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Dawn: So, today's date is 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2016. My name is Dawn Carl Savage and I'm the Dawn. Can you tell me your name?

Ruby: Yeah, my name is Ruby Almeida.

Dawn: And can I ask you to spell that?

Ruby: R-U-B-Y and Almeida, A-L-M-E-I-D-A. Like the theatre, the Almeida theatre, yeah.

Dawn: And can I ask for your date and place of birth please?

Ruby: Yeah, that's up for debate, my date of birth. I was actually born on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1956, but my passport has the wrong date and I can't change it. So, like the Queen, I've got two birthdays. I was born in a town called Jodhpur. I think more familiarly pronounced as Jodhpur, which is the riding breeches that they come from that town called Jodhpur in the state of Rajasthan which is northeast of India. It's a desert region.

Dawn: And today's interview is being recorded at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church for the Christian Voices Coming Out Project.

So, Ruby, can you tell me a bit about your background, your childhood and where you grew up?

Ruby: Okay, so I was born, as I say, in Jodhpur. My parents are actually from the south of India, two neighbouring states are called Mangalore and Goa. My father was in the Indian Air Force, so family travelled every year. I had three elder brothers and they were all born in different parts of India, as I was, so normally when people ask me which part of India are you from, it's a difficult question because we lived all over India.

So, yes, my father was in the Air Force. We've travelled a lot. Lots of different schools. Lots of sets of friends. But the one thing we had in common was the family. We were always together.

Dawn: And what was your faith/church background or did you have any at that point?

Ruby: Pretty much. I mean, the population of India is massive, it's one billion plus now. Percentage wise I think there's about 3% or 5% Christians and majority of them are Catholics from the south of India. Christianity came at the time of Christ. A disciple came over and established himself in the south. So, most people of whatever faith they are really practise their faith in a very vibrant way and certainly with my parents it was very much that. Go to church every Sunday and going to confession every week and all of that. But yeah, it was very much a part of our lives.

Dawn: And can you tell me about any interests or hobbies or anything you had when you were growing up? Things that really got you excited?

Ruby: My childhood, my youth I suppose is in two phases. The bit which was in India up to the age of ten and a half. So, that bit of my life was very much about trying to keep up with my brothers, three elder brothers. I was the only girl and at some stage boys don't want to play with girls anymore, so I desperately wanted to be respected and loved by my brothers. So, it meant getting into pillow fights with them, climbing trees, all of that stuff, playing football, anything, everything. Just so that I could be one of the boys, if you like. And that was great.

Life was interesting because we just, as I say, we travelled, we always met new people, we learned to adapt, to be flexible, fit in. And then we went away abroad. My father was sent abroad to Egypt for two years, so that was another big change. A new culture, new language to learn, different ways of being. That was exciting.

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And when we came back to India and just when I was at that age when you're forming your own friends separate from family, my father left the Air Force, joined the (inaudible 0:04:18) airlines and got a posting to England. So, that was this big new phase in my life. And I remember saying to my dad I didn't want to come to England because I'd just seen Mary Poppins you see, the movie. I love Julie Andrews, but I thought England was a really backward country, you know, with those big long frocks that the women wore and those big Penny Farthing bicycles and the sun never seemed to shine. And so, I told my dad I didn't really want to go. The real reason I didn't want to go is because I'd made really good friends with someone. She was my best friend. When you're that age, at least for me, whatever my parents said I truly believed. So, when my dad said, "Well, we'll go for six months and if you don't like it, Ruby, we'll go back to India". That was 44 years ago. I'm still in England.

And my father had to go back because he was here on work. But my mum made that momentous decision to stay on, because we'd been to so many schools by then and she said she'd stay on till my brothers certainly finish college and university and I could decide what I wanted to do and then we'd go back. But it never happened.

So, yeah, there are two massive chunks of my life which is India and then here. And here was different. (Laughter)

Dawn: Yeah. Do you have a best memory or...?

Ruby: Of?

Dawn: Well, I guess sort of early childhood or...?

Ruby: Oh, in India?

Dawn: Either or.

Ruby: Oh, I suppose in India it was just... there's a kind of context to what I'm going to say, which is we had a really wonderful childhood, you know, really liberating. We could do all the things we wanted to do but within that was a context that my father was an officer and officers, wives and children are meant to behave. And my mum just revelled in the fact that we were naughty children and we got up to scrapes. She just loved it. All the other Air Force officers would come up to my mum, whose name is Emma, and say, "Emma, your daughter ran off with the milkman's bicycle". And all those things. It was great. It was just, you know, we just had a wonderful childhood. We just got up to mischief, all kinds of nonsense. And I guess we got a lot of energy spent and grew up quickly, I suppose, yeah.

Dawn: Cool. So, if we move on to the next section. And can you tell me how you became involved in representing or campaigning for LGBT issues?

Ruby: I guess it's... I was very, very close to my mother. We were like sisters, I suppose. My mother, it's interesting really, my mother had three elder brothers and she was the only one, the youngest and the only girl and the same happened with me. I had three elder

brothers and the only girl and the youngest. And so, my mother always had a yearning for a female presence in her life, particularly in the Air Force where you travel all the time. So, when I came along and I was much, much desired by both my mum and dad, they always wanted a girl because, you know, one boy after another. So, my mother and I became incredibly close. So, when she died, it was a huge, huge loss for me. I mean, I was devastated by it.

My sexuality, my relationship with my partner, my mum disliked my partner intensely, not because she was a woman but just because she was my partner, you know. There was this kind of sense of loss of my love and my attention that I gave to her wholeheartedly was now being shared or given to someone else.

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So, when my mother died, my parents died seven weeks apart, so that was hugely traumatic. But I was left just in a space in limbo wondering what to do with my life and all the things that I suppose I compartmentalised my faith, my sexuality, my whatever, Indian-ness or whatever. I just needed to figure out how I was going to deal with that because now it was just me. There was no one else.

So, I did the classic, went onto the internet and typed in gay, lesbian, Catholic, Asian, whatever. And all these organisations came up that I knew about, I'd heard of them because I used to work in the community sector and I thought, "Oh yes, I know these organisations". And this name Quest came up, which I hadn't heard of. So, I thought I'd look into it and one thing led to another. I got involved in the organisation. And when I first heard of it, all my friends said to me, "Oh, you should be nervous about organisations like that because they probably just wear Jesus creepers and sit around in a circle saying the Hail Mary or the rosary". And I said, "Well, if that's what it is I'm out of there". You know, you kind of figure out the organisation. There's a lot more to it.

And I got involved as the London women's officer. And you know when you ask lots of questions, particularly as a as a newcomer, people get a bit rattled and they think, "Oh she's asking too many questions, give her some responsibilities". So, they think that will shut you up. They kind of gave me more and more to do and then I ended up just eventually getting on the national committee and then currently I'm chair of the organisation. So, yeah. So, yes, that's how I got involved really.

Dawn: Yeah. So, what kind of work is that?

Ruby: At Quest?

Dawn: Yeah.

Ruby: So, we're in a pastoral support group for LGBT Catholics, friends and families. Coming into our 44<sup>th</sup> year now. So, we have regional groups and then we have the national committee that oversee what the local groups do. So, local groups have their own unique dynamic and characteristics. So, one group may just want to do house masses, while other groups will want to do days of reflection and retreats and other social activities. So, the local groups decide what they want to do. But the national committee have an annual conference and an AGM and hold national retreats. And I guess for many years Quest was this little club of people that, you have to understand, it started in 1976, so like young men who felt very ostracised and victimised by society. And so, when they set up the group, they really wanted to just look after each other and were constantly looking over their shoulders and perhaps weren't very, well, I know they weren't very open and outward looking. And when I joined I thought, "Well, times have changed. We really need to change steer and the mindset that we've got".

So, what we do now is we talk to bishops and cardinals, I say cardinals, it was here and in India, and we've started a dialogue where we're saying for all these years we've been doing all that support work that you haven't done, you haven't been able to do, we've done it for you. So, isn't it about time we started forming better relations and supporting each other? And most importantly help you to do what you should be doing. Oh yeah, we don't put it so crassly but you say, "Hey, we've got all these skills, would you like to do this? And we can show you how to do it".

So, that's great. That's really fulfilling to know that after all those decades of the organisation being treated with slight suspicion, doors are opening. And I think it's mainly thanks to that man in the Vatican, Pope Francis, who's just created that climate. So, it's great news and it's a good time to be a Catholic I think, an LGBT Catholic particularly, yeah.

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Dawn: So, I mean, you must have seen a great change over the last 40 odd years, I guess?

Ruby: Yeah. Well, I think, yes, I think culturally, socially, politically, for sure. Those changes are, particularly in the last few years, have been very dramatic. The church, like any institution, I always compare them to these huge big tankers at sea. In order to change direction, they've got to think about it and think about it and execute it and then it is a very slow kind of turn that happens and it does. And the church is even slower at making those changes.

But I'm amazed and encouraged by how organisations now contacting Quest, seeking our advice on what we should do, and then that's fantastic. Before we'd knock on doors and have them slammed in our face. But now it's good. And I think it's important that it's newer people coming into the organisation who haven't got that history of doors constantly slam in their faces, being criticised and vilified, you know, who would say, "Oh why should we bother?" That's what they would say because they remember the hurt and the anger that's still within them.

So, I've only been with Quest 13 years so I go, and I've said this before, but I go in a bit Pollyanna like, and I say, "Hello, I'm from Quest. How can we work together?" I just don't want to deal with the history because that's in the past. It's the here and now and looking forwards. And I think a lot of people find that very refreshing because they're kind of bracing themselves, the bishops and priests, they're going to get attacked by an LGBT person and rightly. There's a lot of anger there. But I think in order to move on, you have to subsume that to some extent in order to create change. So, that's my job really is to just go in and say, "Come on, let's do something".

Dawn: Well, that leads quite nicely on to this question of what are your hopes for the future regarding our LGBT acceptance?

Ruby: Yeah, there's this thing called normalising. I'm really, really interested in that. It's a very big thing for me, that each one of us incredibly special and unique and there's no one like you in the world and certainly as a political movement, we've focused on I guess something that defines us as being separate to heterosexual society. And the church have been so fixated by sex and genital acts that that's all they ever think about and that's all they ever view a person from the LGBT community. And my take on this is that's just a small part of who I am. You know, there are parts of me that are much bigger that define who I am, you know? Yeah. Okay, you know, I've had relationships with women but I don't do that 24 hours a day. You know, I sleep for longer, I work for longer hours in the 24 hour period. My brain, which is active on social and political

things, you know, those are the things that essentially define me more than being an LGBT person.

So, it's breaking that nonsense down and saying to normalise being an LGBT, to say that we're like everybody else, we bleed, we breathe, we cry, we yearn for things, just like everybody else. And I want that change to happen. How long it takes, I don't know. But that's my line in time, yeah.

Dawn: Yeah. I'm just thinking are there any stories or anything particularly you would like to share for the archive?

Ruby: I've been a lecturer for many years at college and university level. And at university they're young adults, so when it's in context, you can talk about sexuality and representation and all of that. Ecology was always a bit tricky, particularly because of the age factor, and also because those young kids, young adults, were still living at home under the influence of their parents quite rightly and some of them come from very traditional Muslim or Hindu or conservative Christian backgrounds. So, you couldn't talk about those things particularly with them.

So, I was really gratified to be involved with the Stonewall campaign role models and it's just been wonderful going into schools to talk about these issues. And interestingly, what Stonewall have been saying is that it's actually the Catholic groups who are the most engaged, the most eager to work with this because I think for so long their hands were tied and they felt they couldn't do anything and because of the curriculum unit called PHSE, which is about personal health and social education, you can shoehorn in all aspects of life, whether it's to do with sexuality, to do with politics, to do with hygiene or whatever. So, it's wonderful that there are so many schools who are so engaged.

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The last talk I did, I'll just briefly say, I had three set groups, Year 10, Year 9 and Year 6. Year 10 and 9 had exams coming up in religious studies. So, the teacher kind of primed me about what to talk about just to get their minds racing and think. But typical of that age they don't want to talk pastorally and they're looking totally disinterested and don't want to ask any questions. Some of them were brave enough to ask a question. Then I had Year 6 who were just still in their uniforms and bright and fluffy and keen and sweet and asking loads of questions and just totally engaged. And the teacher who had taken the Year 9 and 10 away, she came back and she said, "You know, I've just had a class, a session with them and they remembered everything you said and they're really empowered". And it was great.

And I hope that the young kids, the Year 6s, don't lose that sense of innocence and interest and what was for me the fascinating thing was that a lot of them, I had about 150 students in Year 6. I asked them and I said, "How many of you know an LGBT person, a gay person?" and about 25 hands went up. And I said, "Okay, out of those 25 hands, how many of them are friends of friends?" and eight of them had their hands up. And I said, "What about the rest of you?" And they said, "Oh, they're family". It's like a cousin or an uncle or whatever. And I said, "So, how do they, do you know if they're loved?" They said, "Yeah, they're really loved". I said, "How do you know they're loved?" They said, "Because we tell them we love them". And I thought that was just so lovely. It's so lovely that kids understand instinctively about emotions and about relationships and don't judge you for anything other than being the uncle, the mother, the whatever. And that's great. Wish we could all kind of embrace that into our adult lives.

Dawn: Yeah. Is there anything else just, we have time.

Ruby: We've time. I suppose what is great, I mean, I'm probably going to timeframe this a bit, but I was at the LGCM 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and it's wonderful that Tracy and I are talking about collaborating. And I think it's really important that groups out there who do similar things of different faiths or groups or whatever come together on this issue to try and work together. I mean, 25 years ago when I was working with community projects, it was amazing how everybody knew everybody and was supporting each other. There were directories and support. You know, there was a lot of dialogue going on and it'd be wonderful if the faith groups did that as well. I think it's a common cause and it's great that we're talking. So, I hope other groups do it as well.

Dawn: Yeah, I think they definitely are.

Ruby: Great.

Dawn: Shall we wrap it up there?

Ruby: Yeah.

Dawn: There's nothing I need to say but so thank you very much, Ruby. That's fantastic.

Ruby: Brilliant. Thank you, Dawn. Thank you.

[End of Transcript]