

Texas After Violence Project

Interview with Michael Ross

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Interviewer: Aviv Rau

Videographer: Raquel Iridian Garcia

Transcriber: Aviv Rau

Abstract

Michael “Bike Mike” Ross is an Austin-based gardener, bike maven, and self-described “outdoorsman.” In this interview, Mike talks about being born into an interracial family in New York City in a time of segregation. Threats to his Black mother—culminating in her being incarcerated at a psychiatric institution—led to Mike and his sister coming into contact with Child Protective Services before eventually moving in with his maternal grandmother and godmother. Mike opens up about early life and the family’s move from New York to Atlanta, his jobs as a young man in Atlanta, and conflict in his family life. He reflects on the role of music in his childhood home and growing up as a Jehovah’s Witness. He also briefly mentions his incarceration in Georgia. Later he discusses his move to Texas, first stopping in El Paso before eventually setting down roots in South Austin. It was here he met his chosen family and got involved with a community of creatives. Mike, who has experienced homelessness in Austin for decades due to the city’s affordability crisis, reflects on the changes he’s seen since moving to the city in the 1990s and talks about an apartment fire that left him unhoused. Mike expresses frustration with the various service providers he has seen cycle through the homeless community in the decades he’s been in Austin. He talks about the bureaucratic nature of applying for benefits programs and housing assessments in Texas. Throughout the interview, Mike employs the metaphor of a meal to explain how he likes to dish out small parts of his story, “goodies,” over time. In addition to stories about his various jobs throughout the years—including a stint in the Ringling Brothers circus—and his beloved dog Bear, Mike explains how he deals with the various experiences life has thrown at him. He uses his rap music, which you can check out here [https://www.bandlab.com/bike_mike], as an outlet for expressing the pain and the joy he encounters daily.

MICHAEL ROSS [00:00:03] (laughs)

AVIV RAU [00:00:05] Hi. I'm Aviv, I'm here with Texas After Violence Project today, and I am joined by my friend Mike, who is going to be telling us a little bit about himself. Mike, I would love to just sort of kick things off to you and give you the platform and the space to share some of your stories. And I know we're not going to get to all of it today, but to sort of just give folks listening a little sense of, you know, your life and –

ROSS [00:00:34] Who I am.

RAU [00:00:35] Yeah, and who you are. So I'm gonna kind of pass it over to you and you can start that story. And then I'm sure along the way we'll have questions and we'll kind of get the conversation rolling from there –

ROSS [00:00:47] Okay.

RAU [00:00:47] You are in the driver's seat today.

ROSS [00:00:49] Wow. Hold on to your seats [inaudible]. (both laugh) Well, I was born in – my name is Michael Anthony Ross. I was born in 1967. I was born in New York City to Alice Ross, which I don't know what happened to her. And I was given to the courts, and the courts was given – giving me to my godmother and my grandmother. There it was called what they call split custody. And she was – my godmother was ordained by the Baptist church. And my godmother – my grandmother was my actual mom's mother. So I think they put my mom in an insane asylum. I think she went crazy because I was born in 1967 and she was – my dad's white.

RAU [00:01:39] Yeah.

ROSS [00:01:40] So I was born in that segregation. People don't know what segregation is, you know? I mean, that was – I don't know exactly, but – my sister, I have a sister, you know, and she got turned out on drugs. Jesus Christ. And she had children. First child. Oh Lord, my mom was gonna kill her. (laughs) I beg my my mother, Please. Okay, she didn't. I went and got a job working for Toys"R"Us and Burger King.

RAU [00:02:19] Yeah.

ROSS [00:02:20] And then this other place called – down the street on County Road in Georgia was, like, [inaudible] the car wash. All right. And we just – I did that, you know, just to make ends meet because after we moved from New York, I was already out of school. I was graduated. So the thing is it's like, okay, my mom needs me. She [Mike's sister] come home pregnant, she about to kill her, and I got to be the man of the house. (laughs) I'm like, Jesus Christ. Okay, okay. Two women, [inaudible] and she's pregnant. So who's gonna win? I don't know. So I did what I had to do. My uncle never really cut for me because of whatever went on between him after going into Vietnam in 1972 – it was like, him and my mom? I don't know, and whatever, I don't know. But he accused us of saying – he says to me before he died was that, I and my sister's life, took her life, and I'm like, Wow. That's something to say. I cut for him and everything.

RAU [00:03:30] Yeah.

ROSS [00:03:31] You know, he's a Vietnam veteran. I love my uncle. He just a hard person to love. I mean, he sipped on his little gin and juice. Or was that Jack Daniels? It was Jack Daniels. He had a big old bottle of Jack Daniels. Have a little gun right here. And he got two TVs – got football,

basketball. (both laugh) And he might look at some baseball but football, basketball. (RAU laughs)
That's it. Yeah. And smoking small cigarettes and talking kinda – you know, military stuff.

RAU [00:04:01] Yeah.

ROSS [00:04:02] And I'm sitting in like [inaudible]. But I learned a lot of things from him, especially math, good lord, because he was – accountant for the – he did some – he did the taxes for the President.

RAU [00:04:17] Oh, yeah? Whoa.

ROSS [00:04:18] Because he had a badge. I don't know what that badge was about but –

RAU [00:04:21] Something important.

ROSS [00:04:21] But he put me in jail one time in Georgia, and he come get me out of jail with that badge. So whatever that badge was – and then, other people that knows about him, they know about that badge. So –

RAU [00:04:34] Interesting. I wonder –

ROSS [00:04:34] Yeah, he had a little gun about this big and everything. And I love my uncle and – him in his – he may go down the street. He live in Georgia and rabbit is good.

RAU [00:04:47] Yeah.

ROSS [00:04:47] Man, that man make some – go get that rabbit from that man down there. He'd be live and everything. He said, That's the one. He'd come back out here (RAU laughs) all dressed up and everything, looking good.

RAU [00:04:58] Yeah, yeah.

ROSS [00:04:58] He'd make him some, onion gravy, man. (hums)

RAU [00:05:03] So was this in Atlanta?

ROSS [00:05:05] Mhm.

RAU [00:05:05] Okay, nice.

ROSS [00:05:05] Because we moved from New York.

RAU [00:05:09] Right.

ROSS [00:05:09] He wanted us to move from New York and I tried to stay.

RAU [00:05:13] Yeah. How old were you at that time?

ROSS [00:05:15] Let's see, I was 17.

RAU [00:05:18] Okay. Wow. Yeah. So you were like done with school, in that kind of transition period –

ROSS [00:05:20] I was like – right. Basically, I didn't want to leave New York 'cause I had a wife. But by my mom being Jamaican and one third of it was we grew up with our wives. So she picked my wife from a baby.

RAU [00:05:43] Oh, like an arranged marriage almost.

ROSS [00:05:44] Right. And – but Dorothy died and everything, but we never – I ain't gonna get tied down to nobody. (RAU laughs) I'm not gonna walk down no aisle and say I do, I do, that's lying. Waste of time. (laughs) I pull them the d in a minute. (laughs, coughs)

RAU [00:06:03] Okay, so then you ended up in Georgia –

ROSS [00:06:05] Yeah.

RAU [00:06:06] And this is like, you said, right around the time you're graduating from high school, there's all these changes –

ROSS [00:06:11] Grad –

RAU [00:06:12] You're in a new environment –

ROSS [00:06:14] I graduated in '83.

RAU [00:06:15] Graduated '83. Okay.

ROSS [00:06:16] And then I left. Because I was actually forced – because my uncle was like, If you don't come here we're going to send CPS after you. What you talking about. But I was left with my godmother. So my godmother had a conversation with me. She said, Go on baby and everything. I said, Okay. So when I got to Georgia it was okay. I liked it, I worked.

RAU [00:06:38] Yeah.

ROSS [00:06:39] You know, I was already finishing school. I was taking up this, this organization called [inaudible] School for Law. That didn't work out too good. I just talked to the folks in there. He was talking about how much money – I'm like, Okay, wait a minute, I can study law by myself. (RAU laughs) Go to the library and start reading.

RAU [00:06:58] Yep, yeah.

ROSS [00:06:58] Go to – go downtown to the Congress building downtown.

RAU [00:07:01] Yeah, in Atlanta?

ROSS [00:07:02] Okay? So yeah, because in the Capitol there –

RAU [00:07:05] Right, yeah.

ROSS [00:07:06] Behind it is the Capitol library. So guess what? That's the best place to learn the law.

RAU [00:07:11] You're right, yup.

ROSS [00:07:11] Because Democrats and politicians is up in there. You get the, Hey I need help. (RAU laughs) You know, and they will – I did it, right here. So that's the best way to learn. That's what I learned about how UT – and everything – but Georgia, Georgia is very very successful for people. But it's very very hard. Many homeless.

RAU [00:07:39] Yeah. It is. In Atlanta? Absolutely, yeah.

ROSS [00:07:42] And I never been homeless and I wasn't really homeless then. It's just – I'm homeless because of a fire. I got video of that, it's horrible.

RAU [00:07:54] Yeah.

ROSS [00:07:54] People at the church got videos of it.

RAU [00:07:56] Yeah. And when was this fire?

ROSS [00:07:57] The fire was like, let's see – (whispering, thinking aloud) 95? 96? 99? Like 2000? Like middle-ish 2000. Because I was working and everything and I was driving trucks for Three Ring Service and I had to go to work and the children was at the house.

RAU [00:08:18] Right.

ROSS [00:08:18] And then I left them \$150 and everything. So I was out to Mustang Ridge –

RAU [00:08:25] Yeah.

ROSS [00:08:26] – taking those inflatables and stuff.

RAU [00:08:28] Yeah, yeah, yeah, mhm.

ROSS [00:08:28] You know, so driving trucks, I done drove trucks for Ringling Brothers.

RAU [00:08:33] Yeah.

ROSS [00:08:33] I also was an elephant trainer.

RAU [00:08:36] Mhm – oh my God. What? (laughs)

ROSS [00:08:37] Loved it. Yeah.

RAU [00:08:39] There's things I'm learning. I didn't know that, wow!

ROSS [00:08:42] Yeah. Because when I came back – when I got my job after I left Georgia – the reason why I left Georgia is I went into Job Corps. And I argued with my mother. You know, it's very hard to be disrespectful to somebody that took you in when nobody else wanted you and the state wanted to slam me around upside the head, throw you with some biscuits and gravy, and tell a story about it.

RAU [00:09:10] Yeah, I hear that, yeah.

ROSS [00:09:13] And they just – and now knowing that this – all that police system is violence.

(whispers) They just found out about him, had 'em in court. You took all this time? Well, man, when you in foster care, it's –

RAU [00:09:27] Yeah, yeah. People have some terrible stories about foster care –

ROSS [00:09:32] Ooh, (whispers) I ran away twice. I kicked a man in there.

RAU [00:09:39] (laughs) So, I just want to make sure I'm getting it right and understanding. So I know that you said you were living with, like, your godmother and grandmother, and splitting time –

ROSS [00:09:48] Yeah, that was after the state.

RAU [00:09:50] So that was after you were in foster care?

ROSS [00:09:52] After foster care, my grandma – my godmother and my grandmother. My grandmother was entitled to me anyway –

RAU [00:09:58] Right, yeah.

ROSS [00:10:00] – because that's my mom's mother. But my godmother – my grandmother and my godmother, they both were seamstress. One worked in the [inaudible] factory and the other one sewed at home. So they was – and my godmother was ordained by the Baptist church and she had a certificate.

RAU [00:10:18] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROSS [00:10:19] There's a difference to say, Oh, that's my godmother. No it's – ordained. So they made an agreement by both of them being credibility, especially my grandmother. The state gonna always give you to –

RAU [00:10:32] The closest relative, right?

ROSS [00:10:35] The grandmother, yes.

RAU [00:10:37] I see, okay.

ROSS [00:10:38] And I was raised by two women.

RAU [00:10:41] Yeah. How do you think that that shaped – I mean, all of these experiences, right –

ROSS [00:10:48] To.

RAU [00:10:49] – how do you think that they shaped the person that you are today?

ROSS [00:10:52] What? I had to take care of them.

RAU [00:10:55] Yeah.

ROSS [00:10:55] I had to take care of my mother. That – taking care of your mother is not a responsibility, it's a must. I'm from New York [inaudible] See, you cannot take your mother and

push her off in an old folks [home] – taking care of your mother is a must. That's – that's top line. There's no further because people in – I know that people here, they tell their mom they don't care about them. They forget about them. They throw them in an old folks home. But that's your mother.

RAU [00:11:27] Yeah, yeah.

ROSS [00:11:28] You see your mother with no washing machine. You see your mother – we're doing this. Or your mother's battery go out. Why would you go, I don't got the money. No, that's your mother. And that's the thing about it. And then when people have one, for example, I'm from New York – no, you not because you mistreat your mother.

RAU [00:11:45] So that's a real New York value to you, yeah.

ROSS [00:11:47] You – look, you can kick the dad. Mess with our mothers?

RAU [00:11:54] (laughs) That's a line to cross. Yeah, I hear that, sure.

ROSS [00:11:58] They got a better chance going fishing for tuna. (both laugh)

RAU [00:12:04] Ooh, I like that saying. (both laugh) Wow, so this was all – I mean, what a – what an array of things to happen at such a young age, and it sounds like so much responsibility.

ROSS [00:12:17] But it was not responsibility because – I met my dad. My dad was a redhead hippie, and I love my dad. I met him one time. Well, twice. Okay. Yeah, twice. But I'm a baby. But I understand he played a guitar and my favorite song he played was "Sunshine on My Shoulder."

RAU [00:12:40] Aww. So I wonder –

ROSS [00:12:41] He sat in my mother's – my grandmother's. And when I say my mother, I mean my grandmother. My mother is my biological mother. But my mother is the real one that took – my grandmother is my mother because she took care of me when my mother couldn't. And to this day, nobody really knows the truth what happened to my biological mother. I think she was put in a insane asylum or went crazy or something because her and my uncle would never talk and my uncle would never tell me anything, but something must not – she wasn't dead because my grandmother actually wrote and she was in California.

RAU [00:13:19] Oh I see. Well –.

ROSS [00:13:20] My mother – my grandmother searched high and low for that woman – cry and everything for her daughter. She found her and she read the letter. And I was five years old. She read the letter. Before we left New York, my mom sitting in the windowsill and see, we didn't have no porches or anything, we had a fire escape in case the house caught on fire and you go down the fire escape. And then you had the other windowsill – where you can look out on the street and we lived in an apartment building. We didn't live in a house. It was nine story to get all these – each story has one, two, three, four, five, six, seven apartment in an L shape – and you had an elevator. Yes, I loved it. And we played it in the basement and everything but –

RAU [00:14:07] Yeah. So I know you were saying a second ago that your dad was a musician, played guitar, right?

ROSS [00:14:14] Played the guitar.

RAU [00:14:14] And I know that you're a musician now –

ROSS [00:14:16] Well, I do music.

RAU [00:14:19] I wonder –

ROSS [00:14:20] Well –

RAU [00:14:20] – do you think that comes from there? Do you think it comes from other folks in your family? Do you think it's just a coincidence? I wonder.

ROSS [00:14:25] Well, my grandmother was a pianist.

RAU [00:14:27] Oh, I didn't know that. Okay.

ROSS [00:14:28] She had an [inaudible] piano, which my uncle – after she passed away – after we moved to Georgia – from New York to Georgia, we moved from our apartment into a house. So he had that piano. She kept the piano. And he still got that piano to this day. And when they sold the house in Georgia, that piano was still in there.

RAU [00:14:50] Oh, wow.

ROSS [00:14:51] Because I don't know how he got it – well, he slid it through that double door and everything, but he closed it off or something – I don't know what he did. But yeah, she was a pianist and she could sing.

RAU [00:15:03] So you grew up around a lot of music, I'm sure.

ROSS [00:15:05] I grew up a lot of, Christian music. And then this – she was a Jehovah's Witness. And as she was singing, I love to hear my mother sing. My grandmother, I loved to hear her sing. They said my mother could sing, but my dad, he was really, a heck of a guitarist. And he played "Stairway to Heaven" for me, and I just fell in love with that. And he could sing – the man could sing.

RAU [00:15:32] Yeah. Well, so can you.

ROSS [00:15:34] Yeah –

RAU [00:15:36] Yeah. (laughs).

ROSS [00:15:36] But mostly in my music – I mean, and I've been through a lot of ups and downs of that, you know, (laughs) down to, certain things, and you have to view certain things because certain – lot of my music is not copyrighted. I keep it on (whispers) SD cards now. [inaudible] and get it all on the phone. (both laugh)

RAU [00:16:01] [inaudible] Back it up, yeah.

ROSS [00:16:02] I don't mind distributing the music because I know who it's going to, but it talks about what I've been through. What I go through day in and day out here or you know. I just be – say something smart and pop off and there it is. It's whatever's on my mind and people like, What he's saying and everything. You know, that kind of backfired on me the other day. (both laugh) It did. But a lot of people don't listen to music, they just listen to the beat.

RAU [00:16:34] Sure, yeah.

ROSS [00:16:36] I know people listen to my music 'cause yeah, it did. When my friend got mad with me because I wouldn't come over there and everything, because they said – I gave Josh some of my music. And they popped off saying, Well you said something about meth. It's like 2 or 3 weeks later and I'm like what do you, where do y'all come up with – I don't do meth. He said well, Well you said something about this. Wait a minute – you, you relating my music to me but you using my own music against me. While I appreciate you listening to it, but I never did meth.

RAU [00:17:09] Right.

ROSS [00:17:10] Never. I see what it does to people. I've been dealing with drugs way before anybody, because my sister was on drugs and my sister was on powder cocaine. I don't know where this rock come from. When my sister – A student. I was the bad one. I was the one to get the butt whippings – for real. Got caught with a girl in the bathroom. Tell you about that later. (laughs)

RAU [00:17:40] Oh, I heard that story. (laughs)

ROSS [00:17:42] Lord. That was the most embarrassing thing in everything. You know what I'm saying? This is in New York. I'm a little boy. I mean, she [Mike's grandmother] a Jehovah Witness. She having a Bible study out there, and I'm trying to do –

RAU [00:17:54] Oh my gosh (laughs). I can't imagine she was happy with you. No.

ROSS [00:17:58] The little girl left. But I tried to escape. (RAU laughs) Now, see, you know, my bedroom, it had three windows. You had one with no fire escape. You had one with a fire escape – you opened up the window and go down the fire escape. You had this little window (laughs).

RAU [00:18:20] (laughs) You just squeezed through that? (ROSS laughs) Did you fit?

ROSS [00:18:25] Well I went through it, but, this – (RAU laughs) – the torso got stuck.

RAU [00:18:33] (laughs) Oh no.

ROSS [00:18:34] It was about this big. (gestures).

RAU [00:18:35] Yeah, it's like for emergencies only.

ROSS [00:18:35] I was scared. You know, and the brothers in the congregation, they already – I'm trying to hide my face. (both laugh) It was that – I got stuck. But the thing about that, it's not – this on the outside.

RAU [00:18:51] Yeah. (laughs) I understand. Oh my God, what a story.

ROSS [00:18:59] I was punished for a year.

RAU [00:19:02] Oh my gosh. Wow.

ROSS [00:19:04] My mama whooped me with a cat o' nine tails [whip]. Do you know what a cat o' nine tails is?

RAU [00:19:08] I don't actually.

ROSS [00:19:10] My mama used to know this guy that ride a horse. You get that belt that go around it – okay. That belt that goes around to hold the saddle on – well that's his horse belt, that went on the saddle. Okay. He cut that into nine little strips. [inaudible] So you get one to nine.

RAU [00:19:32] Oh my God – oh my gosh. Yeah.

ROSS [00:19:33] I couldn't – I couldn't sit down for six months. (laughs).

RAU [00:19:37] Oh God.

ROSS [00:19:37] I had to go to school with the pillow. Yeah.

RAU [00:19:39] Oh man. You were scared straight after that, huh?

ROSS [00:19:41] The school I went to, P.S. Nine in Brooklyn, New York. And that's the same school that Stephanie Mills went to – never met her, but you can see the plaque, you know. There was – because she was – and everything. So about that time maybe she was in the same school. I'd never been to the class with her, never even played with the child. I was a child, you know what I'm saying? And, you know, mom will meet you at 3:00 and walk you home and everything. It's not like you catch no bus – and when they come up with the bus, I like the little [inaudible], but I didn't like the long one because Special Ed – yeah, Special for real. Mama sent me to school, but she couldn't. So I'm like –

RAU [00:20:26] Okay, so I know that you said – we're talking about New York a little bit and then we're talking about Atlanta, and then obviously at some point you made it here to Austin, right? Where you live today –

ROSS [00:20:36] I made it here to Austin –

RAU [00:20:38] You want to talk a little bit about that?

ROSS [00:20:39] Yeah.

RAU [00:20:40] Cool, cool, let's do it.

ROSS [00:20:42] Like Bear [Mike's dog] do. (RAU laughs) This young lady, she was Mexican. Alright, she lived in El Paso, but I was in Georgia, okay? And I'm driving trucks and everything, and I got tired of doing that for a while because they were starting to be real (pauses) buttheads. I gotta be real clean and nice. I could use some words for them, but I'm not going to do that. (laughs) Well a truck driver – it really gets you frustrated because you got people that take advantage of truck drivers.

RAU [00:21:16] Yeah of course, yeah.

ROSS [00:21:17] And I was like – hmm, so where was I?

RAU [00:21:25] So you met a woman who lived in El Paso.

ROSS [00:21:26] She lived in El Paso. So when they – she had actually talked me into – we kept communicating. She actually called me, I called her and everything. So I had to take a trip to Columbia, South Carolina, and I told her what was going on and I'm going to get back in the truck and I really I don't want to go back home, I want to go somewhere else and pick up another job. And she said, well, you can come out to El Paso. Okay, she paid for my ticket from Columbia, South Carolina, all the way to El Paso. We went from big highways and everything to two lane – and I'm like, Wow. And it took me like three days almost four, maybe five. I mean –

RAU [00:22:14] It's a long trip, yeah.

ROSS [00:22:14] Let's see, it was like – because I kept stopping – Greyhound kept stopping at every little pit stop.

RAU [00:22:18] Yeah, exactly. (laughs)

ROSS [00:22:20] Okay and then – and then something went wrong with the bus then we had to wait for another bus. And then that bus went around again. So we was – I like – I've been around twice areas of the pitholes that they had stopping. (laughs) Okay, so when I got on the right bus, it was in Dallas. And they're called [inaudible]. No, no, it was Americanos. It was like – because I was around when Greyhound and Trailways, it was two different bus systems. Greyhound bought out Trailways – that Trailways was one with the eagle [logo] with the red stripe – had a gold head on it, real cool. And then we don't know how that dog [Greyhound buses logo] beat out that eagle but that dog always kept that eagle going. And Greyhound had an actual hound [logo] on the side of the bus. So Trailways got sold to Greyhound. They bought them and they combined them. And they only had one – one Trailways running, and then it kind of clunked out.

RAU [00:23:29] So you ended up in Dallas?

ROSS [00:23:32] Ended up in Dallas. In Dallas, it was okay for a few minutes. It was – I had a layover 24 hours. So then we got on this bus called Americanos – that's a bird, I'm sorry, but, I mean, it's an Americano. I'm like, wait a minute. I went from Greyhound to Americano – where are we going? (both laugh) Okay, so we went past, and everything – it was a long ride. Beautiful scenery, flat land and everything. So at one time we just came to a stop. And I'm like, Wow, is that a Greyhound bus station? He [the bus driver] said, Yup. It was a bench and a light.

RAU [00:24:18] That's it. Yeah.

ROSS [00:24:19] And it was like a two way line going this way, that way. It – scenery – red rock, beautiful things going up in the air. And I'm like – so I go out there and smoke. (pauses, laughs) And he [the bus driver] said, We don't usually allow that but I can't really say nothing, man, he said. And basically I was the only one on that bus. It was nobody else on that Greyhound going –

RAU [00:24:47] (laughs) Like a personal charter.

ROSS [00:24:47] The bus driver was an old cat. And he say – well, he was from El Paso and he look indian [Native American] to me. And I said, Are you indian [Native American]? And he said, No. I said, Are you Apache? He said, No, I'm Mexican. I said, Wow. He said, Where are you from? I said, New York. He said, You got a way back there in – yeah, Columbia. Yeah. And we had to ride around in this bus twice going to wherever. He said, I'm sorry, but – is that you – and now here we are again. So when I got to, El Paso – wow. You see Mexico.

RAU [00:25:23] Yeah. It's a beautiful place.

ROSS [00:25:24] Nice. See the border.

RAU [00:25:26] Yeah.

ROSS [00:25:28] She picked me up, took me over to the [army] base, had my hair done—everything. Met her mom, [inaudible] everything, and ate tamales for the first time. Homemade tamales.

RAU [00:25:39] Yeah, that's good stuff.

ROSS [00:25:40] And she told them I don't eat pork. So her mom made fish with beef soup. But she used red snapper.

RAU [00:25:50] Oh, yeah [inaudible].

ROSS [00:25:52] You can only get it in Florida.

RAU [00:25:55] Maybe you can get in El Paso, though, I guess. (laughs)

ROSS [00:25:58] Yeah, or you can go down – a lot of red snapper, you can get it – because I see it at H-E-B. But, I loved El Paso, but she wanted more in a relationship and in the [inaudible].

RAU [00:26:11] How long were you guys together?

ROSS [00:26:13] We was like, well, yeah, we – okay, I have to be honest about that one too.

Because if you live with her for about 4 or 5 months, 6 months – Yeah, we was together that long and then I really got tired of being – felt like I was being tied up and everything. And she kept, you know, whatever, you know? (laughs) And, I just wasn't feeling it no more.

RAU [00:26:38] Yeah, I get that.

ROSS [00:26:39] And then I'ma be honest, she pissed me off. She really pissed me off when she broke my Sade "Love Deluxe" album. She broke it.

RAU [00:26:48] Oh, no.

ROSS [00:26:50] Pissed me off.

RAU [00:26:50] So that was enough for you.

ROSS [00:26:52] She said, It was just a CD. Not your CD. (chuckles) That damn CD cost me \$25 and you broke it. I love Sade. That was one of my – one of my exotic Negro jazz artists.

RAU [00:27:15] Okay, so then this was still El Paso – so you're in Texas now –

ROSS [00:27:19] Yeah.

RAU [00:27:20] – you have just – we're setting the scene. You've just like broken up with this woman right? You're no longer together. Did you know other people in Texas? How did –

ROSS [00:27:28] No.

RAU [00:27:29] – you find your way here [to Austin]?

ROSS [00:27:30] Well, shoot. I found my way here where – one Christmas. Her baby's dad is one of the girls. He's one of them. I say hey, so he can see what was going on, him and his lover was there and everything. I'm like, Wait a minute – that's – she said, Yeah, that's my daughter's dad. I'm like, Okay. [inaudible] We was outside, it was snow on the ground, El Paso snow. It's real pretty.

RAU [00:28:03] It is, yeah.

ROSS [00:28:04] Real beautiful. And then you see the [military] base and then you look over at Mexico – it's nice. Okay. He was out there, you know, doing, you know. And that's how I got, you know, really on to that. And I was like, Hey, man, what you – what you got? He said, Oh you want some? Okay, I'll leave it at that. (laughs) And I told him – I said, Look man, I don't got a lot of money, but this woman is driving me crazy and she wants more out of it and – I'm not – I wasn't ready for that. It's too much work.

RAU [00:28:39] You were still pretty young, huh, when – how old do you think you were at this time?

ROSS [00:28:43] I was young enough to run. (laughs)

RAU [00:28:46] Young enough to run (laughs), there we go.

ROSS [00:28:51] So she knew something was going – Oh, so now you messing with him when we walked in the door. Wait. a minute, whoa, whoa, whoa. I said, You know what? You know what? You know what? This is not – I wasn't messing with him, okay? I'm asking this man to get me out of your hair so I don't go to jail, okay? Because you're getting on my nerve. You broke my damn CD, and you keep saying – and that was \$25, and you got tired of me listening to it because you was driving me drama. Okay and now I love to hear her [Sade's] voice, and, you know, and I work all day, and you want me to do extra work after work and – I gotta go. I know I'm not like that and everything, so I asked this man to take me away from [her]. So she packed my bags real quick and throw them out. He said, Damn, you don't throw him out right now. 'Cause I'm not ready to go. So she grabbed her bags. She's well – but her mother made her bring them bags back in saying, You'll leave my home when you're ready.

RAU [00:29:49] Interesting, yeah.

ROSS [00:29:50] Because she was living with her mother.

RAU [00:29:52] You said this is on the army base, is that right?

ROSS [00:29:54] No she was – you can see the Army base from where – her backyard. Because look, when you would go in that backyard you can see Mexico. I mean, it was like way over yonder, but if you got a nice, good pair of binoculars [inaudible]. You can see it's real now – you can see people, cars going across. You got people going around – not going around, but you got people that is actually walking across the bridge. Okay, then you got the military base. But she worked on a military base and her mother worked on it. But she took me to the military [base] to get my hair cut, and I love it. She was okay, I mean, she loved to eat [inaudible] – oh, she was sweet as candy and everything, but when she didn't get her way then she turned into Tyra Banks.

RAU [00:30:47] Yeah so it didn't work out, sounds like. Understandable.

ROSS [00:30:51] Well, it would have if she had just left my items alone. Okay, number two if she stop bugging me. Number three, I was not interested and she didn't know how to take no for an answer. So she thought there was another woman. How is there another woman and I'm right here? You take me wherever I go.

RAU [00:31:15] Yeah, you didn't know many other people in El Paso at the time.

ROSS [00:31:18] I met her – I met her cousin. Now his name was Boogie. Now Boogie, he's a rapper. I have to really figure out – he was a rapper then and everything, and he had this Impala. He was real cool. So I started to listen to his rap and then, you know, he engage in, you know, you know, Bob Marley's action. (laughs) So we hit it off. But he knew what I was going through, so he was like my outburst to him and everything. And then I would hear him in his studio because he had a studio built up right in his house. His garage was a studio. So his – 1960? '60 –what was it – '62, '63 Impala. So you drive his Impala right into his studio.

RAU [00:32:06] Oh my God, wow.

ROSS [00:32:06] I mean, you could shut the door to the –

RAU [00:32:09] The garage. Cool, yeah.

ROSS [00:32:11] So here he is. He's playing whatever instruments and everything. Then, you know, I play a little drum every now and then (whispers) but [inaudible] gotta keep that –

RAU [00:32:19] I didn't know that, wow.

ROSS [00:32:20] Yeah.

RAU [00:32:22] So I feel like we've got a really clear picture of this time in El Paso, and it sounds like it was pretty short lived all together. Right? You weren't there super, super long.

ROSS [00:32:33] Six, about six months. And then came to Austin.

RAU [00:32:38] So I want to hear a little bit about – if you want to share a little bit about that or a little bit about kind of pulling us forward into maybe more recent history.

ROSS [00:32:46] Well, when I got to Austin, I had nowhere to go because when I left, when I left El Paso, I knew I would be on the street, but it wouldn't take me long to get them old – little old dead presidents together [money] and get me somewhere to go. Because it was, it was cheap – rent here was \$300. Okay, my whole life I always had somewhere to go because you always had, you know rooms for rent. \$50 a week, you know what I'm saying? I work for \$3.25 an hour. When they told me I'm making \$10 I – I thought I was Kobe Bryant then. (RAU laughs) You couldn't tell me – I'm for real. To work from \$3.25 to –

RAU [00:33:39] Ten – yeah that's pretty good, especially at this time.

ROSS [00:33:41] All my life – and you got paid every two weeks. And you brought home \$350 every two weeks after taxes. So if I remember that and you offered me. And I came here, and when I started working here, I worked for whatever Allen would pay me. I would just love to get money.

Why? Because then I could eat. I mean, I had no place to sleep – I could eat because if I don't have a place – I have a place to eat and I have no place to sleep then I can make a little bit more money that day 'til you have both places, both things. So my rent was \$300 and I'm paying \$300 but I don't think [inaudible]. Because when you go up South Lamar to Menchaca [street], Menchaca bears off. It was a Goodwill that they knocked down and there's a 7-Eleven right on the corner. And then you go behind the 7-Eleven – that's a cul de sac –

RAU [00:34:50] Oh, I totally know, yes. I can picture it.

ROSS [00:34:51] The first – I lived right there. I lived out in South Austin ever since I've been here. I love it.

RAU [00:35:00] You're loyal to it, huh? I feel like a lot of South Austin people are.

ROSS [00:35:01] I'm loyal to it. East Side – is because the family members that I met here and their mom lived on the East Side [of Austin]. I call them my family. That's Keito [Ka'awa] St. James, they own Tropical Productions and everything. And so I was around their music and everything. We used to do Hawaiian shows and everything. But how I met them – I went to a gay club called the – it was called the Blue Flamingo. You can look it up. It's right there, corner of Red River and Seventh Street. And I used to work there, and I love the girls. I love the girls. Man I'm telling you, people would say, I don't like this. Go and see a show!

RAU [00:35:51] Yeah, it's fun!

ROSS [00:35:51] People don't know. And I still know those people to this very day. And when I was working, I met that family [the St. James family] through Larry that was the owner of the Blue Flamingo.

RAU [00:36:05] I see, okay.

ROSS [00:36:06] So then they did a show there, and that's when I was introduced to Keito [Ka'awa] St. James and his mom and they became my adoptive family. And I've been up under them and they did all their shows, Tropical Productions. We did [a show in] Marble Falls called Tropical Hideaway. And if you could pull up the fliers from back then. Yeah, you see, the whole family, you know, and and they also on the internet. Check them out. Trust me, you will love the shows, and they go nationwide. They all over the Internet – tropicalproductions.com. And I was in the shows. That family has also written a book called Talking Medicine. I call them my aunt. Yeah. And she wrote Talking Medicine that hit the Barnes & Noble. She had two books on [inaudible], Talking Medicine, and then the other book – I'm not sure the title of it. But even though she didn't get really a lot of royalties from it, it hit the Barnes & Noble shelves, and that was her first time writing any book.

RAU [00:37:16] That's cool. So always been – you've always, for whatever reason – maybe it's luck, maybe it's people you're drawn to – it seems like you really –

ROSS [00:37:25] Luck, man.

RAU [00:37:25] – all of these periods in life gotten very close to people who are very creative.

ROSS [00:37:29] Well, she was extremely creative, Kanani. And she's still alive, she ain't dead.

Fifty percent of the costumes was made by her.

RAU [00:37:40] Wow, so all of these seamstresses too? I'm seeing some themes.

ROSS [00:37:43] She was a seamstress and everything – all of the beads and stuff. I would help – we would sit down and we would make beads. We made all the necklaces and everything.

RAU [00:37:56] You were helping with that? Wow.

ROSS [00:37:58] Yes. Because the Austin Bead Factory was right on South Lamar and she was friends with those ladies, and we would go there and get the Austin beads and stuff and everything. 50% – not 50% – all of the costumes that they use to this very day was handmade by her, their mom, and me or whoever else. The dancers would help her make the costumes. She knew she would just measure you and that was it. Your costume was made just like that. All she had to do was ask you to stand up. She would go your way. [inaudible] Boom – 20 minutes later what she made, she could put on and it fit perfectly.

RAU [00:38:38] That's very talented.

ROSS [00:38:39] And the thing I love about is the beading, because we sit down, listen to Bob Marley, and then that's where I got into. (pauses) And the whole time I would pay rent and everything, I was in my work and then I would help her and everything. So it was a family that knew that I was not being misfortunate, but I was [inaudible] and everything. They would take me in or help me make some money and everything, especially if they do luaus and they cook pig – they know I'm a Muslim and they had to clean it at some – they couldn't get in the house. Good

lord. [inaudible] But that's family and it was fun. And I mean, my homelessness really came through from a fire in Austin. And there's all [coordinated housing] assessments and this, that, and the other the that I done took for the years over. They say that I don't have income, I don't have this, I don't have that. Okay, alright, I understand that. Alright, but you know I got a fire you know, this and everything, and –

RAU [00:39:51] And also you have been working all these years, right? You told us all the places you used to [inaudible] –

ROSS [00:39:54] Man, I've been working all my life. And I don't want my unemployment drawn here because they'll take it from me. You know, I work so much I can actually go and get my unemployment. I was in Georgia, I applied for disability. Anybody locked up for two years under any law – two years or more – you [are eligible for] disability under the state law. Why? Because you don't have nowhere to go when you get out. You lost everything going to jail. I went through that, yeah, I was approved. I had to go to all that paperwork and they say I gotta read – it's a lot of – you leave one area to try to go back and everything. But I have things here. But the thing is, you know, when you apply for help, be honest. They wouldn't really – and they never going to be honest with you. Affordable housing is what – a lot of people's vouchers run out. I dealt with a lot of churches here which is no longer – that's like they disappear off the map. Ima start naming them. Which was really save S.O.S. save my streets. That man was the biggest drug dealer on earth. And God rip them. Let me just have the right thing on seven and I 35 downtown and turned him into a preacher – with a guitar. And he provided for us. We had Thomas White Ministries which disappeared.

RAU [00:41:27] Yeah. So it sounds like you've seen a lot of providers of services over the years sort of cycle through –

ROSS [00:41:34] But the – it was all about money. Fifty percent of the help goes into nonprofit organizations. So that organization maybe end up with a GoFundMe [inaudible]. And then next minute you know they get the money, like when people used to come out up there, YMCA North, YMCA South – and all of a sudden they just disappear. So [an Austin-based organization that distributes clothing, hygiene supplies, food, and other basic goods to unhoused people] let the cat out the bag. Well somebody got paid and then they were – disappeared. They said somebody took the money. What you mean take the money? They took the money. What do you mean? They took the money.

RAU [00:42:12] This is really interesting to me because I know –

ROSS [00:42:14] It's horrible.

RAU [00:42:16] Yeah. It's – I mean it's super messed up.

ROSS [00:42:17] And then the mad thing about it. When you enter a homeless person's life, I don't know what chronic homelessness is because you got chronic homeless right now all over the world.

RAU [00:42:31] Yeah absolutely.

ROSS [00:42:33] You got famine in Africa. So we're lucky. I'm lucky.

RAU [00:42:43] I mean in some ways, right? But also it doesn't look like our resources are getting split very evenly here in the US, right?

ROSS [00:42:49] Well, the resources – the thing is, you got a bunch of knuckleheads (RAU laughs) arguing down there in the Capitol building. They don't know – they always trying to outdo everybody. Donald Trump this now, this other man [Governor Abbott] running down there the border trying to set up the army down there. What's his name, the governor?

RAU [00:43:10] Abbott.

ROSS [00:43:11] Abbott, that's his name. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disrespect you, sir (both laugh). And then they want to help this one, and they want to help that one. Okay. I'm listening to the news today. In California, they got a homeless court.

RAU [00:43:28] What is that?

ROSS [00:43:29] Homeless court is when they write [up] homeless people for camping and this that and the other.

RAU [00:43:34] It's like the camping ban here [in Austin]?

ROSS [00:43:36] And the homeless court helps people get into housing.

RAU [00:43:42] Oh, interesting. Yeah, so –

ROSS [00:43:45] So why can't they [inaudible]? But they want to put us in jail. And then I don't do them things folks do down there looking, you know, stuck on that toochie [K-2, or synthetic marijuana] and all that other stuff. It's sad, but to not help a man that's willing to help yourself?

That's not easy! And they keep telling me no. Tell me the truth. Look, man, you ain't got no money.

Okay, okay. Affordable [housing] means you can work with me, right?

RAU [00:44:13] Right. Exactly, right?

ROSS [00:44:14] Well I don't make that much. At least I get out here and work. At least I'm not trying to – Okay, and then a lot of people were basic income. And then I also found out the affordable housing, the reason why they really ain't because California is telling it all. It was a Mothers Against Homelessness or something like that, and they start taking over these [abandoned] houses. On the news, 90.5. I listen to [that station] and you hear things and then you can, you know – the squatting thing, they would – actually it was Mothers Against Homeless Mothers, that's the name of the organization. But still they're dealing with homelessness. And they arresting women for living in a house that nobody else is living in. But what happened is the city buys things and they don't want to take care of it. Georgia have a lot of that going on.

RAU [00:45:13] Yeah, no kidding.

ROSS [00:45:15] I mean, a whole apartment complex is just standing there.

RAU [00:45:20] Yeah, exactly. I mean –

ROSS [00:45:20] With a fence around it and nobody there. And they don't want to do that, but it's easier. And then the reason why the affordable housing come from the people that actually bought the property and they're going to do something with the property, but they ain't done nothing with it yet.

RAU [00:45:34] (laughs) Yeah, exactly.

ROSS [00:45:34] So then if they call [the housing] affordable you can move in there.

RAU [00:45:38] Right. So I just want to make sure we're not missing time to talk about anything. Because I think we're starting to get toward the end – not quite to the end yet, but we're starting to maybe approach that. And so I think as we're kind of thinking about some last thoughts or questions here, I'm curious what's coming up for you? I'm thinking a lot about Austin because this is sort of where your narrative has brought us, right? Where all these stories you're telling have brought us to the present, to Austin –

ROSS [00:46:11] I love Austin because it's beautiful. I seen Austin before, it was all – all them buildings? I'm being honest. There was an economy boom – we knew about these buildings coming and everything, but they, I think they just gathering all the money. And when they built that, that first building downtown called the Blackwell Building, they was having a big thing about that building blocking the Capitol. Then you got that other – that's probably illuminati – that owl building – that building that looks like an owl pointing this way? If you look at – those are clocks, very top is clocks, and you see people up there every now and then cleaning them and everything. That building is also [inaudible], blocking the capitol when you coming in from the east and you can't see the capitol. Okay, but it's ugly [inaudible] down in the middle of the road. You walk up and there's a dead end and everything and the man ran into the fence there. But I love Austin. Austin has a lot of – by me being on the street here, I met a lot of people that's on the street in this town like Drummer Man. Drummer Man was the first man to take a bucket, stick his arm in the bucket, and walk up and down the street, and rap to it. And people give this man money. I mean he just – that was his name, was Drummer Man. Over the years we don't know what happened to him. I know he went to jail and everything, but Drummer Man was the first person that ever [inaudible] on a

bucket. We thought he was crazy but that man coming back with \$50, \$60 and we homeless. And he was saying, Hey, man, you watch over me. I walk with him. (imitates drumming noises) I mean, right there, Sixth and Brazos [street corner in Downtown Austin]. But Sixth Street was Sixth Street. I don't know what is going on down there now.

RAU [00:48:13] I know you talked a little bit about this economic boom in Austin that you saw and how many changes you've seen over the years –

ROSS [00:48:18] It had so many.

RAU [00:48:19] – not just in terms of, you know, money and buildings coming in and whatever. But also you said in terms of –

ROSS [00:48:25] It was a ghost town!

RAU [00:48:26] It was a ghost town, yeah.

ROSS [00:48:28] You had a lot of run-in streets. Where they built that library [Central Library branch Downtown], that's where the city water treatment plant was. Well, all the boo boo and everything. (both laugh) Boy, it was stinky down there.

RAU [00:48:42] (laughs) It was stinky, you said?

ROSS [00:48:43] It was because we had an area down there called hobos.

RAU [00:48:50] Oh, yeah?

ROSS [00:48:51] Hobos was an area. Now the lady – if you ever get a chance, go in that arch. And if they didn't take that lady's picture down in that arch building – when you walk into the arch, there's a plaque with this picture. I can't think of her name, but if you look at it, she is there. She was the one that became – she was the one that found that program and Hobos was her actual program. And it was one of her houses. Hobos was no bigger than a four bedroom house and a backyard. She had it concreted, she had a basketball court up and everything. And what she would allow was the contractors from Downtown to drive up in the back of Hobos, take you to work and bring you back and pay you. And we had some good jobs, we got hired permanent jobs out of there.

RAU [00:49:46] Wow, yeah. And this was around what time?

ROSS [00:49:48] That was in '94, '95, '96. Cuz I got here in '94 coming from El Paso. Yeah. They say run to the border. Shit, I took off. (laughs) I took off so quick, man, you tell her I had some jets behind me. (imitates jet whirring)

RAU [00:50:9] I know you have so many other stories that we could tell, and I definitely want to make sure that we have enough time to honor those by giving them their own time to be told and –

ROSS [00:50:19] I know I skip around a lot, but –

RAU [00:50:21] No, no. I really appreciate everything that we've heard today.

ROSS [00:50:24] That's what makes my music interesting, because you hear me say one thing then I come up with something real crazy, you know.

RAU [00:50:32] You make quick connections, absolutely, your brain is always working.

ROSS [00:50:35] I do five things a day. I could get bored. I could wash clothes. I could go fix the fence. I can go cut the grass. Come right up and cut a tree. Then going over there, working my gas, making all these little projects – for real.

RAU [00:50:50] You love your projects. Always gotta have something to do. So as we're kind of thinking about closing out for today –

ROSS [00:50:57] Okay, what up?

RAU [00:50:59] I wonder if there's anything we didn't get to talk about that you want to share quickly?

ROSS [00:51:04] No, we talked about – I mean, you said I had the stage. [00:51:14] We driving, I told y'all, hold onto your seats. See? (both laugh) I be zooming in and out.

RAU [00:51:17] But you're in the driver's seat, we love it. That's what we're here for.

ROSS [00:51:19] Well, I don't get to speak a lot because I'm always by myself, and I'm always with Bear [Mike's dog]. I be sitting down there talking to him, he talking to me – you know, that's real good when you have communication with your dog. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to call him a dog – my family member.

RAU [00:51:34] Yes. That's right. Yeah.

ROSS [00:51:36] He got lucky last night. He got a 100% coconut water bath warmed up.

RAU [00:51:43] (laughs) Oh my God, that is so fancy. Good for him! As we're wrapping up, I think I've heard so many things from you today about just all of these little moments, like these little anecdotes in your life –

ROSS [00:51:57] I got more anecdotes.

RAU [00:52:00] I don't doubt it. (laughs)

ROSS [00:52:01] You know, I mean, it's a lot of things. When I was working with Ringling Brothers – I'll save that for later. Because that was an experience. I mean I told the man I was hungry. I went right up there and they are said, Are you willing to [work] and I said, Look man I need a job, I'm hungry. He said, What? I say, if I don't eat – I'm not going to be able to eat if I don't be able to work. He said, Are you willing to travel, man? I go anywhere, but I need to eat. So the only way to eat, I've got to work. Them folks took me on to – the period of "Airiana the Human Arrow" and it was three of them. Two skinny, one 300 pounder. And you shooting this woman out of a hydraulic crossbow from – that thing was (sings) huge. But you being in the circus – I'm in the circus. Here I am, I'm running around and the elephant trainer – I tell you how that happened, okay? But I will save all that [for a future interview].

RAU [00:53:07] I think those sound like goodies for another time.

ROSS [00:53:09] (laughs) I got real goodies.

RAU [00:53:09] Do you have any, like, closing words or final thoughts you want to share today about some of what we talked about, like homelessness in Austin? We talked about all of the different sort of moments that you experienced as a kid from a young age that really shaped the person you are today, talked about family, talked about creativity and how it showed up in your life.

ROSS [00:53:32] Creativity came to my life since I was, you know, the transfer from dad to mom. I was [inaudible] and I knew I was. Have already created. I'm trying to get up out of there real quick. Like what happened? Okay, then all of a sudden (imitates sound) boom. So I mean I've always been that way since I was a little boy.

RAU [00:53:56] It's in your DNA.

ROSS [00:53:57] I love – I mean, my mama would buy me a transistor radio and I would take you to a party, have you doing something else. You know I got in trouble for that? You know, she only paid \$3 for the radio. Back then, everything was cheap. We can go get the 50 cent – we could go get 25 cent soda. I can give you 25 cents and you give me a big old bag of candy like that.

RAU [00:54:21] I know.

ROSS [00:54:22] You know.

RAU [00:54:22] So that creativity, it sounds like, has always been in the mix, always been in your DNA.

ROSS [00:54:29] When I seen my mother – I will – always wanted to work – I always tinkering. I have all kinds of motorcycles and everything. [speaking figuratively of his creativity] You know, I

don't give everybody the full dinner – I like to piece it up. A little bit of macaroni and cheese there, little gravy right there with some rice, you know. I don't like giving all the goodies out. I mean –

RAU [00:54:54] Crumbs everywhere, huh?

ROSS [00:54:55] Where you think I get my gas bikes from?

RAU [00:54:59] (laughs) There you go.

ROSS [00:54:59] I went from, you know, I've been working on that thing for five years. All my other ones I sold, 'cause them things went like hotcakes. But yeah, I loved [being interviewed] today, it was lovable. I mean, I got a lot of goodies. I keep goodies.

RAU [00:55:18] You sure do, absolutely. I really, really value that you have taken the time to sit down and share some of your stories. And I know you have so many more, but it has been really cool to get to hear more about you and there were stories that I knew and there were things that I learned today. And I really, really appreciate it, as always, every time I –

ROSS [00:55:36] And yes, I wash my clothes. I do it old fashioned style: wood, water, and fire. I say they do come out clean. And then they dry real quick. Yeah, I do all kinds of things. And yes, I was born in Black History Month.

RAU [00:55:55] That's right, yeah. And it's Black History Month now.

ROSS [00:55:58] And I was one years old when Martin Luther King, Jr. was – he wasn't shot. He was assassinated.

RAU [00:56:06] Yes, correct.

ROSS [00:56:07] Why? Because they feared him.

RAU [00:56:10] Yeah, absolutely. I know that this is kind of veering topics and so we don't have to get super into it, but just in closing, right? You mentioned it's Black History Month and you were born in Black History Month. And of course you've mentioned throughout how seeing segregation as a child and then, you know, moving from the North to the South and all these different things. I wonder if you have any thoughts –

ROSS [00:56:33] Segregation was horrible. That was – what we seeing today is not segregation, it's not hatred against [minoritized communities]. What these folks doing [today], they get away with it a little bit then they end up in jail. Back then –

RAU [00:56:54] It felt different to you?

ROSS [00:56:56] These people were trying to assassinate my mother because – or bring harm to my mom and my dad because of the relationship with Blacks [interracial relationship]. And that supposed to be right? You know, when people say Blacks had to go or go to over here and the white folks right here? My grandmother never had a birth certificate. We didn't know what – I mean, my mother's mother never had a birth certificate. They had to do a – when she passed away they had to do a bone density test just to see how old she was. She was way over 80 years old, but she never had a birth certificate. Now, I was told by my uncle that Harriet Tubman was a name that was given to her, that was a slave name. Her real name was Araminta Ross and she resided in Brooklyn. She has offspring.

RAU [00:58:04] Oh, your last name's Ross.

ROSS [00:58:06] Uh huh. But then there's a lot of things – but I was – my uncle was telling me, you know, off and on. That man was from Vietnam, he seen a lot of stuff. He seen bloodshed. You know, don't get me wrong. I love my uncle, but that was a dangerous man.

RAU [00:58:21] Yeah, you said he was hard to live with.

ROSS [00:58:24] Just in his mind. I mean, he –

RAU [00:58:27] It's a lot of trauma, right?

ROSS [00:58:28] He really didn't do trauma. I mean, if he had trauma, you really couldn't tell it, he always off to himself. But he was real quiet, that's what made him scary. You know, he –

RAU [00:58:41] Hard to be around as a kid, I'm sure.

ROSS [00:58:43] And then even do some things because my uncle, I never knew what he had. A close friend of mine's that was on hospice, well, she moved down there and everything. He told her about it. Then he was brutally abused physically, by not getting food and stuff like that from his dad. So I'm like, wait a minute. I'm coming from a dysfunctional family. Wait a minute. Whoa whoa whoa. No no no. Okay, dysfunctional don't mean you just crazy or nothing. It just means something ain't going right.

RAU [00:59:23] And it's not – it doesn't mean it's your fault.

ROSS [00:59:24] And then it's a lot of things that he has shared with my friend of mine's.

(whispers) That's the one that put me in jail, in Atlanta. Man, I told you about that, right? Like I say, I got goodies. And a lot of things that she knew about she shared with me – I never knew my uncle was abused by his own dad. And I mean not, you know, sexually anything – I'm talking about not giving the man food. So that's why he kept all the canned goods and everything, and he harbored food.

RAU [00:59:59] Yeah.

ROSS [01:00:01] And I'm like, wow. So wait a minute. And then coming from his mouth to her? Yeah.

RAU [01:00:09] Yeah, absolutely.

RAU [01:00:10] That's my uncle. That's my blood uncle. That's not nobody I met on the street. [inaudible] And she was telling me whole lot of things – that he had his ways of loving me and everything – he was a dude and everything. Another thing I like about my uncle, he taught me ways of doing math. I'm like, that man was calculus status.

RAU [01:00:34] Moving quick in his brain, for sure.

ROSS [01:00:34] And I'm like, wait a minute, okay, this that and the other. And then, you know, me and him got into it one day. [Mike said] I'm not doing that math! Then I took off running, he took off behind me. We running around and everything. And then I said, You know what? I'm not doing this, man. And he said, What you doing? I'm sitting here fishing. You can get your fish bowl and do

the same thing. He did because he had mineral rights – he had land and animals in Georgia. So the house was right here, so everything behind it was his. And he had minerals right in there on the other side of the creek – yeah, that was a big old creek. And then I mean, it's nice – we got crawdad – we been eating them for years. And we used to take them and put them in a freshwater tank, just put all the dirt out, then we just scoop them out. That's some good eating.

RAU [01:01:24] Yeah it is, for sure. Well, thank you so much for taking all of this time today and I hope –

ROSS [01:01:32] (whispers) Did I go over again?

RAU [01:01:33] No, I think you're good. I think we're about to wrap so –

ROSS [01:01:38] You know me, I got a motor mouth. It runs on diesel, for real.

RAU [01:01:42] But you know, this is only the first of other conversations that we'll continue to have if you want to, you know, and this doesn't have to feel like the only time to share your story. But I really appreciate everything that you've been able to share with us today, and I just want you to know that it means a lot to me. Thank you for doing it.

ROSS [01:01:59] It means a lot to me because things going wrong and people doing this and – poor, poor Joel Osteen that poor man [inaudible] for real. Wow. So you don't know what'll happen, you know, and when something happened to a person and a documentary come up, that's your interpretation of a documentary. These – you can take this as a documentary, you can take it as whatever. You can take pieces and bits, whatever, you know. But my children needs to know what I

have been through. So as you letting people know what you've been through, it's coming from the person that lived it.

RAU [01:02:48] Exactly, yeah.

ROSS [01:02:49] I'm not going to wait to I, you know, perish – I ain't going to say that – perish and then somebody else write my – my words is what I'm living. And people that know me, know I'm living it.

RAU [01:03:06] Of course. And it sounds like especially –

ROSS [01:03:09] And I don't consider myself a homeless man. I'm an outdoorsman. Because the homeless people don't work. How's it that I got wood, I got jeans?

RAU [01:03:22] You're always working. (laughs).

ROSS [01:03:23] I'm always working. I'm an outdoorsman, I love it. And then they goes, it's gonna get cold. When? The other night. (scoffs, laughs) Boy, I'm from New York. Let's go New York. It's cold up there now, it's still snow on the ground.

RAU [01:03:29] Yeah. Sure is. Absolutely.

ROSS [01:03:41] And by the way, I love that girl on the chalkboard. (points to a drawing, out of view of the camera) See, look, we used it – when we had art time in PS 9 [public school in New York City], that was some of my favorite drawings, like that, stick people.

RAU [01:03:58] The little stick figures and stuff? Yeah, me too.

ROSS [01:03:59] (whispers) I do draw.

RAU [01:04:01] You draw too? Oh my gosh, we're going to have to see some drawings. Cool, well –

ROSS [01:04:05] I have some I can actually show it to you. I'll be like –

RAU [01:04:11] Absolutely.

ROSS [01:04:13] I do a lot. I do a whole bunch of things, keep myself occupied because you get bored.

RAU [01:04:21] Yeah, I hear that.

ROSS [01:04:21] Then I ride my bicycle. If you ever see me on my bicycle, (sings) you ain't gonna catch me. (both laugh)

RAU [01:04:29] You move quick.

ROSS [01:04:29] I love it.

RAU [01:04:30] Well, thank you so, so much again.

ROSS [01:04:32] Well thank you. [inaudible] I love this. So I'm going to say what I got to say and I ain't gonna say – and this, that, and the other – and whatever I say is real. I mean, I live it.

RAU [01:04:44] It's your truth, right?

ROSS [01:04:44] It's my truth. I mean, I ain't going to be like Katt Williams. Love your brother. You know, he Muslim too. You know, he expose everybody (RAU laughs), but he be shaking to make it. And you lying to make it, then, hey, that's not gonna make it. The truth gotta come out.

RAU [01:05:04] Yeah, alright. I think we are more or less at time. So I really appreciate everything that you've shared with us today.

ROSS [01:05:16] Yeah.

RAU [01:05:16] And I think it's really powerful, especially, you know, you were talking about how your uncle, right – you had to hear all these stories about his life and his hardships second hand because he wasn't able to talk about it –

ROSS [01:05:26] Right, but then –

RAU [01:05:27] And so I think it's really cool –

ROSS [01:05:29] But his Vietnam stories –

RAU [01:05:33] Yeah.

ROSS [01:05:35] I can share those, I would love to share those.

RAU [01:05:37] I think at another time, yeah.

ROSS [01:05:39] Because them Vietnam stories coming from a person that lived Vietnam that walked Vietnam, that smelled Vietnam, that played around in Vietnam –

RAU [01:05:52] Yeah, it's harrowing.

ROSS [01:05:55] Some of the stories he told me, I would be afraid to go to sleep because that man lived it. So if he can live through that then –

RAU [01:06:05] Yeah, I hear that. I really, again, really appreciate you taking the time.

ROSS [01:06:11] Goodies, goodies. (RAU laughs) I got goodies.

RAU [01:06:15] You do, you have many, many goodies. Okay, should we go ahead and wrap? You feeling good?

ROSS [01:06:20] Yeah, I'm feeling good. That water was good.

RAU [01:06:22] Yeah, you need more water? How you feeling?

ROSS [01:06:25] And for the typist, forgive me. (both laugh) That's a lot of typing.

RAU [01:06:31] Yes, it is. Let me make that we're good on this. Okay, it's paused, but [inaudible].