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TransGriot Ten Questions Interview-Carmen Xtravaganza

By monica_roberts

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Abstract

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It's time to ask Carmen Xtravaganza the TransGriot's Ten Questions.

1. You're originally born in Rota, Spain because your father was in the military. How much moving around did you do as a child and when did you realize you were meant to be Carmen?

CX-We did a lot of moving as a child. My Dad was stationed in a lot of different naval bases around the world. My parents had split up when I was a very small child but they both shared custody of us so we spent some years with my Dad and some with my Mom.

Well I knew I was meant to be Carmen around 5 years old or so. As far back as I can remember my dad always knew from when I was a small child I was always effeminate. He explained it to me much later after I had already transitioned. My Dad had no problem at all. My Mom took it a little harder, but once she saw me as Carmen she understood and we became much closer. She was my protector, my everything.

2. You began your transition at 16. How difficult (or easy) was that for you to do at that time?

CX-Actually I began at 15 years old in Washington.D.C.at DuPont Circle. I actually ran away from home and started staying in a runaway house there. Life was hard because I was on my own and had to hustle to survive. In Washington D.C. at that time it was very dangerous. I got robbed, mugged, raped and incarcerated during those early two years. Then I headed up to New York with a friend from school who was in the same situation I was.

3. When did your involvement in the ballroom community start and what drew you to it?

CX-I first became involved in the ballroom scene in 1981. I became Carmen St Laurent through the father Robbie St. Laurent. I was drawn to this community because of the adrenalin of competition. The girls that were there were working girls that I had met working the stroll on the West Side Highway in Manhattan near the Village.

It was a community that I felt totally comfortable in. In those days it was much more family oriented than it is today. There were no programs for trans girls like there are now. I became Carmen Xtravaganza in 1983 when I competed for face as Carmen St. Laurent and sat down 7 girls including some Xtravaganza beauties. I then took my trophy and gave it to Mother Angie and she made me an Xtravaganza at that moment. It was exactly 30 years ago this month in August at the Elks Lodge in Harlem

4. I came close to spending my gender variant teen years in New York in the late 70's as my Dad contemplated taking a radio job there. What would have awaited me had my parents decided to make that NY move?

CX-Well at that time New York was street hard but to get your transition going it was very easy. You had access to the best hormones in the world and lots of support through the girls and great surgeons who modified their prices for our community of trans women. Money was easy to make in the hustle life. There was GG's Barnum Room, Guilded Grape, 2-20, The Grapevine, Plato's Retreat, Casa Dario, Paradise Garage, Studio 54 and so many others. There are those girls that didn't live the same life that I did but for me this was my path. It wasn't without pitfalls and risk. There are many of my close friends that didn't make it for a variety of reasons, whether it be murder, drugs or AIDS. .

5. As a house mother, do you believe there should be better cooperation and working partnerships between the ballroom and the trans activist communities?

CX-Yes, I love this question! I do believe that there should be a blending of these two communities. It needs to happen with the quickness. There are a lot of kids out there today that are outcasts from their own family, they have nowhere to go and no one to ask for advice. Since the house scene has changed there is no longer the same kind of camaraderie and support like in the days when I was coming up. The kids today have a very shallow understanding of being trans. For them it's about looks and looks only. Yes, it was about how do I look, but back then we had a sense of self and understanding about core values of community.

Nowadays there is a lot out there for younger trans folks to access compared to the 70's and 80's and 90's. This is something I'm on a mission to change starting with speaking out and explaining my life narrative. I am involved in developing a project with my sister Koko Jones Xtravaganza called 'Stories From The Edge'

Our vision for 'Stories From The Edge' is to travel to colleges and community based organizations around the country to tell our stories which vary and explain that everyone has a different path and no path is wrong as long as you get to where you want to be.

6. As someone who has done runway modeling what do you think about the Brazilian trans girls like Lea T

and Carol Marra getting that opportunity and would you like to see more American trans girls get their shots in New York fashion shows?

CX-I remember Marc Jacobs telling me in the 90's in Sally's Hideaway that he loved my look for fashion. He felt I could do it in Europe but here in the States it would be hard for me. It's the agencies that are in control of who is hired on shoots and runways. The only agency here in the States that has changed their policy since the early 80's is the Wilhelmina Agency who had as a model Caroline Cossey (Tula). She was the first one there. I have done a lot of modeling overseas in Europe and have had a much easier time with the agencies knowing my secret (Carmen's not Victoria's) LOL.. But not the public.

7. You have the power to change or erase one thing that happened during your lifetime. What would that point in your life be?

CX-Honestly, I wouldn't change a thing. I have learned from my mistakes and the lessons that I was taught through them. Knowing what I know I would like to be able to impart some of my knowledge to those that I have lost due to AIDS, violence and racism.

8. What are some of the current projects you are currently engaged or involved in?

CX-Like I said before I'm involved in developing a multimedia presentation called 'Stories From The Edge' with my sister Koko Jones Xtravaganza. It will highlight both of our careers and our transitions. I have such a different story than Koko but at the same time both of our stories are similar. I have also been doing makeup for photo shoots and music videos. Koko and I just did a photo shoot for Beth Israel medical Center in New York for their new LGBT services. I'm happy to say that we are the faces of LGBT services in New York City.

9. You get to ask the TransGriot one question that you've been dying to ask me. What would that be?

CX-How difficult was it for you to transition and create the life you have now? (I hope this is not too personal a question)

TransGriot: Nope it isn't.

10. Where do you see the person of color trans community ten years from now?

CX-Well, I hope to see trans people of color in a better situation, for violence against us to be reduced. For our brothers and sisters to be able to get the healthcare and service that we most urgently need. There is a need for us to be educated about our gender identity so we can empower ourselves to reach greater heights and become more visible in society.

Carmen, thank you so much for answering these Ten Questions!

Cross-posted from TransGriot

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