Oral History # 44

An Interview With
Barry Mandel

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AN INTERVIEW WITH BARRY MANDEL

RENÉE TAPPE: This is Renée Tappe interviewing Barry Mandel for The oH Project, Oral Histories of HIV/AIDS in Houston, Harris County, and Southeast Texas. The interview is taking place on October 5, 2018, in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this interview is to document Mr. Mandel’s recollections concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Houston, Harris County, and surrounding areas.

Hi, Barry. Thank you for joining us today.

BARRY MANDEL: Good morning.

RENÉE TAPPE: Good morning.

Let’s get a little bit of your personal history. Tell me your full name, where you were born, and a little bit about your family, please.

BARRY MANDEL: My name is Barry Mandel. I was born here in Houston, Texas. I am a native Houstonian, son of a native Houstonian. My parents were Joel and Shirley Mandel. My father was born here at St. Joseph Hospital; met my mother, who was from Tennessee; and established themselves here. I have two sisters, one of whom, my older sister, her husband has passed away. She has two sons. My younger sister is married, and she has three sons.

RENÉE TAPPE: They all live in Houston?

BARRY MANDEL: Everybody now is here in Houston. It’s great.

RENÉE TAPPE: That’s nice. Where did you go to high school?

BARRY MANDEL: I went to high school at Bellaire. It was kind of typical that a lot of us that grew up in Meyerland, we all went to the same junior high school, went to
the same high school, and then automatically all went to the University of Texas.

It felt like I needed to break that chain, and so I went to school in Boston, to Boston University.

TAPPE: What did you study?

MANDEL: I majored in business administration and advertising.

TAPPE: Did you have any background in theatre or anything like that at the time?

MANDEL: No, I didn’t have anything. I had always had a passion for the arts. As kids in elementary school, we were always performing for some holiday. Art was a big part of a curriculum back then, and so I think that kind of established my love for the arts. I remember, like it was yesterday, the first symphony performance I ever went to. It was at Jones Hall when I was in third grade. I remember sitting in those red, plush seats, and that was my first recollection, really, of the arts and how it would and could touch me.

TAPPE: Well, apparently it did.

Tell me a little bit about your employment background, from when you first graduated from college up until now working at Discovery Green.

MANDEL: I graduated from Boston, and I wanted to really go into the advertising end of a business. It was a time, in 1981, when the economy of the US [United States] was just in the dumps, and I couldn't get anyone to even look at my portfolio. My father, who had his own company here in town, had called me and said, “We’re getting ready to open an advertising department,” at his company, and if I wanted it, it was mine; and if I didn’t take it, don’t ever assume that I could move back here and that there would be a job waiting for me. I mean, he played all of his cards right out on the table.
So I thought, “Well, I kind of enjoy eating, and I kind of enjoy a roof over my head, so I think I’ll take that.” That was what brought me back to Houston.

TAPPE: What type of business was it?

MANDEL: He sold to grocery stores in the Southwest United States, anything in the grocery store you can’t eat: shampoo, deodorant, pet supplies, school supplies.

I started a division there right at the onset of the VCR [videocassette recorder] machines, where we put in concession departments in grocery stores, where people could rent the machine, they could rent to own it, and we had a whole library of movies that they could check out with, and ended up with probably close to 200 stores at the time. I did that for a number of years.

Ultimately he ended up selling the business, and I was probably 30, 34 years old, figuring out, “Okay. Now what do I want to do?” and really had the opportunity to try and figure out what really was my passion. At the time, healthcare seemed to be in flux, unfortunately, much as it is now. I thought, “I’m going to get into healthcare and see what happens.” I ended up running a group practice for a number of my friends. They were all in practice together. A large concentration of that practice at the time was around HIV care.

TAPPE: What triggered your drive to become involved with various volunteer organizations and nonprofit organizations? You have a long history of volunteerism.

MANDEL: Yes. As kids too, we were always encouraged to do and to give, and so I remember in my earliest of days, we were volunteering. Whether it was at the synagogue or whether it was for the United Way or whether it was some other community organization that was serving the underserved, we were always
encouraged to participate. And I watched my parents do it. So it wasn’t they were just talking about it; they actually did it too. So it just seemed like this was what you did, and it came as naturally to me as eating every day, and so I had always had that.

When I moved back here to town in the early 1980s, it was right at the onset of the HIV epidemic, and it was hitting a number of my friends. You were watching my community, that was scared to death, that was being delegitimized and being ostracized, and I couldn’t just sit by at that point. That was what got me involved with — it was the Montrose Counseling Center at the time, and it was the KS/AIDS Foundation at the time.

TAPPE: What is your earliest memory of there being a concern about gay men’s health? Do you recall?

MANDEL: It was probably from the volunteer work that I was doing at the counseling center. At the time, the sister organization was the KS/AIDS Foundation, because automatically your first sign of AIDS at the time was KS [Kaposi’s sarcoma], and it seemed like that was a natural piece of the epidemic. I don’t know if I remember a specific time or the first time I heard about it more than it was over a period of time, and then I remember having to do something. I remember one of the things we used to do is, we used to take coffee cans and walk through Mary’s and pass them around multiple times during the evening, multiple times during the week, and that was considered HIV and AIDS fundraising at that time.

Nobody would talk about it in the broader community. Nobody would mention it. Nobody would talk about it. Surely, nobody was doing anything about it, and so it was us. It was us taking care of us because nobody else was
Later you would hear just some horror stories of doctors that were treating HIV within the hospital system and how they were being ostracized. They would get in an elevator, and their counterparts would get out of the elevator. Their counterparts on their floor would push the elevator button with their elbow.

TAPPE: Is that right?

MANDEL: Yeah, because they had no idea of what transmission looked like, and everybody was just scared around this.

TAPPE: Even the medical professionals were being shunned by other professionals?

MANDEL: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, I remember going — one of my first friends that passed away, and literally everyone that came into the room had virtually like a hazmat outfit on. If you weren’t being treated at either Park Plaza or at Twelve Oaks at the time, which were the two hospitals doing most of the HIV care, I mean, there were horror stories about nurses leaving the food trays at the door for patients who couldn’t get out of bed but were expected to get out of bed, walk to the door, and pick up their tray for themselves. Everybody was just scared to death and trying to figure out, “Who can we scapegoat over this?”

TAPPE: And it was a community.

MANDEL: And it was a community.

TAPPE: Of course, as you said, the fundraising was all local. There was no money.

MANDEL: There was no money, no money. Then Mathilde Krim started amfAR. Elizabeth Taylor got involved. So you started to see some light at the end of the tunnel, but locally there was nothing happening. We couldn’t get the city health officials, the mayor’s office, even to say the words at the time, which just made
you feel even more ostracized.

TAPPE: There were a number of small organization in Houston, nonprofit, were all-volunteer, that were trying to help. It’s my understanding that there was a lot of duplication of services, a lot of infighting because everybody was just kind of shooting in the dark, so to speak. Could you speak to that?

MANDEL: I think that it was, because everybody was shooting in the dark. When we were finally able to get some type of federal funding through Ryan White CARE [Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency] Act, again, here was a very small pool of dollars that everybody was trying to get to. So yeah, it got really nasty sometimes because people were scared, had no idea as to how else to get the resources, and every day we were watching our friends die, every day. It wasn’t that there was just one of our friends dying. It was happening all the time to everyone’s friends. If you were in this community and you were not touched by it somehow, then something was wrong, you weren’t leaving your house, because there was no way people were untouched by this. You could have had AIDS in your body, you could have had AIDS in your heart, but everybody was touched by it one way or the other. So yeah, there was infighting, and it was a scarcity of resources and trying to access dollars to keep going and to keep doing what we were doing.

Interfaith Care Partners came onboard, and it was a volunteer organization that went into the churches and the synagogues in town and created these care teams that literally went in and adopted people that were fighting HIV. It was a care team. It could be anywhere from five to 10, 15 people at this religious institution that would adopt people who were in the system, to try and help ease
the burden, whatever that meant, whether they needed food, whether they needed transportation to their doctors. All of a sudden then, you started to see volunteerism becoming a piece of it also.

TAPPE: The faith-based organizations did a lot. You were raised in a Jewish community. How did they respond?

MANDEL: They didn’t really respond. I’m not sure if maybe a couple of the synagogues had care teams or not. For some reason, I think that they did, but by and large the Jewish community wasn’t responding. Probably in the late 1980s, early 1990s, I started to see a number of my childhood friends die from AIDS. Again, the community wasn’t responding, and many times the families weren’t responding, so there was no acknowledgment about what happened or how their sons, daughters, died.

I thought, “Okay. I’ve got to figure out how to change this.” I had gotten involved with The NAMES Project through my friend Jackson Hicks and had gotten very involved in establishing quilt displays all over the city. We had a storefront here in town, and so you could not only make panels and then give them to The NAMES Project, but the chapter also did displays throughout the city.

I thought, “I’m going to do one at the Jewish Community Center here in town,” and it seemed at the time to be kind of the heart of the Jewish community. I thought, “But I can’t do it with names that aren’t familiar to these people,” so I added a couple of phases to it.

I contacted a man in Israel who was running The NAMES Project there, and I said, “Can you send me some panels from Jewish Israelis that have been
given to your chapter?”

He said, “I’ll give them to you to use for the display, but I’ll bring them myself,” and so he came to town to do it with me.

Then I organized a number of our childhood friends and said, “Let’s make panels. Let’s make panels and give them so that least in some fashion our friends are remembered through this whole epidemic,” and so we did that too. Created like a steering committee, and we did a week’s worth of programming that involved families, involved the clerical leadership in the community, and involved the high-school kids especially, because that was a target audience for us, in that they understood that AIDS wasn’t about who you were, it was about what you did.

Then the Republican Convention had just come to town, and it was a huge period, again, when we weren’t hearing anything from national leadership about this epidemic that was destroying our community and that we knew then had the ability to create a worldwide pandemic, which has actually now come to be.

There was a woman named Mary Fisher who spoke at that convention, and her father had been a big philanthropist, a Jewish philanthropist in Detroit, and she had contracted AIDS from her ex-husband, and so she spoke about what it was like to be a straight Jewish woman carrying HIV. I thought, “I need to get to her, because I need the Jewish community in Houston to see there is a completely different face to this disease than they thought.” I ended up getting in touch with her, and she agreed to come down and to be the keynote speaker at our opening ceremony.

TAPPE: That’s wonderful. Of your weeklong presentation?
MANDEL: Of the weeklong, yes. She spoke on Sunday, the opening ceremony of it.

TAPPE: How did the community respond?

MANDEL: It was overwhelming. It was overwhelming. It really was. It was a change for the community. It was, “Okay. We can really now acknowledge.” It was the first time that a number of my friends’ parents — at the closing ceremony, when their sons’ and daughters’ panels were presented, it was the first time that they were able to experience the community coming together to comfort them around having lost a child and why they lost the child.

TAPPE: You were very brave to do that.

MANDEL: You know what? I didn’t think about it at the time, and that was probably how it happened, is I just did it.

TAPPE: Because you knew it was the right thing to do. In hindsight, surely you can see bravery there.

The parents, some of them, anyway, that were finally comforted, was it actually the first time that some of your friends and colleagues realized what their child died from?

MANDEL: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. For many of them, it was even for the clerical leadership of their religious institution, one of their synagogues, that was able to come to them and comfort them based upon now full knowledge of what they had been through, because again, it wasn’t that you had just lost a child, as if that isn’t traumatic enough, but you’re losing a child and you can’t tell their whole story to the people that are there to help comfort you. Whether it was justified or not, they felt it, and everyone’s perception is their own reality, and so they believed they could not be completely open with their closest of friends, at
one of the most devastating points in their lives, to be able to say, “This is what I have been through, and this is what happened to me,” because no one was talking about it.

TAPPE: I find that personally such a contradiction because the Jewish community is known to be so supportive and so family-like. I’ve watched it for years.

MANDEL: It just shows you what the environment was like then. It was before there was any medication, really, that could do anything. I think maybe AZT [azidothymidine] had come out at that point, but that was kind of the only hope on the medical front that people were looking to, and so it a very scary time.

TAPPE: Who did you get to participate in that presentation, from the religious community?

MANDEL: For the closing ceremonies, we actually got the orthodox cantor and rabbi who did the ceremony in the auditorium at the Jewish Community Center, and they read the memorial prayers that you would typically read at a Jewish funeral, and they got those that were in mourning to recite it with them, and then the panels were represented, to become part of The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

TAPPE: It must have been very emotional.

MANDEL: I had held it together all that week until that particular moment. Then I realized the magnitude of what had happened over that week was here were finally the most conservative, if you will, of the clergy in our community that were saying “We have a place for you too” to those that were mourning.

TAPPE: That’s wonderful. Congratulations on that.

Since we’re talking about the Jewish community and their response to this particular issue, and at that time it was pretty much isolated to the gay men’s community, tell me a little bit about your coming-out story with your family. How was that?

MANDEL: When I moved back to Houston from school, I had virtually over the period of the course of my time in Boston, I had come out and was living life as a completely open gay man. I moved back here to town and obviously or apparently didn’t feel like I could continue to do that, and I didn’t. I would make up stories about where I was or who I was going out with when my parents would ask me and things like that.

Finally it got to the point where I thought, “Okay. This is not going to be able to go on very long,” and ended up finding a workshop in Dallas called The Experience Weekend, and it was started by the founder of The Advocate magazine, and a friend of him, who was a clinical psychiatrist in Los Angeles, and they had gone through the whole Werner Erhard est Training movement.

Part of that movement was about finding where and how you’re going to make your mark on the world. This for them is probably the late 1970s, mid to late 1970s, and they decided that the way they’re going to make their mark on the world is that by the year 2000, there would be nowhere on the planet that you
could find someone who would say being gay is not okay. They realized in order
to do that, they were going to first have to make gay people okay with being gay,
because there was this huge piece of internalized homophobia that just was
magnified, especially with the onset of HIV and AIDS.

They were doing these workshops all over the country, and so I went to
one in Dallas, and it was over the course of a weekend, and it was at some point in
that workshop that one of the guys got up to speak and tell his story, and it was
the fact that his family didn’t know he was gay, and the facilitators went through
the story for a little while. And then at one point, David Goodstein, who was the
owner of *The Advocate* magazine, turned to him and said, “If you told your
parents that you were gay and they told you they didn’t love you anymore, could
you go on living?”

All of a sudden, this lightbulb went off for me, and it was like, “Yeah, I
could go on living. It may not be my preference, and it may not be my choice for
it to pan out that way, but yeah, I could survive this.” I guess the lightbulb was
that I was bigger than this issue, this issue was not bigger than me, and I would be
able to handle it.

I came back from Dallas, drove to my parents’ house, and I told them I
had something I needed to say to them. My father had just come out of the
hospital with major back surgery and was home for six weeks of bedrest, so
probably not the best time, but it was like it was when I had the most courage and
I needed to do it then.

**TAPPE:** Timing. This was directly from the workshop?

**MANDEL:** Directly from the airport, from the workshop, yeah. Came back to town and
drove straight to their house and sat there and told them what was going on and that I had gone to this workshop and that there were people that had things to say to their parents, and they going to have to stand over a grave and say them, I said, and I didn’t want that to be the case.

My mother looked at me, and she said, “Barry, for this, you could have waited until then.”

TAPPE: Until the grave?

MANDEL: Until the grave.

TAPPE: Was she serious?

MANDEL: Absolutely, absolutely. She was angry at the news. She was angry at the timing of which I decided to deliver the news. Her anger kind of grew a little bit more and more, the more she thought about when I decided to deliver the news. We didn’t really talk about it for a very long time.

Then I was able to find a social worker here in town who was able to help me deal with some of this. Finally she said to me, after working with me for a couple of months, she said, “Okay. Let’s bring your parents in, and let’s kind of start to talk about that.” When they found out that she had a gay son and that she was okay with it, they didn’t want to go anymore. They really wanted to find somebody that would support them in saying, “This is wrong.”

They actually sent me to a psychiatrist at Baylor. They asked me, “Would you go to a psychiatrist at Baylor?”

I had never had mental health support or assistance like that, so I jumped at the chance. I was like, “Oh, yeah, this is great.”

So I went to see him. We talked for a little while and everything, and he
said, “All right. We’d love to run some tests on you.”

I’m like, “Wait, wait, wait, wait. Hold on a minute. Hold on a minute. I think we’re here under two different understandings. I’m here because I’m trying to help my parents deal with this, and I think you’re here trying to determine what I am. I know exactly what I am, and I’m fine with that,” so that was kind of the end of that.

TAPPE: What do you think they were looking for? Were they doing maybe conversion?

MANDEL: I don’t know what it was. I don’t know where it would have gone from there. I really don’t.

TAPPE: But you weren’t interested?

MANDEL: But I was not interested because I thought, “Okay. This is going to take us down a long road that we do not need to travel on. There is no reason,” because I was pretty well committed to just being who I am, and I was not, at that point — because of what had been instilled in me in this workshop, I was not in any way interested in looking at that or questioning that.

TAPPE: How did your parents respond? Do you recall?

MANDEL: That I didn’t go further?

TAPPE: Yes.

MANDEL: They were like, “Okay.” They didn’t push anything, but we certainly weren’t going to talk about it anymore, and we didn’t. Then we went to this family social worker, and we’re working with her. They went a couple of times and then didn’t want to go again. Then we didn’t talk for years.

TAPPE: About that issue?

MANDEL: About that issue.
TAPPE: But you still had a relationship.

MANDEL: Oh, yeah, we still had a relationship. I had ended up in a relationship with a guy that I was working with, and my father did not approve of that at all. He didn’t, and it wasn’t just about the gay thing. He didn’t approve of any type of relationship of people in their workplace. When he found out, he said to me, “I’m not going to acknowledge this relationship. If you-all are at your sister’s house, one of your sisters’ houses, and we come over, we won’t come over or we’ll leave, and if we’re there and you-all come over, we’ll leave.” They didn’t want to be in and around us at all.

I operated that way for a while, and then I thought, “Okay. This is ridiculous for me to let them determine the context of my relationship with my sisters and their families.”

So I went back over to their house and said to them, “I don’t want you-all to be surprised, but I want to let you know the rules are changing. So if we’re there and you-all won’t come over, that’s your choice. If you-all are there, we come over, and you decide to leave, that’s your choice. But I’m not going to manipulate the situations so we don’t have to face those choices anymore.” That caused a whole little hoo-ha, and we let that settle, and that was the way we operated for a while.

Tom was HIV positive at the time. When he passed away, it was finally
the moment that I think, for my mother, she realized Barry being happy is more important than who Barry is happy with. She, my sisters, my brothers-in-law, and my mother came to his funeral. My father did not.

TAPPE: Is that right?

MANDEL: Yes. Then weeks later, he tried to tell me how sorry he was about it, and I just stopped him. I said, “Dad, you didn’t acknowledge Tom when he was alive. It’s too late to do it now that he’s dead.”

TAPPE: It must have been very painful for you.

MANDEL: It was, because I had had this picture that family life was just supposed to be different, especially, as you talked about, the Jewish community and their relationships to families and the importance of it. I certainly did not, when I came out, when they knew about Tom, I did not believe that they would respond that way. It was after that process and ultimately when Scott and I got together that it completely changed and that he was fully incorporated into the family as a son-in-law.

TAPPE: By everybody?

MANDEL: By everybody.

TAPPE: Including your father?

MANDEL: Including my father.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

TAPPE: I guess he was, I don’t want to say making up for what had happened before, but he had learned.

MANDEL: Yeah, I think he had learned. Again, I think them seeing me go through losing a partner kind of shook them to the core, because it took them a couple of
years before either of them — and it wasn’t my father; it was mother had asked me, “Where do you stand with HIV? Are you okay?” It finally took them years to be able to ask that.

She, my mother, years later apologized to me because she was under the impression that I hated her. She said, “I know that you are born this way, and for years, I thought that you hated me because I gave birth to you this way.”

TAPPE: Oh, my gosh.

MANDEL: I’m like, “Okay. Mom, one is, you can relieve yourself of that guilt now; and two is, just so you know, I have had a spectacular life, so I wouldn’t change a thing in it. So you’re relieved now of that guilt.”

TAPPE: Now you’ve been with Scott for?

MANDEL: Twenty-five years.

TAPPE: Congratulations.

MANDEL: Thank you. Thank you. When we got married, there were diamonds that my mother had that we put into wedding bands, and she actually gave those to us at our wedding ceremony, and those are the rings we wear still today.

TAPPE: Oh, how wonderful. Well, it took a while, but here you are.

MANDEL: It did take a while. It did take a while, but I got the picture I wanted to get.

TAPPE: Good for you. Congratulations on that.

MANDEL: Thank you.

TAPPE: I want to talk a little bit about some of the politics that went on during this time that we’re referencing, in terms of HIV/AIDS. I know that you were working some with the Kathy Whitmire campaign.

MANDEL: Right.
TAPPE: Tell me a little bit about that. How did you get involved with it? Tell me about that, because my recollection is that the gay community played a very big role in getting her into office the first time around. Then there was a lot of dissension, and I think you had an inside track to some of that.

MANDEL: Right after I had moved back here, there was a referendum that went in front of city council that Kathy supported. She got elected, really, with a huge push from the gay community because she did something that no other candidate had ever done before, is that during her campaigning, she spent one evening doing a bar tour and went from gay bar to gay bar to gay bar. The only experience that the gay community had had with officials, if you will, coming into the bars, were the police who were raiding the bars trying to arrest us. All of a sudden, here you had a woman, which was a big deal in Houston politics at the time, campaigning and coming into our homes — our gay bars at the time, those were our sanctuaries — coming in and saying, “I need your help. I need your help. I’m here for you, and I need your help.” It was a huge deal, and it was really what carried her to victory in virtually all of the races that she ran from controller on into the mayor’s office.

I think it was during her first administration, she presented a proposal, a nondiscrimination ordinance, at city council, where gay people couldn’t be discriminated against in housing and in employment and things like that. It passed city council, and then there was a whole group that signed enough signatures that put it to a referendum to the community at large.

I thought, “I cannot sit by and not do something right now,” so I got involved in that, and we lost, and we lost by, I think, still, which was almost the
same as the last time we just lost, a 3-to-1 margin.

The opposition felt so empowered that they put together a slate of candidates to run against all of those council members who had supported it, and they called themselves the Straight Slate. Literally, their sole purpose in running was to vote out those people that had supported that nondiscrimination ordinance.

Once again, I thought, “I can’t sit by.”

Turns out a very good friend of mine had become an advisor to the mayor, and I called her. I said, “Barbara, I want to get involved.”

She goes, “Great, because I’m going to be doing the fundraising for the campaign. Come join me.”

“I would love to.”

She calls me, and she tells me that we have our first meeting next week with the mayor. Okay. I put it on my calendar, and I’m ready to go. Then two days before that meeting, she calls to tell me that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and that she was out and that I was going to have to carry fundraising for the campaign.

TAPPE: Oh, my, and you hadn’t even been to your first meeting yet.

MANDEL: I hadn’t been to my first meeting. I had not really actually even ever met Kathy at that point. I mean, I’d seen her in public. Never met her personally. Never been involved in the campaign. Certainly never raised money for a campaign. And now I’m sitting in the mayor’s dining room that was in the basement of City Hall at the time, having the then-mayor look at me and ask me, “What are we going to do to raise money for this upcoming campaign?”

TAPPE: Nothing like a little pressure.
MANDEL: Seriously, seriously. I ended up having to take a leave of absence for work because it was so important to me and it was going to be such a heavy lift to do it. But we did it, and she got reelected, and I continued to stay involved and engaged with her and actually was with her — before she won, there was an interview that they were doing with an ex-mayor of the City of Houston, Louie Welch. I was in the car with Kathy, and she gets a call because they had been interviewing Louie Welch, and the reporter said, as her lead-in, “We’ll be talking to Mayor Louie Welch about how he’s going to address the AIDS epidemic in this city,” and the reporter threw it back to the station, not realizing that the mic was still live.

He says, “We’re going to just shoot all the fags” — “all the gays with AIDS,” and that goes out over the public broadcast.

So I’m in the car with Kathy, and she answers the phone, and she turns to me. She would always sit in the front seat. We had to sit in the back. And she says, “You’re not going to believe what just happened,” and then she tells me this story, and it took over the last, probably, four weeks of the campaign. I mean, it was all that the talk was about.

That year, the election was right after Halloween, and that year, the big costume in the gay community were T-shirts that had what looked to be like bullet holes in them, where people wrote “Don’t shoot, Louie,” and that was everyone’s costume that year.

TAPPE: I remember the costumes.

MANDEL: Yeah, we’re clever, if nothing else.

TAPPE: Very creative.

Did you play a role or learn anything during the time you were working
with her campaign about some of the issues with the hospital district versus the city, like the hospital district would take care of the HIV patients and the city’s hands were tied, and yet the community expected the mayor to be able to do something?

MANDEL: Well, I definitely think that the community expected the mayor to do something, and I remember even at one point, she was speaking at some event at the Hyatt downtown, I think, and there was a whole group downstairs that had been protesting. One of those that were protesting was Sue Lovell, who ultimately became president of the political caucus and also a city councilmember. I remember at one point being down there trying to figure, “What? What do they want?”

Sue just said to me, “What we’d like is for her to even say the words.” I mean, people at that point, in political leadership, were not even saying “AIDS.” That’s what the environment was like at the time. And at that time, all that the people wanted, just acknowledge that it’s happening. It was like, “Our community is getting devastated, and there’s no one even saying, ‘Wow, look what’s happening to them.’” That’s all they really wanted at the time, was just that.

The hospital district had responded, and responded in a huge way. They set up Thomas Street Clinic, they brought in a whole group of doctors, and that’s where those folks that didn’t have insurance went. If you did have insurance, you were lucky enough to go to either Park Plaza or to Twelve Oaks, where there were literally floors dedicated just to HIV and AIDS care.

I don’t remember there being the question about the hospital district and
the mayor, from what I was privy to, but I do think that there was a huge expectation and a desire for her to say it, to acknowledge it, and then to devote the city funds that they had available via the health department into responding to it.

TAPPE: Yes, and I think people maybe didn’t realize the separation of responsibility between the hospital district and the City of Houston, and so she would get blamed for anything.

MANDEL: Right, right.

TAPPE: Were you involved with ACT UP or any of the organizations?

MANDEL: Yeah, I got involved with them from a national level and then realized there’s a place for that, but I felt like I needed to do more here as opposed to on a national level because there was still so much, we were still so behind the times.

A lot of that leadership was coming out of San Francisco and out of New York. Their communities had responded much faster and much better than ours had at the time. It felt like I needed to spend more time here than I did fighting the drug companies and getting the NIH [National Institutes of Health] to respond
and to release trial drugs and things like that. It just felt like the care of my friends was so overwhelming at the time that I needed to do that.

TAPPE: What is your view on the difference in how San Francisco and New York responded versus Houston?

MANDEL: One is that their hospitals and the medical community stepped forward in a much greater way. Obviously, there were a lot more gay physicians in both of those communities than there had been here, and so they were able to turn and respond, where for a large portion of the time early, early on, it was straight doctors here in town that were having to respond and to help us. I’m not even sure if the gay physicians at the time were even out.

TAPPE: You mean here?

MANDEL: Here in Houston.

I remember one of my first physicians here was a dermatologist that I went to see, and I told him I wanted to get tested, and he was like, “Why would you want to do that?” because at the time, you could lose your insurance, you could lose your housing, all of that stuff. I wasn’t in fear of that, but that could happen, and that was kind of, again, the environment that we were in. He literally sat there for 10 minutes trying to talk me out of it, knowing there’s nothing you can do, there’s no drugs, there’s no point of your even doing this. I ended up having to go somewhere else to actually get the test.

TAPPE: To get tested?

MANDEL: Yeah. So that was kind of the way the medical community here was responding, and it was different in San Francisco and New York because their medical community was moving at a much faster pace, especially around care,
than we were.

TAPPE: They were encouraging testing so one would know?

MANDEL: One would know. You know, knowledge was power.

TAPPE: Even if there wasn’t a treatment at the time, you at least knew it.

MANDEL: Right, right.

TAPPE: Interesting that they would encourage you not to do anything like that.

MANDEL: I can remember sitting in his office like it was yesterday, having him tell me that.

TAPPE: Yet the original Montrose Clinic on Richmond, where you could go in, get your number, everything was anonymous.

MANDEL: Everything was done anonymously. You never gave your name. It was all done off of a numbering system. They told you when you come back. At that point, the test took two weeks, and so you waited for the two weeks, then you’d come back, and then they’d look your number up, and then that’s when they would give you your results.

TAPPE: At least there was a way to go about that.

MANDEL: Yes.

TAPPE: Barry, your professional life includes a great deal of time spent in the arts community, which was particularly hard hit, I think, by the AIDS crisis. Tell me a little bit about your experiences and observations in terms of the impact, the people in the community, how that particular community responded, how the city responded to the arts community during that time.

MANDEL: I’m not sure if the city’s response to the art community was any different than it was to the community at large. Again, there was an arts community that
was much like the gay community, that was very insular and very protective of its own, and very prepared to take care of its own. As artists started becoming infected and started dying, it was the others within their community, gay and straight, that really created, again, a care system of support for them and those that they loved.

For a lot of us, we saw our friends go to work, and you know they’re successful, but you never know exactly what they do or how they do it or what they’re like in their professional life and how they portray themselves and everything. Well, with artists, it’s all out there in the open, so you can see firsthand and experience firsthand how talented they are and what joy they bring, not just to themselves, but to the people that get to watch them in all of that. So the loss that was happening and that was going to continue to happen was very apparent to all of us watching this creativity, these bright lights, just get dimmer, dim, dim, dim, and then go out, where with your other friends, it was different. The loss ultimately was as profound, but you weren’t on this road of watching, as a community, the loss of all of these aspects of it, if that makes sense.

TAPPE: It does.

MANDEL: So that was, especially in the arts community, why it was even more profound of the loss.

TAPPE: As you watched it.

MANDEL: As you watched it. And you had seen their talent, you had experienced it, you knew firsthand, again, from just a professional standpoint, what joy it brought you and how it touched you, and then you were watching it just continue to diminish.
TAPPE: Were you involved at all with the Evening of Hope? That was a big turning point, I think, in Houston.

MANDEL: It was a huge turning point. Bering as a church was one of the first to not only say, “We’re going to help in care, but we’re going to go a step further, and we’re going to take our care to a medical level also,” and ended up creating a whole dental clinic because dental care at that time was also a huge issue around the total care of patients.

They started a daycare center where caregivers could get some respite by taking folks there who they knew would be fed, would be well taken care of, well cared for during the day. So they had the care center, and they had the dental clinic at the time.

There was a guy named Randy Hodde who was like the executive director of the organization at the time, and he decided he was going to try and do a fundraiser, and it was going to be a city-wide fundraiser. He went and approached Carolyn Farb, who saw it, got the vision, and embraced it, and took it to a level that I don’t think anyone could ever imagine. She used every chit and every IOU that she had probably ever been given from all of the stuff that she had done in the community, to call all those people back and say, “Here’s your opportunity, and here’s the time for you now to step forward.”

She got politicians, and she got entertainers, and she got athletes to all put their name and their face, literally their face, to the event. The invitation to the event was Carolyn Farb sitting in the bottom level of I think it was three risers, surrounded by these same politicians and entertainers and sports personas that gave their name and their face to supporting the event.
It was a huge hurdle that she pushed the community over in saying, “You
know what? We’re all touched. We’re all affected by this. Let’s openly
acknowledge, A, that we are; and B, that we’re now ready to stand up and say,
‘Okay. How can we help.’”

TAPPE: It was a very big deal. I remember actually looking — I didn’t know about the
event prior to it, but I remember seeing, in the paper, photographs and a little
write-up in the society page. I was so touched by that and so excited, because I
thought, “Oh, my gosh, look at this,” because it was big deal.

MANDEL: Right. It was as if, again, as a community, we had encircled ourselves to try
and protect us and to care for us, and all of a sudden, on the hillside, we see a
cavalry coming. We don’t know what the supplies are or what they were
prepared to do for us, but there’s like a cavalry coming, saying, “We’re on our
way to help you.” That was what it felt like. It was just like this huge exhale of,
“Okay. Maybe we’re at a point now where it will be different going forward.”

TAPPE: That’s wonderful, and it gave permission, I think, for some of the — because
these are the people that she touched, the big society, big money, big
foundations — gave them permission to support something they never would
have put their name to before.

MANDEL: Absolutely, absolutely.

TAPPE: Tell me, do you recall or were you familiar with the issues around United Way
and how they would not initially fund anything related to HIV?

MANDEL: It sounds familiar, but I don’t know if I was really conscious of it at the time.
It was typical, kind of, of their pattern, where they were really at the mercy of
who their largest donors were. Their biggest donors were by and large white,
were by and large straight, and by and large conservative in nature. For years, they had to support the Boy Scouts, who had a moratorium on gay Scout leaders, so it doesn’t seem like that would be unusual for them having to respond that way at all.

And it was typical. People were given a lot of permission at the time — because of the lack of knowledge, the lack of awareness, and basically the lack of treatment, they were given a lot of permission to discriminate and to hate. Everybody would just shake their head and say, “Well, we just don’t know.” “Yes, they can discriminate, because we just don’t know.” “Yes, they can hate, because we just don’t have any treatments right now.” So folks were given, on a lot of different levels, the ability to discriminate and to hate.

TAPPE: That makes sense. One of the longer-surviving organizations in our city to support HIV/AIDS is the AIDS Foundation Houston. Tell me about how you became involved with that, what you have seen through the years, how it started, where it is today, transitions.

MANDEL: It was really one of the first out there that was responding to the epidemic, and so I got involved first by just trying to help raise some money. Again, like I said, we would do coffee cans, walking through Mary’s. That was the fundraiser at the time.

Then the organization kind of established itself and started to create programs that were responding to what people were needing: food, housing, all of that kind of stuff. It was really on the forefront of doing it.

It had just a whole array of different issues internally within the organization, and I think in like nine years they went through 10 executive
directors. I mean, it was constantly turning, the organization, constantly in
changeover.

I got on the board for a little while, and I thought, “Okay. This is too
much of a mess, and I can’t spend too much time doing this, because it’s taking
me away from the other things I really wanted to do,” and I left.

I get a call a couple of years later from a friend of mine who was living in
Midland, Texas, at the time, Sara Selber. She said to me, “Do you know anybody
at the AIDS Foundation?”

I said, “I do. Why?”

She goes, “Because I have applied to be the executive director.”

I said to her, “Why would you do anything like that?”

She goes, “It is a passion, and I think I can change and move that
organization.”

“Okay.” So I talked to a couple of friends of mine. They had already met
her. They had interviewed her. Everyone had really liked her, her power, her
passion.

So she calls me back a couple of weeks later, and she said, “I got the job.”

Like, “Okay. Great.”

She goes, “And I’m moving back. We’re moving to Houston.”

I’m like, “Okay. What do you think your first responsibility is going to
be?”

She goes, “You know what, Barry? I’m going to be here either for a
week, or I’m going to be here forever. My first job is going to be to limit the term
of the board members.”
I turned to her, and I said, “Sara, have a great week, because you are out of here after that.” These were board members that had been entrenched in that organization and had been there for years and were very opposed to really looking and doing things any differently.

To her credit, Sara went in there, and she transformed not only the agency, but the way especially corporate America responded to HIV and AIDS here in Houston.

TAPPE: Tell me about that. How did she work with the corporations?

MANDEL: She took it back to them on a very personal level. One of the things that she did, and I’ll never forget thinking, “This is so bright,” is when she would go to call on some CEO [chief executive officer], she would look through their records at AFH and see how many of that particular company’s employees were getting services from the AIDS Foundation. Never told them names. Never told them who, how, what, where. All she would do was to let that CEO know, “You have 11 of your employees that are receiving services from us.”

It was a different time, again, also, in Houston in the corporate community, in that there weren’t these big global, international companies. A lot of them that were Fortune 500 or big national companies had been headquartered here in Houston, where now they’re headquartered overseas or somewhere else, but by and large they were all headquartered here. And so these CEO’s had a commitment to taking care of the community in addition of taking care of their associates. She was able to show them that these people, this community, need some of those dollars, and that was how the turn started to happen.

TAPPE: And then they responded.
You joined the board again?

MANDEL: And then I rejoined the board again, yeah. She got a number of her friends, that have now become some of my closest friends via that, to come back and really move the organization to a whole different level than it had ever been before.

TAPPE: Do you have any involvement with them at this point?

MANDEL: No, I don’t.

TAPPE: They’re one of, I guess, the few large organizations left. A lot of these small ones either went away because things changed: some medical care finally came in and that sort of thing; or their volunteers died off; and some of them also merged into —

MANDEL: Merged into others. So you look at like Legacy. It had been the Montrose Clinic that merged with The Assistance Fund, brought in Body Positive, brought in the Center for AIDS. So all of the programs of each of those organizations are still going on. They’re now just done under a much larger umbrella that takes away more of the levels of bureaucracy than there had been.

TAPPE: Under Legacy.

MANDEL: Under Legacy, yeah. So all of the programs of each one of those three still continue.

TAPPE: Then different types of support are offered by the Montrose Center.

MANDEL: Right.

TAPPE: With some counseling, and they’re working as well with Legacy.

MANDEL: Exactly, exactly. It’s a much more comprehensive unit of providers now, that now especially, with so many of the primary care providers becoming
Federally Qualified Health Centers and getting substantial dollars from the federal government that are able to put into uncompensated care, there is a much better safety net under our community right now than there ever has before, and we’re addressing additional issues around vision care and nutrition and wellness all as part of your primary care.

TAPPE: I know when I go to a doctor’s office now, we all see it, HIV is one of the things you check off on a box.

MANDEL: Right.

TAPPE: I never thought we would see something like that.

MANDEL: Exactly.

TAPPE: It’s just kind of a matter-of-fact they can be aware, take precautions, and then you just go from there.

MANDEL: It has now become a chronic condition, and you manage your care and your medications just like you would do with any other chronic condition, and you continue living.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

TAPPE: To that point, in the 1980s and 1990s, we saw lots of public awareness: billboards, posters, everything in the bars and on the streets in the Montrose area in terms of education. I don’t see that anymore. Is that a mistake, do you think, with the rise in HIV in certain populations?

MANDEL: Yes, I do, I do. I think that people got the message of, “Oh, just take a pill. Take a pill and move on.” One is, that pill doesn’t work for everybody, so there are lots of folks that are on multiple medications, trying to get that right combination that will suppress the virus. Two is, we don’t talk anywhere near
about the toxicity of those drugs in your body. Yeah, that pill may suppress the virus to, hopefully, an undetectable level, but we’re not talking about the impact that it has on your kidneys, on your liver, on your heart. It’s not a free ride. It’s not a free ride by any standpoint right now.

I have a very good friend of mine who used to do outreach with me in terms of teaching to high-school kids. The way he used to tell it, and still tells it today, is, it is always as if he is walking around with a gun pointed at his head, and he never knows if or when that gun is going to go off. “Is this cough just a cough, or is it actually more than that, because is my virus not suppressed any longer and now running through my body?” You know, there are all of those kinds of questions that he has to live with on a daily basis.

We don’t really talk about that anymore. All we talk about is, “There’s a treatment for it.”

TAPPE: When I look at *OutSmart* and other publications, I see these beautiful two-, four-, six-page spreads sometimes put out by the pharmaceutical companies.

MANDEL: Happy, hot men and women that are going on with their lives with a message of “Take this pill, and you’ll be okay.”

PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis] also, same thing, is taking this pill that gives you some type of protection against a virus. Again, we’re not talking about what kind of damage it does to your body long-term, because they don’t know fully yet. Two is, it doesn’t protect you from any of the other sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea or syphilis that are on a huge increase right now also.

TAPPE: Yes, explosive, just explosive.

MANDEL: Right.
TAPPE: Would you have any suggestions on how to tackle this issue in the gay community, or in the sexually active community?

MANDEL: Right. I mean, I think that we’ve just got to go back to looking at the ultimate risk you’re taking. If your liver is not important to you, go for it. If having two functioning kidneys isn’t important to you, go for it. But the reality of it is, you’re never going to live a full, happy, productive life when your system, whether it’s your heart, your liver, your kidneys, your immune system, is compromised, and you will forever be worried about, is this the moment when it all changes? I think that there’s not enough conversation around, is this moment of passion worth that?

TAPPE: Do you think part of that is generational?

MANDEL: Absolutely, absolutely, especially with the apps now and the way you can meet and interact with people. You know, we had to get up, get dressed, make ourselves look presentable, go to a bar, then work the bar for a little while before you met somebody.

You can sit in your bed right now and just text off one of these apps, and within 15 minutes you can have somebody naked standing in your bedroom, so it’s very different.

On top of that, all of that technology also has made us a society of instant gratification. We don’t want to take too long to get the gratification. We want it to happen, and we want it to happen fast, without having to deal with, “Well, can we talk about your sexual background?” “Can we talk about how many partners you’ve had?” “Can we talk about when you’ve last been tested?” All of that.

TAPPE: I have this huge fear that, in particular, the younger generation doesn’t do that.
They don’t think about it. It’s just like you said, instant gratification. “Who cares? AIDS is something that was out here.” Again, “Chronic condition.” That may change if AIDS changes and rears its ugly head again.

MANDEL: Which would be really, really sad.

TAPPE: That would be devastating.

MANDEL: If we don’t learn from our history, that is when it’s just profoundly worse than it has ever been before. I remember we were having a family dinner, and I think that this story is right, but one of my nephews at some point — there are not really many barriers or boundaries in my family.

TAPPE: Not now.

MANDEL: Yeah, not now especially, especially now that we’ve got nephews and nieces come, yeah, not at all.

One of my nephews had talked about that he had had sex with this woman and that he was really scared before that she had gotten pregnant.

Well, there was a whole group of us adults that had even put the pregnancy issue aside, but were still overwhelmed by the fact that you, in this day, had had unprotected sex.

That didn’t faze him. It was pregnancy, was the thing. Somewhere in all of this, he lost the messaging.

TAPPE: For not just HIV, but as you said, all the STD’s.

MANDEL: All the others, all the others too, yeah.

TAPPE: Ooh, well, when he ends up in a doctor’s office, saying, “What is this?”

MANDEL: Exactly, exactly. You know what? You hope that it wouldn’t have to get to that point, but unfortunately, many times it does.
TAPPE: Well, maybe he’ll hear what you say.

MANDEL: We hope. Yeah, we hope.

TAPPE: I know that being involved in the gay community as long as you have been, you’ve suffered many losses and seen many things. How do you deal with that? How did you deal with it at the time?

MANDEL: I guess the best way to explain it is much like it was explained to me, is, when Tom was in the hospital one night, and I think he may have been in a coma at the time, and it just continued to go on day after day, the same, and I went outside, and I was talking to one of the nurses, she said, “Barry, I think I need to tell you something.”

I said, “Well, what’s that?”

She said, “Tom’s not going home. What they’re doing for him may give him a little bit more time, but he’s not going to be leaving the hospital.”

I mean, that hit me like a ton of bricks, and thankfully she had told me that, because I was able to call a friend of mine that was an attorney, the next day, to come to draft a will for him that we didn’t have because I thought there was no way this could happen. The day after that, he lost complete consciousness.

I was talking to her, and I was like, “So how do you deal with all of this? I mean, you constantly are seeing on your watch people dying, and that’s not at all what you were trained to do.”

She said, “We just pretend like the patients have gone home; that they’re well and they checked out. And we virtually don’t acknowledge it all.”

There were years where I had to do exactly that, just keep going, because the grief could have completely overwhelmed and immobilized me. And there
were times when it did, and I just had to step into that for a little while. There are
certain times when I still step into it and I can feel it. What’s interesting is that
some of the time when that happens is when some of the happiest things are
happening in my life, if that makes sense.

Scott says I cry reading the phone book. It’s like as if everything I have
experienced, I’m trying to experience for all of those people that never got to see
it, never got a chance to experience that. Sometimes that sadness overwhelms me.
It’s like, “Why aren’t you here? Why aren’t you here seeing this? If only you
had known back then that this was going to be what was happening.”

TAPPE: That never really leaves.

MANDEL: No, it never does.

TAPPE: You just find a corner to put it in, and then it comes back out.

How did you meet Tom?

MANDEL: Shopping at Marshall Field’s, oddly enough.

TAPPE: A match made in heaven.

MANDEL: Yeah, I was shopping at Marshall Field’s, and he helped me one day. I left,
and I thought, “Man, that guy was really handsome.” And then go to Rich’s that
night, and he was there. And he was there.

Then we went out maybe like two days later, and that was when he said to
me, “I think I need to tell you something. I’m HIV positive.”

I was like, “How do you know that?” because again, we were told, “Don’t
get tested.”

He said, “Because I believe knowledge is power. I felt something going
on in my body, and the more I knew, the more I felt like I was going to be able to
do something about it.”

I thought, “Man, that makes sense.”

And that’s what he did.

TAPPE: How long were you together before he passed away?

MANDEL: Almost four years.

TAPPE: Devastating. I’m sorry.

MANDEL: Again, up until two weeks before he died, I thought there is no way this is going to happen to me. There is no way that someone I love like this, this much, is going to die.

TAPPE: Yet you saw it around you.

MANDEL: All around me, all around me. I mean, I was half my parents’ age and losing more friends faster than they ever were, and having to deal with that. That’s why even today, people, friends of mine, lose their parents or something, they’re 90, 95, it’s like, “Good for them.” I still can’t get past that some of my friends didn’t make it to 30. They didn’t get to experience and all of that.

TAPPE: They were still kids.

MANDEL: They were still kids, exactly.

TAPPE: If you look, at our age now, and look back and 25- and 30-year-olds, and you think those are the ones that died, and younger.

MANDEL: Yes, the talent, the potential, all of that, it was just gone. It was just gone.

TAPPE: Barry, tell me about your involvement with World AIDS Day.

MANDEL: Back then, it was also used as a fundraiser, and it was a way that the community could come together and acknowledge what we had been through and remember those that we had lost. The hospital district, oddly enough, was one of
the largest organizers of it at the time, and we would do a — it was like a tree lighting on World AIDS Day, because it hits around the holidays, where you would bring ornaments with your friend’s name and put them up on a tree, this tree of remembrance. Then as the disease started changing and less people started dying, it kind of went by the wayside, and it wasn’t as big of a remembrance kind of an event as it had been.

Then two artists in the community thought we need to resurrect it to acknowledge again what the arts community had been through and the loss, and to use it as an educational opportunity. Jane Weiner from Hope Stone Project and Dominic Walsh, who has his own ballet company, decided they were going to put together an evening of arts on World AIDS Day. They had asked me, because of my involvement at the theatre district and with AIDS Foundation before, just to come and help and see if could hear anything, and anything that I could help bring to the table to facilitate this for them.

I sat around this conference room table, and I looked at all of these young artists with their talent and their enthusiasm and their excitement and their willingness and desire to make a difference, and just thought to myself, “Not one of you has been through what we went through as a community.” I was grateful for that; that all of a sudden, it was a different environment, it was a different day. Artists could acknowledge their loss outright on a stage, and they could make a difference in terms of educating the community. But it was a little overwhelming for me because it was a reminder of how much we lost and how few of us were now standing on the other side of it.

TAPPE: Do you know any long-term survivors?
MANDEL: Oh, yeah. It was interesting, because when I was with Southampton Medical Group — that was a group of my friends who were physicians, and they were one of two large physician organizations that were treating HIV — it was during that five years that the cocktail came out. It was the combination of three drugs that was proving itself to suppress the virus.

You had, and I was able to watch, literally, a group of people who had been told, “There’s nothing you can do. Get your house in order and prepare yourself. Take disability at work and get ready, because this is the end of your journey,” and all of a sudden were introduced now to a medical regimen that completely changed their life, completely changed their life by completely transforming their health. You’d go in, and every period of blood draw you would get your T-cell count and you’d find out how active the virus was in your body, and all of a sudden now, you’re seeing your T-cell count increase instead of decrease, and you’re being told that the virus in your body is suppressed.

I can’t tell you how many people would then walk into my office and say, “What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to do now? All of a sudden, I’ve taken disability from work, I’ve got my house in order, and I’ve just been told, ‘Hey, maybe this isn’t the end.’”

So there was a real period of flux in there of not only individuals, but with the insurance companies and with corporations in general, just trying to address, “Okay. How are we going to manage this now and shift the dynamics and the environment?”

I was very lucky that it was at that particular time that I happened to be involved in the medical community and to be able to watch going from,
“Here’s some AZT, and it’s really all we can do for you,” to “Okay. You’re at” — and at that point, the test could only take the virus down to, I think, less than 50, so you were able to tell then. Now the test can tell you whether the virus is completely suppressed.

TAPPE: At that time, as you said, people were preparing to die. I knew two different fellows that — and you may be familiar with this behavior — where they sold their insurance policy. I think you may know how that worked.

MANDEL: Right.

TAPPE: And they ran up their bills purposely, because they thought, “I’m not going to be here.”

Did you see somebody just like that?

MANDEL: Oh, absolutely. People were reacting in a whole variety of different ways when they were given bad news. I mean, think to yourself, if somebody came in to you today and said, “By the way, you’re on the road” — as if we all aren’t, but, “You’re on the road to dying, and it’s going to happen much faster than you think, so get ready,” what’s the first thing you would do?

Well, back then, it was those kind of things. It was, “I don’t want to work anymore, so I’m out of here. I’m going to get as much money as I can right now, and I’m going to go and I’m going to live it up.” That happened with a lot of people, and then all of a sudden they’re given this news, “Oh, that day you’re waiting for, it actually is a little further out than you think.”

One of the guys that does AIDS education outreach with me, he was doing it especially — we were targeting in the Jewish community — he has been a long-term survivor now for probably 30-plus years. Again, he’s grateful for that, but
he says he walks around as if a gun is always pointed at his head.

TAPPE: I hope the children and the young adults hear what he’s saying.

MANDEL: Well, it’s interesting, because when we first started — and we have done this for probably now 20-plus years. We started when we were giving these kids some information that they weren’t getting anywhere and created a safe space for them to ask questions about and to and with people that they would have never done before. We literally have watched, over the 20 years, the knowledge of this group completely change.

The first groups that would come in, in the early days, were like, “Oh, thank God, I can finally ask somebody: Can you get AIDS from kissing?” and that was kind of the level of the questioning we were getting, to, “Oh, my God, we have to talk about this again. We hear it in school. We hear it in health class. We hear it from our parents,” to all of a sudden, “No, we really don’t talk about HIV and AIDS anymore. And by the way, if I had intercourse with a girl and the condom broke, are we at risk?”

So again, we’re almost back to, but now they are much more sexually educated and experiencing, but maybe not with the exact same knowledge that they had had before. So it’s very different now, the level of education and conversation kids have about AIDS.

TAPPE: Which I think goes across everybody.

MANDEL: It’s everybody, right.

TAPPE: Please keep up your education program. Kids everywhere need to know, and not just kids. Everybody.

MANDEL: There’s a huge outbreak in the senior community. Again, it’s all of this “It
happens to them; it doesn’t happen to me” kind of mentality, and that’s scary on a whole bunch of different levels.

TAPPE: Yes, and I believe HIV numbers are increasing within the African-American community. I think, in part, it’s because of hesitancy to talk about things like HIV/AIDS and sexuality.

MANDEL: Right, and just sexuality in general.

TAPPE: That’s right.

Barry, thank you so much for everything.

MANDEL: Absolutely. Great.

TAPPE: Your participation is greatly appreciated. I very much enjoyed talking with you.

MANDEL: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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