Ianne Fields Stewart: An Interview By Alyssa Gabbidon

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Conducted on Zoom

Ianne Fields Stewart (she/her/they/them) is a Black, queer, transfeminine artist and activist. Based in New York, Stewart dedicates most of her time to interrupting the exclusivity of luxury through The Okra Project, founded in December of 2018. The Okra Project seeks to bring home-cooked meals to Black trans people and provide them with resources to live a healthy life. Additionally, Stewart is a member of the performing arts community and has been featured in several shows and performances that highlight the lives of queer youth.

ALYSSA GABBIDON: Hi, everyone! I'm here with youth activist and founder of The Okra Project, Ianne Fields Stewart. How are you doing today, Ianne?

IANNE FIELDS STEWART: I'm doing pretty well. How about yourself?

GABBIDON: I am great. So as you know, this interview is part of a larger class, and we've been gathering information on youth activists since 2010. We find that a lot of information is missing so we'd like to add to this archive as much as possible. This information will be used for educational purposes in case someone wants to research youth activists or something along those lines. Your voice matters, it's important to us, and we want to hear about it. So let's dive right in. What was your childhood like? And tell me any significant details that you like to add?

STEWART: I was adopted (indiscernible). I was born into a white family because my biological maternal grandmother, who was a white woman, didn't want to keep me and was very racist. And so I was adopted at birth. Racism has been the foundation of a lot of my life for a long time. And then I was a young Black trans girl who was denied her girlhood in life growing up in Birmingham, Alabama. And so there were a lot of challenges to overcome and a lot of ways that I felt very alone in the world. And also, I always managed to find joy and play and imagination and theater and the arts, especially for all. These were my saving grace. It was just wherever I would escape and you know, (indiscernible).

GABBIDON: Did you ever feel there was a big misunderstanding between you and your parents based on race?

STEWART: I don't think that at that age I had the ability to articulate it in that way or the discernment. And I think that those issues have emerged later in my life. Early on in my life, my queerness, or my perceived queerness, or my body was a lot more. The conversation tended to be a lot more about my queerness than my race. As far as my parents would go, I'm not sure that there was much. When I went to public school, which I did for a while, I was going with a lot

of Black and Brown kids. And so that really wasn't as much of a conversation as it was my queerness. And then, when it came to my parents or my mother, my race was something she didn't know how to talk about. So she sort of said, “You're Black. Don't forget what that means for you,” in the most supportive way she could. I think that she did what she could, what she knew how to do, without being disingenuous.

GABBIDON: And what are your current feelings towards Alabama? Obviously, it's a predominantly Republican state, and it has a lot of issues there. So do you hold resentment towards Alabama? Or do you still look at it as home?

STEWART: Oh, the South will always be home for me. I think that the South is plagued by a lot of interpretations from outside of the South. Which is not to say that the South doesn't have the history it has. It's not to say that it doesn't have the current legislation and the current political powers in place that it does. But to talk about the South, and specifically to talk about Alabama, as if it is only defined by its racism is essentially to say that the South will only ever be defined in the eyes of people outside of the South, by white people – which is the exact problem. The South is not defined by white people I don't feel. The South is defined by the Black people who have cultivated that soil. Being in the South, I think as a Black person, for me, it feels very much like home because that soil is ours. That land is ours. Our blood, sweat, and tears flow in those waters. While I had to leave because I wanted to be an actress and because my work took me elsewhere, the culture, the soul of the South is Black. And it's very much something that I'm connected to, and will always remain connected to.

GABBIDON: So you believe that because of the history almost, Black people have the right to reclaim the environment? And because of that, the South should not always be viewed as negative?

STEWART: I think that racism is an international epidemic. It's not a regional prejudice. And I experienced much more racism in the Midwest than I ever experienced in the South. Because in the South, there is a culture of kindness. And also we know what racism looks like. We see it. It's impossible not to talk about it. I went to high school two blocks from where Martin Luther King wrote his letter from Birmingham Jail. That history is embedded in the sidewalks, in the walls, in the air that you breathe. In the Midwest, or in these more metropolitan cities that claim a liberal point of view, it's delusional. It's delusional to act as if racism is not present everywhere in this country when we see it every day. It's not a regional thing. Racism is not a regional thing. The problems of the South are the problems of the South but people from outside of the South need to, frankly, mind their own business. Because too often I think people outside of the deep South especially want to say “Oh, well, it must be so bad there. Oh, it must be this, it must be that.” You all have no fucking idea what it's like there. I didn't leave the South because I don't love the South. I thought it was the only way that I could have my effort be met with opportunity. And in many ways, I was right. And in other ways, I was wrong. And I think that it is very, very dangerous, that the use of the South is touted by Northerners, by people outside of the South. Because often, those viewpoints become the narrative that even some Southern people who are currently living in the South, and Southern youth in particular, view themselves. But if we are always seeing the South as a place to leave, how can you ever continue to grow and continue

to move in the way that I think is the most beautiful?

GABBIDON: I can definitely relate to that. I grew up in Georgia, and people always expect that I experienced a lot of racism there, but I experienced more racism in the North than I did in Georgia.

STEWART: Absolutely. In the North, everyone is like “Oh, well, the problem is elsewhere.” And it's like “No, the problem is right here. You are the problem.” And I think the South has a culture of kindness. The Midwest and other places have a culture of politeness and there's a really strong difference between the two. Kindness is that “I genuinely want to treat every person I encounter with as much kindness as I can. I want to move with the best intentions. I want people to be cared for in my presence.” A culture of politeness is that “I don't care about what's happening on my insides. I want you to see what's happening on the outside.” And so what tends to happen is that there are some really pretty outside people with very ugly insides.

GABBIDON: 100% So you mentioned that Martin Luther King was a big influence on, not an influence, but was obviously known because of the area you were in. So would you say he had a big influence on your childhood as a Black kid in Alabama? Or is there another leader who influenced your activism?

STEWART: Yeah, I don't think that it's possible to be a young Black kid and not be, especially from Alabama, and not be inspired by the work of Martin Luther King. I think that as an adult, I am really grappling with his influence and how his legacy has influenced me as far as some of the things that we've learned about the man Martin Luther King, as opposed to the icon, the legend Martin Luther King. And I try to hold grace in that. I certainly know that if I reach the dizzying heights, wherever I'm meant to go in my journey, if it were to be even comparable to someone like Martin Luther King – I know that I would not necessarily want my entire personal life to be dredged out for anyone to see and walked in public for public scrutiny or debate. And not because I'm ashamed of who I am or how I live, but because I value my privacy. And so I grapple with if it is possible to separate a man from his actions? Can we ever truly get a clear glimpse of how one man grows and develops in a lifetime? And how do we honor parts of people while also honoring parts that needed to grow and that we can now see with clear vision?[1] So I think as an adult, I really grapple with his legacy and with his work. I have a deep respect for many Black organizers from the South. Fannie Lou Hamer, for one, is someone who I deeply admire but I wasn't taught about in school.[2] And so as an adult I have to come to know her. And as a child, I used to love Sweet Honey in the Rock, who are a group of singers and civil rights, I guess you could call them a civil rights group? That feels very appropriate. I think I feel comfortable saying that. There are so many people who have inspired the journey for me. And I think also there are some people who it's not just those cultural icons, but also Peaches for example, who was a Black trans woman I met in high school, and I never had the language for who she was or how she walked the world. But I think, again, as an adult, when I look back, I

[1] Martin Luther King Jr has been accused of plagiarism and infidelity.

[2] Fannie Lou Hamer was an American voting and women's rights activist, community organizer, and a leader in the civil rights movement.

remember that was really one of the first times that another sister saw me and brought me clothes. And while Peaches is not in my life, she didn't even really stay in my life. It was sort of a passing moment. I still honor her and what she gave to me, in that she gave me the possibility of connection. She gave me the possibility of being seen and that's something that I always want to thank her for. So, yes, from Peaches to Martin Luther King, I am inspired by Black people who reach out and stand up and try to make this world a little sweeter.

GABBIDON: Do you think any family members push you towards activism? Or is that something you found on your own terms?

STEWART: My family's always been, now again we're talking about a white family. So I think how I view their activism as opposed to mine is two very, very different things. But my mother is an environmental justice activist and organizer who works as the head of a nonprofit that protects Alabama's number one drinking water source and daily is reckoning with the realities of economic and environmental racism and how that affects Black folks – particularly living in the Black Belt.[3] And how urban development is affecting Black people. Her intention as an organizer and as a person is to hopefully use her privilege to give back to Black communities and help Black communities reconnect with nature as is our cultural and spiritual right. In many ways, yes. My family has always sort of been geared towards the left and geared towards progressive thoughts and ideas and actions even. I think again I have a very unspecific lens in how I view white folks who hope to be in organizing and movement work and how the Black folks in movement and organizing work. And I don't exclude my mother and my family from that lens.

GABBIDON: Are there any encounters, I guess not only with racism, but bias during your childhood that incited a drive or fire to do better or change perceptions of how people view you?

STEWART: I mean, three kids tried to drown me in a public pool. I was sexually assaulted at an early age. And part of the way that the person who did that to me was able to do that to me was by the fact that I was socially isolated and didn't have many friends and didn't have any connections. And that is a very intentional practice of grooming young queer kids and young queer and trans kids is the bullying that we experienced. The social isolation that we experienced. The lack of belief in us. The narratives around that we are asking for trouble by existing and the bodies that we exist in. All of those are institutional and also very visceral and personal practices that make young queer and trans kids vulnerable to higher levels of sexual abuse, of homelessness, of social ostracization, and isolation and what that means for a child, young child. And so, yes, in that way, those specific instances that I can, again, as an adult, look back in my wise years. Now I can look back and I can point to this moment and point to this moment as moments where I was activated. But I think that in honoring my humanity, those moments were a lot more about, a lot less about me trying to be in service to other people and more about me trying to be in service to myself. And I think that in naming and learning that something that was done to me was wrong, I think that has provided me with a lens of “This is wrong. This is right.” And that moral framework is where I moved from in my organizing. And I try to stay as close to that moral framework as I always can, to try to stay very clear in the fact

[3] The Black Belt is a region of the U.S. state of Alabama.

that I have known what it is to be treated wrong. I have known what it is to be treated badly. I've known what it is to be treated poorly. And I don't want anyone who is like me to even experience that. And so yeah, I don't necessarily think of it as a specific instance or a specific moment. But I think of it as a collection of times when I was wronged and didn't have the ability to make anything right. And so wanting to make sure that if I am in a position, or if I can put myself into a position where I can make things right, I want to do that.

GABBIDON: So in a way, reclaiming and recognizing what's happened has helped you heal?

STEWART: Yeah, I mean, I think, yeah. I guess they're working or something like that, yeah. I don't think there's any way for any of us to think healing is one of the only things that we can do to create change. I don't think that any of us effectively and with longevity create healing from pain. I think that pain can incite our, and let me actually speak for myself. For me, I know when I'm moving from a place of pain I tend to not be able to hear as well or listen. I tend to be a lot more reactionary and (indiscernible) healing has been a very generative place for me and that's not the case for everybody. I think that some people are able to immediately turn pain into action, and I deeply admire those people and follow and support them however I am able to do so. But for me, I have to heal before I can create the changes I want to see in the world.

GABBIDON: How do you think art has helped you heal and grow as a person?

STEWART: For one, I mean, one is the fact that I am very clear about the fact that I am an adult who professionally plays make-believe. It doesn't need to be deeper than that. Because actually, there's something that is so wondrous to me about make-believe and about imagination specifically. To allow myself to be a vessel for something else, someone else, someone else's thoughts, someone else's words. In the case of dance, someone else's movements. Sometimes to use my body as a vessel for something other than myself is really healing for me. Because I find that every time I occupy a character, every time I dance, some (indiscernible) or I sing a song. Every time I do that, a piece is left behind with me, a piece of that character, a piece of that dance, a piece of that song is left with me. And so it feels in that way an even exchange because I use my body as a vessel for someone else's creativity and brilliance. And a piece of that creativity and brilliance is left with me to grow, and fester is the word that's coming to mind but I'm meaning that in a lot more of a loving, beautiful way than fester. But yeah, it's something that can grow.

GABBIDON: Do you think that the Black community is at all disconnected from the art world? And if so why do you think that is?

STEWART: No, I don't. I think that Blackness is inherently artistic. I think that the way that we dress, the way we speak, the way that we use our bodies to speak, the way that we gather. I mean. I mean, I don't think anyone could go to a Black church service and say that there is not some artistic pageantry involved in how we practice spirituality. So I think we are art itself. So I don't think you can disconnect blackness from art in any way. I would say that if we're thinking about how we, as a community, sometimes think around it, yes. Working as a teaching artist, I

have definitely encountered parents who are not necessarily as attuned to the arts as a viable career option, per se. And that's also realistic. Let's be honest, the arts are not an incredibly viable career option for everyone involved. The idea with Black parents is that it's "Oh, well, we're so disconnected from how important art is." No, I think that Black folks live if they would name it that way or not, inherently understand the importance and value of art. I think that Black folks inherently and deeply understand the value of a consistent check that comes on the 1st and the 15th, and I think that that is not in any way disconnected from art. I think that art is actually typically disconnected from reality because we spend so much time playing make-believe we sometimes forget they're actually human beings who are doing this work. And those human beings require housing and food on the table and the necessities of life. So no, I would not say that Black people are disconnected from art in any way. Are we are Black people disconnected from the viability of artistic career? Career paths? Possibly, yeah, I get that, but that is not the same thing.

GABBIDON: So performing is a form of art for you. And so what has appearing in popular shows such as *The Bold Type* and *Pose* meant to you? And how has it made you feel recognized?

STEWART: As a quick side note, I noticed in the questions that it said *Grey's Anatomy*. I have not been on *Grey's Anatomy*. *Dash and Lily* is the other show that I've done on Netflix, and being a part of those shows has been amazing. Each experience has been so specific to the show. With *Pose*, it was, I had one line and that line got cut and they brought me back to do another one-liner and then that line got kept and so that was lovely. So I got to be on set three different times which was exciting, and I think that was such an amazing experience to be touching history in that way. And to know that forever and always I've been immortalized in this piece of history, this cultural phenomenon. On the set of *The Bold Type,* I think that was probably my most enjoyable experience as a guest star. I felt like I got to flex my muscles as an artist in a way I hadn't gotten to at that point. It was also my first time being out of the country, even if it was just Canada, but that was such, I think that was the first time that I got a glimpse of what doing this as a steady thing would be. And I fell even more in love with if that is possible, and I made some amazing friends on that set. *Dash and Lily* was a bit of a fragmented experience. It was very positive. Everyone was so welcoming and it was such a kind set to be on. But the last day of filming where we were in hair and makeup, on the way to Union Square for this on-site location shoot with 500 extras, and I'm in full hair and makeup. At seven o'clock on the way to set, I got a call that my best friend had died unexpectedly, and I had to perform from seven o'clock until 5:30 in the morning, and in between takes I was weeping and breaking down. And then had to pull it together for the performance. And so I think that when I say fragmented, it's that moment was such an intense and earth shattering evening that I feel like the show has that color for me. Especially because it's that scene is in the first episode of the show. It's one of the first things you see. And so for me that show, as beautiful and wonderful as everyone was, the final moment with it was such a life-shifting moment for me as an individual that I think that it's hard to talk about the whole experience as a whole realistically because there's one defining moment that really sticks out. But it was a beautiful experience, and I've loved every minute of it. I cannot wait to find my next project and to get back on set.

GABBIDON: Thank you for sharing with me. Do you think that, or I guess these shows actively make an effort to represent queer people of color. And so do you think this is important for the youth and how do you think this would have helped you grow if these shows were common?

STEWART: Of course it is. I think growing up, for me, representation looked like Will and Grace and Noah's Ark. And to be the Black queer trans lesbian of my dreams. And I think, here's the thing to also remember, I feel when it comes to representation, representation is one very small piece of a much larger puzzle. Representation is wildly important because one of the kinds of the things about being an artist, and especially being a performer, is that once we have released what we have done, once what we have done is fully crafted and it is released into the world and no longer belongs to me. It doesn't belong to anyone in the more emotional heady sense. It doesn't belong to any of us. Because at this point, the story belongs to the people who are watching it and who are consuming it. And I'm sure that there's some people who saw, who have seen me in *The Bold Type,* and were really touched by that moment. And maybe that did shift something in them. Or maybe that was a genesis of our conversation, or the genesis of a self, really self-actualizing moment. But I think that it's all part of the larger whole. I think that had I seen someone like me on the telly, as I am now, on television, I might not have known that was me.I might have still deeply connected to it. But I might not have been able to say at the time “Ah I am this person.” But it would have at least given me the opportunity to say “These people exist. This is an option.” So I don't think representation is always about saying, “Oh, now after I've watched *The Bold Type*, I am ready to come out to everyone.” And you know what? That’s not everybody's journey. And I think that it actually is a lot more about providing people with the idea of “There's an option. There's an option to be me. This awesome option to be Angelica Ross. There's an option to be like Indya Moore. There's an option to be like the myriad of like Leyna Bloom.” There's so many different people and ways of being in the world. And I think that right now, we think of representation, kind of like “Let's fill the box of trans.” And what I find exciting about the time that I think we're stepping into is that “Oh, wait a minute. Shocking. Trans people don't all come in the same box. Somehow we all have different characteristics.” Because the reality is that Indya and I are, so backstory, I actually auditioned for the role of Angel and got a callback for it and everything, and it went to the perfect person. [4]And I could not imagine that role being anybody else. I'm so glad I went to Indya, who has done phenomenal things with it. But also, as Indya has grown and gone on their journey, we are two very different people. Even though we're both nonbinary, fairly femme presenting people, we're completely different individuals. Our energy can be somewhat similar, but we are really different kinds of human beings. And that is a really important distinction to make. Me, MJ, and Indya would probably all be at the same audition. We could be potentially. But MJ identifies as a trans woman. I identify as a non-binary trans woman and Indya identifies as non-binary. We identify as completely different kinds of people, I don't know Indya or MJ’s sexual orientation but I identify as a queer lesbian. That's also something that we've never seen on television. We've never seen trans women. Or we haven't seen too many trans women who are stepping into queer relationships other than just kind of a (indiscernible) with a cis man. Those are all important aspects of our personality that make our representation more specific and important in that way. So again, I think for me, it's all about providing a myriad of options and inspirations.

[4] Angel is the name of the character Indya Moore plays on *Pose*.

That’s probably far too long-winded.

GABBIDON: No, not at all. So you've mentioned the various identities people can claim. What would you say or rather, which identities are most important to you?

STEWART: Whatever identity I am struggling with the most at whatever time you're asking this question is my answer. That is whatever is most important. My gender I feel pretty set in, in many ways. My sexual orientation I honestly have never given too much of a fuck about my sexual orientation because I don't really believe that gender exists in the first place. And so at the end of the day, I'm like well, I have given you guys other words to describe me so people know how to refer to me in ways that feel comfortable to me. But at the end of the day, we're all bundles of energy and gas and running around exploring this world. I don't really care if I bump into you and we liked each other fantastic. But I think right now | would say my identity as an artist is much more at the forefront of my concerns and my focus because I'm moving into a place where I can really be focusing on my artistry again, and that is really important to me.

GABBIDON: So you have all these unique identities that play an important role in your life. And so how does this intersectionality play a role in your activism?

STEWART: I think that my identity as an artist has made me a more creative organizer. I think that my identity as an executive director of an organization has made me more, has given me the ability to understand how to navigate systems support of my activism and organizing work. I'm also the organization. I am the Executive Director. I tend to do organizing work. So that lines up nicely. I think that my identity as a trans woman has given me a unique insight into understanding how the world treats the people it views with the least amount of respect. I think my identity as a Black woman has given me an insight into understanding how the world treats people they abuse with the least amount of respect. And also how my identity as a Black woman has given me the understanding of how deeply important sisterhood, community, and spiritual quality is to organizing. Everything informs itself. Everything is woven together.

GABBIDON: That's beautiful. How do you think that being Black has shaped your queerness?

STEWART: Black is queerness. And queerness is blackness and all the things. And it's given me that sauce. It gives me that sauce. [5]

GABBIDON: Okay, okay. Do you want to elaborate on what sauce is?

STEWART: No, if you know, you know, If you've got the sauce, you know the sauce.

GABBIDON: I see. I see. Okay. So upon researching you, you've used the term “the exclusivity

[5] Sauce is an adjective used to describe someone who exhibits style and confidence.

of luxury" in several articles/ biographies. And so can you define what this term means and how it plays a role in what you're trying to do?

STEWART: Sure thing. For me, luxury is, well first of all, I think that when we say luxury nowadays, we tend to mean a very, very hegemonic and hierarchical system that is only available to special people. When we think luxury, we think of *The Fyre Festiva*l documentary, right?[6] It is the pinnacle of American capitalism. How I mean luxury, and what I mean specifically by breaking the exclusivity of luxury, is that I think of luxury as, I think of luxury as a feeling. It is the feeling. It is a state of being. It is a sense of peace. Luxury is to lay. It is to rest. It is to heal. It is self, inner self-care it is. For example, what I mean by interrupting the exclusivity of luxury is, I think that for some people, luxury is having time to cook for yourself, to cook a meal for as long as you want, and to sit down and enjoy that meal in the evening. That is not something that I believe should be exclusive to certain people. For some people, luxury is the ability to walk into a room and see a room full of people who look exactly like them. That is not something I believe should be exclusive. For some people, luxury is the ability to fill your home with furniture, to make your home look exactly the way that you want. I don't think that should be exclusive and I certainly don't think that the people who it is exclusive to should be white, cisgender, heterosexual, and wealthy. For me, interrupting that exclusivity is, luxury again is about options. For some people, yes, luxury may be going on a fabulous yacht and living it up. But for me, that sounds terrible. I don't want to be trapped on a boat with people. I don't know these people. That's not a luxury to me. For me, luxury is, I need about two hours to lay down and take a nap on a blanket and a nice pillow. Put my head down. And I don't want anyone to talk to me, I want to be left alone. And I think that that is a luxury that every single person who wants should be able to have. And I think specifically I want Black, trans, and queer people to have that. Because at the end of the day, what I have found is that sometimes if you give people the opportunity to rest for a moment, they're able to do so much more work as organizers, as human beings collectivity. And so that is why everything that we try to do at The Okra Project is done with a hint of luxury. So that it never feels like this is something that was handed to you, it feels like this is something that was perfectly crafted just for you. This meal, heart and soul was poured into this meal that is being made for you. Because that is what you are worth, you are worth someone pouring their heart and soul into something and then handing it to you to enjoy. When you walk into space as a Black, queer, and trans person, you should walk into space and feel that the moment was curated just for you because you're that special. And I think that if we were to create a world where the most marginalized of us could feel that moment, one moment, hopefully, many more moments. But if we can only get one moment, it would be one moment that was perfectly crafted just for you, I wonder what the world would look like? And so that's what I mean by the exclusivity of luxury.

GABBIDON: I love that so much. Tell me more about The Okra Project and your goals with starting it?

STEWART: The Okra Project is an amazing, amazing child of mine that has grown up far more

[6] *The Fyre Festival* is a 2019 American documentary film about Billy McFarland and the failed Fyre Festival of 2017.

than I ever expected it to. In December of 2018, I started The Okra Project with two other folks. I was the founder and both of these folks are now disconnected from the project in various ways. But one person's role was to raise the money, to help me raise money for it. The other person was the chef. I gathered these two folks and I was like “Hey, I want to give back. I'm going back home for the holidays. I know that it can be a very lonely time for folks like me and folks like us. Let's do something about that.” We announced it on a Wednesday. I thought well raise 500 bucks to best serve a couple people, call it a day. Three days later, we had $6,000. And we said “Okay, we're gonna run this thing until the wheels fall off.” And the wheels are firmly in place. And so everything that you see today is, well really, The Okra Project was my baby. It was my way of giving that little bit of luxury to people. My way of saying “If literally, what is standing between you having mental peace and rest, is 50 bucks or a meal? Here's 50 bucks, here's a meal. Can you be good now?” And that's not a dismissive way of saying that's. If that's all it takes? That's fine, here’s 50 bucks. And that's how my organizing has always sort of been, “What do we need to make this happen?” We can't fix everything. No, but let's talk about what we can fix. Because if all you need is 50 bucks to be at peace today, or even if it's 150 bucks, or if what you need is rent, let's get you rent. If what you need is a meal, let's get you a meal. If all you need is rest, let's get you some rest. And let's try to make this as simple as possible and always free.99 because there's no reason that we need to be struggling, for you to get rest. When Mr. Bezos is flying on up to the moon. If Mr. Jeff can fly to the moon, we can find you 50 bucks. We can find you a meal. We can get your first month's rent. You know what I'm saying? And so that for me is what the project is about all about. I released the Tony McDade Mental Health Recovery fund which provides Black trans people with therapy, with Black therapists for free. [7]I released that on May 31 of 2020. That launched us into global prominence and the story from there is our immense massive growth and there is a new chapter coming in our story that I'm very excited for. And yeah, we've been able to do some amazing things. There has been a lot of learning and a lot of struggle in learning those things but I love the project dearly. It is a very precious thing to me, and I hope that it continues to help.

GABBIDON: That’s amazing. Wow. Are there any significant impacts or experiences where you knew The Okra Project was not only set up for change but eliciting change?

STEWART: As a community organizer, I am never satisfied. I'm never satisfied. It's never enough, and so I still have to remind myself that we are changing things but I don't think that's really for me to say, I think that’s for the people around me who are benefiting from the organization to say. But I'll remain in gratitude when I think about how we have been able to distribute half a million dollars in COVID-19 relief. We have been able to provide people with a year of therapy, completely free therapy. We have been able to partner with UberEats and distribute 1500 dollar vouchers and various things like that. Those things are happening all the

[7] Through The Okra Project, The Tony McDade Mental Health Recovery fund aims to provide therapy sessions for Black transgender individuals free of charge.

time, and I have to remain grounded in that. But hunger still exists and food desserts are still a thing. And Black trans women are still dying, and every year is the deadliest year on record for us. And you can't see things like that and think that there's ever a point where it's enough, sadly.

GABBIDON: So what goals do you have for your future and the futures of your respective communities?

STEWART: I've always said that I wanted to make the world a better place than it was when I got it. A lofty goal and I still intend to make that happen. And I, for myself, want to be the actress I always dreamed of being and I will be. And while I do that, to feed my spirit, to feed my heart. I want to make sure that I use whatever access, whatever resources that platform provides me with, that work provides me with and use it to share with my community and hopefully to make my life and the lives of the people I love and the lives of our community as a whole better. I hope to remain always in service, both to myself and in service to the community that I belong and the community that I serve.

GABBIDON: All right. So I have a final question for you. Is there anything else important that you think people studying this movement, and you should know?

STEWART: Well, first of all, don't study me. I think that not everyone needs to be an activist. I think that everyone should remain active. But not everyone needs to be an activist. People should remain activated, you should remain diligent. You should remain aware. But being an activist, specifically being an organizer is not easy and it is not for the faint of heart. It is tiring. It is exhausting. It is wonderful. It is inspiring. It is painful. It is unyielding at times. This work is tough. It's not easy. And I say this to say, not everyone should not be an activist. Some people should just be humans. I really want us to remember to be good people. Because if everyone is an organizer, if everyone is an activist, who the heck are we organizing and remaining active for? And let us also remember that no matter what fancy institution we may go to, no matter how we may, no matter even what very non-fancy things we may do on the ground as organizers, the greatest wisdom that most if not all, organizing comes from is from conversations on the porch with your meemaw. And let us not forget the inherent value and wisdom of Black people. In our everyday lives, we say the most brilliant things in the most unassuming packages. I am, I have been incredibly blessed in my life. Truly, you can talk to anyone who knows me closely, I did not anticipate. I figured that my life would be like this because I was an actress. I never thought that anyone would ever care about what I said, as an activist. I was like “I keep talking and people keep listening.” And I'm glad and I know that I'm good at what I do. But like, I never thought that this would be something that people would actually like, that anyone at Duke would be calling me for. What do I know? And I'm grateful and terrified because I still want to be a student and I still have so much that I want to learn. And I don't want to feel the pressure to always be the teacher. I want to be wrong sometimes. And I would like to be wrong in private, because being wrong in public is scary, and I don't like it. And I would like the gift of being able to be wrong in private, and being able to be taught and redirected in private. But regardless, my life is the life I have. And I'm grateful for it. And I'm living a good life. And I'm doing good and I'm happy about it. But I would say to anyone who wants to be an actress, who wants to be an

organizer, who wants to change the world – you don't always have to be an organizer to do that. Because someone in Martin Luther King's life, who will never be written down in history, is the person that made him the man he is today. Who he was when he was alive. Someone who is someone who will never be written down in history is the person who changed Fannie Lou Hamer's life and made her the woman that she was someone, who will never be written down in history. Peaches, as far as I know, now I don't know what Peaches is doing. Maybe Peaches is popping it, and I don't know. So all respect to Peaches and what she is doing with her life. But Peaches is a part of my story. And she may never be written down in history as and she may never be linked to my story. I can't even contact Peaches to link her to my story. But she is a part of my story. And she changed my life. I think that we have to remember that sometimes what makes us remarkable has nothing to do with what's going to be written down. History has nothing to do with what's going to be widely acknowledged, what's going to have the most follows. In fact, I would say that, in the majority of the time, the most remarkable things that have ever happened to me, no one will ever know about because they exist right here. And I think that is such an important and key part of our humanity as people. And I think that it's important that we all hold on to that. So if you want to be an activist, if you want to be an organizer, amazing, do it. But remain active, get organized. And also, don't forget to be a human in the process. And if you are deciding to be whatever human you're going to be fantastic, amazing. Remain activated. Stay informed. Make sure you know what's going on. Don't be ignorant. As much as you can, try to make the world a better place in whatever small way you can. Try to treat people with kindness. And maybe if we all remain dedicated to that. If I meet somebody, I'm going to try to do right by them. Again, it's that golden rule. It's all very simple. If you just try to be a good person, try to do what's right in the world. Try to make the world a little bit get brighter, wherever you can. If you see something, say something. If you are angered by something, voice that anger. If you are sad about something, grieve it. Grieve it fully. Be a person, be a whole and fully well-rounded person.

GABBIDON: Thank you so, so, so much for sharing with me, this has been such an amazing experience. And I feel so grateful to have had this opportunity.

STEWART: Thank you for wanting to hear it.

GABBIDON: Thank you from Duke and my classmates, I know they're going to be super excited to listen.

STEWART: Absolutely. Yeah. Talk to your meemaws. They got a lot of wisdom. It's simple because we listen to a lot of young people. And that's beautiful. And I love that and I want us to do that but listen to elders as well. I think that that's something I really miss from back in my day. I always talk like I'm 45 and I'm 28-years-old. I do. There is so much to be learned from our elders. And let's remember whose shoulders we're standing on. And it was actually, there's a lovely thing I heard, I can't remember where I heard from now again, can't write it into my story. But someone said to me "Never forget who you are and whose you are." And that has always been so impactful to me, to remember. And I don't think of it just as like family. I think of it as I belong to Black trans women. I belong to Black trans non-binary people. I belong to Black trans and queer people and the long lineage of incredible Black organizers and community activists

who have stepped forward and given us the possibility. Talk to your elders, child.

GABBIDON: Of course, of course. Thank you so much for this experience.

STEWART: Thank you. It's my pleasure.