any, were the benefits to your life from the two years in quarantine? Did [it] benefit your life [in] anyway?

SA: Yes.

TW: How?

SA: It made me sit back and think of what I can create for people with COVID and stuff, so get them better and keep their immune system up.

TW: Okay. Is there anything that you learned about yourself or your family during this time period?

SA: Yeah, that you still have to hustle. Still got to hustle.

TW: Okay. So, finishing up, is there anything I should have asked or anything that you'd like to add?

SA: No.

TW: Okay. Are you still comfortable making this oral history public?

SA: Yes.

TW: Okay. Thank you.