Oral History # 9

An Interview With
Don Gill

Place of Interview: Houston, Texas
Interviewer: Renee Tappe
Terms of use: Open
Approved: [Signature] (Initials)
Date: 4/12/18

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DON GILL

RENNÉE TAPPE: This is Renée Tappe interviewing Don Gill for The oH Project, Oral Histories of HIV/AIDS in Houston, Harris County, and Southeast Texas. The interview is taking place on April 12th, 2016 in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this interview is to document Mr. Gill’s recollection concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Houston.

Hi, Don.

DON GILL: Hey, Renée.

RENNÉE TAPPE: Hi. Thanks for joining me.

DON GILL: Thanks for being here at 911.

RENNÉE TAPPE: That’s right, 911 Welch. Thank you.

So we can get a little bit of your background, please tell me about your family history, your parents, where you were born, and just kind of give us a —

DON GILL: Well, my real name is Donald Lee Gill, and I go in the community by Don Gill. My parents were John Harrison Gill, and my mother was Claudie May Nash Gill. Place of birth, I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. And I have eight brothers and sisters, seven brothers and sisters that are alive. I have one brother that is deceased, so there were nine of us children. Mom got married when she was 14 years old. Usually, I guess, they got pregnant pretty quick back then, but for some reason, Mom did not have a child until she was 18 years old. And she’s very religious, so she was praying to God, “Oh, God, please let me have a baby.” So she did, and 17 months later she gave birth again to another girl, so her prayer
went to, “Oh, God, can I have some boys?” So she had three boys one right after another, and she said, “Oh, God, can you space them out?” So she had a girl, a boy, and a girl, then me.

TAPPE: Oh, my goodness. You’re the youngest?

GILL: Yes, I am the youngest. And growing up on a farm, we had no money, but we had food. We could have T-bone steak for breakfast if we wanted it. We could have fried chicken, because there was no mother in the world greater than mine that made sure her children, if she could, had everything that they needed. And so it was just great. Mom went to church. Dad stayed home, and he kind of took care of the farm. And what did rural life do with me? It makes me appreciate the
city. It’s not so dark in the city, because back in those woods, it could get very, very dark.

They got a telephone five years after I graduated from high school, and they put a unit in the window two years after I graduated from high school. I said, “Hey, why didn’t we have air conditioning and phone back then?” But if you wanted to be nosy with the party line, Mom’s was one long ring, and another resident of the community was two short rings. Everybody called one another Brothers and Sisters and so on. And you could listen in on their phone conversations if you wanted to, but no, I didn’t want to. I left there.

TAPPE: Where did you go to high school?

GILL: It’s right outside of Leesville. Leesville is the courthouse of Vernon Parish. And I went to a little town right next to the Texas line, or Sabine River, called Evans, E-v-a-n-s.

TAPPE: And when you were in high school, what types of activities were you involved with?

GILL: Well, being that we were a Class C school, I graduated at that time with the largest graduation class ever, and that was 28. Now, the next year, they beat us with 29, but I don’t think they have that many anymore. The activities, I played basketball. I loved basketball, but Dad did not. He thought it was a waste of time; we should be out in the fields working. So I’d wait until he went to bed at night, and then I would go out and build a fire and shoot basketballs. I would play basketball with my neighbor boys during the summertime. At least we had a
little break when Dad was at work. And I can remember Shirley and I getting off the school bus in the afternoons. We’d run into the house and watch *Dark Shadows*, but the whole time we were watching *Dark Shadows*, we were looking out the window to see if Daddy was coming, because we had to turn the TV off and go outside and make sure we were working. I loved basketball. I really did. And since we were a small school, that was the only sport that we had.

TAPPE: Did you have a lot of friends or a fair number of friends, given the size of the school?

GILL: Oh, everybody that lived in Cottonwood, everybody, we were friends. Now, would I live there again? No, because I’m an adult and my life is different than that, but yes.

TAPPE: How old were you when you left?

GILL: I graduated from high school on May 12th, 1970. That was a Tuesday night. And I moved to Houston that Friday.

TAPPE: Oh, my. We’ll get more on that story. I remember, when we first met, you were talking to me about when you were being raised in your family. You were talking to me about religion and how important that was in your life. Could you speak to that a little bit, please?

GILL: Well, a child basically only knows what their parents teach them. We’re a
reflection of our heritage. And since my mom was very religious, she never
smoked a cigarette, never drank a drink, never wore a pair of pants, never cut her
hair, never wore makeup. She was Pentecostal, and I respected it because it’s the
only thing I knew. And between my seventh and eighth year, I joined the church,
if you want to use that term, and that’s when I also was beginning to realize very
much so that I was gay. It’s very easy to hide who you are behind religion
because once those hormones start kicking in, I remember my mom praying all
night sometimes when some of my brothers and sisters were out on dates, but she
didn’t have to worry about her baby because she knew where he was, in there
dreaming about a date.

TAPPE: Now, was that because of your age? You weren’t old enough to date?

GILL: No, I had no desire to date girls.

TAPPE: But did she know that at that time?

GILL: No. Now, a mother, you can’t hide anything from a mother, so yes, she did.

However, we never discussed it until later in life.

TAPPE: But at that time, you were at home and —

GILL: I was a good little Pentecostal boy. Excuse me, United Pentecostal.

TAPPE: Were all of your siblings involved with the church?

GILL: Not necessarily. By the time I came along, my older sisters and brother one,

Junior, had, before I really realized what everything was, they had already gotten
married. I was only two years old when Eloise and Bernice got married. Then I
don’t remember Junior getting married, but I do remember Junior having a baby,
then his husband — “his husband,” ha. I’m in Montrose, aren’t I?

TAPPE: That’s right.
GILL: Junior’s wife was named Pat, and they had a little baby, and I think after about three or four weeks he had crib death, and I remember that very much. I guess I started remembering things from when I was five or six years old, and I remember that, but I don’t remember Bernice or Eloise or Junior getting married. Now, I do remember when James and Jimmy and on down the line got married.

TAPPE: Are you still involved with the Pentecostal religion?

GILL: Not the church itself, because my father being illiterate, he always said to us that if you eat food from my table, you will obey my rules. Now I, as a Christian to this day, I believe in a lot of what the church taught, but I cannot go to their church because I would feel that I’d be blaspheming because I’m eating dinner from their church knowing that they do not accept me for being who I am, so I go to Resurrection.

TAPPE: I know some churches have evolved somewhat, but to this day the Pentecostal church still feels very strongly about homosexuality.

GILL: Very obvious from Kim Davis in Kentucky. She would not give out marriage licenses. That’s the same religion I was raised in. My mom did not believe in a lot of things, but she believed in common sense. Kim Davis wanted 15 minutes of fame, and that’s what she got.

My mother was a leader in our church, and what do you expect when there were only 14, 15 members in the church? People would come and talk to her, and I remember one young lady saying, “Sister Claudie,” that’s my mom’s name, C-l-a-u-d-i-e, “I’ve got an opportunity to take a job, but it’s behind the counter at a convenience store, and I’m going to have to be selling cigarettes, and I can’t do that.”
And Mom said, “Well, don’t take the job, because that is your job. When someone wants a pack of cigarettes, you reach, you give it to them, and you’re getting a paycheck. You’re not committing a sin.”

So Kim Davis did not have common sense. She just wanted fame.

TAPPE: And she got only 15 minutes, thank goodness.

You said that you were 17, 18 when you moved to Houston?

GILL: I was 19. As a matter of fact, on my 18th birthday, which was August 25th, was the beginning of the first day of my senior year in high school, and I got my senior high school ring on August 25th, 1969, because I graduated in 1970. Nice round number. I didn’t think of it, ’69.

TAPPE: Now, what brought you to Houston?

GILL: My brothers and sisters, most of them did live here. Eloise, Louise, James, and Jimmy lived here in Houston. And yes, I do have a brother named Jimmy. My mother did not know that Jimmy was short for James, so I have a brother named James and a brother named Jimmy.

TAPPE: Tell me about this Jimmy and James.

GILL: Well, Mom and Dad did not know that Jimmy was a nickname for James, so they had two sons — well, a lot of sons. There were five boys and four girls in my family. And so my Dad’s name was John. My oldest brother’s name was George Wesley, but he always went by Junior, so there was John, Junior, James, Jimmy, Jessie. Then I come along, it’s a D, a Donald. I don’t know how that happened.

TAPPE: Ran out of J’s, I guess. That’s funny.

When you came to Houston, you were 19, you had finished high school. Did you have any other training, school training after high school?
GILL: Not immediately. When I first came here, all I knew was I had to get away from home because — my brother Junior was a wonderful guy. When he was sober, he was the nicest man you ever want to meet in your life. He would give you the shirt off his back. But as I said, Mom was a very religious lady, and we were involved in a church in DeRidder, Louisiana, that it was kind of a nondenominational Pentecostal, and we were the first church in Louisiana, because of civil rights there, to allow African Americans, and at that time colored people, to worship with us, and the Ku Klux Klan did not like that at all. They even burned a cross in front of our church one night when we were having service, and it got to the point that the white people there, we just didn’t like what was going on, so it got to the point that he built a fence around the church, and he started asking wives to leave their husbands and —

TAPPE: You mean the pastor of the church did this?

GILL: The pastor — and putting trailer houses around the church, and tents, and wives were leaving their husbands, or husbands were coming with their wives to create their own little piece of heaven here in earth. And on a Wednesday night, when Shirley and I were in the back studying at church, we were doing our lessons for the day, and we noticed that the preacher had Mom up front talking to her, and Mom was shaking her head no and crying, and the preacher is pointing his finger at her. And Shirley and I by this time, we did not know what was going on. We got very, very scared.

And Mom finally, after about 20 or 30 minutes of this, her shaking her head no and him shaking his head yes, she got up, she shook his hand, and she pointed at the door for us to meet her at the door. So we left, and on the way
home she was crying hysterically, and she said, “Children, don’t ask me anything.”

In Louisiana, we have hills kind of like Huntsville, so Mom, on our way to the house, once we got on the dirt road to go back into the creek bottom where we lived, she put it in neutral and killed it so it would save gas, and when it came to a stop, she got out and let the tailgate down and just started crying, and she still would not say anything to us children about what was going on.

So when we got home, Mom walked into the bedroom and she told us, she said, “Go wake your brother Jessie up and have him come in here.”

And she went in the bedroom and said, “John, get up and come to the living room.”

He being Daddy, “Oh, woman, I hope this is good, because I’ve got to get up tomorrow morning at 5:00 o’clock and go to work.”

She said, “Shut up and go sit down.”

She stopped crying, and she had all of us sitting in front of her, and she looked at my dad. She said, “John, you are the father of my nine children. Maybe you don’t go to church, but I love you, you old goat,” and I’ll never forget her saying that. “But no man, no man, has the right to tell me to leave my husband and bring my children and live in a tent on the ground. We have already lost our daughter-in-law to that and our two grandchildren, and we’ve lost countless neighbors that have taken their children and moved into the church, but I cannot be a part of that,” and that’s when we joined the United Pentecostal Church.

And I did say that we lost a sister-in-law, our daughter-in-law, my mom
said. Junior’s wife took his two children and put a tent on the ground, and that’s where she took my nephews and nieces to the church — and my brother just did not understand. He spent four years in the fourth grade and quit school and got married and had two children. His whole life was turned upside down, and he didn’t know how to accept that. And when you’re in pain, having a drink sometimes can relax you, but if it relaxed you a little, then you might need a lot. And then when he had a lot, if, for instance, when he came to the house and he was cursing about all that was going on at that church, how that man stole his wife and took his children, he would curse during it. And for instance, Dad might say to him, “Son, please stop cussing in front of your mother.”

And he would say, “Don’t tell me what I have to do,” and just fly into my father and start beating my father. And if we tried to stop him, he would do the same thing to us.

So I had to leave home. Okay? I did not want to live in that. I constantly asked my mom to please make him leave, and she said, “No, son. God will take care of it.” And we kept waiting for God to take care of it, and I’d be happy going to school on Mondays because I knew he had to work during the week, but I would cry on the bus going home on Fridays, not knowing what was going to happen at home, and some of it was not pretty.

TAPPE: That doesn’t sound like it.

GILL: But it was my life at that time. I didn’t know anything different. And sometimes I’d be caught there. An example, one time, when your house is pier and beam, you drop something on the floor, you can hear it. It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was the only one there, and my dad and I noticed that Junior had driven up.
And I kept my ear out, and then I heard the commotion, and I went running, and I
could not get Junior off Daddy. So I just went to the front porch and got a pine
knot that you burn in your fireplace, and I just stood behind my brother, and I
raised it as high as I could and just slammed it in the back of his head to knock
him out and get him off my father. And I guess I was 14 years old at that time.

TAPPE: How frightening for you.

GILL: It left a bad impression. Okay? Did I want to leave home? No, I did not want to
leave my mom and dad, because I was a baby. I was spoiled rotten. I didn’t
know what life had out there for me, but I had to leave because God wasn’t taking
care of it. Why? Because God only helps those that help themselves, and my
brother wouldn’t help himself.

TAPPE: It sounds like your mom was a very strong woman in terms of the fact that she
was able and willing to leave that church and not fall into that trap.

GILL: Oh, yes, Mother was a very unique person. She was the oldest of her family of
children, and there were eight in her family. She was the oldest, so she was kind
of used to taking care of people. And my dad’s family, if you want to use the
term, they were from the other side of the tracks. Now, my family was all poor,
but my dad’s side of the family, his sisters got pregnant without being married,
and Mom and Dad would take some of the children and raise them, and then they
would go to someone else.

Mom was a fighter. How did she do it? I do not know. She had nine
children living in the house at one time. She had her mother-in-law, who felt she
stole her baby from her, because my dad was my Grandmother Gill’s baby, and
she would just try her hardest to get my dad to go against — my mother was
Claudie, but she called her Old Claude. And so Mother and I were on the front porch when Uncle Barney came and picked up Grandma Gill to go live with him when I was in the second or third grade.

So Mother had nine children, her mother-in-law, and three or four other people’s children all living in the house at one time. She was a fighter. Dad, not having any education, was just finding work anywhere to get money. And we were part of soup lines, cheese lines for food. But as far as food, vegetables and meat, we had that, but there were certain things that Mother would go to get because we were poor.

TAPPE: Certainly, and she wanted to protect everybody.

GILL: Oh, she was a fighter.

TAPPE: Good for her.

Once you moved to Houston, what did you do? Did you live with one of your siblings?

GILL: I moved in with my sister Louise, who at this present moment is very ill and in the hospital. So I was supposed to go there today, but I knew if I had gone, I would be an emotional basket case talking to you, so I didn’t go see her today, but she’ll get better. She just had intensive back surgery, and I don’t know that pain because I’ve never been there, but I understand it’s quite hard.

TAPPE: It can be very difficult.

GILL: And my sister Louise is very fragile also. If you’re going to have strong people in your family, then emotionally you will have weak people, and Louise is very strong, but she’s also emotionally very weak.

And so I lived with her, and she was a beautician. She had her own shop,
and she did well, and I just liked the way she communicated with people and the respect that people gave her. Louise, behind my back, had gone to a beauty school because she had heard about a scholarship that they were offering to men, young men, to come in. So I got a scholarship to go to beauty school. All I had to buy was my book.

So I started beauty school, and about three weeks into beauty school, I realized that was not what I wanted to do, but I remembered what Dad always told us. Never stop anything that you start, so I finished it, and I worked at it for a year, and I just hated it. I just did not like being a hairdresser, putting someone’s hair up for a wedding or they’re coming in every week and getting their haircuts and you hear about their hysterectomies and their gallbladders and their marital problems. I didn’t like it.

And so my sister’s husband, Ruben Faulkner, F-a-u-l-k-n-e-r, worked for Stewart & Stevenson Oil Tools, and he was pretty high up in the company, so he got me a job as mail boy and fetching jock boy. I would be running errands for different people. One way to find out and learn the layout of Houston is, “Oh, Don, you need to go over here to North” — I had such a problem finding North Shepherd.

And so I was gone three hours trying to find this one place, and I’d stop and ask people, and they would say, “Okay. It’s over there.”

So I kept doing that. I was raised in the atmosphere and living in the country and hearing preachers from the pulpit — I remember the Astrodome opening and three of our members came to Houston to watch the Astros play in the Astrodome. And I remember the preacher preaching against it. “That will
send you to hell. Those city people, they are this, and they are that,” and things like that. “We’ve got to go on a fast and pray for these three members that have gone to that big city and gone to a baseball game.”

So when I moved to Houston, I had a problem looking people in the eye because of just what I heard about city slickers, and it took me two years before I had enough nerve to drive downtown Houston, but I did. Now I live — walk out my front door and see the buildings downtown.

But I got my beauty license and I worked at it for a year, and then I became a mail boy. Then I went to parts. Then I went to purchasing. I quit and went to work for a company called Clemtex, C-l-e-m-t-e-x. They were a sandblasting company. It was going to all these big refineries, selling them sandblasting material to keep their machinery up and going. I really didn’t fit in, going into all these big — on the Houston Ship Channel, all those big refineries. It was like, this is not being around the people I really want to be around. So I quit after about six months, and I bartended.

TAPPE: Who did you want to be around?

GILL: At that time, church people only, because that’s where I felt most comfortable. And I immediately started going to a church, which is Woodforest Pentecostal, and Brother Samuelson was our pastor, and his wife, two beautiful people, and two children. And I was kind of redhead at that time. Hair changes colors as you get older. And our pastor was a true redhead, and everybody thought I was his oldest son because I would go to dinner with them a lot.

So church was my life, and that’s where I met Debbie, and Debbie and I, we fell in love. I loved her, but I also knew that I was different, and I didn’t know
what to do, but society taught that we had to get married.

I got my hair cut by a gentleman in North Shore at a barbershop. His name was Larry. And you know, one gay person knows another gay person. Even I knew it, but I didn’t know it. And Larry was bisexual, and he gave me an address one day after about seven or eight visits, and I told him my wedding date was only six months away.

Debbie was a beautiful girl. I mean, she was only about 5-foot-1. Pentecostals don’t cut their hair, so her hair was below her butt, just beautiful dark brown hair.

And he gave me an address. He said put, “Put this address in your pocket, because Don, whether you really know it or not, you’re gay. I’m bisexual. I am married, and I have a daughter, so I wouldn’t change anything I have, but if I had it all to do over again, I would not have gotten married. So you need to check this place out and see.”

I didn’t for a long time. Then I went to Bible college at night, and one night in Bible college I sat and I looked around and I saw young men my age that were hiding their identity of who they really were behind religion just as I was. Now, did I love God? Yes, and I still do, as much this day, but I just can’t live the way the church taught, because if it is a sin — in other words, if cutting hair to you is a sin and you have a guilt complex about it, to you it is a sin. But to me, smoking a cigarette is not a sin. So it’s just whatever you’re taught and programmed.

I got up after the class was over. I pulled the address out of my wallet, and I drove to this bar. I didn’t go in. I just drove around, and I would watch
people come out. And there was an International House of Pancakes next to it. It was on Richmond, but on the other side of Kirby. And I would watch people come out, and they looked pretty normal to me. So finally one time I got up enough nerve to go into this bar. And you have to remember, I’m just off the farm and out of Bible college.

TAPPE: I bet you were frightened.

GILL: Well, I talked real country. And I walked in the door, and if you went to the right, you would go to the pool tables, flat on the surface, but if you went to the left, you turned and went up two steps to the upper part of the bar. And I turned to the left, and I was going up those two steps, and a gentleman was coming out happy for Jesus, and that’s what we call drunk, HFJ, happy for Jesus. And he looked down, and he saw that I was very young and naïve, and he just turned around and said, “Hey, girls, new meat.”

I turned my heels and went out, and it took me still another four weeks before I had enough courage to go back in. And so I did, and I saw that the people, they were people like me. And I didn’t drink at all, because it was against our religion, so I was, “May I have a Coke?”

And the poor bartender, like, “Oh, my, this is a hick.”

But they liked me. They really did. There was this little group called Roundtable. Ted and Al and a bunch of people, and I just started sitting and
talking with them. They were much older gentlemen than I at that time, and I was so thankful that when I did come out in gay life, I met business people that got up the next morning and went to work. And so it was okay. It was just wonderful. And I did not know it, but they all had bets on who was going to take me home first, or who I was going to allow to take me home first. So Al was happy he won.

TAPPE: Was it one from that group?

GILL: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. He was a bisexual man, married, had three children, three boys, but was he a handsome man. And I finally gave in, and I went home with someone. Did I want to? Oh, God, yes. I wanted to be held, I wanted to be loved, but I didn’t know anything about doing it.

And when I — not with him; that was much later. When I met someone, just about on my third visit, and his name was David, and to this day, he is still my friend, 45 years later. He’s the one I told you that’s quite ill at the moment. And I went to his house, and he was such a gentleman, and he saw that I was naïve. We didn’t do anything except play with his dog Maggie, and I got Duchess, was a puppy of Maggie’s. But David is still a friend of mine to this day.

I quit Stewart & Stevenson, and when I saw Farrah Fawcett and Dorothy Hamill on television shaking the hair instead of teasing the hell out of it and spraying it with lacquer, that’s what I wanted to do. So I resigned and went to barber college in the mornings and worked in a salon in the afternoons, and that’s when I became a barber.

TAPPE: And you’ve done that for years now, right?

GILL: Yeah, way before wrinkles or cellulite.
TAPPE: So you came back to your original training.

GILL: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was able to work in a salon because I already had a cosmetology license, and then I got my barber license.

TAPPE: And you’ve worked for yourself now for how long?

GILL: Oh, a long time, a long time.

TAPPE: And you’re still working?

GILL: Oh, no, no. I’m officially retired, but I do work part-time. Because I developed peripheral neuropathy in my feet and legs, I can’t stand and do one customer after another after another. I can do two clients in a row, but then I have to sit down. Now, I could do eight in a row if necessary, but that night I wouldn’t be able to sleep because my feet would be hurting too bad, so I have to pace it.

TAPPE: So you have to slow down a little bit.

GILL: When I first started going to the bars, we were on that, I went to The Galleon.

Then Al took me to Bayou Landing, and I saw a drag show. I was blown away. I had no idea that men did that and that they could be so beautiful doing that. And so I met a couple of the drag queens and, well, started talking with Jennifer George and Kitty Key and Donna Day and Sachi.

Sachi was unusual. He was a very muscular black man that his wife would sit at a table with his lover sitting beside his wife. But could he perform. And that’s where I fell in love with Shirley Bassey, my all-time favorite vocalist, because that’s what Sachi did. And when I saw him the first time, he did Shirley Bassey’s “This Is My Life” in full drag, and when he was through doing it, he was in a pair of tight shorts, and muscles everywhere. From a woman to a man, this is my life. So I began to love the community even more at that time.
TAPPE: That opened up a whole new world for you.

GILL: I was still living with my sister. So in 1973 is when I moved to Montrose. Kitty Key, Don was his real name, he was seeing a young man. They were best of friends. I don’t know if they were lovers or not, but Don. Kitty Key said, “I want you to meet someone.”

So I went and met Don, and when I looked at his eyes, I went, “I know you.”

He said, “I don’t know you.”

I said, “I recognize your eyes.”

I met him when I was in the eighth grade. He came to my school with his first cousin, who was my agriculture teacher. Now, I didn’t live the rest of my life longing for those eyes. However, when I met Don, I remembered his eyes, because there’s nothing more sexy to most people than beautiful blue eyes, but to me, brown eyes. I love big brown eyes, and that was just one of his traits.

I finally asked him his last name, and he said he was originally from Louisiana. As a matter of fact, he and I were born in the same hospital in Shreveport, Louisiana. His father grew up knowing my mother and father, so it was really easy for Don and I, after we got together, to go to Louisiana and visit without putting all the cards on the table.

And so once I got to know him, we became lovers, and it was 1974, beginning of September of 1974, and we spent five years together, and it was cool, because we didn’t exchange rings until our first anniversary. And I called the bakery for a cake, and I said, “I want a huge, big old sheet cake.”

They said, “Just a sheet cake?”
And I said, “Yes. Then I want you to cut it into a number 1.”

Then we had a number 2 for our second anniversary. Then a number 3, a number 4, and we didn’t eat number 5 because we had broken up.

But Don and I didn’t break up because we didn’t love one another. As a matter of fact, he is the one I told you that sleeps on my sofa all the time because he’s quite ill. We are best of friends still. You can never love someone and hate them, or you never loved them at all. And maybe you might dislike some of their characteristics, but there was something there that brought you together just besides sex.

TAPPE: So you’re still best of friends?

GILL: Oh, best of friends, yes, yes.

TAPPE: How did your family react once they realized that you were involved with the gay community?

GILL: Well, one of my brothers, Jimmy — not James, but Jimmy — when I was working in a salon here in the Montrose after I had moved to Montrose from North Shore, he came in the shop one time, because he was driving a Western Auto delivery truck, and he said, “Brother, I have a question I want to ask you.”

And I said, “What’s that, Jimmy?”

He said, “Are you one of them?”

I said, “One of what?”

“You know, one of them uh, uh, uh” —

I said, “Jimmy, you’re trying to say homosexual.”

“Yeah, that word, that word.”

I said, “Yes, Jimmy, I am gay, and as a matter of fact, Jim is my lover.”
This was much later. No one really knew that much when Don and I were together.

And he said, “Well, all you’re going to have to do” —

I said, “Jimmy, before you go any further, may I say something to you?”

“Yeah, you’re my brother.”

I said, “Jim and I were just talking the other night about you and Linda, you-all sleeping together, living together, doing the dirty together, and we were thinking, ‘Oh, my God, how terrible.’ But we realized, Jimmy, that you are a taxpaying citizen and you have every right to do what you want to do in your own bedroom.”

He looked at me and said, “Damn, I think you’re using some of that there uh, uh, uh” —

“Are you trying to say reverse psychology? Yes, Jimmy, I’m your brother, and Jim is my partner, such as Linda is your partner, and I don’t want you and Linda mooching all over in front of me, and rest assured Jim and I won’t do that in front of you. So you keep your stuff in the bedroom, and we’ll keep ours in the bedroom, but we’re still family.”

So the word got out when Jim became ill. Jim and I met shortly before Halloween 1980. Our first date was on Halloween night. Now, that should have told us something, but we were gung-ho, and we went to a big Halloween party.

When Jim got sick, it got out to the community because not per se about Jim, but one of my cousins who was more like my brother than my brothers, Leo Perkins. When he got ill, of course I was there with him all the time, and they knew it was HIV and AIDS. So everybody put two and two together. Okay?
Then my first cousin Joey became ill, and he also died.

But I kept most of them right here where you and I are sitting. I had a daybed. My table was over there. And I wouldn’t put my friends in hospices. Those whose families would support them or had a lover that supported them, that was great, but those that didn’t, and this is not just blood, this was friends, their families disowned them, I brought them here, and I took care of them. All the hospices were full, and I was working here at home so I could be with them. They could hear the chickens in the backyard, and they loved to see the people step up on the front porch and going into the shop and getting their hair cut. And I was always cooking something.

TAPPE: That’s wonderful. You created your own hospice with lots of love.

GILL: I was younger then. I don’t know if I could do that now. That was hard work. But when you have to do something, you have to do it.

TAPPE: What’s your first recollection of when something was going on in the gay community in terms of health issues? Do you recall?

GILL: Yes, very much. By that time, I had just opened my own salon. It was called Hair Plus by Don, and it was on Westheimer at Shepherd, where Randalls supermarket is. There was a little shopping center there.

And one example, this client came in, and I said, “Your allergies are bothering you, aren’t they?”

Then four weeks later, when he came in, “Boy, your allergies have gotten worse.”

He said, “Yeah, I’ve been to the doctor a few times, and they just don’t know what’s wrong.”
And I said, “You’ve lost weight. I mean, you look like shit.”

I never should have said that, because we didn’t know. We’re humorous. And I never saw him again. He just died.

Another client. Then another client. And then we started hearing about Rock Hudson. Now, by that time, Jim was already ill. But my recollection was in the early 1980s with my clients, people that came to see me once every four weeks to get their hair cut. And when you visit someone every four weeks, you visit your hairdresser more than you visit your doctor or your dentist.

I’ll give you a little history note here on that. That is why a barber pole is red, white, and blue. The reason for that is they were the doctor. They were the dentist. The red was for blood, the blue was for veins, and the white was for bandages.

TAPPE: Oh, really? I didn’t know that.

GILL: You went to your barber if you got hurt. The barber would extract bullets out of people. The barber and beauty industry have tried to get the United States Postal Service to recognize our industry since it’s one of the oldest besides prostitution. They have never recognized our industry.

But back to your original question, when did I recognize it. It was from my clientele. Beautiful men that would just come down with allergy infections or whatever, and at that time within six weeks they were dead, or seven weeks, eight weeks. Then they started realizing that it was kind of pneumonia, and there was Bactrim, the wide-spectrum antibiotic. It extended some of my clients’ lives a year, but it didn’t stop the wasting away, the losing the weight. Still we didn’t know what was going on.
Then I’ll never forget. I was going to a hairstyling convention here at one of the large hotels, and the night before they had identified it as the acquired immune deficiency syndrome, and so —

TAPPE: And then at least you could put a name to it, and it started to make sense that something was going on.

GILL: But we didn’t know how it got started.

One of my clients, by the name of Mike, his partner was one of those that died when they didn’t know what was going on. He went out, and he had a great time. And he felt so guilty once they realized it was sexually transmitted. He said, “I have given it to so many people.”

The guilt that we as a community felt in ourselves and the fright coming from what we didn’t know was going on, everyone was very humbled. The gay men became so humbled. Their gay female friends at that time were so compassionate. Wow, I had two gay women that helped me in so many ways, emotionally mainly, and financially if I needed it, especially when I took off work and just took care of Jim until his transition.

So when I moved to Houston, I became a hairdresser. Then I went to work for an oil company. Then I became a barber. Then I met brown eyes from when I was in the eighth grade.

TAPPE: And here you are.

GILL: Moving to Houston was a family thing, if you want to put it that way, but this is the most beautiful city in the world, and I don’t hear that just from me living here as an adult, because when I left Louisiana, I came here. I hear it from so many clients that left here and moved to San Francisco or moved to San Diego or New
York City, and eventually they moved back. They said it’s not because of the weather. It’s the people. You cannot find greater people than the people of Houston, Texas. As a matter of fact, when I first started fundraising, and I’m sure we’ll get into that, Houston, Texas was known worldwide as being one of the most organized cities for taking care of their own community.

TAPPE: Yes, and I have learned that.

Now, what I’d like for you to do is tell me, because I want to go back to some of your personal stories with Jim and your caretaking and how you managed all of that, but let’s talk about the fundraising. You have done tremendous things with fundraising in this community. How did you get involved with that?

GILL: Thank you. I got involved in fundraising because what I’ve learned the most about living was from the dying. What good is life if you cannot help someone less fortunate than yourself? I had never been to a fundraising class. I had never done anything like that. But a person can do anything within reach if their heart is set on it. HIV had already taken Jim; my second lover, Mark; and my cousin, Leo; and countless clients; and my best friend of all time, because you will always have that one special friend. And believe it or not, we have talked about my heritage as being United Pentecostal, Tony was my best friend. I mean, when we connected, we just connected as friends.

And I asked him one time, I said, “Tony,” because I met Tony through Don, “what is your last name?”

He said, “Pentecost.”

I said, “Now you’re yanking my leg.”

He said, “No, my name is Tony Pentecost.”
And I said, “You just yanked it harder.”

He pulled out his driver’s license, and he showed me. His name was Anthony Pentecost, and I was just blown away. But we became best of friends, and when it came to people that became ill first in my life besides clients, it was my best friend, Tony. I was devastated. That was the first time a ball bat had been put in my face except my brothers trying to shoot us when we were kids. But Tony was my best friend, and I can talk about these things now without crying because every person that lives has a step on the ladder of life that we climb. That was the first shaky step I stepped on. It touched me deeply. And he was just courageous. Tony was Tony, and he helped me learn a lot. I’ll never forget May 15th, 5:30 p.m., 1987, Hermann Hospital, when the doctor said to me and to Jim, “You have full-blown AIDS, and Mr. Nichols,” Jim’s last name, “we’re not sure if we’re going to be able to pull you out of this.”

I went to the telephone, and I called Tony. And of course, I’m crying. And I said, “Tony,” and I explained what was going on.

And he said, “I wish I could be there with you, because I can sense that you need me very bad,” because Tony was always there for me, and I was always there for him. A shoulder to lean on, discussions to talk about, bitching to talk about, whatever, that’s a true friend.

And he said, “Don, you know that I would be there with you if I could, but I am dying with what Jim is going to die with. You have got to buck up.”

How is a hairdresser supposed to buck it up? I mean, I’m just being humorous there. Okay?

TAPPE: I understand.
GILL: That’s how I got into fundraising, but the inspiration came from my first lover, Don. He had entered a contest called Prime Choice, and I was against it, because I was still his friend and he was my employee. “I don’t want you doing that. That’s the leather community. No, you don’t need to do that.”

He said, “I’m doing it whether you like it or not. Do you want to sponsor me as a business?”

I sponsored him as a business, and he didn’t win.

But next year rolled around. He entered it again, and he won. And I started noticing his clientele just boosted out the ceiling. But everyone was showing him so much respect, I liked that, because growing up all my life, I was John and Claudie’s baby boy. I moved to Houston, and I was Louise Faulkner’s brother. Then I met Don, and I was his lover.

I wanted to do that, so I set myself out to run for Prime Choice. And lo and behold, I won it, and I became Don Gill, not this person’s brother, not this person’s son, or not this person’s lover. I had my own ID at the age of 42, and then the respect from the community towards me not only because I won Prime Choice, but because everyone knew what I was doing here in my home: I took care of both my lovers, and I took care of friends, and I took care of other friends. The respect of that, plus being a business owner in the community.
“Oh, girl, love your wig,” no. When you’re there for a fundraiser, that’s a business. You have female impersonators. If you want just a drag show, just go to a drag show, but these female impersonators are putting on a dress to get out there to raise money for the less fortunate. I fell in love with this characteristic of the heart that these individuals had, and if they could put on a dress, and some of them are not drag queens, they’re just entertainers, to raise money for people less fortunate than ourselves.

Now, when I was most honored at the beginning stages of fundraising was when I put together a fundraiser for women’s breast cancer for Montrose Clinic.
Getting recognition from the Governor of Texas, Ann Richards, and then other elected officials throughout, I could sit here for hours and talk about fundraising, but it’s not me that makes the fundraising. It’s the entertainers that put on a dress. It’s the singers that sing live. And it’s you, the audience, that give the money. I just bring everyone together for a cause. It worked, but it’s not me. It was the people I knew.

None of the Don Gill Productions were ever open to all entertainers. I got familiar with entertainers, and I wanted to pull together fantastic entertainers that would entertain the audience, that they would want to come to another Don Gill Production.

When you were in school, the school bell rang at a certain time. You went to lunch at a certain time. Church services started at a certain time. When you became an adult, you started punching a clock to go to work at a certain time. You had a doctor’s appointment at a certain time. Dentist appointment. Hairdressing appointment.

And why are fundraisers always on drag time? I don’t understand that.

It’s a business.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

TAPPE: Not yours.

GILL: It is a business. When you’re putting together a fundraising event, people are coming there to donate for a cause. You should not say it’s going to start at 7:00 o’clock and start it at 7:45. That can be a drag show so you can go just strictly to a drag show. And sometimes there might not be a bar full of people at certain
times when you say you’re going to start it. But everyone was there when Don Gill Productions started because it started on time with or without the leadoff performer. And at that time, there was no texting, there were no cell phones, and there was no computer. Everything was done by telephone.

TAPPE: And if someone didn’t show up, you were on the telephone.

GILL: I went to the next person, because it started on time, because fundraising is a business. That’s just my way of looking at it. Now, it’s not some of my children’s way of doing it, my children being the fundraising children. They don’t mind going 30 or 40 minutes behind time, but in general they see that it works to start things on time. The public perceives that much more so than my personal endeavor. The public likes that, and I made it an issue.

TAPPE: When did you formally start Don Gill Productions?

GILL: Well, Don Gill Productions, when I did a first fundraiser, is when my first lover, Don, had a double heart attack. And at that time, he had already resigned from working for me and was working for The Houston Voice. He wasn’t getting any money because he had just started working there, so I put together a fundraiser to help him out financially so he could get on his feet. And the bar was packed, because Don was very well known. And so that’s how Don Gill started fundraising.

Then I saw Lady Victoria Lust do a Roast & Toast of Walter — I can’t remember his last name, but he was the owner of the Brazos River Bottom at that time. And I thought with that in mind, why can’t we do something for Lady Victoria Lust. So I put together a Roast & Toast of Lady Victoria Lust with the assistance of the infamous Regina Dane, Richard Bang, and everyone knows Pat
Petty of Miss Camp America. The three of us put together a Roast & Toast of Lady Victoria Lust.

Now, we had two buckets they could tip in because at that time, the Holiday Charities was called the Holiday Fund, and it was sheltered under the Colt 45s. So we had two buckets, one to tip for the Holiday Fund and the other to tip to send Lady Victoria Lust on a vacation to get her out of town for a weekend. And I asked the audience, “Should we do this round trip or one-way?”

They liked that, and that was the first time I was really holding a microphone and talking, the second time, and people were, “Hang in there. You’re doing a good job.”

And I told my first joke. What does it taste like to perform oral sex on a senior citizen? That depends.

So that’s how it all started. I’m a barber, and I like jokes. I mean, if you can’t joke about life sometimes, life and laugh go together. Now, we have tears that are mixed in that. And so I gave the Roast & Toast.

And then about three or four months later, there was an event going on, and I can’t remember what it was, but it was a chili contest, and they asked me to be a judge of the chili, and I was. And so Brian Keever, who everybody knows,
wonderful person, Damita Jo is his stage name, when he was introducing the judges, for some reason he said “Don Gill of Don Gill Productions.” I’d never heard it, and it stuck.

TAPPE: So Damita Jo did it for you.

GILL: It stuck, and it’s been there since then. I mean, I was already doing some things, but that’s how Don Gill Productions got started.

Now, Lady Victoria Lust and I, we emceed shows constantly. Every weekend, we were emceeing shows together. And it was Lady Victoria Lust and Don Gill, Lady Victoria Lust and Don Gill, and one time someone put Don Gill and Lady Victoria Lust. I went to that writer, and I said, “Please, never put my name in front of a famous person such as that.” That was respecting the elders.

Scott ran for Daddy of Montrose just about five years ago. I was not really walking well at that time because of my neuropathy, and it was hard for me to get up and down, but when Scott gave his speech during the Daddy of Montrose contest, “We must respect our history, and we must respect our elders,” I stood and applauded that.

So Lady Victoria Lust got me going, and she was talking about me with everyone. I didn’t know it. I started cutting her hair, his hair, Marvin Davis was his real name, and he noticed the way I was running my business, and he told me, he said, “I want you to run my charity.” And when he died, I really didn’t know it, but he had left me in charge of the Holiday Charities.

At that time it did become the Holiday Charities because meanwhile, Lady Victoria Lust and I, Regina Dane, Bob, we sat right here at this table. Because we wanted to have our own identity instead of being the PWA Holiday Fund
sheltered under the Colt 45s, we created, along with Michael Gates, an attorney, the PWA Holiday Charities.

On a Friday afternoon about four weeks later, after we sent the papers in, I’m going to speed this up a little bit because we can drag it out, I went to Mary’s because that’s where Lady Victoria Lust liked to be, and I showed her the papers. “We got it. We got the name.”

She said, “Good, you got the name.” That was the hardest part. “Now, get the 501(c)(3) and run my charity as a small business.”

I said, “Lady Victoria, why in the hell are you saying this?”

He said, “Because I’m dying.”

I said, “Lady Victoria Lust, you’re fine. You’re not going to die.”

That was on a Friday night. And then on a Saturday, I went to Mary’s just to see how he was doing, and we talked a little bit more, and it was one of my dear friends and advisor’s, Jeanette Vaughn’s, birthday, and they were meeting at Chances. And Lady Victoria Lust said, “Are you going to go out?”

And I said, “No, it’s Saturday. I don’t like to go out on Saturdays. My feet hurt.” The beginning stages of neuropathy, I didn’t know it.

And I took him, took her, to his house. He wanted to get a gift for Jeanette Vaughn. And so he came back out, and he got in the car. And I had a Z28 at that time. You know, the midlife crisis that costs you so much, I hate it. I loved that car, but it cost too much money, but it sure was pretty and red. When I took those T-tops off, I thought I was hot, and I did get hot weather-wise. But he got out of the car. He said, “I hate that damn car. It’s so low to the ground.” And he looked back in the car, and he said, “Now, run my charity as a small business.”
And I said, “Lady V., you’re not going anywhere.”

Now, we had already discussed him being the only child of the only child of an only child. He had antiques that went back many, many years. He had already told me that when he did die, this is the person I was to contact. He would let me know what antique dealer to do. So it wasn’t that I wasn’t kind of prepared, because I just didn’t want to accept it, but I was getting prepared mentally as well as taking notes. And he said, “You’re not a drag queen.”

And I said, “I very well know that.”

He said, “But you’re going to lose most all of the members, because I’m asking you to run it like a small business.”

I said, “Okay.”

TAPPE: What did he mean, you were going to lose the members?

GILL: Because I wasn’t a drag queen.

TAPPE: I see.

GILL: He was a drag queen.

TAPPE: Okay. I see.

GILL: Because I wasn’t going to be running it from a —

TAPPE: You were going to do a business.

GILL: I was going to run it, yeah, like a small business. We did. We went down to three members only: Jack Adams, John Szewczyk, and myself. Now, we had my two friends, Don and David, Joel Eisenhower, and Orlew as volunteers that would do things, but there were only three members there for a while.

I gave him a business card. He said, “Because I don’t want to die alone.”

So I put my pager on the back of the business card, because we didn’t have cell
phones then, and I went to the gym on a Monday morning. But that Sunday before, I was bartending at the Venture-N to raise money for our Working Account, because you can have a brand new car, but you’ve got to have money to buy insurance and put gas in it, so that’s when I came up with the idea of creating a different account so the money you donate to the Holiday Charities, 100 percent of that dollar went to people with AIDS, so I created The Working Account. I worked my butt off behind the bar off on Sundays. So that Sunday we were working, and I was asking John Szewczyk, “I thought Lady V. was going to come by,” but he didn’t.

I woke up on Monday morning and I went to the gym, and I came home, and there was a message, “Don Gill, call me. This is Carolyn from The Houston Voice.” She said, “Have you heard about Lady V.?”

I said, “No. What are you talking about?”

“She died last night.”

I got on the phone and started calling around, and yes, it was true. I went into my shop to see if I had any messages for haircuts, and the hospital had called seven times, but they didn’t look on the back of the card for my pager number, so guilt hit me right in the face with a baseball bat. I felt so guilty that he had to die alone, because he didn’t want to die alone, and the community saw that I was just heartbroken, and they were telling me, “You’ve got a job to do.”

Everywhere I went, the elders were coming up to me and saying, “She has already come to us and said that you are the person she has chosen to run her charity.”

I look at fundraising the same way I look at my business. I am not the
best, but I am far from being the worst.

Let me take a break.

[BREAK]

TAPPE: Okay, Don. You were telling me about Lady Victoria Lust and how you learned about her passing and that she wanted you to take over the charity.

GILL: Yes. As I was stating, everywhere I went that day, the elders of the community were stating, “She has chosen you to run her charity.”

And Bob was out of town on vacation at that time, and I was trying to get in touch with him and didn’t know how, and like I said, at that time there weren’t cell phones. So when he got back, he called me, and we did it.

But anyway, at the time that she passed away, the charity was about an $8,000-a-year charity, and now we’re up into the $50,000s- and $60,000-a-year charities, with no grants, now. Okay? This is all bar fundraising events.

TAPPE: How many events do you have a year connected to that?

GILL: Right now, Renée, I have turned most everything that I created over to other individuals because I reached a point not of burnout but I could feel down deep inside that the loss of so many people was beginning to kind of build up inside, and after me being up there for so long fundraising and emceeing one show after another, and I had five productions a year, and running my business and my personal family as well, then when it knocked on my door and took all my friends and cousins, I got to a point of burnout, so I turned a lot of it over.

Night in Black Leather, I turned over to Chris Beck at that time. LIVE, I had turned over to Clay Hardy and Jules Czarnik. We called her Julia. Jules, but
her name was Julia. Two vocalists. And then I had turned the boy of Montrose, those were the things that I created, and I turned the boy of Montrose over to, at that time, Robert Helms.

And so that year we had elections for the Holiday Charities, and I am still the executive director, but I was also president. We elected Rocky Atwood, the best president the charity has ever had. He was the president of a bank. I mean, he could give projections, and that was the best financial year we ever had. He was a financial person. He had the education for that. I had the passion. He had the education.

And so I started drinking. I got depressed, because an idle mind, the old saying, is the devil’s workshop. I was used to planning for the next fundraiser a year in advance. I’ve got composition books in that curio there where I planned shows by writing them down in a composition book. And I just started drinking, and yeah, the pain went away there for a bit. And I thought oh, if it went away some, I can make it go away a little bit more.

Fundraising for all those years, it was in a bar setting, and I’d have one drink, then I’d have another drink, and then I’d have a meeting at a bar and would have a drink, and after doing that for so long, 15, 16 years, when I got depressed, I didn’t want the public to see me drinking and depressed, so I did it here at my home, and I really went into a deep, deep depression and at that time became an alcoholic that was killing myself.

And the neuropathy was setting in, and I didn’t understand why I couldn’t walk without falling, even when I was sober, and my drinking — I had a dog, and my neuropathy, which I didn’t understand, I’d get up to lock the door at night and
set the alarm and just fall straight backwards on the floor. Yes, I was a little drunk. I’d go to the refrigerator, being I lived alone, I’d take a half a gallon of milk, raise it up, and the next thing I know, I’m on the floor, boom. And my muscles would just give way.

So I had to stop drinking because the neuropathy wasn’t going anywhere because when you’re drinking, you can fall on the floor easily, and when you’ve got neuropathy, you’re definitely on the floor, so I found myself on the floor more than I did upright. Since my muscles were getting weak from sitting on the sofa, I would put myself in my office chair, and I would roll myself to the back door to let my dog out because I couldn’t walk.

My sister came and got me one Sunday, and she took me to the hospital, and all I could remember, all I could remember, is I was thinking they put me in the barn where I grew up as a child. I thought I was in the barn. And I asked my sister later, when one of my Gill children passed away, a Gill fundraising child, she detected my voice was quivering because that was a great young man. His name was Brett and we called him BA Gill. It was just devastating, and I saw it coming. We all saw it coming.

The last time he really had anything to do with me was when I cut his hair one day and he was shaking so bad and sweating so much, and this was at 11:00 o’clock on a Sunday morning, he needed a drink. I know. I had been there. I had already sobered up at this time. And I hugged him, and I said, “BA, when you go to the bar, have a drink quick. Drink it real fast. Then I want you to notice, in your second drink, middle way through, your shakes and your sweating will go away.”
No person that depends on drugs or alcohol wants to listen to anyone. You have to figure those things out on your own. But it was my place as a parent — yes, I did feel like I was his parent — to say what I saw.

And when he was in the hospital, he was telling one of my other Gill children that “It looks like Pa’ Gill was right. I needed help sooner.” And he died the next day in the hospital. He could not control his withdrawals. It shut his organs down.

So I called my sister when that happened because it sparked something in my mind about what happened to me when I was in the hospital. I asked her, “Sis, why every time I woke up were one of you, either Shirley or you or Louise,” my sisters, “holding my hand?”

And my sister Bernice said, “Brother, you were so depressed and every organ in your body was saturated with alcohol, and the doctor said if you survived, if you survived, the first 72 hours,” that I would live. “But we cannot guarantee. Your brother is critically ill.”

So she called all of my family. My family started coming. I was just, “What’s going on?” The word got around in the community.

I was so angry at myself for hurting everyone when I was just so depressed. And yes, alcohol will stop depression for the first ten minutes that you start feeling the alcohol. Then you have to drink more to stop it from hurting, and before you know it, it becomes a crutch.

Am I an alcoholic? I don’t know. I don’t want to try alcohol again, because I did go back to it once, and the same thing was starting to happen. And I went back to it again. I never admitted my depression. I admitted that I was
drinking too much. And you have to admit those things to yourself before you possibly can crawl out of the hole you’re digging.

TAPPE: With your depression, as you state, do you think this was something that it was innate in you, or was it because of all of the things that had gone on in your adult life and the losses that you had suffered?

GILL: Well, growing up as a child in Louisiana, in Cottonwood, and seeing my brother do what he did, that kind of set off the anxiety and the depression between my seventh- and eighth-grade year in high school. And when I was in the tenth grade, I got so emotional, but I also had a very bad cold, and then it went into the flu, and my mother hospitalized me. And they started running out of ways to get the fever down, and it just so happened my brother, the next weekend when I got out, he pulled another big one and blood was going everywhere and fighting at home.

I had the most wonderful parents that anybody could ever have. They loved me just as much as they loved their son that was a drunk. They wanted the best, and the best is for a mother to be close to her child. And even though Junior was causing all the problems, Mother still couldn’t tell him to leave. I had to leave.

So I told one of the doctors, “I can’t live there anymore.” So they took me out of school in the tenth grade, and they sent me to Houston under a doctor here because I had caught hepatitis. They put a guy with hepatitis in my room when I had pneumonia. And so my weight started going down and down and down, and medicine wasn’t back then what it is today, because I remember looking on the door in my semiprivate room. It was $12.50 a day. How are we going to pay
that? Daddy had insurance.

So depression, I think everybody has a little bit of anxiety. Everybody has a little depression. I can’t be around anyone that is screaming and cussing. It just brings back too many memories of that, of a child living in that.

So to answer your question where did it come from, it’s just an accumulation of things growing up. When you live in a family of nine children, there’s always something going on, period. Somebody has a broken leg. Somebody has a broken arm. Maybe that’s why I could be a caregiver as patiently as I was because I always saw a lot of tragedy. Like I said, my dad had a huge family. My mother had a huge family. So there was always something going on. Then if there wasn’t something going on, my mother would create something. You know how mothers are.

TAPPE: Let’s finish up with your fundraising, about Mr. Prime Choice. Tell me about that, and then this Gill Family. I know that you, if I’m not mistaken, do not have any biological children.

GILL: No, I do not.

TAPPE: But you have a huge Gill Family.

GILL: I am honored.

TAPPE: And so tell me about that also.

GILL: Well, Prime Choice was something that I wanted because remember, I told you I saw Don, after he won, the respect that he got from the community.

So after Mark passed away, I went to the Venture-N during my birthday, and my cousin had come from out of town and some friends had come from out of town, because I wasn’t in the bar settings. My life wasn’t that. My life was home
with Jim and then Mark. Then people would come over for dinner. We would go
to dinner with them. We would go to movies. We hardly ever went to bars.

Don, David, and I went to the Venture-N one night, and there was an
event here in Houston before the Gay Pride Parade, years ago, a big party called
Pre-Parade Party, and they always had a Mr. Pre-Parade. And they were having
that contest that night. And my friend David said, “Why don’t you enter that?
Everybody kind of knows who you are now to a degree by being a business owner
and being friends of Don and I.”

And I said, “Oh, I don’t want to enter that.”

So they brought me a shot of scotch. “Try this.”

Ten minutes later, “Now you want to enter?”

“No.”

Fifteen minutes later, “Do you want to enter?”

And then he got other people coming over, “Just enter this contest.”

I did, and I won. I was like, “Wow.”

Then that was on a Saturday night. Then on that following Wednesday, at
the Mining Company was the Bear of the Month contest. That’s the men with the
hairy chest and all that stuff. So I was in there, and Lee was the sponsor of the
Bare of the Month contest. He came up to me, and he said, “Enter this contest.”

I said, “I’m one-fourth Indian. I don’t have any hair on my chest.”

He said, “I just double dog dare you to enter this contest.”

I’m a country boy, if you double dog dare someone. So I’m up there
entering a hairy man’s contest, and I have about ten hairs on my chest. But I was
41 at that time, and I was exercising and taking care of myself, and so it got to the
point where you had to take your shirt off. Now, this Pentecostal boy was like, “I have to take my shirt off in the public?”

“Yes, you have to take your shirt off.”

So I took my shirt off. And at that time, I had a ruffle-board stomach, and everybody started applauding. I walked out of there with Bare of the Month. And that’s not B-e-a-r; that’s B-a-r-e.

So I went to Mary’s on Father’s Day, and Rita Charles, Mother of Montrose, Don happened to be there bartending. “Enter this contest.”

“I don’t need to be Daddy of Montrose.”

And they said, “We double dog dare you. Here’s a shot of scotch.”

See, back to being in the fundraising in the bar scenes, just a drink here and there. And I did, and I was the seventh entry, so there were seven contestants, and they asked you a question, and they asked me, “Why do you think you should be Daddy of Montrose?”

I said, “Well, Daddy of Montrose. I’m going to refer to my father, my dad. My dad, John Gill, I’m his baby, and when I would fall and hurt myself, Daddy was the first one there to pick me up, reassuring me that everything was going to be okay. My friends are dying. I cannot say to them that everything is going to be okay. I, as their friend, can help take some of the fear away by being there for them and keeping them in my home.” I won the contest. It blew me away.

So the next thing was Prime Choice, which I already wanted, so I won it. And I told them, I said, “I’ll keep going until I lose.”

Thank God, the next one, I lost. I got second runner-up. I went to Dallas
for a regional contest, Mr. Gulf Coast Drummer, and once I got there, I realized that it was much heavier leather than I needed in my life. And I’m a firm believer that anyone has the right to do what they want to do as long as it is with the motto of the National Leather Association, “Safe, sane, and consensual.” I realized that I was in the wrong place, but I did not want to disappoint my Houston community because I had 12 sponsors, business sponsors.

So I rented a bed and breakfast, and I put all of my people that were in the contest with me, because you have to perform a fantasy on stage. And what I do in my private life is no one else’s business but my own, and that was a question that was asked me in that contest: To what extent are you involved in the leather community? Where? When? And maybe who?

And I went, “Thank you for the question. However, I’m going to answer your question the same way I answer someone when they say I don’t deserve my equal rights. I say to them, ‘I am no different than what you are, except what I do in the privacy of my bedroom.’ And to answer your question, sir, what I do in the privacy of my bedroom is none of your business.”

Oh, I got straight zeros from that one judge. Thank God they dropped out the lowest score and had the highest score.

Then they had a jock strap contest in this thing. I had to walk across the stage, a Pentecostal boy as I am, in a jock strap. Now remember, I played basketball and I didn’t even take off my warmups because of my religion, and here they’re asking me to walk across the stage, basically I got a piece of leather covering my dick and a strap going up to cover the butt. My God, I looked at that video, and I looked like a pencil walking across the stage. However, I had a goal,
and that was to have my city to be proud of me. I got second runner-up. Thank you, Jesus.

So during lunch at that event, everybody went to lunch. I didn’t want to go to lunch. I stayed and I watched everything that was going on backstage. How they were getting together. How the coordinator was coordinating with his staff. Watching just everything.

Then I came back to Houston and said, “I want to help,” and I did. I started. And Barry Petrie and Champagne, but I don’t remember Champagne’s last name, they were part of Soirée Aubergine, which was a group of people that was not a 501(c)(3) or a nonprofit, but they raised money for Bering Community Service Foundation.

And being that I was Mr. Prime Choice, they said to me, “Would you put together a fundraiser from a leather perspective for Soirée Aubergine to present to Bering?”

And I said, “Sure. I’ll call it Night,” that one night, n-i-g-h-t, “Night in Black Leather, A Night in Black Leather.”

So wow, it raised $5,600, and that just — I went, “Wow.”

So Don said, “Let’s go downtown and register that name.”

So the next year, I put it together again. It raised a little bit less, $2,000 less.

Then the next year, I raised for the Colt 45s. It went up to $5,900 for that event.

The first one was for Bering Community Service. The next one, for the Holiday Fund. The next one was for the Colt 45s, at $5,900.
The next one was for Steven’s House, which was a hospice. It raised $10,500.

Then the next one was for Houston Buyers Club, which was a vitamin place to help offset the toxicity of the medications, and it raised $14,400. Then it just kept going, and I kept going.

And then the transgender community heard about Don Gill and the way I tried to run the shows. Every entertainer knew where they were. They knew it was going to start on time. They knew it was advertised in advance. Entertainers wanted to be in my show. I was honored.

But remember, I just put them together. It was the entertainers and your money that made it successful, with The Houston Voice, with OutSmart Magazine. Greg Jeu, wow, what would this community do without him? The community just came together around me. Tad Nelson, the editor of The Houston Voice, he said, “You’ve got so many titles, and you’re keeping on going. You’re like an Eveready battery,” whatever that bunny rabbit is.

TAPPE: The Eveready Bunny.

GILL: He said, “You’re just Mr. Everything.” So from that point forward, every article he wrote, he wrote “Mr. Everything.”

Then Carolyn went to work for The Houston Voice, and she was the
community gossiper. She wrote the gossip column. And when I had one of my Night in Black Leather events was the first time after I had judged, then emceed, the next year. Remember, I ran for Gulf Coast Drummer and only got second runner-up. But the very next year, right after Gulf Coast Drummer is when I did Night in Black Leather.

Then Dallas asked me to come up and be a judge for Gulf Coast Drummer the next year. And then I started emceeing and entertainment director for Gulf Coast Drummer for three years, then now it’s Leather Sir, and I did that for two years.

And I said enough is enough before they run me out, because you have to remember, everything is going to run its course, and I chose to step aside. They weren’t tired of me. As a matter of fact, they wanted me to keep doing it, because it was all Houston entertainers and it was at the Dallas Eagle. And when the Dallas Eagle first opened, Don Gill Productions first started, and I wanted to do something different, I asked a bunch of entertainers, “Would you-all mind going to Dallas?”

And they said, “Not at all, not as long as it’s your show.”

So I took a group of people. The community sponsored it. Rented hotel rooms for every one of the entertainers to be in, because I had a place to stay already. The community said yes, we’ll give you the money. Go rent the hotels.

And we did an event there. The first fundraising event in the Dallas Eagle was called To Dallas With Love, Don Gill Productions, with all Houston entertainers, but with a challenge. They had to come to Houston and do the same thing for one of our charities. It was fun doing those things. But the most
rewarding was when I asked people, no one ever said no. It was just rewarding.

And the transgender community heard about Don Gill and doing his thing, and they called me and asked me if I would emcee one of their banquets. And that was right before our Christmas show, and I said, “Why don’t you come to the BRB this Sunday night and see the Christmas show that I’m putting together.”

Bob and I were the directors of the Christmas show.

And halfway through it, when I was introducing an entertainer, they came over and said, “We want you.”

I did that for three years in a row. I was the entertainment director and the emcee for the Transgender Unity Banquet for three years. I’ve got an award back there to prove it.

It all just happened so fast, but I guess I was successful, if you want to call it that — the one word I can say that I respect the most, the two words, or two titles, was Mr. Everything and Mr. Wonderful. The thing I appreciated the most through all of this, Renée, was that they trusted me. And that is the biggest honor a person can have.

One gentleman that I was dating from Dallas came down, and I had a fundraiser. The next day, we went to that same bar where the fundraiser had been the night before, and there were people coming up to me that were unable to make it. “Don, I’m so sorry I missed your event last night. Here’s $100.”

Someone else came up, “Here’s $100.”

Someone else, “Here’s $50.”

Before I walked out, I had almost $1,000. And this gentleman said, “People trust you with cash?”
I said, “Look, I only have one life, as it is right now, and I want to make sure the next one is not as painful as this one.” And trust, that’s an honor to be trusted.

TAPPE: Well, you’ve done a wonderful job.

GILL: When I won Mr. Prime Choice, the next year I ran for it but I was stepping down, and there was only one contestant, and I was talking to the owner of the Ripcord at that time, Gary, Little Gary, because there was a Big Gary that worked there and there was Little Gary. His lover, Chuck, was listening to the conversation, and Gary said, “We’re not going to have a contest if there’s only one contestant.”

I said, “But this person deserves the title because he’s raised $3,500 before the event,” and Chuck heard me talking to Gary. Gary passed away. Chuck came to me and said, “Don,” because Prime Choice is owned by the Ripcord, and he said, “would you produce and direct Prime Choice?”

I went, “I’d be honored,” and so I produced and directed Mr. Prime Choice for 17 years.

Everybody thought I owned it. No, I was just the producer and director only of Prime Choice. Robert Harwood was a godsend of a young man. He was always so photogenic, and I looked like a dried-up California prune. He looked
great and was Mr. Prime Choice 1997.

So in 1998 or 1999, I asked him to start emceeing with me, and he did, and we did it year after year. And when I created LIVE, Robert was there with me. No, excuse me, not LIVE, boy of Montrose. He was right there with me when I created boy of Montrose in 1999. And the reason I created boy of Montrose is for the Holiday Fund, but traditionally this coming Mother’s Day, we will have a Mother’s Day contest, and they will choose a Mother of Montrose. Father’s Day, they will choose a Daddy of Montrose. And I was thinking, I am tired of working behind the bar to put money in our Working Account, so I came up with the idea of creating the boy of Montrose to go with the rest of the Mother and Daddy, but he had to raise funds for our Working Account. And it was on the patio at Mary’s in July. Was that ever hot. So I moved it to the Ripcord, and so it’s been at the Ripcord forever since, and it’s kind of a leather title.

And then six years ago, people kept saying we need a girl, we need a girl, and I kept going, “Shy Anne, go down and register the name. “You,” different people, “go downtown and register it. Start it.” No one would do it, so one day I just went downtown and I registered the girl of Montrose, but in the Holiday Charities name, not Don Gill. So the Holiday Charities now owns the boy of Montrose and the girl of Montrose, and they’re part of the First Family. So Mother of Montrose is on Mother’s Day in May, Daddy of Montrose is on Father’s Day in June, the boy of Montrose is the third Saturday of July, and the girl of Montrose contest is the third Saturday of August, and the Family is completed for the next year. The girl has to do one for the Holiday Charities Working Account, but she’s allowed to do two others. Now, they can do as many
as they want, but they’re asked to do three.

TAPPE: Now, this is not the same as the Gill Family?

GILL: That’s a different subject totally.

TAPPE: Tell me about the Gill Family.

GILL: Well, there’s a bar in town now, it’s called Tony’s Corner Pocket, but years ago it was called Keys West. And Joe, the owner of Keys West, and many of the clientele and I found that to be my place to go and have a cocktail after work. Anytime he had a fundraising event, that was Keys West’s fundraising event. Like Miss Keys West or whatever else he wanted to put together or ask someone to do, he would always make it a Holiday Charities event. The money would come to the Holiday Charities.

And so this particular night, it was their Turnabout show. The bartenders became drag queens. The drag queens became bartenders. And one of the bartenders, his name is Josh Jones, he worked somewhere else and he worked only on Saturday and Sunday, and just a very pleasant young man to be around, extremely polite, courteous. At that time I was dating David. I was working the credit card machine during the show and people were coming over giving me their credit card, and I was running the credit card machine. And then they said, “Okay. Our next performer, you all know him on Saturday in the afternoons as Josh Jones, but tonight he’s Anne Marie.”

I glanced and I went, “Whoa,” and I kept trying, “Oh, you want to donate $300,” run the credit card machine and watch this person on stage, and so finally when it was time for Josh, or Anne Marie, to come back on stage, I told David and his best friend, I said, “Here, work the credit card machine. I’m going to go
watch this.”

And I went over and I stood at the bar, and I watched the way this young man, Josh Jones, Anne Marie, stood at the steps, her concentration on thinking about what she was going to be doing. She stepped on stage, turned her back to the audience, and the music started, and one hand went out so graciously. I mean, it was just like poetry in motion. Then when he turned, it wasn’t klutzy. It was with class. And he started doing his impersonation.

I was hooked. Not only was his timing perfect, his looks — as a matter of fact, I have a brother-in-law that wants to divorce my sister and marry Anne Marie. He was beautiful. And so I met him when he was getting off stage, and I said, “Josh, what did you say your stage name was?”

“Anne Marie.”

I said, “Josh, you’re beautiful and you are talented. I want to put you to work.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

I said, “Three Saturday nights from now at the” — oh, the hotel at Hillcroft and the Southwest Freeway, Hilton Hotel at the Southwest Freeway. And I said, “I am the emcee and entertainment director for the Transgender Unity Banquet. I want you to be my female impersonator.”

Then two weeks later, I had another Don Gill Production at another bar, and I had him in it. Then three weeks later, I had another Don Gill Production. I was busy. I had him in it again.
Then one Saturday, I got off work and David and I went over to Key West to see Josh and to have a drink. We were playing cards, because we loved to play cards. At that time of day, 4:00 o’clock on a Saturday afternoon, it’s not busy, so Josh, we would sit there and we would play cards or dice, and we had a handful of cards, and he looked at me. He said, “Pa’” — well, “Ma’,” because I was a caregiver at that time. My friends called me Ma’ Gill, M-a, apostrophe, because I took care of people. And he said, “Put your cards down.”

So I put my cards down, and I said, “What?”

He said, “You saw something in me that I really did not know was there.”

I said, “You’ve got it, and you know it’s there.”

He said, “No, I didn’t,” because that’s his honesty. He’s such a kind young man. And he said, “I have a question to ask you. Since you saw this and you’ve put me to work, other people in other organizations are now seeing it, and they’re asking me to perform in their shows.”

And I said, “They should. You’re beautiful.”

He said, “But I want to take your last name.”

I went, “You want to be Anne Marie Gill?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Under one condition. You spell your first name different,” because it was A-n-n-e, Anne. This was too classy of a person. I said, “I want you spell your first name A-n, apostrophe, An’ Marie Gill, because you’re too classy to be just an Anne.” Now, that’s just my personal opinion.

A few weeks later, I saw a young man by the name of John Pace do that little song on a little tractor, “Don’t You Think My Tractor’s Sexy?” And he is a
cute young man, and back then he was just a knockout. So I asked him, I said, “Do you want to join the family?”

So An’ Marie; and JP, John Pace, took JP Gill.

Then they just got all kinds of attention, and I was putting them to work, and we were all having so much fun, and they gave me this beautiful picture of just him and her for Christmas. And BA, Bret, was watching all of this, and he came up to me one night, and he said, “Oh, Pa’,” because I became Pa’; I was a fundraiser now, not just a caregiver, “I want to be a Gill.”

And I said, “You have to go ask An’ Marie and JP,” because An’ Marie started this.

He came back, and An’ Marie told him, said, “Only if Pa’ Gill wants it.”

So he came back, and he said, “An’ Marie says yes. Please, please, please,” just like a little kid in a toy shop. I just love him. If you met him, you would want to hug him, because that was the type of personality Brett was. He was just a jubilant North Texas boy that was like a little bear that you just wanted to hug, and he always giggled.

And I said, “Yes.”

Then Greg Davis became Marcia Mink Gill.

So there was An’ Marie Gill; JP Gill; BA Gill; Rocky Atwood, who became RA Gill; then Marcia Mink Gill.

Marcia’s first name, he chose it became that was his grandmother’s name, and her maiden name was Mink, if I remember correctly, so that’s why he chose Marcia Mink. Then he chose Gill.
Then the gentleman I was dating at that time, David Paul, he became DP Gill. And then we have someone, his name is Robert, and he’s called Mona Lott Gill.

Then we have Gillettes that perform in the names that they’ve been doing. Susan Hayes, who was just our Emperor last year for our Court, is still Susan Hayes, but she’s a Gillette. Sherry Ann Bouton is a Gillette. Lillian Devereux is a Gillette. Craving Moorehead, and don’t even ask me where he came up with that name, Craving Moorehead. So there’s a bunch of us, and we get together once a year, and I am just so honored.

And I’m not an entertainer. Now, have I entertained? Oh, God, yes, and they’re sitting out there all laughing like a hound dog barking. I was doing
Minnie Pearl because that’s the closest thing I could come to. I wasn’t quite
classy enough to be Dolly, so I was Minnie Pearl.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

TAPPE: But you have all these entertainer children.

GILL: Children. And they’re out there every weekend now.

TAPPE: That’s right. Well, I had heard of the Gill Family, and so thank you for filling
me in on that.

GILL: We’re called it the GFFF, Gill Fun Fundraising Family, and there are three of
them, four of them, five of them have been Emperor or Empress of the Court
System. As a matter of fact, Marcia and JP were Emperor and Empress at the
same time, both of them Gills. I’m sitting back, boy, my chest is like a bantam
rooster, just stuck out there. And so then when Sherry won, it grew a little bit
bigger. Then when Susan won, it grew a little bit bigger. Mona Lott Gill also
became Empress. They don’t even realize, I think, how much I care for them.

Am I active? No, I’m a very quiet person. I always have been. I don’t
like crowds.

Someone said, “You put together bar-packed crowds, and you don’t like
crowds?”

I say, “Oh, I had my space up there on stage. I wasn’t out there in the
middle of it.”

TAPPE: Yeah, but you’ve done a wonderful job and with a wonderful reputation.

GILL: Thank you very much.
TAPPE: Absolutely. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to switch gears a little bit and talk on a more personal note outside of the fundraising. Tell me a little bit about your partner Jim, how you met. And I know from our conversation earlier that you were his caretaker, you had a lot of roles to juggle at that time. Tell me about that and how you managed.

GILL: Well, I wasn’t a caregiver at the time I met Jim. I met Jim in 1980, about two months or a month before Halloween. I was at the Briar Patch because I always wanted to own my own business in the Montrose, so I worked in a bar one night a week and all the tips and that little tiny paycheck, I put into a savings account for me to open my own business.

And one Wednesday night when I went over to pick up my check, this hunk — and when I say hunk, I mean hunk, his arms were as big around as my...
thighs, he was a bodybuilder, cute as a bug in a rug, shaved his head — his face was still and my lips were a magnet. So we started talking, and we planned to have a date because he was on his way to work at the coffee manufacturing place on Navigation. I love driving by there and smelling the coffee.

So we had a date on Halloween night that year, 1980. I lived with a roommate at that time who had divorced his wife and had come out of the closet, and we shared a town house over off Shepherd at Norfolk. It was a big townhouse, and we weren’t lovers or anything like that. We were friends, because I was cutting his hair in North Shore. And he told me one day years ago that he, before we even became roommates, that he was bisexual; that he loved his wife and he loved his three boys, and he ran across the right man, and he just couldn’t help it. He told his wife and his boys, and he moved out with this man in Baytown.

His name was Rob and he was a great roommate. He was a great roommate. He did his thing, and I did mine. He was quite heavy weight-wise. He came home one night just boo-hooing his eyeballs out because he was already 46 years old. But I don’t care if you’re 46 and you come out of the closet or you’re 19 and you come out of the closet, you are in for a bumpy ride. And he just was just emotional. “No one wants me because I’m so heavy.”

I said, “Rob, get over it. There are chubby chasers out there. Now put yourself out there.”

And sure enough, he met some for sure like that, but I had also met Jim, and Jim was living with Rob and I because my Jim and I had our own bedroom, bath, and everything. We just shared the kitchen and living room.
And so four of us was too much, so Jim and I started looking for a house, and one of my gay friends, female gay friends, knew about this house for rent, so I came in off Montrose and we looked at it and we took it, and then Jim and I set up house. And then I told the owner of the building, my house, that I needed to buy a home because I was opening a business and needed the tax write-off, and he said, “Why don’t you buy this house?”

So Jim and I bought this one. We put the central air in, and heat, and we closed doors off because every old house had two doors to it. Every room had two doors. And put central air in and built a fence, and I built my chicken coop, and we were broke after all of that. So we stayed home. We had friends coming and going.

Jim stopped working at the coffee company because he wanted to get back to what he was doing, which was teaching, and I wanted to open my own business, so we both did the same thing at the same time; we changed jobs. He changed professions, but I didn’t. I opened my own shop, and he started teaching, so we didn’t go out. We were broke.

Jim got off early and would always come by the shop to say hi, and then he would go work out at the gym. On this particular Saturday, he came back from the gym, and I know your blood pressure boils when you’re working out and your blood is rushing, but he came back with this rash all over his neck, but it went away in a day. It was like oh, okay.

Then about two weeks later, it came back again and it was in other areas, on his chest and his neck.

Then three weeks later, he just didn’t feel like going to school. He said, “I
just feel tired. I feel like I have a cold.” So he was off that week, and that
Saturday night, we went to Christie’s Seafood & Steakhouse on South Main, and
right after the salad and they brought the entrée — he was telling me during the
salad, “It’s cold in here.”

I said, “Yeah, it is a little nippy.”

But he went into the hardest chill. I had no idea what was going on. I
mean, he just couldn’t eat. I mean, he was just shaking. So I asked the waitress
to put everything to go, and we came home, but before we went to the restaurant,
I asked him, I said, “Do you mind if I get up tomorrow morning and run to
Louisiana to visit my mom on Mother’s Day?” because it was the night before
Mother’s Day.

So we came home and boy, the harder the chill, the higher the fever. It
went up to 104. And I just didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know. And
then the next morning, he said, “Aren’t you going to your mom’s?”

I said, “No, not with you feeling like this, I’m not.”

So that afternoon, another chill hit him and his fever went extremely high,
and that was Monday.

Tuesday, I said, “We’ve got to go to a doctor.”

So we went to a doctor and he took an X-ray and he said everything is
okay. So he put him on some antibiotics, and sure enough, the antibiotics kind of
halted the fever.

But on Thursday — on Tuesday it halted it. Thursday — Wednesday, oh,
Lord, those particular times are so confusing because you knew something was
out there, but you couldn’t — that always happens to other people, not you.
Okay? Not my lover. We had already been together seven years.

So I took him back to the same doctor. They took another X-ray, and they said you have to go to the hospital immediately. Within two days, the pneumonia was very obvious in the lungs. I called my sister, Louise, God love her heart, the one that’s sick right now. She was always there for me, plus she was my employee. When I first became a hairdresser, I was her employee. Then years later, she became my employee. So I said, “We are going to St. Luke’s,” and she came.

And we were checking in, and checking in sometimes can take forever. And Louise got there, and thank God she did, because he went into one of those chills. And when I say “one of those chills,” if you’ve never seen an HIV person go through a chill, it is scary. So they finally rushed him on up to a room. Then the next day — that was Friday, then the next day was May 15th, and that’s when they said he would not, possibly, get out of the hospital due to AIDS.

I called my best friend, and he couldn’t. And I called his brother Joe. His brother Joe was also gay and lived in Fort Worth with his lover Kent who was a neurologist. And we all knew what was going on. And my other female best friend, Barbara Owens, was a massage therapist. I came home late Saturday afternoon just to get some clothes, and she came over, and I laid down on the bed and she gave me a massage. I did fall asleep for about 15 minutes. A cycle of sleep is 20, according to what I have read. But this 15 minutes of her massaging me and me getting that 15 minutes of just total relaxation, I woke up and I said, “I’ve got to go back to the hospital.”

And he got out. We had to wait six weeks for him to get on AZT as a
trial, because it wasn’t prescription. It was trial medication. He was a Buddhist and I’m a Christian. I started going with him to his Buddhist meetings, and I began to learn different things about life, how people can perceive life. I always perceived life to be from a religious point of view. If you did anything wrong, all you have to do is ask for forgiveness and it’s wiped clean. Buddhism taught us they don’t forget. Cause and effect, what goes around comes around. So I learned so much.

And when he got to the point he no longer could read or chant, I did it for him. I was his spouse. I did the Nam-myoho-renge-kyo over and over and over. He was in bed and he heard me doing it for him. I would get his literature in the mail, and I would read it to him every week. And by doing all of this, it made my Christianity stronger.

And one night at a meeting, one of the counselors or the guide — I don’t remember what they were called right now — said we are responsible for everything in our lives, good and bad, and there is no other way you can go around it.

And I did, I’ve heard enough of that, and I raised my hand, and I said, “I want to know what the heck you mean.” You can speak plainly in Buddhism, I mean, when you’re meeting. I said, “How can you say we are responsible for everything in our lives, good and bad? What about that woman on the Southwest Freeway that just got a job and that was her first day ever to drive the Southwest Freeway to go to downtown and work in a high-rise building, and a guy was standing on the Mandell overpass and threw a brick off and it hit her through the windshield and killed her instantly?”
“How can you say she’s responsible for that, Don? Did she not stop at that stop sign? Did she not yield? Or did she run that red light? She put herself at that point at that time when that young man was going to do something bad. Maybe she could have stopped at that stop sign or not run the caution light. She put herself there at that moment. That is what prayer is, Don. When you pray, you’re also praying not for just your salvation, but for protection.”

And it kind of made a little sense. I said, “Okay. I’ll take it with a grain of salt.”

But that was his way of explaining we are responsible.

And as I have gotten older, if you exercise, you exercise to keep your body up. If you pray, you keep your spirituality up, which controls the body, your mind, your heart. So I think it all kind of goes together.

Am I religious fanatic? No, I am not a religious person. I’m a Christian. I try to be Christlike as much as I can.

Can I be judgmental? Oh, yeah, a Virgo can be.

Can I be sharp with the tongue? Oh, yes, a Virgo can be.

But I’m responsible for everything that comes out of my mouth, and if it’s detrimental against another human being, that’s creating a cause, and I don’t want to reap any effect.

TAPPE: How did Jim’s Buddhism help him through his illness?

GILL: I would leave the hospital being with my dad, and my dad is lying there dying and saying, “Oh, God, please don’t take me. Please don’t take me. My family needs me. Please, I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.”

And I’d come home crying, and I’d walk into the bedroom, “Jim, Jim, are
“You okay?”

“Oh, shit, I’m still here?”

He was ready for his new beginning. He did not like the vessel that he became, because when I carried him around in the house, you have to be real careful when you’re a caregiver. I would stand and have Jim stand on my feet. Then I would put my hands under his elbows, and he would grab my what that is [indicating] muscle, and I would walk backwards with him. And he asked me to stop one day in front of a mirror. “Jim, no, no, no.”

He looked at me. He said, “Stop, Don.”

So I stopped, and he looked in the mirror. He said, “I don’t like this body. I’m ready for my next beginning. And I want to thank you for being here with me to help me go through this transition the way nature wants it to be because if I commit suicide with pills like some of our friends have done, I’m going to have to repeat in my next life this cycle of life until I get it right so I can reach the state of buddhahood.”

It all kind of makes good sense. I’m totally against suicide, and he was too, so we went through it transitionally. He taught me everything.

When I buried my dad — I came home from the hospital when Dad died, and he was so weak, he said, “How’s your dad?”

I said, “Dad’s gone.”

And he tried to raise his arm and put around my neck, but he was so weak he couldn’t. So I put it around my neck, and of course I fell apart. You talk about a Pentecostal eyewash, and I did.

And he said, “Now you’ve got it out of your system. Go take a shower.”
Get dressed. Go to Louisiana and bury your dad.”

“Jim, what about you?”

He said, “I’ll be fine.”

So I got the cookies, and I got the water and everything, and, “Jim, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

So I called friends, and I said, “You’ve got to check on Jim. You’ve got to make sure he’s okay.”

So I got to the front door, and I was going out the front door, and I knew that I forgot something, so I closed the door. He thought I left. And I heard this [sound]. I ran to the bedroom, and blood is just running from his mouth and his nose. And I said, “Oh, my God, Jim, what” —

He said, “Don, please go bury your dad. I’m okay.”

I said, “No, you’re not okay, Jim. You’re dying.”

He said, “That’s what I mean. I’m going to be okay. I will be right here waiting for you, dead or alive.”

You can imagine how it was, going to bury my dad.

I went to Louisiana. I buried my dad. I came back and he was still with us, and he had eaten — you have to remember, when someone is that sick, they say, “I’m hungry for chicken and dumplings,” for an example.

I would go and prepare the chicken and dumplings, and he said, “I can’t wait for it.”

Then when I would bring him in and set him at the table, he couldn’t eat it. Just the smell of it satisfied him, then the thought of eating it made him sick. So of course the wasting-away syndrome.
So when I came back from burying my dad, he said, “You’re not ready for me to die, are you?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “You can take me back to the hospital one last time.”

He kind of died in the hospital. And of course, I went falling apart. And they revived him. The nurses came in immediately and started working on him, and they got him back, and got his throat cleared, and he started breathing again. And he looked at me after he was able to talk. “Don’t you ever do that to me again.”

I said, “Do what, Jim?”

“Don’t cry. Let me go. There was the most beautiful light I have ever seen in my life, and I turned around and looked at you, and you’re bawling your eyeballs out like a sissy. Now, stop it.”

He made me grow up. I was the baby of my family. Everybody always took care of everything else. They did a blood transfusion on him to try to make him stronger.

I brought him home, and he was real good at getting up before I left to go to work and at least sit in the chair. This morning, that particular morning, he didn’t want to get up. I said okay. Now, I only worked over there on West Gray, so it was nothing for me to run home. So every two hours I made it a point to come home, and he was still in bed. “Jim, you need to get up.”

So I came home at lunch. “Jim, you’re still in bed. You need to get up.”

“Oh, well, okay.”

So I came home at 2:00, and he was still in bed. I said, “Jim, I don’t like
this. Now, you need to get up, so I’m going to put some water and some orange
juice beside the bed, and I’d like for you to be in the chair when I come home
from work.”

He was still in bed, but he had had a stroke. He was out, totally out. I got
his fever down. I got him cleaned up. I brushed his teeth. I could say I combed
his hair, but he didn’t have any. He shaved his head.

And I started to look for my dog. “Duchess, where are you?” His dog,
Schatzie, always stayed at his head, and every time I tried to touch Jim, she would
growl at me like she was going to take my left arm off or something. And I
started looking for Duchess. I couldn’t find her. I went out in the backyard,
thinking maybe he let her out in the backyard. I couldn’t find her. I looked
everywhere, and I sat in the chair beside the where I always sat, and I just put my
head in my hands, and I kind of looked down and started crying, and I saw
something do this [indicating], and I looked back, and she had had a stroke. And
I picked her up, and I came in here, and her tongue was hanging out but she was
still breathing. She was still alive. Jim is unconscious.

And I called my sister Louise. She said, “I’ll be right there.”

I said, “Lou, please listen. Don’t come. It is time for your baby brother to
grow up. You guys cannot help me in this situation. I chose to have a dog. I
chose to have a lover that his life force in this existence chose to have an early
exit. I have to do this on my own.”

So I lay there holding my dog on my right side, holding him on the left
side, checking to see if either one of them had died during the night. And no one
can say someone knows how it feels unless you wake up six or seven times a
night just to see if the person you’re sleeping with is dead or alive. This night, it was my dog on one side and my husband, if you want to call it, on my left.

So I got up the next morning, and I called my son at that time. Now, when I say my son, his name was Vince Crowley. He moved here from Pittsburgh. And between Don and Jim, I met Vince. And Vince and I tried dating for six weeks. He was a big sports nut, and so was I. And it’s unusual to find a gay guy really into sports, but we knew our relationship couldn’t last. So we broke up, and we remained friends. He always bought Jim Mother’s Day gifts and me Father’s Day gifts. Holding Jim and holding Mark and my dad as they took their last breaths, when I was holding little Vince, that was like a knife in my heart, because he was like my son.

So Jim and I talked a lot before he died, and after the blood transfusion and after he came back, because he came back from the stroke, and “Oh, good morning, Don. Hey, how are you? I’m thirsty.”

I said, “Let me go get you some orange juice.”

So I got an orange juice, and I took the paper in, and he said, “What day is it?”

I said, “Look at the paper.”

He looked at the date on the paper. He said, “That was seven days? Where have the last seven days been?”

I said, “Jim, you had a stroke or something.”

But he already told me, no more heroic measures. And he went, “Wow, we need to talk.”
And I said, “Okay.”

He said, “Don, are you going to be happy when I die?”

I said, “Jim, with what you’ve told me and what you’ve taught me, yes, I can.”

He said, “Good. As soon as I die and you bury my ashes, go get your ass laid.”

TAPPE: Did he really?

GILL: Oh, yeah, that blunt.

And he taught me how to accept death, and he also said, “You are going to find someone within six months, and you will be married.”

I said, “Jim, no way.”

Exactly five and a half months later, on a Sunday afternoon, at 8:45 at the Mining Company, I was telling some friends of mine, because they all knew I was going out, so they all came out to meet with me, and we sat around and ate those pecans and threw the hulls on the floor. I stepped back because one of them told a joke. It’s five and a half months later, and I’ve got to go on with my life. I put up the Christmas tree that day and bawled my eyeballs out, so all the tears were gone, and every ornament I hung on the tree that day, David, my friend, sitting over there, said, “I’m not going to put one on it. This is your baby.”

First, we went to Mary’s and had a shot of tequila and a light beer. Then we went to the Mining Company, and they were telling a joke, and I stepped back, and I stepped the foot of a gentleman named Mark and I turned around to say,
“Excuse” — and I looked into his eyes, and we just stood there. If you want to call it instantaneous, it was. Just looking at that young man in his eyes and the way he looked at me, I fell in love. I mean, I guess the best way to say it is lust. But the connection was like a shot of electricity and weakness going through your legs, so we decided to come home together, and being the sinners that all of us homosexuals are, according to the Christians, we went to his place. And as we were walking up his stairs, he said, “Don, it’s 20 minutes after 10:00.”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “Do you mind if we watch Sports Sunday?”

And I went, “Oh, my God, you like sports too?”

So we watched Sports Sunday. Then we — two years later, Jim died on June 27th in 1989, and July 1st of 1992, Mark died in my arms in the same bed where Jim was. My sister asked me, “Are you going to be okay?”

I said, “It’s that bed. I’m buying a new one.”

So I went out and bought a new bed.

TAPPE: I don’t blame you.

GILL: I couldn’t help it when Mark told me, because we had safe sex. Then when Mark told me on the next date, he said, “I’m HIV positive,” I said, “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have put your foot under mine. I can’t help it. You’re beautiful, and I just love your spirit.” He was the kindest, sweetest man I have ever met.

Now Jim, that little Yankee could be a bitch. And one thing he couldn’t understand was why in Michigan they had so much emphasis on education and why in Texas that he was teaching seniors how to read “Alice and Jill went up the hill.” How did they get to be a senior? That frustrated Jim more than anything
else in the world, was the Texas school system; that they just push them through
just to get them out, and he couldn’t understand it.

He said, “Those are brains. Those are little people. They should have
teachers in place when they were in elementary school to see whether it was an
attention deficit disorder or whether it was a speech impediment. What is wrong
with this state?”

I said, “Jim, you crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. I didn’t. So you’re
going to have to accept what it is. I don’t understand all you’re saying, like you
wouldn’t understand how to do a frosting or a permanent wave. So just find
happiness with what you’re doing. Just help the students that you have, and give
them something to look forward to.”

And he did. I could tell when he drove up from work when he was pissed
off. It was like, “Oh, Lord.” Because in Michigan when you’re snowed in for six
months, you read. They read to one another all the time. And I was the opposite.
I never saw my mom and dad read a book. So we were totally opposite. I did
everything from a common-sense point of view. He did everything from a literate
point of view.

I mean, if he was going to move this recorder that you’re recording over
there where your tea glass is, he’s going to get a book to read how to move it over
there. He’s going to frustrate himself and just have all kinds of heebie-jeebie fits.
And me, I’ll just reach over there and move it. That was how we were opposites.

TAPPE: But it worked.

GILL: Yes, it worked. And we would still be together today. He’s been gone 23, 27
years. In 1989? Oh, Lord, time kind of flies. But since we got together and
being who we were then and who I am now is a world of difference. I’ve learned to respect so much, and especially our history in this community. And I’m so delighted to be known as Mr. Wonderful and Mr. Everything, but I’m touched deeply by the trust this community has had in me. And it’s not me, the Don Gill the fundraiser, that made all of this happen. It was the entertainers that entertained at the events I put together. And it was the people that came to the event, their money.

And I’ll never forget one night we did $23,000 in one night, and I was blown away.

TAPPE: I’ll bet you couldn’t sleep that night.

GILL: It was an adrenaline rush putting those events together, and having John and Claudie’s baby boy up there on that stage talking his country way of talking and all of the literate people that were coming to see the events that I put together. But it was not Don Gill that raised all of that money, no. It was the entertainers that raised the money. I just put the events together.

TAPPE: I remember you telling me that when you were caring for your partners and your friends, that you were trying to balance caretaking, your personal life, your business world. And tell me how you were able to do that and what kind of toll it took on you.

GILL: The toll ended up in 2008 with me being in the hospital almost killing myself from drinking and getting depressed after I stopped the fundraising. But how did I balance all of it together?

It’s called adrenaline rush. When you are able to help people that you don’t even know — example, the Holiday Charities would donate money to the
Colt 45s because we could not have their list of patients. If they had ten people on a list and we wanted to give them $100 each, we had to give the Colt 45s a $1,000 check. Then they wrote $100 check, and we put it in that envelope, “This is from the Holiday Charities.”

One time I was at Kroger, and we wrote a $75 check this time, and this young man walked up to me and he said, “Mr. Gill,” because remember, people saw me on stage in spotlights. I couldn’t see who all was in the audience. “Mr. Gill, you don’t know who I am.” And this young man had Kaposi on his face. He was very, very skinny. And he said, “I want to thank you and your organization for the $75 check I got through the Colt 45s.”

And I said, “You’re more than welcome.”

He said, “No, you really don’t know how much I appreciate it. I won’t be alive another Christmas. My mom and I, we were $35 short having enough money to buy a bus ticket for her to come see me. That $75, we bought the bus ticket, and the rest of it, I have so much food in my refrigerator that my mom cooked and I froze.”

TAPPE: Oh, that’s great.

GILL: I walked to the front door and just put my cart to the side and walked out, and one of the cashiers came out and said, “Happen again?”

And I said, “Yeah.”

I would just get emotional, and I would have to leave the room. It’s the little things like that.

When we would visit hospitals back during the time that they had AIDS floors at Park Plaza and Twelve Oaks, we, the Holiday Charities, a group of
volunteers with us, would go and take gifts at Christmastime to these individuals. And they went into Twelve Oaks Hospital, and there was this girl that had HIV, and of course I wasn’t there and I didn’t know it, but I went to the post office box, and there were two envelopes in it, and it was a little-bitty letter envelope, not a legal-sized, the bigger, longer, the little-bitty ones, and it had two stamps on it. I said, “It only needs one. It’s not even heavy.” And I opened it, and it was three dollar bills, three $1 bills. “This is interesting.”

Then I opened the other envelope, that same handwriting, from Lufkin, Texas, and the woman’s handwriting was a little bit worse than mine, and that’s pretty bad. It said, “You don’t know who I am, but your people came to Twelve Oaks Hospital and came into my daughter’s — my angel’s” — she said “my angel’s room, and they brought this most beautiful small container with a rose and potpourri. I am writing this letter because my little angel is dead, and some of the potpourri that you — I buried my daughter with some of the potpourri that you gave us. The rest of it is sitting here. I’m smelling it and I’m looking at it, thinking of my angel, writing you this letter.”

TAPPE: How wonderful.

GILL: Whoa, those are the things that make life worthwhile. Like I said, what I learn from the dying is what good is life if you can’t help someone less fortunate than yourself.

TAPPE: That’s right. That’s a wonderful story. And I am assuming she gave you that $3 to help out, like a donation.

GILL: Yes, yes.

TAPPE: How wonderful.
Let me ask you a question. When you were doing your fundraising, the people there were there for a purpose: to see your show, to support you, to support the community and the organizations that were raising funds. Did you see, within the community as a whole, discrimination between people that were HIV positive and people that were not, especially early on, some people staying away —

GILL: Not in a bar setting, not in a bar setting, no. I never witnessed that in a bar setting.

TAPPE: What about in general?

GILL: But in my business, yes.

TAPPE: You did.

GILL: Yeah, I heard clients and — one of my clients happened to become lovers with someone that I knew, and he worked for Stewart & Stevenson, and Steven became lovers with Rick. Rick got critically ill very fast, and one day Steven was getting his hair cut, and I said, “Steven, are you okay?”

Now also, just to back up a little bit. A lot of people would book client appointments with me. “Hey, you just got your hair cut two weeks ago. You don’t need a haircut.”

“Yes, I do.”

Then they would come in. They said, “I don’t need a haircut. I want to talk.”

I said, “What about? Are you okay?”

“I just left the doctor’s office, and I’m positive.” At that time, no, there’s no cure. “And I want to be around you for 30 minutes at least, and let’s talk.”
And getting off onto that, what were talking about? I hate that.

TAPPE: If you noticed discrimination.

GILL: Oh, Steve told me one time, he said, “Don, when HIV first started, I had a lover and he got sick. I am one of those people that took my lover to the emergency room, and they came out, got him in a wheelchair, and I said, ‘I’m going to go park the car,’” he said, “but I never went back. Now that I have totally found the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, he is now dying."

I said, “Remember, what you sow is what you reap, and what you run from the fastest is going to catch up with you the soonest.”

I never ran from AIDS or HIV. It scared me, it hurt me, it devastated me, almost broke me financially, having to take so much work off, being self-employed. I had to refinance my home to take care of other people’s children that mothers and fathers did not want.

And then I saw other young men that would become lovers with an HIV positive person just waiting for them to die so that they can inherit insurance. I never got that. Maybe I should have, so I wouldn’t have had to refinance my house so much.

But especially with my cousin Leo, we were born and raised together, and his lover’s name was Hal, H-a-l, and Leo picked Hal up off the street. Leo was a banker. He went on to college. He became a banker. He was more of a brother to me than my brothers were, and when Don and I became lovers years and years ago, before HIV ever came on the scene and I was only 23 years old, one night at 10:30 or — no, it was a Sunday night — he was passing through town, and there was a knock on my apartment door, and I went to see it, who was this. It was
Leo, my cousin. He pushed me out of the way, walked straight in the bedroom, turned the light on. Don looked up and said, “Oh, my God, who are you?”

And he said, “I want to know who you are. I want to know, because that young man you’re with is my little brother, and if you’re going to hurt him, you’re going to have to go through me.” That’s the way Leo and I were.

And when Leo was dying, he sat here with my sister Louise and with Don, my first lover — the table was over here [indicating] at that time — and he said, “Duck,” — that’s my nickname, and he always called me Ms. Duck — “don’t start crying when I’m saying what I’m about to say.”

He said, “Hal,” his lover, “come over here and sit down. Don and Louise are here to witness this. Hal, I am leaving you everything I own: the jewelry shop, the house, the life insurance policies, everything. The moment I take my last breath, you are to change your life insurance policy, and half of it is to go to him, my brother and your best friend.”

I planned for that kind of financially because that’s when I started throwing myself into fundraising and I started donating a lot of money to fundraising because what you put out is what you get back, and Hal never got around to do that. You can’t cry over something you didn’t have, but that was my brother.

Hal never changed his will. Everything that my cousin worked for — because remember, he picked Hal up off the street. He educated Hal. Hal became a great jewelry designer all because Leo educated him and put him there and bought the shop for him.

The moment Hal took his last breath, his homophobic Methodist father
fired every employee at the jewelry store and locked the door. Everything my cousin worked for went to a homophobic Methodist man.

My next friend Andrew, we were in Louisiana, and we drove by New Orleans. He wanted to gamble a little bit. And I know this person, but I don’t know this person. It was three years after Hal died and this father inherited everything. You don’t treat people mean without reaping some circumstances from it.

TAPPE: Karma.

GILL: The man had already gone through two heart attacks and was in a wheelchair. He should have never treated people that way. That’s wrong for me to say, but that’s my feeling. You reap what you sow. He ordered every one of us out of the hospital when his son took his last breath. He fired everyone at the shop and closed the jewelry place down. There were hundreds of thousands of dollars of jewelry in that place, plus the life insurance policies and all that stuff.

He was never there for his son. I was the one that took care of his son. I don’t regret it. I have another life after this one, and if reincarnation does exist, I either want to come back as a 5-foot-9, long-legged, beautiful, big-busted blonde married to a rich River Oaks man or a dog in a gay household.

Mark’s dad came over Tuesday night, and I fixed him dinner. His mom wasn’t able to come, but his dad was here, and I had every light on as bright as I could because Mark was saying, “It’s so dark in here.” The nurse just started that day, so he had his first morphine pill when he went to bed that night.

When I woke up the next morning, I went in to shower, and I came out, and I was in my underwear and I wrapped a towel around my head and towel
around, if I had breasts, that a woman would do, and I was playing Mammy from

*Gone With the Wind.* “Miss Scarlet, do you need to urinate?”

He opened one eye and he looked at me and he said, “You’re always so funny.”

I said, “Don’t worry about being funny, Miss Scarlet,” and I can drag it out the way I did, but I’m not. It’s being recorded.

I was standing there in that garb, and he was just smiling as big as he could smile, and I said, “I do really need to pick you up and put you on the urinal.”

And he looked at me and he said, “First of all, Don, thank you.”

So I picked him up, and he was skin and bones. Even bones are heavy. Okay? And I was getting ready to turn around, and he said, “Stop.”

I said, “Mark, why?”

He said, “I really want to say something to you while you’re holding me.”

I said, “What’s what?”

He said, “Thank you for loving me. I know you loved Jim, and you would still be with Jim if he were still alive, but the way you have loved me unconditionally and sometimes the way you even broke in tears sometimes in my arms thinking about Jim, my respect for you went up even higher, and now here you are holding me to put me on a urinal when I am dying. Thank you very, very much. You will never know how much I love you.”

He started coughing while I was holding him. That was his last breath, while I was holding him. His body fluid started, and I sat him on the potty, and I looked up and I said, “Lord, come on.”
So I put him back in the bed, I brushed his teeth, I combed his hair, I put another shirt on him, and I called his mother and dad.

After Mark passed away, which was on a Wednesday, I got up Thursday morning, got dressed, and went out front to go to work because I had already missed so much work anyway, and one of my clients by the name of Peggy McCue Rhoads, R-h-o-a-d-s, stepped on the porch for her every-six-weeks haircut, and she noticed that evidently I must have looked tired and washed out. She said, “Oh, my God, what’s wrong, Don?”

I said, “Peggy, I’m fine, but why don’t we just not talk today, and let me cut your hair.”

She sat down on the porch swing and she said, “No way. We’re going to talk.” And she said, “What is wrong?”

I said, “Mark died here in my arms yesterday.”

She said, “What are you doing working?”

I said, “Peggy, I have to work. I’ve lost so much money, and I have to work.”

So this young lady had been a client of mine for a long time, and she noticed me losing friends, and she also had acquaintances that had passed away. Since I told her I had to work, she came up with an idea, “AIDS and the Working Man,” and she wrote a poem called “The Caregiver.” And when I read that poem, I had no idea that someone outside of the community hit it on the nail exactly how I felt. And if you read these poems, she talks — I mean, I can read it to you if you like, but I will give them to you for you to take with you — it was pretty heavy. I really had a good Pentecostal eyewashing. But one sentence in here, referring to
AIDS and the Working Man:  
The Caregiver  
(excerpt)

His path is strewn with broken bodies,  
His dreams haunted by lovers he watched die,  
His life a bitter battle with a Demon he cannot see,  
But who rules his world in silence and  
Terrible purpose.

This Thief of Life has stolen his heart,  
Left him empty  
But alive  
And alone.

Brutal destiny.

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That was the first one. Then after she gave me that, I said, “Well, you  
have to remember, now, there’s more to this, Peggy, than what you realize. We  
have to have a sense of humor in all this, because it will get to us if it doesn’t.

She asked me to talk to her about it, and she wrote “Best Friends.”

TAPPE: Feel free, please.

GILL: One of the paragraphs in “Best Friends” states, and this is my life:
AIDS and the Working Man:
Best Friends
(excerpt)

We are friends.
We support each other,
Allow the tears,
Stand firm together
As we move toward fate.
We cross the threshold of that door together,
But in the end we will stand on the other side
Alone.
For only one is a traveler;
The other merely makes the journey easier.
Still we move forward.
We made our choice long ago.

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This “Best Friends” has been used at many eulogies.

TAPPE: Is that right?

GILL: Then I was telling her what friendship means. Then I wanted her to realize that there was more to it than just that. We had to learn to say good-bye and our lives continue. So she wrote “A Farewell,” “AIDS and the Working Man: A Farewell.”

Then when I won Mr. Prime Choice she was so excited that I was entering it because she knew that I wanted to win that contest, so she wrote a poem called “AIDS and the Working Man” because I explained it to her when she asked me how it felt. I said with all of those people applauding that night, it made it feel like a day in the sun, and that is the name of this poem, “A Day in the Sun.”

She knew the young man Vince that I considered to be my son, and she saw how it was just like sticking a pin in a balloon and letting the air out of it; that's what it did to me. And this one, I will read, and it's called “AIDS and the
Working Man: For Vince:

AIDS and the Working Man:
For Vince

The moon was full the night he died,
A golden diamond poised in a black sky
Like a breath of expectation,
Awaiting an angel.
The ink is dry, the chapter finished,
And yet I cannot close the book.
There is a demon in me
Who gives me no peace,
Some inner beast I’ve never heard
Who howls, possessed at silent treetops,
"Why?"
There is no calm in the knowledge that he sleeps.
I am too selfish for that.
I crave order in the chaos of my soul,
Letters all neatly arranged to make words,
Numbers that always equal one sum.
This death is frost in summer,
A riddle with no answer,
A vexation to the brain,
A cannibal of a hope.
My short time in his world
As a witness to this genocide
Has not prepared me for this pain,
Finally too personal.

And yet,
Beneath that shrinking demon in my heart
I feel a stirring.
I see a pair of tired eyes,
Gentle solace amid the rage,
Soft and silent, urging calm.
I recall the sound of laughter —
His lungs too weak to make it loud,
But happy nonetheless —
And feel the press of his hand in mine,
Still firm.
And in the fury of my frozen heart,
A spark of gratitude ignites.
What would life have been without him?
Can I begrudge the universe my time with him,
However brief?
Make no mistake, the pain exists,
The beast is not yet quiet.
But perhaps this chaos is that order that I seek.
Perhaps we must walk through lunacy
To become sane.

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She’s a beautiful writer.

TAPPE: That’s beautiful.

GILL: And like I said, the very first one, when she really became a part of my life, I took her to Bering, because I wanted her to learn more about HIV than just me, and at this Bering meeting on a Wednesday night, they have different sections of HIV people, caregivers and family of, and we were in this family of, and they have sofas facing one another, three sofas, and they went counterclockwise.

Everyone introduced themselves, and it got around to me and I said who I was. The gentleman sitting to my right, immediately to my right, his knees sometimes touching mine, was a Hispanic gentleman. And when they asked him his name, he said, “I don’t want to be here. I don’t even want to state my name. My son has this godawful, sinful disease that’s killing him. He asked to get it himself, and it’s killing his mother. Look at her. She’s just falling apart.”

It put a damper on the meeting, and she wrote a poem. She wrote a play about it, and I went and watched the play, and it was touching, and the gentleman that wrote Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was the one that read that little play, because they had put it aside. The University of Houston didn’t want it. But that author, I can’t think of his name, who wrote Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? saw it, and he put it in a play over here off West Gray. What’s the name of that theatre there?
TAPPE: You mean Stages?

GILL: Stages, thank you.

The first poem she wrote, and if you don’t mind, I really would like to read that, it’s called “The Caregiver,” and she’s referring to me. Okay?

AIDS and the Working Man:
The Caregiver

Somebody’s brother.
Somebody’s son.
Nobody’s lover.

Each attempt to walk the path of love
Foiled by the Foe.

A strong man.
Wiry frame, gentle hand,
Face ravaged by the quiet agony
Of too much death.

Need for love repeatedly eclipsed by fear,
Desire to escape his fate of pain
Overwhelmed by selfless mercy.

We live in different hemispheres —
I bask in the sunlight of a hopeful future,
While he shivers in the damp, dark fog
Of hate and prejudice.
I call him friend,
But can never truly know the tortured soul
Of this man who dreads love,
Knowing it can kill.

His past is strewn with broken bodies,
His dream haunted by lovers he watched die,
His life a bitter battle with a Demon he cannot see,
But who rules his world with silent and Terrible purpose.
This Thief of Life has stolen his heart,
Left him empty
But alive
And alone.

Brutal destiny.

This tribute was inspired by Don Gill, my hairdresser and confidante of many years. Through my visits to him every six weeks, I have glimpsed the devastation of AIDS in highly concentrated doses. Don’s seemingly never-ending struggle as caregiver is the most valiant I have ever seen, and I felt an urgent need to express my view of his world and the selfless work he does. He has touched my life, and I wanted his story to touch others as well.

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She wrote beautifully, and this woman helped me. You were talking about other things. This woman, straight woman, married, with a child, Rice graduate, saw the pain her hairdresser was going through and was able to put it on paper.

That was like a B12 shot to me to read what someone else saw.

TAPPE: Absolutely, and she took the time. How wonderful.

GILL: Those are yours to take [indicating photographs and poetry].

TAPPE: Thank you. Well, this will be great. Thank you.

GILL: Those were the reasons I became a fundraiser. Holding Jim, holding Mark, holding my dad, seeing my brother murdered and knowing that he was — he died, I wasn’t supposed to go through those things until I was older, much older, like now, you know. But I was only 37 years old, trying to run a business with employees — well, not at that time; I was already working here — trying to take care of my family and doing fundraising all at one time. The fundraising gave me joy because I knew it was helping someone.

Yes, is there some ego? Yes. If a fundraiser says, “No, it’s nothing about
ego,” yes, everyone enjoys a pat on the back, period. I don’t care if it’s because you painted a wall correctly or “I love the way you rearranged the furniture.” Like clients coming up and standing in line to shake my hand after a Night in Black Leather a few times, “Congratulations, Don,” that gave me more inspiration to do more.

And there is another young man coming on the scene, and I see him. Craig is his name. Delightful young man that is making a huge statement. I had my statement back then, and it was much, much, much rewarded.

Night in Black Leather is still out there, and it probably will be done, if not this year, again next year. LIVE is still being produced and directed. Boy of Montrose is still going on. Girl of Montrose is going on. The Holiday Charities is just doing great, to be a small organization. And I’m getting older.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

TAPPE: Slowing down a little bit, letting someone else take over parts of it.

GILL: But I’m so honored, and I’m honored to have this interview with you.

TAPPE: Well, thank you. It’s delightful.

The monies that were raised through the years that you were involved with, of course, that was the height of the epidemic, we’ve watched the curve change a little bit. How has that affected the fundraising in the bars? Is our generation still interested in raising money for PWAs? Is the younger generation interested in it? Are they aware of it? Are they concerned about raising money? Are they concerned about the virus? What do you see from what our generation saw to what’s going on now?
GILL: When I started and when HIV first came on, like I said earlier, we did not know what was going on. All we know is friends were falling out. Clients were falling — not falling dead, but just dying within a six weeks’ period. Yes, when I started fundraising, there was no cure. It was just to make sure that someone had a roof over their head and utilities on for the few weeks that they had to live.

With the new protease inhibitors which we have in this day and time, and I will try to say this professionally and not quite so country accent as I am, what it has done, it has caused — not caused; that’s a horrible word to use — but with our friends living much longer but not being able to hold a job and still being needed, such as the funds we gave our friends when they were dying, they still need those funds today. So the protease inhibitors, gosh, I wish they had been here when my lovers were alive and my cousins.

Damn you, Ronald Reagan, because if Ronald Reagan would have allotted the money, we would have probably had these protease inhibitors in the early 1980s instead of the early 1990s, and a lot of people could still be alive. But since he got Jerry Falwell, Pat Buchanan, and Billy Graham as his personal advisors, they advised him that God sent this disease to show those homosexuals they’re sinners, and he did not put any money into research. Neither did George H.

Was money spent on HIV during those years? Yes. Those HIV people were entitled to their Medicare. They had paid into it. But no money was being spent on the research of AIDS.

When Clinton became President, he allotted X amount of money for research, and we had protease inhibitors within a few years.

I asked the doctor recently, “If Ronald Reagan would have done what Bill
Clinton did, what would be the difference?”

He said, “Your lovers and your friends would probably more than likely be alive.”

So with our friends living much longer, we need more money than ever. So my generation, it kind of touches me deeply when I hear someone 28 or 30 that is HIV positive, when this disease has been around since the early 1980s.

Now, are people playing safe? I cannot say. I’m not out there playing around, myself. My neuropathy just won’t let me get it on, if you want to use that term, but I do know of people that protease inhibitors have allowed to them to be — the HIV virus nondetectable. They’re out there now practicing unsafe sex. That’s their life. I can’t speak for them out there. I can only speak for myself. I slept with HIV for seven years and never knew it, and I am negative.

So are the young people understanding the definition of all of what’s going on? Yes, they see it, but they don’t understand where it came from and how it was. 90 percent of them are out there 100 percent to help someone. Then there’s that 10 percent, “Oh, don’t you like my new wig?” or, “Don’t you like my new jewelry or my new dress?”

Yes, everybody wants to be complimented on that, but once you go through, like with Regina Dane being there at the beginning, Crystal really loved being there at the beginning, they have still got their heart straight into that neuropath of what it’s for. A lot of them don’t know what it was like in the early beginning.

So yes, the attention is there. The effort from all the new titleholders that are having to do shows, yes, they know where the money is going and they
appreciate it. And we, the elders of the community, these young people have no idea how much we appreciate what they’re doing, because I’m not going to be around forever, and the Holiday Charities, I’m going to have to pass it on, and our charter states that the Holiday Charities will be around as long as HIV is here.

Now, even if they find a cure and they can stop it from being spread, in other words, we’ve still got these people that are too ill to have a rebound, that we have to take care of, so the Holiday Charities would be around as long as the new directors in the future — or the board directors know what to do.

Am I honored to be a part of the Holiday Charities? More than you ever know.

TAPPE: Well, I’m anxious to see some of your shows. I actually have been to some in the past, but not in the past several years.

GILL: No, I’ve not had a Don Gill Production in many years, especially since I got sick. Once you reach that point you’re so depressed that you let alcohol rule your life, you also have to regain your confidence. And sometimes I would talk to one of my clients, and his name was Jimmy Carper. He and I could talk together, and sometimes he would talk to me about, yes, he’s accomplished this. If someone else heard that, they might think he was boasting. No, he was just still trying to keep his momentum going, such as when I came back and I had lost my ambition and my confidence, sometimes I would talk to him about the things that I did back then, to reconnect or jump-start my confidence level again.

TAPPE: Rejuvenate yourself.

GILL: Jump-start is the best way to say it I know.

And it took me a while. A couple of people misunderstood that, like as if I
was bragging. No, I was just trying to get my confidence level rebooted. So I’m stepping back in this year to do a production, and it’s going to be LIVE, and it’s going to be September 25 at Neon Boots, and I have underwriters already that are paying for the piano to be delivered, tuned, and picked up. And you can be in drag if you want to, but you have to sing with your own voice. It’s called LIVE.

TAPPE: Right. Oh, that will be great.

GILL: Yes, and I am so excited. I am only the producer. Marcia, one of my daughters, and David Barron is like a child to me because I remember when I started Night in Black Leather years ago and he was only just a kid, had a nice voice, and I started putting him in shows. He’s like a Gill, but he’s not a Gill. He’s one of my kids by heart.

So there’s Shy Anne, Christopher Garrett, Jules, Clay, and David Barron, they are really, if you wanted Gills, they’re the first ones where we joined hands and did shows that we didn’t think would come off as successfully as they did. They trusted me in putting it together and I trusted them in their voices. So David Barron is one of the directors of LIVE, and Marcia is one of the directors. I’m only the producer. And I’m going to kind of do like I did some shows in the past, and I’m not giving it away right now. Then I will only be introduced, then I will introduce the next entertainer, then I will go sit down. So I’m not going to be up there with a microphone in my hand all night, but I will be seeing everything that’s going on.

TAPPE: Oh, that’s wonderful. I look forward to it.

Don, thank you so much for everything.

GILL: Thank you. I hope my little story can be some inspiration to someone, but most,
you have no idea how much I love my blood family. They all have children, they all have grandchildren, and they have someone to fall back on, such as my sister who is knitting another blanket for one of her great-grandchildren that will be born. She has a legacy that she is passing down that her family, generation to generation to come, will have that quilt that she’s knitting.

Maybe some of my nephews and nieces might want to know what their Uncle Duck did, because they all call me Uncle Duck. They will be able to read the transcript which you’re doing, and I really want to say to my Gill Fundraising Family, God, I love you kids so much; and my real family, I am who I am today because of the way John and Claudie Gill raised me.

TAPPE: Wonderful. Thank you.

GILL: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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