Oral History #12

An Interview With

Michael Peranteau

Place of Interview: Houston, Texas
Interviewer: Renee Tappe
Terms of use: Open
Approved:
Date: 5/3/2016

It is the policy of The oH Project to redact the names of third parties in reference to their HIV / AIDS status or sexual orientation unless The oH Project has written consent from the third party to be named or proof that the person mentioned has shared his or her HIV/AIDS status and/or sexual orientation in a public record.
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL PERANTEAU

RENÉE TAPPE: This is Renée Tappe interviewing Michael Peranteau for The oH Project, Oral Histories of HIV/AIDS in Houston, Harris County, and Southeast Texas. The interview is taking place on May 3rd, 2016 in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this interview is to document Mr. Peranteau’s recollection concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Houston.

Hi, Michael.

MICHAEL PERANTEAU: Hi, how are you?

RENÉE TAPPE: Thank you for joining us. To get started, tell me a little bit, please, about your family history: where you were born, a little bit about your siblings.

MICHAEL PERANTEAU: My full name is John Michael Peranteau. I go by Michael. My mother was third-generation Houston. Her name was Elizabeth Jane Bogar. Her father had furniture stores here. She grew up in the Montrose-River Oaks area. My father is Francis Gerald Peranteau, and he was from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His family was from different parts of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and Wilkes-Barre mainly. I was born in Houston. There were seven kids in my family. We were all born at St. Joseph’s Hospital. My mother was born at St. Joseph’s Hospital. There were seven kids in her family. All of them were born at St. Joseph’s. So wherever we were in the country, because we did travel somewhat, we would come back to Houston to have them, whatever child was coming next.

I have four sisters and two brothers. My sisters are Paula Elizabeth, my
oldest sister, Paula Elizabeth Peranteau; my next sister, Suzanne Elizabeth Peranteau; Elizabeth Jane Peranteau; and Frances Elizabeth Peranteau. And they’re all older than me. Then I was born. I was the first boy, so I got lots of kudos. And then my brother came. He was a year younger, and he’s Patrick Timothy Peranteau. And my younger brother, who lives in California, is Thomas Gerald Peranteau. We grew up in a big family. It was a problematic family. My father was an alcoholic, and there was that to deal with growing up, but we had a lot of fun as kids.

I went to high school at Strake Jesuit Prep, College Prep. I think when I got to high school I was really naïve, but then by tenth grade I wasn’t so naïve. I had lots of friends. Jesuit had this funny way in the beginning of how they — the classes were A, B, C, D. And really, D was like the — it was based on the academics, right? So they changed that after a couple of years. But I came in in the C class, and then moved to the B class. But Jesuit was an all-male prep where we wore coats and ties. And next door to us was St. Agnes, actually the school that my mother went to, and so we were all male, they were all female. Later on after I graduated, they started doing classes together, but we all would always just meet in the parking lot.

After high school, I actually had a scholarship to a university called Spring Hill University in Alabama, but I didn’t take it, and I ended up going to the University of Houston and the University of St. Thomas, not graduating from either, spending a couple of years at U of H, a couple of years at UST. I think I did a semester at UT, but it was a super heavy-duty political time. It was during the time of the end of the Vietnam War, and so I was just so involved in all of
that, that I didn’t — most of my siblings went on and became lawyers or got their
Ph.D.’s or whatever. I didn’t do any of that.

TAPPE: You instead became involved with the political movement?

PERANTEAU: The world. So I became really involved with political movements. In
1972 I would have been two years out of high school. I was very involved with
the political campaigns, the war in Vietnam winding down, and Nixon and all that
stuff. I got super involved with that. And then around the same time, about 1972
to 1974 to 1976, I got real involved with art. My best friend had a sister who was
in Santa Fe, and I started working for her and spending a lot of time in New
Mexico, then eventually came back in the later 1970s and began exhibiting art. I

TAPPE: From what I hear you say, you didn’t have any formal training in art. Is it an
innate talent in you?

PERANTEAU: Well, it sort of was, in my mom. My interest is really around
organizing, and then I was really interested in art also. So I’m not an artist, but I
decided that I wanted to work with artists. My first lover, that I was with for 12
years, Max Pruneda, was an artist, and we ended up working at this place here
called 120 Portland that some friends of ours owned over by the museum. We
would clear out the restaurant on a Saturday night — we’d stay up all night —
hang a show throughout the night into the next morning, and then the opening
would happen on Sunday afternoons, and we’d have these huge openings at this
really great place over by the museum in one of these big houses.

And it was just super popular, and so from that we went to — a friend of
ours bought some property right on Almeda, and I opened my first gallery with
Max — we both opened it — in 1981, and we ran that for two years. Looking back now, it was just sort of natural. We figured it out. We didn’t know, when we started, if we were going to be for-profit or nonprofit, but then we started doing lots of things that were like performance and music, and so it was not going to be for-profit.

We were heading in the nonprofit direction, and then my friend sold all of her property on Almeda, which included that piece of property, so I left that space. And Max was an artist, so he went back into his studio, and I went to DiverseWorks downtown and became part of DiverseWorks. It was in its first year. DiverseWorks is a multidisciplinary art space that was located on Travis Street downtown. Now it’s on Main Street in the MATCH Center [Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston]. But I started the performance programming there, and I started an artist residency project there, and that was my role. Charles Gallagher was the founder, and then he and I became co-directors. A third director came in in the mid-1980s.

So that was 1981 to 1983 with the gallery. 1983–1984 I joined DiverseWorks. And then this other person came and joined us, Caroline Huber in 1985, and we started doing all this stuff at DiverseWorks. This will tie in to later discussion because the AIDS epidemic was beginning in the mid-1980s, early to mid-1980s, and we started doing projects and working with artists that were involved with that and doing lots of — I was bringing lots of performance artists in that were dealing directly with AIDS in their work.

Mid, late 1980s to the early 1990s, really a political time in terms of AIDS, and DiverseWorks was real connected to that in a bunch of ways that sort
of culminated in us giving ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] our space in 1992 when the Republican Convention was here, so we literally vacated the whole 10,000-square-foot space, gave it to ACT UP, and ACT UP was housed there. And the FBI had a van in the parking lot the whole time they were there.

There were lots of actions going on. We were soaping fountains and were doing more serious things. We were really involved in protest. So it was great. DiverseWorks was sort of a part of that for a long time and stayed part of it until things got better in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

I was there for 12 years, and I started out as a co-director, and then there were three of us. Eventually I became executive director in 1992, and other things were happening that I was helping with. A thing called Project Row
Houses in the Third Ward, our board president funded that in the beginning, lent them money to buy the property, and I was real involved with that in sort of setting that up.

I was diagnosed with HIV in 1993, and I’ll talk more about that later, so in the midst of becoming the executive director, I was diagnosed, which sort of threw me into a tailspin, and so I stayed another year at DiverseWorks, left in 1994. In that year, that was before 1995, when the drugs came, I just thought it was a death sentence. I remember some friends taking me on what they thought was my final trip to Europe, which it wasn’t. All the photographs from that trip for some reason are black and white. You know, it’s like a —

TAPPE: Purposely?

PERANTEAU: I don’t know. Teresa Southwell made a book about the trip, and so it’s like I’m just flipping through the book, thinking this is so dark and sort of macabre. It was a horrible trip to Europe, actually. I had been going to Europe a lot, and I had been traveling internationally a lot with DiverseWorks for seven years solid, but it was the worst trip. And so I was in a funk, and this attorney friend of mine, who was a really good friend of Max’s and mine, Joel Martinez, who worked in international law at Vinson & Elkins, had been tested positive and had sort of retired or taken disability from his job, and he came over one day and was like, “You need to get out of this funk, and you’ve got to do something. We’re going to start this place because these new drugs are coming out, and we’re going to” — this is 1994, end of 1994. “These new drugs are coming out, and we’re going to start a treatment center.”

And I’m like, “Really?”
And he goes, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we need you, and you’ll help us set it up and put the board together and do all that.”

So we did that, and there was another person, Chris Kerr, who was involved too, and Chris was involved for just a bit. He was involved for two years maybe, but he was there in the beginning and a resource. Joel was quickly becoming a treatment expert. We all had to learn a whole lot real fast to open up this place. So in 1995 we opened up the Center for AIDS — it was called the Center for AIDS: Hope and Remembrance Project in the beginning. It was a treatment information center. All of the new drugs were coming out. Where would you go besides your doctor who didn’t have time because he had so many patients? Where would you go to learn about the drugs? So we became experts, especially Joel, and then Joel and Paul Simmons, who was hired later, became real experts and worked with the Treatment Action Group in New York and all these other places around the country. So it became a national space.

TAPPE: People would come to you for information about the drugs and trials?

PERANTEAU: Everybody was terrified. First of all, they didn’t know what to do. They wanted to go in to their doctors with some sort of knowledge. We could explain how the virus worked and what was going on, and then what a nucleoside analogue did or what a specific drug did. We began to talk in 1995 about the drug combinations, because the protease inhibitors had come out, and they were the things that really changed the game.

I didn’t go on drugs until the early 2000s, so I wasn’t on drugs yet, but we did all kinds of things to get people to go on drugs that needed to be on drugs and to get them off things like AZT that was killing them. So it became a hub of that,
and we did all kinds of things. We were really involved in the whole AIDS landscape. We worked with Bering. We worked with AIDS Foundation Houston. We worked with the county. And more and more, we became the place where people got treatment information.

We were funded in a million different ways: from foundations, from pharmaceutical companies, from doctors. But doctors, especially with Joel and Paul, became appreciative of what we did. And at first they were a little threatened by it, but they started to realize that there’s no way, if they have 2,000 or 3,000 patients, that they could explain all this to patients, so then they loved it, right?

TAPPE: They were territorial, perhaps, at first?

PERANTEAU: They were territorial in the beginning. And then also, we weren’t doctors, so Paul came on as a clinical nurse, and he’d been involved in many trials and stuff, so he was great, and he helped us in that sense. But so all of a sudden, for these years, we’re the treatment-information center for Houston, so for five years I was the executive director of that and ran that. And Joel and Paul really traveled most of the time.

Sara Haynes, whom I hope you do one of these interviews with, I brought her from DiverseWorks, and she became the development director and eventually became the executive director when I left, but she had knowledge — we both had knowledge about fundraising and how to set up a board and what to do and how an organization could run and getting interns and getting help and volunteers and all that stuff. So we did a lot of that.

TAPPE: Where did you learn those skills?
PERANTEAU: Well, I had a life. So if we go back in time a little bit, we go back to DiverseWorks, it was real important to me in the mid-1980s that DiverseWorks become nationally known because there was this huge national dialogue going on with all of these — DiverseWorks was an artist-run organization, which meant that artists made up a big portion of the board, artists made up an advisory council, and artists made up a lot of the staff. So we were one of probably 300 organizations in the country that were doing this, that were part of an artist-run-organization movement. So I wanted us to get connected to that, so I was the person that would travel to New York or travel to Washington, especially Washington, and sit in these meetings until these groups would let us join because nobody from Texas really was trying to do that.

So we became part of a couple of groups. One was called the National Association of Artists Organizations. I eventually got on the board of that. And then we became part of something called the National Performance Network. So Houston was connected, and we did the National Association of Artists Organizations Conference one year, and Joan Mondale was the speaker, and we did this huge thing, and it was in Houston. So all of a sudden, Houston was in dialogue with San Francisco and New York and Seattle and Chicago and all the places where things were happening.

So with the Center for AIDS, it was the same sort of thing. We became part of a group of organizations — there weren’t 300; there were just maybe a dozen, not even — that were doing treatment-information services. And also at the same time, these treatment activists were being developed through these organizations to go out and do science battle with the drug companies, especially
if a drug — there were some drugs that didn’t work, and they would still keep using them.

The activists became really knowledgeable. So they began to sit at the table with the doctors, sit at the table with the government, the National Center for Disease Control, and to sit at the table with the pharmaceutical companies especially, because they were the ones making all the money from this and getting all the money to do research and development. And you know, where were the patients and where were the people with — just like artists weren’t involved in the discussion about what was happening with their work, people with HIV and AIDS weren’t involved in the discussion about what was happening with the disease and the treatment. So in both instances we inserted those people in so they could be in the discussion, because you can’t have — and it had always been that museums decided what would be shown and artists had no say, so it was important to give them a voice and a forum. And the same thing with people with AIDS and HIV. So that kind of worked.

TAPPE: So you were really an activist in both.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, so that worked. The model worked. Put the people in who are affected the most directly, whose lives it’s going to change or who might not live because of the decisions you make, put them in the discussion because they have a lot to contribute. So the treatment activists like Joel and Paul and the ones around the country — I just read an article in an AIDS magazine yesterday about Spencer Cox, who was this really famous one at the Treatment Action Group in New York, but they were super-smart people who had been in other walks of life and came into this with their brains. Joel was brilliant and just went from being a
lawyer in international law into medicine. He could have been a doctor. So that’s sort of where I fit. I helped that happen.

TAPPE: Do you consider yourself an activist? A treatment activist?

PERANTEAU: Yeah, you know, I actually looked up something. An activist is someone who seeks to create positive change by getting involved and taking action. So in that sense, yeah, so that would have started. And I think that probably came a lot from my mother, not so much my father, but my mother. I just remember that we rode our bikes for Kennedy when we were kids, and my sister Jane, who is the one that has that property with us in New Mexico, was invited to go to the inauguration, and so we were politically involved as kids, and then with Vietnam and my parents’ being against the Vietnam War and my brother and I waiting for our draft lottery number, sitting on the bed, to see. I got a really high number, and my brother got a lower number, but neither one of us got drafted. But my parents were prepared to send us to Canada, so they were sort of radical leftish.

TAPPE: Was your whole family of the Democratic Party?

PERANTEAU: Yes. I wouldn’t say they all are now. I have a brother living on a boat in California with his wife, who’s a lawyer, and he is prepared, you know — when Obama got elected, he was prepared, this whole group of conservatives — he’s a Californian, now — were prepared to take their boats and sail to the Dominican Republic. So our family now is not. I mean, I think the majority of us are still really left, you know, Democrats.

TAPPE: Certainly more progressive.

PERANTEAU: You know, people change as they — they get reactionary as they get
older. So I had background from my family and friends. When we went to the Republican Convention in Miami and the Democratic Convention in Miami that summer, we went two different months. That was 1972. Two friends and I went, and we drove and got involved. When the Republican Convention happened first, it was just so violent and so crazy. They were so horrible to us. And I actually was in an action group where Allen Ginsberg was our group leader. These were street-action groups, and we were trained by him over two days to go out and do all this stuff in the convention. And our biggest thing we did, that I did, I was in a group that ended up lying in front of the Doral Hotel to block Nixon just to annoy him from getting back in, so there were 900 of us that lay in front of the hotel, and it took hours to carry us away. But that put me in jail for two days, I think, or three days.

TAPPE: Was that your first jail time? For activism, anyway.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, my jail times, there has only been one time for tickets and one time for activism. Parking tickets, from DiverseWorks.

So I was politically involved, and really politically involved then, and I had just turned 20. And we had done things when we were in high school. In high school, we went to the huge protest that happened in Washington in 1968, I guess around the time of the election, and there were a million people or something, but we drove — we told my parents we were going to go stay with friends for the weekend, and my brother had a Volkswagen camper bus, and six of us took the camper bus to Washington, D.C. over a three-day weekend, so we drove all night.

TAPPE: And you were in high school?
PERANTEAU: That was in high school.

TAPPE: At Strake Jesuit, yet.

PERANTEAU: Yeah. And they didn’t know. I just remember that trip, and so when I can think of the people, my friend Denise Seider, who is in California now, but the people on that trip, just us being sort of radical politically. It was the end of the 1960s, and we were affected by all of that.

TAPPE: You were the right person at the right time in history for that.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, it was just weird. It was a weird — we were sort of more towards the end of that movement, the late 1960s, but it was still rocking at that time.

I’ll come back to the Center for AIDS. So I was at the Center for AIDS from 1995 to 2000, and then I wanted just to get back to my art life. I mean, things had gotten so much better and the numbers had shifted, and you know the deaths had slowed way down. I know we’re going to talk about the deaths somewhere in here as much as we can talk about that. Everything had slowed down, so by 2000, I felt comfortable leaving to go back into my nonprofit work in other areas, although I always stay connected to HIV work somehow, either on a board or working on a fundraiser. I was going to say, in 1986 Tori and I were part of a group of six people that did the first fundraiser for AIDS in Houston, HIV and AIDS, which was Art Against AIDS, and we did it at The Galleria. It was a
huge auction. We raised $160,000, and we were the first funding entity to give money. We gave money to nine HIV and AIDS organizations. That was before Ryan White and everything.

TAPPE: What umbrella was that under?

PERANTEAU: It might have been AIDS Foundation Houston, I think. Tori will remember. I tried to find some stuff on that, and I couldn’t find it. I think she has it. But that was the first big joint effort to raise a bunch of money, and then to be able to give out that money to groups that really needed it and weren’t getting any federal money or city money so much back then.

So I left in 2000 and started a nonprofit called Non-Profit Projects, Inc. And I worked with nonprofits, setting up nonprofits. So there are a bunch of ones that have gone on to do really well, things like the Aurora Picture Show, which is in the Rice Village now; Nameless Sound. I worked with nine groups at one point. I was working with nine nonprofits. I was given a grant by Louisa Sarofim, sort of a seed grant to start that nonprofit, and The Brown Foundation, but specifically from Louisa Sarofim, so it’s Louisa Stude Sarofim. She and her brother were the heirs to the Brown fortune and started The Brown Foundation. She always supported stuff that I did, always. Always, the radical work at DiverseWorks. And then when we did the Center for AIDS, she supported it. And then when I started this nonprofit, she supported it. At one point I was working with nine groups, so that was how I was making a living.

And then in 2003, I went to work for Project Row Houses and worked there for a three-year stint as the interim executive director for three years, so really the executive director. And then I went back to Non-Profit Projects, Inc.
And then I took a serious job. I think I’m getting this right. I became the development director for the Society for the Performing Arts, which I had no idea what that was going to be like. But that was a huge job where I had to wear two suits and go to all these things and do a million things, and it was a $2 million organization. So I did that for about 18 months and made some money and bought a house, which I hadn’t done.

When you get that diagnosis, you think you’re going to die, right? And then 1995, you think, well, I’m going to live a little longer. But I was not doing what my siblings were doing, which was setting up retirement accounts and doing all this stuff. I didn’t think I was going to live, so I didn’t even think about that.

TAPPE: Day-to-day, you were day-to-day.

PERANTEAU: Day-to-day, and once I realized in 2005–2006 that I was going to live, knock on wood, and I was doing fine, I did start doing stuff that would — that was part of what the job at SPA was about. Stayed there for a year and a half, and then went back to Project Row Houses for three years as the development director, and then went to Art League in 2012, and so that’s where I am now. It’s 2016.

“You have called yourself an activist.” So it’s funny. We were at the conventions in 1972, and then the conventions were here in 1992, so that was a 20-year thing. I mean, I had been to some of the other conventions too, over the years.

TAPPE: When you were involved with the conventions as an activist, you said early on
it had to do with the war, right?

PERANTEAU: Right, early on, it was the war.

TAPPE: But the later one was war or everything? HIV?

PERANTEAU: It was everything. It was war. It was AIDS and HIV. It was sort of all those things. There were a group of four artists that were defunded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and we were part of a big battle with Congress about that. I got involved in that discussion. I was involved on sort of a national level with that. So it was always that. The right was coming in to try to take away people’s rights in some way, shape, or form, or defund the National Endowment for the Arts.

And we were saying people want their tax dollars to go to this. You know, it’s such a tiny, tiny percentage. But the Republicans would earmark it to take it out, and we’d have to go up and do battle for that. And we did battle here some with our city with the Cultural Arts Council when it started. It’s now the Houston Arts Alliance.

So always, to me, it’s always been the same battle in a way. In all the fields I was in, I had mentors too, people that helped me. When you said, “Where did you get this knowledge?” like, when I started doing all that stuff with DiverseWorks and the national stuff that would help me later with HIV and AIDS, I had people who were just generous, right, who ran organizations, who were already in those movements, whom I could go to or I could call about things and figure out. I didn’t have to reinvent things, because they had been through it. And now I’m going to be 65 this summer, and it just seems like the battles are always the same. We’re back in the social-agenda war.
TAPPE: We’re back in the 1920s right now.

PERANTEAU: We’re back in the 1920s in a bunch of ways, and 1930s, the late 1930s.

So it’s like there’s always work to do, so I’m mentoring a lot of people now. My two people that work for me — they work for the organization, not for me — they are just really young and incredibly intelligent and they’re socially concerned, so I’m just helping them. If they ask me, I’ll tell them stuff.

I’m an optimist. I do believe that the world is going to be a different place. I don’t think I’m going to live to see it, but I think in 30 years, 40 years, it’s going to be a very different place, and I don’t think it’s going to be The Children of Men world. That’s definitely one view, especially with what’s going on in Europe right now; that the wealthy will be here and everybody else will be behind these fences.

I think it’s going to go another direction, because I think the technology is going to take us someplace so fast that any sort of political system now is not prepared for what’s going to happen with technology and what’s going to happen. I’m part of the school that believes that they are going to cure all disease and create a way for everybody to have food, so ultimately I’m an optimist. And I try not to go down that wormhole where Facebook is taking me these days in these political arguments.

TAPPE: I know. You have to be really careful with that because it can become very frustrating. That’s for sure.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, you can’t change people.

So in the latter part of the 1980s, mid-1980s to late 1980s, I was involved with Tori doing the auction and other things to raise money for different things,
different AIDS organizations. And we were, at DiverseWorks, doing things. Like the four NEA artists that were defunded, they were all gay, so we were bringing those artists to perform. So Tim Miller from Los Angeles, and Holly Hughes from New York, and John Fleck and Karen Finley were the four artists, and they’re all super sort of famous now. It’s so funny, we’re all in our sixties now, but we were bringing them, and their work was — Tim especially, but all of them did work about AIDS. Karen Finley did some of the most powerful work ever about AIDS as a performance artist. So we were programming that work.

We also were dealing with the issue of people of color and AIDS, so we would bring this group from San Francisco called Pomo Afro Homos, which was Post Modern African-American Homosexuals, it was a performance group, and they did work about everything to do with being black and gay but also with HIV. So we brought lots of groups. We also did exhibitions that either included artists that were speaking to that in their work or exhibition specifically about it, so we did lots of political stuff.

We did the Guerrilla Girls. Actually, the Guerrilla Girls are this artists’ collective from New York, and they started back in the 1980s, and we brought them to Houston, and they did this super elaborate installation in Houston. We never knew who they were. So they flew from New York. A woman picked them up. They were four women that whenever they came to the gallery, they wore their gorilla masks and they were upstairs and they built the installation, and they had this whole crew of women volunteers from Houston that were bringing them all the stuff. So they did this elaborate installation, and we shut the place down for a week so they could have it to do the installation, and then it opened,
but you never knew who they were.

They’re still that way. They were on Stephen Colbert on network television the other night, and this is April of 2016, and there was one of the original ones, I think, and two of the newer ones that were there, but they were all sitting on stage in their gorilla masks, and they’re still doing it. So they just did a project that I read about last night, in Minneapolis. Their work would deal with AIDS too and AIDS in women, or HIV in women, and also really about feminism and women’s issues.

But there’s a group now called the Electric Machete Collective out of Minneapolis, and the Guerrilla Girls are in Minneapolis doing a show, and they’ve included 30 other feminist groups, including the Electric Machete feminist group out of Minneapolis, which is one of the first Latino neighborhoods in Minneapolis doing this project with the Guerrilla Girls. So we did stuff like that, and it overlapped. The AIDS programming at DiverseWorks overlapped with what was happening in the world.

So I guess I was an activist in the sense of as I was curating some of that stuff, because we had a visual-arts curator who would work on visual-arts stuff and I would work on performance stuff, but as we did that, we sort of overlapped, but we consciously were being activists about this issue that nobody wanted to talk about. So it was the days of nobody wanted to talk about it, nobody wanted to say the word. It was the days before even the word was invented. We went through that dark time.

TAPPE: Where you knew people were sick.

PERANTEAU: And people were sick. So there were people we know that were sick,
that were dying, at the same time as all of this was going on. So as I start to think about it, I don’t know how much I can get into this without getting emotional. So we were out trying to do this work, and also at the same time you might be taking care of somebody and part of a team taking care of somebody, and maybe even not called a team at that point in time, but you were part of a group of people taking care of somebody because their families didn’t want to take care of them and didn’t want to have anything to do with it.

So I can think of this artist named Jon, who passed away. He was a successful interior designer and artist, and he lived in a warehouse space sort of like this, a big, elaborate one downtown, and he was one of the first people I know to die. He had just so many things, and he was this amazing person, but when he died, his parents just wanted nothing to do with it. And we had no idea that — he had amazing things, so we started donating the things out and trying to sell them and make money, and we took some of them because we didn’t know what to do with them.

He was the first of many, and so we were always sort of dealing with both. And I guess I forgot that aspect — at the same time as we were doing this, we were also dealing with friends who were at various stages of the disease.

TAPPE: That might have helped fuel your energy for your projects.

PERANTEAU: To think oh, well, yeah, that’s important, but right now, this is the most important thing. HIV and AIDS, to me, are the most important things, because all of these people are getting the disease, they’re dying from the disease, and Reagan won’t talk about the disease, nobody will talk about the disease, and there was no acceptance anywhere, so we were part of that group that was helping with
these people.

TAPPE: Were you able to interact with any of the city government and county
government?

PERANTEAU: Not so much back then. We were involved with the groups that were
starting to form around it; specifically, AIDS Foundation Houston and Bering
Omega, and I’m trying to think of who else. The county started, probably the
county more than the city always, the Ryan White initiative, so at the beginnings
of those, we would be involved. But we also started a group here called Queer
Nation, and a Houston branch of ACT UP, so we were involved in protests urging
the city to do funding and making people aware of things. And it was also
creating a presence in the Pride parade every year, just getting it out there so
people understood what it was and not — trying to help with the people to
understand it so there wouldn’t be this horrible ignoring of it.

TAPPE: The continued stigma. Well, more than a stigma.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, the stigma, and that people just wanted to — you know, oh, we
don’t talk about that here kind of thing. Joel Martinez was great and was just an
amazing activist, and he was just so articulate. So he was also the front person a
lot for that, and he was real involved, although eventually he got so involved in
the treatment and the science. That was where he was. But he could move
between both worlds and talk about this in a way that the regular world
understood and patients understood and people with the disease understood.

But I think a lot of people did that. A lot of people shifted into this other
world because there wasn’t — the people that began to staff the organizations that
dealt with HIV and AIDS and dealt with treatment and dealt with clinics and dealt
with all that stuff, the social-services side, the psychological side, these were all people learning. We were all learning on the hoof in the end of the 1980s up to the 1990s. We were learning how to deal with this disease, right, and what to do, and hospice was starting to happen, and Bering Omega had the first one. So everybody was kind of working together, but it was a fairly frantic time.

TAPPE: Tell me a little bit about your activism. Were you out? I hear clearly about your organizing, but were you out picketing? What were you doing?

PERANTEAU: We were out picketing. We were visiting politicians. We were going to Washington and New York, and we were definitely out doing stuff as much as possible here. That was one of the reasons that Queer Nation started and the Houston branch of ACT UP, was to specifically be present in situations, and also to begin to honor these people who were passing. You know, figure out ways to celebrate their lives. I remember going to so many memorial services and that whole aspect of that. Things at Rothko Chapel or wherever, at churches, wherever they would happen, we were somehow dealing with that too, so we were kind of dealing with all parts of it. And I say we, because it was a big we. It was a lot of people.

TAPPE: And the death toll climbed.

PERANTEAU: Right, during the worst years, the late 1980s and the early 1990s, those were the worst years. And so those were the years, especially the late 1980s, were the years when you just had no hope, and chaos would show up and you would know that nothing was going to stave off the infection, nothing would slow it down, which is what the new drugs did, but nothing that would slow it down back then.
That was another thing, you know, exposing the people who were trying to make money off it or saying this will help cure it or whatever, and there was really nothing that would. So then dealing with your friends that would get HIV, their emotional side and what was happening with them, and then literally dealing with them as they began to get sick. So we were all sort of figuring out ways to do that.

TAPPE: How did you stay strong when you were seeing so much suffering with your friends and experiencing so much loss?

PERANTEAU: I think we did it, or I did it, by working with these other people and supporting each other in our work. And I felt like — this interview has made me think some about my life, but it made me think about the stuff that I’ve done, and I feel lucky and honored to have been part of all the stuff that I’ve been involved in.

And I don’t have a lot of regrets, you know. I think I’m going to go to Highlands University when we move to New Mexico, just for the hell of it, to get my degree, but I never — there were two or three times, even four years ago, I went back to school and then I stopped. I finished the two courses, and then I didn’t do any more. And it’s like there’s just never been — how do you step away and take four or six years to get these degrees? I just didn’t have time. And so I guess that was the nature of my personal life, was that there was just too much to do. There was no way. So I didn’t get to feed my intellectual side as much as probably I could have or would have. There was just no way. There was no time.

And I think that the nature of what we did, I mean, it was always, whether
it was DiverseWorks, where it was always a — you know, we had six artists in
residence. We were all like a family, right? Or whether it was the Center for
AIDS, where it was the same thing. It was like we were like a family with our
board. We had really good boards there, and we were all working for something
that we really believed in, and that was maybe a common thread. We were
working in an area that we really believed in. If you take time to smell the
flowers, there’s a lot of pride and stuff around that. I don’t think I’ve ever had
time.

TAPPE: You mean in your accomplishments?

PERANTEAU: Yeah, or I mean in the world. But I sort of thought that by now, there
would be time. But then I’m sitting here dealing with this election in 2016 and
sort of mentoring younger people at work, and they’re back to dealing with
equitable pay for artists and all these things that we dealt with. So it’s sort of like
this thing, you know, that history repeats itself over and over, although I think
we’re always taking steps forward. So now I’m just at the point where I’m
beginning to think that I will maybe pull it back in some, and I don’t know how
much I can disengage, but disengage enough to do some personal things.

TAPPE: I’m not sure you can disengage much, but you might be able to. I think your
reference to a lack of a formal education, which is what you’re referring to, not
taking the time or having the time to go back to that, is one thing, but in listening
to your story, you have an education that most people don’t have.

PERANTEAU: Yeah. It’s sort of in a specific area.

TAPPE: Not just in the arts. That was one of your beginning driving forces. But in
organizing and in caring, pulling things together, supporting people, seeing where
people need to help each other, and you’ve done that, whether it was in the arts or through the Center for AIDS. So it’s a different kind of education.

PERANTEAU: Yeah. My sister talked about it recently, and that was my sister Jane, who is my sister that I’m close to. She talked about it recently. We talked about it, and it was like I sort of never — I don’t know where it all came from, so it was just like this sort of — some of it was intuition, but then it was just this kind of thing. And I also never dealt well with any sort of praise or that — sort of like when you talk about it to me, it always sounds a little weird to me. But people will say where did it come from, and I don’t even know. There’s been a little time to think about that, right?

So when I got to the Art League four years ago, the Art League was a mess. They had had a really abusive director for six months that was just terrible — everybody had PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder], so I am a fixer, which probably comes from being an adult child of an alcoholic, but the fixer part has always been there. And when Rick was setting up Project Row Houses or Joel was beginning to set up the Center for AIDS, those were situations where I could go in and fix it and say well, we can do this. This person could be good here. Here’s how you do the board. These are the kind of people you need. So that was —

TAPPE: Well, that’s invaluable.

PERANTEAU: Those are my best situations, to go in and fix it. I already had a much higher-paying job that was being offered to me then the Art League came up. I walked in and I knew what they needed. I never thought much of the Art League in my professional career, so that was a challenge. I knew part of the board
wanted to hire this younger woman who was really smart. I went in and I just said you know, these are the kinds of things that I see that you need now. You do need this person to come in when I leave, but your financial base is not solid and your board needs help.

TAPPE: Your foundation.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, and so you need to do some foundation work and we need to get the place on the map. So we’ve really gotten it on the map. But I love that part, and I’m going to be leaving, and that’s hard.

TAPPE: But you’ll leave it in better shape.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, I hope.

TAPPE: And much stronger.

PERANTEAU: I still have to do some work. Yes, it’s already in a lot better shape. In most of the situations I left, whether it was Center for AIDS or DiverseWorks, I think I left them in better shape.

Leaving DiverseWorks after I had been made executive director, which is what I wanted to be, was all about me getting the HIV and being depressed and really having a meltdown. So I just remember this board meeting at DiverseWorks where it felt like the whole world was falling apart, and that was me, feeling like I was falling apart, and I just remember being in this board meeting and part of the board saying, because the organization had — I stay on the finances of any organization I’m involved with, but I had let go of the finances, so the money looked like it was all crazy, and I was just not on it. I had hired this assistant who really didn’t know what he was doing.

And so in that meeting, it was a really painful meeting. I sort of fell apart
in the meeting, and then the board fell apart because they knew I was going to
leave and I had been diagnosed with HIV and it was this horrible thing. So the
whole board was saying we’ll just shut the place down.

And then some really good board members stepped forward and just said
no, no, no, no, no, no. They had a bigger vision, and they just went no, this is
what’s going on here now, and we need to support Michael in this, and we need to
focus on this — so then they cleaned everything up. It was like there were no
issues with the money; it was just that it wasn’t being reported right. I hadn’t
been — so that was a horrible time, and so I stayed — didn’t work for probably,
you know, six months or something, until Joel came and said let’s do this other
thing, and then I was just on that.

TAPPE: And this was the Center for AIDS?

PERANTEAU: This was the Center for AIDS, was my next project. Joel was really
good, because he pulled me up, and he said we’ll keep a bowl of Vicodin here just
in case — we’ll have it at the Center for AIDS all the time in case you need it.

And so, yeah, it was fun, and again, it was like family.

TAPPE: A bowl of it.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, that was a joke.

TAPPE: The Center for AIDS is now connected with Legacy; is that correct?

PERANTEAU: Right.

TAPPE: Tell me how that happened.

PERANTEAU: So the Center for AIDS went on until — so it started in 1995. I left in
2000. Sara Haynes and Paul Simmons really ran it. Joel passed away in probably
2003. It went on for another — until 2013 or something, when it was absorbed by
Legacy but kept its name within Legacy. So it’s housed in the Legacy Clinic in Montrose. And Paul Simmons still consults with patients about treatment, and he still stays connected nationally about what’s happening. And now there are a zillion drugs. I just read an article that I just went oh, my god, I’m so out of what’s happening, because all the drug names are new.

So it began. So it was still valuable enough that Katy and the board at Legacy thought it was something that they should keep going. So they gave up the building on Hawthorne. I think Bering got that building. I’m not sure what Bering is doing with it. It’s right up the street from Bering on Hawthorne.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

TAPPE: Oh, yes. I don’t know.

PERANTEAU: Cute building. Anyway, Paul moved into offices at Legacy. So that was nice to see that continuity and it’s going to keep going and it’s still here and there’s still some place in Houston — and Katy, I know, saw this. There’s still some place in Houston that’s dealing with the issue of treatment and what’s happening with the drugs we do, so she can — people from other organizations can still use Paul and the Center for AIDS as a resource.

TAPPE: Well, it’s a natural fit with Legacy.

PERANTEAU: Yeah, great fit, especially since they have so many clinics now.
TAPPE: Did you see, as time went on when you were with Center for AIDS, a change in the population that would come see you?

PERANTEAU: Yes.

TAPPE: Of course, this was the gay man’s disease initially.

PERANTEAU: In the beginning, we were just dealing with the gay community, our community, and people of color in that community that were gay, but we weren’t dealing with the issue of HIV and IV drug users, and we weren’t dealing with women of color and HIV. So we began, and we were real acutely aware of those issues in the later 1990s at the Center for AIDS. So the populations that we worked with were all the populations. And so if we were going to go out and do a presentation or we were counseling people or people were referred to us, we worked closely with other groups to get them to refer all populations to us. And so then Paul or Joel, and for a few years me too, we would just sit down and meet with people from everywhere, or we would go out and do presentations, which we did a lot.

People were terrified of the drugs including myself; that’s why I didn’t start until 2003, probably. We were terrified of the drugs and the side effects. And then you’d realize the thing about the side effects, it only affects this percentage of people. Chances are you’re not going to have these side effects, and if you do, these are the things you can do, and we would just have to carry that message out there so people would take the drugs.

TAPPE: So you were diagnosed in 1993, you said; is that correct?


TAPPE: And you didn’t start drugs until 2003? That was ten years.
PERANTEAU: And I was the worst. I was the worst. You know, I have to knock on some wood. Is this wood [knocking]?

TAPPE: It is now.

PERANTEAU: I did not want to go on drugs. Although I had done a little bit of drugs in the 1990s, I just basically wasn’t doing anything. And my T-cell count always hovered in this place that was okay. My partner has real high T cells. I didn’t ever have real high T cells, but they always stayed in the same range. And so at one point after 2000 they dipped, and so that’s when Dr. Schrader, my doctor, convinced me to go on drugs, and I think Paul Simmons was involved in that discussion too.

So I finally went on drugs. My T cells have come up and sort of stayed in the same place for all these years. So that’s 13 years, and I’m still on the same drugs, and sometimes I think about changing — but I was just as afraid of it as everybody else, and I didn’t want to get on the drugs and then have all the side effects or the long-term effects, which nobody really knew what they were back then.

And eventually there are the effects. I mean, people are thinking now that oh, it’s a treatable disease and all that stuff, but the truth is that the drugs that they give you still, even the new drugs, because I was reading all that stuff yesterday, there are still things that affect your heart, your cholesterol and all that, and your kidneys and your liver. Those are the three areas that they still hit bad. So with long-term treatment you’re going to deal with those issues at some point.

There’s been a lot of information recently about the older populations dealing with HIV and AIDS and being on treatment. I read about somebody
yesterday that had been on treatment for 33 years, but he’s fine. So it just sort of
depends on if you’re willing to do the healthy things.

TAPPE: You were not on treatment and maintained health for ten years.

PERANTEAU: Yes, for ten years.

TAPPE: How interesting, though, that you’re there educating people.

PERANTEAU: Yes, some people I know didn’t think it was so interesting.

TAPPE: Well, it’s your decision and it’s your body.

PERANTEAU: Right, totally. When I worked at Project Row Houses in 2003, I
remember there was a couple that were married and HIV positive. He worked for
us; she didn’t. But I remember they would not take their drugs. So I remember in
2003, even though I probably hadn’t started at that point, I was trying to convince
them to take their drugs. And so one night I even put on my pajamas and drove
over to their house and said, you know, let’s just do it together. We did this
whole thing where we finally got them on drugs.

The wife of that team is still alive. The husband passed away. But they
were just so terrified of the drugs, and I was sitting there explaining to them —
no, I think it was that I had started, so that’s why I went over and I said we’ll do
our drugs together. And I put my pajamas on, drove over there, and they were in
their pajamas, and we just did the drugs together.

So there was still, and there still is today, a lot of fear around starting
drugs. Not as much.

TAPPE: You had fear on both sides. A fear of not taking the drugs and fears of the
consequences if you did.

PERANTEAU: The biggest indicator is still your viral load. And so — what is wood?
There is no wood? Oh, this is wood [knocking].

The biggest indicator is the viral load, and so I’ve been fortunate enough to have no viral load. And so the people who have more T cells and their viral load starts to show, they should start drugs, and finally that’s more known, but back then it wasn’t known. If they have 500 or 600 T cells, they weren’t going to take drugs. But if that viral load starts creeping up, it can just immediately or real quickly change, so you really need to take them.

TAPPE: Do you feel that you want to investigate some of these newer drugs?

PERANTEAU: I do. Before I leave town, I want to talk to Paul Simmons at Center for AIDS, because he will be encyclopedic about the new drugs and tell me which ones would be the best for me to take. I’m still on a heavy regimen that I don’t think I can sustain and my partner is also on a heavy-duty regimen. I didn’t ever expect to live to be 64, so I would like now to live to be 75. So whatever Paul says, I would take Paul’s word as gospel pretty much on it.

TAPPE: Whatever has the least effect on your kidneys and heart.

PERANTEAU: Right.

TAPPE: Of course, if it’s a cholesterol issue, they have other drugs, but your kidneys are obviously a little more fragile.

PERANTEAU: And I track those things. I recently had blood work. I’ll have the meeting with the doctor tomorrow, just to see where I am and see which numbers are up. You have to monitor it, you know, but it’s not nearly as often as it used to be, so every six months.

TAPPE: Let me ask you a question. Let’s go back to the mid- to early 1980s and then when AIDS reached its peak a number of years later, even until today, with a
community where you have people that are HIV positive and people that are not. Did you see, and do you see it now, any discrimination between people that are HIV positive and those that are HIV negative?

PERANTEAU: Sure, tons. Some really, really, really strong stigmatization and prejudice against people with HIV and AIDS in the gay world, in the gay bars, some of it understandable, especially in the beginning, when nobody knew anything. But then later, as we knew more, as we got to know more, people were still weird about it. It’s gotten better.

Today, you know what, if you kind of go through the sites, if you’re going to poz or if you go to gay.com or any of that stuff, it feels a lot less to me. It feels like it’s a much better place. A lot more people than I thought would be are on PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis] so that they just don’t worry about it, right?

To me, it’s a little too lax. There’s an attitude of, “It’s treatable, so I’m not going to worry so much about it,” which I think is not the right attitude. If you want to go on PrEP and then you can pretty much guarantee you’re 90-something percent not going to get it, that’s great.

But the truth is that 50,000 people a year still get HIV, so it’s still a huge issue. And when people say it’s not an issue, there are now close to 700,000 people who have died of it in the United States, since it started. It’s a million people a year in the world, so it’s still, to me, a huge concern because that just continues to fan out.

I think the pharmaceuticals stopped dealing with the idea of a cure once these drugs came along because they were going to make so much money on the drugs. I think the issue of the cure is back on the table in research and
development because the numbers are just getting too big and it’s continuing to grow at such a rate. So to me, I think they’re much closer to getting a cure than they were in the past, or to developing a cure.

TAPPE: Do you see the younger generation being a little bit more carefree about their activity? Your generation?

PERANTEAU: No, the young. I think people who lived through it, my generation, people from their forties up, people who lived through it in any way, shape, or form in the 1980s and 1990s, those people are more conscientious. If they’re negative and they made it through that time period, they’re really careful.

The younger people, a couple of things. The younger people I think are either getting on PrEP or a lot of them are really careful, but it seems to be looser right now in terms of people not worrying so much because there’s treatment. But a big part of that is they don’t have any idea how awful it is to have it. And things like this, The oH Project, I’m doing it because I think it’s a great way to record that history for future generations. I work with somebody who just turned 29. I started working with him when he was 25. He’s gay and he’s an activist and he’s really smart, but he has no idea what happened with HIV but he wants to know. He said, “I wasn’t even born, so what happened and what was that like?” He totally does his own kind of research on that all the time. And it’s not just him; it’s his friends too. They are really curious about it in a really good way. And so the more things they can have that tell them what happened and get the point across, the better, because we don’t want history to repeat itself in this instance. And these young people, not all of them, but a lot of them are really curious. And where do they go to get the information? It’s become so relaxed
that it’s not really written about anymore. Nobody talks about it. I don’t see that much about it anymore.

TAPPE: I don’t either. We used to see information everywhere.

PERANTEAU: Right, big time.

TAPPE: Literature and workshops.

PERANTEAU: I’ll come home a lot because I’m over — I’ll just go by Whole Foods on Waugh, and then I come down West Gray, and when you make the corner onto Fannin, you go by Houston — what’s it called? The baths?

TAPPE: Yes.

PERANTEAU: Whatever it’s called. Both baths are on Fannin. So you’ll go by that one, which is the more popular one, the better looking people go to that one, and it’s packed all the time. And I think, what’s happening in there? Is it safe sex? Do they have signs up? Do they have condoms? Do they do all that stuff?

And then there’s Midtown, which actually, maybe Midtown isn’t looser. In a way, Midtown does have all the signs up. I think they do all that stuff. But these two bathhouses are both crowded, so what’s happening with that?

Nobody’s talking about it. But I don’t know.

You know, AIDS Foundation Houston used to go to the baths and do presentations so are they still doing that? I don’t know. I think probably some. But there doesn’t seem to be the urgency, and maybe that’s because they aren’t seeing people die. That just means that people are getting HIV positive and they are taking the drugs, so nobody would even know that they’re HIV positive, and that’s not what happened in the 1980s and 1990s.

TAPPE: No. In the 1980s and 1990s, when people were positive, it was evident they
were positive, and then the obituaries in the back of *TWT* took up half the magazine.

PERANTEAU: Right. And now there’s nothing like that, so there’s nothing to scare them, and you can just start to think it’s not happening there.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

TAPPE: Okay. Michael, let’s switch gears a bit. Tell me about the support that you’ve received from your family for all of your activism, through your illness, and throughout your community work.

PERANTEAU: What happened in my family was, we were all raised here in Houston, and there were seven of us kids, and my father had already passed when I became positive, but when I came out gay, they were supportive. They were liberal. My brothers and sisters were all supportive. My sister that I’m closest to now, Jane, has always been an activist too and done a lot of things. And a lot of them have, in different ways, so that wasn’t an issue. And then when I came out positive and came out as positive to them, there was support. It was never an issue, but a lot of fear that I was going to live. But most of them, the tendency in my family was to educate yourself. So they went out and educated themselves as much as they could about it; they became more knowledgeable about the issues. When we’d see each other for holidays or whatever, as time went on, they became much more knowledgeable about it, and they were accepting.

One of my sisters, who had been teaching at the university level for years at Lewis & Clark and then at University of Maryland, has a Ph.D. in rhetoric and she’s super smart, and she’s the one that was invited to the Kennedy inauguration
as a teenager. Her name is Jane Peranteau. After living in Montana and Maryland and Oregon, she came back to Houston and began working for Episcopal Health Charities. And so she was peripherally involved in projects and writing about projects and issues around HIV in sort of the greater Houston area. They covered a 56-county area.

And then at one point in 2009 maybe, I think it was 2009, she was brought in because at that point in time, from my recollection, there was a lot of friction between the various agencies. And the main 14 agencies that deal with HIV and AIDS, some of the directors had been in place for a long time, and so she was brought in to facilitate a retreat, a day-long retreat with the directors, at the original Montrose Clinic building on Westheimer, and she’s a great facilitator and mediator. I mean, she’s really good at it.

I just remember her doing that. One of the big issues was the relationship between Ann Robison with Montrose Center and with Katy Caldwell at Legacy, and it was sort of a territorial thing. And this meeting over that day was a way to get at the issues and be in a safe place to talk amongst themselves about what was going on in an honest way. My sister is just dead honest and a truth teller, and she just literally had them dealing with all these issues, and at the end of that day, everybody was in a better place. I know Ann and Katy were in a better place.

And it was funny, because that came out of nowhere for me a little bit. I guess they were looking for somebody to facilitate it, but that didn’t come through me. It must have come through the Foundation or something. And so she ended up being that person. I don’t think I suggested her. But it was funny to have her in — I wasn’t in that world anymore, but then she was in that world.
And she had run an AIDS agency, the first and only AIDS agency, which is still in existence, in Roswell, New Mexico for five years, and she served on the Governor’s Task Force for AIDS, so she was very involved. So that sister became an ally in a lot of ways, right? She really understood the field and the politics of the field and how it worked and treatment. She dealt with and set up, I think, one of the first successful needle-exchange programs in the country and all that, so she was very involved. There was heavy IV drug use in southern New Mexico and central New Mexico, and so she was involved.

TAPPE: But she was able to help bring some of the people together?

PERANTEAU: She was able to bring the groups together in Houston and dissolve the friction. She was able to make people talk. I don’t know how public this will be with Katy and Ann, but just even to get them in the same room, because they were the leaders in the community, and have that friction dissolve, relaxed everybody. And then they were able to really differentiate on what they were doing and talk about the directions they were going and not be so territorial. I think a lot of things happened. I think her retreat was a little part of it, but a lot of things adjusted after that time.

TAPPE: I know that through the years, a lot of the smaller organizations have either gone away because there’s no need or no one was volunteering for it, or they were absorbed into Legacy or Montrose Center. So back when they did have more organizations and everything was kind of new and trying to figure out boundaries —

PERANTEAU: Right, like the People with AIDS Coalition, PWAC, that Fred Walters ran. It was a big organization and they started Project L.E.A.P. [Learning,
Empowerment, Advocacy, Participation], and that’s been absorbed into different groups, into the Montrose Center and into AFH, AIDS Foundation Houston.

Somebody I know was just in Project L.E.A.P., so obviously Project L.E.A.P. is going on and the programs that the PWAC were doing are still going on through other agencies, like the work we did at Center for AIDS is still going on through Legacy.

So yes, I think for the most part that’s been a good thing. I think agencies have had to carve out their positions. What’s the difference between the Montrose Center and what Bering Omega is doing? Well, Bering Omega’s signature things have always been the Wednesday night dinners; the lunches that they do with people living with AIDS; the dental clinic, which is major, major in terms of the country. It’s one of the best, if not the best, clinic. So everybody has carved it out, and I’m not involved in that world so much anymore, but it doesn’t feel to me, from what I do know or when I run into Katy or whomever, it doesn’t feel like there’s all that acrimony anymore.

TAPPE: I agree with you, and I think part of that early on just had to do with trying to figure out identities. Who we are, what are we going to do, boundaries, and money.

PERANTEAU: Who’s going to take what, and money. Always money.

TAPPE: So you have a fistful of dollars, and you want to spread it everywhere.

PERANTEAU: Well, it was always money. So to me, it was the same thing in the art world and the AIDS world. So in the art world, museums were getting all the money so that the small and midsized groups that were so grassroots and needed support weren’t getting it. And there were always times in history when the
museums tried to pull all the money. Like there might be a downturn in the economy and their donations would go down, and they’d say, “Well, we should just get all the money.”

The same thing with the large agencies, with HIV. I mean, we fought for our money at Center for AIDS. That place was special because it was the only treatment-activist place. But there is always the thing about as groups grow, then they become big, and then how do they interact with the smaller groups, which are still really important.

TAPPE: I think Houston should be very proud of the fact that they have several large agencies like they do that serve so many different facets of the community, or the general population, in fact. We have all areas covered.

PERANTEAU: Right, yes, we do. I mean, I feel that too. I don’t think, like the issues we were talking about earlier off mic, about the homeless and the things that are going on with that, I don’t feel that that’s going on. It’s no longer the people with AIDS or with HIV can’t get help or treatment. I think the Ryan White is well-funded. I think Legacy is an amazing story. Montrose Center is an amazing story. We were talking about the housing that they are going to build. I feel like the gay community in essence is really together.

We talked about the issue of HIV and education earlier, and I think that’s a huge issue because I don’t know what’s happening at the bathhouses or the bars. I don’t know how that’s going, and I’m sure AIDS Foundation Houston could answer that question better, because I’m not in that world, but it doesn’t feel like it’s happening as much maybe as it should, and I think that’s something that I might check into.
TAPPE: Just to wrap up here, we talked a little about education. I don’t know what’s going on in bathhouses either, but I remember years ago, when all this was first coming about, that you didn’t have to be in a bathhouse to see the education. You saw it everywhere.

PERANTEAU: Right, everywhere.

TAPPE: You saw it on TV, you saw it on billboards, you saw it in the publications. I don’t see it anymore, and maybe where sexual activity is taking place, maybe it is there, but sexual activity takes place everywhere.

PERANTEAU: I don’t go to any of those places, so I don’t know. I don’t go to bars anymore or anything, so I have no idea. But I do see publications, and I don’t really even — I see the pharmaceutical ads in those publications big time, right? Pages. But I don’t see anything anymore about education, just something about PrEP, and that will usually be a pharmaceutical that does that. So I am curious about what’s happening with that.

TAPPE: Yes, I may have to investigate that a little bit more.

PERANTEAU: I think I might investigate that some too. You and I will just head over to the gay baths, and we’ll see if they’ll let us in. “We’re coming in as a couple. We just want to check it out. We don’t know.”

But it’s scary because there are that many people still getting the disease, right?

TAPPE: That’s right. And you were saying 50,000 people a year?

PERANTEAU: In the United States. In the world, a million people a year get it, which to me is a huge figure.

TAPPE: It is massive.
PERANTEAU: 5,600 people a day, that’s what that works out to. But in the United States, 50,000 people a year are getting it. I don’t know where Houston fits in that. I’m sure you can Google it and find the maps that show where it’s the most, but it will be the major cities, like it’s always been. So I think it’s still an issue, a big issue.

TAPPE: So your concern for the future is that we continue with education?

PERANTEAU: Absolutely, that we continue with education, we continue — some of what’s happening with Medicaid and Medicare. So there’s an aging HIV population, and there are issues around, in Texas specifically, not taking the Medicaid for the Obamacare, which brings up issues for people who have to take drugs because then they have to — how are their drugs going to get paid for? And I know there are a lot of programs that are helping with that, but that’s still a big issue.

I know that yesterday, which was May the 2nd, the federal government agreed to go ahead and give, for this next year, to give Texas $6.2 billion to fund its hospitals. We need that money because our governor, our crazy governor, did not sign up for Medicaid support as part of Obamacare. I think 26 states have. So where is the money going to come to keep funding the drugs, because I know my drugs cost somewhere between $16,000 and $20,000 a year. Where does that money come from to help people who don’t have the resources to do that?

TAPPE: And you’re staying healthy.

PERANTEAU: Yes.

TAPPE: So the people that might be taking drugs and for whatever reason cannot stay healthy, then of course their costs go way, way up for hospitalizations.
PERANTEAU: Well, and then I’m saying, those are the people that are — if you’re worried about your healthcare — if you’re on Medicaid and you’re already on disability with Medicare, that’s one thing, but there’s lot of people that aren’t. So for those people, they’re worried about their healthcare, and then they’re also worried about their drugs. And I’m sure they’re in programs that get the money for the drugs, but it just makes it so complicated, and they just don’t have this — you don’t have that anxiety factor, which is a huge anxiety factor. So people are dealing with not only the stress of having the disease or the HIV, not only having AIDS or HIV or being at various stages of that, they’re dealing with the anxiety of where they’re going to get cared for, how it’s going to get paid for, and how they’re going to have their drugs costs covered, and then keeping up with their drugs.

I was examining some of that in the last week. Most people piece together their drug support through ADAP [AIDS Drug Assistance Program] and through Ryan White, but also through the pharmaceutical companies, through programs that they have to help support people who can’t afford to buy the drugs. It’s complicated. It shouldn’t be so complicated, right?

TAPPE: There’s your next battle.

PERANTEAU: Oh, yeah.

TAPPE: Just to conclude here, I was speaking with a gentleman recently about the fundraising that you still see going on in the community. Years ago people used to have shows in the bars just for fun.

PERANTEAU: Right.
TAPPE: Then it shifted to raising money for HIV/AIDS support, and that’s still going on. I asked him if the support is as necessary now as it was 20 or 30 years ago. And he said oh, yes, because of the aging population. It was like a slap in the face. I thought oh, my god, of course. It’s right in front of me, the aging population. He said, “Renée, people are living longer.”

PERANTEAU: I’m 64, but it means all the people coming up behind me are going to live longer and need the drugs and need the services too.

TAPPE: That’s right. And some of them are not able to be employed because they’re not as healthy enough to maintain a job, so there are huge gaps, not just with the insurance, but with daily living expenses.

PERANTEAU: So I’m part of that first generation of people who are in their sixties and seventies. So for how long will we live and what will happen? Who is going to help us? Who’s going to help take care of that population?

People like Michael Rudelson at Bering Omega, former President of the Board, now on the board. He’s made a lifelong commitment. He and his wife are lifelong supporters of Bering Omega. So there are people who are still involved, but like you and I talked about, it doesn’t feel as urgent. I don’t know where we can get a clear picture of that, but I know that the money is still needed, as are the programs to work with these people.

TAPPE: I think just in today’s talk, we have at least five more projects for you.

PERANTEAU: And you. I’ll call you.

TAPPE: All right, Michael. Thank you so much for your time.

PERANTEAU: All right. Thank you. If you need anything else, let me know.

TAPPE: I will.
PERANTEAU: And I appreciate you doing this a lot. It’s amazing.

TAPPE: Thank you for your time in sharing your story and for all of your fighting for all these years.

PERANTEAU: You’re welcome.

TAPPE: Don’t stop.

PERANTEAU: All right. Thanks.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

*****