

Laura: Chris, before we get started can we give you one of these incredibly legalistic consent forms to fill out, please? Although it says that we have the rights to use your words and image in any medium now invented or ever to be invented in the known universe, really this is for the Valentine Exhibition and for an oral history archive about the AIDS epidemic.

Rob: Okay. So it's going up to heaven too, right?

Laura: It will go up to heaven, and-

Rob: I see, I see.

Laura: We very much hope and are fairly confident that it will also go into a catalog we're doing for the exhibition, which will contain much longer oral history excerpts, as well as portraits.

Chris: And, the exhibition is on AIDS in Richmond, is it? What's ... Yeah.

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Patricia: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura: It's called Voices of Richmond's Hidden Epidemic, and the premise, the starting point for the show was that almost no one who was not involved with HIV in one way or another realizes that Richmond has one of the highest rates of new infections in the nation. And, that most people today think that HIV and AIDS are diseases of the past. It was all gay, white men who got AIDS-

Chris: Oh, here.

Laura: And then we cured it and everything's great now. So, for instance, this week we did a group interview of eight women and one man, all of them African-American, HIV positive, in some cases with AIDS, grandmothers, right? And, some of them have been HIV positive since the '80s and some of them got their infections last year, as grandmothers. So, that's a story that we feel hasn't really been told and that most people are really unaware of and people don't know.

Chris: Right.

Laura: That it's senior citizens and youths who are the fastest growing groups-

Chris: Oh, yeah.

Laura: Of HIV infections. I mean, who would think that, right?

Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Patricia: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura: Despite PrEP, right? Despite the idea that you can take a pill a day and get your viral load to zero. So, that's why we're doing this exhibition.

Patricia: Yeah, we started to interview ... Well, Laura started interviewing last year and had to do it connected with the pandemic exhibition at the Valentine that happened last year.

Chris: Oh yeah. Yeah, sure.

Patricia: And so, there was a section of it there.

Rob: Did you see that?

Chris: Yeah, I did.

Rob: I missed that. I'm so sorry.

Patricia: And so, the videos about HIV that we're running came from those interviews.

Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative), okay.

Patricia: And then, from there, we decided that to build from there, and the Valentine was interested in focusing in on particularly the history of AIDS and here in Richmond.

Chris: Richmond, okay.

Patricia: And so, it's great to really see the evolution starting from, like, thinking about the '80s and what it looks like today.

Chris: Sure.

Laura: And I think that kind of evolution is what we're really interested in, and you two played a big role, including Lisa too, in organizing a lot of the benefits, and so-

Rob: And, Desmond Kelly.

Laura: Yes.

Rob: Who is in California?

Chris: He's in San Diego, yeah.

Rob: San Diego, and then [Julie Latham inaudible 00:03:30] was the fifth person.

Laura: I've heard that name a lot.

Rob: She was Common Cause, but she's passed away, so it was the five of us.

Laura: And Desmond Kelly, who was he? What did he do?

Chris: Des Kelly was a wonderful guy.

Rob: Absolutely.

Chris: He was a wonderful guy.

Rob: He was a cutie.

Chris: Yeah, he wasn't kind of like a movement person. He wasn't kind of like a professional activist, like some of us sort of are.

Rob: Julie, yeah. For sure.

Chris: But he ... Remember RAIN?

Patricia: Yeah, sure.

Chris: Richmond AIDS Information Network? Yeah, so crazy RAIN, they had a program where you became a buddy. They trained you to become a buddy to a person with HIV, and Des and I were in one of those buddy classes. This must have been in the early '80s.

Rob: So this was before Artists for Life?

Chris: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, a couple years before Artists for Life. And so, we went through the training together and we became friends, and that just kind of brought Des into the whole AIDS world. And, I forget how he hooked up with you for Artists for Life. I don't remember how that happened, but that's how he got hooked up into AIDS.

Laura: Okay.

Chris: I don't know. How did the five of us get together? I don't remember.

Rob: That's way back there. I knew you.

Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rob: And I would imagine you suggested Des.

Chris: Probably.

Rob: And, I think I knew Julie somehow.

- Chris: Everybody knew Julie.
- Rob: And then she was connected to Lisa.
- Chris: Yeah. You were the artist in Artists for Life. You were the artistic inspiration behind it, you know? So, you, kind of, formed the idea of it, and then brought us on board to help make it happen.
- Rob: Because it was huge. I would say I lived in New York several different times, and then I moved back from L.A. in '81, you know? and had a... I was wild, because I had not been wild before in my life really, so I was just out there sexually everywhere in New York City. And then, maybe after a year ... Oh no, I got partnered with someone. So, during that time, all of a sudden this huge thing, the hammer just hit and people... Because at the beginning it was really, you got it and then six months later or a year, you were gone. So, it hit the community people, dancers, guy dancers in New York. So, I started knowing people who were passing away.
- Rob: I moved to Richmond, and then right after I moved, I moved to Richmond full-time '85, and right after I moved to Richmond, the dance community in New York did a huge benefit. Everybody was involved with that. It was called Dancing for our Lives. It was Twyla Tharp and Merce Cunningham, and I think even Martha Graham sent something. And then, I was down here and it was like, "You know, we should do something. We should do something." And then I was like, "It can't be Dancing for our Lives. It should be just all the performing arts that we can get a hold of here in Richmond."
- Rob: And, so I don't remember how Artists for Life, that title came about. That might have been Lisa. I don't know how that title came up, but then it was so big, the concept was so big, I was like, "I think we should have, like, a board, a steering committee that addresses issues." And so, somehow the five of us came together, and it was a great fivesome. It was a great quintet.
- Laura: Can we take you way, way, way back? Because, you both already said about 25 things we want to follow up on, but we'd love to start off by just learning a little something about where you both started out. You know, where and how you grew up, what brought you to Richmond, and then what the climate was like in Richmond when you got here.
- Laura: And then, into Artists for Life and your fivesome.
- Rob: All right. I'm from Indiana and I grew up on the beach, the shores of Lake Michigan. A little resort town where Chicago people had their Summer homes. We were one of the townies. And, it was a great life. Life at the beach, you know? And, I went to graduate school at Notre Dame, and I came to Richmond for a job right out of graduate school. That was 1981.
- Chris: What was that job?

Rob: With the Office of Justice and Peace with the Catholic Diocese of Richmond. Now, this'll be hard to believe for anybody who's aware of that stuff, but at that time, the Catholic Diocese of Richmond was the leading progressive voice for justice and peace in the City of Richmond. Hard to believe now because it's gone totally over to the dark side, but that was what it was because there was a visionary Bishop, Bishop Walter Sullivan, who just did amazing things.

Rob: And so, I worked there and in justice and peace issues. You know, I was just telling you we were co-founders of Richmond Peace Education Center, in 1981, and did a lot of that kind of stuff. And, Richmond in the 80s, it was like the city was mired in the 19th century. You know? It was like the Civil War happened last month and we weren't over it yet.

Chris: Are we?

Rob: Well, it is different now. You know, there are so many different populations now. It was a majority, poor majority black city. But, at that time, the power structure was still white. You know? It may be that the majority of the council was black even then, but Main Street, the white business men ran the city. And, it was very conservative, but in a very polite, Southern way. It wasn't that kind of, like, nasty, Trump-ish conservatism we see now. It was more polite conversationalist that we just don't talk about that stuff, you know? And AIDs was one of the things we didn't talk about. It wasn't polite.

Rob: And so, yeah. I don't know how. I don't know how it hit the city's consciousness, but you have to remember that that was the Reagan years. You know? So, we weren't talking about AIDs even at the national level, because this was not a population that we wanted to highlight. You know? So, I don't know if Reagan ever declared it any kind of national health emergency. Maybe he did in his later days. I don't know.

Rob: So, there was nothing behind it nationally. There was certainly nothing behind it locally except for RAIN, Richmond AIDs Information Network, which was run by a crazy, old hippie woman, and it was total chaos. You know? It was just total chaos there, every day, every week, every hour, every minute. Which made it kind of fun, you know? It was part of Fan Free Clinic, and the free clinic movement was also kind of a hippie-ish thing from the 60s, you know?

Rob: So, it was kind of fun and it was also kind of nutty, but it was at least doing something for AIDs. You know? And then, there was the beneficiary- Ultimately, the beneficiary of our thing, Dr. Lisa Kaplowitz.

Chris: Beautiful person.

Rob: Who ran the Infectious Disease Clinic in MCV. And, she was kind of, professionally speaking, the face of AIDs in Richmond.

Chris: She was.

Rob: You know? I mean, she was it. And, there were other colleagues of hers. She wasn't, you know, a lone ranger, but that was how Richmond was addressing AIDs, through the MCV Infectious Disease Clinic and through RAIN. Later, RAM came along, Richmond AIDs Ministry. That was a few years later. And then, CVASE, Central Virginia AIDS Services and Education, which was more black oriented. I served on the board of CVASE, and yeah.

Rob: And so, you have to remember there was this newsletter out of San Francisco, I think, Treatment- AIDs Treatment Newsletter or something. There's nothing, nothing establishment. There was nothing, nothing that they could treat AIDs. This was pre-ACT even, you know? And so, people- It was coenzyme Q10, which was some nutty nutritional supplement. And, there was AL721, which you made in your own home with egg yolks. You know, that's what people were taking. And, going to Mexico for Interferon. And, it was a death sentence. So, that was the environment that we stepped into.

Chris: Guys, it's so impressive how much you were involved. It's so great. All those organizations. I was born in Baltimore. My father was a traveling salesman, and we just popped, popped, popped all around, and I couldn't stand it. And, I vowed when I was young that I would live some place for a long time, one place.

Chris: I danced professionally. I auditioned in New York City and I got into this minor dance company out in LA, and we traveled all over the United States and went to Europe. And, I taught at UCLA, and then I got... I just went, "Oh my God, I think I can dance some more." So, I moved back to New York and sort of got involved in the Downtown East-side scene. It's post modern dance. And then, when that hit, you know, when AIDs hit, it was this huge wake up call in New York. And, it was obvious there was, sort of, two camps, people who really modified their behavior, their sexual behavior, and then people who did not. And, when I moved down to Richmond, I felt like Richmond was years behind in their awareness of what was going on. And, if I would meet someone and we were going to, sort of, do the do, that person, most likely, was not interested in being safe at all, and just didn't know why I was so uptight.

Chris: So, it seemed really different to me. What else are we talking about? Just how we got... I was just aware in New York who was passing away, and it was profound. In New York, we were terrified, you know? I just remember my first friend, John Berndt, who was a choreographer that I danced for. And, we was the first person we all knew. And, it was one Summer. It was probably, like, '82. Maybe '83. He invited me over to his apartment on the East Side, and it was hot and he had his shirt off. He was going to cook dinner for us. And, one by one, he stood there in the kitchen- Because, I was like, "What's gonna happen? I don't know how this is transmitted." It was really the beginning. So, he washed every utensil in front of me in hot water, and then set the table. So, he was being really...

Chris: At one point, he turned his back to me and there was this quarter sized thing on his back, and I just said, "What's on your back?" And he said, "That's the last bit of real skin," because everything else, AIDs, his psoriasis and eczema had gone insane. So, his whole body was sort of flushed red, and there was no more skin.

Chris: So, at the end of the evening, I'm just eating and just going, "Oh, I don't know what I'm doing." But, I really- He was a friend and I was like, "I'm gonna be here." And, at the end, we kissed on the cheek. You know, I kissed him on the cheek and I left him. He lived East Village and I lived West Village. And, the kiss just, you know, terrified me. I just didn't know. You know, my mouth had made contact with his cheek and I walked all the way.

Chris: It was probably 40 minutes. I walked all the way back from the East Village to the West Village, to my apartment. I never swallowed. I never licked my lips. And, I got into my apartment, and I went to the bathroom and I washed my mouth out with soap. That was the climate in New York, because people were freaked.

Chris: So, beautiful, beautiful dancers. You know? And, my feeling was, "How am I here?" You know? How did I, seemingly, get through this without getting this? And then, I felt like there was some sort of responsibility, because they were so- That generation of gay men were so talented, just so incredibly talented. And, I was like, "I think we should do this." Do the AIDs benefit.

Chris: So, that's sort of where that came from. It's really interesting. When I got to Richmond, I ended up doing the Fast Forward series at the museum, which was a progressive, sort of modern, post-modern performing series. There was theater in it and there was dance, and I got a gig on that. I was the first Richmond person, and it was one of the most memorable nights of my life. Artist for Life, too, was certainly one of them, two of them.

Chris: And, that was like a peak for me. I just went, "I am totally, absolutely satisfied." This was... I think it was '87. And, I did that performance and I had that moment, and the next day, I was working registration down in the basement of the Mosque, Altria. We were doing registration for Fall, and I was in shorts because it was really hot. And, I looked down at my leg and all of the veins in my leg were red, going up to my groin because I had some sort of boil. And, it seemed really extreme and I went down to emergency in- ER at MCV. And, this young intern came in and he went, "What is that?" And I went, "I don't know. That's why I'm here." You know? And he said, "I'm gonna get a doctor."

Chris: And, this big, lesbian came in, a doctor, and she just went, "I have a question for you." And, I said, "I bet you do." She said, "Are you in the at-risk population?" And, I went, "I certainly am." She said, "We're going to test you right here," and I just went, "You're not."

Chris: I said, "I don't care who knows I'm gay, but I do care who knows if I have AIDs or not. And, I didn't have it, so... I don't know. It just really hit home, and there are a lot of times, as an artist or a performing artist. It's like, here are these big issues, and what do I do about it?"

Chris: You know? I'm not particularly a political activist. And then, I was just like, "Oh, I can bring some people together," and we brought... It was just the most eclectic, weird group.

Rob: It sure was.

Chris: We had- Virginia Opera came. They sang an aria. The Museum Theater, that group came. Marie Goodwin-Hunter did a scene from Night Mother. And, the Richmond Ballet came and [inaudible 00:20:07] Bumuntu. It was just really an eclectic group.

Rob: That guy, Zoot.

Chris: Zoot was, like, a pantomime mime. He did something about operating a gurney. He had a gurney. It was a great little program.

Rob: It was, yeah.

Chris: It was a great program. And then, the artists' community got Jack... I'll think of this. I can find his name out. But, the artists, the visual artists got excited, and they were like, "We want to be a part of this." So, it was like I went [inaudible] because it was so multi-faceted.

Chris: So, then I said, "You're just gonna have to do this." So, then they reached out to all the artists in the city, and we did a reception- Two receptions after each of the two performances at The Milk Bottle, right there behind that. And then, there was a silent auction of the art on the wall. And, we raised... The performances raised about 20,000 and the silent auction raised ten. So, it was a huge contribution.

Chris: And... Jack Plant... I think Jack Plant-

Rob: Jack Plant and Jeff were the Federal Reserve Bank. He was the head of their art.

Chris: He piloted that. So, every substantial artist of, you know, repute in this city contributed something.

Laura: I mean, what I wonder about is you're both describing coming to a city that's in the 19th century, backward, no one knows about safe sex-

Chris: They know about it. They don't think it's a big deal.

Laura: They don't think it's big deal!

Chris: They've not been hit. They've not been hit with friends going, you know?

Laura: So, where do you get from that 19th century Richmond to an event where the Federal Reserve is putting its stamp of approval on the event and saying, "Yes, this is important," where all of VCU Art School, it sounds like, is getting involved? Right? What's the trajectory? Do you know what I'm saying?

Rob: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, I would say, even in the old Richmond, there were always pockets. There was pockets of progressives. So, the Catholic Diocese was one. RPEC was one. The Quaker, the Meeting House was one. The portion of the gay community that had awareness was one. I mean, there was always pockets of people who knew what was going on in, you know, [inaudible 00:22:46] Richmond. You know?

Rob: And, I think it was that. We were working within those networks, you know?

Chris: Networking, I think, was how this grew.

Rob: Yeah. Yeah. And so, Style Weekly was just being invented then. Or, started, created, whatever. Lorna Wyckoff was the publisher and editor and found and, you know, general big mama of Style, and she, being a smart person, saw this as something that could give her a lot of visibility, a lot of publicity. She saw the vision pretty early on, that this could be something. You know?

Chris: I think she also had a really strong social conscience.

Rob: Yes, she did.

Chris: And so, she came onboard as a media sponsor, and then... It's on the poster. I don't remember her. I didn't listen to the radio, but one of the radio stations, sort of pop radio stations came aboard and they would do media sponsors. But, do you know what? When I moved down here, I feel like I had a long... I was not an easy... I didn't make peace with myself as a gay person for- It was long.

Chris: I came from really conservative roots and, you know, wanted to be the best little boy in the world, and you know. So, it was a long time, but when I finally went, "Oh, I'm embracing this," and I moved down here from New York- And, the very first dance I ever made in New York, I was gay on stage, and I told stories about who I was and friends that I knew. And, I moved down here, and...

Chris: The dances I made, right from the get-go, not everyone- I said, "I'm not just a gay artist," but it was obvious who I was to lots of them on stage, and it was really interesting. I remember going by one of the chairs of the other departments in the performing arts, and he called me into his office while I was walking by. I taught movement for actors in the theater department, and he said, "Come in here," and I went, "Okay." He said, "Shut the door." I went, "Okay. What are we doing?" He said, "What in the hell do you think you're doing?" And, I went, "Do you mean because my dances have gay themes?" And he said, "Is this career suicide or what?" And, I said, "Oh. I don't care about a career." You know? I came down here and, if I have to wait six years to find out they didn't want me because I was gay, then I'd rather get it over with now, that they don't want me.

Chris: So, I just felt like it was really important to be visible. If you're not politically motivated, I feel like the other thing is just be visible in who you are. You're not like on a soap box, but... So, then, my performances were already like that. They had that element. And, after Fast Forward, that first concert, I felt like I had some sort of visibility. And, I went,

"What do I want to do with that?" And, I went, "I feel like I could do this thing." That was the seed of... You know, address this social issue. And, the money that was split went to patient care and research down at MCV. So, half of it and half of it.

Chris: One more thing. She spoke at the benefit and she was just-

Laura: Lisa did.

Chris: Lisa did, and she was not a performer. She was shy on stage, but then she just spoke. And, oh my God. Everyone in the audience just, you know. This is someone pretty evolved on stage.

Laura: I'm interested in two things that you've said. Well, many things, but questions about two of them. First of all, I wonder what it was like when you're really becoming comfortable in your identity. New York is a place where it's much easier to be comfortable in a whole range of identities, right? And, you moved to- I don't want to say the most backwards city on Earth, but-

Chris: One of them.

Laura: Right? You move from New York, a place where there's a huge, out gay community to Richmond, where there are so many repressive laws, customs, atmosphere. Why did you make that choice at that time? What led you to that?

Chris: Oh, well, I had gone to school here at RPI.

Laura: Okay.

Chris: Which later became VCU. And, my parents had moved from Richmond back here. So, my mom and dad were here in '83, because I came down for a semester as guest artist in '84. But, I was trying to come the year before because my mom was really ill. So, my mom passed away, and then I was the guest artist in the Fall of '84. And, my father was here alone, and I was like...

Chris: My sister lived at Virginia Beach, I think, and my brother lived in San Francisco. And, I was like, "Oh." I think gay people and their families can sometimes be available for things that other siblings are not available for because they have children or a big career. And, I went, "Huh." Dad wasn't the parent of empathy for me. That had been my mom, but I went, "I could come back here and be a part of this chapter for him," and so I came back. Someone should have said, "Don't come back for that." You know? But I did. So, that was the reason.

Chris: And, I had been the guest artist the Fall of '84 and they really liked me. It was a clique. We did well together. It was a good place for me. So, I came, but one of the reasons I came was my dad. Plus, I was tired as an artist. In New York City, I would wake up in a panic that, four days from now, I was gonna have to pay the rent. And, I was doing all

these, sort of, really no-money gigs. And, growing as and an artist, but going, "Oh my God. The next three nights, I gotta cater some parties."

Chris: Now, I'm early thirties. I need to take care of my creature comforts. I'm just hysterical all the time, because I don't have health insurance, I don't have... So, yeah. A number of different things.

Patricia: And then, what was it about that night at Fast Forward that was so impactful for you, that made that one of the best nights of your life?

Chris: Oh, I was a late start as a dancer. I had lots of, sort of, physical limitations. If you say this is the checklist for a phenomenal dancer: phenomenal feet, legs that go up to here... And, I didn't have a lot of those. But, I had so much passion and I just loved it, the feeling of it. But, it was difficult, because there were dancers who had their gifts and their list was much more substantial than mine.

Chris: But, the very first thing... It was the second thing, but in New York, I choreographed something. It was stories about my neighbor in LA and this older woman, and how she helped me and inspired me, and her strength. You know, one of them was, she was encouraging... I was going to a drag party. My men's group were arguing about drag and, you know, is this something we should all be doing? And, after a while, it was like, "I don't want to talk about it anymore. Let's just do it." Anyway, she was supportive and, at one point, I was in her apartment. I was trying on her each mumus, and I had her big shell earrings on. I was just like, "I don't know how I got here."

Chris: Anyway, I seem to click as a choreographer, and that is when I found my voice. I went, "Oh, this is who I am. I am a good dancer, given if it's within my skillset." And then, choreographically, I was like... And, I thought it was a compromise to move down here from New York, but it was anything but. I felt like I had studio space for free, dancers for free, audiences that wanted to see it, and... Yeah.

Chris: So, I felt like I made an awful lot of work here.

Patricia: I saw that on the flyer it said "Burnside and Dance Company." So, can you tell us a little bit about the dance company?

Chris: Yeah. I incorporated for a while. That was another mistake, because every day I would go home and there would be a stack of administrative things from the State and the City and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I finally got out of that, but it was pick up people. I didn't have regular people all the time and rehearsal all the time. It was like, we're gonna do this, and then I would get a new group and we're gonna do this.

Chris: And, I thought we did really well as a steering committee. Don't you?

Rob: The five of us?

Chris: Yeah.

Rob: There were challenges. There were challenges, but there always is in a complicated event. But, we pulled it off, certainly.

Patricia: What were the challenges?

Rob: Oh, personality. We weren't all easy to work with.

Chris: There were some egos.

Rob: Yeah.

Chris: There were at least four egos. Three. At least three egos.

Laura: Lisa said that she was just amazed that you came up with the idea and said, "Let's do it," and you did it, because she said that, for her, the idea of being able to pull something together, create this committee, raise the money, have this amazing night heckled by bankers from the outside and incredible energy from the inside, she just thought that was life-changing for her.

Rob: She was very young then. She was the youngest of us.

Chris: For sure.

Rob: So, she may have not have had as much experience in this regard as the rest of us. We were all young. How old were we?

Chris: I bet I was the oldest, maybe me and Julie. I was probably... So, when was that? It was '88. I was 41.

Rob: Okay.

Chris: I was 41.

Rob: All right.

Chris: Or I just turned 40.

Rob: So, you were older than I thought.

Chris: Yeah. I looked damn good then.

Rob: But, we had no organization. There was no Artists for Life Inc. or anything like that behind us. It was literally us five. That's who did it, you know? And, I think it was partially naivete that helped us do it.

- Chris: Absolutely.
- Rob: You know? Because we were just like, "Let's do this!" It's like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, you know? Let's put on a show!
- Chris: With no funds!
- Rob: Yeah. And so, we did. I had no expectations. I couldn't picture it. I thought it was a fabulous idea and I wanted to be a part of it, but I couldn't picture it, so it was hard for me to be disappointed.
- Rob: I just... Like, let's just do this. Yeah, let's do this. Let's do this. Let's do this. And, I didn't know how it would be. So, it kind of didn't matter. For me, doing it was as important as the result.
- Laura: What were your biggest goals, as you worked through these meetings with sometimes clashing egos and enormous lists of things to do, what were your big goals with the event?
- Rob: Well, to make money. We wanted it to work, you know, to make money and contribute to the AIDs fight in Richmond. I, personally, wanted it to be really high quality because it would have been embarrassing if it wasn't. You know, that was an ego thing.
- Chris: I thought, you know, a benefit is a benefit. But, for me, the other unspoken is you're just going to bring visibility to this, this issue. And, I thought Richmond seemed way behind, and they seemed like they should be more aware of it, the issue, and people should just come out in support of it, and not have it be this, sort of, covert subject.
- Chris: The thing that was really inspiring, because, if you do something like this and there is no money, you're either going to have to get some money or... We went down to- It was Theater Four, then. It was an old, antiquated theater. And, I talked to them and they said, "Listen. We will give you the theater for two nights and one day of tech if we're a part of this." So, then the Theater Four rep became a part of it. And then, you need a huge technical staff. You need people to hang lights, you need people to run the show, you need a sound person, and everybody came in pro bono.
- Chris: So, the museum theater people came, the Richmond Ballet Theater people came, Theater Four, techies from all over the city came. It was something people just gave of their time because the performing arts know. You know, they were starting to see people hit in their communities, among the performers. So, people just really came forward and provided things pro bono. Like Lorna, you know? I know she, and I've heard her speak about other things since. And, this was something that was still in the forefront of issues, and she wanted to be a part of that and support it.
- Rob: This was the first for her. Some people did want to jump on it and get with it, those who were nothing to know.

Chris: Right. Yeah, we did well. The audiences were pretty big.

Rob: And, as you said, the support that was necessary to make this happen was huge.

Chris: But, there were many networks that word spread and then those people supported it. Whether it was the arts community or, you know, the gay community or the political community.

Rob: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura: Rob, can you talk a little bit about how the political community, the left got involved? Had the political community here seen AIDs as one of its big issues?

Rob: No. No, it hadn't. It was a gay issue, of course, and gay was here and straight was here. There was some overlap because most gay people are kind of leftist-liberal, but not all.

Rob: But, there wasn't that much overlap. The liberal progressive communities in Richmond certainly supported it by attending. I mean, a lot of the people that I knew from that world were attendees, and they were enthusiastic about it, but we really didn't need to go to them for support. I mean, we had that train rolling.

Rob: And so, I think it was the first time that AIDs then became an issue for the non-gay progressive left, that Artists for Life actually fueled an increase in awareness for HIV and AIDs activism among the non-gay left. And, it led to many things. It led to many things. There was that second Artists for Life, there was the Heartstrings. Remember Heartstrings?

Chris: Yeah.

Rob: A national thing that came through another AIDs benefit.

Chris: Which was too big. The concept for that was too big. It was a tennis match and a performance and... Go ahead, sorry.

Rob: There was an inter-faith AIDs thing that the churches put together. The Diocese, the Catholic Diocese, again amazing, established a commission on sexual minorities and started having yearly conferences for gay and lesbian people. And, it was all because Artists for Life sort of opened the eyes of the non-gay left. They said, "Oh God! This is a problem. Oh, yes. We need to do this as well as nuclear weapons." You know?

Patricia: So, how long did you organize the benefits? Twice or more?

Chris: So we... I just haven't...

Chris: Not long.

Rob: No, not long.

Chris: Because we threw this together. Because I did Fast Forward in the Fall of '87 and we did this May of '88.

Patricia: Whoa. That's pretty fast.

Chris: May of '88. So, we just took that and somehow made it happen. But, another interesting thing: when I moved from New York and I was looking for a place to do my own performance, I was like, "Oh I like this," which was Theater Four. I said, "I like this theater a lot. I want to do it here," and everybody was like, "Oh, no no no no." You know, "West End won't come East of Boulevard. They won't." And, I was like, "Huh. Oh well." And then they came anyway because they were interested to see.

Chris: So, there was certainly what Rob was talking about. It was a place of roles and old Richmond. But, it was great to be a part of that, where we were breaking that down.

Patricia: Did you face any obstacles? I'm thinking about organizations or people who were not necessarily supportive of what you were doing.

Rob: I don't really remember.

Chris: I remember going to the provost at VCU. We went in and I took Sharon Kenny with me. She was from the dance department. She was helping and we went in to talk to them. I wanted to sell him tickets to the show, and he was doing this, you know, la-di-dah. And then, I started to get really angry.

Chris: And then, Sharon was just like... So, I felt like VCU, the institution, was not supportive of that event. And, she got me out of there. We had our ABC license debacle.

Patricia: What was that?

Chris: I was handling getting an ABC license for the milk bottle reception, and I had the fervor, but I was also teaching full time, and it was huge what we were doing. And, this guy was saying, "No, you can't have this," or something, and I ended up screaming profanities into the phone and slamming it down. And, he called you at work, and you said, "I'll come over. I'm getting you and we're going to the ABC license place," which is over there in [inaudible 00:43:35]. And then, we got there to the parking lot and you said, "You will sit in the car."

Chris: And, about a half hour later, he came out and he had the license. And, I said, "How did that go?" He said, "I talked to the guy that you talked to." I said, "Oh." "He said you were the rudest human being he had ever met in his life."

Chris: But, it was... At that point, I was in counseling with Francis Stewart, who was a part of the Stephen [inaudible 00:44:12] Counseling Services, and after it was over, she said,

"So, what's next?" I went, "I don't know. I don't like who I had to become to make this. You know, we all had to push, but I felt like I-

Rob: You most of all.

Chris: And, I just don't like who that was. I felt like I had- You know, screaming, "Fuck you," at the ABC guy, it was just a lot. It brought a different part of my personality to the fore, and I didn't enjoy being that persona. So, I think it's hard-

Rob: You were the main guy. The other four of us were sort of your helpers, but you were definitely the main guy. You probably had more of the burden than any of the rest of us.

Chris: And, the performers.

Rob: Yeah. You dealt with the performers. Dealing with that many performers, that in itself...

Chris: And, there wasn't a diva in the bunch.

Chris: Oh my God! I was like, "Get off! If I had a hook, I would pull you off!"

Laura: It sounds like that was the event that made AIDs activism visible to a larger community. Is that fair to say?

Rob: I think that is fair to say. I mean, again, there was RAIN. RAIN was here already, and I don't know when RAM happened, so there was something going on. But, it was very ghetto-ized. And, I think that's what made AIDs visible to the non-gay community.

Chris: I didn't... I was in the performing arts, so I didn't have a sense of that. That's great. That's great.

Laura: When was your first interaction with HIV or AIDs here in Richmond? I know you've spoken about it in New York City. But, the community here in Richmond, what was your interaction?

Rob: I can hardly remember. I just remember reading about... So, I don't know what I was reading, a magazine or something. It had a picture of this guy, young guy, very handsome, good build, and then it showed him right before he died, of AIDs, of course. And, it was like he was a totally different person.

Rob: He was just like this skeletal [inaudible 00:46:56]. His skin had blackened and his eyes big. It shocked me. Still, decades later, I still remember that moment. Because, I knew AIDs was a disease that gay people get, and if you get it, you die. But, I didn't know that's what the death actually looks like, you know? It just shocked the shit out of me.

Rob: And, that's when I became aware. Oh my God, this is something I have to deal with in my life and I have to address this. Not just in my personal behavior, which I immediately

started doing, but as something that has to be addressed socially and psychologically and spiritually and culturally. And so, that's when I went to RAIN, to their AIDs buddy program. I figured that's what I could do.

Rob: That was crazy, by the way.

Patricia: Can you tell us about it?

Rob: Well, the training was good. The training was really good. Norma did, actually, a good job on that.

Chris: Who?

Rob: Norma [inaudible 00:47:57].

Chris: Okay.

Rob: She actually did a good job on that.

Chris: Oh, good.

Rob: But, then I got assigned to this crazy guy from one of the projects up in Church Hill, and he just wanted too much, you know? He just wanted too much. Like, I got a call, 1:30 in the morning. "Rob, you gotta come up here to my apartment. I picked up a guy on Broad St. and I think he's gonna kill me." And, I said, "Listen, I'm not coming out to the projects in the middle of the night to rescue you from a guy who's gonna kill you. If you're alive tomorrow, call me."

Chris: And, was he alive?

Rob: Yeah, he was alive and he did call me.

Rob: So, that was the first time it became real to me, because there I had a guy. I had a guy who needed a lot of stuff, because he lived up- I forget if it was Cretan or... I don't know which one is up there, across from the Martin Luther King School. I forget which one that is. But, yeah. He needed everything. Like, here I was, smart and professional and educated and I know resources and I get what I need. And, this guy... This guy couldn't handle lunch, you know?

Rob: And so, that was my first exposure. And then, people started dying.

Chris: Richmond people.

Rob: Yeah, Richmond people who I knew. They had died previous.

Chris: And then, people here.

Rob: Yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura: It's interesting, because we've talked to a lot of people from those early days. People like Jim Beckner or, of course, Bill Harrison, Rodney Lockden, and everyone talks about their interactions around AIDs in the 80s and early 90s in terms of the white, middle class people that they knew.

Laura: And so, it's interesting to hear you talk about having an AIDs buddy in the projects, because that's never come up before. So, was the AIDs community a little more integrated in terms of race and class than we've been hearing during that time?

Rob: Well, I think it was integrated in terms of race and class to a certain extent. Yes, it was. And, what you're hearing, which is accurate, is that it wasn't integrated enough. As usual, as is always the case, white guys with money got all the attention. I mean, right? That's always the case. But, it wasn't exclusively so. For instance, I mentioned this organization, CVASE, Central Virginia AIDs Services and Education. That was focused directly on the black community, and that was meant to correct the imbalance that RAM and RAIN had. Neither of them were exclusively white focused. Nothing was ever exclusively white. But, it's just, when white people are involved in something, we tend to be the dominant voice, no matter what it is, because that's-

Chris: We're used to it.

Rob: Just how society is set up. Yeah. Right. But, there was always integration, and there was always some involvement and outreach into minority communities.

Laura: Interesting, because, at that time, my impression of Richmond at that time was that a lot of white, progressive people simply did not know people in the projects or how to communicate with them or even get in touch with them. So, I'm interested in how this guy from the projects, who was your AIDs buddy, got in touch with RAIN or RAIN found him. Do you know what I'm asking?

Rob: Yes. Yes, I do and I don't know how that happened. But, he did. He did find them or they found him, and it wasn't the only one. It did happen, but it was happening enough below the radar screen that it wasn't obvious to a lot of people.

Laura: You know, another question that I think has been eating at us a little bit... You know, we've heard so much about Act Up in other cities, not all of them New York. Like, Glenn Hues, very involved with Act Up in Baltimore. We've never heard a peep about Act Up in Richmond. Is that because it just never found traction here or because people don't talk about it?

Rob: I've never heard of it in Richmond.

Chris: Oh.

Rob: Was it ever here?

Chris: Yeah.

Rob: It was?

Chris: Yeah. So, I was chair of the dance department. This is after Art-

Patricia: What years are we talking?

Chris: That I was chair of the-

Laura: No, no, no. That you first started hearing about Act Up and...

Chris: I would say...

Chris: Oh God.

Chris: '91. No. So, I would have hear Act Up, probably, late 80s. I would have heard of it. So, then I was chair from '91 to '96, of the dance department. And, some young man had taken one of our dance classes, and the teacher, for his money, said something. "Don't dance like a gay guy," or a fag or something. I just heard what he said. So, then he got all incensed, and he connected with Act Up.

Chris: And then, it became this big, political thing, and the newspaper was coming for and interview. And, I got these kids. The Act Up kids, they came to my office, and they were looking to me for support. And, I went, "You got the wrong person. She might have made a mistake, but she was a part of Artists for Life. This is not a prejudiced human being. She put her artistry and her time into being a part of this, and I think you have the wrong person. I think what you're doing is absolutely..." You know. But, they were really young. And then, the newspaper came. I met them on the front steps and I went, "There is no issue. I've talked to Act Up and I think this is dissipating. So, I'm not going to comment about anything."

Chris: Oh, and I think I brought the woman the Act Up kids together, and then we had a discussion. And, I was just like... You know, I think she learned something and I think they learned something. I said, "Don't destroy this person's career. This is somebody who has supported what we're doing in one form or the other."

Laura: So, was Act Up active at VCU, or was this, kind of, a one off thing?

Chris: I think they had a life here.

Laura: Okay.

Chris: I think they had a life here. I don't know much about it. I'd heard of them and I'd heard them doing things in Richmond. The only time I ever interacted with them was this event. They were young students and they were part of it, and they came. Their motivation, their political motivation, I thought was displaced. Not totally displaced, but I thought, for the most part, here's this really great person who has been supportive. So, she's not the enemy.

Laura: But, it sounds like Act Up was not very visible in Richmond.

Rob: I don't remember them at all.

Laura: Yeah.

Chris: I want to tell a side story.

Laura: Please do.

Chris: So, I think it's really, really important, what you're doing. I think, to talk to people who were actually in the street and involved to some extent... In 2010, my partner got a big job down at Elon University down in North Carolina. And, we were there and they had... I thought I always wanted to be involved with this culture, but it was the performing arts. It was a musical theater. So, the performing arts, that department housed theater and dance and technical theater and performing arts history and musical theater.

Chris: So, I just thought, "Oh, God. Here are these young people who can do everything. They can sing, they can dance, they can act." So, one year, they ask- There's organization in New York called Broadway Cares, where they, at the end of the shows, the director comes out and says something, and then they pass the buckets. And, the performers who were on stage stand in the aisles and everything. So, then there was a version of that at Elon called Elon Cares. But, you know, Elon is not a very diverse population of people, and they tend to be upper economic strata and up. So, one year they asked me to be their mentor for this, and I was like, "Oh great. I've got this idea for choreography." And I told them, I said, "You're gonna sing 'I am a Walrus' by The Beatles and we're gonna do this stuff.

Chris: So, I got eight of them, eight of the guys, and they were all enthusiastic, they all knew the song, and I went, "So, this is like free association choreography, and we're gonna go back to the 60s. There's gonna be a little pop of this and a pop of that, a pop of this. So, you just grab your partner and just kiss him on the mouth, and just throw him away. And, da-da-da. And then, you do a little Michael Jackson, da-da-da. And then, you shoot a gun."

Chris: It was just all this, sort of, 60s pop stuff. And, by the time I got home, one guy had quit. And, he was like, "I think you're such a sweet person." I went, "I'm not." And then, someone else quit the next morning.

Chris: So, then I got together with the six- And, that was diverse. There was a good, diverse group of kids, but they were mostly gay. You know, the straight guys were hanging on. This kiss doesn't mean anything to me. And, these gay guys were, "No! My parents are gonna be in the audience!" And, I went, "But, I thought we had come so far with this."

Chris: So, I said, "I'm the teacher and I'm here to take-" They said, "If you would take these things out, we'd be fine with this." And, I was like, "Uh-uh. It's been too long. I'm not changing anything for you and your discomfort. But, I am the teacher and I'm gonna take care of you, and we're just not gonna do the piece."

Chris: Then, I sort of fell to the sidelines of this whole thing, this night of song and dance. So, then, all of a sudden, they realized, Chris has to say something. And I went, "And, I will."

Chris: So, we did two performances at this, and I came out and I just said, "This is a wonderful endeavor and there's some great talent on this stage. And, I thought I would just tell you what this is, why we're here. And, if you'll indulge me." And, I had ten friends who had disappeared. And, I talked a little about each friend. And then, we went on for the finale or whatever it was.

Chris: And, one of the big administrators at Elon found me the next day. And, he said, "I was there with my wife and my two kids," and, "My boy was nine. And, we came out of the theater and my wife and I said to the kids. 'What did you think? What was your favorite part?'" And, the little boy said, "When the old guy told us why we were here. And, I went, "Huh. Okay. I'm not a walrus, but it went okay." And, I think that whole group of kids had no idea, really, what it was that we were doing, where Broadway Cares come from, and what Elon Cares had been. It'd just been an additional night to shine.

Chris: So, I think it's important that this generation, this young generation, because, as people fell, you just got on with your life. But, something... You close something off with each of that. And, I went, "Oh. I'm doing this." And, you were ambitious in having your career, but then this whole group of people were just going. They left.

Chris: In my field, they were phenomenally, phenomenally talented. One of them was one of the reasons I ever danced. I saw him dance on stage and it was just like, oh my God. This is male beauty come down from heaven. This guy was so beautiful, and he was in one of the first wave in New York who went.

Chris: And, that just seems... I mean, he never knew his impact on me, that he just motivated me. So, this generation, I just feel like it's gigantic, that hole that was left.

Laura: What would you want to tell this generation about HIV and AIDs?

Chris: I think that there are people who came before them, who came before me, who were braver than me, who I owe a huge debt to, who we all owe a huge debt to. People who were so brave. My first Los Angeles Gay Pride Parade, I went into West Hollywood and I'm standing on Santa Monica Blvd., and around the corner comes 50 dykes on bikes. I'm just like... And then, there was this midland level parade, and then, around the corner at

the end comes 50 drag queens in convertibles. And, I was just like, "Huh. I just don't know where I fit into all of this, but I'm here."

Chris: And, we went across the street to the park. We were all sitting on blankets, and there was haranguing and screaming activism into the microphone. And it was just like, oh, God. And, everybody was just talking and ignoring that.

Chris: And then, this voice came on, and it was this eloquent, impassioned voice talking to us about what we needed to do to move the gay movement forward. I leaned over to the blanket next to me and I said, "Who is that?" And, they said, "Oh, that's the Supervisor from San Francisco, Harvey Milk." And, it was like, God, what a voice and what a vision.

Chris: And, I changed my behavior from sitting on that little blanket. He said, "Come out to everybody you know," and I was like, "I will. I will." So, I would say this generation... And, I didn't know who came before me or anything, but they were brave. First, I was like, "Drag queens make me uncomfortable." Then, I came to see, oh my God. They were the bravest of the brave. They were visibly making their presence known and making people reconsider what was going on.

Chris: Because, the rest of us were hiding, mostly. For a part of it, anything. But, my partner is, like, 14 years younger than me, and he had a completely different experience. He sort of never thought about it, and then one day he went, "Oh, I'm gay." And then, he went, "Okay. I am," rather than this other life of, "My God, this is..." Because, I don't know about you, but I knew at five that I was.

Rob: I probably did, too. I didn't have words for it, of course.

Chris: Right? I knew it was something not to talk about.

Rob: Although, it wasn't hard for me to come out. I think I fell into good situations.

Laura: What year did you come out? How old were you?

Rob: Well, you know, it doesn't happen in a moment. It's a process, right? So, to myself, it was during college. It was late. It had been percolating for a long time, decades, but when I finally said, "This is me," college. Because, the pressure was so intense to, like, do the chicks. And, you know, I wasn't into that. So, I said, "Is this like scotch? I have to acquire a taste for it? Do I just have to jump into this and it'll start being fun?"

Rob: And, when I tried that, I realized, no, this isn't like scotch. I'm not going to acquire a taste for this.

Laura: So, 70s?

Rob: Yes. I'd say, like, probably about 1970, '71. Yeah. And then, it was rather easy to start coming out to people. That hardest part was coming out to myself. And, like I said, I

landed in good situations. So, when I came to Richmond for my first adult job, it was no problem. The Catholic Diocese of Richmond. It was no problem. It was not an issue.

Patricia: Can you talk a little bit about your activism? So, when did you get involved, just in general in terms of social justice?

Rob: Oh, always. I don't know why, but always. Always. I knew that would be central to my life. So, I've gone through the whole activism menu. Started off with kids with autism in college, as a kind of extra curricular, just to do something for other people instead of just the whole college scene.

Rob: And then, people with mental illness and the prisons. A lot in prisons. Again, with the Catholic Diocese, did a lot of work in prisons. Anti-death penalty, Peace Center, Justice of Peace concerns, nuclear disarmament, anti-racism in more recent more years.

Rob: So, it's always been something. I think it's just kind of how I'm structured, you know? I knew I'd never be a corporate person, never make a lot of money.

Laura: It's been so interesting for us. Last year, we taught a class about HIV in Richmond, and used the oral history transcripts for our students to create a documentary drama, which we performed at Richmond Triangle Players. We're gonna do it again this year, December 1st, World AIDs Day. But, the first text we assigned them was that photo book, "Lesbian and Gay Life in Richmond."

Chris: I remember that, yes.

Laura: I don't know if you've seen it. And, they were so offended. They were so offended by the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian.'

Rob: Oh, yes.

Chris: Yes. Absolutely.

Laura: Because, they're so beyond that now.

Chris: They're so beyond that.

Laura: And, we were such dinosaurs.

Rob: Yes.

Laura: In that class to them.

Rob: Yes.

Laura: And, that's been very interesting to see.

Rob: Yes. Yes. The generational divide is very, really a powerful element. I'm very aware that my time on the stage is over, and as soon as my term on the RPEC is done in December, that's it, you know? We have to start our meetings saying, "What are my pronouns?" He, him; she, her; or they, them?

Rob: That drives me crazy.

Chris: Does anybody say, "It"?

Rob: No, but I want to. It drives me crazy. Drives me crazy. The issues are different. The issues are different. They're not my issues anymore. And, you were saying, "What would you tell the generation, the next generation?" So, I would say older people like me, yes, our time is over and we are retrogressive, and I don't get some of what drives you and energizes you, but don't think that we're the enemy. We had our time in the trenches and we did stuff, and now it's your time to be in the trenches, and you do stuff. But, don't just write us off and call us the enemy because, you know, "White people just don't get us."

Chris: I was still a "He."

Rob: Yeah. But, that's a very difficult dynamic, the new generation versus the old, and it's...

Laura: But, it's interesting, too, because it affects how much they think about or don't think about AIDs, now that HIV has become, primarily, a disease of poor, black people.

Rob: Yes.

Laura: Right? I mean, I'm sure you've heard the statistics, right? Just in the US, overall, every one of us has a one in 99 chance of contracting HIV during our lifetimes. And, for black men who have sex with men, it's one in two.

Chris: Wow.

Laura: So, it's a huge divide. Huge.

Chris: I think the whole thing around gender and sexual orientation identification, the whole thing about Sigmund Freud gave the terms in his era, and he was saying, "This is homosexual." And, before, straight men would have sex with men, and did not consider themselves at all homosexuals, because they inserted their stuff into another guy, someplace. So, they were still the inserter, which meant they were heterosexual.

Chris: And then, Sigmund Freud said, "That's not true. If you're having sex with men, that's homosexual." So, then that whole group just changed their behavior, because they didn't want to be this label. And, it was like, oh, I think fluidity was much more prevalent before all these words came out.

Chris: And, I certainly felt fluid in my youth. And then, as it went along, I was like, "Oh. This has a lot more weight to it than this." And, I like that they're talking about that and they're fluid, and I don't want to be called gay.

Chris: Or, Lucas Hedges, who was the star boy at [inaudible 01:11:03], I heard an NPR interview with him. And, she said, "I heard that you just said that you aren't straight, that you're on the spectrum someplace," and he said, "I think I am. I'm 22, I haven't worked it all out yet, but I certainly feel like I have lots of different possibilities, and I don't need to say who I am. I don't feel the need to identify myself as straight or gay or bi." And, I think that's really healthy.

Rob: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I agree.

Laura: Yeah. My daughter feels no need whatsoever to identify herself as any particular thing. She's 19, and-

Chris: But, that's political, too.

Laura: Yeah, it is. It's very political.

Chris: I think it's true, and I think it's something that you could own inside yourself or talk about with your friends, but I just don't like when things get politicized. Or, this is politically correct to say, "I'm this or that." But, I did.

Patricia: Are there any thing that we didn't ask you that you'd like to say?

Chris: I would say, when I got your email and that Lisa said that it was... I do remember that it was really stressful, but that is certainly not what I remember. I remember that people wanted to be involved and wanted to give. So, I remember Julie was really strong, and she wanted to make this a really out there, confrontational... And, I was like, I do think it'll be confrontational. It will be out there. But, I don't think we do it by blasting what this is about. I think you just have this event.

Chris: You talk about it. There was a two page ad in the Los Angeles Time, the Sunday Times one Sunday, and they were promoting Night for Human Rights at the Hollywood Bowl, all the performers. Barbara Streisand and Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, they were all signing this. And, Bette Idler's production company put it on. And, we went and that's what it was. It was a fundraiser for gay and lesbian rights, and no one, no one at all that night spoke about why we were there. It was like a smorgasbord of performances that had no context for why we were there. And, everyone had come for the context.

Chris: And, I wanted to make sure, in our event, that there was context, that people were speaking about why we were there. And, they did. The hosts for the evening spoke about it. But, Lisa Kaplowitz put we're there for. And, this is an event for...

Chris: And, I wanted to make sure that my piece was- Obviously, it had a gay theme that night. There's a difference in what you're presenting. One is just a fundraiser fluff ball of an evening, and the other is an evening that has entertainment value, but has content.

Laura: What was the mood among the audience that night, both before, during, and then afterwards, at the milk bar? And, what was the mood outside the theater? Because, Lisa talked to us a little bit about that, as well

Rob: I don't remember outside the the theater. The mood of the audience was wonderful. They were aware they were at an event, an historic event in Richmond, the first of it's kind. And, they were happy to be part of it. And, the reception...

Chris: The reception what?

Rob: Dika Newland.

Chris: Oh, Dika Newland. Dika Newland, she want wanted to perform. Her and her manager-partner or whatever were all over me. And, I was like, "No, no, no, no, no. No, you can't be on stage. We're not gonna put the audience through that." So, somehow Dika Newland was in where all the tables were with the food, and people would be outside the door. And, they'd run in, grab a plate full of food and they'd run out, because she was just screaming like a banshee.

Laura: Can you explain to Lucrezia who Dika Newland was? Because, she was such a figure in Richmond.

Chris: She was a part of the music department's faculty, but she was ancient and she performed, but it was sort of a rock... God, it was just an avant garde rock-cat-in-heat kind of thing.

Laura: Because, she'd been a student of Schoenberg's, hadn't she?

Chris: Yes. Yes. Yes. And, I heard that the dean, Dean Tosken, finally, because hardly anybody took her classes and she was on full salary and everything. And, I think he personally went to her, and there was a real cushy exit deal.

Laura: Dika Newland was famous to me because, one time- You know, we've all been in the situation where we told our students that we'd have their graded papers back to them and we haven't gotten to them. She called in a bomb scare to the classroom.

Chris: She had not a minute of the day for me. She just- I'd go, "Hey, Dika!" And, she'd walk on by. Until we did the benefit. Then, she would- [inaudible 01:16:55]. And, I was like, "Okay. I think you want something."

Laura: So, after Dika is howling into the microphone, what else happens at the milk bar? Were people still-

Chris: Some students, some students of mine were doing little performing experiences in some of the rooms. So, you would go in, there would be, like, six of you. And then, they would do this thing that was sort of interactive. That was Ray Schwartz and Amy Garmin. Do you remember that?

Rob: Uh-uh. I don't remember. The art was wonderful. You know, the building itself. You know, it's renovated as apartments now, but-

Laura: Yeah, what was it like back then?

Rob: It was just vacant. It was just sitting there. It was a great building, with the milk bottles and everything, but it was just sitting there, vacant and kind of dirty and not kept up. So, it was a really cool environment for that kind of party.

Laura: How did you end up getting this space?

Rob: I don't know. You got it Chris. Didn't you?

Chris: I did get it. I don't remember how. I remember the process that I was working on to convince. But, as I said- Oh, because what I mostly remember: really, really positive energy. I don't remember the resistance much, or the conflict. But, people were strong. There were strong opinions. And, the next event I went, I said, "I'm not gonna have a steering committee. It's just gonna be me," which came with its own set of issues. And then, I did an event, a big benefit, and I made it into a two semester class at VCU.

Chris: They were like, "What's the class gonna be?" And, I went, "The class is gonna be how to put on a benefit." So, this Summer course, I said, "This is six months out. This is six months out to three months out. This is what you do to get ready for a benefit six months out to three months out. And, those kids with no experience at all, you know?"

Chris: And then, the Fall course was, this is three months out to the event. You know, we're gonna have the event.

Rob: What event was it?

Chris: It was for Africa.

Rob: Oh.

Chris: I had gone with a school of social work to Ghana. And, there was another one... It was just like, oh my God. This is life. This is life some place else. And, I was disturbed by that. I came home and said, "I can't do anything. I'm not a social worker."

Chris: But, I liked what you talked about, because I think what I've noticed in the arts is there are people who, this is what they do. If I'm going to be a choreographer, I'm going to be the best choreographer of my generation, blah blah blah. Or, I'm going to be a

Pablo Picasso, or I'm gonna be a duh duh. And then, I think there are other kids, emerging artists, where they want to put it in context. You know, I am this artist, but how does that inform the greater good?

Chris: And, I always felt a responsibility to their other things happening. And, I would like to be a part of that. You know, trying to add a drop to that solution. And, I think we need all kinds of people. And, some of those maniacally focused performing artists were a part of this. They came on stage. But... It's sort of like earning your place in the world, it feels to me.

Laura: Yeah. That's beautifully put.

Chris: Oh, about the other thing, I would disagree. I feel like I'm on my way out, yes. But, I don't feel like it's over yet. I feel there are things to add, and I think there's still... An ancient person can still ripple out. We might not have the right language. That's why dancers don't speak. Anyway...

Laura: I feel like I know all of these people in their 80s. I interviewed a guy recently who was 87, and he was still going to these international Marxist conferences all over the world, just in it.

Rob: I saw three old men just today, on the way here. Three old, bald, white-haired men marching down the boulevard with a sign, "Build Peace". Just three old me, just marching. And I thought, "Good for you, guys. Good for you."

Rob: What it was, I don't know, but they were still at it

Patricia: But, you mentioned the Africa event as part of the benefit. Can you talk a little bit about that? So, the class that you did was towards this HIV-

Chris: Benefit.

Patricia: Benefit, but it was connect to-

Chris: No, no. It wasn't HIV.

Rob: Separate event. Separate.

Chris: It was a separate thing. This was- Because, we were in the capital of Accra in Ghana, and it was heart rending. I had just never-

Laura: Seen that.

Chris: Seen that. There were clans of children, clans of children who lived in the city, that some of them had been sent from their country families to help make a living, or one of the parents had come with the children and the other was in the country, and their parents,

most of them died from AIDs. So, there just these... You know, they were all just kids. And, they would come out of the woodwork, and the group we interfaced with addressed those issues and brought meals to them once a week. And, it was just like... I had never had a face-to-face with that at all.

Chris: So, yeah. By that time, I was out of VCU full-time, and I had proposed this course, and my office was at the Harrison Street Café. And, I just sat there and had my meetings with the students who were gonna- Because, we had a silent auction for that, too. And, I said, "Well, here's your agenda when you talk to the curator, Ashley Kissler."

Laura: Okay.

Chris: And then, she would said, "I'm going to say this and this," and I went, "I'll come, too," because that's not how you talk to the curator of the Hand Workshop, at that point.

Chris: You know, and we made, or Africa made like \$50,000, which translated into big bucks in Ghana. And, they put in a rural school, the first level rural school.

Chris: But, those kids, the kids in those classes, several of them changed their majors after those classes, because they came from the entire population of VCU. Some were art students and some were... And, you know, people were, "I'm going to go into nursing," "I'm going to go into this..."

Chris: I think the way to talk to the younger generation is just to give them power, to just say you're going to do this part of the project, and I might have the wrong age set and vocabulary, but what do you have? And, I went into the For Africa one and went, "Oh, I have this image! It's gonna be up on a billboard up at Elwood Thompson's'," and I had such a strong image. And, this one guy came in and he said, "I was thinking we could use this." And, he brought it up on his laptop, and I was like, "Oh. I was... What's everybody think of this?"

Chris: They were going... I went, "Okay!" So, then this kid had this picture he had taken when he was in Africa, and that was the billboard Elwood's. It became the cover of the poster and the program. If you gave them permission, they started to own what they were doing, and then they got excited. And then, my way of doing things expanded.

Chris: And, I think Artists for Life was really much stronger in what we were able to accomplish, because there were five people. And, Eddie's slipping. He was sort of advisor ex-tempe. He would come and...

Rob: Yeah.

Chris: Remember that?

Rob: Yeah, I do.

Chris: Remember him over at Dez's house?

Rob: Uh-huh.

Laura: Thank you both.

Rob: Thank you.

Laura: That was super helpful. I hope we asked the questions that you wanted us to ask.

Rob: I hope it was helpful for your project.

Chris: Yeah.

Laura: Hugely helpful.

Patricia: It's great to connect all the different parts of activities and moments that were happening because, if you keep them in silos, then you don't get the bigger picture. And, I think this is part of the bigger picture. It really brings... It's part of the fabric of how the movement in Richmond really kept going. Right?

Laura: Yeah, because activism has been one of the pieces that we've wanted to highlight more, because we've been talking to a lot of public health people, a lot of people with HIV, doctors. We talked to Sarah Monroe, who I'm sure you got to know a little bit, because she works so closely with Lisa. But, the activism piece has been the one that we wanted to pump up a little bit

Rob: Well, Bill Harrison could help in that, I'm sure.

Laura: He did. He did. Yeah.

Patricia: Absolutely.

Laura: No, we had a great interview with him, and he's been very supportive.

Rob: Yeah.

Laura: Well, good good.

Rob: Okay.

Patricia: Before we part, one question. Do you know anything about the ballroom culture here in-

Chris: The what?

Patricia: Ballroom culture here.

Chris: The ballroom culture?

Laura: Yeah.

Chris: A while ago, but no. I don't.

Patricia: We understand that there were also houses here that really supported the LGBTQ community here, especially those that had HIV and AIDs. So, we heard, like Patricia Corbett mentioned that. So, we were kind of wondering if-

Rob: That was a different world from me. I didn't know anything about it.

Chris: Me too, actually.

Laura: It may end up being one of our missing pieces because it was one of those situations where she was very enthusiastic, and then, when push came to shove, she just stopped answering our emails.

Rob: Oh.

Laura: Which happens sometimes. It's okay. We'll continue barking up as many trees as we can.

Patricia: We'll continue.

Chris: So, if you're interest, I know I have some boxes with a bunch of stuff.

Patricia: Yes.

Laura: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Chris: So, pursue me and, sometime during the Summer, I will get those out. I will find those boxes.

Laura: That would be perfect timing

Patricia: Yes.

Chris: Plus, if you are interested in seeing the performance-

Laura: Yes.

Patricia: We are.

Chris: I think-

Laura: So, it's in special collections?

Chris: It was special collections, and they... You can go, and I think everything is there, cataloged. And then, you can sit there. They'll set it up and they'll run it on a monitor, and you can watch it there.

Chris: But, you know, it could also... If it's something you want, I could get, maybe, a DVD burned for you guys.

Patricia: That would be great.

Laura: It would be great. It would be great for our students.

Patricia: Our students, that's what I'm thinking a lot, because we're gonna be teaching a class, as Laura said, in the Fall. And so, I think, the closest they can get to what it felt like, I think that would be really great. It would be.

Laura: When's the last time you took a look at that?

Chris: A long, long time ago.

Rob: I never saw it.

Chris: I thought I gave copies to all four of you.

Rob: Well, maybe you did, but the last time I saw the performance was the second night of the Artists for Life.

Chris: I just remember, was it Dixie Alexander? She was from the radio station, and she was... She didn't seem herself, and she had trouble reading her script. She was just totally unprepared. It was just painful. And, the next night, she was- I think that was the first night, and then she was replaced with somebody else. Doobie McDaniels was a newscaster, and she was wonderful. Randy did both night.

Chris: And then, Artists for Life 2, that was, I think, Murray DePillars and Stoner Winslet were the hosts, which seemed huge to me.

Laura: I didn't know Stoner Winslet.

Chris: She is the current and longtime director of Richmond Ballet

Laura: Oh. Oh, okay.

Chris: And, she's someone who really walks the tightrope of not being political at all, just because of-

Laura: That ballet world.

Chris: Right, that ballet world. But, I think she was... Artists for Life 2, I think she was one of the hosts, the two hosts.

Laura: Well, thank you again.

Rob: Thank you.

Chris: Yeah, thank you so much.

Patricia: Thank you so much for taking your Saturday morning and sharing it with us.

Chris: Down Memory Lane.

Rob: Glad I did it with you.

Chris: Absolutely.

Rob: Haven't seen you in a while.

Chris: Yeah. Likewise.

Laura: Are there pictures of the five of you?

Chris: Not together, I don't think. There are pictures in that commemorative program of the each of us.

Rob: Cathy Benham was cleaning her house out and she saw that program, and she was talking to me. She said, "You looked, like, 12 years old, all five of you."

Chris: That's about... The day after it was over, I turned 45. That was something.

Rob: So, how much older than me are you? A couple years, right?

Chris: We have the same birthday.

Rob: Yeah.

Laura: Do you really?

Rob: Yeah.

Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative). August 28th.

Rob: August 28th.

Chris: What's your birth year?

Rob: '51.

Chris: So, I'm four years older than you.

Rob: Okay.

Chris: You'll be 68.

Rob: 68 this August, yeah.

Chris: Yeah. '72. Well, thanks again for doing this.

Laura: Yeah. Thank you.

Patricia: This is great.

Chris: Yeah. I think we'll feel good all day long. I will.

Laura: Rob, I remember so clearly when I was in Providence, Rhode Island, '76 and '77, working a lot with the United Farm Workers during the grape and lettuce boycott. It was all the nuns and priests who were always out there on the picket lines with us, and we met at the convent.

Rob: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep. That's how it was then.

Laura: The Catholic Church was so different then.

Rob: So different. Yeah. We just had a reunion of the Dioceses Office of Justice and Peace last week, because it doesn't exist. They shut it down after it turned right-wing.

Rob: So, there were 16, 17 people for the whole time it existed, sharing what we accomplished, what we snuck through, and it was really great. It was really great. But, you know, everything comes back. Everything comes back.

Rob: This is just a moment.

Laura: Yeah.

Chris: Gotta write that down. When?

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Patricia: Well, thank you again.

Chris: Yeah.

Rob: Thanks.