

Pride Toronto's Black, Queer & Trans Excellence Series Podcast EP04

LENGTH • 55:35

SPEAKERS

Hollywood Jade, Sherwin Modeste

Hollywood Jade 00:00

You're listening to Pride Toronto's Black Queer and Trans Excellence podcast, where we honour and celebrate the Black experience through the lens of the LGBTQ2+ community with honest conversations about embracing Black joy. I am your host, Hollywood Jade. kuku and Bon soir, how is everybody doing? Happy Black History Month! Happy February! I've decided that we are just going to celebrate these milestones of making it this far, so happy February 2021! My name is Hollywood Jade, my pronouns are he/him, and depending on who I'm talking to, sometimes cis, and I want to welcome you back to the podcast. Thank you so much for all the love and support, it's been great the conversations that have been started because of these other conversations that we've been having, so I'd like to take this time now to shout out Pride Toronto for having me. And speaking of Pride Toronto, my guest today, if you are listening and are a follower and have been paying attention, you will know that he is the newly elected Executive Director for Pride Toronto, add sound effects, we insert them here, so like finger snap, finger snap. Sherwin is a dynamic, passionate and seasoned executive leader with over 22 years of combined experience. Sherwin, how are you doing this afternoon?

Sherwin Modeste 01:47

Hi Jade, thanks very much for having me. I am doing good, just amazing. You know, it's cold, the pandemic, and everything, but you know, just knowing that it is February, it's the month that we can, as people of African descent, Black people, we can celebrate, I'm actually excited for today and also to be here.

Hollywood Jade 02:11

Yeah, I think that's a good point, like and I mean, I know that especially in of lately, like Black pride has been spilling over beyond just February, but there's something that I find interesting about how a lot of programming becomes so centered around us in February. And one of the things that I've been noticing a lot of people have been challenging these companies and these corporations, because like even myself, I've been featured a lot this month, and I was like, I don't even remember saying 'yes' to half of this stuff, but "hey, I'll take it," you know what I mean?! But..

Sherwin Modeste 02:45

Yes

Hollywood Jade 02:46

Hopefully, they'll still want to feature us in April, and June, and July. And I think that is, is what's great about these conversations that we, we've started having more publicly and in these types of forums via the internet and podcasts, is about telling fuller Black stories, and not just solely in February.

Sherwin Modeste 03:10

And that's, that is so true, because you're so right, in terms of African Heritage month, or Black History Month, should not just be celebrated, you know, for the 28 or the 29 days of February, but it should be celebrated 365 days a year. And, you know, it's really important that we highlight this, because you know what, the contributions of Black folks, both locally here in Canada, but globally, there is not enough days in the year to really celebrate it. So I think you're right on when you said the celebrations have to continue and must continue. But the struggles, also needs to be highlighted. So yes, we're doing the celebration, but we also highlighting that the struggles and the fight continues.

Hollywood Jade 04:06

Yes, I agree. And it's interesting, and I like how you frame that saying that, we do have to highlight the struggle, but we are also not just looking at the past, but we're talking about the present struggle that we are still existing in. And I look forward to a time where the struggle is something that we only talk about in passing, because there's, there's just so much more to, to celebrate, you know what I mean? Like when I really think about even the wealth of knowledge that has come to me this year about things that I didn't know about people, Black people, and their contributions and like, it definitely can spill over and further and wider than just February.

Sherwin Modeste 04:52

Yes, definitely. And I think I share the sentiment that you share around moving away from the struggles, moving away from the fights, and moving into a celebration, and I think this is the desire, not just of you and I, but of many of humanity, many Black folks both here and abroad. But we know that human beings by nature, you know, we, we fall in, but the key thing that I really like is that we will not stop - we understand, and we want to get to the point of, you know, as to celebrate, but we will not stop because, you know, one of our historians said to us that, if we forget our pasts, if we don't know our history, it is very likely that, that will come back to haunt us. So for me, it is, I'm always proceeding with caution, I'm always standing at an amber light, I don't always take the green, because proceeding with caution has helped me to really understand the struggles even more, and really being able to navigate through some of those struggles.

Hollywood Jade 06:16

Wow, I love that. I love that you are at the amber light, that was such a great visual know what I mean, because in proceeding with caution, then you have the choice, you're giving yourself options, you know what I mean, versus it has to be this or this. That's good! Okay, before we get any deeper into, you know, Black History Month, [chuckling] and, and celebration versus struggle, or how they can coexist, I wanted to talk a little bit more about your newly elected position, because this is a huge deal. Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations! Um, how was the process of becoming elected for you?

Sherwin Modeste 07:01

So I have to say being, being a, it's actually an appointment, not only election. Being appointed, the Executive Director of Pride Toronto was quite a process. Going through the search process with a Search Committee, but it was about four or five interviews, and assessments, and so I went through a very rigorous process. And this is why I don't take this position lightly, and I am not in this position, because, you know, I, it was handed to me, I have to see, I had to work hard for this position in order to get appointed as the Executive Director.

Hollywood Jade 07:52

I didn't know that it wasn't like an election process, I, look, I'm not here learning new things every day, you know? So, I mean, this is a big undertaking, and yes, you have a lot of executive leader experience, but what, what drew you to, like, did you apply and then they chose from the applicants? Like, how did how did it all begin? I'm novice, I know nothing. [both laughing]

Sherwin Modeste 08:21

It is, it is my, in my former role, I worked as a director, and my CEO, sent me the posting and said to me, "I see your name all over this posting." Within a couple days, a day or two, my partner sent me the same posting and said, "I see your name all over the posting." And I'm like, okay, you know what, something is, something, the ancestors are speaking some way. And then the recruiter reached out to me. So within a week, I had three individuals reaching out to me for the same position. So I decided, you know what, I'm going to put my hat in the race and I applied, and sort of went through the process, the process, right up until, you know, and I wasn't certain until I got that call to say, you know, the Board of Directors would like to offer me the position. And I was like, wow, you know, Sherwin, this young guy from a small village in the island of Grenada is going to be leading..

Hollywood Jade 09:32

Let's go!

Sherwin Modeste 09:33

..one of Toronto's, one of Canada's largest LGBTQ..

Hollywood Jade 09:36

One of North America's largest!

Sherwin Modeste 09:38

..you know, and for me, it was Wow! But it was also the work has begun.

Hollywood Jade 09:45

Amazing!

Sherwin Modeste 09:45

So, ya know, so definitely was quite a process, but throughout all, you know, I just really had to acknowledge my ancestors who have really sort of paved the way for people like myself and like yourself

Hollywood Jade 09:58

Yeah!

Sherwin Modeste 09:59

To do what we're today.

Hollywood Jade 10:01

I, I really wish sometimes that that people could see us having these conversations, because I don't know if you could hear it in his voice. But like, as he was describing, the people who sent this to him, like your smile, and your energy just got brighter and lighter, and lighter, and lighter, as you kept talking about this experience and like it, I think it's so important that, especially at a time like now, when, when the world is in such a state of disarray, like, I feel like I say this all the time, I think we are, like, at a point where it's a reset, you know what I mean?! So the norms of the past no longer exist, like, we're going to be those people who talk "well, back in my day, we used to have this, that and that," they're like, and it'll be a whole different experience, and I think it's so important that the narrative of the direction the world seems to be going is that it wants to make sure that the narratives from all aspects are being heard, you know. And that, it's not just always about the struggle, like, yes, you went through this process, but you've come out of this process on the other side of it as an Executive Director.

Sherwin Modeste 11:19

Exactly! And I think this, you hit the nail, right on the head, the end product, coming out. You see this in terms of the resiliency and, and bringing it back to us, again, as a people, one of the things that I admire about us as Black people, we are a very resilient bunch of folks, and no matter how many times we fall, you know, there were times in during that process, that I felt this was not for me, I am very comfortable in the position that I am in. But there was something that was drawing me closer to that position. And again, as I said, it's that resiliency that, you know, we can constantly find ourselves in, where, you know, the strengths of many folks and the shoulders that we constantly have to, have to lean on, has definitely been, you know, that, that pillar for me, that foundation that, you know, the work that I've done in the community, the work that I will continue to do in the community, and the work that I will do, you know, as long as I have health and strength, is built on the foundation of resiliency. And for me, that's, that's where I stand and, you know, principled in the work that I do.

Hollywood Jade 12:39

I love that. Um, I want to talk, you mentioned in a little while ago about being from a small town in Grenada, you said?!

Sherwin Modeste 12:39

Yes.

Hollywood Jade 12:39

So give us, give us a rundown a quick rundown of your journey of being from a small town in Grenada to coming to Toronto and becoming involved with Pride Toronto.

Sherwin Modeste 13:02

So I again, I'm, I'm number nine of 11 children. My mom has 11 of us, I grew up with my mom and my stepdad. And it wasn't easy. There were you know, it was, there were some hard days. But as a child growing up, there were two things that I were interested in: politics and religion. So I wanted to either be the Prime Minister of Grenada or a Roman Catholic priest.

Hollywood Jade 13:33

Wow.

Sherwin Modeste 13:34

Somewhere along the line, something shifted, and I migrated to Canada, primarily to do Hotel and Restaurant Management. By the time I got to the fifth form, I was just like, okay, you know, what, this priest thing is not working for me, and.. But I always knew who I was, but it was not something that I was willing to, to, it was not going to be entertained. And as a result, at a very young age at 18, I got married, had a daughter at 19, and so did all the stuff to deny Sherwin of Sherwin really is. Right! That did not work - clearly [both laughing] You know, so, you know, now I return to Grenada and you know, I'm very different in terms of the atmosphere, you know, the struggles of people from, you know, to, to the LGBTQ community continues to struggle. You know, I have many friends there that, you know, says to me, you know, I just want to get out, you know, it's too hard, you cannot be yourself. And, you know, I'm very grateful for making that decision 26 years ago to move to Toronto.

Hollywood Jade 14:56

Wow.

Sherwin Modeste 14:56

You know, it's a constant reminder for me that there are still friends and family that are going through that struggle of having to deny themselves who they really are. So yeah!

Hollywood Jade 15:11

So it was part of your move, you think, as a way for you to embrace yourself fully? Is that part of why you left?

Sherwin Modeste 15:19

I would say no, I would say no, I moved

Hollywood Jade 15:23

You found yourself when you got here.

Sherwin Modeste 15:25

I knew before because I mean, I knew before.

Hollywood Jade 15:29

Right.

Sherwin Modeste 15:29

Again, as I said, being the good Christian Catholic boy that I was, it was not something that will come to the dinner, dinner table - it was not spoken about, it was not acted upon. And so not until, an old saying that we say we have back home, "till flour became thicker than water, or water became thicker than flour." I, I more or less kind of, uh, I could not resist any longer, any longer, I could not hold, so I just had to let go. And you know, you know, went through the process of telling my family and, you know, close friends. And it was not an easy process, but I have to say, you know, thank God that, you know, the people that I really care about, have embraced me and love me for who I am.

Hollywood Jade 16:19

That's beautiful. So when did you start working? Because you said you had moved here to work in hotel management. To study.

Sherwin Modeste 16:29

To study. Yes.

Hollywood Jade 16:31

And so when did it then switch to you now being into strategic planning and operational leadership. [Sherwin laughing]

Sherwin Modeste 16:40

So I, after six months, at one of the institutions here, I realized that hotel and restaurant management was not, as much as I love the concept, it was not for me. So I shifted and went into early childhood education, with ultimate goal of looking - thinking that I would become some policy guy really working on early childhood development, and so on. And during that time, being an early childhood educator, I became very active in the union. And at a, I was 19, or 20, when I ran for a position called the National Diversity Vice President of CUPE. So which is a mean, a very high level position representing workers of color, and what after being elected, that was, I would say, my leadership started with CUPE, you know, from my local Vice President, and, you know, joining a series of committees, and so the, the labour movement, sort of what the, I would say, brought out that leadership in me and, you know, 20+ years now, the lights have not stopped shining, in fact, it has only gotten brighter.

Hollywood Jade 18:06

Okay, so let's, let's, 'cause, 22 years, 22+ years is a lot of experience in leadership, and I can only imagine how much it's shifted over the years in terms of the people that you've, you've had to lead and how you have to approach leading all of these people. So let's talk about some of these, these, like, key pivotal roles that you've played over the last 20 years, like there's, like quite an extensive list of amazing things that you've been a part of. So let's, let's highlight a couple of them to give our listeners a broader understanding.

Sherwin Modeste 18:43

Yeah, so I have had, you know, from working for the United Nations Association of Canada as the diversity educator, you know, also working for one of Canada's largest social housing providers' board as a frontline worker, and also as a manager growing the budget and growing their programs from, you know, a 3 to you know, a 10 and leaving them in a very solid place in, in relation to funding and program stability. You know, taking on the

leadership at a health center, where two programs, two agencies are merging, and my responsibility as the Director for Community Health was to ensure that the supportive housing and the healthcare side of the business merge, and I tell you, it, it, it was not something that I had any experience, this was my first go at it. But again, those transferable skills that have gained throughout the years I've been able to take with me. So often times folks will say "Oh, you know, well, I have not done all of this." Well, you see, it's really about transferring the skills and the knowledge from one step to the next, and for me, these are the those are some of the key roles that I've had. But again, even in my volunteer capacity, you know, being the, the Vice Chair and board member of the Black Coalition for AIDS prevention, you know, being the Chair of the board of directors for Second Base youth shelter, those are areas. So it's, for me, it was not just about paid employment, I also made it my duty to give back to the community that have given so much to me, in terms of my volunteer role. But I also have to say, again, I'm going to bring you back to my very young union days, and I remember the current, the current President of CUPE Ontario, and I know, he would not mind if I called his name, Fred Hahn invited me to my first Pink Triangle Committee, and that's the committee that will fight for working rights for the LGBTQ community. And I'm telling you, this was again, another opportunity where I was able to work with predominantly white allies, and really bring forth some of the issues that Black workers, LGBTQ workers were facing. And it again, has really brought me, I remember, when I left Ottawa and came to Toronto, and I made a commitment to myself, I am not going back in the closet, I'm going to be out and being told to my face, at an agency, at a staff training, that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, that if a man can have sex with another man, that, you know, they can bring dog faces to the table. I mean, that's how insulting it was. But I never, I never give up, because my vision was, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and somebody had to start the conversations, so some of the conversations I started, and but I know that someone else will pick it up. So oftentimes, it's that person that's gonna start the conversation, and then someone else will pick it up. So I've been the starter of some of the conversations, but I've also picked it up from others, and continued a conversation.

Hollywood Jade 22:45

Wow, that.. you brought up so many, well, wow! [laughing with awe] It's, it's so impressive, like one of the things that I think you said that really stuck out to me was that a lot of the positions that you found yourself in, you didn't necessarily have training or experience to be in that position, but you had these transferable skills, and this knowledge and this spirit, and this drive, and all of that combined made it possible for you to go in and effect positive change in all of these different committees, and in groups that you've been able to contribute and deposit yourself into.

Sherwin Modeste 23:34

Most definitely.

Hollywood Jade 23:35

That's insanity! [Sherwin chuckling] And you've been doing this now as an openly gay man for how long?

Sherwin Modeste 23:45

So I would say, for the past 15, 16 years.

Hollywood Jade 23:52

That's amazing.

Sherwin Modeste 23:53

Yes, yeah. Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 23:56

I know you, you mentioned it a little bit, and I think I, back to this whole celebration versus struggle thing, I think it's important for us to acknowledge and bring voice to what some of these struggles were, like, I know you mentioned the whole Adam and Steve comment, which is something I grew up hearing a lot of, even before my sexuality was something that I was even completely aware of or really understood. Like, there was rhetoric and terms that were thrown around me, not necessarily at me, but around me, and you know, where all this jargon and this rhetoric, and being of Caribbean descent, being a first generation Canadian, like I've experienced a lot of that. In particular, again, being a queer male, I experienced a lot of that. Like how did you, not necessarily overcome, but like, how did you not allow yourself to become so stuck in, in those, in that mindset of being courageous enough, basically I'm asking being courageous enough to continue to do this fight?

Sherwin Modeste 25:17

Yeah, I think for me, I have to say that I've had some very strong mentors and femtors, male and female..

Hollywood Jade 25:27

Femtor?!

Sherwin Modeste 25:28

Yes, so, the femtor are the females in my life, you know, we got to break down that masculinity and.. [saying it with laughter]

Hollywood Jade 25:35

I love that! [both laughing]

Sherwin Modeste 25:37

So, they have been, you know, just amazing, amazing supports. You know, and to this day, you know, if anything goes wrong, or if I am struggling, I have a group of individuals that I can go to, whether that is for emotional support, whether that is for, you know, leadership support, whether that is for spiritual guidance, I have grounded myself with some elders that have been there for me, and will continue to be there for me. And in return, I have now made it a duty and a responsibility of mine, to be a mentor to others. So that, that work will not stop! Growth does not stop when you have reached your success, growth stops when every one of us.. because what is very important, if you have one orange tree, and you bear the fruits, and everybody enjoys it, but if no one took the time to get a plant from that orange, once it dies it's done. So again, grafting out from the mother plant, or the father plant, is very, very important. And I am the product of strong mentors and femtors, so I need to ensure that I am part of the process of sharing.

Hollywood Jade 27:17

I understand completely why once you got in these rooms, and you did these interviews, they were like, yes! I don't know what I.. everything that you're saying, I, I receive, and I hear, and even as somebody who in, more recently and more actively, have been really not thinking, but have been a more active mentor, I've really been, that's a very good seed for me to take. You know, and then and I'm like mind, like you, it's like, yes, we all could just eat this orange, but what are you doing with the seed hon? I know, it has to it has to there has to be, I'm focused on like generational wealth.

Sherwin Modeste 28:05

Yes.

Hollywood Jade 28:06

I mean, yeah, and not just financially, like mentally emotionally when I

Sherwin Modeste 28:10

Exactly!

Hollywood Jade 28:11

When I think about the culture that we lost, due to like the AIDS pandemic, like the amount of culture that just no longer exists, because these weren't conversations that we were having, and if we were, we were only having them with each other.

Sherwin Modeste 28:31

Yes.

Hollywood Jade 28:31

Because of these platforms, and people like yourself, who, who fought the good fight, like for there to be representation and, and inclusion and, and, like giving people a base and a wealth of knowledge to continue to operate from, you know, these stories won't die now.

Sherwin Modeste 28:51

Yes, yes.

Hollywood Jade 28:53

You know, I'm sure moving here was, was not the easiest thing for you. And you didn't necessarily have resources and people that you could go to and talk to about a) moving and then b) coming to terms with yourself, like..

Sherwin Modeste 29:11

That's, that is so true. And again, you know, and you're so right, you had to be solid, because there were many roads that I could have taken. I mean, you know, they were all there for me. But I

Hollywood Jade 29:25

Clearly! [chuckling]

Sherwin Modeste 29:26

I chose to take one that where I am today. But one of the things that I'm also very mindful of is mentors and femtors of opportunists, and for opportunity for themselves. And, you know, one of the examples that I often share with folks is that, you know, Barack Obama, the first Black person to hold office in the White House. Know what, they could, he could have easily said, "You know what, that's it, I've made history. I am done. It's over. Good God!" Okay, but today it, four years later, we have our first woman of colour, African and South Asian heritage. Okay, so we know that when he invest in our people, you know, when we, we be mentors and femtors, that the sky is the limit. Barack reaped the harvest of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks, you understand. And today, Jade, you and I may not see our first of something, but you know what, the generation to come, we'll see it. But what we need to do as individuals, we need to pave the way, and too often, we, we settle on, once we feel that, "you know what, I have my house,

Hollywood Jade 31:05

Yeah.

Sherwin Modeste 31:06

"My career is good, you know, what I can travel, I am done?" Well no! As a people, we need to work together. And this, for me has been sort of my motto in terms of really continuing to work, continuing the struggles, you know, continuing to fight as a, as a, as a community, as a community, we need to do this, we need to be there for each other. And, you know, I have joined a team at Pride Toronto, that is amazing, you know, and but again, there are things that needs to be fixed, and we will fix that together.

Hollywood Jade 31:50

I mean, I don't want to get all up in your private business, [Sherwin chuckling] but we don't talk a little bit about it, because, you know, I there's been a lot of with all of the the recent representation, and Black people being promoted to and, and uplifted and allowed into spaces and welcomed into spaces where more decisions are being made, a lot of conspiracy theorists will lean on the side of saying, "Oh, this is this is just this generation's version of affirmative action", but now it's, it's all inclusive, and affirmative action. And it's, it's, it creates a sticky environment sometimes if that's what we allow the narrative to be, and I think what's important with all of your experience, and being a queer man of colour, is second to your experience and your knowledge, you know what I mean? Of course, we can't separate the two like, you're going to bring your experience as a Caribbean queer man to all the work that you're doing, but that is not necessarily the main platform - I think your main platform is about advocacy and the promotion of human rights, and like, equality.

Sherwin Modeste 33:23

Definitely, definitely. And, again, and I, I hope you're you, you're gonna get a little bit; you will learn a lot about me, by the time we finish this conversation. One of the things that many organizations, including Pride, and a lot of city organizations, we as people, as Black, South Asian, Latin folks, we were invited to the dinner, but we were not allowed to sit at the dinner table. Because they felt we were not worthy enough, or we do not, you know, we do not fit that mold to sit at that table. So today, we're not just sitting at those table, we're sitting at the head of the table. Okay, we're no longer opening the door for the guests to come in, we are, the doors are opening for us.

And for me, it is really important. I will not be a token person at any table. If I am going to be invited to a table, I must be able to speak my mind, I must be able to contribute without having to hold back. And I have to say that's how I feel at Pride Toronto, okay. Um, I am fortunate, and I think I might be the first Executive Director that are experienced in this that have a majority BIPOC board members.

Hollywood Jade 35:05

Amazing!

Sherwin Modeste 35:06

Both co-chairs are members of the BIPOC community. We've now, at the staff level, again, and these are not individ-, these are not token position positions, these are individuals that are coming in with skills and experience, now have a BIPOC majority staff.

Hollywood Jade 35:27

This, I don't mean to cut you, but it's I think that is such an important thing to, to, and I'm glad you made note of that, it's like I, just what that is going to do for the conversations that we'll be having at the table alone. It I'm sure, there's, it's going to come back that is going to come with its own set of issues without a doubt, but like the diversity of the conversation, the, the inclusion of the ideas, the perspectives from which we've never looked at things, that is going to ultimately make for what, to me sounds like, an awesome committee, and if you have an awesome committee, you're bound to have an awesome event. And...

Sherwin Modeste 36:13

Exactly! Yes, yes, I think you've just hit the nail on the head, all of these pieces, it's really it brings the end product to one that others will look at and say "Have mercy" like, is this really what is happening to Pride Toronto. And I think this is what I am working towards, I know this is what you're working towards, this is what many of the others like you know, the Leanna's and the others are working towards is really that end product, where every one of us irregardless of our race, irregardless of our sexual orientation, irregardless of you know, our immigration status, and so many other things, that we can walk into Pride's office, or walk into any Pride event, and feel that we are part of no longer it is a white, gay male organization. You understand?! And you know what?! We thank them but we also have to acknowledge that they have done some injustice, and we're going to fix it. And in fixing it, also Jade, there are going to be individuals that are going to get upset. But when they get upset, we cannot lose focus in what our goal is. So you know what, you're going to step on some toes, and I have had to sort of make some hard decisions throughout my career.

Hollywood Jade 37:49

Absolutely.

Sherwin Modeste 37:50

Believe you me, it has helped me to grow. So when we see nonsense, we need to call it okay, because this is what the change that we want to see. We must be able to call it.. and I'm, I'm excited, as you can see, I'm, I'm excited. I'm bubbling you know, you know, because, again, we are about to really see some change. And we are going to be part of that change in PrideToronto.

Hollywood Jade 38:22

Well, I mean, what's, being a man of a certain age, and having had certain experiences as a young queer kid, and just the difference in even, even just visibly, the difference in the way Pride is presented by, even the visible representation difference, like Pride in the past has always felt very, like you said, very Caucasian, very hot, white guy with eight and a half abs, 0% body fat, these boys don't even look like they live in Toronto, the Toronto that we all know. And it's just interesting, like it, but it makes a difference. You know, Toronto has always, everyone who comes there's always like, "Oh, it's so multicultural, it's so diverse, it's so this, it's so that," but where is that being represented in events, like Pride? And I think there's been a shift in that in, in recent years, and I can only imagine with this, this diverse BIPOC committee that it's only going to increase and get better, and the representation is just going to be further reached.

Sherwin Modeste 39:49

Definitely, definitely. And again, I want to share an experience with you: you know, 2019 I went to New York for WorldPride and I visited,

Hollywood Jade 40:02

I was there, too.

Sherwin Modeste 40:03

Oh, good, good [chuckling]

Hollywood Jade 40:04

I danced, I danced for Deborah Cox in Times Square.

Sherwin Modeste 40:07

Oh, have mercy. Well, I spent a day and a half at the Stonewall. And I'm telling you, this changed my life forever. Because, again, I was there, and I was able to hear the stories of my trans women of colour, I was able to hear their cry, I was able to sort of, you know, feel the pain that they were going through 50 years, 51 years ago. And I left New York promising myself that I want to be part of Pride Toronto. It was not my intentions to be Executive Director, because I was very comfortable in my job that I was doing. But I thought get on the board, become an active volunteer. Okay. And for me, again, we cannot we, we must pay reverence to these women, these trans women of colour that said, "Enough is enough." You know, and I bring that back to visiting Ghana, West Africa, and visiting the dungeons, and being at the door of "No Return," where you can hear and smell the bodies of many of our ancestors that left Africa, not knowing where they were going, you know?! And I connected the two. And my, from, when I left Ghana, my second trip, I promised that I will not stop until I have, you know, encouraged as much people of African descent, Black folks, that was not born in Africa, to visit at least once, to know exactly where they're coming from. So if I'm bringing us back the conversation again, knowing your history, knowing where we are coming from, from slavery, to that movement that started in New York 51+ years ago, yeah, to the recent celebration of 40 years of the Bathhouse Raid, you know, that I've just given him an awakening, to say: "Enough is enough!" And there are lots of folks in Toronto here, Black folks, that have fought a good fight, so you

and I can celebrate freely. And so I think for us, it's really important, again, for us to know, our history and her story, so that, you know, we can really bring fullness to the work that we're doing.

Hollywood Jade 43:01

Yes, I couldn't agree more. And it's, it's, once again, I say this, every time I interview somebody, and I love, I love that it's connecting dots for me, even to the community that exists locally, you know. And I think there are narratives and stories, much like yours, that are vital and important for people to hear. Like, I know, there's, there, especially in the last like five to seven years, there has been a huge influx of like people from all the different Caribbean islands. And I'm like, where.. I would be so lost coming here, and the only, like, resource that I feel like I have is a nightclub, you know, or Church Street. And a lot of times, let's be honest, we don't see ourselves reflected in security, in bar staff, in entertainment, in the audience in these spaces, you know, so like.. I hear you that I think like the education aspect of and the history of are so important that we've lost so much of that because the narratives have become very corporately driven, you know, and I think, like, that's one of the things that I loved about going to Pride in New York, and in Atlanta, and in Chicago, is there's always like, a history, there's a weight to us, we're here to celebrate, but understand that this wasn't always a celebration.

Sherwin Modeste 44:35

Yes, yes.

Hollywood Jade 44:36

You know, we celebrate we celebrate now because we we we fought for this and I think because we are living in a time where kids are literally growing up gay, it's not like they have, there's no big coming out story anymore, not, I shouldn't say there isn't, but those are becoming less commonplace. Now it's like parents are contacting me being like, "Hey, so my daughter just told me she's a lesbian." And I'm like, "Okay, and how can I help?" [both laughing] Ya know?

Sherwin Modeste 45:15

Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 45:15

But what's great about that is that they they see me as a resource.

Sherwin Modeste 45:20

Mm hmm.

Hollywood Jade 45:21

I didn't, I didn't have a resource, you know. And it's, it's great knowing that there are people who are involved in, in the planning of these big events, that history and, and foundation and these things matter, because I think that'll help change the narrative back into Pride being about a celebration of freedom, as opposed to just a celebration of freedom.

Sherwin Modeste 45:52

Yeah. [Jade laughing] But I think I think it's also very important that, you know, and that we also acknowledge that the fight have not been completely won.

Hollywood Jade 46:06

No.

Sherwin Modeste 46:07

I think it's really important and is, see one of the things that I have not missed in the past 10 years or so, is the trends march at Pride, the Friday Night. Because that march to this day continues to be very militant, continues to be, you know what?! we are still fighting. So that advocacy, that piece, we need to make sure that it is not lost. And you know what?! Yes! We welcome the corporate sponsors, we welcome, you know, all the ones that want to contribute towards the celebration, but I think it is also very important that they, too, acknowledge that there is still work that needs to happen. You know, it's the same thing, and, you know, it's again, injustice to one is injustice to all.

Hollywood Jade 47:08

Yep!

Sherwin Modeste 47:09

You know, we cannot as whether we refer, we are in the context of Black people, whether in the context of LGBTQ, indigenous folks, we need to all rally, because the "divide and conquer" theory continues to this day, to separate us. You know, those of us that are [of] Caribbean heritage, you know, they're folks that say, "Oh, well, you're a Jamaican, and oh, you're Grenadian and you Trini" like.. You know, again, what we are one people.

Hollywood Jade 47:42

Yes.

Sherwin Modeste 47:42

I think this is one of the things that I I again, and I just really pray that, you know, we will get to the place where we will, we will sing from one hymnal. We may not all sing the same song at the same time, but, you know, we can sing from that same book of, you know, really rejoicing to celebrating our successes, and you know, to send a message that if you mess with us again, the protest welcome, and this time, it's going to come harder.

Hollywood Jade 48:17

Yeah.

Sherwin Modeste 48:19

So yeah, so no, so I am definitely 1) a product off, you know, folks that have done well and have fought and have paved the way. And as I said to you, I think for me, it is really important that I do my part in paving the way for others. And, you know, yes, this is the first time that we're meeting, you know, in person, but I, I also can sense that same passion.

Hollywood Jade 48:46

Yeah.

Sherwin Modeste 48:46

Believe you me, there is another 100+ young Black men that have the same passion that want to be there for our people. So I think we just need to come together, and we need to celebrate, but we also need to protect our flock. This is our flock.

Hollywood Jade 49:04

Yeah.

Sherwin Modeste 49:05

And, and as shepherds who have, you know, been given a responsibility. If one of our flock goes missing, one sheep from our 100, we will go after them. And this is what is very important for me. We no longer can continue to lose our young Black men and women through suicide because of their sexual orientation.

Hollywood Jade 49:33

Yeah!

Sherwin Modeste 49:33

We, we need to bring that to the forefront, we need to fight the good fight until we, you know, [thump's chest] so I'm just it's very passionate as for me these these issues have just..

Hollywood Jade 49:50

Yeah. Listen, there's absolutely no reason to apologize because I feel like we need these, we need conversations like this to become normalized again. You know, like, I feel like we stopped talking, and a lot of our conversations became about responding instead of understanding, you know what I mean? Like, we were listening so that we could get a word in. But no, like, I feel like, it's important, especially like you were saying, as, as, as leaders, and as shepherds, and as elders, that is, it is up to us to continue to keep this torch lit. And to pass this torch along.

Sherwin Modeste 50:35

Yes, yes, yes. Become more, more proactive and less reactive to situations. So

Hollywood Jade 50:42

Amen.

Sherwin Modeste 50:42

My brother, I am telling you [both laughing] Yes, no, no, this is this has been like, super, super amazing. Yeah.

Hollywood Jade 50:52

Yeah. It's, it's again, like I, I'm, I'm grateful for you, sharing your knowledge. And nothing makes me happier than when people have an assumption or an opinion that's very ignorantly based, and then you come with evidence,

and case studies, and 22+ years of experience, and a platform that isn't based on wanting to be the Executive Director for Pride, but wanting to bring about as much positive change and equality as possible. And I think what's beautiful about you being appointed to this position, is that without a doubt in my mind, like and I don't have no say, but it would be abundantly clear to me why you would have definitely been a front runner for this position.

Sherwin Modeste 51:50

No, thank you, thank you, and you know, what I, I need every community member support, because you know that this struggle, it's not one that's going to be won by one person - it takes an army. Okay. So there is an army out there that is fighting against us, so it is not going to take one person to win that battle. So definitely looking forward to working with every member of the community, both, you know, identify as Black, but also allies, you know, that are truly, true allies, who knows their place in line, so they know when they need to step forward and when they need a step backward, when they need to remove themselves from the room, and when they need to take up space in the room.

Hollywood Jade 52:42

I really need to get sound effects because the, there would be, there'd be a cheering section underneath you right now. [both laughing]

Sherwin Modeste 52:50

You know, but yeah, so no, definitely. It's been it's, it's been amazing. As I said, I'm looking forward to the journey. And see where, where it takes me in terms of, you know, I have to say the only part I would, I would say to you, is that I'm also a proud father - I have a 25 year old daughter.

Hollywood Jade 53:12

Yes.

Sherwin Modeste 53:15

But you know.. [Sherwin laughing]

Hollywood Jade 53:16

You see, this is honestly, I wish, I wish that everybody could see, like, your joy when you talk about these things and like you, like, there's certain people who can put on and turn it on and play the role but like, you can't, there's certain emotions that you just can't hide, you know what I mean? and you the way your face just lit up, when you were like I would like to let everybody know that you are the proud father. I mean, you did mention that you had a daughter, and we didn't circle back, but like, how is how is it being a dad?

Sherwin Modeste 53:56

You know what, it's and, I'm it's an honour and it's a privilege not just being a dad, but also being a single dad. And you know, it's been the biggest joy of my life and I will not trade that moment for ANYTHING on the face of the earth - just love it!

Hollywood Jade 54:20

I, I as someone who aspires to one day, be a father, I applaud you, and that you are open with your daughter, and that you are open with your life. I love this! And thank you so much, Sherwin, for your time. You definitely, when talking about community, you got me on your side, I, you won me over. [both laughing]

Sherwin Modeste 54:46

No, no, no. And thank you for taking the time to sharing in your time with me this afternoon, this evening. And again, looking forward when all of this pandemic and all of this is over, you know, when we can truly celebrate, I'm really looking forward to you know, being able to break bread, because I think for me this is really, really important. So again, it's always a pleasure and an honour to be able to sit and have conversations with like-minded folks and definitely looking forward to what the future holds for all of us.

Hollywood Jade 55:17

Great.

Sherwin Modeste 55:17

Thank you very much again!

Hollywood Jade 55:19

Thank you so much and thank you all for listening. Once again, this is Hollywood Jade, I am your host, and I look forward to seeing you all, not seeing you, but sharing more time with you all soon. Peace, love and hair grease!