

Transcript of *Know Your Elders*

Part of *Illuminating Matriarchs*

AUDIO DESCRIPTION:

This is a two minute extended audio description introduction to Janis Mayers' 18 minute documentary "Know Your Elders". The film has been extended with black or frozen frames to accommodate descriptions. The film features LeZlie Lee Kam. Her name is spelled with a capital Z in LeZlie. She is a woman of colour who identifies as a world majority, Brown, Trini, Carib-Indigenous, Indo, and Chinese person who is five feet tall with short salt and pepper hair. She also identifies as a Jurassic and bionic dyke and a rainbow elder or senior who looks young for her age. She wears a purple t-shirt with the word 'dyke' in large white letters under a light blue satin pajama blazer that has a blue, red, white, pink, and brown polka dot pattern. LeZlie wears rainbow-coloured bracelets and a rainbow-coloured watch strap. On her right hand she has a gold band on the ring finger and a henna tattoo on the top of her hand. LeZlie is interviewed in her home. The discussion takes place in the living room. LeZlie sits in an armchair in a corner next to a tall reading lamp to her right. Behind her on the wall is the red flag of Trinidad and to its left is a smaller Pride progress flag. On the wall to her right is a small framed black and white illustration of 4 fish lit by a beige cone shaped lamp shade. Peppered throughout the film are quick clips of memorabilia and artefacts from her life which she has on display in her home.

[Humble Beginnings by Ghost Beats plays]

AD: Daytime, The front porch of a brick building . The porch has a pastel purple wall on it's left side and a wrought iron railing in a matching colour along its front. The wall is decorated with hangings: smiling suns in copper and red other hanging ornaments. An empty plant pot, and a small purple table holding a plastic bin are underneath it. To the right of the home's front door is a green plastic lawn chair and side table. In a window above them, is a poster that reads "Pride is good for your health" below which is a white heart shape with a rainbow border. Wearing a turquoise jacket against the cold LeZlie walks out of her house cane in hand.

[The song fades out]

Janis: In Toronto on an ordinary street, there is a modest home with an extraordinarily colourful front porch. Surely a creative mind resides here, perhaps a humble superhero. Perhaps both. A person who has paved roads for future generations to move forward. She's always on the go. I was lucky enough to sit down with LeZlie and have some ginger beer and ask questions, reflecting on 47 years of activism on the streets of Toronto and beyond.

AD: Leslie pictured from the waist up sits in an orange armchair in her living room.

LeZlie: So, my name is LeZlie Lee Kam. I am a world majority, Carib-Indigenous, Brown, Trini, Indo-Chinese, differently-abled, rainbow senior, dyke. And this is why this is here. This is Robin, one of my trusty mobility devices.

AD: Leslie's hands fold over the soft handle of her metal cane which is covered in a colourful flower design.

Janis: I've done some extensive research on your activism in Toronto. Um, thinking about everything like from, say, from the eighties, uh, 'cause I heard you did a... you had a hotline, phone line type of thing.

LeZlie: That was in the seventies

Janis: Uh, I'm sorry I didn't get into the— [LeZlie laughs] But yeah, you—

LeZlie: it's been 47 years

Janis: You've been bringing together a community, uh, for decades, decades—

LeZlie: yes

Janis: Out of everything, um, what would you say would be your greatest accomplishments? Things that you're most proud of, that shine above the rest?

LeZlie: Um, well the first one, apart from working at LOOT, the Lesbian Organization of Toronto, that was 1976, um, was putting dykes, lesbians, trans women of colour into the Toronto Pride Parade.

AD: A quick shot of a colourful photo of a parade float emblazoned with a sign that says: "Stop Police Racism" and "End the Criminalization of Peoples of Colour". Beside this lie a cluster of buttons with slogans like Lucky Little Queer and Proud Dyke as a handwritten one that says leZlie agitator

LeZlie: And we were world majority lesbians and that was in 1993, right through to 1999.

AD: A young LeZlie beams crouching beside the Stop Police racism sign.

LeZlie: That was one of the first of my accomplishments. The next one was starting an intergenerational social event for rainbow seniors. So that's a term that I'm using now because there was nothing. And when I started getting older, I realized we are not working from an intergenerational perspective in our many communities. And I started doing that with Vanessa Dunn and that was back in 2014. So the accomplishment coming out of that was once I joined the board of Pride Toronto for the first time, Pride Toronto did an official event honouring and celebrating the lives and accomplishments of rainbow seniors in 2022 – took that long. And my third accomplishment that's noteworthy for me is that I am now training all of the staff in the City of Toronto's 10 long-term care homes. And they are mandated to be rainbow inclusive.

Janis: Considering all of the challenges that you've faced with, with transitioning to having to use a cane and several health challenges that you've successfully kicked in the ass, [LeZlie laughs] What do you think gives you the strength to overcome things like that?

LeZlie: So, apart from being a Jurassic dyke and a bionic dyke, [LeZlie laughs] what gives me the, what did it, what was it?

Janis: What gives you the strength—

LeZlie: The strength—

Janis: to have overcome these—

LeZlie: Um—

Janis: these things

LeZlie: Mmm Mmm! I don't know if it's strength. It's more like, uh, perseverance.

Janis: Mm-hmm

LeZlie: And, uh, my one and only tattoo that says "Fierce". I dunno if you can see that.

AD: The inside of LeZlie's right forearm with a tattoo of two female gender symbols framing the word.

LeZlie: So my little mantra is "Fierce, Tenacious and Persistent". That's what keeps me going. Yep.

AD: A lanyard with tag of a hand painted rainbow over her mantra

LeZlie: Yep

Janis: And currently, do you, um, are you involved with the Seniors' Pride Network or is it something different?

LeZlie: No, I'm involved with the senior Pride Network, Toronto

Janis: Uhhuh

LeZlie: I was involved with the Ontario senior Pride Network, which we formed when Covid was at its height because what people didn't realize was that rainbow seniors in long-term care homes and retirement homes had absolutely no visitors. 4,000 plus seniors died during the height of Covid. How many of those were rainbow seniors? And the reason why we had no visitors and no outside contact was because chosen family was not recognised as essential caregivers. So the Ontario Senior Pride Network was formed and we made a submission to the Long-Term Care Commission that was investigating the deaths of all those seniors. So we changed the Ministry of Health wording. Now they include chosen family as essential caregivers, yeah. So all the work I do is to make things easier for younger folks so they don't have to go through what we are going through still.

Janis: Mm-hmm

LeZlie: The constant fight

Janis: Mm-hmm

LeZlie: And the other piece of work that I'm doing is with the Youth Elders Project at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

AD: A square photo of a low brick building then a black and white promotional photo of LeZlie and two others smiling

LeZlie: All my work is intergenerational and intersectional and I've been working like that before those words even came into being.

Janis: Mm-hm

LeZlie: Yeah

AD: LeZlie nods with her hands resting on her cane handle in front of her. Just to her left is a small table with a cordless phone and books and another with a shiny gold plastic crown

Janis: Your role at Pride I see your crown next to you

[LeZlie laughs]

LeZlie: So the, the crow–

Janis: Tell us that story

LeZlie: Okay The Crown is a different story. The story about the Crown was in, uh, 2020 just when COVID was happening, Taylor Mac, I dunno if you've heard of Taylor Mac. Drag queen extraordinaire from New York. Decided to honour rainbow senior activists internationally. So they reached out to all the different countries and I was nominated by Buddies through the Youth Elders program, and I was the only person nominated from Canada. So a crown was sent to me to recognise the work that I do and Buddies put on a show

[LeZlie laughs]

AD: Leslie on stage with 6 others stand around a large table with their backs to it

LeZlie: Highlighting my accomplishments. So I can say, you know, with full assurance that I am the queen of rainbow seniors in Canada. That's why I have my crown. Would you like me to put it on and show it to you?

Janis: Absolutely, absolutely. Do you mind if I get a close up of that?

[LeZlie laughs]

[La La by Lunoreh starts playing]

AD: LeZlie puts on the crown. It is decorated with large rhinestones, sequined flowers, ribbon and glitter paper. She laughs and smiles as she models it for the camera and then sets it beside her.

[Song begins to fade away]

LeZlie: But the Youth Elders program is really important to me. Not only because it's intergenerational and intersectional,

AD: LeZlie in a black and white promotional photo of LeZlie with two others smiling

LeZlie: We are also now taking queer and trans youth to meet rainbow seniors where they gather instead of asking rainbow seniors to come to us. And the other big thing that I have done along with, and I don't do this work by myself, I always work with, you know, different folks. So when we started off doing Time After Time, the intergenerational rainbow seniors event, um, Vanessa and I realised that since we were honouring rainbow seniors, it made sense to approach a long-term care home

Janis: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: So we went to ReKai, and ReKai is the only long-term care home in the world

AD: A news article flashes up with a senior giving the peace sign draped in a rainbow flag under the headline “Long Term care home unveils “Rainbow Wing” for LGBTQ2 residents in Toronto.”

LeZlie: that's completely rainbow inclusive

Janis: Is that in Toronto, or—

LeZlie: It's Toronto, Wellesley and Sherbourne. There are two locations—

Janis: Mm-Hmm

AD: A news article photo of an open rainbow painted door

LeZlie: And there's a 25-bed-wing and there's an 800 person waiting list. So since 2017 we've been having the event at Re kai.

Janis: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: And again, rainbow seniors come from the city's 10 long-term care homes and from all the other rainbow senior programs in the GTA to attend this event. And in this year, 2023, we had 450 plus people attend that event. So it's getting bigger and bigger

Janice: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: So it's now a signature Pride Toronto event. And it's... apart from that one, the only other rainbow senior event that's happening in Toronto during Pride is the one that we do at Buddies through the Youth Elders program.

Janis: Mm-Hmm. Now, I'm wondering if you could speak to, um, a decade where you felt safe or a decade where you felt like you, the changes you were fighting for were, were creating headway.

LeZlie: Um, a decade. Hmm That's a good question. I wouldn't say there was ever a decade. I would say maybe a couple of years, maybe during the mid nineties. Yeah I, I would say given my lived experience, that's the only really positive period of time that I can remember.

Janice: Mmm, Mmm

LeZlie: Otherwise, it's always been a struggle, uh, for me when you ask, you know, how do I keep going? And what, what, what have I had to deal with?

Janis: Yeah

LeZlie: From the first time I, when I went to the Lesbian Organization of Toronto was racism

Janis: Hm

LeZlie: And I thought, you know, and still we think within our many communities, these isms don't happen. They're worse as far as I'm concerned, they are worse. And I find myself, even before Covid happened, I find myself saying to people, we need to be kind to each other because the world is not kind to us. Therefore, we have to make a thousand percent more effort to be kind to each other. And unfortunately, I don't see that happening, but I'm an optimist, so there's always hope.

AD: Artwork on LeZlie's fridge door. One painted postcard reads "World Majority Lesbians, A revolution of Colour" and the other is embroidered cloth "The world needs your magic"

Janis: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: So I carve out little chunks of where I live in the world and where I live in these various communities. And that's what I expect from people.

Janice: Mmm-mm

LeZlie: Because if you want to be treated with kindness, caring, and compassion and respect, you need to be doing the same things. And I hope that I'm doing that by my example of how I'm living my life.

Janice: Mmm-mm

AD: A needlepoint embroidery of a rainbow triangle and the slogan "This is a safe space" Re kai

LeZlie: You know, if you have nothing good to say, say nothing. I should go back where I came from. Aren't you too old to be a lesbian? Do you have to flaunt all your rainbow paraphernalia to the world? Do you actually have a job? Do you know it's my taxpayer's dollars that are supporting you?

Janis: Jesus

LeZlie: Yeah

AD: In this next section LeZlie lays photographs down on her kitchen table as she recounts the moments captured. She stands next to the table and wears a medical mask as she speaks

LeZlie: So this was the only time there was a big, that dykes and lesbians of colour had a big truck in the Pride parade

Janis: What year was that?

LeZlie: 1999

Janis: Whaaaaat? [Clicks tongue twice]

LeZlie: Yep. And now there are no more big trucks in the parade 'cause we've gone green. Uh, this was 1999.

Janis: Okay

LeZlie: And at that time, uh, there was, um, a high rate of crime on the TTC.

Janis: Mmmm

LeZlie: So the TTC and the police had this, uh, ad campaign to stop crime on the TTC and they used two Latino men. And that is what started this. So we decided, well, everything we did was political. We didn't, as you can see our sign here. Any time we were in the parade, we, it was a political statement for us.

Janis: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: So we came up with this: end the criminalization of people of colour.

Janis: Mm-Hmm

LeZlie: And stop police racism. And we put these up on the truck

AD: The colourful photos of the parade float are shown again. A second photo reveals that the float vehicle is a tow truck

LeZlie: And, uh, two white cops came and said, take the sign down [Janis sighs] And we said, no. And then they said to the truck driver, J&P Towing 'cause you could just see the J&P.

Janis: Ah yeah yeah

LeZlie: They, you have, uh, a contract with us, so you're gonna be penalised [Janis draws in breath] And the truck driver said, there's nothing I can do. These lesbians rented me and the truck for the day. [Janice laughs] And then those white cops went away and two white women in pants suits came along and they said, oh, we are here to protect you. We are undercover police, so can you take the sign down? And we said, no, and they, they went like this...

AD: LeZlie slides back the hem of her blazer

LeZlie: They just pulled their jackets back and they had their hands on their guns and they said it would be in your best interest to take those signs down. And we said no, and they complained to Pride and Pride came over and asked us and we said no. And we went out just like that and the crowd went wild, yeah

Janis: Jesus!

AD: Photos of young smiling LeZlie, in a bikini top in front of a fountain and wearing a collared shirt, vest and dress pants perched on a bicycle

LeZlie: Yeah that's, this is, I'm very proud of doing that, making that happen.

AD: A photo of a performer dressed as a giant vagina in sunglasses. LeZlie speaks from her armchair

[Humble Beginnings by Ghost Beats plays in and fades out]

LeZlie: Ok, so in terms of moving forward and change for the future, this is working very closely here in Toronto and other small Prides across Canada that are two-spirit. So personally, I'm engaging more now and also through Pride Toronto, we are engaging more and, uh, taking direction from, in the spirit of truth and reconciliation from two-spirit folks in terms of what they want us to do and how they want us to support them. Continuing the youth elder way of working because if we don't work together, we are not gonna get anywhere. We must support each other. And in terms of celebrating diversity and inclusion is, uh, learning from each other. And I know I've mentioned supporting each other already, but I'm still hearing older, [laughs] well, rainbow seniors saying, "oh, you don't know how easy you young folks have it". Well, I work and I have friends who are a lot younger than me. 40 and, you know, years younger than I am. It's a lot easier to come out

[Cape Town by In This World starts to fade up]

It's a lot more difficult to survive. So really and truly, those of us who are rainbow seniors, yes we are struggling. I'm one of those, I'm living on the brink of poverty and still we must, we must. It is our obligation and our responsibility to support younger queer and trans and two-spirit folks who are coming out and support them in different ways by helping them to have conversations, to learn about history. And also to let them know that they can also change the course of history in terms of what it is going to be like and what it could be like to be queer, trans, two-spirit moving forward. And I always like to end by saying, if you are lucky one day, you too will be a rainbow senior.

AD: Credits roll. As they roll footage is shown at the top right of a stack of old photos and LeZlie's hands passing over them as she puts away items from the kitchen table. The top photo on the stack is a black and white picture of her in a dress at about 3 years old.

LeZlie: I use these pictures when I work with folks in long term. And so there's a lot of, um, physical stuff happening in long term care homes where straight seniors are attacking, ike physically attacking rainbow seniors

Janis: Oh wow, Jesus Christ

LeZlie: Yeah. So they asked me to come in and do something at one of the homes. So I did this, uh, PowerPoint where from different ages to show that I'm a human being

Janis: Mm-Hmm.... Oh, so.... love photos!

AD: She lays out a childhood, baby, and graduation photo.

LeZlie: This is when I was a fag

[Everybody laughs together]

AD: She puts out an adult family picture and others where her gender expression is more masculine in pants or more feminine in a skirt.

Credits:

"Know your Elders"

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Thank you Common Boots Theatre

Digital Cycle 2

Audio Description provided by Superior Description Services. Written and voiced by Rebecca Singh with consultation by Vivian Chong and input by Janis Mayers Audio Engineering by Cecilio Escobar.

Commissioned by Common Boots Theatre

CBcommons is made possible through support from TD Ready Commitment. Common Boots Theatre receives operating funding from Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Toronto Arts Council.