

[Mr. Lofton leaves and Mr. Harrison enters]

**LB:** And did you come from the Red Cross?

2:01:50 **BH:** Long story short, I was with the Red Cross for about seventeen years and I was burned out. I had the PR dream job in Richmond. I did. We had a phenomenal board. The conduit would make a phone call and make things happen. I think it was at that time the best nonprofit board in the city. And we had excellent media relationships. We had a media advisory committee, ABC, CBS, NBC, The Times Dispatch, The Free Press, WRPA, two or three other radio stations—they met monthly.

**LB:** Wow.

**BH:** And this was the only committee like that in existence in the country...

**LB:** I've never heard of such a thing.

2:03:50 **BH:**...where competition comes together to work. Well, it was the Red Cross. Which was at that time America's favorite charity. They've had a hard time of it since then. I was just listening to NPR the other morning in the shower with this hurricane and they were questioning where the money's going. And the guy didn't have any answers. They got in a lot of trouble a few years ago over how much... you know. Over where is the... [**LB:** I remember.] And National did not do a very good job at all. But anyway, they started really changing the culture of Red Cross. And National started controlling a lot of things. Everybody was supposed to be raising money. The culture was just changing. So then they started offering early retirement packages because they needed money so badly. I knew I was burned out. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life... I mean I'd sit in the parking lot... and that job used to be my *life*. I just ate, drank, and slept it. I couldn't get enough of it. And so I took a leap of faith. I was going to be a freelance writer. I got a good severance package and insurance for eighteen months, so... you know. But freelance writing, I thoroughly enjoyed, but I didn't make enough money to pay the light bill. I mean you know, as you all know.

**Videographer:** That's why I don't freelance.

**BH:** All this work you put into these articles, and they want to pay you a hundred bucks. And that doesn't even pay the... I mean, come on!

**Videographer:** Trust me, I don't freelance.

**BH:** I know. I know. It's just... It was a fun hobby. I loved it 'cause I'm from Emporia. And I went down there and I would go down there once a week and do a story for them. Human interest stuff. And my favorite story was Norma Jean Harold. Who do you think Norma Jean was named after?

2:04:25

**LB:** Marilyn Monroe.

**BH:** Marilyn Monroe. She had run the lunch counter at Anderson's Pharmacy for twenty-five years. And she was retiring. I went there and I spent the day. I had a blast. She'd never been in the paper before in her life and when we did the story—she was on the front page. I just! It was really rewarding personally. And listening to her customers and they're giving her a hard time. And she's doing the cooking and she's waiting on them. It was very rewarding, personally, to go home and do that sort of thing. But anyway, long story short, I was sitting at Joe's Inn one night, and the chair of the board came up to my table and said, "Can I call you tomorrow?" I just thought she wanted me to do some volunteer work or something. And the director was leaving. And she said, "Can you fill in until we find somebody? Would you be willing to do that?" That was five years ago. They hired me about six months after that.

**LB:** That's great. So total life change.

**BH:** Yeah, yeah. I've been an activist since the 70s, so to get paid to... and plus there's nothing that makes me happier than a thrift store or an estate sale. So I tell people when I can't do what they hire me to do, up here, I go play in the thrift store and I price ash trays and talk to customers. Bag stuff.

**LB:** That's really funny.

**Videographer:** So we've been running for a little bit folks, and I wasn't being deceitful, but I was trying to adjust my lights and all of that. Awesome.

2:06:04

**LB:** So we're good to go.

**Videographer:** We are ready for questions.

**LB:** Bill, why don't you just start by saying what your name is and what date it is.

**Bill Harrison:** My name is Bill Harrison. And it's September the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

**LB:** So Bill, tell me something about where and how you grew up. Tell me about how you got to be where you are.

**BH:** Well I grew up on a peanut farm in Emporia, Virginia. A village raised me—grandparents, aunts and uncles, great aunts and uncles, cousins, surrounded by. I was very blessed. And when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I realized that I was gay. And this was back in the late 60s. The times were very different then. It's something that I kept to myself for a long time. I came out in the mid 70s. I was married to a woman for a few years. That is what a lot of men, gay men of my generation, did. I just was going to put it in the back of my mind, and I wanted to be straight. There was no alternative. And I did not like being homosexual. I saw it as a curse. But I always knew that if there was one being... oh, 'cause a lot of people, I think especially growing up in the Bible belt, there's this religious struggle that we have with our orientation. I never had that because I knew if there was one being that understood, it would be God. So, the religion part never bothered me. I thought the religious folks just don't understand.

So anyway. My marriage ended. And that's when I decided that I was just gonna be honest about who I was. I've been an activist ever since then. I came to Diversity about five years ago. It's a privilege. It's an honor (especially with all that's happened in the last few years with marriage equality and that sort of thing) to be here at Diversity of Richmond, to be in the center of it.

**LB:** Tell me about activism in Richmond when you were starting out in the 70s. Were you here in Richmond the whole time?

**BH:** I was. Yeah. The first work of activism that I did was writing letters to the editor of the Richmond Newsletter, which was the afternoon paper at the time. And the editorial page was extremely homophobic. I went to my first march on Washington in 1979. I came back to Richmond and there was a scathing editorial by Frederick Von Hoffman. I'll never forget. About the degenerates marching on Washington and how Washington and Jefferson were probably rolling over in their graves. That march meant so much to me, that I was so outraged by those words. I wrote my first letter to the editor. I said, "Washington and Jefferson are probably already rolling over in their graves because they were all slave owners, and black people have marched on Washington. So this was not the first time they rolled over. That started it for me. I got some pushback, but I got a lot of people saying thank you. People were not verbal or public nearly as much back then as we are today.

Then I got involved in a group called Dignity Integrity, which was the Catholic and Episcopal support groups for gay and lesbian people, which was very supportive. It fed my spirituality. I became Episcopalian. That was a real solid foundation for me to become more involved in the community.

My first nonprofit job was with the Fan Free Clinic back in the 1980s. I was working for a public relations firm here in town at the time. The Fan Free was looking for someone to coordinate

media, and do fundraising, development, all sorts of things. It was during the height of the HIV epidemic here in Richmond. It was the beginning of it. I applied for that job. It was critically important to me that I get it. Everybody I knew in the City of Richmond, I said please write a letter of reference for me and mail it in to the clinic. Well, when Nora Schots, the director, called me for an interview, she said, “I just have one request—no more letters. I get it.” Cause I think she got [a lot of letters]....

And I got the job. Looking back on that, there was a man by the name of Steve Williams who worked at the clinic. He grew up here in Richmond. He actually had been a monk for several years. He no longer [was] a monk. He had got into banking in Dallas when he was diagnosed with AIDS. He came back to Richmond to die. He volunteered with the Fan Free Clinic. This was just where I was at the time that I thought, “I’m not going to get real close to Steve because he’s going to die...” ...and he became one of my dearest friends. I’m embarrassed to say that’s where I was. But I saw it as a way to protect myself so I could do the work. Well, if you’re not gonna let it get in your heart, you’re in the wrong business. We became very good friends. Steve ended up forming Richmond Aids Ministry, RAM, which was a interfaith response to the HIV epidemic, and they did phenomenal work. So, he left the clinic. But I remember going there before I met him and I thought I’m just not gonna get that close to him.

**LB:** So was that your first experience with the HIV epidemic, meeting Steve? Had you been hearing about it?

**BH:** I had a couple of acquaintances, who I knew had AIDS. But I was really not that involved at the time. When I went to work at Fan Free, I just became immersed in it. That’s when I fell in love with nonprofit. But I remember recruiting volunteers to work at Fan Free was very easy, because the Fan Free Clinic was the first organization in central Virginia, to create a organized response to HIV. They had a hotline. They had care teams. They had support groups for HIV-positive people, people with AIDS, caregivers. I think there was a support group for straight people with HIV. There would be people lined up to be interviewed sometimes to be volunteers. Style Weekly jumped right on board. And was very courageous, telling stories quite often about people living with AIDS. I’ve got a lot of those Style editions. Sue Robinson, who was the editor at the time was a leader in doing that.

**LB:** Is she still around?

**BH:** Yeah. She is Sue Sain now, I think. She is the PR person for the VCU Library System.

**LB:** Perfect. So tell me more about the early days of the epidemic in Richmond.

**BH:** Well.... I tell people, “You had to live through it.” It’s very difficult to explain it. It got to the place that we all knew so many people who had died. There were very few treatments at the time. When you got the diagnosis, it was a socially unacceptable disease. The gay community, I think, at that time, had just really started to make significant progress, and then we got hit with this. That gave a lot of people permission to hate us again. The religious community, the extreme right conservative part of society. “This is God’s punishment. We told you all along this was wrong and God is telling you now how wrong it is.”

Seeing parents disown their sons was a tough pill to swallow. Because I knew that if I were to be diagnosed, my parents would never leave my side for a moment. I knew that, because they had told me. I’m sorry. I don’t know where all this is coming from, it’s been so long ago that I’ve talked about this. My mother... I don’t think either one of us wanted to bring it up. I hadn’t been tested at the time, which is a whole ‘nother ball of wax, getting tested. You got tested. And sometimes it was three or four weeks before you got your test results. You just knew you were gonna be diagnosed. You just knew you were.

By the grace of God, I wasn’t. I wrote my mother a letter, and I said, “I just want you to know, I got tested.” We had never talked about it. But I knew by things she had said indirectly, I knew where she was with this. And I wrote her and I said, “I tested negative.” When I saw her the next time she said, “Thank you for your letter.” Then, when I was making a quilt panel one time, when we brought the quilt here to Richmond, she helped me make it. I took all my stuff home and we were on the living room floor putting it together.

I remember, in Emporia, a young man who I had taught at Sunday school at the Baptist church that I grew up in. His father taught me Sunday school and I was in college and I was teaching the youth boys’ Sunday school. Steve was in my Sunday school class and I had not seen him for several years. He had moved to Richmond and he had been diagnosed with AIDS. I went to visit him in the hospital. I hadn’t seen him in years and he couldn’t look at me. He was embarrassed, even with me.

I think people had shame and guilt. I look at how our community responded to that disease and so I know that we can handle anything. When we were going through the marriage controversy. I thought—however it works out, we’re gonna be fine. I mean, look at how we handled AIDS. It came out of nowhere. We had no instruction. There was no support. Look at what we did. We unified, we built community, we responded. You became friends with total strangers. People who you did not know in January, in November you could be making their funeral arrangements because you were their closest friend at the time, because their family was absent.

The funerals, for one thing... Funerals tend to be pretty traditional. When we started dying, we redesigned them. We started doing what I now call “Open Mic Night,” where if you wanna say

anything you can. All these people would line up to go to the podium and talk about the person. That was new. It was a very, very difficult time. At the same time, I think that my community showed the world what family values is all about. And we showed the world what humanity is all about and how resilient the human soul is, and what love is all about.

2:19:05

I remember you would go to a party or somewhere and you would look across the room and you might not know him personally but you knew who he was and he had the look. He had the weight loss, the wasting syndrome. Or it might be some type of sarcoma. And you knew. You just felt this pain in your gut. Because you didn't know him, but you could identify with him and what he was going through.

I remember going to a cocktail party in the Fan, I call the "highbrow gaze." I was talking to a couple men one night about my work at the Fan Free Clinic. And one of them said, "I don't think I'll ever know anybody who has that." Well guess who was talking to us a few years later....

**LB:** What was the gay community like here before AIDS came? And how did it change after that? Because it sounds like an incredible experience to be in the middle of that community when the epidemic hit.

**BH:** Before HIV, we were making significant progress, but there was still a tremendous number of closeted people. People got fired because they were gay or lesbian. That was not uncommon. We would have the Pride festivals. We'd have a good turnout. It was a weekend of events. Not nearly like we've seen today. We have a Pride festival every year now. About 35,000 people come. The governor's there. The senators are there. Back in those days to go after the gay and lesbian vote it was the kiss of death. Third party candidates did it but the mainstream candidates for the most part did not. A lot of folks were closeted.

Then when people started becoming diagnosed with AIDS, I think that a lot of people were forced out of the closet. A lot of times people knew that people were gay but nobody really talked about it. You didn't talk about your family member, you might have suspicions, or somebody at work. Then when people started beginning to be diagnosed, that's when America realized how many gay people they knew. There was a story I read—this is probably back in the 80s. I think it was written by a Catholic priest. It was entitled something like "The Day that the Gays Disappeared." There was one day that all the gay and lesbian people woke up purple. Nobody wanted to go out because you were purple. So everybody stayed at home. And how America was so different that day because the gay and lesbians had disappeared. The next day they woke up and everybody was who they normally were and we all went back to work. It talked about.... I think with HIV a lot of people were forced out of the closet and America realized how many gay men they really knew.

**LB:** Back in those early days, when there were so few treatment options, and you were at Ground Zero, Fan Free—how did you cope with those moments? What was it like for you, or for other caregivers, to have to sit someone down and give them a diagnosis?

2:22:30

**BH:** Well I didn't actually do that part of it. That was handled by doctors. We did testing at the clinic. But we had physicians who would share the test results [**LB:** The news] with the patients. There was just so little hope that when you got diagnosed, it was a death sentence for the most part. Everybody knew that. Then when you would see people and you wouldn't see them for three or four weeks and when you would see them there would be a dramatic change in how they looked, in some people... I think the clinic, the Fan Free Clinic, created community for people who had probably not ever felt the need for support groups surrounded by friends life is very different now. And there was a need that the clinic definitely filled, a huge void.

**LB:** I imagine, given that it was perfectly legal and common at that point to fire people because they were gay... what happened once people with AIDS began looking like people with AIDS?

**BH:** Right, well quite often I think they just stopped work because it got to the point they weren't able to work.

**LB:** Pretty quickly, I imagine.

**BH:** Yeah, yeah. There was one medication, AZT. But for a lot of people it was a rapidly aggressive disease. When your defenses are down, you don't really have a lot of spirit to keep on going. But, you know, that was interesting because I kept reading about suicide statistics of people with HIV, and I never knew anyone who took their own life because of AIDS. I never knew anybody to do that. And I knew a lot of people who had AIDS. It was the first time in my life (I was in my thirties then) that I was that closely connected with dying people... and watching their journeys.

I grew up in a religious family. But living through this, I thought—I don't know exactly what happens, but I do believe that when we leave this earth, it's good. Because I watched so many people come to a place of absolute peace and acceptance before they were... They were just so at peace with their future. I thought, "I don't think we would get there, if it wasn't good waiting for us."

**LB:** What was it like for you, as someone in your thirties, to be surrounded by people your age, who were dying? How did that change you?

**BH:** Sometimes I felt guilty... I didn't know how I had gotten spared. Watching the parents who did stand by their children, that was really hard. When they were my age, and they were losing



their sons. What do you say? I have no concept of what it's like to lose your child. It's got to be the worst hell that a parent, that a person can go through, I think. But it was inspiring in so many ways to watch people live life, and celebrate, and keep the faith, and keep a sense of humor about it. It was an inspiration.

2:26:44

**LB:** It sounds like it shaped the rest of your life.

**BH:** Oh, without a doubt. I am one of the most blessed people I know. I think it's because I was given the gift to be able to allow people and stuff to come into my heart. Because living through that was a gift to me. Because it not only taught me a lot about the gay rights movement and how strong we are and how phenomenal we are. But it was a foundation for my life journey on looking at life. Very few things are a matter of life and death. Very few things. And we get so caught up in stuff, the bills, the roof, you know all that. And every so often we get reminded of how insignificant those things are.

Remember those Rolodex that you would keep on your desk? I have my Rolodex from those days. Because it's filled with names of people who have AIDS. One of the things that I thought, and I think it works—the best form of education for the public is to humanize an issue, whether it's being gay or lesbian, or whether it's having HIV. There were lots of invitations to do educational things on HIV and whenever it was appropriate, I would pull a panel together. I would have a African American man with AIDS, a white guy with AIDS, and then it grew. I would have a person who was a hemophiliac with HIV, an injecting drug user (because that was certainly a socially unacceptable way of contracting HIV), to have people to talk about that. Then I realized, a key piece of that panel that needs to be there is a parent. Because most of us are not gay men. We're not injecting drug users. Most of us are not hemophiliacs. But most people are parents. And when you can put a parent in front of an audience, especially a community of faith, and they talk about what it's like to be experiencing this, it's really hard for people to turn away and not heed that message. When it's a mother. Fathers didn't want to talk that much. But mothers were ever present to share their story. The phenomenal amount of change that mothers brought about—I'll never forget that.

**LB:** How have you seen the face of the epidemic change over the past thirty years?

**BH:** Well, you know, we've discussed this a thousand times. Back in the day, the faces of AIDS were white, gay men. For the most part, every educational campaign that was designed featured white, gay men. White, gay men were leading a lot in the movement. We were having the cocktail party fundraisers on Monument Avenue. Every jumped on board. Everybody wanted to be doing something. And then over a period of time with the treatments that were developed, over the past thirty years, the face of AIDS has changed... because a lot of the growing number of men of color, who have HIV, have contracted HIV. America doesn't talk about HIV anymore.



I think that a lot of that has to do with—white gay men got what we needed. We got the treatments out there. We got a lot of funding. We got the attention. White gay men with HIV, for the most part I think, are staying healthy. It's no longer a death sentence. But the new, diagnosed cases of men of color is astounding. It's very unacceptable and horrifying to me that America has turned its back on this disease. It's not talked about anymore. It's not in the media any longer. Being a white gay man... while a lot of this was going on, I was oblivious to it. I'm well aware of that now. I was completely oblivious. African American men did not see their pictures in the public service announcements. They did not see their photographs on the posters. I think it was easy for them to go: "That's not anything that's going to affect me." Because of the lack of education and the poorly developed outreach campaigns that were developed. A lot of these were done by the federal government. A lot of the good work, seeing the real world, was being done by those grass roots organizations. But it still wasn't merely enough. Because of that, I think the face of HIV right now, when I think of it, is the communities of color who need to get the attention.

**LB:** One of the groups that Sarah Monroe also talked about, when I last talked to her, was women, who don't get attention. And are sort of out of the PR picture of people with AIDS.

**BH:** Yeah I think that... Well, the vast majority of the cases back in the day were men. I remember we were joking about some "religious" people were saying this was God's punishment. And lesbians were not contracting HIV. So we said, "Well lesbians must be God's chosen people, because they're not getting this." Women have definitely been excluded to a certain extent, to a large extent I think on the educational messages.

**LB:** What do you see as one of the greatest obstacles over time in reaching people you need to reach?

**BH:** I think that race is an obstacle. This is one of the things I learned a long time ago at Fan Free... We had several clients who were African American women. They weren't coming to support groups or anything. We had very few black volunteers. And we were talking about, how do we change this? I said, "I don't know, I'm a white guy. So got me on this. But how 'bout if we just put the word out that we need black volunteers?" I don't know if that's politically correct or not. But I knew that there was one African American woman who I'd become an acquaintance with and I thought, "She can relate much easier to an African American woman than she can to me." So we put the word out, "We need black volunteers. We especially need black women volunteers." And they started coming in. I think that people of color have a real opportunity to reach people of color with an educational message. More effectively than I would be able to.

**LB:** And you think that's happening more and more?

**BH:** I think that it is happening more, but again, it's been put on the back burner. We've got some really good grass roots organizations out there doing phenomenal work but again—AIDS is not talked about anymore. It's not talked about.

2:34:50

**LB:** So what do you think is the way to get AIDS back onto the front burner? Given that black men who have sex with men in this country have a 50% chance of contracting HIV?

**BH:** Right. Those numbers are just astounding, within the rates of infection. Something that I've said, and I've not really done anything about it—a couple years ago I was on a panel, talking about HIV back in the day. There was an African American man on the panel and he talked about what was going on today. I thought, “White men got what we needed and then we walked away.” I think that white gay men need to step up to the plate again. We need to reinvigorate the community and address this issue because our brothers don't get it, especially the young ones. They didn't live through this. And when you're young you think nothing's gonna happen to you anyway. But it can. It's heart breaking to see the numbers of the young men who are becoming infected. It's not the death sentence that it was, but it alters life tremendously. And it doesn't need to happen. I mean, we *know* how the disease is spread. That would be one of the things that would aggravate me back in the day. We know how it's spread. And it took a long time for my community to grasp that. And to start protecting ourselves, even when we knew.

[videographer notifies LB that she will pause for a second]

**LB:** So what do you think have been your most successful moments as an AIDS activist? And I don't mean just you personally, of course, but for the activist community?

**BH:** To me, the most significant lesson that I learned is—I realized how phenomenal my community is, that we can handle anything. Because look at how we handled AIDS, how we unified a whole community, and how we just started organizing and having meetings in peoples' homes about what to do: How do I take care of someone in my home who has AIDS? What do I do? If I hug them, if I kiss them on the cheek, if I help them in the bathroom—am I at risk? There were a lot of questions like that. There was a lot of bad information out there. “If they cry and I come in contact, I wipe a tear—am I putting myself at risk? These are all legitimate questions that we needed answers to. So we marched on Washington. We confronted people. The Reagan administration was an enemy when it came to the AIDS epidemic. I think it motivated a lot of people. It put the fire in our bellies. Again, it's something you had to live through. It's very hard to convey.

One of the things that bothers me now is I don't think our community really knows its history very well. Young people now have no concept of what HIV, of what the AIDS epidemic, was all

about. They have no *concept*. I can share it with them, but you had to be there to a certain extent. It's not ancient history. It wasn't that long ago that it happened. It's still going on.

2:39:03

**LB:** It's sort of amazing how recent it was and how devastating and yet, as you say, we don't talk about it anymore at all. So what do you do with this new generation? What do you do about the growing community of injectable drug users who are contracting HIV? As an activist, how do you frame that question?

**BH:** It's not a sexy thing to talk about. It's not a fun conversation to have. But we have a responsibility to do it. We have a responsibility to teach LGBT people about legislation and the laws and injustice. We also have a responsibility to continue the work on HIV and I think it's time for the LGBT community in America to revitalize that conversation and for more community centers, such as Diversity, to make it a priority to talk about.

**LB:** So you're in a prime place to make it a priority. What are some of the things you're doing here, at Diversity, to change that conversation, to educate, and to move the community forward?

**BH:** Well, with the addition of Rodney Lofton on our staff, senior staff, who's a nationally recognized HIV educator. Rodney's a true gift to us. I have to laugh because every year we have this "Diversity of Richmond Celebrates" event where we give away all of our grant money and we give awards and everything. While I was talking I was talking about how "We're gonna make HIV a priority and Rodney Lofton's gonna lead it." I hadn't even discussed it with him, but I knew that he would. And he told me later, "Run stuff by me before you announce it." But I knew that he would. No better person in the City of Richmond to do that. Rodney's connecting us with communities. And we also are funding the Minority Health Consortium, which does a lot of work out on the street reaching people in an urban setting. We're funding Nations Foundation, which is also working with a lot of transgender people. HIV is a issue in the transgender community, especially, again, with people of color. We fund other organizations that are doing the grass roots work. And that's where a lot of our priority is going.

**LB:** What do you think some of the biggest obstacles that you face right now are?

**BH:** I think a challenge in this is getting people's attention. It's not the issue for a lot of people that it used to be. Now it's people of color for the most part, with the large numbers of new infections. That doesn't tend to concern America, like it did when white men were getting it.

**LB:** We have a new administration in Washington.

**BH:** Really? [laughter] I'm sorry. I know you can't air that.

**LB:** No, we can air whatever we want. So, given this new administration and its attitude about funding the fight against AIDS, funding AIDS treatments, and AIDS education. What now? How do you work with that particular challenge?

2:42:28

**BH:** I think that the Trump administration is a wake-up call for us in a lot of different areas. In some ways, it can be a blessing. Because he wakes us up. It's a call to action. We can't assume that good's gonna happen any longer. We've actually got people who are going to try to defeat what we see is good. Whether its LGBT fair treatment and justice, or funding for HIV disease. So I think that we need to speak up louder than we ever have in a very long time, and have our voices be heard. Because this might be naïve, but I've always believed, this is America. Justice will prevail. It might take a lifetime. It might take two lifetimes. But this is America and justice will finally prevail. And we cannot sit back and be silent. We've got to raise our voices louder than they've been raised in a very long time.

**LB:** And have you seen that in the months since November? And especially since January?

**BH:** Absolutely. The first few months after the election, last year, we got significant fundraising events done for us. They would tell us, it's because of the election. And these were new donors. These were restaurants, different businesses who were doing fundraising, and they wanted the money to come to Diversity Richmond. What I found interesting with a couple of them, they didn't know exactly what we did, but they knew who we were and they had trust in us. They didn't know all the details of Diversity. But then we had a good reputation. They were raising money for us. We saw a significant increase in fundraising in the first few months.

**LB:** Why do you think that HIV is such an issue in Richmond in particular? Why do you think we have one of the nation's highest rates?

**BH:** I think that race has a lot to do with that. Again, it's not getting the attention because it's not white men, for the most part, becoming infected at all, any longer. I think that poverty has a lot to do with it, access to medical care, access to education on the issues. I don't know how often this is talked about in schools anymore. But back in the day it was hot topic. And it was challenging sometimes too. We found that one of the best ways to get into a school was through a PTA. Because if parents were concerned, then the parents wanted their children to get the information. So when parents went to school board and said, "We want this," it opened the door a lot easier than us.

I remember when I had first gone to work for the... I worked for the Virginia Department of Health. I was doing public information for their HIV program. I talked to a local TV station about having a call-in, a telephone bank that people could call in with their questions one night.

**LB:** When was this around? [**BH:** I'm sorry?] Around what year?

2:46:01

**BH:** This would've been in the early 90s, early to mid 90s. I wanted to set up a phone bank at a local TV station so people could call in questions about AIDS, and one of the doctors at the local health department went through the ceiling that we were going to do that. Things are very different at the Virginia Department of Health now. This was in the early days. There was a lot of fright out there. But I got called on the carpet for trying to organize that because his theory was—if the media contacts us, we can answer their questions. But we don't reach out to them. And that was so contrary to... I mean, I'm coming from the nonprofit world into this government operation. And at nonprofit, we *did stuff*. That was a shock to me. We finally... and Tom... we got that done numerous times, but it was not easy in the beginning.

**LB:** What policies, either federal, state or local would you most like to see change, regarding HIV?

**BH:** You know, I'm really not one to answer that question. My work in this, in AIDS, has been so limited the last few years. I don't really know what needs to be changed.

**LB:** And plus with the Trump administration, there's probably a huge list of things that will need to change that we don't know about yet. Right? What misconceptions do you think most people have today about HIV and AIDS?

**BH:** A misconception that, probably, the gay community might have is that : it's no big deal any longer. When it is a big deal. Again it's not a death sentence like it was. But it alters life tremendously. You live with it for the rest of your life. It's always there. We need to start within our own community, to wake up. It is an issue. And to take another lead, to step back up on the plate and take a lead in bringing out that education. We have a responsibility to do that. Again I think the white gay men have a huge responsibility. My generation of white gay men, we did phenomenal work, unbelievable work. Maybe we need to invigorate the younger people. I don't know. But it needs to be a topic that we talk about more.

**LB:** If there was one thing you could say, both to the gay community, but also just to Richmond as a whole, about the AIDS epidemic, what would it be?

**BH:** AIDS is very much alive in Richmond, Virginia. Just look at the numbers. We've got one of the leading rates of infections in the country. And it's preventable. It's preventable. You have to go to a certain amount of trouble to contract HIV. It's not gonna jump on you. You have to make an effort to contract it. And it's education. It's instilling in people: "I don't want to get that." It's instilling in people that: "I can protect myself, I need to take care of myself." But when you're already downtrodden and you're feeling bad about who you are. And you don't have the money

to pay rent or buy food and the only way that you can bring in income is to be someone selling sex—and that’s happening a lot with people who need money. People are not selling sex, for the most part, because that’s what they want to do. They’re doing it out of absolute desperation.

2:49:29

**LB:** And so that’s the community we most need to reach?

**BH:** I think so.

**LB:** Is there anything that I haven’t asked you?

**BH:** [shakes his head no]

**LB:** Well thank you, Bill. This has been fantastic. You must talk about AIDS all the time now. In your work. [Bill shakes his head no] Or not?

**BH:** Not all the time. Not as much as we should. Because last November I made that promise to the community. That’s gonna be a top priority. I need to, I need to do a better job at that. I’m not giving excuses. There’s just so much, you know. But it needs to be a major priority.

**LB:** It’s been amazing to me, since I first just started exploring the idea of this project, what an intense reaction there has been from the activists, and the medical communities. It makes me think that there’s a huge elephant in the room, that no one’s talking about. Most people I talk to outside of the HIV community have no idea that Richmond has an especially high rate. Why is that? Why is that information so little known?

**BH:** I would like for the folks handling all of that to be more public with the information. And to reestablish some real strong... I know that the Virginia Department of Health is doing that. But again I think it’s something that because it is not of white men any longer, it’s been put on the back burner. I mean just look at the history of this country. If it’s not impacting the right people, it’s not going to get the attention.

This is a completely different situation—but where I grew up we had a two-lane highway, Highway 58-East. There were so many accidents on that highway because, especially in the summertime, people were taking it to Virginia Beach and it was two lanes. The speed limit was 55. There were accidents all the time and people were dying. The general assembly would do nothing about it. Emporia actually named that highway: “Suicide Strip.” They put up this big sign, when you’re entering it, with a skull and crossbones. It said, “You are now entering Suicide Strip.” A general assembly member’s grandson was killed on the highway. And then they made it four lanes. When the *right* people are affected by something, change will come about. In America, when the “right people” are not being affected, the “right people,” everybody, needs to

step up to the plate and make that message clear. Because again, you have to go to a certain amount of trouble to contract HIV. We can protect ourselves. It's not contagious. It's easily preventable. Why people are not hearing that message is for different reasons. But one of the main reasons is—it's not being offered to them.

2:52:51

**LB:** It's fascinating to me, because I do a lot of projects in the community. I feel like some days, three different people tell me that Church Hill is the largest food desert in the nation. And usually once a month someone tells me that we have the highest concentration of public housing anywhere south of New York City. And yet, even immersed in that community as I am, I only recently heard the statistics about HIV in Richmond. That's baffling to me because I'm not a white member of the general assembly who hears nothing about this. I'm in this community. And yet, I'm not hearing that message. So if people who are sort of in the community that's involved in different forms of social activism, they're not hearing the message. Why is that? I understand why Joe Republican is not necessarily getting the message. But there are a lot of people out there who would be very interested and whenever I share this information—people are shocked.

**BH:** You know it's very difficult sometimes to look in the mirror. We have monthly breakfast meetings here at Diversity Richmond of all the executive directors of LGBT organizations in the area. It's a room of 99% white people... HIV is rarely talked about. Now, the representatives from the Fan Free Clinic talk about it. But it's for the most part not an issue with the rest of us. We need to look at our own community. I think that's where we need to start, with our own LGBT community. There have been so many issues that we've been dealing with—again I'm not giving excuses—the transgender issue for example that have surfaced in the last few years. Which to a certain extent have become one of the #1 top priorities in that movement. The racism within our own community. If you're a lesbian or a gay plus you're a person of color—the double whammy there. The acceptance of LGBT people within the Hispanic community. Years ago when I lived in Miami, I would have my Hispanic gay and lesbian friends tell me... the lesbians would say, "My parents would rather I be a prostitute," they told me that, "than to be lesbian." They could live with me being a prostitute more than they could being lesbian." But the different cultures in our communities. But sitting around this table once a month—HIV is rarely talked about, within our own group.

**LB:** It's fascinating, but not in a good way.

**BH:** Yeah.

**LB:** So, it's gonna take a lot to change. I can't wait to see what happens over this next year. And I can't wait to see what happens with the big history that I know you're working on, the oral history with William & Mary. I feel like there's gotta be a lot of overlap in there.



**BH:** Yeah. Okay. A couple of things came to mind while we were talking, of people that might be good for you to talk with. Elaine Martin is with the HIV program at the Virginia Department of Health. She's been there for twenty-five years. She started out working on the hotline and now she's up in senior management. Before you leave I'll give you her telephone number. She's a heterosexual white woman who's been involved in this since Day One. She's seen so much in trends. She coordinates a lot of the educational outreach from Virginia Department of Health. They're dealing with Trump administration on funds. She would be a very good person for you to talk to.

**LB:** Yeah that's great.

**BH:** Another person is Phil Crosby, who is the executive director of Richmond Triangle Players. They're celebrating their twenty-fifth year. They did a lot of AIDS plays. [**LB:** I remember.] And they continue to do, periodically, an AIDS production. I'll give you his number, too.

**LB:** That would be fantastic.

**BH:** Because he's been involved for a long time as well.

**LB:** You know I had an amazing interview with Rodney, but so much of it was about his own experience that I wish I had asked him more questions... I mean I asked him about working with high school kids in the early days. I asked him about his own writing. But not as much about AIDS education, given his incredible history.

**BH:** Well Elaine can help you with that. Juan Pierce is the executive director of Minority Health Consortium.

**LB:** Yeah, I know I need to talk to him.

**BH:** Juan is always late to the meetings. He's always late turnin' in his reports. But my God, the work that that man does—urban work, reaching people that nobody else cares about. He's a must I think for this. Because he's out there on the street, right now doing it.

**LB:** That's who I need to hear from, you know different generations, different viewpoints, different audiences. Because yeah, from everyone I talk to, it sounds like AIDS today is reaching very, very different groups than it did initially. Although you know Loraine and I talked, as we both had people in our families die of AIDS who did not fit that white, gay, male profile.

**BH:** Another person that would be good for you is... Oh my god, my brain is getting so old... Dr. Danna Kuhn. Danna's story is incredible. He's a hemophiliac. He was diagnosed a long time

ago. He was married. He became infected through a blood transfusion, and his wife became infected, and his wife died. And left him with two small children. Danna has appeared before, he's testified before Congress. Anyway, a few years later he was at a hemophiliac convention, and met this delightful nurse by the name of Jan, and they fell in love. They got married. Jan ended up getting a job with VDH in the HIV program. They look like Ken and Barbie. They would do a lot of church stuff. I'd get invitations. And I would just go in 'cause of Jan and Dan. And they would take it. Their story was just incredible. They had the two children. I remember we did a church down in Petersburg. When church was over they got in the car and left and the little boy waved goodbye to me. It just broke my heart, because he'd already lost his mother at such an early age. I thought... his dad... well that was twenty-five years ago and now he's married. They're both married. And Jan and Danna ended up having twins. It's a process that you go through about washing the sperm. I don't know the details on it. But they ended up having a boy and a girl.

**LB:** That's wild.

**BH:** He has his own nonprofit organization in town that, I don't know, it raises money for something medical. But I see him. I run into him occasionally. But I'll give you his number.

**LB:** That would be fantastic.

**BH:** He is about the only hemophilia voice in Richmond. And he was nationally recognized with his work.

**LB:** That would be great. This has been fantastic. Thank you so much for all of your help in so many ways.

**BH:** Thank you all for doing this.

**LB:** We're happy to be doing it.

**BH:** I mean you're bringing me back to life.

**LB:** It sounds like it's quite a lot. Right?

**BH:** I'm so excited that Rodney thought about Lisa Cumbey, who he told you about, because Lisa's brother, Allan Cumbey, died twenty-five years ago. But the Valentine has just purchased one of his paintings. There's gonna be a...

**LB:** Annette [?] told me. Well this is great. And Michael Simon, the photographer we're working with, who you know. He'll be in touch. He's still figuring out what kind of portraits he wants to take, what settings, all of that stuff. He'll absolutely be in touch. We're still looking for a home for the exhibition. I'm totally confident that we'll find one.

3:02:08 **BH:** You will.

**LB:** It's a hilarious problem to have. I was saying to Rodney—my experience has always been that the venue approached me and that's what the exhibition came out of. And this is absolutely ass backwards. But we'll figure it out. We'll go once more back to the silent well. The Black History Museum has been surprisingly unresponsive. But also think about 1708 because it's location is real...

**BH:** I will say that Adele Johnson, at the Black History Museum, she is juggling a thousand things.

**LB:** I know she is.

**BH:** So that is what's going on there I can tell you ...

**LB:** So you don't think it's radio silence, you think it's just...

**BH:** Oh, she's doing this [juggling motion] all day.

**LB:** Okay, I'll go back to love bombing [?] her.

**BH:** Yeah. She's an incredible woman.

**LB:** I know her. She actually approached me years ago when we were doing a documentary play about the bussing era in Richmond Public Schools. One Voice Chorus ended up providing the background music to the play. They all were in chairs at the back of the stage, doing their thing, while the actors did their thing. It was great.

**BH:** You know, when I was at Fan Free, the Virginia Museum put the AIDS quilt on exhibit. Because they sold as art.

**LB:** Yeah, I mean that's something. I think I could reach out to Sarah Eckhardt as well. And see if she'd be interested.

**BH:** Yeah. Suzanne Hall, she was my contact over there.

**LB:** Yeah I like Suzanne a lot.

3:03:41

**BH:** I'm getting older because I don't know anybody. I don't even know what Tom would suspect, I don't know anybody there anymore. Used to just pick up the phone and call and I'm getting old. People are retiring.

**LB:** Or—newspapers are shutting down.

**Videographer:** Yeah, they're laying people off.

**LB:** So you're not getting old. It's the newspaper business that's just getting tough. But yeah. I mean. We'll keep on cranking. The dean at the University of Richmond has offered to fill in any funding gaps that need filling for this project, which is amazing.

**BH:** Good.

**LB:** I think we're gonna be in good shape. I think there's so many people who need to be interviewed and need to be a part of this.

**BH:** I wish I had thought to get a photograph this morning of Bob so we could start talking about this in our newsletter.

**LB:** We can figure it out. If you want we can get Michael on the stick sooner rather than later.

**BH:** I was just thinking to come in and take a...

**LB:** Oh, to take a snapshot. Yeah.

**BH:** Is there any way from his video you could send me a clip of him?

**Videographer:** I could send you a clip or even do like a still shot.

**BH:** A still would be great.

**Videographer:** I think I can do a freeze frame and export it.

**BH:** Thank you. That'd be great so we can start talking about this.

**LB:** That would be great.

3:05:23

**BH:** Normally... and I know I explained this to you, we do our grants every year. It's a committee decision of who gets funded. But... I got a wonderful board. They're not in my business all the time. And when I email the executive committee... "Just wanna fyi—I decided to do this"... the response was just so incredible.

**LB:** Oh, that's fantastic.

**BH:** "I'm so glad they approached us. I'm so glad you know about this. I'm so glad you're doing this." A lot of times I send out the emails and I don't get any response. I don't know if they read it or not. But that one got the response.

**LB:** That's good. I've already talked to the dean at the University of Richmond who's an amazing guy. I told him that I want to, probably next fall, have six different faculty teaching classes related to the AIDS epidemic in Richmond so that we can bring in panels of speakers, and do other events. Because often at universities there's so much scheduled at once that you can't always get the audience that an event needs. But if we have a hundred students who are all focused on this at once, from public health angles, from an art angle. Patricio, my collaborator and I, will do a documentary drama about AIDS with our students that we will collaboratively write and perform. There are a lot of different things that we could do and we'd love you to be part of that process as we move forward.

**BH:** Sure.

**LB:** Because I always feel like that that's what you need. You need the critical mass.

**BH:** Let me know whatever you need. You just made me think of something else. When I was at the clinic, we had a play that was written by Roger somebody... who was a VCU theater student. It was called "For Whom Bells Toll." We got funded by the Virginia Department of Health. Elaine Martin was there. We took that show on the road to colleges and universities. It was like six acts. It was a lot of HIV information. It was a lot of humor and things. Richard Koch, who is a well-known actor here in Richmond, was in that production. It was a couple years. If you google him... I see he and his wife... every couple of years I run into them. K-o-c-h. I think he was the only person left here in town who was a part of that.

**LB:** I wonder if the script is around. Because wouldn't that be an amazing thing to have in the Richmond AIDS archive?

**BH:** My God. We didn't know we were making history.

**LB:** I know. No one ever does, right?

3:08:00

**BH:** You know. They probably threw it in the trash can. But he might very well. He might very well have one.

**LB:** It's so funny. I do a lot of these kinds of projects. You know who the only people who really archive every single thing and keep meticulous records are? Communists. I'm doing a huge communist project now. And there the problem is you have five million pages of material. They never throw away a scrap.

**BH:** Well Barbara Weinstock, has Rodney told you about her?

**LB:** Mentioned her.

**BH:** She had boxes and boxes. Actually, the first letter that I wrote that I told you about—I was going through one of her scrapbooks and I was like, “Oh my god!” There it was. I was not as all that out. I made up a name: Hunter Maise. There was a Maise family back home and I always liked ‘em. And I thought the name Hunter. I loved that. So I sent it Hunter. They don't verify everything the way they do now. There was Hunter Maise who had written that letter, criticizing the news leader.

**LB:** That's fantastic.

**BH:** I finally started using my own name.

**LB:** When did that happen?

**BH:** My first time I used my old name was when I wrote the Episcopal newspaper in this diocese because there was criticism of the church sponsoring the Dignity Integrity chapter. I was very involved. I wrote a letter to the paper and that was the first time I used my real name.

**LB:** That's a huge marker.

**BH:** I look back at my poor parents in Emporia. Because once a month there was a scathing letter, when I started using my own name, for William Harrison Jr. about “the gays.” And you know, “down there in Hooterville.” And everybody's getting' the newspaper. I put ‘em [Bob's parents] through some stuff.

**LB:** They adjusted right?

**BH:** I don't know how.

3:09:55

**LB:** Well you know I think that's part of being a parent, right? It's part of just spending time on the planet. Don't you feel now, with the current generation, that they think about things in ways that you could never have imagined thirty years ago?

**BH:** Truly. Yeah. My sister, we were laughing, (my parents are now deceased) and we were laughing one day at their house that I said to my parents, "Do you ever lie in bed and look at the ceiling and wonder what happened?" And my mother said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "I'm gay." I was the first out and gay in Emporia. I mean, word hit the street.

**LB:** I bet it did.

**BH:** And I said, "And your Southern Baptist daughter married a divorced Jewish man. Do you ever just? You're not the "norm" from down here." But we all worked it out. God bless 'em. They're in a good place now. I know.

**LB:** Absolutely. And now, I think even within the gay community, things have changed so much in the way of terms of gender, identity, and the way people think about their sexuality.

**BH:** I can't keep up. I can't keep up. Please let's not add another letter to it. Honestly, it's a lot to keep up with. One of the things that I've become aware of, I just turned sixty-four years old. I'm gearing up to look at Social Security. I saw it advertised where this financial planning group out in Midlothian was doing a Social Security 101 workshop. I went and it was about fifty people. Most of them were couples. It was an excellent presentation. But he kept talking about "you and your wife," or "you and your husband." I thought, "They need to get with the game here, because most gay and lesbian people do not have children." We have income. We need to be looking out. We need to be planning all of this. You're the person we need to look to to help guide us through this. But if you're not talking to me, I'm not going to do business with you. All you have to do is say, "your spouse." That covers everybody.

**LB:** It's not rocket science.

**BH:** But they're unaware of that. So I'm sitting there going, "Hm. You're excluding me from this conversation." I'm not saying it's intentional. You're unaware. This is income. This is business out there that you could get by changing the terminology that you're using.



**LB:** ‘Cause they’re in a bubble. It’s interesting. I was just in South Africa, and there they don’t say, “LGBTQ,” they say, “LGBTQI.” That was the first time I had heard that. But that’s one of the letters you’re talking about that they keep adding.

3:12:50

**BH:** Yeah, you know the word “queer,” makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. When I came to work here, it was a real adjustment for me because “queer” this and “queer” that. I would just cringe when I heard the word. I’ll never call myself a queer because I have a completely different history with that word. But young people see it, I think, as being inclusive of our entire community. And that’s fine. That’s fine. Be queer, if you want to. That’s your decision. It’s not a word that I identify with. But I accept it.

**LB:** It’s a very different generation.

**BH:** But it still makes me cringe when people talk about the queer community. I’m not queer. I’ve been here long enough, that I’m not gonna be queer if I don’t want to.

**LB:** Well that’s one of the great privileges, right? Not to be forced into a box that you don’t want to be no matter how “progressive” people think it is. Right?

**BH:** I hate that word.

**LB:** I’ve never heard “intersex” in an American context, but in South Africa they use it all the time.

**BH:** Yeah. Q for queer. Q for questioning. Sometimes I wonder if people just don’t lie in bed at night and think, “What kind of category can I come up with?” Now I can’t say that in front of anybody. But sometimes I wonder—what’s next? What other category can we create?

**LB:** Well I’m just excited to see what happens when these kids who are now twenties and thirties get to be fifties and sixties. And how they see the next generation coming up.

**BH:** Oh, Lord knows what the world’s going to be like fifty years from now with all of this stuff.

**LB:** I know.

**BH:** The gay marriage thing, fifty years from now it’s not gonna be an issue. We’re gonna look at it and say... the way we do now with mixed racial marriages. But at the same time I don’t think that racially mixed marriages are totally acceptable. It’s not just in America. Like it will be eventually.

**LB:** I know. People like to dream that we're so progressive but...

3:15:20

**BH:** I forgot who I was talking to the other day and they were asking, "How integrated is Richmond?" I said, "I just have to look at my own life to answer that question." My neighborhood I live in... In our neighborhood association, I think it's fifty homes and there are three black families.

**LB:** Where do you live?

**BH:** Byrd Park. The parties I have at my house. I have a holiday party every December. It's seventy-five people there. Sixty are white people. So how integrated is my life? On a day to day? Outside of work?

**LB:** And it's probably more integrated than most.

**BH:** It's more integrated than anybody where I grew up from. I know that much.

**LB:** But I know, still. It's absolutely true. That's Richmond. Things change and they don't change. I live in Church Hill and I've seen my neighborhood change dramatically in twenty years.

**BH:** Where do you live?

**LB:** I'm on the corner of 29<sup>th</sup> and Franklin.

**BH:** I used to live at 29<sup>th</sup> and Grace. You were right behind me.

**LB:** Yeah. And I used to be on Libby Terrace.

**BH:** Yeah. Are you in the middle of the block? Where are you?

**LB:** I'm one house over from the corner.

**BH:** The corner is kind of where a house has been built over the last forty years.

**LB:** Well the corner next to where I am looks out over the park. It's condos now. So it's a big tall...

**BH:** Alright, so at the intersection of Franklin and 29<sup>th</sup>, where are you.

**LB:** Well, so the park is here and I'm right there.

**BH:** Oh, oh! That huge house!

3:17:02

**LB:** I'm next to that huge house. I'm in an apartment.

**BH:** Well my house, if you just come back up to East Grace. It's right on the corner of 29<sup>th</sup> and Grace.

**LB:** Yeah.

**BH:** I loved living up there. I didn't realize how it's... I don't know... All my neighbors are long gone. They've all moved. They had kids or whatever. But the house right next door to where we live was the McWilliams family. And it was a pink house, this was back in the 90s. And Mr. McWilliams had a barber's shop right next to the post office on 25<sup>th</sup>. And Mrs. McWilliams could grow *a flower*. She had, in between the bricks, there's that little line of bricks, with the moss, she had flowers coming up. So the other day, this was meant to happen, I was playing on internet with Richmond real estate, just looking for the fun of it. There was this house in Church Hill and I pulled it up and it was the McWilliams house. They have totally renovated it. It was a visual tour of the inside. Oh my God, what they've done with that house! But she had the pink aluminum awnings that came out with a "MC" on it.

**LB:** I remember that house.

**BH:** Yeah. We lived right next door to that.

**LB:** It's cool, but you know I remember. When I lived on Libby Terrace. When I first moved in there were three black families. It's just a little cul-de-sac really. And then over the course of time, they were all replaced by...

**BH:** When were you on Libby Terrace?

**LB:** I moved around the corner two years ago. But before that I moved there in '99.

**BH:** Jenny Campbell?

**LB:** Yeah, two doors down from her.

**BH:** Okay, yeah. The woman who was a nurse at MCV for a hundred years, Gloria somebody.

**LB:** Oh yeah! Gloria was across the street.

**BH:** Francis.

3:19:00

**LB:** Yeah, Gloria Francis. Absolutely.