Interview with Jason Jones, by Dexter Peters

Author's profile: Dexter Peters is an English language teacher in France. In 2024, he obtained a Ph.D in History and Civilizations of the English-speaking world from the University Paris Cité, under the direction of Professor Florence Binard, a specialist in British civilization. His thesis entitled "Experiences of gay and bisexual men in Trinidad and Tobago between 2009 and 2020" explored the challenges facing not only same-sex persons but also other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Interviewee profile: Jason Jones is both a citizen of the UK and Trinidad and Tobago. He has been a pro-gay activist and human rights defender for over 30 years. In the UK, he participated in the anti-Section 28 marches of 1988 and was also a member of the Stonewall Immigration Group. In the Caribbean region, he was the cofounder of the first LGBTQ+ advocacy organization in the Southern Caribbean "The Lambda group" and was the founder of "I Am One" in Trinidad in 2012. His most recent achievement was the 2018-landmark win, which allowed for adult consensual same-sex intimacy to be decriminalized under law. Thus, Jones became an icon for LGBTQ+ progress not only in Trinidad and Tobago but other countries of the English-speaking Caribbean who have decided to address these same laws.

Interview Context

In postcolonial Trinidad and Tobago, remnants of British colonialism remain embedded within the country's judicial system. This is largely due to the savings-laws clause in the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, which protects and perpetuates inherited colonial laws. One of these laws include the Buggery Act, which criminalizes homosexuality. It was Jason Jones who decided to oppose these laws by filing a lawsuit in March 2017 against the GORTT. Jones' civil litigation was heard before the country's High Court judge, Devindra Rampersad, on 12 April 2018. After hearing the arguments from Jones' legal team, the Court's judge esteemed that condemning consensual acts between consenting same-sex adults was unconstitutional. However, after this 2018 historic victory, the State appealed the Court's decision. The Court of Appeal was to render its verdict in 2019 but with the Covid-19 epidemic, this decision was delayed. It was on 25 October 2023 that the Court of Appeal disclosed its verdict on the State's appeal, but its decision was reserved. Thus, the Court still had to deliberate and a final decision on the appeal on 29

November 2024 was to be made public. Unfortunately, the decision was postponed, and the verdict is still pending. Regardless of the outcome, Jones or the GORTT will appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (JCPC) to make a final decision. This is despite the Caribbean region possessing its own final Court of Appeal of the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). There is therefore, a continued dependency on the inherited and historical British judicial arm, as well as an underlying distrust of regional independent judiciary. To better understand some of the experiences and challenges confronting the LGBTQ+ community in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the pre- and post-steps to Jones' 2018 litigation, an interview with the pro-gay activist was carried out.

The interview was conducted at Kettner's House, Soho, London, on 21 October 2019.

DP: So, first and foremost Mr. Jones, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

JJ: Well, I was born in Trinidad in 1964 and I'm the son of Mervyn Tomford who was the first television announcer at Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) and Monica Jones who was a British journalist and came to Trinidad and worked at TTT as well. I grew up in Woodbrook, Port of Spain, went to Newtown Boys' RC school and passed with a scholarship for Fatima College, which is one of the prestige schools in Trinidad. I didn't have a glittering academic career and I was more involved in the arts. So, I sang at music festivals, and I sang with many choirs. I was a soloist at the choir of St. Patrick's church in Newtown and the Agapé group and *La Petite musicale*. I was quite well-known as a singer. After leaving college, I then joined the tent theatre which was one of the only regular theatre companies that did training and employment in the Caribbean. And I was with them for three years and toured the world performing mostly locally written theatre pieces based on Carnival theatre, which was a type of theatre mainly developed by Henry Kamps and after that, finally, I got a bit of an island fever and I took off to London in 1985. And I have been mostly based out in London for the last 30 years although I do take trips back home probably every ten years to spend a couple of years and to get back in touch with my roots.

DP: So, how was it like growing up as a kid in Trinidad and Tobago?

JJ: Well, I think, for people hearing how I grew up, it may seem quite unusual but for me it's just how our life was. We grew up in a very privileged environment because of my father's fame being on television and my mother being a journalist, knew a lot of people of importance. We were always surrounded by black people who were incredibly powerful. My father was one of the main public relations

people who worked with the Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams. My mother used to be involved very heavily with journalism. She was in contact with well-known people on the island. Any given day, you could find her with the Mighty Sparrow, Calypso Rose, Derek Walcott, Peter Minshall. So, I guess that would seem unusual for other people, but for me it's just what I knew, that upbringing and being surrounded by such empowered people. C.L.R. James is a very close friend of my stepfather. Having those people around me, shaping me, definitely had a huge impact on how I viewed myself as a person of colour in the world.

DP: When did you discover that you were gay? And how was your coming out experience?

JJ: Well, I didn't have the classic coming out experience, because I was quite an effeminate child and I was involved in the arts, singing, dancing and theatre, from a very young age. I pretty much was outed by my parents. When I was faced with quite serious bullying at home and on the playgrounds, when I was about 14, my parents sat me down and explained to me what was going on. My mother was also very close friends with very well-known gay men on the island, Wayne Mark, Peter Minshall, Geoffrey MacLean.[1] These were fairly openly gay men and very close to my family. I had a way of finding my own faith by having these people playing a part in my upbringing. I never had the big classic coming out, I was outed.

DP: You said you were outed. So, what were the reactions? And could you explain outed?

JJ: Well, my parents explained what homosexuality was and that I was a homosexual and it was quite obvious what the problem was, and that was the issue for everybody. What you have to remember is that in Trinidad, in the 70s, we were a very young democracy and we have been independent for just over a decade. Things like homosexuality were way down on the list of priorities for Human rights, particularly coming out from the Black Power movement that happened in the 1970s. The access to what that meant was very rare and I was very lucky that I had access to information and support and parents very supportive of me. They had no problem with the fact that I was homosexual but of course the wider society did, and I faced a lot of persecution from my brother and kids at school. It was more a state of other people having a problem than I did. I never thought that it was a problem, my parents never thought it was a problem and the people that mattered to me didn't think it was a problem. So, I'm very lucky that I didn't have an internalized homophobia to deal with. I always felt like probably that's who I was.

DP: And could you just reiterate on the point you made with 'persecuted' by other people? Could you specify in detail?

JJ: The schools I went too were all Catholic boys' schools and those environments were where you had adolescent hormones flying everywhere and I kind of became the poster boy for bullying. It was almost a rite of passage to have me fight as a homosexual. So, I was quite targeted for serious physical abuse and luckily, I was very tall and was able to fight back. And I know a lot of people who were not as fortunate and probably suffered a greater deal than I did.

DP: I also wanted to know, did you have what some people call a "mother" in the gay milieu or someone who looked out for you since you came out as gay? Did you learn anything from this person? I know we use this term 'mother' a lot in the Caribbean.

JJ: I think you've seen it in the recent American TV Series, *Pose,* where you had mother of the houses. That is not specific to a Caribbean experience, but I think it is very specific to Queer Trans people of colour. We do identify in our groupings, somebody, that takes this leadership role and we do imbue them with feminine motherly characteristics. For me growing up, that would have been, Raymond Choo Kong,[2] who unfortunately was murdered earlier this year. When I joined the Tent theatre, Raymond was just probably starting off as becoming a well-respected actor and at the time, Tent theatre was mainly younger people. I was one of the youngest and Raymond was the eldest member. So, Raymond being fairly openly gay at a certain age, he definitely was the mother of Tent theatre and our relationship had lasted my entire life until sadly he was murdered in his home a couple of months ago and this was quite devastating for me as he was such an important person in my life.

DP: So, we learned that you were very involved in theatre and that Raymond Choo Kong was one of your role models. I wanted to know, how did you get involved in pro-gay advocacy as an adolescent? How did you transition into it?

JJ: Being openly gay in Trinidad meant that that was an act of deviance by itself. And at the time, at the beginning of the 80s, there were very few of us who were openly gay in the public scene. Just walking in the street was an act of deviance and for me I think that was part of what led to my activism and of course my stepfather is Rex Lassalle.[3] My family was surrounded by people who were in their own ways very instrumental in raising the profile of black people around the world. C.L.R. James, I spent a couple of weeks with Simone. These people had a positive impact on my identity; and however I feel, as having the right to be a human being. All of that came together at the point of me bringing this challenge three years ago. I think it would have never happened, had not all of these things come together in one human being. Whenever I speak about other people, I'm definitely a product of a village: some very proud black men and women.

DP: And how was your experience working with Nina Simone? I know she is a feminist, and she fights for human rights and equality. So, how was it working with her?

JJ: Well, it wasn't work, Nina was staying by my theatre director, Helen Camps,[4] and at the time Nina was out of work and at home, she was at one of her lowest points. She was an alcoholic and had a drug habit. She was in a dysfunctional relationship with a woman who was her manager at the time. So, Nina was at one of the lowest points of her life and I probably thought that she was bipolar and all of these things came together to that point where she was homeless and living at my theatre director's home. She was lashing out a lot and for some reason we started to form this friendship and I started taking her out for drives around the island. We would sit on the beach just chatting about anything and the amazing thing with Nina, of course, is her vast history and particularly, her connection with Civil Rights movements. So, the fact that my mother at the time was married to Rex Lassalle and Rex was living in our home, at the age of 14, I got fascinated by his history and I was fascinated by her history and we had a lot of things in common. I think there was a great sense of mentorship for her when she was dealing with me. I do remember very vividly her telling me, "to get off this rock […]," "[…] to go out and see the world." I know for a lot of people, you shouldn't refer to your home country as a rock or you shouldn't refer to the big world as being better than your home, but what people don't realize, is that Nina came from a very small town herself. And by her leaving that small thing and going into a bigger city in the United States, that was where she found her way. So, there is an important parallel between the two of us. Her leaving a small town, me leaving my small island and that journey and seeking a way in that world which is not very supportive of people of colour and queer people. All of that is something that we shared in parallel and looking back on the time I had with Nina and the things that stood out for me. Definitely, she imbued a sense of courage, to go out and seek my way in the world and also the idea of what is comfortable, what is your safe surroundings, if you allow that to dominate you, then you kind of don't grow. For me it was a very important relationship with Nina.

DP: Could you tell us about your role in the LGBTI community both in Trinidad and Tobago and abroad in the UK?

JJ: I have to separate the two since they are both quite convoluted and a lot had happened. The first part of the thread was when I came to London in 1985. There was a very vibrant gay scene here, East London being a gay centre. There were clubs and I don't mean like night clubs, I mean there was a tennis club, there was a badminton club, a running club, swimming clubs. There was a much stronger sense of community and community things that you can do, that didn't surround alcohol or sex. For me, coming from Trinidad into this environment where I can go and play badminton and where I could go to swim on a Sunday was

a huge revelation and then in 1988, the Conservative Party passed Section 28. Section 28 was a law that prohibited the promotion of homosexuality. What that meant is that public funding and public resources could not be used in any way to promote homosexuality. Books could not be put into schools and could not be put in libraries. All the funding to a lot of these organizations was shut down. We have this complete break from having a thriving community to a complete negative shut down. And this time was the height of the AIDS epidemic, so we had thousands of thousands of gay men dying and the Conservative Party's response to that was also very dark and it created a very underground atmosphere for the next five to ten years. At that point, I returned home to Trinidad. I went for a holiday and I just thought I needed to reconnect with Trinidad and that was in 1992 and I stayed long. After being there for about six months, I got involved with what would be the first ever LGBTI organization in the Southern Caribbean called LANDA. Raymond Choo Kong, he had a theatre in Port of Spain called the Space Theatre, Victoria Street. He had a theatre space and downstairs was a bar. It was an official space and on Saturdays, we started meeting there to start this organization. I was on the board of founding members of that LGBT organization, the first in the Southern Caribbean.

DP: Today, you're currently residing in the UK, would you consider this as a form of voluntary or forced exile? Why?

JJ: I think it's a bit of both. As I tell people, it's very difficult to try to pigeonhole me because I'm half English, even though it's not my born right, but I have a right to be here from my mother. This is my mother's country, so I have a right to be here. You can't really classify me as an immigrant or as an exiled, but at the same time there is a safety and a support that I have here that I don't have in Trinidad because of the violence in Trinidad and the fact that there is no security or support from government security forces. When I reported the death threats to the police, they took the report, but nothing was done. And, in terms of a social safety net for me, that does not exist in Trinidad. Trinidad is a very small place and it depends on the family unit and the family unit is everything and if you lose that net of the family, you're pretty much an outsider and things can become very difficult. You can become very isolated. I don't think Trinidadians have a concept of how difficult isolation can be. But at least in London, I have a safety net which is the social services managed by the government. There is not that in Trinidad. I'm in that point of my life where I have to choose a place where I'm protected, and for me right now, the UK is that.

DP: You spoke about the safety net in terms of social services and institutions put in place to protect LGBTI individuals, what about your family as a safety net? Does that exist?

JJ: My family pretty much ex-communicated me for the last 20 years. I have lost contact pretty much with all of them. I think having

somebody as openly gay as I am, is publicly quite a defiant thing and unfortunately the way Trinidadians think is if you align yourself with my fight then it does put you in the crosshairs of the crazy people. The double-edged sword for me is that I have been ex-communicated by my family. I have no contact with them, but that also gave me the freedom to embrace the challenge because I knew I would be in danger and I also knew that I wouldn't be putting anyone else in danger. It's a double-edged sword. If I had the love of my family, I would have never done the case. I would never put someone through what I've been through.

DP: And when you speak about your family, what sort of remarks you had to bear witness to since the lawsuit? What were the norms within your family that made them want to exclude you and made you want to go away from them?

JJ: They made me homeless. I did the first ever public drag performance in a theatre space in 1992. This was the first time that drag was ever treated as a form of theatre. It was a full show, it was two hours long. It was at Raymond's theatre space in Victoria Avenue. Unfortunately, a journalist was there undercover and the following week, I was at the front page of the press and it was quite a traumatic time. I was on the front page with the headline stating, 'Homo hosts concert,' something like that. When those newspapers hit the stands that Thursday morning, within two hours, my family gathered and said I was bringing shame to the family name and I had to leave the house. I was made homeless after that. Things never recovered after that and what we have to remember is that because my father was a well-known person, they didn't use my name in the article but it stated, son of some famous television announcer. People put two and two together and I had no shame, and I didn't care. What was the big deal? But for them it was a big deal. So, our relationship never recovered after that and it went further downhill, the more public I became in my activism. Now there is no relationship whatsoever. A couple of my nieces and nephews who are now entering into their early twenties, have reached out, they are interested. The younger generation don't have the issues that people of my generation have anymore. They are moving forward. For them it's a great sense of pride of what I have achieved, they understand that it's not just about what you do in your bedroom, but it's your right to justice and what your constitution stands for. I know that for me, I've lost that family forever, but when you do what I do, the sacrifices are part of the job and if you're not willing to make those kinds of sacrifices then you can't make these achievements. That's part of it, part of the deal and you have to go into it knowing that.

DP: You spoke about being cast aside, isolated by your family and society. But how were you able to cope with all of this and what happened during this transitionary period?

JJ: Again, that is why I live in the UK. Here, there are safety nets, so when I was made homeless, I got on a plane and moved here. The UK looks after people. So, if you have been ostracized by your family because you're a homosexual, there are services to help you. I have been looked after by the state, and I'm hugely grateful to have that, which is again why I do a lot of work around asylum cases for LGBTI people. I am the Caribbean expert for asylum cases for LGBTI persons in the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. It is because I know first-hand, what it is to be ostracized from your family and society at large. When we talk about LGBT advocacy in the Caribbean, unfortunately, it's a very split thing. You have the main advocacy groups which are managed by tertiary educated middle-aged cis-gender black men and these men have very safe lives. They are cisgender because they do not standout in society. They are from the leading class, African, tertiary educated or have a degree which puts them into a safer space. They have been running advocacy in the region for over a decade and nothing has been happening. This is why I brought the case because I was fed up with this glacial pace these guys were moving at. And the fact that they were gate keeping what was happening. They made a decision that they were not going to engage with law reform. I said, "you can make that decision, but I don't have to because I'm a citizen." That is why I brought the case and they have fought me tooth and nail, and they continue to fight me now even after my victory.

DP: Before you said you deal with asylum seekers, not only from Trinidad but other countries in the Caribbean.

JJ: It's mainly Trinidad and Tobago but sometimes other lawyers would reach out to me. It can be anything but it's mainly Trinidad and Tobago that I'm the expert on.

DP: So, how many asylum seekers today have you had to deal with?

JJ: I wouldn't say. I wouldn't give numbers based on the circumstances of each case. They are hugely different. They go from people who are transgender to just a young man who finds himself homeless because his family found gay porn on his computer. What people need to understand are the requirements for asylum. The Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) doesn't support asylum cases. So, a lot of those people who are looking for in-country reports come to me. CAISO refuses to do it. The head of CAISO says to people who are going to seek asylum to stay here and fight. You don't tell people what to do with their lives. He could stay there and fight because he is a cisgender tertiary educated middle-aged man who lives in a nice and middle-class suburbs area in his mother's house. He has no right to tell people to stay and fight. The experience of each person is totally different. The experience in Laventille cannot be compared to a red gay man in Westmoorings.

Two entirely different experiences in Trinidad. That's what people need to understand. You have to take each case-by-case situation. There is no one side for cases when it comes to asylum. You must look at each case individually.

DP: So, the asylum cases are mainly from which group of the LGBTI community?

JJ: Mainly gay men and transgender women. These are the two main bulks that we see coming out of Trinidad and they will escape to anywhere in the world.

DP: And what are their preferences in terms of countries to reside in when they seek asylum? Is it a choice?

JJ: It's not a choice. The escape routes, I won't comment on them. I've made it clear to everybody that I don't want to know that process. It then takes away my power to support asylum cases. I don't know what the escape routes are, but obviously there is a desire to stay in countries where English is the first language. I do know there has been quite a lot going to European countries, but the language issue is the big issue. But I think when you're that desperate, you'll go anywhere that will take you.

DP: Do you think that some people try to take advantage of this asylum system?

JJ: Of course, that is true of every system. It's unfortunate that people would look at those who take advantage of the system and think that the system is broken. The system isn't broken. Every system has people taking advantage of it whether it be banking or parking in the streets, somebody is going to try their way forward without going through the proper channels. That has nothing to do with this. What we have to understand, the reason why people are escaping these countries are because of laws which were created hundreds of years ago. These laws weren't created by us they were created by Europeans and the churches.

DP: Don't you think it's a bit ironic that asylum seekers seek European countries knowing that the laws were created by the Europeans themselves?

JJ: It's not even ironic. It's really quite offensive that Britain has done so little in the last decade regarding this situation. I mean up to this point, Britain has done nothing to support my case. Absolutely nothing. I have no interest in defending how we treat this situation in Europe. I think the EU and the Commonwealth, and Britain, need to get together on this. We have not found the right mechanism to do it yet because this is an argument about sovereignty and the division of the global north and the global south, and issues of race come into it as

well. It's a discussion I think is going horribly wrong because the people who are at the bargaining tables are the wrong people. You can't have LGBTI advocacy being constantly led by white people and then those white people telling black people, what you are doing is wrong. There is too much of a history of race imbued into these conversations. You have to have people of colour making those decisions. Somebody like me from Trinidad leading those conversations, but those people won't let me in at the bargaining table because there is too much money involved.

DP: Coming back to the asylum cases, who treats those cases? Is it at the local, regional or international level?

JJ: Once you leave the jurisdiction of your own country it becomes the jurisdiction of the country you're claiming asylum. Trinidad has no idea what's going on. Trinidad does not even know who is in Syria.

DP: Who is the appeal made to for asylum seekers?

JJ: Well, it all depends on the jurisdiction that you claim. So, if it's in Germany, the whole thing happens in Germany. If it's in the UK the whole thing happens in the UK. It has no bearing on the home country whatsoever.

DP: In 2017, you launched a lawsuit against the state of Trinidad and Tobago because of its current buggery laws, which continue to condemn Trinbagonian homosexuals. I would like to know, how was your court room experience like? Who was allowed into the court hearing?

JJ: It was very good actually. The first case matter happened very quickly after I filed the case. That happened a month after I filed the case. Justice Rampersad showed himself to be very humane in his dealings with me and very kind and very aware of how difficult the situation was. So, he was very supportive of how I was dealt with at the court and my access there, and how I was treated by the court. There was no sense of me being a criminal and at that point I was. I was holding my hand up and saying that I was a criminal. In my affidavit, I spoke about having relationships with men, about my diplomatic life and all of those things, actually somebody could have walked in and say, "right your nicked." As you know, it's an offence of 25 years in prison. In a different scenario, I would have been arrested for admitting a crime. So, that I think is what people don't understand of how powerful a moment that was. This was somebody walking into High Court, admitting a crime and saying that I want you to change the law that makes it a criminal offence. It's a big moment for the law. It's a big moment for the constitution and for the democracy. It was also a public gathering, and anyone could have walked in.

DP: Were you optimistic about acquiring a positive outcome at the April 2018 hearing? Why?

JJ: I knew I was going to win. I wouldn't have done it if I had an ounce of doubt that I was not going to win, but I knew I was going to win. I'm not a lawyer, but I'm educated enough to understand the strategy of my legal team. When the legal team came to me with the strategy, I knew this was a winner. I knew that no way it was going to lose. The great thing about Trinidad and Tobago is that our judiciary is very independent, and they would not be dissuaded by politicians, political and societal beliefs. I also knew we were at a point in history where this was something that could happen in Trinidad. That a judge could see this as being a modern moment to reform not just the Constitution, but how society views a minority community.

DP: The lawsuit has also been faced with a lot of criticisms from religious groups as seen in multiple publications of many of the popular print media and TV channels in the twin-island state. Could you share with us some of the arguments brought against you by various leaders and how did you react to them?

JJ: I think the arguments about religion are very obvious. It's always about a certain part of the Bible, which people like to quote. For me, it was very clear moving forward and I have to give Judge Rampersad credit because the first thing he said in court is that he was in his private life, a Hindu and a Hindu pundit, and a practicing Hindu priest. He made it very clear that if I felt that he was not going to be impartial, I could have him removed and he held his hand up and said you know, I have these beliefs outside of the Court Room, but in the Court Room, there is no religion and the Court does not see religion making judgments. By him making that statement, made it very clear to everybody that this was not going to have an impact on the judgement. What you do believe in your private life regarding spirituality cannot heavily impact on our constitution and how other people live their lives. The reason why I believe that in Trinidad, I would get this justice is how multicultural we are. We have 35% of the population who are Hindu, 10% Muslims and when you have a multi-racial, multi-religious society like that it's very rare for those groups to then say, "I'm going to deny this group their equality when they are sharing the country and having equality amongst themselves." So, my arguments regarding all of this, was to stay out of any discussion about religion and to make it very clear that Trinidad and Tobago is a very multi-cultural melting pot and we all had to share the nation. And I think that a lot of the local human rights organizations took up that mantra about sharing the nation. It is important for us to remember that no matter what the differences we may have; you do have to share the space.

DP: Do you think if Trinidad and Tobago had a mono-cultural society or a society where there was one dominant culture or race that the outcome of your lawsuit would have been different?

JJ: There is no doubt that we have to discuss the fact that people of African heritage who are Christians have a huge issue with homophobia. The roots of it go back hundreds of years and the religion that is dominant now, the evangelicals, for example, have taken great deal of power by making a whole issue around the equality of gay people as the central focus and that focus has so dominated the dialogue that I do think that if they were the lead religion in Trinidad it would have made it more difficult as seen in Jamaica. Jamaica again, almost 90% of the population are Africans, Christians. The homophobia there is, definitely, a lot worse than in Trinidad. It's a lot more violent and it is a lot more pointed. I don't think Trinidad has that level of homophobia because of the other races and other religious beliefs.

DP: So, coming back to the lawsuit, what has the local and international public support been like?

JJ: In 2015, I approached an organization here called "The Human Dignity Trust (HDT)" to bring this challenge. I walked in off the street, knocked on the door and said, I hear you do these things and I want to do it. We then spent six months of work preparing this case and then I got a phone call from the Executive Director saying that "Jason, we are not supporting you anymore, you can't use our name for anything anymore." No reason was given, just a telephone call saying, "remove your name from all of your work." Well, I can't express how shocking that was, especially as there was no referral about it. And after six months of work, I'm not paid this. Those guys were paid for six months of work. I wasn't receiving a penny. So, after six months of my work, my own personal investment in doing this work, I was shattered and then somebody who was working with them and was working on the case quit working with the HDT and the day he quit, he called me and said "listen, I think what they did to you was utter nonsense and I don't work for them anymore so I could talk to you. So, let's meet at a second date." And that's how the case got picked back up. He said to me, "if you want; you can go ahead on your own, but they are going to blacklist you. You're not going to get any support from anybody you're pretty much on your own and at that point." I was so enraged because this was an organization that was getting millions of pounds of public funding and then, getting no explanation. It, also, has a very chequered history of doing this work around the world. So, HDT of course, being the world's only organization to do litigations like this, when people heard I was doing the case, the HDT said that we don't think the case has any merit, don't support him. So, they actually put some rocks in my way. I have been blacklisted by all LGBT organizations both in Trinidad and Tobago and around the world. Nobody will touch me. So, I basically do it all on my own.

DP: So, what was CAISO's and the Silver Lining Foundation, what was their input on the whole thing?

JJ: They said that they don't support litigation, and they said it was a waste of time and that I would fail. They all banded together and said, "I don't support Jason Jones." It was a very public and behind the scenes quite awful character assassination that they did against me. So, they said, "he is just a troublemaker and he is just doing this for his own publicity, and for his own fame." I mean seriously, if this is what people do for publicity and fame, they have to be jackasses.

DP: And why do you think there was this form of ingratitude on behalf of these organizations?

JJ: Because this is the gatekeeping that you find happening. These organizations have no public mandate, no democratic mandate, to address the LGBTI community. Nobody voted in CAISO, or Collin Robinson, to be the representative of the LGBTI community. So, they don't have any democratic mandate. These are just people who get off their buttocks and say that they are going to do something, and that's great, no problem. But when I get off my ass to do something, all of a sudden, I'm a troublemaker and I don't know what I am doing. But, I obviously did, because I won.

DP: And what was the receptivity after winning the lawsuit. Browsing through some of the YouTube videos, these organizations seemed to be relatively grateful?

JJ: Well, of course, everybody always wants to cohort your work after having achieved something and that's fine. It will always be known that it was my case and I did it on my own without their support.

DP: Do you think that stigma and discrimination are less crippling today for the LGBTI community in Trinidad and Tobago? Why?

JJ: That's a difficult question because we look at the world around us and we see things like 'Will and Grace' on television or 'Hoes' with a lot more visibility and then, I hear stories of people who would not go for a HIV test or if they get ill they wouldn't go for medication because they are in denial of the disease. I hear people being beaten up by their families, young boys being thrown out on the street. So, it's again, I don't think it's a question we just won't answer. The answers are varied as our society is. For one person, life maybe very good. You have the Peter Minshall and the Brian Mc Farlane who live very comfortably as gay men in Trinidad. But, is that the story of black gay men in Laventille or Beetham? So, it's not as simple as black and white. Around the world, we are seeing a hardening of the right wing and that has led to a lot more attacks. Even in the UK, we have seen a rise of attacks. I think that physical attacks on LGBTI individuals rose up to 50% over the last three years. This is a serious number and you're talking about the United Kingdom. So, yes, things have gotten

better in some ways, but it also gone a few steps backwards in other ways. So, it's not a simple black and white answer.

DP: So, you mentioned the Brian McFarlane and Company. There seems to be a point on the social status of gay men. Could you elaborate a bit more on this?

JJ: Well, that is what I refer to as the glass closet, where it's ok to be gay if you're a hairdresser or beauty queen promoter, fashion designer and costume designer, but you know it's not ok if you're a garbage collector or if you're working in the health industry. Those areas don't have openly gay people working in them. So, the glass closet is quite a dangerous thing to think about as being an example of what is the true LGBTI people. I had people tell me, well, Peter Minshall is gay, Brian McFarlane is gay, but they don't live in the world that the average person lives in. They don't take a route taxi to go home, they don't go to City Gate, the bus station in Port-of-Spain. I have had to do that and I know that I have to codeswitch to different environments because I move in different environments in Trinidad. I think Brian lives in Goodridge park. He goes to his office in Woodbrook, he goes back into his air-conditioned car and has dinner at Movina, and then drives back to Goodridge park. You cannot use that as an example of the daily lived experience of the average LGBTI person. It's not real. But then, we hold these people and we say that's visibility and that's the lived experience, but it's not.

DP: And do you think that it's also because of their contributions to the arts in Trinidad and Tobago?

JJ: I mean, it's always been as long as history knows itself, a connection between homosexuality and spirituality, either priests or being nuns. That has gone on for thousands of years and not to mention between us and artistic expressions, whether it be theatre, music, drama, the whole range of artistic expressions have been a real welcoming space for LGBT people. When people ask me, why do I think LGBTI people exist in civilization? I believe that's what our job is, to promote civilization. We are not having kids. So, our focus is on building our civilization. We are the ones that look after our language, our culture, our buildings and we drive those things forth, and that for me it's an important part of what I see my space as being. So, losing my family, not having kids, not having that full focus have allowed me to focus on things like changing my Constitution. I would not have been able to do that if I had three kids and a mortgage.

DP: Could you also clarify the case with Gillian Lucky where rumours claimed that she was a full-fledged lesbian?

JJ: Again, I can say very openly about Peter Minshall and Brian Mc Farlane because I know them personally, and I know them on that level. But, I can't comment on Gillian Lucky because I don't know her

personally and I don't know her personal life. What I would say is, it's rather unfortunate, that not even one person who is LGBT adjacent has come out in public to support me. You would have thought that somebody would have come out and say I'm gay and I'm an ally. There are so many people who have nothing to lose, not one person. That was very disappointing. Technically, a lot of these people are my friends.

DP: And what was the local and international impact of your case?

JJ: As Trinidad has the Privy Council as our Supreme Court, the judgement will have an impact on around two billion people who live in countries which were former colonies of Britain. The first impact it had was in India. India at the time was also hearing a case to decriminalize homosexuality and after my judgement, the team that was presenting my case added my case in as grounds for removal of the law. The judges held up those laws. I was mentioned twice in the Supreme court's ruling from India. In the democratic world, there are three important Supreme Courts, the US Supreme Court, the India Supreme Court and the Privy Council. So, to have this connection where you have decriminalization in the US Supreme Court, then decriminalization in the India Supreme Court, the last one to fall is the Privy Council. My case would be the last one to fall under judgement. People understand that it's the last time that this case would ever come up. It's important for literally millions of millions of people. So, already being involved in the decriminalization of India, a population of about one billion, which works out to be about 75 million people got decriminalized by using my case. That's the impact of it. It created a legal timeline for other cases to happen. Since my victory, other cases have been launched in Dominica, another case in the St. Vincent and the Grenadines, another case is going to happen in St. Lucia and the two more I'm supporting that are coming on board. The plan is to have the countries of the English-speaking Caribbean and Mauritius. If you have cases that are filed in those countries they don't even have to file for a judge, just the paperwork in the Court system. When I win at the Privy Council, all of those cases win because they have the Privy Council as their highest Supreme Court as well. Well, I would have decriminalized, literally, millions.

DP: What is your next step now concerning the case?

JJ: Well, because the Attorney General has appealed to the High Court, which is normal procedure, when you have a matter that is of constitutional quarters, you must get final judgement. If you don't, you would have a situation as what we saw in India. In India, they decriminalized at the High Court level in 2013. That was then appealed, and it got overturned. It had to go to the Supreme Court to get a final ruling. If you don't get a final ruling, that judgement is always up for appeal. We always knew if I lost, I would have appealed and if the Attorney General lost, he would have appealed. It always

goes through that whole system. My appeal would be heard and the Trinidad and Tobago Appeal Court and then, whatever that judgement is, it doesn't matter who loses, they would then appeal to the Privy Council. There is an argument of interest for me to drop the Appeal Court and I don't know if I'm going to chase that. I hope to go home soon and sit down with the lawyers and discuss the best way forward because I don't want to be sitting down twiddling my thumbs for the next five years. I need to start pushing everybody. I don't do the whole victim thing, but this has taken over my life and I don't want it to drag into years and years of crying. So, I'm going to be pushing everybody on the case as soon as possible.

DP: What is your next step in terms of pro-gay advocacy?

JJ: Well, this is not public knowledge, but I just got funding to do, which is another bit of history in the making. I'm doing the first ever national survey, post decriminalization. So, this survey will happen in Trinidad during Carnival. I wanted to do it before or during Christmas, but everything got screwed up and you know how administration stuff is. I'm doing the national survey in conjunction with the University of the West Indies (UWI) and I'm the author with Professor Keon West, a doctor in psychology at Goldsmiths, and he's half Trinidadian and half Jamaican. So, West and I are the authors of this survey and it's going to be a national survey conducted by students of UWI. UWI is actually teaching this at law school now. The students are very aware of what I'm doing, and they have all volunteered to conduct the survey. So, the survey would be done face to face and I'm not doing the online thing because I think people lie. It's the first time in history that a country is surveyed post-decriminaliztion to hear what people think and targeting everyone.

DP: I also wanted to talk about the theme of 'death,' which is a recurrent one within the LGBTI community. I heard many LGBTI cases in Trinidad and Tobago go unnoticed and I would like you to share on your personal experience as well as that of others?

JJ: After I filed my case in 2017, a couple of weeks after, a friend contacted me and he said that there was a police officer on the down-low and he wants to talk to me. He shared how he thinks there is a serial killer working in Trinidad. There have been a lot of murders happening and I got sent from another source pictures of the victims. Don't ask me how I got those things, I just got sent all of it. I sat with the police officer and he's been a policeman for twenty years in Trinidad. He is not an idiot. He said that he thinks there is a serial killer and that he has been working for a number of years. I went to my bosses and they said, "if they're killing *bullers* then they deserve it." So, there was no investigation into links with these murders. The serial killer is targeting people who are on the outskirts of society. So, he targets a lot of small islands gay men and he knows that if he kills a

Guyanese or someone from St. Vincent, the person doesn't have any family looking for them. Over the past two and a half years, there is a dozen men that I was to link and who have died under suspicious circumstances with the same type of murder scenario. One of the last victims was Roger Jefferson, a very high-profile white Trinidadian gay man and his family did not report it. So, what are you going to do? I went to the police commissioner and I said to the acting one, "there was a serial killer," and nothing was done.

DP: I know there is also a lot of local black Trinidadians who have been butchered. Do you think that the media and the police system show any interest in homophobic crimes?

JJ: When I spoke to Acting Commissioner of Police, Williams, and I asked, do you have any statistics on homophobic motivated crimes? He said, "Crime is crime and we don't keep figures like that." He has no concept that there is a difference between crimes, which are perpetrated against homosexuals as against other crimes. I mean this is the Commissioner of Police. So, there is no way of number one, getting these figures and number two, if you are a police force who has no concept of homophobic motivated crimes being different to other crimes, then all hope is lost. The local newspapers ran two stories where I said this is what's happening. They met with the police officer and whenever there was any sort of publicity about it, the murder stopped. But then, we had Raymond and Roger. I know about them because I knew them personally, but God knows how many other men have been murdered.

DP: Looking at the Facebook publications on the murder of Raymond Choo Kong, there wasn't any link to his murder as being a hate crime or a homophobic crime. It was more an appraisal of his contribution to the arts and details of his murder. How did this particular case make you react?

JJ: I was attacked by gay and straight people for speaking out about the crime and they are like you're outing Raymond. But Raymond outed himself last year. He went on the Gay pride march and did an article stating his age in the 60s and saying that he's only now coming out. And thank you Jason for teaching me that it was time. Homophobia can only survive if people give it life. How you give it life is by denying that somebody is gay and that is what is happening in our society. If you separate what people are in their private life from what they are in their public life, you're actually feeding the homophobia and people don't realize that. I got attacked in social media. When the President Paul Mae-Weeks took office, the journalist from the Guardian did an interview with her and in it he asked the President if she was gay. Because she was a woman of a certain age, single, never been married and there were a lot of rumours swirling. And he did what a journalist should do. If you want to talk about an issue, you should ask a question. People started to lose their minds.

How dare you ask that question to the President? What is wrong with asking a question? They didn't see that that itself is homophobic by you burying the actual fact of even asking a question, you're being homophobic. And I'm talking from lawyers who couldn't see their own internal homophobia. And I said, "Listen, this is your middle-class homophobia." You can't even ask a question. That's homophobic. You have just denied our own existence.

DP: Do you still think you are still "Trini to the Bone", as referred to in David Rudder's song?

JJ: Of course, I refer to myself as Tringlish now because I have definitely lived in both and I am loyal to both. Trinidad is not a perfect place, but it pisses me off to see how Trinidadians can also be xenophobic and nationalistic to the point of ignoring their problems. You can't fix anything if you're so Trini to the bone and that you are afraid to overlook the problems. Every year, we go from holiday to holiday to holiday and it seems as though, this whole culture of not dealing with issues, but let us party, carnival, Christmas, Eid and whatever, has created an absolute lack of self-inspection or critical thinking of our country. The most horrible thing I found with my achievement has been people's response, not knowing that you're able to engage in your democracy the way that I did. This has never happened before. There has never been a case of this country where someone is challenging the very fabric of democracy and your right as a citizen. So, hearing people for the first time saying, I didn't even know I could do that. That to me was the most powerful thing. I think my legacy, of course, will be seen from the LGBT perspective and the reason why my case is being studied at UWI, law school in Canada and the UK is because of that. The internal engagement through education, through litigation, to access justice and your right as a citizen. That has never been done. So, learning from this would reverberate for decades and decades. I get people messaging me saying "I want to decriminalize marijuana" and I'm like "yeah, go for it." I think the actions that we will see following on will be, you know. If it's one thing, I'm proud of, it's the courage that it took to stand alone. I think that courage is quite undeniable and like I said, I was lucky to be around the people I was around with.

DP: What would you like to see change in Trinidad and Tobago apart from the Sections 13 and 14 of the constitution as well as the Immigration Act? And do you think that this change is possible?

JJ: Well, there are 27 laws in our Constitution that affect LGBT people. You mentioned the Immigration Act, things like two people of the same sex can't rent a hotel. So, these 27 laws will all come up for review after my victory at the Privy Council. What should be happening now and what frustrates me so greatly is that people lack vision in advocacy. So, you have CAISO, the largest LGBTI organization that is completely focused on inclusion in the Equal

Opportunity Act, but ignoring all these other aspects of law which infringe on the human rights of LGBT people. What you should be focusing your advocacy now, is when Jason Jones wins his case in the Privy Council and in parliament they have to sit. They will be forced to sit and remove this law. If you don't lobby now, so when that conversation does happen in law, all other 26 laws are coming under review as well, then you're wasting your time. What you saw happened here in the United Kingdom, when they decriminalized in 1967, nothing happened for 30 years. The first law that was changed in the UK after decriminalising was a law that I worked on which was the Immigration Act and we changed the Immigration Act to allow the same sex partner of a British subject residency based on a *de facto* relationship for four years with cohabitation under the same roof. I changed that, me and 40 test cases. So, I have helped to change laws in two countries. The reason I do this is because I get off my seat and do it. We have a vision, we want to change this, we get up, we lobby, and we do the things that we need to do. That doesn't happen in advocacy. I don't know what people are waiting on or what CAISO is waiting on. Every time you hear CAISO, they say "we don't want marriage equality." Who are you speaking for? How dare you decide that we don't want marriage equality? Who are you? If you're in an equality organization, then you should be advocating for full equality. Not this piece-meal nonsense where we will target decriminalization and then 30 years, they don't answer to nothing.

DP: So, you think that the objectives established by CAISO are not very ambitious or purposeful?

JJ: Of course not. How can you be an equality organization and then state you're not advocating for marriage equality? What does that mean? You should be fighting for everything a straight person has. That's it. That's your whole role. Everything you have, I want it too. It is not brain surgery. When you spend all your time and energy fighting for this thing and ten years fighting for that and you're not getting it. Yes, CAISO has been fighting for inclusion in the Equal Opportunity Act for ten years. How far have they gotten in a decade? They have gotten zero. That's why I did what I did because I'm fed up with getting zero.

DP: Do you think that being of double nationality helped you to make the progress that you're making today as compared to if you were solely Trinidadian?

JJ: I definitely have access to resources. This case has cost close to a million pounds. I have access to these resources because I'm here in the UK. But in terms of the vision, anyone has access to dreams no matter wherever you're from. You should see an interview that Collin Robinson gave on *Telesur*. The journalist from *Telesur* is a Trinidadian woman. She interviewed him the afternoon of my victory. I just went to a rum shop and concluded there. So, she's interviewing him and

says, “Collin I understand that you were not very supportive of the case, so how do you feel now.” You know what he said, “I could not have imagined winning.” That was the problem. He couldn’t even imagine it. If you don’t have an imagination, you shouldn’t be directing strategy for advocacy. Strategy is people who have imagination and who can see beyond their environment. If you sit in this bar and you say you want that drink, I want those chairs and I want to be able to walk to the toilet. But if you don’t think about what is going to happen when you go out of the place and into the streets and into the shuttle, and how you’re going to navigate getting from the front door to the next place you want to get to, then you’re wasting your time.

DP: And are there any other things you’d like to add concerning your advocacy efforts in Trinidad and the UK?

JJ: A lot of the things I work on don’t gather public attention. I have been working for thirty years and a lot of the achievements don’t gather public attention. I don’t do it for the fame and the glory. It has been quite usual this last year navigating things like this. This has never been part of the work. I just do the work. So, the stuff I have been doing, I have been on board for a new LGBTI organizations in London and for asylums. These are all silent things that I have worked on in my life, but it’s not public and I don’t need them to be public. The case obviously brought a lot of national and international attention and it will continue to. But, his is not why I’m doing it. I came home from the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2015 and I worked a year on building the Commonwealth Equality Network. Again, another organization that I helped develop, and I came back from our first big international event where you’re at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings and the first LGBTI components to fall. I came back from it totally degenerated because I just thought, “what did we just achieve?” Everyone left that conference and there were no concrete decisions made to move forward. So, we spent 30,000 pounds flying activists around the world and nothing. I come from a background where if I am going to spend 30,000 pounds for a year of work, if I don’t come out of that year with something tangible saying this is what you have achieved, then it is a waste of time. I came back from it. I emailed everybody and said what is your take on this and they said, “it was great to come together and we achieved the historical thing, et cetera.” But have we come away from? what is the takeaway and move forward and say that was what I achieved? No answers. So, after that email, I went and I knocked on Human Dignity Trust and said I’m fed up with this, time for something big. I didn’t lose my mind and just say that I’m going to take my country to court. I’m not that type of person. It’s utter insanity what I did. But, I was so frustrated by this very laissez-faire attitude, particularly from within the community itself of people who are flying in and staying in a nice hotel, talking a lot of non-sense and then going

back to their countries and doing the same. I watched that and I said "No, this can't be all there is."

DP: So, you're saying it doesn't add up, the effort and the investment being made to achieve some sort of progress within the LGBTI community.

JJ: Yes, everyone came and they left with nothing. Then, there was another Commonwealth Heads of Governments meeting, which was here in the UK in 2018. It was one week after my victory in Trinidad. So, I flew back specifically to be here in time for the meeting. And all the people in Malta were here and they had meetings with Theresa May. They had meetings with loads of big people and what did they leave with? Nothing. For me I may be an activist, but it's not how I earn my money. I earn my money through Sales and Marketing. If I don't achieve my sales target, I get fired. That is what happens in my work, in my training, in what pays my bills, if I don't hit that target, monthly, I get fired. That's it. In advocacy, there is no accountability So, you could have somebody like Collin Robinson, sat in that job for a decade and what has he achieved?

DP: You also quoted yourself as being Tringlish. Is it 50/50? Could you elaborate?

JJ: It is now because I do live here now and it is the safety that I received here after the absolute horrendous treatment that I had in Trinidad and yes, I have to respect my status here as an English person. I have gone through horrendous racism from my own English family, but what Britain provides me as a gay man is beyond anything I could have ever hoped for in Trinidad. In Trinidad, I received hundreds of death threats, no support from the gay community, no support from the police, no protection from security services, nothing. I received nothing from Trinidad and Tobago for what I have achieved.

DP: But why 50/50 if the scale seems to be balancing more toward the UK?

JJ: Listen, loving Trinidad doesn't mean I can't criticize it and point out its faults. People don't understand that about criticism. It doesn't mean I don't love my country. It doesn't mean I hate Trinidad or Trinidadians. It is that we have serious problems and we have to work among them. The fact that you cannot even speak about the problem in Trinidad is symptomatic of how bad things are. You cannot even ask somebody, "are you a homosexual?" without people losing their minds. That is a deeply entrenched homophobia. Unfortunately, at this stage, it takes something as dramatic as what I have done to force people into the conversation. The day that I filed the claim, and of course, I have a person who does my public relations, Ian Royal. He did a media pack and all of the press was there on the steps of the Court Room. I walked out, did all the interviews and of course, I was

the top story that night on the news stations. People told me that they felt the anger that was being spouted, "How dare you? Who does he think he is? Why is he talking about this? He took me off from my dinner." Now, if you don't understand how bad homophobia is in Trinidad with just the mention of it with people saying it turns their stomach, it's very frustrating to sit in events like CHOGM with activists who are paid to be there and who would behave one way in that environment and then go back to their country and buy in to its nonsense. It's very challenging. For me you're not an activist and I don't know what it is you do. But, you're not an activist. So, that's the problem.

DP: So, Mr. Jones, thank you very much for this interview. It was a pleasure to have you here to share on this current affair, hot like Tobacco sauce.

JJ: Thank you for having me.

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[1] Geoffrey MacLean (1942-2024) was a well-known conservationist and architect in Trinidad and Tobago. He was the ex-president of the Trinidad and Tobago Institute of Architects and was a member of Citizens for Conservation, an NGO which sought to protect the country's man-made heritage such as some of the country's historical buildings.

[2] Raymond Choo Kong (1949-2019) was a renowned actor and producer in the twin-island republic. He was one of the pioneers of comedy theatre and received several Cacique Awards for several of his theatrical representations throughout his career. Many of his comedies embodied sexual innuendo which significantly contributed to the queer culture of Trinidad and Tobago.

[3] Rex Lassalle (1945-present) was an ex-lieutenant in the Trinidad and Tobago regiment. He was one of the leaders of an army mutiny which joined the Black Power Revolution movement in 1970. The movement led to him being arrested and serving 2 years and 3 months in prison. After leaving the regiment, he studied medicine in the UK where he studied various forms of alternative medicine.

[4] Helen Camps or Ellen O'Malley Camps (1928-present) is known for founding the Housewives Association of Trinidad and Tobago (H.A.T.T) in 1971 and launching the experiential Trinidad Tent Theatre in 1982. She has been a feminist activist for over fifty years.