Oral History

An Interview with
Steven Vargas

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AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN VARGAS

MARILYN MORRISSEY: This is Marilyn Morrissey interviewing Steven Vargas for The oH Project oral history program. The interview is taking place on March 7, 2016 in the AAMA office in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Vargas to obtain recollections concerning his family’s experience with HIV and AIDS during the early 1980s; Steven’s experience from 1990 to 1995, when death rates from AIDS spiked; and from 1996 to 2002, which Steven describes as his dark years. This interview will also cover Steven’s employment in the field of HIV, his involvement with the Ryan White Council, and other volunteer work.

Good evening, and here we go, Steven. Will you please tell me the names of your family members that you care to share?

STEVEN VARGAS: Yeah. My mother’s name was Mary Elisa Martinez, and my father’s name is Johnny Vargas. I have four brothers and one sister, and in order they are Ronald John Vargas, Kenneth Edward Vargas, April Nicole Vargas, Robert Angel Reyes, and Carlos Reynaldo Reyes. My mother was married five times, and her fifth husband had — his younger brother was gay. His older brother was gay, as well. My entire family on my mother’s side experienced the whole stuff with HIV that she was going through: my cousins, my aunts, my uncles. There are a lot to name.

MARILYN MORRISSEY: Well, I remember you said everybody participated in your mom’s care.

STEVEN VARGAS: And their names might come up in some of this history.
MORRISSEY: Just tell us as you go, then. How is that?

VARGAS: Okay. Yeah. I am from Houston. I was born and raised here in Houston.

The old Memorial Hospital that was downtown before they tore it down, that’s where I was born in 1968, March 19th. I grew up in Houston, all over Houston, really. My mother got divorced from my father when I must have been about four. I remember in a memory when they were divorced, and I don’t remember faces. I must have been really short, because I remember legs when they came in and they picked up my youngest sister, April, and my brother Kenneth, and they went to go live with my dad after my parents got divorced, and my brother Ronny and I lived with my mother and were raised by my mother. We visited with my dad, growing up, pretty regularly up until about the age of about 10, I think, or was it 15? No, I think it was more like 10.

At that point, we were given a choice of whether or not we wanted to go and visit, and even though I enjoyed visits with my dad, I liked being around my dad back then, but it was kind of boring being at his place. When you’re a kid, those things kind of influence your decisions. Sometimes he wasn’t home, he was out working, and so we would go and essentially spend time with him, but he wasn’t around.

MORRISSEY: What did your dad do?

VARGAS: He did a number of jobs. He worked for the Houston Chronicle. I think he worked for the Post, but I know he worked for the Houston Chronicle. His last job, from which he just recently retired within the last couple of months, was working for HISD in one of their warehouses over here off of I-10.

MORRISSEY: And did your mom work?
VARGAS: And my mom worked too. She had a variety of jobs also. She was a
secretary. She worked as a real estate agent. She worked for a paralegal firm.
Her last job, before she got really ill and had to leave that job, was at State Farm
Insurance. She was about to get to a position where they were going to be
sending her out to different places that experienced tornadoes or hurricanes, to
evaluate some of the damage that was done. That’s what she was headed towards,
and then she started getting sick.

MORRISSEY: Steven, where did you go to early school, primary, grade school?

VARGAS: Since my parents were divorced so young, my mother was a single mother
raising two boys, which then we lived all over. I remember going to Dogan
Elementary School here in the near north side, Fifth Ward area. I remember being
there for third grade. For fifth grade, I remember being at Cunningham
Elementary in Bellaire. Junior high, part of it again, near north side at
McReynolds Middle School, but also the last two years of middle school at
Humble Middle School out near Lake Houston in the Atascocita area. High
school was more stabilized, mainly because I went to a school in which there was
no zoning, basically. I went to the High School for the Performing and Visual
Arts. Anyone from anywhere could go there.

MORRISSEY: But you had to qualify.

VARGAS: Yeah, I had to audition and everything else, then got through that, and yeah, I
was accepted and started going to school there. I was there in 9th, 10th, and 11th
grade. And then for my senior year, it was spent at a private arts high school in
Chicago, the Chicago Academy for the Arts.

MORRISSEY: Because you were such a good —
VARGAS: Well, I guess I was pretty good, but it was more an opportunity to go to Chicago, because my high school boyfriend, his father was transferred to Chicago. The entire family was going up there. I was his first really close friend. I don’t think they really knew we were dating at the time. They did, later, really soon, later. They found out pretty soon. They kind of wanted us to spend some time together, so they invited me up to spend a summer with them in Chicago. And so school was out, and I went back home, I was home with my family, and they said they wanted me to come up with them for about a month before school started.

I went up there, and about the time I was getting ready to come back, they wanted to know if I had thought about maybe going to school in Chicago. And I told them at the time that I really liked HSPVA and probably the only thing I would do about leaving PVA to go to a school in Chicago was if there was another arts high school, and they found two different arts high schools. One of them was a private arts high school, and that was Chicago Academy for the Arts. And it was tuition, I think, $4,000 per semester. I was good enough to get a scholarship coming in as a senior, and they rarely if ever gave scholarships to people coming in as seniors. Their cutoff point was at least your junior year, if you’re starting your junior year, but after that they didn’t give scholarships, but I got one.

MORRISSEY: For playing the French horn?

VARGAS: French horn, yeah. I was a musician. And yeah, so that’s how I ended up living in Chicago.

MORRISSEY: What an experience.
VARGAS: Oh, yeah. In a way, it was an early childhood dream of mine, adolescent dream of mine. When I started playing the French horn in seventh grade, by the time I was in ninth grade at HSPVA, I became more familiar with good horn players around the nation, who they were by name. I didn’t know them personally, but hearing all the older kids, you know, the 12th grade, the older kids talking about different horn players, Dale Clevenger in Chicago and Gail Williams and all these other folks. And so I thought one day I want to be a Chicago horn player. And then years later, three or four years later, there I was in Chicago.

MORRISSEY: You got there quickly.

VARGAS: Yeah. And what was so weird is that at the Chicago Academy for the Arts, very different from HSPVA. At HSPVA it was much more structured. It was a really good, equal emphasis on doing well academically as well as whatever your art area happened to be. And the same thing was emphasized in the Chicago Academy for the Arts except that they expected you as a musician to go out into the community and find some groups with whom to perform. That really wasn’t really what the focus was at HSPVA. It was all about learning here in school and everything else. You played with the orchestra in school and the band in school. And you could play with other groups also, but really the focus was everything having to do here with school. And in Chicago, they really pushed you out to get to know the community and find some groups with whom to play.

I had to go out and audition for the Elgin Symphony Orchestra. I ended up getting to play with Holy Name Cathedral’s Brass Consort, is what they were called, and that was a paying gig for me when I was 18 years old. And I played
with DePaul University’s wind ensemble. I auditioned for that. They needed some extra horn players, and they auditioned, I auditioned, and they had me come in and help them out. Basically I was a ringer.

MORRISSEY: So that’s where they discovered you and offered you a scholarship?

VARGAS: No. Actually that happened after the scholarship.

MORRISSEY: After the scholarship.

VARGAS: Yeah, that happened after the scholarship, yeah. Basically the scholarship was a performance. I did an audition for Chicago, and they went ahead and accepted me to go to school and gave me that at least partial scholarship for that. And then the other ones, I went to because they kind of pushed us to go out and do some auditions. I would have never done that at that age if they hadn’t pushed us to. And I remember thinking to myself, oh, my god, what did I get myself into?

At PVA, I kept thinking, all I had to do was worry about working up three or four pieces for a senior recital, and now I’ve got to go out and find these groups to play with? Oh, my gosh. But it worked really well.

I remember one winter night in my black tuxedo after one of the performances at Holy Name Cathedral, it was after everyone was gone, all of the musicians were standing on the steps of Holy Name Cathedral, which is right on State Street, and so I was facing west, and looking to my left, you could see the Sears Tower. Looking to my right and behind me was the John Hancock Building. There I am in my tux with my overcoat because there was just a little bit of light snow, and all the musicians were talking. They were all older than me, and they were about to go to a bar, and they’re all talking about, “Yeah, if Steven
comes in in between us all, we can just all get around and sneak him in.”

And I was kind of up for it, but at the last minute, I just chickened out. I said, “No, that’s okay. I’ll go home. I’ll go home.”

But I remember standing on the steps through that conversation, and all these horn players and these brass players, and I’m thinking to myself — you know, that’s when it dawned on me that oh, my god, I’m a Chicago horn player. And I said, “I have my check here for $150 for this gig that I just played.” Yeah, that’s when it dawned on me.

MORRISSEY: Pretty cool. Very, very cool.

VARGAS: Yeah, it was really cool. For 18 years old, it was very cool.

MORRISSEY: So you graduated from Chicago?

VARGAS: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And then did you go to college?

VARGAS: Well, I was supposed to go to DePaul University, but that was about the time that I heard some things going on with the family, and so I came back home.

MORRISSEY: What year was this?

VARGAS: This would have been 1987–1988. 1987. 1986–1987, because I graduated in 1987. And I was at one of the rehearsals at DePaul University, and the music director, we were walking, I was walking to his car as I was walking to come back home, and that’s when he mentioned that if I wanted, you could just get a full scholarship and go to DePaul University. And I was right there getting ready to do it, and I made one phone call home to share all the good news and everything. And it was all great news, and I got a lot of support, but I also heard on the other line, just heard — I remember my mother was really happy. She was very proud
of me, but there was something in her voice.

MORRISSEY: And you didn’t know yet that —

VARGAS: I didn’t know. In fact, at that point I didn’t even find out anything, no, but I just — there was something in her voice and everything.

MORRISSEY: But your intuition, in her voice.

VARGAS: Yeah. And so they came up for my graduation, to Chicago, and we all drove back home. We got back home and everything, and really at that point, what it was, it was just stress on her whole marriage. That’s what was going on. And like I said, my mother was married five times, so this was her fourth husband, and I think that’s what was really bothering her. I think she kind of felt like the writing was on the wall, just heading the same direction that some of the other ones did, and you can kind of hear that. I mean, it was always really sad when my mother went through that.

MORRISSEY: That sounds hard.

VARGAS: Yeah. I can’t even imagine being a single mother, and I help ladies like this all the time, and they’ll share these things with me, and I keep on thinking she probably thought the exact same thing. You know, they think about living with HIV, who’s going to want them. Some of them have kids. I remember one of them shared how, you know, “When my husband got put in jail, and now he’s not part of our life anymore, and I have my two daughters,” and she was sharing how she wasn’t sure if she’d ever find someone that wanted to be with her, and she has two daughters, but she did. And then she’s going through it again with HIV. I just can’t imagine. “And I’m right back here again, thinking is anyone going to be with me if they know I have HIV?” And so she got through that. So it’s the
same kind of those things, and I wonder about that, when my mother was going
through all that stuff back then, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, I’ll bet. Did you ever get a chance to talk to her about it?

VARGAS: About that period? No. By the time we started really having our serious
conversations was right about the time that she found out about her own
diagnosis, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Which was in 1988? 1990?


So I grew up everywhere. All over Houston. Bellaire, Atascocita,
Humble, here in Montrose. Everywhere.

MORRISSEY: Well, I’d like to hear also about your years with your uncle. That sounds
like a wise thing your mom decided to do.

VARGAS: Well, it was really strange. He was more like a family friend back then.

MORRISSEY: Your uncle?

VARGAS: Yeah. The rest of it didn’t come into play until later. He was more like a
family friend back then through his brother.

MORRISSEY: And his brother was married to your —

VARGAS: Later married my mother, yeah.

We were living in Bellaire, and I was supposed to be going to Jane Long.
I’m not sure if that’s a middle school or a high school, somewhere off in
southwest Houston. And they were talking about his friends who were gay, who
were substitute teachers, two of them, substitute teachers at HSPVA, and that’s
how we found out about HSPVA, and talking about kind of how they wished that
there was a school like that when they were growing up, because his friends
would share with him that they were gay and that although they weren’t open
about it in the school, there were kids in school that you saw them with their
boyfriends and no one seemed to bat an eye. And it was just like regular high
school and just kids being kids, but you saw some male couples, and every once
in a while you saw a female couple, and no one seemed to bat an eye. This would
have been sort of back in the early 1980s. And they just thought, you know,
wished they had an experience like that when they were growing up, and they
kept on pushing my mother to — you know, “Steven should go to this school.
You should really think about sending Steven to this school.”

MORRISSEY: So had you already come out to your family?

VARGAS: I think I came out to my family when I was in fifth grade.

MORRISSEY: So you knew, that early?

VARGAS: Well, I wasn’t certain that early. I wasn’t really certain. All I knew was that
I had a crush on a classmate of mine. I remember telling my mom that; that I had
a crush on a classmate of mine, his name, and everything else, and the reaction
was okay. I think a lot of people hear the same kind of reaction, I think. My
mother’s reaction was that some guys like guys.

MORRISSEY: Oh, that’s great.

VARGAS: Yeah. She was telling me about some of the family friends and some of their
boyfriends. She said, “You know, some guys like guys.”

MORRISSEY: Nonchalant.

VARGAS: Yeah, you know, “You might grow out of it; you might not.” That was it.

MORRISSEY: Well, that’s good information to have as a fifth grader.

VARGAS: Yeah, exactly. So when I was in fifth grade, hearing that I might grow out of
it, I might not, that left me in a complete state of uncertainty for a couple of years.  

I’d say, “Oh, am I going to grow out of this or not?”

But she also mentioned words of caution. “Whereas in the family, we all love you, we support you, but let’s be careful. Don’t talk about this in school.” That’s what I got. “In public, be careful. Be careful. We love you here. That doesn’t matter. You love who you love, but in public and everywhere else, just be cautious.”

MORRISSEY: Good piece of advice.

VARGAS: Yeah, exactly. And so when it came to going to HSPVA, I originally did not want to go. I had my friends out in Humble, Humble Middle School, and they were all going to high school, Humble High School, together, and I wanted to go to Humble High School with them. I was kind of looking forward to — I liked physical activity. I didn’t really like, like, sports too much, but I loved running around and climbing and all that other stuff, and so I enjoyed that. So I was kind of looking forward to high school and football games and stuff like that. I wasn’t a huge fan of football. I just liked being there with a bunch of folks. And so that’s really what I wanted, and so I made a deal with my mom, and it was, “Okay. I’ll audition, and if I get in, I’ll go. If I don’t, then I’ll just go back to my high school. I’ll do that. That will be the easiest way to figure out where I’m going.”

And I auditioned, and I got in.

MORRISSEY: You get in every time you audition, it sounds like.

VARGAS: And I never thought I was that good. Now as an adult looking back, I realize I was a lot better than I thought I was.
MORRISSEY: Well, if you started in seventh grade and you were already knocking the auditions dead and stuff, you were good.

VARGAS: Yeah, I wasn’t really that good the first year I started playing the French horn. It was just one summer I was really bored, and all I did was practice. And I went back to school in seventh grade, we went through the auditions, and all of a sudden I was a good horn player. It wasn’t like that the year previous.

MORRISSEY: Interesting. So boring can be a good thing, being bored.

VARGAS: Yeah, just leave your horn out on the bed and never put it away, and you end up picking it up and practicing. That’s what I usually tell other folks too, is that if your problem is finding time to practice or something, just don’t put your instrument away. Leave it out. You’re going to pick it up.

MORRISSEY: That’s a good piece of advice.

VARGAS: Yeah. And so that’s what happened with that, so yeah.

MORRISSEY: Okay. So you came back to Houston.

VARGAS: Yeah. I went to Chicago and after graduation came back to Houston, and I was here in Houston for about a year, and my boyfriend at the time had gone to Oakland University outside of Detroit, in Oakland.

MORRISSEY: Your boyfriend in Chicago?

VARGAS: Yeah. Well, he was my boyfriend here in Houston. His father got transferred to Chicago. I went there with them. I was still his boyfriend. And when I was living with them, this is the beginning of the — here’s whole other stories that have nothing really to do with HIV but kind of leads up, gives you a little bit of my background, I guess.

So he and I started dating when I was in tenth grade at HSPVA, and when
he was a junior in high school, he left early to go to school in Detroit. So my senior year of high school, when I went to Chicago and he was there with me, in January he was going to start classes in Detroit. So in January he moved to Detroit, and I was still in Chicago with his parents and his brother, living in the basement of their town home. So it felt a little bit of the bait and switch, at least I did. Nice to invite me up and everything else, and then you’ve gone, and you’re gone and left me with your family. But his family and I are very close. To this day, we’re still very close, and I love them to death.

MORRISSEY: Is he in Chicago?

VARGAS: No. He’s now living in Maine.

So he went to Detroit and went to school. I graduated from high school in Chicago, and I came back home. I spent the whole year here. He came back home for the summer, and he really was pushing me to go back to school and college, and I filled out some paper work, an application for Oakland. I was accepted. I did end up going, but no one in my family had ever gone to college, so none of us was really familiar with exactly what you need to do. All I knew, that I was told growing up, was if you did get good grades, you can go to college. I did that. I went to college, but I didn’t know anything about having to pay for college. I didn’t know anything about registering for classes. I didn’t know any of that. I just know that, hey, they said I could go, and here I am, and that’s kind of how it went.

I rushed through registering for classes, totally confused about the process of what’s going on, but everything was taken care of. It was fine. I was staying in a dorm room on campus. He and I were sharing a room. There were two
people to a room, and he and I ended up sharing a room. I remember when I was
driving up there, two of his friends were with us when we were driving from
Chicago. I had gone to Chicago. We stayed kind of a long weekend with his
parents, and then we were driving to Detroit to go to school, and two of his
friends were with us on the road, so there were four of us in the car from Chicago
to Detroit, about a six-hour drive. And on the way there, they were telling me
things like you’ve got to be careful. You can’t really be out here. You can’t
show people that you’re gay here. It’s a suburb.

And I remember in the car, and I even looked at all of them, I said, “What
did you get me into here?” I said, “I’m not sure if I can do this. I’ve never had a
life like that.” At the time, a lot of people, that was their life: kind of keep things
to themselves and hidden from their family and their friends and that kind of stuff.
That was their life, but it wasn’t mine. And I just wasn’t sure if I could do that.
And I tried it, and we got there. We got our dorm room, and we were in classes.
Not once had I set up anything for payment. Not once, nothing.

MORRISSEY: And nobody’s asked you?

VARGAS: And no one even asked, and so I wasn’t sure what was going on with that.

So I was there in the dorms, and we were having some beers and some pizza one
night in one of the guys’ rooms. We ended up making friends in the dorm. We
were in the jock dorm. We made friends in the dorm. You know, a couple of
musicians in the jock dorm. And the guys right across the hall from me, one of
them was the dorm president, and a friend of his, and they were really good
friends of ours, and we were over there having some beers and some pizza, just
joking around and carousing, about six of us in that little dorm room probably
about as big as this room, my office here.

And at one point they started making jokes about gays, and I don’t exactly remember what the joke was or something. I just remember that after a couple — I don’t know; it must have been two or three, and I had beer in my system at that point. So at one point, they made a joke, and I said, “You know what?” I just slammed my beer. I said, “You know, screw all of you-all,” and I just got up, and I walked out and slammed their door and went to my dorm room across the hall and slammed my door.

“Whatever. What did we do? What happened? What is it?”

And I told them. I said, “You guys are being a bunch of assholes and making jokes about guys that are gay, not even knowing that there are people in your midst that you’re making fun of, and I thought we were friends.” And I said, “I can’t even look at you-all right now,” and I closed the door, and that was it.

And no one talked to me for about two weeks, and I was fine with it, actually, because in my mind I kept on thinking to myself, who would deal with this kind of bullshit? And when I’m thinking about the car ride up, about you’ve got to watch it, I thought, I can’t do this. And I’m just like I am now. I’m not really overtly gay or anything like that, but I am. And so whether people know it or not, it was just offensive.

So no one talked to me for a couple of weeks. I remember going to the lunch area where everyone would go to the cafeteria for lunch, and I remember sitting — we used to all sit together and everything, and I remember sitting by myself.

MORRISSEY: Where was your roommate, your boyfriend?
VARGAS: Well, he was in class, and then he would come back. And he kind of felt kind of like I outed us both, but he was stronger than that, though, too. He was fine. “If that’s the way we’ve got to do it, that’s the way we’re going to do it.”

MORRISSEY: Okay. Well, that’s good.

VARGAS: And so he went with it too.

But one time, he was in class, and I was eating lunch by myself during that period, but it took it a couple of weeks, and then I remember one of the guys came over and sat with me, and we were talking, and it was almost talking without even mentioning what happened. And then before you know it, we were all sitting together again, laughing and joking like that never happened, but they were a lot more sensitive after that.

MORRISSEY: Well, good.

VARGAS: And I remember, later on when they were redecorating and painting the dorm doors in the hallways, the room numbers, I asked if — because they were doing purple and these red triangle, squares, you know, the 1980s with the little different color shadow kind of a thing, that kind of dimensional thing, and I thought, “Oh, can Bill and I” — his name was Bill Harris. He doesn’t mind if I mention his name. So I said, “Can Bill and I put a pink triangle on it?” And I explained to them everything, what the pink triangle symbolized. And one of the guys said, “Yeah, but then what if there’s a guy in there that’s not gay next year or something?”

I said, “Well, he doesn’t even know what it means.”

He said okay, and they let us do it.

MORRISSEY: Well, that’s great.
VARGAS: So we had a pink triangle outside our dorm room. I know I kept on thinking, like, taking it back. That’s a way of taking back the symbol.

MORRISSEY: Good for you.

VARGAS: And we did that. And then at Christmastime, before the Christmas break, before everyone went home to their different places, they were giving awards out to folks, a little party, Christmas party and presents, because we picked names, and then they also gave awards like, I don’t know, most optimistic, and most athletic, that kind of stuff, and I got an award for dorm dad. I have no idea how that went. I think I had a little bit of that, but I got an award for dorm dad, and I got the award for dorm mom.

MORRISSEY: That’s a great story.

VARGAS: So a little gay trailblazer back in 1989 in Detroit, and I didn’t even see it that way, back then. I was just being me.

MORRISSEY: You didn’t know anything else.

VARGAS: Yeah, and it wasn’t until I got to Oakland University, it wasn’t until I got there that it really, really hit home how fortunate I was, being raised by the family I was raised by and the way I was raised. It wasn’t until I got there that it really, really hit home that wow, the only way I can even do these things and say these things, that I know that my parents aren’t going to disown me, my friends back here in Houston aren’t going to ostracize me. I knew that, and that’s what gave me the strength to put my foot down, and I said, “Fine. You-all want to kick me out? Kick me out. I have a whole community back home that loves me anyway.” And so I think it was there that I really realized how fortunate I had it growing up.

MORRISSEY: Very lucky, it sounds to me.
VARGAS: I didn’t feel so lucky growing up with my mother and everything else that way because back then I kind of felt like I kind of wished my parents didn’t know I was gay.

MORRISSEY: Really. Because?

VARGAS: Oh, different things. You know when you’re a teenager, you know, you get very rebellious about some things. You could have the best parents in the world, the most accommodating parents in the world, and you’re going to be rebellious about it, and I was. I remember, I was embarrassed by a book, a little yellow book my mother got me called One in Ten. It was about one in ten folks are gay, and I remember getting that book. I didn’t even read it. I just saw it, and I said, “Really?” But now I can look back at those things and just really realize how fortunate I really was.

MORRISSEY: Yes, I’d say. Because I don’t want to miss this piece of the 1980s with you, when you lived with your uncle —

VARGAS: Yeah, early 1980s. 1983 and 1984, and it was just a couple of years.

MORRISSEY: When you were 15?

VARGAS: Yeah, 15 and 16, just those couple of years. He had a lot of gay friends, a lot of gay friends. There are a lot of things now, I understand more now of what they said than I understood then. Not even double entendres, just different words they’d use for things, and I’d say, “Oh, I know what that means.” I didn’t, then. I had no clue.

[BRIEF PAUSE]

MORRISSEY: Okay. So you were living with your uncle. He’s got a lot of gay friends.

VARGAS: Yeah, and they were all fun, and I had crushes on some of them. But I
remember one day after school, or was it a weekend, I just remember sitting in the living room. He had a very small apartment, a one-bedroom apartment, Avalon Square Apartments there on Westheimer. And I was sitting on the floor doing my homework, and the TV was not on. They were talking at the dinner table, which was about from here to there where that wall is [indicating], at the dinner table. He and about four other friends, like five of them were all crowded around the table. They were playing cards. That’s what it was. They were playing cards, and they were just shooting the breeze. And I remember hearing them say — it was about a friend of theirs whom they hadn’t seen. He said, “Well, you know he’s sick.”

And one of them, Dean, I think, asking, “Oh, don’t tell me he’s got that thing.”

And they said, “Well, I don’t know. We don’t know. We just know he’s sick and everything.”

He said, “Oh, okay,” and then they started talking about this thing, what’s going on. There’s this flu that’s getting people, and it does something where it makes you really sick, and then you just don’t get over it, and they weren’t sure what’s going on. That was one conversation to hear them talking about that.

And then another time around Halloween, I remember Halloween because a friend of his, T.J., came to the door, knocked, and I opened the door, and he was all in red, drag queen, all red from head to toe, kind of like Stockard Channing in To Wong Foo, red from head to toe, and he was kind of embarrassed when I opened the door, but he came in and everything else, and so that was fine. But I remember they were talking and they were joking about — what was it? I think
they were joking about going to a bathhouse, but I’m not really sure, but that’s the interpretation I got. These days. I think about it back then, to me, it sounded like they were going to an after-hours club or something like that. That’s what it sounded like to me, but I think they were talking about a bathhouse. And the only reason I think that now is because I remember one of them mentioned, “Oh, no, no. That’s where people get it and keep on getting sick. I’m not going to go there. They closed those places down in San Francisco. I mean, that’s probably why everyone keeps on getting sick.” And so that’s why these days, I think they were talking about the bathhouse.

MORRISSEY: Were there a lot of bathhouses in Houston?

VARGAS: I didn’t know back then. I have no idea. I know now there are still two that I know of. But back then, I have no idea. I think it was probably the same two, if not more. I don’t know.

MORRISSEY: Are they in Montrose?

VARGAS: Midtown, both of them. Midtown, and they’ve been there forever, even back in the 1990s or something like that, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Are they covert?

VARGAS: It’s kind of hard to say if they’re covert when you’re part of the gay community because everyone kind of knows about them, at least gay men, so it’s kind of hard to say, are they covert? But I guess if you weren’t part of that community, you wouldn’t know what that brown building is at the corner of Fannin and Main Street.

MORRISSEY: Oh, okay. See, I have no idea where the bathhouses are.

VARGAS: Yeah, that’s one right there, the corner of Fannin and Main Street, right
across from that CVS and HCC [Houston Community College]. There’s HCC. There’s that gas station. Right behind it, that brown two-story, that’s a bathhouse.

MORRISSEY: I know where you are, uh-huh.

VARGAS: And so when you walk in, there’s a gym on the first floor, but if you go up the stairs, there’s not a gym. There’s other kinds of workouts, but certainly not a gym, no.

And the other one was close to the Greyhound station, Club Houston, and it’s still there, but it’s a newer building. They tore down the old building and put up this newer building, yeah, but it’s still Club Houston. Same thing. First floor: gym, pool, sauna, you know, everything else. Upstairs, no.

MORRISSEY: Okay. That would be interesting to go to a bathhouse sometime, but I don’t know if — were women allowed in?

VARGAS: You know, I remember, growing up in the 1990s, those dark years was when I became familiar with those places. I don’t remember seeing very many women. Every once in a while, I remember there would be a woman there with some friends, and they’d be out laughing by the pool area, but you wouldn’t really see them upstairs or around or anything like that. They were downstairs or outside. But yeah, that’s basically it, but I think I may have seen or heard a woman maybe twice in the times that I had been there, yeah. I think it was a period of about five or six years that I used to go on a pretty regular basis, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Okay. During your dark years.

VARGAS: Those are the dark years, yeah. It was dark in there.

MORRISSEY: Well, let’s flip back to between 1990 and 1995.

VARGAS: Oh, before we do that, with my uncles, every one of those folks, my uncle
included, every one of those folks is no longer here. They are all gone now, and they all passed away, a few of them in 1994, and my uncle, in 1994 too, about a month after, passed away.

MORRISSEY: I can’t imagine.

VARGAS: These are folks that I had crushes on. I guess to some folks, they would be considered positive role models. But for a young gay man seeing other gay men who were older, who had jobs, who were productive in their lives, I consider that a positive role model, and not just that part of it all, their lives and everything, but the camaraderie they had with each other, the drag stuff sometimes, even. That’s what I mean by positive gay role models, right there.

MORRISSEY: Right, healthy friendships.

VARGAS: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Sometimes not so healthy, but I was always warned about that. I was always warned, what was it? I was always warned that if one of my uncle’s friends in particular, if he ever comes down knocking — he lived in the same apartment complex — he said, “If he ever comes down knocking on the door, I don’t want to hear it. Don’t let him in,” and I never did.

MORRISSEY: Was he one of the ones you had a crush on?

VARGAS: No.

MORRISSEY: Well, that’s good.

VARGAS: It’s a good thing, and so I never did, and he never knocked on the door anyway. He was protective like that too. And that’s another thing, what I mean by positive gay role models.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, mentoring.

VARGAS: Yeah, he was protective. He gave me little insights, gosh. I was at a
wedding. A friend of ours had a big wedding, and she had folks from the Houston Grand Opera Chorus that sang at her wedding because they were all friends and everything. And I remember, at the reception they were asking — I think I was 19 or 20 — and they were all going to go back to somebody’s house for a pool party, and one of the guys asked me, “Hey, you should come with us to the pool party.”

I said, “I’d love to.” I didn’t even have a bathing suit.

He said, “Oh, we’ve got a bathing suit you can wear. We can find something.”

I was all happy and excited. I ran to my uncle, and I said, “Hey, is it okay if I go with Forrest and them to their pool party?”

“No.”

I said, “Well, you know, they just invited me. They’re really nice. I want to go, and they said I could borrow a swimsuit.”

“No.”

So I didn’t go. But that’s the kind of protectiveness he had. And that’s also what I mean by I wish my family weren’t so knowledgeable about me being gay, because I could have gotten away with so much stuff if they weren’t so aware of these things.

MORRISSEY: Well, maybe it’s good, especially during the 1980s.

VARGAS: Particularly during that period, yes.

MORRISSEY: With all the hormones raging.

VARGAS: Oh, yeah, I could have gotten myself in all kinds of trouble and didn’t, didn’t.

MORRISSEY: Good. Anything else about your uncle?
VARGAS: Just that I just remember the last several months of his life were visiting all his different friends that were in hospitals, Park Plaza and Twelve Oaks, and I went with him because I was really worried about him. I knew he had HIV at that point. And I knew all of his friends, what they were going through. And I remember once we went to Park Plaza, and on the way there, because I had just visited two of his friends already, we were on our way to Park Plaza to visit another one, and I remember there on the way, just on the way there in the car I remember talking about, and I said, “Tio, I just get really scared because you’re sick too, and you’re going in and out of all these hospitals, and there’s people with the flu, there’s people with all these things.” That was the conversation we had. I was just worried for him, and that’s why I was going along to help him out.

MORRISSEY: How did he respond to that?

VARGAS: He didn’t respond.

MORRISSEY: But you were able to share your concerns with him?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. I remember him saying, “I know,” and that was it. We didn’t need to say anything else.

When we visited that friend at Park Plaza, that’s one of his friends, Tad, that he passed away. I remember Tad’s family didn’t know he was gay, didn’t know he had HIV and was dying of AIDS, basically. They knew that he was really sick, but they didn’t really know he was gay and they didn’t really — part of his life.

That was another thing that I thought was kind of strange, because here I am with my family, everything was very open and everything, and they, all of my uncle’s friends, none of them were really out to their parents at all. I remember
talking to them about that when I was 16 years old, and he’d say, “How do you-all do that? How do parents not know?”

And they’d say, “Well, they just don’t. I never talked to them about it.”

And I just thought to myself and said, “I can’t imagine that,” but that was their life.

One of them was married later on, got divorced. One of them was a priest, Catholic priest at a church in Galveston, and he’s gone now too, all of them. But when we went to go visit Tad at Park Plaza, one of the things he mentioned was that he really wanted — because he was going to be dying and he knew that, and that’s kind of what they talked about, and Tad wanted my uncle to go to his apartment and get rid of all the porn and magazines and poppers and drugs and anything that had any kind of connection to his life as a gay man in Houston. I think his family was from Louisville, something like that.

MORRISSEY: So he went to his grave with his family not knowing he was gay?

VARGAS: Yeah. To me, it’s really still hard for me to understand that. But I remember the funeral, and not one word was said about him being gay. Not one word was said about how he died or what he died from.

MORRISSEY: Did he have a partner at the time?

VARGAS: No, no, he didn’t have a partner at the time.

That’s exactly what we did. We went and we cleaned out —

MORRISSEY: Degayed it? You degayed the apartment?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. Got all the — back then, all the TWT’s, he had a whole collection of TWT Magazines, the This Week in Texas. We got all the TWT’s. I kept some of them, because some of the guys were kind of cute, the
centerfolds.

I remember in the refrigerator, he had poppers in the refrigerator, and I thought it was some kind of a medication. I remember asking my uncle about that. I said, “You know, he’s got medication inside the refrigerator, so we should take those? I’m not sure what kind it is or anything like that.”

And my uncle went in there and he grabbed it. That’s all I remember about that. Now I know what those bottles are. That was poppers. That was not medication. I know what that is now.

MORRISSEY: What are poppers?


There are so many things. I remember some of the friends, you’d find little bags of white powder and stuff like that, and I wasn’t exactly sure what kind of drug it was. Sometimes I wasn’t sure if that was a drug. I thought, I don’t know what that was. But then later on, I kind of clued in that that was a drug. What it was, I had no idea. Now, I keep on thinking oh, it was probably coke, but back then I had no clue. Pot, I remember finding some of that too.

We had to clean everything out. All the gay stuff, everything, everything. Gay calendars. I remember one of them had one of those Michaelangelos on his refrigerator that you could dress up in little dresses or suits, and so that too, all that stuff. That was the first time I did that with my uncle, and we did that more than once, more than several times. And I was amazed it wasn’t just us. Sometimes it was he and I and a couple of other guys, and we were all going in there and we were all going to clean things out and everything else, and that’s exactly what we did, and I was 19, 18 years old.
I keep on thinking for having such an accepting and open kind of a family, I was really pretty sheltered. I had no idea about what those drugs were. I had no idea about a whole bunch of that stuff. The bathhouse stuff, all their allusions to that kind of stuff, I was clueless. It went right over my head. Now as an adult, I keep on thinking oh, that’s what they meant. Oh, my god.

MORRISSEY: Do you appreciate that that all went over your head? At the time, would it have been useful or helpful?

VARGAS: Oh, I probably would have done horrible things back then with that if I knew what that was, I think. But knowing my family, they probably would have been a couple of steps ahead and would have headed me off at the pass. A lot of kids think they know it all. I did too, but no matter how many times you think you’re going to get away with something, someone was there to head you off at the pass.

In my family, someone was there to head you off at the pass.

MORRISSEY: That’s what family is for.

VARGAS: Almost there.

MORRISSEY: Later, later.

Your uncle sounds like he was a good man, a nice guy.

VARGAS: Well, he was a nice guy. He was a nice guy, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: How long did he live after he was infected? Seven years, did you tell me?

VARGAS: Let’s see, 14, I think, from what he shared. I remember, the year he passed away — it was the year he passed away, he was so active and physical. I remember he was riding his bike. He looked really healthy. That’s when he shared that he thinks he’s been positive for about 14 years.
MORRISSEY: So this was before medication?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, because he passed away April of 1994, and medications came into play in 1996. I remember that when he passed away, he was at Park Plaza Hospital. I remember going to see him at the hospital one night. I was only there for maybe 20 or 30 minutes, not even long, because I just wanted to check up on him, and I went and I visited with him, and he was in bed, and he comes up out of the bed and went to the restroom by himself. It didn’t look like there was any kind of pain or anything, just like getting out of bed and going to the restroom, and he came right back, and so he was fine. He looked fine. He walked around like he was fine, but it was that same night that he passed away.

Because I remember I went home, I went to bed, got a call early in the morning from my mother, and that’s when she told me. And I kept on thinking to myself, that can’t be. I was just there, and he was fine. That one still kind of haunts me a little bit, yeah. He wasn’t the first person that I knew that died from AIDS. He was at that point the closest person that I knew that had died from AIDS. And I wasn’t with him when he died or anything like that. I wasn’t with any of them up to that point. I wasn’t with anybody up to that point that had died with AIDS, been with them when they passed away. That did happen later. I was with my stepfather and my mother both when they passed away.

MORRISSEY: Did they pass away in a hospital?

VARGAS: Yeah. My uncle passed away in Park Plaza, April 1994. Where did my stepfather pass away? He was in 1994 also, November, I think, of 1994, and I remember he was rushed to the hospital. I got the call that he had been rushed to the hospital. I went to the hospital. What hospital was it? I’m not sure if it was
part of the Memorial system or not, but it was one of those big hospitals, and we found where he was, and he was going to be rushed into ICU [intensive care unit].

I remember his mother and his other brother were there, and my mother was really upset because they weren’t essentially going to honor his wishes. He did not want to die in ICU with a bunch of things attached to him or anything like that. He said if we got wind that that was what was going to happen, that he was going to be dying, that he wanted to be around all of us. He didn’t want to die that way, surrounded by nurses and doctors, which is the way he ended up passing away.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

MORRISSEY: They could trump your mom?

VARGAS: I don’t know. I just remember that that was the decision that his mother made, because they were married at that point, but that was the decision his mother made, and I’m not sure if my mother just gave in to what her mother-in-law wanted, but I just remember that that is how he passed away. He was in the ICU. He died of a collapsed lung. They were trying to do some things to help him out, but he ended up having a collapsed lung during all of their procedures that they were trying to do, and that’s how he passed away, yeah.

And my mother passed away in August of 1995, so between April of 1994 and August 1995, those were the three closest folks that I had, and I was there in the hospital with my stepfather when he passed away, not in the same room.

But when it came to my mother, we were with her because my mother wanted the same thing. She did not want to die attached to any machines or anything, and I remember my mother had gone in and out of hospice three
different times, and she got well enough to leave. The doctors couldn’t believe it and everything else. I always got nervous when she came back home after that pattern had set that she would come home and be home for maybe a week or two, and then she would have to rush to be back to the hospital, and then she would end up in hospice care for a month or so, and then she would come back home for maybe a week or two and get sick again. And I always got kind of nervous when they said, “Well, yeah, she’s doing really well. She can probably go home.”

I’m thinking, you said that last time and the time before that.

And then I remember, this time I went and she looked really pale. She had gotten to the point where she — we had her at the Hospice at Texas Medical Center.

MORRISSEY: Oh, that’s beautiful.

VARGAS: I know. It is. It is, and that’s where she was, and it was a beautiful spot.

And she had a room with a big bay window, and if you sat in the bay window and looked, you could see where the kids would play, and so she would sit there and watch the kids play, her grandchildren play, and I think that’s the thing that my mother missed — that bothered her the most, was the idea that she wasn’t going to see her grandchildren grow up, and that became pretty clear that she was not going to see them grow up. She was so happy when they were born. I remember she kept on trying to get me to do something about having a baby. I said, “I’m a gay man.”

“You can adopt,” and then she named different friends of mine that were girls. “Oh, you and Carol would have beautiful babies.” “You and Becky would have beautiful babies.”
It’s like, “Oh, no, Mom.”

She said, “There’s artificial insemination.”

It’s like, “Oh, god.”

MORRISSEY: So you never felt a pull to have a baby?

VARGAS: No, not me, I never really have. I still don’t. I keep on wondering if that’s going to sneak up on me one day, but I still don’t.

MORRISSEY: I’ve never really had a big maternal pull, but I love my nieces and nephews.

VARGAS: Me too. Yeah, exactly, yeah. Love them, seeing them grow up and how they are now as adults, but none of my own, though. No, thank you, for so many reasons.

When she was at the hospice, August 1995, I got there and the doctors wanted to talk to me, and they told me the same thing; that this time it was, we can get her in the ICU and give her some oxygen and everything else, and that might buy her some time, but not sure how much time. It could be a day. It could be a week. They don’t think that she’s going to make it a month, but that’s something we can do.

So I asked them, “But there’s no guarantees on any of that?”

It’s possible that they could go ahead and go that route, and she may pass away.

And I asked them, “So what does that mean? So what does that mean if we don’t go that route?”

And they said, “Well, she may not make it through the night. She more likely won’t make it through the week.”
And so with that, I kept on thinking about what my stepfather’s experience was and how upset my mother was about all of that. I was the oldest son, and I had to make a decision, and I at that point remember, I told the doctors, “Well, so if you-all don’t do anything, my next thing to do, then, would be to let the rest of my family know to come by and give their last respects?”

And the doctor said, “Yes.”

So I said, “Okay. All right.”

And that’s what I did. So I said, “Okay. That’s what we’re going to be doing.”

I couldn’t call any of my family. Again, like I said, I’ve been very fortunate that I have family that was there. My cousins, my cousin Leticia, my cousin Sandy were really helpful to us, I mean, so helpful being there when we couldn’t be there. They were there with her. All my mother’s sisters were there for her when we couldn’t be there, if I was at work or something like that.

Someone was always with her.

MORRISSEY: Oh, that’s fantastic.

VARGAS: People spent the night there on that bay window couch thing. They slept there. Someone was always with her. Sometimes a lot of people were with her, and I’m sure that the nursing staff and everything just weren’t used to that.

To this day, I still talk to nurses and doctors, that “You-all have got to get prepared for Latino families. It’s not going to be acceptable to just have one or two family members. You need to get better, figure out something, a bigger room, something, but that’s not going to fly.” I said, “I don’t care what your rules and regulations are, that’s not going to fly. You need to figure something out.”
Anyway, and the same thing was true with her.

My cousin Sandy had just visited with my mom, and she was on a plane and flying back to California. My cousin Ticia, because we were there now, whenever we got there, they would go back home and get some rest and be with their families. My cousin Ticia had gone all the way home at that point too.

MORRISSEY: And she lived —

VARGAS: She was here in Houston. She lived in Houston, near north side. And she and my mom — you know, Texas, the Hospice there. And so when I made that decision, I remember telling my aunts and my uncles that were there that the doctors are not sure if she is going to make it tonight. They mentioned that if she goes on life support, she might be with us another week maybe, but no guarantees. And I repeated to them that Mom always said that she did not want to die attached to any kinds of machines. She wanted to be surrounded by her family. I don’t know if she’s going to make it through the night. She might. I’m not sure how long she has if she doesn’t go to ICU. And I remember some family members thinking, “So why don’t we get her ICU?”

And I told them that I want that because it will buy some time, I think is what the doctors say. We’re not sure how much time, but they also say that it’s a possible that she could die in ICU, and I’m not sure if I can live with myself if that happened, knowing what Mom wants. And so we have to be here. We had to be here for her, to see what she wants. It’s not about us. I was pretty strong about that decision and everything. Back then what got me strong was how angry I was.

MORRISSEY: That she was dying.

VARGAS: Yeah, and everything about HIV and AIDS and all of it. I was so, so angry
that that gave me kind of a strength to stick to what she wanted. This is what she wanted, and despite whatever it is I want, a lot more years with her.

So they made their phone calls, and folks started showing up. My cousins, my brothers. I called my brothers and told them that they need to be — I told my brother Ronny, “Can you pick up the boys from school?” They were at Reagan High School at the time. “Just, can you tell the teachers that?” you know, because I already had been speaking to the teachers about the possibility that I might need to take my brothers out of school just on the spur of the moment, and to tell the teachers that we need to be with our mother right now, and they will know.

I remember I ended up having to go get my brothers for some reason. I went and I got them, and that was hard for me because honestly — I need to talk to my brothers about that. I’m still not entirely clear whether or not they knew what we were about to go through. They knew their mother was sick. They knew she had HIV. They knew she had AIDS. They knew she had been in and out of the hospital, but they also knew that she had been in and out of hospice. And I think being teenagers in high school, I think sometimes they think that they just — that that was going to be the rest of their lives. She’s going to be going in and out of hospitals.

And so when I went and got them out of class and everything, I think they picked up with it and thought more serious. It was hard for me to talk to them. I was going into kind of a shutdown mode. I picked them up, and they said, “Is Mom not doing well?”

And I said, “No, she’s not, so we need to be with her right now,” and that’s all I said.
We went to the hospice, got there. When I got back, oh, my gosh, my uncles were there, my aunts were there, their spouses were there, my cousins were there. It was a packed room, packed room with people. And we got there, and they kind of like ushered us all up close to the bed so we could be close to our mother, and we all took turns — at that point, she was no longer coherent, and she wasn’t seeing us. I’m not even sure if she was really hearing us. During her last moments, everybody was around her. It was like layers and layers and layers of people. We were all so tightly packed in there too. It just gets huddled in so close, all of us.

And we got to the point, I remember we were all talking, everyone was saying these nice things and telling her that we’re all here with her; that so-and-so is here, Mom and Dad are here, Ticia is here — not Ticia, she wasn’t there. And so we just kept on talking to her, kind of being reassuring. And I remember when I got there, when I was there and I was talking to her, at one point one of my aunts said, “I don’t think she’s breathing anymore.”

And so everyone, we got really just like — it’s hard to imagine all those people in that room when all that talking was going on and some of them were listening to music and they had some MTV stuff on the TV, and when they mentioned that, one of my uncles said, “Be quiet. We need quiet,” and they turned off the TV, turned off the radios and got even closer, and I was right there next to her, and you could see that she was breathing. I remember seeing that.

I said, “No, she’s breathing. She’s breathing. You can see her chest going up.”

I don’t know how long we stood vigil in silence. I have no idea. But I do
remember when her breaths started getting further and further apart, and I remember — my cousin and I talk about this sometimes — remember being not sure if the breath we just witnessed was her last, and then you would see another little slight rise, and then nothing again. And we just stood there and not even sure. Maybe she was still with us, or not. And at one point, just seeing her mouth and her chest just still for longer than — you know, there were periods when it seemed like it was still for a long time, and then you would see just a little bit. But I don’t know how long it was that we stood there, and there was nothing.

And I remember telling one of my cousins, “Go get the nurse. I’m not sure if she’s here. Let’s go get the nurse.”

And then the nurse came in, made her way through, and she went to my mother and she took the pulse, and then she crossed her hands in front of her and said, “She’s gone.”

And when she said that, that silence, it just erupted, erupted with sobs, everybody, everybody, the babies, them. From the babies to my grandparents, everybody was just kind of like all at once. It’s almost as if someone just turned on the radio and it was a full blast of all this sobbing and crying. It just hit all at once for everybody.

And me too, even though at that time I didn’t really cry. I remember putting my head down on my mother’s — I had my hand on her arms, and I put my head down like this [indicating], and I wasn’t crying, but I was incredibly moved. I was just so shut down. I had already begun shutting down since that afternoon when I was on the way to pick up my brothers, and she passed away around 8:00 o’clock at night, so five, six hours, something like that. I was already
MORRISSEY: Well, you were the big brother.

VARGAS: Oh, that too.

MORRISSEY: I’m sure that was — well, I don’t know. Was that part of it, you think?

VARGAS: Kind of, kind of, because I did feel the pressure in those years being known as grandson, her oldest son and the oldest grandson. I did feel that pressure from my family. They didn’t mean it or anything like that. It was just that that’s how we were raised. You’re the oldest son. You’re the oldest grandson. You set the example, that kind of stuff. That all played a part of it. Big brother, all that stuff.

MORRISSEY: Your anger.

VARGAS: The anger, the shock, all of it. So I didn’t really cry then. I cried a little bit.

So that was that night. And it was so strange. It was so surreal.

I’m sorry, Marilyn. I know you had some situations this past holiday season with family and everything.

MORRISSEY: I lost my mom five years ago. My heart was broken.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, it does. It breaks your heart. It’s beyond that. It just breaks you. I remember I didn’t even want to leave. She was no longer with us, and we stayed there late, late. I don’t think I actually even left that place until 2:00-something in the morning, hours after.

MORRISSEY: Well, I could see why you wouldn’t want to leave.

VARGAS: Yeah, and different members of my family, they all left and everything else, and at the end of it, around 2:00 o’clock in the morning, there were about ten of us still there. We stayed until the folks came in to take my mother to the funeral home. That’s why we were there so late, also. And so they showed up and they...
took her, but it didn’t seem like that long, though. You know, there’s always this thing where you’re sitting down waiting for something to happen. You’re sitting looking at your clock, and it’s like come on, already. But that was not one of those moments. We probably could have been there another eight hours, and it would have felt just like a moment.

MORRISSEY: So hard, so hard.

VARGAS: Yeah, those are hard times.

And she was the last one to go. My stepfather had already passed away that previous November; and his brother, that previous April. April of 1994; November of 1994; and my mother, August of 1995. Almost a year later is when she passed away, but not exactly a year, but she was the last one of that group to go.

And at that point, when they were alive, I remember I used to take my mother and my stepfather — my stepfather only went once or twice — to the Bering Support Group on Wednesday nights. They have a Potluck Support Group, and we used to —

MORRISSEY: Bering?

VARGAS: Yeah, Bering.

When we first found out about my mother living with HIV, it’s been about 1989 or 1990. First we found out about my stepfather. I remember seeing him — the second time, I remember seeing him when I got back for Christmas break. After I was voted dorm mom and dad, I came home for Christmas and I saw him, and he looked a lot thinner than what I remembered. And I remember talking to my mom about that. She says, “I don’t know. We went to the doctor, and first we
were thinking it was cancer, and they’re doing all kinds of tests. They can’t figure out what’s wrong.”

They had talks about the possibility of HIV. She knew a little bit about his history. His history was very colorful. I think he was a Hare Krishna for a while. I think he mentioned it once about he used intravenous drugs. But he also had relationships with men at some point in his life, and so I remember my mom talking about, you know, “But the doctors keep on saying that — no.”

MORRISSEY: They were testing him?

VARGAS: But they never tested him.

MORRISSEY: Because he was heterosexual?

VARGAS: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And married to a woman.

VARGAS: With three kids. And basically, we weren’t his kids, but that’s what the doctors saw. And they actually met in a church, even, too, so that’s part of their story too. Some of the doctors then, they never thought —

MORRISSEY: It didn’t occur to them.

VARGAS: No. My mom even mentioned that we asked the doctor maybe what about HIV, and the doctor said, “Oh, no.”

And back then, we didn’t even know so much about the test. We just figured back then, doctors knew. At least in my family, that’s what we thought. And they said, “Well, they said no, so I guess not.”

But I think at one point they insisted once of the doctor, “Please, go ahead and test him for HIV. Test him for everything,” and they did, and that was when they found out.
And so when they found out, that’s when they talked to me, and it was only me at that point. My mother and my stepfather spoke to me about that. They both told me about my stepfather being positive and having AIDS. And of course, in my mind — I’m getting a headache just thinking about it. That’s because of the emotions too. My first thought was, well, what about her?

And my mother said, “I want to get tested and find out too.”

I said, “Okay.”

And so we went to the Montrose Clinic on Richmond, when it was on Richmond. It was pretty soon within that week that we found out that about him being positive, and that’s within the seven-day period in that period we had gone already to get tested with my mom, and then we had to go back for results two weeks later. That’s back in those days.

And so we went back, and I went with my mother, and my stepfather was with us, and I was waiting in that waiting room when they took my mother to the back. I had seen them come out and ask for different people and go to the back. Back out 15, 20 minutes, something, 30 minutes later. And when I went with my mom, they called her name, they took her to the back.

15, 20, 30 minutes passed, about an hour passed, and that’s when I started thinking this is not going well. But I sat there and I waited. When my mother came out from the back, she was coming around the corner, she was smiling, but I recognized that smile. I recognized this is Mom’s fake smile. This is her strong-face smile, but I went with it. Here we are in public. I went with it. So I didn’t even ask her how she was doing.

I said, “Okay. Are we all done?”
She didn’t say a word.

I said, “I’ll drive,” and I got the keys, and we were walking out. We got out to the car, and I couldn’t help it anymore. We got out to the car. There were only a couple of cars in the parking lot at that point. We got out to the car, and I was getting the keys and going around, walking to the front of the car to go to the driver’s side. I had already unlocked the passenger’s side, but she hadn’t gotten in, and I kind of stopped at the front of the car, and then I came back. And then that’s when I asked her. I said, “What did they say?”

And she still couldn’t say it. She just sat there, and she didn’t answer.

I said, “Mom, it’s okay.”

And she just went [indicating].

“Does that mean yes, you have HIV?”

And she just nodded her head again, and then she started crying. And so I gave her a hug. I didn’t really cry then either. I gave her a hug, and I kissed her. I told her it was going to be okay. I don’t know how long we were out there standing by the car, but at one point, someone came back out because I was still there, and they ushered us to the side of the building, and that’s where we met Secret Henderson, who was the first person my mother ever told who wasn’t family that she was positive. She already knew. That was her job then. Back then Secret Henderson basically helped folks come to grips with their diagnosis.

MORRISSEY: Secret?

VARGAS: Yeah, that was her name, Secret Henderson. And she’s still around, I think. I ran into her just maybe a decade ago. I was at some conference around HIV, and she was there. They asked her to say a little bit about the criminal justice
system and HIV, and introduced Secret Henderson. And I remember looking at the agenda, and they said, “And so-and-so, Secret Henderson is going to tell us a little about” — and I just bolted up like that [indicating], and it was her. You know, it was her. Secret Henderson was pretty old back then, and even here it was a decade later or maybe a little bit more, and she was still around, even older.

MORRISSEY: Right. Did she work for an agency or —

VARGAS: Well, back then, I think she worked for Montrose Clinic. And then she ended up working for the Harris County Jail system. She was helping folks living with HIV that were incarcerated. What she’s doing now, I don’t know. I’m not even sure she’s still alive, but she’s a — there’s another person we need to try to find and get some talking to. African-American woman, wonderful spirit. She would be nice to talk to. That’s a name we need to do. And Secret basically really was really comforting, knew everything right to say, and said it in a way that was just perfect. My mother was still upset and everything, and I can’t say that she left feeling hopeful, but she was able to get through the rest of the night, yeah.

MORRISSEY: And your stepfather was with you?

VARGAS: He was with us. He was quiet the entire time. When he and I spoke — we went to dinner once and my mother went to the restroom, and that’s when we spoke for a little bit, because I had to tell him I don’t blame him for what happened, but I had to warn him too. That’s not the case with the rest of the family, for a lot of folks in our family. I had to warn him about that. With me, because I’d known so many folks that had passed previously, I’d seen the kind of stuff how HIV affected them. Today we say stigma. Back then, we were just —
what we called it back then. But we saw how it kept them quiet, silent, ostracized from their families, all that stuff, and how people didn’t want to share that they had HIV for fear of being fired or something and people not wanting to talk to them anymore.

And so I’d seen that already for a few years, and I knew what my mother had told me about them trying to find out what was wrong with him. There were members of my family who thought he must have known. There’s no way he could not have known, and I remember sharing with them there are a lot of people who are living with HIV and don’t even know it. Why is it so hard to believe that he was one of them? And so I said, “The only thing I keep on thinking is that he may have suspected. But known? No, I don’t think so.” I do believe that he may have suspected, for sure, because he knows his life history. It’s always a possibility, given some of the things he did when he was younger. But to know, no, that was not it. Some of my family members still think that to this day; that he must have known. I’m not going to argue that point anymore. I’m sure if they were being interviewed, it would be a totally different story.

MORRISSEY: Well, this is your story. Well, that was hard stuff. Let’s take a break.

VARGAS: Yeah, I don’t mind breaking now, because I have a headache now.

MORRISSEY: All right, yeah.

VARGAS: It’s all that holding back emotions.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, time to take a break for sure.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

[INTERVIEW RECESSED UNTIL MARCH 12, 2016]

MORRISSEY: This is Part 2 of an interview with Steven Vargas.
And Steven, when we stopped the other night, we were at the point where your mom had just passed away and how really crummy you felt, anger, sadness. You described the hospice with all of your family in the room and lots of sobs and how you stayed with your mom for a long time afterwards until the funeral home. You were glad the funeral home took a while to come so you could be with your mom.

VARGAS: Yeah, had they not come and picked her up, I keep on thinking that it’s one of those situations where the nurses or doctors would have had to come in and tell us that we’re going to have to do something now, because it was hard for me to pull myself away from being at her side. Even after she was gone, it was hard for me to just leave the side of the bed, just step away from the bed. I just couldn’t do it. I was standing there for hours.

But when the funeral folks arrived and everything, it made it easier for us because they were going to have to take her now, and so that was kind of like — I don’t want to say forced natural, but it made it easiest for us to get up and go ahead and leave. And so even after they took her out of the room, we lingered a little bit and slowly started gathering things, the pictures of the family and things, and walking out.

At that point that morning, that late, I think there were only about five or six of us, my family members, are still there, and everyone else had already gone and left because like I said, I think she passed around 8:00 o’clock on August 9th, I think, and so at 2:00 o’clock in the morning, we’re leaving.

And I went out to the car and I sat in the car, and it just felt strange, that strange feeling you get for folks who have lost parents, one or both of them.
There is just a strange sense of disconnectedness from the world, and I remember sitting in my car at the time and thinking to myself, am I going to feel like this for the rest of my life? Is this what people feel like when they lose their parents? Was it kind of an intangible connection to the rest of the world, just having them here? Now that they’re not, there’s nothing to tether you? Yeah, that’s what it felt like to me.

And I remember sitting in the car, and I remember my grandparents were still alive. My grandmother was there, and she was being driven home by my uncle. They had pulled out, and then they came up and parked next to me, and they asked me if I wanted to go to their place and not be alone, but I really wanted to be alone. I wanted to be.

And I said, “No, I’m fine. I’m ready to go home. I’m going to go home,” and I went home. It was an apartment on Colquitt, at the corner of Colquitt and McDuffie. The Takara Apartments is where I lived at the time. And so I went home. I still hadn’t really cried. I parked, and again I sat in the parking lot for a while before I got up and went into my apartment. It was just a strange feeling of — what was it? I didn’t even want to even go into the apartment. I didn’t want to experience the world — everything that had been experienced on a daily basis, parking my car, going to the apartment, doing all this stuff, I didn’t want to experience that because in my mind I kept on thinking it’s all different now, and I didn’t want the difference. And experiencing it means just walking into the world kind of without her now. That’s what it was like, so I was really hesitant to do anything.

But I went to the apartment, closed the door, and I just stood there in the
middle of my living room, just stood there, just thinking. Didn’t sit, didn’t venture into the bedroom or even take my keys out or put my wallet away, nothing. I just stood there in the middle of the living room, and then I started getting angry again.

And I’ve never really done anything like this before, but I got so angry, I picked up a chair and I just threw it down on the ground, and it broke into a number of pieces. It didn’t really make me feel better. I was a little disappointed that I did that. I said, “Oh, I broke my furniture now.”

And I remember after that, I just went to my bedroom and I went to bed, and I fell asleep pretty soundly, pretty quickly. I remember that. I remember just getting into bed and being upset, and before I knew it, I was asleep and waking up the next day. The next thing I know, I’m waking up because there’s sunlight coming through the window. It’s morning now. I had to go on with the rest of the day.

I called work and told them I wasn’t going to be coming in, and I told them what happened. And at the time, where I was working, they were very supportive where I worked at, Detering Book Gallery. They were very, very supportive. They were very aware of everything I was going through. I shared everything with them, and they allowed me sometimes to leave work a little early and go to take care of my mother.

I even had a second job at the time. My income from the Gallery was for me, and my second job at an answering service, all that money went to my mom to help them with some bills and everything. And so sometimes they were, again, very supportive sometimes. That second job, I’d be out there until sometimes
midnight or 2:00 o’clock in the morning and sleep in a little bit and come in late. They were fine with that.

And so yeah, it was a very good place to be working at that point in my life, because I had already been working there a little bit, at least four or five years, before all this happened.

MORRISSEY: So they knew you.

VARGAS: No, no, no. Wait a minute. No, no, no. I think I started working there in 1991 or 1992, yeah, but they were very supportive, yeah.

When it comes to how long they were living with HIV, my stepfather’s brother, I remember him mentioning that he thought he’s been living with HIV for about 14 years, before he passed away. That wasn’t the case with my stepfather and my mother. It feels like they, almost as soon as they found out they have HIV, within three or four years, they were gone. When I look at it, it’s more like five or six years, but still, it just seemed like it was really quick that they were gone, so that was kind of disturbing.

MORRISSEY: And then at the same time, you’d been losing friends?

VARGAS: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: Talk about the attitude of young gay men that you spoke about in the pre-interview.

VARGAS: Oh, god. Well, I lived in Montrose, kind of the Gay Central in Houston. And it didn’t matter if you were gay or not; if you lived in the neighborhood, you knew of someone that was dying from HIV, dying from AIDS. You knew somebody. And at the same time, if you were gay and a young gay man, there was so much fear about — you wanted to use condoms, you used condoms, but
not always. And there was always this sense of fear that, you know, almost anything we did, we could end up getting HIV, because everywhere we looked, someone looked like they had HIV. They were really skinny or sometimes still had KS [Kaposi sarcoma]. You could see splotches. And so it just felt like it was all around us, and we knew that not everyone who has HIV, when they first acquire it, looks like they’re getting sick or anything like that, so you could be with somebody who had HIV and they may not even know it, and you certainly don’t know it. It was just always very — it felt like it was Russian roulette every time you went out and hooked up with somebody. That’s what it felt like.

MORRISSEY: People weren’t being tested? They weren’t going to get tested?

VARGAS: Montrose Clinic was open on Richmond, and that was the place that I know a lot of people used to go to get complete STI [sexually transmitted infection] screenings, including being tested for HIV, but that was about the only place that I knew of. There may have been others. I know now that there are organizations like AVES [Amigos Volunteers in Education and Services] and Over the Hill that specialize in different populations, Latinos or African-American community, but all I knew of in Montrose was the Montrose Clinic, yeah, and that’s where people would go for everything, everything. A little burning sensation, you’d go to Montrose Clinic. Itching, and you’d go to Montrose Clinic. And so that’s just where everybody went, including for HIV testing. That’s where we eventually went with my mother too so she could get tested, yeah.

MORRISSEY: When you talk about the fear, understandably, every time you would hook up —

VARGAS: And I didn’t hook up much back then. I really didn’t. I didn’t even want to.
I was too depressed, basically, dealing with my parents. That’s basically what it was, and I was not in the mood.

MORRISSEY: Gotcha. But in the pre-interview, you described the mind-set, I’m sure between bouts of fear, that the young men were saying, “We’re all going to get it, so what the heck?”

VARGAS: Yeah, it felt like it was a gay rite of passage, inevitable; that no matter what you did to protect yourself, at some point you’re going to make a mistake, you’re going to slip up, you’re going to forget, or you can get too much caught up in the moment and that could be the time that you acquire HIV. It just felt like back then, that it was an inevitability.

I’ve spoken to some other folks about that, and when I say it that way, they say, “That’s exactly what it felt like.” They’re thinking here we are, we’re doing everything we can to protect ourselves, but we’re not 100 percent. You just felt like that one slipup, or in a year’s time, four or five slipups, that one of those could have led to some kind of an HIV infection. Yeah, it just felt like an inevitability that it was going to happen.

MORRISSEY: Describe the community at the time, within the politics that were going on.

VARGAS: Back then, I wasn’t so much into the politics of what was going on. I was more attuned to what was going on community-wise, but my mother and my stepfather, they were. I originally started taking my mother, and my stepfather went a few times, to the Bering Support Group on Wednesday evenings for their potluck dinners. Those still go on today. And through them, they met a lot of friends, some of whom were much more active politically and would let them
know about different rallies or things that were going on. And my mother would want to participate, and she would. When she was healthier, she did.

I remember two things specifically. She wanted to go to the Republican National Convention with some protestors.


VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, she wanted to go to that. And I did talk her out of it, because she was already having problems getting up and down stairs, and I just kept on thinking no, no.

MORRISSEY: In a crowd?

VARGAS: Yeah. And I’m sure she could have held her own and been fine. I just was not certain. I just kept on thinking you might have to stand in lines just to get in for one time. You’re going to get tired. That’s what I was mainly concerned about. I was always afraid of her pushing herself. Just like my uncle, when he was visiting all his friends in the hospital that one month when three of them passed away, that conversation we had about, you know, “I’m really concerned about you spending all this time in these hospitals, in and out.” Just visiting friends, I was concerned that he would pick up something from one of the hospitalized patients.

The same thing with my mother. My mother loved her grandchildren. She had two before she passed away, and she always wanted to spend time with her grandchildren, hugging and kissing. And for me back then, kids were just like germs with legs.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, they still are, I think.

VARGAS: I was like, “No, no. Wipe them down or something.” I was that bad about it
sometimes. I really was, Mar. I must have been a terror.

   Like, “No, you can’t hug your grandma. Go wash up first, and then she’ll hug you.”

   The other thing I remember, not just the inevitability of them going, I remember the other one was, at one point in Galveston there was a measure by the City Council, and I can’t remember what year it was, it wasn’t in the early 1990s, where they wanted to quarantine folks living with HIV on The Island, in a particular part of town or something.

MORRISSEY: I remember that.

VARGAS: Do you remember that?

   Well, they did go to that one, and I remember I went with them. I wanted to talk them out of that one too, but I could already tell that was not going to work, they were going to go, so I was going to go with them. And I went with them, and I basically sat in the car. My stepfather was almost arrested. My mother, I don’t think she was. She wasn’t arrested. But I remember my stepfather was there with a whole group of folks, and at one point he had to step away because he was getting pretty angry. And I remember because he was getting angry and emotional and loud and everything, he was also having some problems breathing, so I remember we pulled him off to the side and brought him back to the car and sat down. And I don’t know how long we were there, not even three hours, I don’t think, maybe four, but I remember he was already in the car after about almost that third — getting into that third hour, he was in the car with the AC on so he could breathe more easily and everything else.

   Then I was able to convince him at that point that we should probably go.
“We can go now, because you’re already” — I had mixed emotions about their involvement. I was proud of the fact that they were standing up not just for themselves, but with their friends, for each other and for others who weren’t there. I was very proud of them for that, but I was also — I was just scared. I was just scared that this was another pressure, another stress; that we needed to minimize or learn how to deal with stress, not bring more stress. So that was the thing, so I just had so many mixed emotions about it.

My mother got to the point where she couldn’t be as active doing that, being active that way. And she never really wrote to Congressmen or anything like that. She would phone, though. She would phone and call and speak to their staff. Whenever they had big phone-ins and stuff like that, she would do that.

I remember once, Paul Broussard, that was — this was the very first time that I ever did any activism myself. Paul Broussard, who was murdered.

MORRISSEY: Yes, terrible. Did you know him?

VARGAS: I didn’t know him. I didn’t know him. I wasn’t really going out that much in those days. Even though I was of age and everything, I just — again, I was not in the right frame of mind, the mood, or anything like that.

I remember when he was murdered, there was a huge protest. I was working at Detering Book Gallery. My boyfriend at the time was working at Half Price Books. And we had both just gotten home from work, and my mother called, and somehow she had gotten wind from some of her friends there was going to be a huge protest at Westheimer and Montrose, and she wanted to let me know so I could go.

And then we were talking a little bit, and she said, “So are you going to
I said, “No, Mom. Bill and I just got home. We’re tired. We’re going to rest. We’re going to watch it on TV. For sure they’ll have it on TV. We support that. Yeah, we’ll support.”

And it was not the right thing to say, because she wasn’t really angry, but she was curt, she was passionate about how I need to be there. “You need to be there.” She just reminded me that — and it still kind of gets me to this day, sometimes, because I had that kind of support and I take it for granted so much back then. But she reminded me that I can go there, stand there, and if there are TV cameras, I have nothing to fear. If it was on the evening news and I’m there, my face is splattered all over the news, I’m not going to get fired from work. I’m not going to be disowned by my family. My friends aren’t going to ostracize me. Everyone knows me for who I am as a gay man, supports me. It means nothing to them that way, so I am free, more free than many other people to do this.

MORRISSEY: Wise woman.

VARGAS: And because of that, I needed to be there.

MORRISSEY: Well, I guess that got you going.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. So I did go, and I remember about after I got off the phone, she said, “Let me talk to Bill.”

Started with him, same nudging.

And so we both went, and it was the very first protest I ever went on my own, not along with my parents, and it was an empowering moment. It was a powerful thing to be there with all these folks trying to make it known that what was going on was not okay.
I remember at one point Ray Hill was there making a ruckus like he normally does and proudly so. At one point they had a policeman and a horseman said we couldn’t be blocking the streets like that. We were at Westheimer and Montrose. We could not block the streets. And I don’t know who started it, but at one point someone said, “We’re not blocking the streets. We’re crossing streets across the streets.” And so all these people that were there, we were crossing streets and crossing the streets and just making one big square, an unbroken line of people, one big square of crossing the street, just walking not in a circle, but just in crossing the streets, so we weren’t blocking traffic. We were just crossing streets. It just takes us all a while to get over to the other side.

MORRISSEY: Did you cross the street?

VARGAS: Yes, I was part of the group, yeah, because I think we all kind of did. If you were on the side of the sidewalk, you were walking towards the corner so you can cross the street with everybody else and be part of that big flow of people crossing the street. I don’t know how long we did that. It wasn’t even 10, 15 minutes before they came in again and said we couldn’t do that either.

But yeah, that was a good moment, and I remember calling my mom and telling her what we did. And I said, “Oh, I’m an activist just like you-all now,” and she was just teasing me.

And she still used to tease me about that kind of stuff, and she said, “Gay activist. You’ve been arrested.” In her mind, you’re not an activist until you’ve been arrested. But I’ve never been arrested, still.

MORRISSEY: Have you been taken in?

VARGAS: Not even taken in, no.
MORRISSEY: That’s good.

VARGAS: Nothing like that, ever. My brothers used to say I must have some kind of cop repellant or something, because I’ve been with them before where I almost ran a policeman not off the freeway, but he ended up having to exit because I didn’t let him in. I didn’t even see him, and all he did was flip me off.

MORRISSEY: You got off light.

VARGAS: Yeah, I know, exactly. And there was another one that was doing traffic, and I kind of went around him and I almost hit him, and he just gave me a look and moved me on, and I just kept on going. My brothers kept on thinking, “That wouldn’t have happened to us,” so I don’t know. So that was that.

MORRISSEY: You lose three important people, very important people, in a short span of time, you’re HIV positive, you haven’t told your family, the people you need the most but you were concerned about them and what they were going through with the loss too.

So about a year after your mom’s death, you told your family?

VARGAS: Yeah, it was about a year after, that I went ahead and told — who did I tell first? I don’t even remember anymore, Mar. I’m not sure if it was friends or family. At that point, I was single still, but I really don’t remember who it is I told first.

Oh, well, it wasn’t even friends or family, really. That’s probably why I had no memory. I’m not remembering it right, because it wasn’t friends or family that I told first. When I first started trying to figure out that I wanted to tell my family and my friends, I wanted to kind of practice. I don’t know if that makes any sense, but I kind of wanted to practice. And I kept on thinking to myself,
“Well, god, with whom do you practice telling?”

Let’s see. After my mother passed away, I was depressed during that whole period. I think I was depressed for, like, five or six years while they were — they were alive for five or six years of their lives, I was still kind of depressed. But after they passed away, I was still — what it was, I was grieving.

After a couple of weeks, we were still in August, a friend of mine said that I had to go out with him. He said, “You need to go out. You need to come out of it,” because I was just staying in my apartment. I didn’t even go to work for a couple of weeks then either. And then after those couple of weeks, I kept on thinking that they must have, like, gotten together and planned an intervention or something like that, because it seemed like after a couple of weeks, everybody was trying to make contact and get me to do something, come back to work, go out with us over here, to go out with us to JR’s.

MORRISSEY: Worried about you.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. And I still was not really ready, but I did go out with a friend of mine to JR’s, and I wasn’t really ready, because I remember going into JR’s and I kind of didn’t want to be there, but I also felt like I wanted to be with my friends. I did want to be with them, and this was where they were, and this was where they wanted to be, but I didn’t want to be in the bar, but I went with them anyway, and I was in the bar, and I was uncomfortable.

I remember at one point I was standing at the bar with a couple of my friends who were to my right, and they were kind of talking, waiting for the guy to come over so we can give our drink order, and someone just kind of brushed up against me as they were walking by, you know, walking back to the back of the
bar and everything. They just kind of brushed up against me, and I jumped when they did. I jumped. And then some of my friends said, “Are you okay?”

I said, “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, fine.”

But I realize now that that was kind of dealing with PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] there. And I remember, after that I was really self-conscious, then, after that, and I kind of remember sitting with my elbows and shoulders pulled in like this [indicating] at the bar. Where before I was kind of leaning and talking, all of a sudden I brought my elbows in and was kind of making myself as small as I could at the bar. And I didn’t stay long.

After that, I said I’m going to have to go home. I have to go, because when that person brushed up against me, not only did I jump and everything, but it was just — I don’t know what happened, but I just felt like I was just going to break down in tears. And so I was there, made myself small and everything, and after a little bit, I just set — and I don’t even think I finished my drink, because at one point it came out, “I feel like I just came out and took a couple of swigs.”

And I said, “I need to go home,” and one of my friends gave me a ride home.

And I remember, when we were in the car and everything, I kind of sobbed a little bit and said, “I’m really sorry. I do want to hang out. I can’t right now,” and I got home.

And I got home, and that’s when I cried. And it must have been three weeks, three to four weeks after my mother passed away, and that’s when I was at home and I started crying and I could not stop. I don’t know how long I was there. I wasn’t even sitting on my couch. I was sitting on the floor, leaning
against my couch, with my legs underneath the coffee table, and I was just bawling. I just could not stop.

And I remember thinking to myself, if I get to the point where I can’t breathe, I need to have the phone next to me. I remember seeing the phone up on the counter and everything. I kept looking at it. “I need to get the phone, just in case.” But I didn’t move, and I calmed myself down, and after that, then I went to bed, just cried myself to sleep that night, but I think I was just crying for hours. It just felt like hours.

MORRISSEY: It must have felt good at some level.

VARGAS: It did. It did. At some level, it did.

MORRISSEY: Not to minimize your sadness and everything else.

VARGAS: No, but that’s the thing about it. It was incredibly sad, but it felt good to just finally let it all out. I just remember kind of thinking to myself, “God, all it took was just one person just to brush up against me, and I’m a wreck.”

I remember telling a friend of mine about that too. He says, “That’s what it feels like for me.”

I want to be around everybody. It’s like I want to be around everybody, but I don’t want any attention. While everyone is doing everything, I want to be there in the corner and just being there and seeing everybody. I just don’t want any attention. I just feel like if you can just give me a hug, I’m going to crumble into all these little pieces and cry and all this mess.

MORRISSEY: Fall apart.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. And you know, today, I think some people know that I like to give backrubs and back scratches and I hug and I always used to also, but there
was that period there in my life where I couldn’t even be touched. I was just
afraid I would just fall apart, yeah.

MORRISSEY: But then you eventually did tell your family about your status?

VARGAS: Yeah. I started practicing by telling folks who I knew, met in bars and stuff
like that. When I started going out with my friends, I started practicing by telling
them, because it was a year after, about a year. And so by September and
October, I was going out with my friends and feeling a lot more comfortable, still
a little trauma there, and so just folks that I knew from the bars. I didn’t have
their phone numbers. I knew them by face. I knew their first names because I’d
see them and maybe hang out and everything with the rest of our friends. But just
folks like that, that’s who I started telling that I had HIV.

I’m not sure if this is evil or not, but like I said, I wasn’t really ready for
relationships or anything. I wasn’t ready for anything like that then, but I
remember when I felt like someone was trying to get a bit more close, that would
be the first thing I did, was just tell them I had HIV. And from my perspective, I
felt like because I really wasn’t ready for a relationship, but I felt like that would
be — by doing that, either we’ll see how good a friend they really want to be or if
they’re just going to bolt. And a lot of them bolted, but some of them were still
there for me, and that was nice. And then some of them, we’re still friends today.

But that’s how I started telling folks. I started telling folks first to try to
head people off at the pass in case they wanted to get more serious, thinking it
might scare them away, but it also served as a practice point for me to actually say
I had HIV. So that’s how I started. That’s how I started doing that. In some
ways, it kind of backfires a little bit because folks you don’t really know that well,
they’re just folks you know at a bar, and you don’t really know how trustworthy they are and if they’re going to keep a secret or not.

And I remember some other folks — somehow someone else found out I had HIV. It didn’t bother me that they found out I had HIV. I was just curious about how the hell did they find out? I don’t remember ever telling them. And then I thought to myself, maybe it’s just one of my practice sessions, but I still don’t know, to this day.

And then by the time my birthday came around in 1996, that’s when my cousins and my brothers took me out to eat, and that’s when I, for my birthday, after we had our fun and everything, on the way home was when I told my brother. My brother Ronny was the first one I told, and I told my cousins, my cousin Tish, my cousin Sandra, and I told them that they can feel free to tell the rest of the family. “I’ll be telling folks too, but don’t put yourself in an uncomfortable position thinking that you’re withholding information. Or if you feel like telling my aunt, your mom, go ahead, you know, do,” because it was fine by me. And I wasn’t sure if I could go to everyone in my family. We’re a big family.

So that’s kind of how it came out. It was just about a year after I found out, and after my birthday dinner on March 19th, 1996 was when I started telling family.

MORRISSEY: And at the same time that you’re coming out about your HIV status with your family, is that also the beginning of the dark period you described?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, because by that point, it had been, I don’t know, August, September, October, November, that’s it, December, January, so it had been eight
months, almost nine months, since my mother had passed away. I was still
grieving, but I was already moving through it when — one of the things about
growing up with my parents, some things were annoying for me, but I appreciate
them now.

I remember once going out, when my parents were still alive and my uncle
was still alive, going out with some friends, and we went to JR’s. We walked into
JR’s, and I heard my mother’s laughter, and I looked, and she was way back —
there was a pool table in the back, before you get to the bar at the wayback, and
she was back there playing pool with my uncle, my stepfather, and some of their
friends. And I remember telling my friends that I had gone there with, I said,
“Let’s go to another bar.”

Growing up, even when I was 21, I didn’t feel as comfortable going out
when they were alive. I don’t know. It was like, “Honey, you’re ruining my
groove here.” So I hardly ever went out, and even when I went out with my
friends after my mother passed away, and she was the last of those three to pass
away, even when I went out with my friends, I was too skittish initially, but after
a while, going out every once in a while, I got more comfortable.

The dark period started because I was out with a friend at an after-hours
club, and I was still depressed. I was trying to have a good time and everything,
but I remember being in my apartment once before going out and I couldn’t even
remember the last time I smiled. I couldn’t remember how it felt to smile. And I
remember standing in front of my mirror, thinking. I said, “Well, maybe this is
why some of these guys keep on approaching me. They think I’m some dark,
serious person.”
MORRISSEY: Mysterious.

VARGAS: Mysterious, serious person, and I’m really not. I just came across that way back then. And I remember sitting in front of my mirror, trying to make myself smile and not feel silly or foolish about it, and I remember just standing there making myself smile in front of the mirror, and even the sensation of the smiling felt weird. It didn’t feel natural. I remember even going and putting my hands and going like this [indicating], trying to lean down and put pressure on my cheeks with my knuckles to kind of like simulate a smile and see what it felt like again, so yeah.

But I went out with this friend, and we went out, and we ended up at an after-hours club, and that was the first place I ever did cocaine. Went to the restroom or something, and then he said, “Well, this guy gave me some ’caine. Do you want to do some cocaine?”

And I said, “Well, I’ve never done that.” I’d do that. And I said, ”Well, I know you snort it, but I’m not going to snort it off this toilet seat.”

And he said, “Oh, no,” and he got his little keychain, and he did some and I did some, and then we went back out. And like I said, that was the first time I had ever done that. We went back out and started dancing, and we were dancing, and I started smiling and having a good time. I remember, it was some disco song that was playing. It may have been Sylvester. Gosh, it was like one of those throwback nights. “Mighty Real,” it may have been. I think that’s it. It was one of those songs that was playing, and I remembered my mother used to go out with some of her friends that were lesbians to this bar called The Copa, which was at the corner of Richmond and Kirby, I think, and she used to go out dancing with
them there, and I remember here I was at this club, really late, dancing, on cocaine, and having a good time, and what was popping in my mind was wow, Mom probably danced to this song at The Copa. Here I am dancing, looking around and seeing all these other people having a good time, smiling, dancing.

I started smiling. I started dancing, and I had a great time that night. It was artificially induced because of drugs, but that was the beginning of that dark period for me because after that, whenever I’d go out, if someone had some kind of a drug or something like that, then I would probably do it. I did it, either whether it was cocaine or crystal meth. I did it kind of like to bring in an artificial kind of being normal and not sad, and have fun again.

And so when that began, that was the start of an addiction. And it got pretty bad. It did get pretty bad. Some of my friends during that period, when I would tell them that, you know, “I need to start pulling away from this. This is getting pretty bad. I’m doing this every weekend now. It’s getting pretty bad,” they said, “Oh, you’re not a serious user. You’re just a dabbler, whatever.”

To me, it was just every weekend. And then at one point — but I didn’t stop. And I remember when I was doing cocaine and crystal meth then, and then even smoking pot sometimes too. And then it got to a point where the weekend was no longer just like Friday night and Saturday night. It was Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night, and part of Sunday, so now I had more days of the week on which I was using. At that point when it got to those kind of four days, it was more crystal meth than cocaine, and pot was still there, and alcohol at the bars, all of that stuff. I got really kind of deep into all that. Basically it turned out instead of like just a couple of days or a couple of nights, it was four nights a
week that I was using drugs.

And then it got to the point where it was almost on a daily basis. I say almost because I would try to consciously think to myself, “Wait a minute. This is, like, six days in a row. I better not do this,” and would really not, for at least a day, and then that would be my routine. Then I’d go back to it again. I was still functional, able to keep my job, maintain my job and do a good job at my job, and then it just got to that point where when I wasn’t at work, I was using something. If it wasn’t alcohol or pot or crystal meth — it was one of those three. But if I wasn’t at work, and I got home, it was going to be one of those three things that I picked up and then would go out with some friends and have a good time and everything else.

MORRISSEY: So you were living alone at this time?

VARGAS: I was living alone at that time, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Okay.

VARGAS: And let’s see, I remember telling some friends that, “Hey, if I” — because a friend of mine with whom I used to party a lot, he even commented once about it. “You’re really doing a lot of this stuff, a lot. Every time we get together, you’re really high and everything.”

I said, “Yeah.” I said, “You know what, if you still see me like this, really deep into all this stuff after about six years or so, you have my permission to put me into treatment.”

I said it as a joke, but I remember after about five years or so, six years — no, it was that five-year mark, it was right around 2000 or so, that I remembered thinking to myself, wait a minute. I’ve been drugging and drinking for five years,
getting close to that seven-year mark. I need to start pushing away, pulling away before someone throws me into treatment.

And I did. After I took those first two years between 2000 and 2002, it was basically slowly — I remember once the drug guy came — he was the pot guy and the meth guy. He came knocking on my door once, and I told him no, I’m not going to get anything. I’m not going to get any more. There’s no need to stop by again.

And he reacted as if I was rejecting him personally and everything, and I wasn’t, but I just told him, “No, I need to get away from this stuff, and your visits and everything just means we’re going to get right back into it, and so no, you can’t come into the apartment.”

I remember he had his foot in the door. I said, “I’m going to kick your foot out. I’m going to close this door.” And I said, “Don’t come back again.” And then I suddenly closed the door and I locked it, and he went away.

Of course, I heard from other dealer friends, “Hey, so why did you treat him so rudely?”

And I just told them. I just told them, “I need to get away from all these drugs and everything, and the only way I know of to start is to get away from the drug guy, and so no.”

MORRISSEY: That’s a good starting point.

VARGAS: And I did, and then I started — so yeah, that was basically how I basically started pulling away. And by 2002, I had a couple of years clean, almost a couple of years clean from using any kind of crystal meth or cocaine. I still smoked pot every once in a while, but I didn’t have it around me on a regular basis, and I was
still drinking when I went out to the bars.

2002, then, one weekend, I did end up using crystal meth again. And I remember after that one, I thought to myself, no, I don’t get a reward for being a good boy for a year and a half. I need to get away from this stuff. And then after that, it’s been fine since then.

So I just slowly pulled myself away. I got myself into it pretty quickly and slowly pulled myself out.

MORRISSEY: So did you go to support groups, or you just did it all by yourself?

VARGAS: Well, god, I tried going to a crystal meth support group, and it did not work. Afterwards, I kept on thinking to myself, gosh, you know, it’s probably not a good idea to get a lot of meth heads together, because usually when a lot of meth heads — when you’re using meth, you’re having sex, that kind of thing, so when you mix them all together — and so you have a bunch of gay guys together trying to get off meth, but we’ve only been off of it for maybe a week or so. I think I was off for a little bit longer when I went to that support group, but there are folks who were only off of it for about a week or so, so they’re still kind of gregarious, a little horny and want to make those kinds of connections. That did not work for me.

MORRISSEY: Well, it’s good you knew, then.

VARGAS: Well, after a couple of weeks going to that group and everything and hooking up with one of the guys, I thought to myself, you know, this is not going to work, so I stopped going to that group. And yeah, I was better on my own.

MORRISSEY: Okay. Okay.

VARGAS: When people always talk about their clean dates — so my clean date,
completely clean date now, was October 16th of 2004. That was the last day that I used either cocaine or — that night I used crystal meth and just one bump, and I thought to myself, “No.” I said, “You weren’t going to do this. You’re not going to do this.” But ever since then, yeah, I have my margarita every once in a while.

MORRISSEY: Oh, you do?

VARGAS: That’s it, yeah. Usually on a Friday or Monday night, a margarita with some friends or other.

MORRISSEY: Oh, okay.

VARGAS: Yeah, that’s what it’s been so far.

MORRISSEY: Okay. And then can you talk about when you decided to go to the doctor and —

VARGAS: Oh, yeah. April 19th of 1995 was when I was — my mother was alive during this period, and she thought I was more fulfilled when I was in a relationship. The relationship I was in when we found out that she was positive ended, and part of the reason why it ended was not really because of them, although I think she saw it that way. I was spending a lot of time with my family, taking care of my family, and so right after work I had a second job, and then I’d also go after that sometimes or in the mornings, help them out with some things. On the weekends, I’d be over there. And I remember the boyfriend I had at the time, when we lived together, we had a talk about our relationship, and he didn’t think I was putting as much into our relationship as I had in the past. And like, in my mind, I kept on thinking to myself, well, I’m not, but I think you know the reason why. What the hell?

MORRISSEY: You’ve got a pretty good reason.
VARGAS: But it wasn’t really an ultimatum, but it came across as an ultimatum when he mentioned that, you know, we need to start putting more attention into this relationship, or I’m not sure if we’re going to make it. And just hearing that like that, I thought to myself, no, we’re not going to make it.

MORRISSEY: “Because I don’t have time right now.”

VARGAS: Right, yeah.

MORRISSEY: “I mean, if you can’t wait,” you know.

VARGAS: And that was exactly it.

MORRISSEY: “Get your own distractions.”

VARGAS: Yeah, and that’s exactly how I felt. And we did have a huge fight. It wasn’t like fighting fists or anything, just we did get loud and started yelling at each other. I remember telling him that we’ve been together for four years, this has happened, and I’m going to be there for my family. And I remember telling him that my family is not asking me to choose between them and you. You’re asking me to choose between them and you. I’m going to be choosing the folks who are more able to have me the way I am, and so this is the way I am right now, and if that means that this relationship is over, then I hate that, but I’m okay with that too.

And I’ve kind of always been that way, but that was the point where it really hit me that this is going to challenge the way I’ve always thought of things and everything, and it did challenge it, but I still stuck to the way I’ve always done things, which is, you know, I don’t normally — if I’m being asked to choose between one thing or another, I’m not going to choose the thing that’s asking me to choose, no, because the other half, that other piece, is not asking me to sacrifice
you. I’m not going to sacrifice them for you, no, I’m not doing that. And I’ve always kind of been like that, and I’m still, now.

MORRISSEY: Good way to approach it.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, I think so.

MORRISSEY: And I can’t imagine, especially your family, to —

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, and he knew what was going on. He was there with us and everything. He and I put some money together so I could even buy my mother a car so it would be easier for her to get to and from some appointments when I was working and I couldn’t do it. And maybe that was part of it too, I think, sometimes. Maybe he thought that that was the one thing on the wall that we did together, putting some money to get a car, and he’s just, “Oh, my gosh, how much more is this going to be later on?”

Who knows? I really don’t know, because we did not have that discussion. I’m not going to put that on him.

MORRISSEY: Sure, sure. We’re all doing the best we can.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, so that was that. And so when I went to the doctor — so when I found out in 1995, I was single. So we broke up, and I had my own apartment. That’s when I went to that apartment on Colquitt. And I remember my mother was really sad when I told her that. I didn’t even tell her that we broke up for about a month, and I finally did. It was because I was moving into my new apartment and everything, and I told her I was moving, and she wanted to know what was going on, so I told her. And she was kind of upset when I told her. And I said, “Well, I’m fine, Mom. I’m fine.”

And then that’s when she said something weird about when people get
married, that their priority is their family. And she said when a man and a woman
get married, that the woman in that man’s life is his wife, no longer his mother,
and the main person in his life should be his wife.

And I remember telling her, I said, “So what are you telling me? That I
should have been more considerate for Bill’s position?” And I didn’t even let her
answer that one, because I was not in agreement.

And I told her that. “Because if you’re telling me that I need to be more
sympathetic to Bill’s position, I’m not, Mom. I’m not there.”

And then I went into the whole differences between gay — the male-male
relationships and heterosexual relationships. From my perspective on that one, I
said, you know, “I hear you on that, but we can’t even” — back then, we couldn’t;
we can now. I said, “But we’re not married. We can’t even get married.” To me,
that makes it for folks easier to just get up and walk away if things aren’t working
out, and that’s exactly what we did. “And so I hear what you’re saying. I don’t
think it really applies.” It may have, from her perspective, but in my mind, it
didn’t apply. But that’s when I got this inkling that maybe she was blaming
herself on the end of that relationship and everything, but I didn’t blame her, not
at all.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

MORRISSEY: That sounds like you were right where you wanted to be, helping.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. For that moment and for what I needed to do then, I was right
where I made the choice to be, where I needed to be at that moment. Had
circumstances been different, we may never have had to make that choice, but
that’s what happens. And so with that, I did end up meeting this guy, and we did
date a little bit in January. And in February we went out on Valentine’s Day, and we did have sex, and it was unprotected. And it was two weeks after that that he gave me a call and he had something to tell me, and he had a hard time telling me what it was he had to tell me.

And in my mind, when we were dating for that month and the half and everything, I was very open with him with what I was going through with my parents because I thought to myself, I don’t want to get in a relationship with somebody and then have this other conversation like I just had with Bill. I said, “You need to know that this is my priority right now.” And so we had that discussion. I was very open about it. And we talked about HIV issues and what I was going through with my mom, trying to get her to support groups and everything else, and so I thought I had laid the groundwork to have some pretty open conversations about things.

Well, when he called and had something to tell me and he couldn’t bring himself to tell me, I said, “Okay.” Well, at one point, I just thought let me just throw some things out there and see to which is he going to say yes. And I said, “So you met somebody else?” I don’t think we ever had a talk about being in a monogamous relationship. I was, at that point, I mean, but I wasn’t going to hold it against him if he met somebody else and had sex, because we hadn’t had that talk or anything.

He said, “No.”

And I said, “Oh, okay,” and I just kept on going. I said, “Do you want to break up, or is it not — is there” —

And he said, “No,” and he said all these nice things about the relationship
and me.

And I said, “Well, what is it?” And then I thought, and I stopped, and I said, “Oh.” And then I said, “Do you have HIV?”

And he just said, “Yes.”

And I said, “Okay. So now we know.”

When he said that and everything, we were on the phone, I did get scared, and it was just, “Shut up.” I was scared. But I didn’t react that way. And I said, “Okay. So now we know. So that’s what it is.”

And he said, “Yeah.”

And then we had a much more serious conversation after that. It was just about how I thought I’d lay the groundwork for open and honest conversations about these things. He knows what I’m going through with my parents. What made him feel like he couldn’t tell me? And then a little bit of the anger came out when I was thinking I’m not going to — what did I say to him? I said, “You know, it’s not entirely your responsibility to make sure we have condoms. I should have some condoms too, but I would think that if that’s the situation, that you would have been a bit more mindful about it.”

MORRISSEY: So he knew before you guys —

VARGAS: Yeah, he knew he had HIV beforehand, yeah. And so, at the same time, I kept on thinking to myself — I was trying to think, because my stepfather had already passed away. My mind went back to the conversation I had with my stepfather about how I don’t blame him, and I don’t believe that he knew before he had it, like some of the rest of the family. I just wanted him to know that, because I know he felt horrible that people thought that “he knew ahead of time
and did this deliberately” kind of thing, and he didn’t even try to fight it too often. Sometimes he would say that’s not the case, and then he just stopped trying to fight it.

And so I wanted him to know that, but that conversation that I had with my stepfather came back to me because I had that conversation with him because I knew the power of stigma and the effect it had on keeping people silent because I saw him going through it. At first he was kind of open about it, and then he was just completely silent about it. He didn’t want to tell anybody else. He just had some bad experiences with it. And he lost his job, even. He was a cook. He was a chef.

MORRISSEY: Because of his HIV positive status?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. So he had a lot of things not work out well from revealing his status, and so the effect of stigma. And because of that, that’s why I felt it so important to tell him how it was that I didn’t feel the same way. And so when this guy told me this, and that moment when I was angry and I told him that you could have been more mindful about it, I know we were both responsible for bringing condoms and using condoms, but that thing came up.

And then so as soon as I said that and I heard him kind of sobbing a little bit, I backed off a little bit, and I told him that everything I said, I still hold to it. I think I laid the groundwork. And I think we could have both been more mindful, and I may be wrong in thinking this, but I think he could have been more mindful. I said, “But I don’t blame you, because I know that all these things that we all have a part to play in keeping not just each other safe, but ourselves safe, I didn’t do my part that night, and I accept that.” I said, “I don’t put you 100 percent to
blame for possibly exposing me to HIV.”

And then that conversation, that he had to realize that this doesn’t mean that I have HIV. I might.

And then I asked him how his health was, and it was pretty good, although he — but we ended up breaking up. By the end of the conversation, it was pretty clear we were broken up. I didn’t say I didn’t ever want to see you again or anything like that. I just told him that I’m not sure if I can talk to you anytime soon. I need to think about these things and work through these things. I need to get tested, and so I don’t think I can talk to you right now, but it’s not out of any kind of hatred or anything like that. It’s just that this is just yet another thing — that’s the way I put it. This is just yet another thing I have to add to my list of things I need to be figuring out how to work through, and so I need some time, and that’s how we ended that.

And then on April 19th, I got tested and I was positive. Well, actually, April 19th in 1995, when I got tested, it came back as indeterminate. These days, I know what that means. Back then, I was probably still converting, because I waited about three months before I went, and it wasn’t even three months. It was just shy of three months, even. I just couldn’t wait anymore, because I went, they did the blood draw, and then I had to wait two weeks.

And then when I went back on the 19th, when it came back, they said, “Well, we’re going to need you to get tested again. This one came back, it was indeterminate. But if you come back next month or in a couple of months, we’ll be glad to test you again for free.” And this is at some place off of 610, near the Astrodome, because I didn’t want to go to Montrose Clinic. I had been there with
my mom. I had been there, different places, the HIV service organizations, with my mom, with my stepfather, and I didn’t want to go to those places. I even did volunteer work for AIDS Foundation Houston, for Body Positive, different places, a little bit for Bering, serving food at the pot luck dinner, but I didn’t even want to be in that world and find out about my own HIV status.

So I went to this nondescript — I think it was a City of Houston clinic that did the STI testing, and that’s where I got it done.

And when they said to come back in a month or two, they’d do it for free, I didn’t go back. I didn’t go back until the very next year. I was traveling for work, and I was driving back from California in a van with books, carrying books, thousands and thousands of dollars of books in this van, and between San Antonio and here, Houston, I had a blowout. And with the blowout, I tried to steer into the blowout, but I ended up hitting the guardrail. It was a concrete rail, and the van kind of bounced off of that, and it flipped and it rolled across the highway. It went down a hill, and books were everywhere. And I had a huge — we had all kinds of things flying in that van.

I remember looking out the window, gripping the steering wheel, and it felt like I was inside a washing machine looking out, you know, dirt and grass and glass. I remember when it stopped, the van was right side up, but the passenger door was kind of bent in, and my door was bent. The front windshield was completely gone. It had been shattered somewhere in the rolling. Something in the rolling hit me in the back of the head, and the first thing that caught my mind was, I remember sitting there in pain, but I thought to myself, “I’ve got to get out of this van just in case it explodes.”
And so I remember trying to open my door, and my door wouldn’t open. It was just jammed shut, so I went out the window. And when I went down the front of the van, and I was really dizzy, and I didn’t even realize — I walked up the hill a little bit, because it rolled down onto the feeder road below, and I kind of walked up and tried to get up to the highway to get away from the van, and I sat there.

Someone pulled up and they asked me if I was okay.

And I said, “I don’t know.” I said, “I think so,” because I’d — but the back of my head, I was holding it because it hurt so bad, but I remembered when I pulled my hand away, it was really sticky. And I remember looking, and I could see that it was blood.

And so I said, “Well, I think I’m hurt.”

And they said, “I’m going to call 911,” and he ran to his car and he drove off.

And later on an ambulance came in that took me to the Army base in San Antonio, and they ended up giving me staples in my head. There was a lot of glass in my hair and dirt and glass and grass and everything. And I had contacts on at the time, and one contact was gone and one contact was in but it was really scratchy, and they had to take that out. You know, I was there in the hospital, and that was a very sad day for me because I was there in this hospital the next day, and I had to call somebody to come and get me, and that was — this section is kind of more painful than I thought, Mar.

MORRISSEY: Do you want to take a break?

VARGAS: No.
MORRISSEY: Okay.

VARGAS: I had to call somebody to come and get me from the Army base, and this was, oh, gosh, about nine months after my mother passed away, and so part of me almost instinctually just thought to myself, this isn’t okay. I’ve got to call my parents. And within a split second, also I thought to myself, “Don’t be silly. That’s weird. They’re gone. What are you talking about? Don’t be silly.”

And I couldn’t think of anyone to call after that. I couldn’t think of anyone to call. I had friends. I had family. Again, I didn’t want to call them and tell them, and it was more out of I didn’t want to scare them. I didn’t want to panic them or anything like that. This was before I told them about my HIV status. That was probably another reason why I didn’t want to call them.

And so I ended up calling my boss. I thought that well, I need to call him and let him know what happened. That’s the phone call I’ll make, and that’s the phone call I made.

And my boss came down and he picked me up from San Antonio. And we were driving back in his truck back to Houston, and I started crying, and I told him — his name is Oscar. And I said, “I’m sorry, Oscar.”

I remember he patted me on the shoulder and he said, “It’s okay, kiddo. You’re going to be okay.” And I mean, just by doing — when he did that and everything, I remember just looking out. I was leaning in the passenger seat, kind of leaning against the — I was sleepy too. I was leaned up against the passenger door and I was looking out the window, and I just started crying, not like bawling, just tears started coming down my eyes, and I just thought that the folks I would have normally called in a situation like this, I never really needed to call on them.
for help or anything like that, but at this moment would have been a moment that
I would have called on them, and of course I couldn’t anymore, and it just felt bad
that here the only person I had to call was my boss? Even though they were very
nice and supportive, but it just felt so disconnected. I don’t know, I just felt really
sad about that.

And I got home. He helped me into my apartment. And so I remember I
had that night to myself. I remember the doctor said not to shower that night.
Wait until the next day, something about my stitches or something. Try not to get
my head wet. But I remember when I got in the shower, I tried not to get my head
wet. I was just trying to wash the back of my neck, and I just kept on looking
down at the drain and seeing dirt, like that the water was not quite water, it was
dirt and a little blood, it was a little reddish.

Well, I remember when I finally was able to wash my hair a day later, and
it was very sensitive too, and I had to be very careful with it. I just remember that
when I was doing that, I could feel there was still glass in my hair. It was like as
they say, oh, I can’t rub heavily. I had to be very careful and get some water to
wash that, get that glass out, and dirt, and I remember seeing grass was still there.

So yeah, and it was after that, that my birthday was about a week after
that, a week and a half after that. And I remember calling my brothers a couple of
days later and telling them that I was in a car accident. “I’m fine,” and I was fine.

And he said, “Well, what hit you?”

I told him what happened. I went to the Army base and they did this, they
did that, I’m home now. I said I got some staples in my head. I’ve got to make
an appointment to see the doctor, to go get all that done.
And so my brothers, they were worried a little bit, and so one of my brothers came over and he saw it and he says, “Oh, you’re not that bad.”

And I said, “I know. I just got these stitches.”

He said, “Oh, no, that’s really bad.”

But then my birthday came up, and that was when they took me out for my birthday dinner, and it was that same night that I ended up telling them about the HIV status too. And that was when they all found out. I didn’t go to the doctor until — I think it was sometime closer to June or July. March, April, May. Maybe May, maybe May. It was after the car accident.

And the only reason I went to the doctor was because — the only reason that I ended up even getting into medical care was because my employers, because of workmen’s comp and everything else, they were going to send me to the doctor.

And I told them, I said, “Well, this is my concern about going to the doctor. I think I have HIV. I went and got tested, and they said it was indeterminate. I’m supposed to come back. And so I’m still not sure if I had it.” At that point, I still wasn’t sure if I had HIV. “I’m still not sure if I have HIV, so I just need to let you know that even if I go to the doctor, they may want to do a test. They may find out about that and everything, so I’m not sure if that’s going to affect our insurance rates or anything like that.” And I said, “But I just wanted you-all to know about that.”

They were perfectly fine. They said, “Don’t worry about it. We’ll get you to the doctor,” and they got the doctor who did that workmen’s comp stuff and everything.
And then afterwards, one of my co-workers asked me, she said, “So did you do the HIV test?”

And I said, “No, no, I didn’t. They didn’t even talk about that, so I didn’t even do it.”

And she said, “Well, I think you need to go to a doctor just in case,” and they encouraged me to go to a doctor.

And that’s when I went and saw a doctor here in town, and he — I told him that I’m here for the follow-up care for my accident. And I told him that I think I have HIV. My employers know, but I’ve never really officially been diagnosed. I was told, and I told him what they told me.

He said, “Well, and it’s been over — it’s probably time for you to get tested again, then. It’s about that time. We’ll go ahead and do that.”

And so I think he really talked a little bit about how we’re going to do this so it didn’t come out as a preexisting condition and everything else, and we worked that out. He was very sympathetic and waited until we did that, and I got tested, and it was positive. And I knew it was, but at the same time, until you actually hear a doctor tell you or something like that or see it on a piece of paper, then it’s not really real. And so then, I was positive. And that’s how I got the medical care, was because of that car accident.

MORRISSEY: So then you started getting care?

VARGAS: Yeah. And at the time —

MORRISSEY: Were you taking medication?

VARGAS: Not yet, although the doctor mentioned at the time, we weren’t taking medications. We did some viral loads and everything, and my first viral load was
pretty high, and then when I went for the three-month visit, my viral load had come down to something like 30,000 or something like that from 175,000, and so within a few months it had come down all by itself, with no medications, to about 30,000.

Well, we know that happens now. When you’re first infected, within the first six months or nine months or so, your viral load goes very high. It’s a common — it’s what we see now as an acute infection, and that’s really when you’re most likely to infect other folks, when you’re living with HIV and have no clue you have it and the viral load is really high.

And so my viral load was high, but when I went back to the next appointment, it had already come down to about 30,000. And so he was thinking about some clinical trials that I could participate in. So with the clinical trials, he said, “Well, we’ll discuss that next time. We’ll do another blood draw, and we’ll look and see if you can participate in some clinical trials next time. We’ll have all that information.”

So we did that. I came in the next time, and at that point my viral load was less than 10,000, and then I didn’t qualify for clinical trials because someone had to have a viral load of at least 10,000 or more to participate in some of the clinical trials in which he had a part. And so I didn’t even qualify for the clinical trials, and that’s when he explained to me about some of the medications.

So this would have been probably sometime like August, again.

MORRISSEY: In 1996?

VARGAS: Of 1996. And he explained to me about some of these medications that they’re hearing about; that those are some of the clinical trials we’re thinking
about, so there’s some things coming down the pipe that he thought might be good for me.

And I remember telling him, I said, “I read an article about those and everything.”

He said, “Yeah, and they’re really good. They stopped the clinical trials early because they’re proving to be really effective, and so I want to see if we can start you on those meds.” The concept back then was hit it hard with everything you’ve got, basically, and that’s what he wanted to do.

And I told him no. I told him that no, if my viral load went from 100,000-something to 30,000, to 10,000, with no medications at all, I don’t think I want to take any medications right now. And I told him, my mother and everything, what I saw growing up was folks who lived with HIV who were pretty healthy, at least they came across as pretty healthy, were getting things done in their day, but when they started taking medications is when they started getting sick with the side effects. First it would be side effects from the medications, and then they will start getting sick anyway.

So in my mind, I don’t want to start taking any kind of medications until a point that I start getting sick because of HIV-related situations. If I can still get up and bathe and jog and work out and go to work and everything else, that to me is a testament of how healthy I am with HIV, and I’m not about to start taking any medications that could possibly get me sick with side effects and basically follow my parents’ path. I’m not going to do that.

And he tried pushing a little bit more, but I pushed right back, and finally I just told him, “Okay. The deal is this. The deal is this: If I get to the point where
I have my T cells going down for two separate labs in a row,” which was a six-month period then, “and my viral load is showing a trend to move upwards, then we can have the conversation about medications again. But up to that point, there is no need to even bring it up again.”

And I was with him for five or six years as my doctor, and I was able to not have to take meds because my viral load was way below 10,000. At one point, it was even close to 2,000 to 3,000 or something like that.

MORRISSEY: So this is during the dark period?

VARGAS: This is during the dark period, yeah. And that was the other thing, Mar. I wasn’t heavily using drugs at that point, but I was using them occasionally at that point. And during that period was when it started getting to heavier and heavier drug use, so that entire five or six years, I even told him, and when he did some lab work, he said, “So do you use drugs or anything like that?”

I said, “Oh, yeah. So for this week it was” — and I told him everything, because in my mind, I thought to myself, we all need at least one person with whom we can be completely honest about. It used to be my parents, but they weren’t there. I’m an atheist, and I kept on thinking so I don’t have a priest or anything like that I can be honest with. It’s got to be my doctor. So that was the person that I was honest with about everything, everything.

And so that was the thing that was surprising to me. That was another reason why I started trying to — after that five- or six-year mark, I remember I went to the doctor in that fifth or sixth year and he did another viral load, and my viral load still was below that 10,000 mark, and my T cells were still in that 600, 700 range. I was still pretty healthy. After living, at that point, five or six years
with HIV and doing all these drugs, a mixture of drugs, some of them all at once sometimes, that my body was still so resilient that in spite of all of that, it was still doing really a remarkable job at keeping HIV in check.

And that was another thing. I remember when I got back and I was leaving his office and going down the elevator, I thought to myself, what the hell am I doing? I mean, my body is doing this incredible job with keeping HIV in check, and I’m not really helping it out at all. I’m doing all these things. I’m doing just the opposite.

MORRISSEY: Your wakeup call.

VARGAS: Yeah, and I thought okay, that, and plus I was getting close to that seven years, six years. All those things all at once, that was also part of the picture of why I started trying to get away from the drugs and alcohol. So that too, so yeah.

MORRISSEY: Gotcha. Gotcha.

VARGAS: And I didn’t start taking medications until — I’ve only been taking medications for the last two years, three years, though.

MORRISSEY: Really? Wow.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. Let’s see. So yeah, that gets us closer to where we are, the current period. But those dark periods, that’s what the dark period was. It was a lot of drugs, a lot of sex, and I remember it was almost always protected sex unless I was with other folks that were positive.

I remember I went through this period where I wouldn’t have sex with anybody unless I knew they were positive too. I mean, I’m not going to have sex with somebody that’s not positive. I’m not going to risk it. At least I know you have HIV and I don’t have to risk about possibly giving it to somebody else.
And yeah, I remember some folks being pissed off at me that were negative; that I — what was it? They thought I was being kind of snotty or a snob about it. And I kept on thinking to myself, no. I said, “This is for your protection. What are you talking about?” But whatever, so yeah.

MORRISSEY: Interesting.

VARGAS: So, yeah, yeah. It wasn’t until later that I remember hearing something, that term about bug chasers, folks who were trying to —

MORRISSEY: Oh, really? Is that what you —

VARGAS: It wasn’t until much later that I heard the term. When I started working and helping folks with HIV, then I heard the term bug chasers, and I thought to myself, oh, was that what they were? Those guys that were negative that were upset because I wouldn’t have sex with them, were they bug chasers?

MORRISSEY: Interesting. Is that when the barebacking came back into —

VARGAS: Yeah, for the most part, I guess. Barebacking never went away.

MORRISSEY: Okay. Hey, this is a good time for maybe a little break?

VARGAS: Yes, it is, now.

[A BREAK WAS TAKEN]
Steven Vargas Family Photographs, 1988 - 2012

Ron Vargas, Steven’s brother; Mary Elisa Martinez, Steven’s mother; Steven Vargas. Summer 1988.


Mary Elisa Martinez, Houston Festival, Sam Houston Park, Houston, TX. Early 1990s.
Mary Elisa Martinez, with grandchildren.

Steven Vargas with his mother, Mary Elisa Martinez, at her wedding to her last husband. October 1994.

Steven and his brothers. (L-R) Ron, Carlos, Steven, Robert, and Kenneth. 1994 - 1995

Steven Vargas Family Photographs, 1988 - 2012

Steven with his brothers and sister-in-law. (L-R) Steven, Robert, Idalia (Carlos’ wife), Carlos, and Ron. Winter 2001.

Steven and his brothers (L-R) Kenneth, Steven, Robert, Carlos, and Ron. Early 2000s.
MORRISSEY: Okay, Steven. Now let’s move on to your employment in the field of HIV. Tell me about jobs you’ve had.

VARGAS: Well, let’s see here. I kind of stumbled into work with HIV. Like I said, when my parents were alive, I used to do a lot of volunteer work: Body Positive, AIDS Foundation Houston, a little bit with Bering. And when they passed away, when my mother passed away, I didn’t want to have anything to do with HIV. And then later on when I found out about my HIV status, it kind of brought me back into the HIV world again, but I had had it up to my forehead with anything having to do with HIV, and after my mother passed away I just didn’t want to do anything else. I didn’t do any volunteer work. I completely pulled away from all that.

And I was working at the time, like I said, at that very supportive place, which was Detering Book Gallery, and so I just really just dove into work, and also that was one of those dark periods. But 2004, we were going to be closing the shop in Detering. Detering closed shop in 2004, sometime between March and July. And because of that, basically I had to find a job. I was working there for about 12 years. That was my dream job. I keep on thinking had it not closed down, I’d probably still be there, probably would not be doing the stuff I’ve been doing. I would probably still be there. But because the bookstore closed, I had to find another job.

And so this was probably about February or March, and I was trying to find some employment, and I was having a hard time because again, I hadn’t finished college. I completed high school. I graduated from high school. I didn’t finish college. I got sidetracked taking care of my family, so I didn’t really finish
college, and so I had a hard time finding employment. I was getting unemployment insurance, though.

And so the unemployment, my very first check for the unemployment — I was supposed to apply for three different jobs per week. In one week, I applied for four, and then the following week, I only applied for two, but it was six anyway. And I can’t remember why that was. There was something that happened. I can’t remember what it was. But anyway, I only applied for two. And so I sent that paper work in, and I got a notice from the unemployment, Texas Workforce Commission, saying that I didn’t have enough applications to get the check, my unemployment check. And I remember, and so I called them, because I was thinking to myself, wait a minute. It’s six. It’s just four in one and two in another, it’s still six. Just like they said, all they needed was six every couple of weeks and for me to turn in that paper work, and I did.

So I called them, and it was their mistake, they said. They said, “Oh, no, you’re right. No, we are going to send it. It’s going to be late, though.”

And I was a little bit in a panic, because I was going to count on that to pay my rent, and my rent was not going to be on time. So I called my landlord, and I told him about the situation. I’m not working at where I was, and my first unemployment check is going to be late. I’m not sure how late, but it is going to be late. And I said, but I’m going to see if I can find some financial help from my family or some organization or friends or something.

At that point a friend of mine was working at AIDS Foundation Houston, and I remember he was visiting and we were talking about things, he said, “Well, just come with me when I go to work, because we have a rental assistance
program for people with HIV, and you can just come on in and see if you qualify for rent assistance.”

“Okay. Sure.”

So I went and went through their intake, and I met with Steve Stellenwerf, was the first person. And what was so strange about that is that Steven Stellenwerf was — the first time my mother and I tried to find out anything about HIV and AIDS, we went to AIDS Foundation Houston because it was the only organization to have anything about HIV in its name, so we didn’t know where to go, and we didn’t know what to do. So we thought, let’s just go to this place called AIDS Foundation Houston. They have to be able to tell us something, what we needed to do next, and we did, and the person we met was Steve Stellenwerf. Basically we talked.

My mother was working at State Farm. She had good insurance and everything else. Essentially all they had were support services like the housing programs and everything, but she made too much money to qualify for anything like that. I remember Steven Stellenwerf just asked, he said, “So is there something? Is there anything? What is it that we can help you out with? Is there anything else you need?”

And that’s when we told him. And he said, “Well, you understand that she doesn’t qualify for any kind of help or anything.”

“Well, that’s fine with us. We just came here because we don’t know what to do.”

And he told us about support groups, and that’s how we ended up finding out about the Bering Support Group, and I took my mother there. And back then
in those days, it was a little flipped because our first night at that support group, we walked in, there was a roomful of people in the basement. It’s mainly gay men and some women, some of them with their mothers. So we were there as a gay son who was HIV negative at the time helping his mother that was HIV positive, in a room of gay men that were positive whose mothers were there to support them or other female friends there to support them and help them through this. So it was a little twisted, just a little backwards. So anyway, that was the benefit of Steven Stellenwerf in our lives back in those days.

And that again, as you know, from what we talked about earlier, got my mother connected to other folks and the activism and everything else. And so it was all Steven’s fault.

MORRISSEY: That other Steven.

VARGAS: Yeah, that other Steven, yeah. And so then here I am, there needing help with the rent, and the person that I’m with is Steven Stellenwerf, and I don’t think he remembered me. I explained my situation.

“Oh, yeah, you sure may qualify to get the help and everything else.” And he said, “Well, have you been looking for work?”

And I said, “Yeah. In fact, I applied for a job here at AIDS Foundation Houston back in February.” And this is now, I think, close to June, May or June, and I still haven’t heard back, and so I kept on applying to other places. But that’s what I told him. I said, “Well, yeah, I applied here for a job way back in February, but I never heard anything, so I figured you-all probably filled the position.”

And he said, “Oh, okay. You know, we are looking for folks right now.”
And then I said, “Oh.”

“Would you be interested?”

And I said, "Well, what” —

And he told me what the job was. I asked what it was, and he told me.

And I said, “Well, yeah, I’d like to try that.”

MORRISSEY: What was it?

VARGAS: And it was basically helping people — they called it intakes. Basically, when somebody gets there, help them to complete the paper work and figure out what is it they need and then direct them to the right program that they have there. And so that’s a benefits and resource counselor, BARC. That’s what they called it, yeah. And so that was the job they were offering, so when I got home that night —

[BRIEF INTERRUPTION]

MORRISSEY: So you’re doing intake now.

VARGAS: Yeah. Well, what had happened with that, I got home, and when I got home, I already had a message from them to come in the next day for a job interview. I went there the next day, and I was hired, and I started doing that job, and that’s how I got into doing this work again, yeah. So yeah, I was there as a benefits and resource counselor. I was helping out folks on their first time in.

There was a program called Project LifeRoad, which was a transitional housing program for folks living with HIV. It’s no longer in existence. And I remember at the time, the program manager liked how I dealt with the clients coming in. I dealt with them in a compassionate way. It wasn’t judgmental. He loved that, and he wanted to know if I would be interested in being a case
manager in Project LifeRoad, and I told him no. I remember telling him that I really don’t have any kind of experience along that road at all. I have no real training at all in it either, because he told me that these are folks who are homeless, they may have drug or alcohol issues, they may have mental health issues, and when they’re here with us they already have at least 30 days clean.

And when he told me all this and was asking me to work in this field, really what was at the back of my head was, like, no, because I’m afraid I might make them relapse or something. At that point, I had been clean about two years, but I was also — that same year was when I relapsed in October, and so I just felt like I’m not sure if I’d be any good for them. So I said no, and so I was fine with just being a benefits and resource counselor.

And then a few months later, the person that they hired didn’t end up working out, and he came to me again. And this time, after being at AFH for, I guess, about four or five months, and I had already noticed that yes, I do treat people with a bit more patience and understanding than what I had observed others doing, when I noticed that, I thought to myself, well, maybe I could do that. If that’s the situation, that I know — I just remember some folks there. There are a lot of wonderful folks at AFH, a lot of wonderful folks, but there are also some folks who I kept on thinking to myself, oh, please, I wouldn’t let you talk to my mother like that.

MORRISSEY: Right, “So what are you doing in this business?”

VARGAS: I know. It was like oh, my god, I know I can do a better job than that. And so when they came and asked again, I did say yes. So I went from being that benefits and resource counselor for about four to six months to being a case
manager for folks living with HIV in a transitional housing program. And so when I started at AFH, it was in July of 2004.

And then the following year, one of the staff members from AFH had gone to Project L.E.A.P. [Learning, Empowerment, Advocacy, Participation], which is offered by the Ryan White Planning Council. It’s a free 17-week training on everything you need to know if you plan on being a Planning Council member.

We had a staff meeting once, and he shared a little bit about Project L.E.A.P. and how it really opened his eyes. He was a person living with HIV for years, now working — he’s been working in this field helping folks with HIV for years now too, and he thought he knew everything there was until he took Project L.E.A.P, and he said, “I knew the tip of the iceberg.” And when he said that and everything and he was encouraging everyone to take Project L.E.A.P., it really sparked my interest, but my interest was more not about being a Planning Council member.

I thought to myself, you know what, if I can do this 17-week training class, you know, I have my own lived experience of helping my parents as a caregiver, my own lived experience as being a person living with HIV. L.E.A.P. will bring in at least 17 weeks’ worth of education on some other aspects of HIV, some of which I probably can’t even think of now, but different things, other kinds of resources that are available, and that was the main reason why I wanted to take Project L.E.A.P.

And I applied, and I got in, and I took the class, and it was more than any of that. The very first day of class — I’d like to suggest that we try this sometime
with Tori in our classes these days. But the very first day of class, we did this exercise where there was this huge timeline across one wall, and the facilitator asked us to place a blue dot on the year when we first heard about HIV. For me, it was 1982 or 1983. 1983.

And then to place a dot on the year in which you were directly impacted, someone you knew that had HIV or even your own HIV status, when you found out your own HIV status. And so I put a little red dot at the 1989 level for my uncle, and then again for 1995 for me.

And after that, they spoke a little bit about everyone that had dots in 1983. This was what was going on in 1983.

And so we got to put our own lived experience in context of what was going on in the HIV world here in Houston. It was a really powerful exercise. It was a great way to start that, because it really helped us feel where we were a part of all of this history.

And then some of the things he was talking about, he talked about Galveston, and I remember thinking, I said, “I remember Galveston. I was there,” and those kind of things. He talked about — different things he was talking about that just kept — you could place yourself in that history. You felt really part of all that history.

I remember when I wanted to go to L.E.A.P., I had to get special permission from work because the classes started at 6:00, and I had to go from McGowen and Main Street to Mandel and Hawthorne for the classes, and I’d get there by bus, so I had to leave just a little bit early. Well, I think I was working until 6:00 then, but they let me leave at 5:00 so I can get something to eat and get
on over there, but they fed us dinner there, so I never had to get anything to eat once I figured that out. And so I went into the class for the 17 weeks, and I graduated.

I remember at the end of the class, the Chairman of the Council at the time, Steve Walker, came in and he gave us a little test. And I don’t know, I still to this day have no clue what that bearing had to do on anything, but he gave us a little test and he asked us if we could write on a piece of paper who our State Representative was. Okay. And at that time, it was Sheila Jackson Lee. It still is. Well, not anymore. They’ve redistricted. Now it’s Ted Poe. But back then, it was Sheila Jackson Lee. I knew that. I put it down.

And then he asked us to write down who our State Senator was, which was a confusing question for me because I felt like who our State Senator is? We have two. So I put them both down. John Cornyn and Kay Bailey Hutchison.

Then I think he did something afterwards, and I was the only one that got that Senator question right. I kept on thinking, well, it was kind of confusing, the way he said it, and he said it was meant to be. And with that one, I realized to myself, I realized I was a bit more politically aware than I gave myself credit.

And so part of L.E.A.P. was to encourage people to apply to be Council members. I didn’t think I’d be a Council member, but I went ahead and applied to be a Council member. And then that December, because I think we had a graduation in October, that December I got a letter in the mail from the County Judge — it was Bob Eckels, Robert Eckels at the time — saying that I had been appointed to the Planning Council. And so 2006 was the very first year in which I started serving on the Ryan White Planning Council.
MORRISSEY: Okay. Before we do any more about Ryan White, let me get back to a
couple of questions about employment. Can you talk about how things have
changed from when you worked for that first agency and —

VARGAS: Oh, gosh, yeah, yeah. Well, even before I even worked at AFH, because like
I said, I used to do some volunteer work at AFH, and one of the things I
remember doing, one of the things I had to do was that back in those early days of
HIV, even when people — when people would pass away, sometimes, like if their
family wouldn’t know that they passed away or they had any kind of association
with this service agency, so they wouldn’t think about letting AFH know that, you
know, the folks for whom you’re helping to pay rent are gone now. Just all of a
sudden, they wouldn’t see them at their appointments at AFH for a week or two.
So my job, as a volunteer back in those early days, was to sometimes look
through — most of what I did was filing things away, and sometimes not even
that. Sometimes I got the condom things together. But sometimes I had to go
through the obituaries and have a little list of names of folks who have not been
making their appointments and just going through the obituaries and try to find
names. And I always would find names.

MORRISSEY: And about what year was this?

VARGAS: That would have been 1992 or 1993, in that period. Before my mother
passed away and before my uncle started getting sick, and so it would have been
the 1992–1993 period that I used to do that. I used to go, and that’s how we
would know that someone passed away, because their obituary would be in the
paper. People wouldn’t let AFH know, and so that’s how they knew that okay, we
can close this file.
I remember when I was there in those early days, everyone that came through those doors was a gay man. Everyone that came through those doors at AFH was a gay man, and when I started working there, because that was 1993, and I started working there in 2004, July of 2004, as a BARC, benefits and resource counselor, I may have seen maybe three to five gay men in a week, and the other 20, 25 were heterosexuals.

MORRISSEY: That’s a big change.

VARGAS: Big change. It went from being mainly white gay men, some African Americans and Latinos in 1993, almost always men, to a very big mix of men and women, African Americans, Latinos, heterosexuals and gays, but mainly fewer gays when I started working there. So that was the first big difference. That was the first big difference I noticed when I started working there, and I remember it hit me.

I remember telling James about that. I said, “Wow, sweetheart, this has really changed. I hardly ever see any gay men.”

MORRISSEY: Yeah, it’s changed.

VARGAS: Yeah. So that was a big change. Let’s see, here. What were some of the other big changes then? I can’t think of any right now. That was the first one that pops in my head.

MORRISSEY: Okay. Well, if something comes into your head, we can always come back here.

So did your job as a social service provider get harder? Easier?

VARGAS: It got easier after Project L.E.A.P. because Project L.E.A.P. was energizing.

I was there in the evening, from 6:00 p.m. until about 9:30 p.m., and I would be
so energized. I don’t know, just everything was so — I got so excited about everything we’d just learned and how it relates to my life. And then also as I’m in the classes, I’m thinking about some of the folks I’ve been helping or seeing through our offices at AFH and putting them in context with the history and everything else. I was always jazzed afterwards. It’s 9:00, 9:30, I sometimes wouldn’t get to sleep until about midnight. I’d get home and I’d tell James everything we just did and everything else, and sometimes he would get tired of hearing it and so I’d write it. I’d be writing all these things, and so yeah.

I can’t even remember what that question was anymore, Mar.

MORRISSEY: Did your job as a social service provider get —

VARGAS: So yeah, I felt like everything I learned really did help me a lot. I felt a lot more empowered, not just as a person living with HIV, but armed with a bunch of information that a lot of folks who are — folks that I knew with their master’s in social work that worked at AFH didn’t have a clue about some of the resources, or at least not to any real depth or breadth about the resources that were available to folks living with HIV, and it was L.E.A.P. that introduced me to all of that. They knew about the Blue Book, but I’m not sure if they ever spent any real time looking through the Blue Book.

MORRISSEY: I see.

VARGAS: And so yeah, so it really did help me a lot, and I was — again, I already came to the job with some understanding about what it is to live with HIV, and sometimes we’d get some clients that are very, very angry about — sometimes they’d just found out about their status, and they were homeless, or they were being kicked out of their homes or something and they’re in this transitional
housing program, and they’re very resentful, very angry. I rarely revealed my HIV status, but every once in a while I would, and particularly when someone would say something like, “Well, what the hell do you know what it’s like?”

And then I’d just say, “Well, I just have a little bit of knowledge on that,” and then I’d share a little bit.

The first time I did that, I wasn’t sure if it was even appropriate or if I even should, but I did, because I felt like this man needs to know, and I told him, and it really changed things with our relationship when I told him that. And after that, it was very easy for me to talk with him, and he would vent a lot with me. Everything he was thinking, I remember going through some of that stuff myself and going through it with my parents. And so it did make my job easier, and I got a reputation there at AFH for being a very good case manager.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]

MORRISSEY: I’m not surprised. How have things changed for your clients over the years?

VARGAS: Over the years, let’s see, for the good or the bad? I got a reputation at AFH for being a very good case manager, and I even got a reputation from our Vice President at AFH once about how I — she thinks I over-empower the clients a bit too much.

MORRISSEY: What? Now, how do you do that?

VARGAS: Because basically they would tell me — we have a job training program through Project LifeRoad for folks, basically for folks who have been living on disability and who are wanting to get back to work but weren’t sure if they were really ready. This job training program offered through Project LifeRoad enabled
them to do maybe three or four hours a day at doing like a secretary job or answering phones at AFH or helping at the Coalition for the Homeless or different places they would be placed, and it would only be part-time to first see, are you really ready to go back to work? Can you really complete four hours a day of work? Because really the goal is, when people go back to work, it’s a 40-hour week. Can you do that? And you know, slowly see if they’re capable of doing it. Some were and some weren’t.

But I remember some of them would have — and that’s what I would talk with them about. And some of them who were clients of AFH and also kind of employees at AFH through the job training program got privy to some of the behind-the-scenes stuff that happens too, the same stuff that I observed when I was kind of working there too, and it gave me the idea that I know I can do a better job than that. And they would feel very self-conscious about things, and they would share it with me and vent with me. And I would tell them — one of them was sharing with me at the front that you know what, I feel really uncomfortable sitting there doing that work as a secretary, answering the phones, because sometimes some of the staff — and she named the staff members — they would come, they’re making copies of things, and they’re saying all these thing about the clients, and some of it’s nice, some of it’s funny, but sometimes it’s not. And she knows some of them, and she was, “I’m just not feeling very comfortable about that.”

And I remember talking to her and telling her, you know what, anytime you work anywhere and we’re not feeling comfortable, we have two choices. We can either address it so that folks know that they’re making us feel
uncomfortable — sometimes we need to do that. If you’re at work and someone is flirting with you and it’s making you feel uncomfortable, I think it’s perfectly fine for you to tell your supervisor that that’s happening. If you’re at work and you’re hearing people say awful things about the folks you’re there to serve, whether you’re at a restaurant or at a clothing store or even at a service organization, and you feel uncomfortable, I think it’s the same thing. You should feel okay to let folks know that that is making you feel uncomfortable. Two things. One is, it could open their eyes about being a bit more aware of what they’re doing —

MORRISSEY: Discreet, yeah.

VARGAS: — and be a bit more discreet, because if you can hear it, who knows who else can. Stuff like that. That was one example.

There was another example too, where — and so she did, and then —

MORRISSEY: I smiled earlier, because I’m thinking oh, that’s how you’re empowering people.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. “Don’t be afraid to say something about that.” That one.

And there was another one, a transgender client of ours, who went and — she’s great, she’s wonderful. And one of the prevention staff people at AFH thought she was great and said, “You know, she’d be really great with our outreach team. It’s not really one of those jobs that we have with the job training, but if she wants to apply, all right.” That person said, “I’ll vouch for her and get her hired, because I think she’d be great in this role.”

And I totally agreed. I said, “Okay. All right.” I said, “Now, but let’s be careful about this, because AFH has those rules about criminal background
checks, no offenses within the last seven years, and she does have some offenses on her record.”

And he said, "Well, but I’ll be upfront about that.”

And so I met with the client, and I mentioned this to her about the possibility, but I also mentioned to her that the only thing that could possibly be a roadblock is the criminal background check, her seven-year history and everything. But I told her also that from my perspective, you’d be so good in that role.

And so she did apply, the person did hire her, and she was working with that team for about a month, and then she was told that they had to let her go, and they had to let her go because of that criminal background, which she understood. And I understood too, but at the same time, I kept on thinking, wait a minute. You-all were supposed to check this, but the person who hired her was new in her role also and she wasn’t really familiar with everything you needed to get done, even though she knew about that criminal background, because I told her about it, and the applicant told her about it too in the interview.

So they ended up having to let her go. She was disappointed. We were all kind of disappointed. But you know, she also felt very proud of the fact that we thought so highly of her and considered her for that. Everything was good.

Like I said, she worked for about a month, and they were a little late getting her check to her. That was the first stumble. The first stumble was not only did they end up letting her go, but they were late getting her check to her. Okay? She was willing to forgive that. She opens her check, and it’s a lot less than what she calculates, and she brought that to me.
So we both sat down with her hours and calculated and everything and even took away for taxes, and I remember mentioning to her that, “No, you’re right. They did underpay you. You do need more money than that,” I said, “so you mention — these things happen. These things happen, so it’s best just letting them know. Do you want me to do it?” I said, “I think you should do it. This is you doing this. But if you need my help, let me know.”

And she went and she handled it, and then she came back to my office, and I asked her, “So how did it all go?”

And she said, “Oh, well, I think they’re going to go ahead and pay me everything. They’re still disputing some of the hours I worked. And now” — because they kept the check. But they also want me to take this check back to the bank that issued it so they can cancel it, and I’ve got to bring that documentation over to them so they can cut me the real check, and we’re supposed to meet and get clarification on the hours because they’re not sure if those hours are all right.”

And I was sitting there thinking, I thought, “Wait a minute. So they want you — they made a mistake on the hours on this check” — this is my old employers I’m talking about. I said, “They made a mistake on this check, which they admit to. They’re still not sure what the real amount is, and they’re working on that, but they want you to take this check back to the bank and then bring something back?”

She said, “Yeah.”

And I must have been making a face like I am with you right now, because she said, “That’s not right, is it?”

I said, “Well, I’m not exactly sure where the rules fall with this for the
agency. I’ve never really done that part, but just from a person from the outside and from being objective, no, that’s not right,” I said.

And then she also told me that the person who hired her, she wasn’t answering her phone calls, she wasn’t really answering her questions, and she felt like she was getting the runaround, and so she didn’t have any confidence that they would actually pay her her full amount, and she was going to be okay with that.

And I wasn’t okay with that. I said, “No.” I said, “If you want, let’s call. Let’s call her boss and we’ll just let her know what’s going on, because I don’t think it’s appropriate for them to try to get you to help them fix their mistake.”

And so we called and we spoke to the Vice President, and she asked us to come in. She said she wanted to review your hours.

She said, “Well, Steven, it’s just that there’s a dispute about the hours.”

I said, “Oh, we understand that part, but why is this person who is recently off the streets and homeless, has no vehicle, is being asked to spend money on her own bus fare to correct a mistake that her employers made?” when I’m talking to our Vice President. This is a third person.

And so she said, “Well, let’s meet in my office,” and said, “and I’ll talk to her.”

Oh, just me. I said, “Great, I’m in trouble. That’s okay.” I was ready to deal with that.

But she said, “Bring her with you,” and we did.

We went and we redid hours. Yeah, I brought the documentation. And she was right, and they came to an agreement about what she should be paid, and
they’re all in agreement, and that was it.

And so when it came to the check and everything, she had a meeting with the person who hired and told her, “No, that’s your mistake. You need to fix it up. You did it all wrong in the first place.” And she ended up having to get it all fixed and everything.

And then that client was very happy with the outcome, and after that, she kept on saying all these nice things about me. She said, “Oh, Steven, he’ll go to bat for you. Oh, just go to Steven. He’ll help you get through that,” yeah.

I even at one point — one of my clients that was a plumber, he was deaf and he was a plumber, and he was out of town and he was arrested, but he was out of town in San Antonio, and he was in jail in San Antonio, and I only knew it because he never checked in after the weekend, and technically I’m supposed to check all the hospitals and the jails, and he wasn’t in the hospitals and jails in Houston. And then I get a phone call from him, and he told me he was in jail in — and I thought he was lying to me. I did, because I checked all the jails.

He says, “No, I’m in Bexar County.”

I didn’t even know where Bexar County was. I didn’t know that that’s where San Antonio was.

He says, “It’s in San Antonio.”

I said, “Oh.”

And so I remember speaking to a lawyer, the lawyer he had, and they needed some documentation to prove — he was saying that he was homeless and he was staying in a transitional housing program. I’m not sure what was going on that they didn’t believe him. I vouched for him. I ended up getting together with
one of his friends that were going to go and visit him.

I got permission from my boss to do this. They said, “I’ll leave it up to you, Steven. If you want to do that, you can do that, but I don’t think any of us would have done that. You’re going to be riding with strangers into a different town to help a client that’s currently in jail. We’re still not exactly sure if he’s telling the entire truth about why he’s in jail.”

But I’d already been working with him for a few months, and I felt like I knew his character. And I told them, “No, I think this is just a miscommunication, a misunderstanding. I think the documentation we have will prove that to the Judge.”

And so they allowed me to do this, and with his permission, I took all that stuff with his friends to the courthouse, met with his lawyer. We were sitting in the courtroom, and I saw him, and he smiled and I waved. That was all we did.

And then he went before the Judge, and we weren’t sure what was going to happen, because they ended up taking him back, and I just came back home. And so again, we weren’t sure what the outcome was. We did what we could. We’ll see what happens.

And they ended up letting him go, and then he came back home, and there was another one with the, “Oh, yes, Steven will go to bat for you. He will help you.”

And I keep on thinking, I don’t think case managers really do this like this, but I told them that — but what I remember when my mother was sick, there was a case manager from the Assistance Fund, Rebecca Mullins, who, when my mother was very confused about her health insurance when she could no longer
work, what needs to be done to maintain our health insurance, and it was through the Assistance Fund and the COBRA payments that they made to maintain her insurance that she was able to maintain her care when she was no longer able to work.

And I remember speaking to Rebecca a couple of times myself, when I was working at the book gallery, and Rebecca, what I’d tell her, “Well, we’re kind of confused because we got this bill and it doesn’t make any sense,” and I explained it to her.

And Rebecca would just say, “Oh, no, that is not how they need to be doing that. Can you fax that to me, and I’m going to call them myself.”

So that’s what I knew of. I knew that case managers did that, and so I just basically tried to do what I had observed people doing. But now here it is almost a decade later, and back then you had a lot of people that were stepping in to help other people living with HIV before there were things like funded positions and stuff like that.

MORRISSEY: Resources.

VARGAS: Before there were resources. Now there were resources, but they came with different rules. Ethics for social workers and everything else. And so that kind of case management where you really get out there and help someone to that degree wasn’t happening as much. And sometimes when people — what I heard from others is that, “Oh, no, you don’t want to do that. You’re going to get fired.”

When people did do that kind of stuff, they would get reprimanded or stuff like that. And in my head, I kept on thinking, well, I’m not really a social worker, I’m not really a case manager, so they can do whatever they want. They can target —
MORRISSEY: What they can’t do.

VARGAS: Yeah, they can take away my license that I don’t have.

MORRISSEY: That’s a good point.

VARGAS: And so I did.

MORRISSEY: That’s great.

VARGAS: And so I think that’s why I have the reputation I have.

MORRISSEY: Well, that makes sense.

VARGAS: So that’s work in that field. And from there, I left AFH and went to The Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans.

MORRISSEY: AAMA.

VARGAS: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: That’s where you are now.

VARGAS: And I’m still there now.

MORRISSEY: And what do you do there? Service providing?

VARGAS: Yeah. Now I am a coordinator for the Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS program. I serve as a case manager too, but I mainly—I do both.

MORRISSEY: Of course you do. It’s nonprofit.

VARGAS: Exactly, exactly. So yeah, nonprofit, short-staffed, so everyone has a double duty, sometimes triple. And so it is still like that at AAMA. It wasn’t like that at AFH, though. That’s one of the things I appreciate about AFH, is that — because I started off as a benefits and resource counselor. Then they made me a case manager, and I did that for two or three years. I did that for two years. And then I was a coordinator for that program of Project LifeRoad at the SEARCH building, so I had —
MORRISSEY: At the SEARCH building down on Fannin?

VARGAS: Yeah, that’s where my office was for Project LifeRoad, was at SEARCH, on the third floor.

And so at AFH, I had a varied experience. And I kind of got burnt out with doing — because at AFH, I ended up doing client coordination and case management, but my case management was with 21 clients, and it got really just too much. And there were some other things that were going on with which I disagreed. I didn’t like some of the stuff that was happening, and my last straw was, I had in that program — I’m not going to talk about this. I just read one of the interviews that’s a lot more controversial than this.

I had three different program managers in each of those three years that I was in Project LifeRoad, and it seemed like they never got to do what they thought could be done to make the program really what it could be. It’s like they get there, and that first year was about getting to know the program, all the challenges, all the resources we had available, all the opportunities you have available, all of that, and then we would have some staff meetings somewhere towards November or December, and we’d hear all their ideas for the next year. Great ideas. Ways to expand that job program and different things. It was just great ideas. And then for some reason, they’d be let — I never knew why they were let go, but the first one was let go, and then we got another one. He was great because he’s the one that provided these opportunities for me.

And then the second one that came in, she was wonderful. Same thing. There a year, getting to know the programs, really open to the ideas from the rest of the staff and what we heard, and we basically shared some of what the previous
person had mentioned, and she was willing to roll with those things and everything. So again, her second year, so they see her with this is what we’re going to do, and the next year would come and she wouldn’t be there anymore. They let her go. And why again, I’m really not sure why they let her go.

The third one comes in. By this time, I had some time in the program. I had been in different positions at AFH, and so now they’re looking at me and some other folks in Project LifeRoad that have been staff members there for a little bit to help the new program managers, and so we become friends, we become even closer, we had more privy to what goes on behind the scenes now because now we’re — so we’re just helping each other out.

And same thing. With her, I knew what happened, and so that really was the last straw for me too, knowing what happened.

Basically it was just a situation where they had accused her of falsifying some time sheets, and technically she had, but what I remember, being privy to some of those conversations, being in the same office when they had these conversations, that she was given permission to do this by our Vice President, and she was told how to do those time sheets in that manner. And now here it is, about a month after all this kind of occurred, and she’s being called to the carpet for falsifying time sheets.

And I remember she telephoned, and my office was right across from hers, and she probably — she doesn’t know this, but she said, “Steve, can you come here for a sec?” and I went in.

And she says, “Can you close the door?”

And I said, “Yeah.” And I thought okay. What’s up? I closed the door.
And she told me what was happening. She said, “Do you remember the conversation, you and I were here, and the conversation we had with them, and they said — and you said, ‘Oh, yeah, yeah,’ and they gave permission and said, ‘Yes,’ and the time sheets?” She said, “Do you remember the conversation about how do I log this on the time sheets?”

And I said, “Yeah, they said to put everyone down for a total eight-hour shift for that day we were out in that training and” — because we were going to do — it was for the holiday, and we were going to be out at her place for training in the beginning, and then it was just enjoyment for the rest of the day.

And they had approved that, because I remember hearing the conversation. And they told her, “Oh, just go ahead and put that everyone is there for eight hours a day.”

And I said, “Okay.”

And so she said, “Yeah,” and she said, “That’s what I think.”

I said, “I know.”

She said, “I just want to make sure I’m not going crazy.”

And I said, “So what’s up?”

And she said, “I don’t know. I think they’re trying to throw me under the bus.” And she told me that they were questioning her about those time sheets and everything.

And I said, “Well, just remind them that it was their idea. Remember? Because I was there. Tell them I was there, and I can remind them that it was their conversation.” I already had a conversation with the Vice President once before, with that client. And I said, “Tell them I was there, and I remember this
And so she did, and I remember at one point it was just a big controversy, and it really soured everybody. And I remember one day she was called into the main office for a meeting with the Vice President and somebody else, and then halfway through the day, I was called to the meeting also. And I was on my way over there to the office, the main office, met with them, and essentially they wanted to write me up because, they said, “Oh, because these time sheets weren’t done right,” and they did that story.

And I had to remind them. I said, “Yeah, but don’t you” — I’m trying not to say names here.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

VARGAS: I said, “But don’t you remember when you had that conversation with her and you said to put down the eight hours? So that’s the only reason we did it that way, because we were instructed to do it that way, not just we offered it for her. But I was in the room when you mentioned it to her, and so I think we’re not — so if we’re culpable for falsifying time sheets, then I don’t think all of that fault lies on us. I think the fault kind of lies on the folks giving directions.”

I even motioned like this [indicating] to the both of them, and they just made these quick — “I’m not following. I don’t understand. I’m not following that.”

I said, “Okay. And that might be part of the problem.”

And so then they went through this speech about, “Well, Steven, we really need you to help us. We understand that this has created a lot of rough feathers over there in Project LifeRoad; that the staff is not very happy about all this stuff.
We want to know if we can count on you to help us move through all this at Project LifeRoad.”

And I said, “Oh, yeah, yeah, I’ll help,” and that’s kind of how we left it.

I asked them, I said, “So if I sign on this, does this mean that the next write-up or three write-ups, that I will get fired or something?”

And one of them said yes and the other one said no at the same time.

And I just looked at them. I said, “Okay.”

And that’s when they went through this stuff, “Can you help us smooth things over? Can you just try to help us get things all back on track?”

And I said, “Sure, sure.” I said, “Sure.” I said, “I don’t understand it, but I just want to make clear that I don’t think — if this is going to lead to anyone being let go, I don’t think that that’s the road we need to be going down,” and then I gave them my spiel about the program managers.

“This program is never going to really meet its full potential if we’re not giving those program managers the opportunity to do something.” I said, “This is the third one we’ve had in this program in the last three years.”

MORRISSEY: That gets old.

VARGAS: Yeah. I said, “So I don’t think by letting another program manager go, over something that to me sounds like either miscommunication or outright just not understanding things or seeing things eye-to-eye, then I don’t think it’s a reason to let them go.”

They said, “Oh, well, Steven, if we can count on your help to smooth things over.”

And I said, “Yeah, you can count on me to do that.”
And so I did. I went back to the office. I go up to the third floor, get out of the elevator, come around the corner, coming down the hallway, and three of my staff members are all standing there in the hallway, just looking me, and said, “Are you okay?”

I said, “Yeah. What’s up?” I said, “What’s going on?”

And they said, “We heard you got called to the main office.”

I said, “Yeah.” I said, “Yeah, I got called to the main office. We already dealt with that. Done.” I said, “What?”

And then I’m walking towards them and they were standing there, and then one of them told me, “Well, she was let go.”

And I said, “What are you talking about? I just left there. We just had a talk about this. What do you mean, she was let go?”

They said, “Well, when you went to the main office, a few minutes later she came in and they were escorting her to her office, and she gathered her things and they escorted her off the property, and we couldn’t even say anything to her. They wouldn’t even let us talk to her.”

And that, my blood pressure went and spiked from that.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, I’m sure.

VARGAS: And I said, “Oh, okay. All right,” and I put my head down and was shaking it.

And I went to my office, and they followed me. And I told them what my experience was. I said, “This is what just happened.” And I told them, “I had no clue that they were going to let her go. My understanding was that we were going to be working to try to smooth” — because everyone else was all kind of pissed
off about how the main office was kind of treating the staff and everything,
because evidently they had all been talked to also, and I didn’t. I knew about my
staff, a couple of them, but I didn’t know about everybody else.

MORRISSEY: By the main office?

VARGAS: By the main office, each of them being asked about what did they know
about the time sheets and everything else.

MORRISSEY: They didn’t let you know that they were talking to your people?

VARGAS: Oh, they knew I knew about two of them, but not everybody else. I didn’t
know that. And so they didn’t tell me that in the meeting either. And I told them,
“Well, you know what?” and I turned to them. “I am so sorry to do this to you
guys, but two can play at this game.” I told them that we have a coordinators’
meeting tomorrow and a program managers’ meeting tomorrow. “I’m scheduled
to be there, and I’m going to be at the main office tomorrow, but I need to let you-
all know that — I’m just telling you-all this now, that I basically am going to
show up tomorrow and I’m going to resign, because this does not sit well with me
at all.”

And so I went in there just like they wanted me to for the program
coordinators’ meeting and the managers’ meeting. Instead, I used one of the
computers to type up a letter of resignation, and I went into our CEO’s office, and
I told her that I was going to be resigning. She asked me to come in and have a
seat, and I told her what was going on, and I had my letter.

And she said, “So is this like two weeks?”

I said, “No, I’m afraid it’s effective now.” And I mentioned to her, “You
know, if an organization feels that they can just up and let people go like that,
without any real time to think about or rectify or reconcile, then I feel as an employee that I can do the same.”

MORRISSEY: Good for you.

VARGAS: Yeah, and that was it. “So take my letter of resignation, and I’m going to be leaving.”

And when we were in that meeting, they were paging program coordinators and managers because we were all supposed to be down in this meeting and not everyone was there. I wasn’t there. And some of my staff, the other coordinators knew that I was going to be resigning, and they were down there. I’m not sure if they said anything. And then I just left. I left.

And I went home, and I told James that I resigned.

And he said, “Okay. What happened?”

And I had told him the night before. You know, I stayed up all night kind of writing this letter, almost all night, and he made me stop. He said, “No, you need to stop. Go to sleep. Finish it tomorrow morning when you go in.” And I did in there.

But he said, “So you did?”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “We’re going to be okay.”

I said, “I know. I know we’ll be okay. You know, we can always go to some agency for rental assistance. Maybe they’ll give me a job too.”

And what’s so weird is, the very next morning, there were a lot of phone calls, a lot of messages on my machine. Some of them were job offers.

MORRISSEY: Oh, great. They heard you were free, huh?
VARGAS: Yeah, and I was surprised, because again, from my perspective, I have no real training in this. I have no idea —

MORRISSEY: You’ve got on-the-job training.

VARGAS: Yeah, I’ve got a lot of on-the-job training. And so for me at the last minute it was between Legacy and The Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans, and the deciding factor was I think that Legacy mentioned that they’re happy to have me onboard, but I would have to resign from Council.

MORRISSEY: From what? Ryan White?

VARGAS: From the Ryan White Planning Council. And with AAMA, I didn’t have to resign from the Ryan White Planning Council. So again, back to that whole thing about I’m not choosing the people you’re asking me to choose.

MORRISSEY: It shows up in your life.

VARGAS: I know that.

MORRISSEY: So your employment interfaces with your volunteer commitments?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Big time, it sounds like.

VARGAS: Yeah. And I’m very clear with my — because I was very clear with that at AAMA also; that my priority is the Council, the stuff I do with Latino Task Force. That is really where my heart is. I’m very effective with helping people. It’s not something for which I have any training, and sometimes — I noticed it when I worked at AFH.

And sometimes after some time helping people, other people living with HIV, you know, that secondhand trauma gets a little overwhelming for me too. Some of it is reminiscent of my own experiences, experiences I went through with
my mother. And seeing these things continuing with people a decade later, it can get a bit overwhelming.

MORRISSEY: And give me an example of that, because you mentioned it the other night, about the women sitting across from you in your office and how it reminds you of what your mom went through.

VARGAS: Let’s see. Situations, and they’re not even like my mother’s experience sometimes. Sometimes they’re completely different. But situations like when I’m hearing someone across from me, a woman who was a prostitute, who was in jail, served her time, came out, and is HIV positive, and she has been homeless and on the streets, she’s gotten her life back together, but no one wants to hire her, have a hard time finding employment because of her criminal background history, stuff like that.

Oh, there was a woman who came in, whom we helped through Project LifeRoad also. Her main issue, she couldn’t get access to any services because she didn’t have a current ID. I remember telling her, “Oh, well, here’s a resource to get an ID, called Operation ID. You don’t have to pay anything. Maybe we’ll pay whatever cost that they can’t pay, and you can get it.” And she has three kids. She had three kids.

She was sitting in our office with her sister. And then her sister looked at her, and her sister told me, she says that, “Well, she can’t really go there, because she can’t even go to the DPS office because she has warrants out for her arrest from tickets from a while back.”

And that’s really why — because I can lend her the money to get her ID, but she has warrants out for her arrest, and she’s afraid she’s going to get arrested
and worried there’s no one to take care of the kids. I can take care of them, kind of, I said, but I really can’t afford it and all this other stuff. So those kind of situations.

MORRISSEY: Frustrating.

VARGAS: Yeah. It’s okay. We came up with a resource for that too.

MORRISSEY: You found an ID for her?

VARGAS: Well, yeah. No. At that time, there were discussions about creating for Houston Homeless Court program. It was already in existence in San Diego. There were only conversations. And I remember one of the folks, might be Lynda Greene, Carolyn Bates, myself, Sharon Epstein, and Scot More, who were five of the folks who would kind of meet on a regular basis and get other people around the table to talk about what would we need to do here in Houston to create a Homeless Court program? And we talked about different things that we had clients that had issues with: not being able to get IDs, not being able to get different things because they have warrants and they’re afraid of being arrested, they have no money to pay off these things because some of them were homeless and sleeping on the streets, so they’re just going to be in jail.

[BRIEF INTERRUPTION]

VARGAS: And so we all met. And mainly Scot More was the person, and Lynda Greene, they made contact with a group that started Homeless Court in San Diego. They were able to find a gentleman that really got it going, started with the veterans and then made it into, I think, citywide. He came into Houston and gave a presentation about it. We had a big meeting about it.

And from that meeting, that same group of five folks ended up serving as
the planning, the organizers, the development of a program like that for Houston. We were able to get a Judge onboard. We spoke to several Judges. We had meetings with representatives from the Police Department. How can we structure this program as close to the San Diego version as we could? A lot of stuff we heard from the police officers were, “Well, we can’t do that here in Texas. There’s a lot of them. We can’t do that here in Texas” talk.

We were able to find a Judge who helped us, and he served as the first Judge for Houston’s Homeless Court. He was willing to do it within his court system, and that was Steven Kirkland. He’s still a Judge, Harris County Judge now and not just a Municipal Judge.

And so we started doing that program, and that was the program that she went into, went through that program. Everything she was doing to help herself, keeping her medical appointments, keeping her appointments with her support group and her sponsor, all of that counted as community service, because the way we interpreted Homeless Court is, she is doing the community a service by addressing the situations that are keeping her on the streets and getting tickets and everything else and living out of a car with her kids.

And that was structured into the program; that anything that a homeless — if you got a ticket while you were homeless and you are now in a housing program or substance abuse program or some other kinds of program, mental health program, then the work that you’re doing with that program counts as community service. So whatever it is that you had to pay would be commuted into community service hours.

MORRISSEY: Great.
VARGAS: All these hours. Sometimes some folks — I went in there once with a
gentleman who after, ever since he’d been with us and everything, he had 172
community service hours. All he needed was 60. And this was the case for a lot
of folks, not just for him. So they would go in there with all these community
service hours, and essentially that would resolve that ticket issue, it would be
taken off their record, they would not have to pay a cent, and then they had to
walk around with this paper saying it was resolved, until they got it officially out
of the computerized system on the court records.

MORRISSEY: What a great idea.

VARGAS: Yeah, and so when people ask me sometimes — I just got recognized as one
of the long-term survivors.

[BRIEF INTERRUPTION]

VARGAS: So all of that, you know, that long-time survivor’s recognition that I got
recently —

MORRISSEY: Is that the POZ, the magazine that’s on my desk?

VARGAS: Yeah, that is the POZ Magazine that’s on your desk.

MORRISSEY: Yes, but I have to ask it. We have to get through Ryan White first.

VARGAS: We’ll get through that.

MORRISSEY: So you’re with AAMA now.

VARGAS: So back to the employment. So yeah, AAMA.

So I did the whole Homeless Court stuff when I was at AFH, and then I
went to AAMA. I’m really proud about that program. It’s still around, and I’m
really proud of that program.

MORRISSEY: The LifeRoad?
VARGAS: The Homeless Court program.

MORRISSEY: Oh, the Homeless Court. Yes, what a great accomplishment.

VARGAS: Now it’s officially part of the Municipal Court system.

MORRISSEY: I think I’ve heard of it.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, it’s really cool. I’m not as involved with it as much as I was when I was part of the steering committee and the whole development of it, but oh yeah, I’m still really proud of that.

MORRISSEY: I’ll bet that helps a lot of people.

VARGAS: I’ve lost count of how many people that I helped at AFH or at AAMA that got help through that program.

MORRISSEY: Because they were all hitting brick walls, no matter how —

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. Tickets for riding the train without a ticket or sleeping on a bench in the park.

MORRISSEY: Surviving, tickets for surviving.

VARGAS: Yeah, exactly. So anyway, so I’m at AAMA.

So leaving AFH, there was a bad taste in my mouth. I still appreciate — and I tell this to everybody. I still appreciate everything they do for the community, I still do, and support them for everything they do for the community. It’s just that at that time, there were some things going on that’s just like [sound]; that I didn’t want to have anything to do with that, not with that way of thinking.

And so I found someplace else to work, and that was AAMA, and at AAMA I went in there and I was started off as an outreach worker, which I loved. I had never done that. At that point when I went to AAMA, I thought to myself okay. So now I’ve been a benefits and research counselor, I’ve been a case
manager, I’ve been coordinator, I can be a manager, I can be an outreach worker.
I’ve never done either one of those things, and so I want to do something I haven’t done within this field. And what was immediately available was an outreach position, so I went in there as an outreach worker, and I was part of a team of about five or six people that were going out in a van.

We’d go to labor pools like outside the Lowe’s or Home Depot, a group of Hispanic men. We’d pull up in a van and we’d get out. They’d all come rushing, mainly thinking that we that we were there to offer work, but we weren’t. We were there — in the summertime, we’d have cold water, stuff like that, and we’d talk to them a little bit and see what else they needed. Did they look for work? Were they looking for help with rent?

And we’d tell them well, we have some resources for that, but we’re mainly here to test people for HIV. And we do a little HIV education in Spanish or English, whatever was needed, and we used to get some folks being tested.

Every once in a while, we found somebody that was positive who didn’t know it, or sometimes we came across folks who would tell us they knew somebody that was really sick and they don’t know what’s going on with him. He’s undocumented. He’s too afraid to go to the doctors.

And we’d go, and he would be positive too. Not always, but we’d meet some of them would. And the ones that weren’t positive, we still helped them get into some kind of medical care through the Harris Health System. They didn’t know that they could get medical care through the County.

MORRISSEY: Get a Gold Card.

VARGAS: Yeah, they didn’t know. They didn’t think they could. They thought, you
know, because they were undocumented. And part of the whole undocumented also is, you know, they didn’t want to draw too much attention to themselves, and so they thought that would draw all kinds of attention. But we assuaged their fears and helped them get it and get into medical care.

MORRISSEY: Great.

VARGAS: And so that’s the stuff that I was doing as an outreach worker and started doing HIV education in English and Spanish. And they had a conversation — there was some money that the State was offering for HIV early intervention case management for folks living with substance abuse issues and HIV, and I remember the director of the program who brought me over basically and got me in there, even sooner than I wanted — I really wanted to have a couple of months off before I worked again, but they kept asking me. “Oh, come on in. Come on in. We need some help,” and I did. So I had maybe a couple of weeks off, but I did that.

So we had conversations about this HIV early intervention case management program, and so they called me into a room so we could all — so I could share my ideas about what I did as a case manager at AFH, what did they think could be applicable here in working with this grant, and then I ended up helping out doing the request for the proposals, doing the proposal, and a part of that is that they need to have already on staff at least two case managers with at least two years of case management experience. I said, well, I’m not here as a case manager. I’m here as an outreach worker, but I do have more than two years’ experience.

They said, “Oh, can we put your name down there?”
I said, “Yeah.” I said, “Just not as the case manager, though. That doesn’t mean I’m going to be the case manager, right?”

They said, “Oh, no. They just want to know. We can hire somebody else for that and everything, and you can be an outreach worker.”

I said, “Okay, sure, yeah. Go ahead and put my name down. Put my name down,” and they did.

We ended up getting that contract, and at that time we had a new director by the time we got the contract, and she wanted to know if I’d be willing to work in that program. And I told her that that really wasn’t what I was thinking, and I gave her the little bit of the history behind it all. That’s how my name ended up on there.

But they said, “Okay. Well, I think you’d be a very good candidate for this. You’re from inside and you know the organization now. It comes with a raise.”

And I really didn’t care about the money. I know I should care more about the money, but at the time I kept on thinking how much longer do I have to live, even though I know now that we’re going to be living awhile. But even back then, I still wasn’t entirely sure.

My conversation with my employers and my supervisors used to be that my health comes first. I’m a little selfish that way; that my health is going to come first. I will be glad to help in any way I can, but if I see my T cells or viral load is going in directions they don’t need to be going, then I’m going to give you some notice that I’m going to be stepping away from this kind of work, and maybe work, period, and try to see what I need to do about getting my health up
or focusing on disability, but maybe, who knows.

That was my line of thinking, those years, and I always told my employers about it. And I always told them that my first commitment is the Council and the Task Force, and so long as my schedule can accommodate that, we can work together.

And the same thing with this new director. She wasn’t exactly onboard with all that. They said, “Well, that was way before I got — that was our director way before I got here. I’m not sure if I can completely honor those.”

I said, “I completely understand.” I said, “Just let me know. Just let me know if it can’t be honored anymore. I can look for other employment.” I was just very upfront. I was always kind of flummoxed by people who are too scared or maybe they’re too career-minded, I kept on thinking.

I used to tell myself, “Well, Steven, you’ve got to be understanding. They went to school and spent all this money on schooling, so they have a lot of investment in this career. And so maybe that’s why they don’t speak up as much when they don’t want to rock the boat too much.” But from my perspective, whatever I did to rock the boat usually wasn’t really for me. It was really for something that I thought was harming our community of HIV folks, and so I was more than happy to speak up if no one else is.

“Fire me. Fire me.” I said, “I’ll probably end up with a lot of phone calls with job offers when I get home, like I did last time,” and it does work out that way for me. Who knows how much longer? I’m getting near 50.

At one point they came back to me again and asked me again if I would be willing to be a case manager because the contract needs to be starting soon and
they need to have somebody in that position and they’re going to work as
diligently as they can to find a case manager. And they said, “And it comes with
a raise, Steven.”

I said, “Don’t even tell me.” I said, “I don’t like money to help me make a
decision. I want to make a decision out of what I want to do and what I think is
necessary. And if it’s necessary that I step into this role to make sure we get that
contract, with the caveat that we’re finding somebody, I’ll do it.” And I said, “So
we’re all in agreement on that front?”

And they said yes.

And so then I was a case manager at AAMA for the HIV Early
Intervention Case Manager position. I even told them once, told our new director
that — again, I keep on thinking, I wonder if you can do this or not, but I did. I
told her that, “Oh, my gosh,” I said, “I would have qualified for this program back
in the day. HIV positive or drug issues.”

And she just looked at me strangely, and I said, “Yeah. I mean, not
anymore. I mean, I passed a UA [urinalysis]. You can UA me again if you want.
Not anymore. But back then, yes.”

And I got the job as the case manager, and I did that. And then I helped
doing all that. And a lot of work we did were folks living with substance abuse
issues with HIV, but we’re very good at helping folks that are Hispanic or
monolingual Spanish-speaking folks, and so all the clinics, anytime they had a
client that needed any kind of help with rent or food or child care or
transportation, if they were Spanish-speaking, they just automatically sent them to
us. And sometimes when you’re talking to them, they didn’t really have the
criteria needed for that program. They didn’t admit to any kind of substance abuse. Because of that, we really couldn’t case manage them. We couldn’t help so many folks that — the opportunity came up through HOPWA to apply for more funds.

MORRISSEY: HOPWA?

VARGAS: HOPWA, the Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS.

I had no desire at all to go after this money, but someone sent me an email about it, and then another agency sent me an email about it saying that they really think AAMA should consider this. And I remember telling them well, that’s not my decision. That’s our director’s decision. But so I told them, “I’ll forward the information on to them and even let them know,” and so I did that, and I spoke to Adriana DiBello.

And I said, “Day Boss, I just sent you an email about a potential grant that we could apply for. And just so you know, just so you know, I got this via an email from one of the service organizations, and they really think we should apply for this. And I also got word from someone that I know that works within the HOPWA program at the City that they really want us to apply for this.” So whenever I hear that, it’s not a given that we’re going to get the grant, but it’s like they’re rolling out the carpet.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, a good indication.

VARGAS: Yeah. “I just want to give you a little heads-up on that. I’ve already sent you the email.” And I had to go and do my other things, and I did.

Then I was called into meetings to talk, again, about so what do we need to know to apply for this grant? Can you help us with the RFP [request for
And so we did, and we got that grant, and now I’m working in that grant. I started off as a case manager, but then they have me now as more of a coordinator because I’m doing the reports and all the monitoring of it too. I’m making sure we’re doing what we —

MORRISSEY: Of the grant?

VARGAS: Of the grant, yeah.

And so that’s what I’m doing at AAMA now. So yeah, that’s everything.

MORRISSEY: And you started work at AAMA —

VARGAS: In 2008, February.

MORRISSEY: All right. And when did you become involved with Ryan White Planning Council?


MORRISSEY: Okay. And what positions have you held on the Council?

VARGAS: Let’s see. I’ve been a member of the Comprehensive HIV Planning Committee solely my entire time with the Council until I became Chair. My first year of Council, they wanted to know if I’d be willing to co-chair and serve as the Vice Chair, and I said no, because I — well, I told them I wanted to become more familiar with how to get things done before I step into a role like that. And then the very next year, they asked me again, and at that time I said yes. The Chair of the Council at the time called me at home and wanted to know I would be willing to serve as the Co-Chair of the Comprehensive HIV Planning Committee, and I said yes, and so in 2007 and 2008 and 2009 and 2010 and 2011, for the next five
years, I served as the Co-Chair of the Comprehensive HIV Planning Committee.

MORRISSEY: Okay. And what does the Council do?

VARGAS: The Council. The Council does all kinds of things, but the main thing that we do is, we decide what services are necessary in Houston to help people living with HIV who have no other resource to pay for those resources they need. And the Council can usually step in and help in some form or other. We prioritize those services, we allocate funds to those services, and then they get out to the community, to all the different agencies. We also publish the Blue Book, which has a listing of all those agencies that serve the HIV community. So that’s the primary role that the Council serves.

And it’s by federal law that the Council has to be comprised of some folks that are living with HIV and also different folks also represented besides particular populations, like folks coming out of jail or folks with mental health issues also having some kind of a stake or representation from, like, a Medicaid office or the HOPWA office. Also folks like that have to be at the table in making these kinds of decisions. And we’re all appointed by the County Judge. I’ve been appointed by both Bob Eckels and Ed Emmett. And so yeah, that’s what we do.

[END OF AUDIO PART 5]

MORRISSEY: Who recommends you for the Council?

VARGAS: Well, there is an application. Anyone can apply to be a Council member.

MORRISSEY: Oh, you apply for it?

VARGAS: Yeah, you could apply for that. Anyone can. It is a volunteer position, though. You didn’t get paid for any of this. Anyone can apply to be a Council
member, and based on what kind of representation we need, sometimes that has a bearing on the Judge’s decision, and recommendations that come from our Operations Committee. They’re the ones that screen all the new applicants and make recommendations, and then Tori gets that information off to the Liaison, and the Liaison gets that to the Judge, and they make their decisions, and everyone gets their letters in the mail on who’s been appointed. And if you don’t get a letter in the mail, that means you weren’t appointed, yeah.

MORRISSEY: And is that an annual appointment?

VARGAS: When you’re appointed, it’s a two-year term. And you can be appointed for a total of three terms, which would be a total of six years. After that, you cannot be appointed for a seventh year. You basically roll off of Council, but you can be an external member, which basically means you can come in for the committee meetings and be part of discussion and vote at the committee level, but as far as the full Council, you’re not part of the Council and you don’t have any vote there, but you can still be in attendance.

MORRISSEY: So what makes you want to invest your time in the Council?

VARGAS: It was L.E.A.P. Again, because I went into L.E.A.P. in order to get more breadth and depth to my understanding of what can help the HIV community. And it did a lot more than just give me that depth and breadth. It lit a fire to do something with all that information I just gained.

MORRISSEY: It sounds like it changed your life in a way, a part of your life.

VARGAS: It did, and it’s a huge part of my life, the majority of my life, really, now, I’m thinking, all the different parts that have been changed. Like I said before, when I was younger, my parents were so much more involved in activism, and I got a
hint of that just in accompanying them. And then though Project L.E.A.P., even though there’s a little bit of training on advocacy, the focus was on everything else that happens in our city to make sure we get the funds here to help people who are living with HIV. That, to me, is a form of advocacy and activism also. In my mind, I kept on thinking this is just a more formalized way of dealing with things than what we had back in 1983 and the early 1990s.

Back then, it wasn’t a formal way. We protested. Some people tied themselves to chairs or chained themselves to different things, to doors, whatever, raised a ruckus to bring attention to the plight and to hopefully get some money to help folks. That money is here now, and it’s in the form of these government grants like the Ryan White Planning Council has, to help communities, and so we have a much more formalized structure to kind of do the same thing.

And so I kind of feel these days like, what, I’m kind of continuing on with kind of the work that my mother did, but it’s almost like a next generation kind of a thing, because where they didn’t have these kind of structures in place, we do now, and I kind of feel like I’m doing the same thing, but in this venue.

MORRISSEY: Gotcha, gotcha.

VARGAS: And I think that really is what I like to do, and that is my priority. The work I do in the social service organizations and everything, that helps me pay my rent and my bills, and I love the opportunity it’s given me to not just read these needs assessments that we develop and get data and from which we make decisions for how to help people, but because I’ve helped so many people over the last decade in these social service organizations, sometimes I’m reading through these needs assessments and I can read about folks that say that they couldn’t get rental
assistance because they didn’t know where to go, and that, boom, pops in my head, someone that I had helped in the past who that was exactly their situation, and I didn’t even know this help existed, and I share with them what’s available and help them get access to it as I’m reading through it. So I think one of the things I appreciate about working in a social service agency is exactly that; that whereas on the Council, we see people for public comment every once in a while, but mainly we’re dealing with data, but what I like is that I still see the people when I’m at work, and these are also people that help give us information that goes into this needs assessment. They’re sitting in the groups that are answering the questions for the needs assessment, and so yeah, I can’t even figure out how — it’s a really important part of my life.

MORRISSEY: Yes. What’s been the biggest challenge as a member of the Council?

VARGAS: The biggest challenge is, we really have an inability to respond at a moment’s notice to situations that we see developing. That’s the thing that frustrates me most. My first couple of years on Council, what would frustrate me is, we would be talking about different things at the community level, and then sometimes we decided we’ve got to move on this. In my head, I’m thinking great, get something done this year.

Yeah, we got something done that year. We talked about it, and now it’s going to be on the agenda for one of the committees, Priorities and Allocations, or Operations, or Quality Improvement, to figure out how do we operationalize this idea now. That’s the second year.

MORRISSEY: Things move slowly, yeah.

VARGAS: That’s the thing that for me is a challenge and a frustration sometimes. It’s
like, god, I understand why it has to be that way, and I can’t figure out, now that
I’m Chair for the last term, I’m into the third year as a Chair now, I rack my brain
trying to figure out how can we speed this along? But there’s so many different
moving parts that you can’t really speed it along in one section without knocking
things out of whack on another section.

And so it’s the nature of the beast, and that’s what I tell folks all the time.
You know, if you see something happening, say it now. Don’t wait to see if it
gets better. Don’t wait to see if there’s a good time to bring it up, because the
longer you wait to share it, the longer it’s going to take to get the research done to
get the data to make a decision on whether or not we can actually do something
about it. And essentially if you tell me now something needs to get done, and
when all that stuff gets worked on, we can have an answer for you and a
resolution in about three years.

MORRISSEY: Well, patience.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So that’s the one frustrating thing there for me.

MORRISSEY: Okay. And what are you most proud of as a member of the Council?

VARGAS: Oh, of the Council? What am I most proud of? There’s so many things right
now. As a Council member, I think I am most proud of our — when I chaired the
Comprehensive HIV Planning Committee, we started working on a Plan for our
entire nine-, ten-county area in which it wasn’t just about — like we had always
done on the Planning Council, wasn’t just about providing the care for people
living with HIV and everything else that helps them get to staying in care and
healthy lives. It also incorporated everything before they get into care, the
prevention side of it all.
So one of the things as a person with HIV back in the 1990s for me is, I used to get so frustrated with the idea that no one seemed to be knowing what they were doing. The left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. You could get tested by somebody, and they can tell you where to go, and you’d go to see this doctor, and sometimes they wouldn’t have a lab result. And not only were they not talking to each other, they didn’t want to talk to each other.

MORRISSEY: No continuity of care.

VARGAS: Yeah, there was no — and now I’m so happy we have what we call the HIV Continuum of Care. Yeah, it encompasses everything, not just — there is no silo thinking. If you’re silo thinking — and that’s what I used to see a lot back in the late 1980s and 1990s. There was a lot of rivalry between agencies because of monies and trying to find people who were living with HIV. Sometimes there would be rivalries between what neighborhood you could go do outreach in. They’d say, "Well, you can’t do it on this side. This is our part of town."

MORRISSEY: Like gangs.

VARGAS: Yeah, and as a person living with HIV, that made no sense to me at all. This was before I worked in the field. Just seeing all that, I just thought, are you here to help us or not, or are you here just to get your paycheck? That was always my thing. I said, god. And so I had an opportunity, and not only did I have an opportunity to see what we could do about breaking down some of these walls and getting some work done across the entire continuum, not only did I have an opportunity, I almost had an invitation.

HRSA, the Health Resources and Services Administration, had just released some information about how they would like jurisdictions to consider
maybe doing something like this. And it was so funny. When I read that, I
thought it’s about time. And the other thing I thought to myself was, so they want
us to do this, and yet they’re still not doing it. The CDC and HRSA still don’t
really work together along those lines, and yet they’re encouraging us to do the
same. I’m taking it. And we did.

And that was the first Joint Prevention and Care Services Plan, I think, in
the nation. We were invited up — I did that. It was kind of done and everything
during my last year, my sixth year in Council, and then I rolled off, and so in 2012
it was being implemented, so I wasn’t really there for that, but it was being
implemented, whatever year that was.

And then I came back onto Council the following year, and when I came
in, they asked if I would chair the Comprehensive HIV Planning Committee again
and I did, and so now I was chairing the same committee I was on when I helped
develop that Plan, and now we’re monitoring the Plan, which was really exciting
for me.

And then when it came to the Affordable Care Act, it hadn’t been rolled
out yet, but there were rumblings about it coming and the changes it would mean
to the system, and I had been nominated at least once, maybe twice before, but I
remember at least once during my first six years on Council, I was nominated to
be Chair of the Council, and I declined the nomination because we were in the
middle of the development of the Comprehensive Plan, and I did not want to step
away from that and be the Council Chair, and I told that to everybody. I said I
appreciate it, and I’m honored, I really am, but I can’t right now. My focus is
this. And so I stuck to that.
And when I came back to Council and I was monitoring now the evaluation of the Plan, and then my second year of my second stint, I was nominated to chair the Council again, and that time I did accept, and what I told folks, the only reason I was accepting, which is why I’m not going to be Chair next year also, for the same reasons, the only reason I was going to accept the nomination to chair the Council now was because we’re about to go into the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, which we know is going to affect some of the work that we have in our Plan, and I am deeply familiar with everything that went into this Plan, what’s in this Plan, and what we hope to accomplish. And my familiarity with this Plan, I think, gives me enough knowledge to know where we can flex and bend without sacrificing what we wanted to do in spite of all the changes that are going to be happening around us, and that is the only reason I accept that nomination now, why I want to be Chair.

And I was elected as Chair, and I was reelected the second year, and I was reelected this year. But at the time, I told them I’m only going to be Chair for a couple of years, maybe three, and after that I think we should have kind of come to grips with how this new Affordable Care Act is working, how it affects our systems, that I won’t need to chair anymore.

And that’s exactly how it’s panning out. And even more so, that Plan was a three-year Plan. It was only meant to be a three-year Plan. At the end of that third year — other advocacy stuff I do, but we’ll get into that later — but at the end of that third year, they asked if we would be willing to consider to extend that Plan another year. And we thought, well, there are some things we didn’t get to finish up on, so let’s do that, so we did. We all voted, and we passed it on for that
year, so there was a fourth-year Plan.

And then they asked again, are you willing to do it again? And we did it again because, again, there were still some things that still weren’t done, and so we voted, and I was elected Chair again for that third year. So this is the third year that I’ve been serving as the Chairman of the Ryan White Planning Council, and it just so happens that that Plan that I helped develop, which was originally only supposed to be a three-year Plan, was extended into what is now a five-year Plan, which again those last two years are basically to help with all that, and now from now on, or unless they change it again, the Plan, the current one that we’re working on, is going to be another five-year Plan, whereas all the years before this, there’s always been three-year plans.

So I said I’d be here for two or three years, and just miraculously it just happened that the Plan, which was supposed to be a three-year Plan, was extended for another couple of years, which actually gave me those three years the entire time working under the Plan that I helped develop. And I already mentioned to folks a number of times, at the orientation, at the end of last year, and I say it every once in a while still, that, “Guys, I’m not going to be Chair next year,” just trying to see who wants to take the reins next year.

MORRISSEY: Think about it, yeah.

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. And so what I’m really proud about, as far as Council, I’m proud of that.

As far as the community work, I’m most proud of the Houston’s Homeless Court.

As far as the Latino HIV Task Force, when I chaired that body, which I’m
concurrently chairing and concurrently being on the Council, at some point some of those years overlap, the thing I was proud of there was the development of the Houston Hispanic HIV Treatment Cascade, because the Treatment Cascade had just been introduced to the rest of the nation. It basically is a visual representation of the different stages of HIV care that people go through, from having HIV, being told you have HIV, getting access to medical care, getting prescribed medications, and then hopefully getting to a point where your viral load is virally suppressed, so those columns of things.

So that’s what that Treatment Cascade is, and it’s called a cascade because at 100 percent, only about 87 or 83 percent know that they’re HIV positive, so it’s already a step down. From all the people that are living with HIV, 17 percent of them don’t know. It’s only about 83 percent know. So that’s a step down.

And of all those, only about, at the time, that we knew, was 60-something percent were actually getting into medical care. And so of those, about 40 percent of the folks living with HIV, basically, or less than 40, were not in medical care.

And then it keeps on stepping down from there. Okay?

And so at the time, across the nation, as far as reaching the full benefits of HIV treatment, only about 25 percent of the people living with HIV were actually virally suppressed, only about 25 percent.

Now, we’ve all been working hard across the nation and in Houston, working with these Treatment Cascades and trying to put everything into work that are mentioned the National HIV/AIDS Strategy. Our own local Plan is heavily influenced by that National HIV/AIDS Strategy, working so hard to address a number of different issues that now, in our area at least, I think it’s 46 or
50 percent of folks that are living with HIV are virally suppressed.

MORRISSEY: Wow.

VARGAS: And so all that work is bearing fruit.

MORRISSEY: That’s great.

VARGAS: Yeah. And so you see it. I remember when it used to be 25 percent of the people living with HIV didn’t know they have it. Now it’s down to 17 or 16.

When originally in that continuum, 25 percent of the folks living with HIV are virally suppressed, now in our area at least, it’s about 46 percent. It probably is a little bit higher than that now.

And so we do see some positive outcomes coming from all that work in the Plan and all this stuff.

MORRISSEY: That’s great, yeah. How rewarding.

VARGAS: Yeah, it’s good to be around to see — everything we’ve talked about, Mar, from the days before we had medications, from the days that we didn’t even know what was causing it, when my uncle and his friends were talking about they think it’s poppers, stuff like that, to what we know now, all the medications, when it was just AZT, which I think is what really took my mother out.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, that’s bad stuff, isn’t it?

VARGAS: Seeing all these people getting sick so fast and then dying so quickly, within five to ten years they were gone, and how we don’t see that as much now. We still see some outliers, but we don’t see that as much now, all the medications we have available to us now.

And then the idea of a National HIV/AIDS Strategy, here we are with President Bush and PEPFAR [President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief]
giving money to other nations to help with their HIV crisis, but what we
demanded of them is that they come up with a plan — before we give you this
money, you need to come up with a plan and try to tell us what you’re going to be
doing with it to address the HIV epidemic. At the time we were doing this,
basically asking them to do this, which they did, we weren’t holding ourselves to
the same standard. We were just going willy-nilly putting money there, putting
money — and so President Obama came about and got some folks that helped
develop this National HIV/AIDS Strategy.

Now we’re walking our talk. And that is what I think really helped make
a difference with what we’re seeing with people being virally suppressed and
everything.

MORRISSEY: Right.

VARGAS: So it’s weird to have lived through some of all of that, and not just read it,
but lived it and remember it. And I keep on telling myself, oh, every old person
feels this way about their history. There are folks that can tell you where they
were when JFK was shot. We can read it in a book or see in it a movie, but they
can tell you where they were when it happened. And the same thing with 9/11,
for my generation, at least. But there’s a difference between reading it and having
lived it.

MORRISSEY: Sure, oh, yes.

VARGAS: And it’s really neat to be on this end of it all. And to be considered a long-
term survivor is still kind of strange for me too.

I remember when someone said, “What does that mean?”

It just means that I haven’t died yet. That’s all it means.
“It means a lot more than that,” is what they said, and they’re right.

But yeah, it’s been interesting. It’s been bittersweet.

MORRISSEY: I’ll bet.

VARGAS: Yeah. A lot of incredible triumphs, things you never would have thought.

There’s a quote in one of those things for the Comprehensive Plan. I told this to some students once. I was at a L.E.A.P. class, sitting on a panel, and someone asked me once, “Do you ever think we’ll see a cure?”

And I told him, “In the early days, they said we’d have a cure by the end of the decade. We know that decade has come and gone, and we’re in the next millennium and we still don’t have a cure.” And we’ve heard before about different ideas for a cure, and they just don’t pan out.”

And so when he asked me if I think there will ever be a cure, I am hopeful, and I have to say I’m hopeful and I know that we will see a cure one day, hopefully in my lifetime, and I think I may. And I told the student that there are a lot of things I didn’t think I’d live to see.

And this is the quote that’s in the Comprehensive Plan. When I was diagnosed, everyone I knew that was living with HIV died. That was what we knew about HIV back then; that if you had it, you were going to die. That was the only thing that was happening. People weren’t really living long lives. They were dying. There was a time when I used to go to the bars and you didn’t see men with gray hair. And then it dawned on me. I said, oh, wait, there’s a reason for that. You see them again now. It’s wonderful. I never thought I would see the turn of the millennium, and I always wanted to, and I did get to see it.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that we would ever have an
openly gay Mayor in my hometown, and not only do we have one, she’s been reelected.

MORRISSEY: Not only do we have one, but what were you saying about Annise?

VARGAS: Oh, not only do we have an openly gay Mayor at the time, but now she’s been reelected to the point where she can’t be reelected anymore. She’s reached the term limits. I said, I never thought I’d live to see something like that.

I never thought I’d see the fact that we’d have other than a white man as President, and we have an African-American President. There’s a lot of things I never thought I’d see that I didn’t even dream I would see, and I’ve seen.

There are things now that I would hope that we would see, and we have, now. PrEP, pre-exposure prophylaxis. The pill that someone can take to help prevent acquisition of HIV even if HIV was present.

You know, I remember when I was talking to some friends and we thought that HIV is an inevitability for us; it’s a rite of passage for young gay men back then. That’s what we thought. It’s inevitable. We could try as hard as we can, but at some point we’re going to be coming down with HIV. We’re going to be diagnosed with HIV.

And I remember someone jokingly said, “Gosh, if there was just a pill like a birth control pill.” We have that now.

So I am hopeful that we’ll see a cure and hopefully in my lifetime. And I wouldn’t be surprised anymore if I saw one in my lifetime. I’d probably cry, cry, cry, tears of joy if and when it ever happens, but I don’t think I’d be surprised anymore.

MORRISSEY: Okay. I’m going to pause for a minute.
MORRISSEY: Okay. So you’ve mentioned some other volunteer groups you’re involved with, and they’re all basically AIDS activism?

VARGAS: For the most part; not all of them. Houston’s Homeless Court wasn’t strictly HIV-related, and I’m currently Co-Chair for the City’s Health Department’s Hepatitis C Task Force.

MORRISSEY: I saw that, yeah. And do you take your AIDS activism into those groups?

VARGAS: Oh, yeah. One of the reasons I am Co-Chair of the Hepatitis C Task Force, we had a meeting several years ago at AAMA, and we were all trying to come to agreements about what are the next steps with hepatitis C. At that time we were just hearing about this potential cure, these medications that seemed to be working and curing up to 90 percent of the people, so much better than 50 percent and they’d have to deal with depression from interferon and everything else back in the day, and the side effects now weren’t anywhere near as bad as the ribavirin and pegylated interferon.

And so we had a meeting there, and we were all talking, and again, I just feel like folks can be so timid, and no one was really saying anything. They were talking about what they’d seen and what they’ve heard and what we need, what can we do. They said, “Well, we need the City Health Department to move in a direction to move us there. We need money for this.”

And at one point, I just got — and we really can’t do anything until there’s money in the thing, and it just frustrated me to no end, just hearing that kind of talk.
And so I spoke up. I raised my hand, and the person that was moderating the discussion called on me, and I told them that what I’m hearing is a little disappointing because what I remember in terms of HIV, not hepatitis C, but what I remember in terms of HIV was that doctors didn’t want to treat people living with HIV, the County didn’t want to deal with folks, our President at the time never said a word about it, even when people were clamoring for him to, the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] did not invest money in trying to figure out what to do. No one was doing anything and were just turning a blind eye to people who were dying all around them, and it took the folks that cared for those folks to finally — and some of those folks who had enough strength and weren’t so infirmed to stand up and start demanding that something be done.

I remember at City Council, the African American Task Force, before it became the African American HIV Task Force, went carrying coffins to City Hall to show the impact of HIV in African-American communities in our town of Houston here, and that resulted in a lot of funding from City Council to start up that State of Emergency Task Force, and that’s what it was called.

Lee Brown was Mayor then, and called the HIV epidemic in the African-American community a state of emergency, and it was, and in some cases it still is, and it also resulted in money for that group to get some things done.

So what I hear, though, around this table is folks waiting for the money to be here.

You need to demand the money. You need to demand action. You need to step up and go up there and protest and talk to City Council members, talk to the heads of organizations, and let them know what’s needed. They are going to
be wrapped up in what they do in their day-to-day, focused on that, trying to get whatever it is they need to get done by their own deadlines. They’re not thinking about these things. They’re probably seeing it on the news or reading the same articles, including the doctors, thinking, “Oh, that’s nice. Oh, good. That will be nice when it happens.”

No. Make it happen. You need to speak up.

I remember the person, one of the folks from New York from the office from whatever it was, Vertex Pharmaceuticals at the time, I think it was, afterwards asking us to stay behind. I had to leave early, because I had to go to a Council meeting. I said, “I have to leave early. Sorry to just lay it all down on you-all like that, and I’ve got to go,” and I left.

When I came back, my boss told me she was really impressed with what I said and wanted to meet with me, and we ended up getting a grant from them.

MORRISSEY: Oh, great.

VARGAS: Yeah, to help out with some hepatitis C activities. And as I remember saying to my boss, “See, boss, I told you. You’ve just got to speak up every once in a while.”

And then after that, one of the gentlemen that was working with Vertex at the time asked me if I’d be willing to represent AAMA on the Hepatitis C Task Force, and I asked my boss and she said sure, so I started doing that. And now he’s kind of gone away from it, and the Task Force members asked me if I would consider chairing the group, and this is my first year chairing that group.

MORRISSEY: Oh, so you’re chairing that.

VARGAS: Yeah, I’m in the middle of it right now.
MORRISSEY: Oh, okay.

VARGAS: So that’s how that happened.

MORRISSEY: So it sounds like your AIDS activism is helpful to other groups.

VARGAS: It is, oh, definitely.

MORRISSEY: And people respond positively to it.

VARGAS: Yeah, surprisingly sometimes, yeah.

MORRISSEY: Great. All right. I’m going to ask you, what are some of the awards you’ve won and why?

VARGAS: Okay. Oh, my gosh. Let’s see here. Well, my first year, in 2005, while I was taking L.E.A.P., I started volunteering with the Latino HIV Task Force, which was also part of the City Health Department’s Task Forces around HIV, and I basically just showed up. My director at the time at AFH, one of the ones that was let go, the second one, she and I went to that first meeting that they had. They had a meet and greet. And then I mentioned to her that I’d really like to be more involved with that, and she said, “Well, if you want, you can do that.”

And so I did. I started going to their meetings on a routine basis. They used to meet at the Houston Area Women’s Center at 10:00 a.m. on a Wednesday, the third Wednesday or second Wednesday of the month. I’d go there, and there would be a table of about 20 people around that table, and I was just one more person. And I remember, I went to that meeting, the first meeting was, like, in February of 2006. We went to a meet and greet in November 2005. My first meeting was February 2006. So I was in that meeting, and I was new to the group. Like I said, so I was new to the group.

I recognized a couple of folks from when my parents were alive, yeah, and
they remembered me. I remember we were talking. I said, “Oh, my god, I haven’t seen you in years.” And I told them I was working at AFH, and so it was all good and everything, and then we all sat down, and then — Hispanic groups can be pretty contentious. They can be pretty contentious. And this meeting was pretty contentious too.

The Chair at that time had been the Chair for at least eight years, and folks were pretty rebellious with her. A lot of them felt that she had been the Chair so long that now it was kind of hard to differentiate her agency from the Task Force, and so they were very challenging to her. And I was new to the group. I didn’t really understand any of that history at all.

And at one point the guy sitting directly to my left said, “Well, what kind of influence does this Task Force really have?” He said, “We come to these meetings, and everyone is talking, and we have testing events, but I don’t see anybody from City Council here. Where are the people from the Ryan White Planning Council?”

And I was sitting right next to him, and I was a new Council member, and so I just said, “Right here.”

And he just looked at me, because when I greeted in introductions, I didn’t say I was a Planning Council member. I said, “My name is Steven Vargas, and I work at AIDS Foundation Houston as a case manager in Project LifeRoad,” and went on my way. And so when he said that, it was kind of quiet, and people were just looking around, and so I just raised my hand and said, “Right here.”

So they asked me then to share a little bit about Council and different things that we’re working on. And I had been to at least two meetings already, so
I just shared about those two meetings, and one of them was about the needs assessment, that we were currently about to develop our next needs assessment, and so if any new organizations want to host a setting where we could interview some of your clients, that would be really greatly appreciated. And so I was able to share something there. It wasn’t the only thing I shared; it was the only thing I knew.

And so then we kept on going down the roll, and afterwards, everyone came up to me and said, “Oh, yeah, we’d like to,” and I gave them Tori’s number.

I said, “Call the Office of Support. They’re scheduling the dates for setting up the meetings and everything,” and they did that. And so I made a contribution in my first meeting.

The other thing I noticed is that they weren’t taking minutes.

MORRISSEY: Oh, really?

VARGAS: Yeah, they weren’t doing any kind of minutes or anything, and back then, the Task Forces weren’t that formalized. They didn’t do stuff like that. They just kind of met. Who was there, was there, and you made those decisions.

MORRISSEY: Gotcha.

VARGAS: But I had mentioned to them — because they kept on talking about how to get more people, how do we get more people. And I shared with them that well, maybe if we have — I said, “Do you have one of these lists of volunteers? But they never come to meetings, and how do we get them to come to meetings?”

And then someone else said, “Yeah, but some of the volunteers come in, and then we take so much time trying to catch them up with what we are doing because they have all these questions.”
And I just mentioned to them, “Well, do you-all have minutes?”

And they said no, and they’d never really had minutes. And I volunteered to take notes and develop minutes, and with their permission, with the Chair’s permission, I would be glad to send them to her for review, and then she can send them out to everyone on the list, whether they’re sitting around this table or just show up at volunteer events. And so I got that started, when they started taking minutes. And we still take minutes to this day. That was back in 2006, and so now we still do. Well, those couple of things and being a part of the Ryan White Planning Council member I think meant something to them there.

And I ended up at the end of that year, I was voted as the volunteer of the year for the Latino Task Force. So that was the very first kind of recognition or award I ever got for any kind of work I did in HIV. That was the very first one. And Adrian Garcia was at the luncheon with us and helped give that to me and everything, so I was starstruck.

MORRISSEY: By Adrian?

VARGAS: Yeah, yeah. He was a City Council member then, and he had actually come to our Project L.E.A.P. class and gave us great pointers about how to make an impact with City Council.

MORRISSEY: Oh, great.

VARGAS: You know, showing up for public comment isn’t just about sharing our grievances, but if we have actual numbers and data, that makes a difference. And he said, “If you have a dollar amount about how something can save the City money, that would definitely get our attention.”

MORRISSEY: That’s great.
VARGAS: Yeah, that was great advice, and we’ve been doing it that way ever since.

And so he was the one that helped give me that award, and I was starstruck and I felt really good. It’s a really big one. It’s just a plaque. It’s behind my head.

MORRISSEY: Is it? Okay.

VARGAS: Yeah, the big one.

MORRISSEY: I saw some plaques up there.

VARGAS: Yeah. That was the very first one. I’ve also been recognized in the development of that joint Comprehensive Plan between the prevention and care.

I’m highlighted in there. A big, full page of my photo, the one that you saw in the write-up, that’s actually in there, and it is the —

MORRISSEY: [Indicating]

VARGAS: That one, yeah. So even though it’s not an award, it’s a type of recognition because it’s part of the HIV news profile for our city, and so that went to D.C., and we went to D.C. and presented about it, because it was by invitation, and submitted it, and so that floated around several times around D.C., and so that one.

I’m involved with the Latino Commission on AIDS based out of New York. That’s the organization that helped start the National Latino AIDS Awareness Day observances back in 2003, and back in 2012 started the National Hispanic Hepatitis Awareness Days also.

They had this leadership training institute called the Dennis deLeon Sustainable Leadership Institute that they asked for me to think about applying for that. They were here in Houston doing a big training with the City Health Department. I was there, and we had a lot of talk back and forth and everything
else, and I remember their Vice President, Mariam Vega, said, “You know, we have this training program, and I think you’d be really excellent for it,” and I did apply for it. Again, I wasn’t thinking very much about whether or not that I would get it. I just went along with what they said. I’ve always kind of been like that.

Remember the DePaul story? Same thing. It just doesn’t hit me. It doesn’t click. And so I just know that they asked me to.

I said, “Okay.” And so I applied, and I got accepted into that program, and one of the things that we had to do was participate in webinars, and we also had to develop something we were planning to do in our community in regards to HIV, and I was with the Latino HIV Task Force. I was no longer Chair. I had already stepped down from being Chair. The voted me as Emeritus Chair.

MORRISSEY: Well, that’s an award.

VARGAS: Yeah. I forgot about that, yes. That’s a recognition. I’m still not sure if I still hold that or not. They keep on saying I do.

So I did. I developed this PowerPoint presentation of what we were experiencing here in Houston. It was essentially that the Latino HIV Task Force has always been an organizer of mass testing events. We’ll get agencies who sometimes have never worked together all come together, and we were able to host — we had so many volunteers by bringing all these people together that we were able to host mass HIV testing events in heavily populated parts of town by Hispanics: in southwest, in Spring Branch, and in the near north side, or the east end. We always tried to make sure that we had enough volunteers so we could have multiple sites. And the reason we had the multiple sites is so that folks
would have someplace easy to get to, and we had been doing that for three years.

And then that was about the time, right after we started, there was a lot of negative rhetoric around immigration back in 2011 and 2012, around there, a lot of negative rhetoric around immigration. And I shared with the Latino Commission on AIDS when I did my PowerPoint, which was with some of the staff and the Vice President and CEO of the Latino Commission on AIDS and four different representatives from the CDC. We didn’t know that was going to happen. That was kind of a surprise for us, and a lot of people got pretty nerve-wracked. And I was too, but I got over it. Just like now, once I get talking, it just goes away.

MORRISSEY: I should be so lucky.

VARGAS: And so I did that presentation. I started my presentation by deciding what we planned to do with this presentation and with the Task Force, three different bullet points.

The next line was what we have done.

The next line was, these are the challenges that we’ve encountered recently, and what I related to them was that where we’ve traditionally gone in Spring Branch, off of Long Point, near all these flea markets, we’ve always tested out in the streets and it’s hot and everything, but we were finally able to get the Spring Branch Community Health Center, which is right behind this one flea market where we always used to test, so people were used to seeing us there, except now we were going to be behind it, in a building, not outside, with AC, a huge room to do education, six different separate lab rooms to do tests with privacy and relay results. Perfect, great, great setup. But what we didn’t take into
consideration is the impact of some of this negative rhetoric around immigration.

We got out there. We set up. We had flyers just like we always did the whole weekend before, letting folks know where we were going to be and everything else, and we didn’t have that many people there. And so we said, "Well, you know what? People don’t know we’re back here. Maybe that’s just different.” So we sent some folks over to the other side, to go into the flea market, and left them with some flyers and tell folks where we were, and so they did that.

And then they came back and they said, “Well, we did, but there really aren’t that many people.”

I said, “Oh, it’s usually packed on a Saturday.” So I went over there with them and everything. They wanted to show me. And they were right.

And so I asked one of the ladies that worked there, I said, “So what is it? What’s going on? There aren’t that many people here.”

And they told me that oh, well, this is what happened. Earlier this week, there was an INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] raid on this flea market, and they arrested I forget how many people for making fake ID’s, and they arrested other folks who they found with some of those ID’s, who had just recently bought some of those ID’s, and so there was basically an immigration raid. They took about 17 people, they said. Six people that were actually doing the ID’s, and then other people, about a dozen others, that were just folks that were there at the flea market. That was one day, and then later in the week they did it to the other flea market down the road.

MORRISSEY: I remember that.
VARGAS: Yeah, and so I started thinking so that’s what happened. That’s why there’s nobody here. And I shared that with the CDC and the folks at the Latino Commission on AIDS. And then I told them what we did to fix it, kind of to address it, and said instead of us trying to hold an event at a place where they’re not familiar, this really nice air-conditioned building, we really realize that we have to go to where they’re going, and where they’re going has changed, and it’s because of the immigration rhetoric.

“So where are they going?”

And we said, “Well, there’s ESL [English as a second language] classes. AAMA has a huge, 400-student of completely free ESL classes called Adelante,” and we offered up — I got my boss’s permission.

“Is it okay? Can I say that maybe we can come since they’re already” — our conversation was about going to where they’re at, and they’re here with us at AAMA.

And she said, “Sure.”

She ended up attending the meeting with me, and she offered up AAMA’s Adelante Program (ESL) as a potential site for HIV education and testing. And so we did go ahead, and we organized a testing event at Adelante and we educated something like 200 people and tested just about 170-something, which was more, in both education and testing, than any of the three previous testing events that we had organized with the Latino HIV Task Force combined.

If we took the last three testing events and we combined, including the one that was almost a complete failure, we didn’t get folks in, about 50 people in for Spring Branch, but if we add that one to the two other ones, the two other sites
that we had that particular day, we tested more in that one day at AAMA and educated more people in that one day at AAMA than we did in any of those locations put together.

And so the idea that we had about going to where people were at really worked well for our benefit, and the CDC was very impressed by that. They said, “That’s what we need to hear.”

I said, you know, that we can talk to them about other presentations.

“But what we need to see is that people are able to learn from what they’re experiencing, and this demonstrates that really well.”

And so they were saying all these nice things about the presentation that I did, and I got this award, this nice little plaque, glass plaque, it’s in my window in the office, from the Dennis deLeon Sustainable Leadership Institute, for that presentation.

MORRISSEY: Ah, okay.

VARGAS: So yeah. So that’s that one. Long story, I know. Let’s see.

And then there’s the POZ Magazine recognition. That one, they wanted to highlight 100 long-term survivors who were still doing things in the community to help others. And Tori had this great idea that we need to nominate from our own pool here, because there are a lot of impressive people on Council, lots of impressive people on Council, and so we need to nominate from our own pool, and so we did that, and each of the folks that we nominated — myself, Bruce Turner, and Cecilia Smith — each of us was recognized.

MORRISSEY: Oh, yeah, I saw Bruce.

VARGAS: Yeah, you saw Bruce, because he was in there too. And I nominated Bruce,
and then somebody else nominated Bruce, and then I was trying to figure out who
could I ask to nominate me? And I couldn’t think of who I could think of. I
couldn’t ask another Council member to do it because I was already doing it, and
we have the Council for Bruce and someone else was — and so I ended up
contacting Frank Levy with the Hispanic Health Coalition. He and I had worked
on some projects together before to great success. One of them was helping out
the CDC. They asked us if we could help them work something out, which we
did, and it was great. And then also — oh, my god, I’m starting to sound like
Donald Trump. It was great.

MORRISSEY: Was it “yuge”?  

VARGAS: No. And then with the Latino Commission on AIDS, I was thinking about
asking them, but I had already contacted Frank Levy, and I was going to wait.
And then I was contacted by the Latino Commission on AIDS. They said, “Hey,  
Steven, we wanted to ask to see where — there’s this opportunity. We want to
nominate you,” and they told me for long-term survivors.

And I told them, “It’s funny you should ask.” I told them what we were
doing and everything else. I said, “And I was trying to think about, you know,  
should I nominate myself? Should I ask someone?” I said, “I have somebody
here locally,” and then I told them all about Frank Levy and everything.

And then so they said, “Well, we’re happy to do this with it,” and they did
it, and I received the recognition for that.

MORRISSEY: Great.

VARGAS: I know there’s some others, but I really can’t remember them all. There’s a
number of them.
MORRISSEY: Well, I think when you edit this, I’m not for sure, I might be speaking out of turn, if you think of something, I don’t know if it can be —

VARGAS: I have a whole list that the Council made me develop, basically. They asked us to submit some qualifications for being Council Chair, so I thought, I don’t know, and I put everything that I had done, and I’ll show it to you.

MORRISSEY: Okay. I’ll get back to that in a minute.

Is there anything else you want to have in your oral history before we end this session?

VARGAS: I haven’t said much about my partner, James. He and I got together the year I found out I was positive. He’s still the love of my life. Anytime we go away from each other, we kiss each other goodbye. I lost my mother in 1995. He lost his mother in 2001; his father, previous to that, when he was still in college. James and I have known each other since 1983. We both went to the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts together.

I remember October, when HSPVA was having their annual spaghetti supper, and it was my very first performance with an orchestra. I had been rehearsing and everything else, and I was very excited about it. I had rehearsed a lot but not performed yet in front of a crowd, and I was really excited about that. And I came in in my tux and my horn, and I came into the school, and I made the right-hand turn to go down the music hall, music wing, basically, and at the end of the hall was this really cute guy, really cute, walking my direction, and I swear to god, I think I just froze. He was so stunning in his tux, with his curly blonde hair, and just walking with his hand in his pocket, towards the front, where I was. I swear to god, I turned and I think I just froze there just for a split second, because
I remember thinking to myself, “Move, Steven.”

And it was James. That was James. He was a harpist. And so we went
and got everything ready, but for me, that was love at first sight. We had mutual
friends in common. PVA was a small school, 600 students. We all had, basically,
mutual friends in common. And so every once in a while, I would go out with
friends if I knew he was going to be around.

MORRISSEY: And stare at him.

VARGAS: Yeah, stare at him. It got to the point sometimes, because he’d caught me
staring, and I was very open about staring, I guess, I even got to the point where I
was following him around, following him around from classes sometimes, not to
and from classes, but if he was going down the hallway in the same direction I
was, I slowed up my step a little bit and sort of keep an eye on him until he turned
down the hallway, and then I’d keep on walking.

MORRISSEY: Are you the same age?

VARGAS: He’s two years older than I. How old am I? 48. He is 50. He’s two years
older than me. So he was a junior when I was a freshman.

MORRISSEY: Oh, you were smitten.

[END OF AUDIO PART 6]

VARGAS: I was, but nothing there. I remember even in ninth grade, I got to the point
where I even sometimes would be outside his harp room listening, doing my
homework. He had the door closed, and I could hear him practicing the harp, and
I’d be doing my homework and was just listening to him play. And then I
remember once he let me into the practice room when he was practicing. “You
might as well come on in,” and kind of annoyed by it all. And I would sit there
and I’d just stare. And he said, “But don’t look at me.”

I said, “Okay,” and I’d be doing my homework, and what’s wrong with that? Doing my homework.

Basically that was it for ninth grade.

And I was dating somebody in high school, in sophomore year, so it kind of went by the wayside a little bit, although I was still smitten. I even told the guy I was dating that [sound], and he thought he was cute too, although he thought that he was stuck on himself or something like that. I remember that. Well, they both each thought each one of them was stuck on themselves, but anyway.

And so the summer between sophomore and junior year, I went over to visit a friend of mine, Carol LaRocque. She wasn’t there but her mother was there, and she was a big classical music buff, so we were listening to some Prokofiev music, and I was sitting on the couch, lying down on the couch, listening to *Alexander Nevsky* by Prokofiev. My friend wasn’t even there, and I fell asleep.

I woke up because I heard this growling in my ear [sound] and they didn’t have a dog. I kind of opened my eye, and I looked, and it was James. James had stopped by visit with her too, and she still wasn’t there. I was there, and he said, “Do you want me to give you a ride home?”

I said, “Sure.” And I was all [sound], getting excited about that. It was the first time I had been in a car with him. “Do you want me to give you a ride home?”

I said, “Sure.”

I got in the car, and we started driving home, and I told him, “Listen, do
we have to go straight home?”

And he said, “Well, no. Where do you want to go?”

And I told him, “Well, I don’t know. Let’s just drive down — oh, let’s go
down to Westheimer,” because that’s back then when Westheimer on Friday and
Saturday nights was just landlocked with cars.

MORRISSEY: Oh, yeah, cruising.

VARGAS: You could not move anywhere, and the sidewalks were full of people. And
so that’s what we did, went down there, and we drove down the — my idea about
going to Westheimer was thinking oh, good, we’ll get stuck in traffic and just
more time with James. And that’s exactly what we had. We had more time, and
we talked a lot. And he knew I had a crush on him. I even told him. He said, “I
know. You follow me everywhere.”

I think we fooled around a little bit that night. I remember we finally got
through Westheimer, and it was getting late, and he said, “I’ve got to get you
home,” and so we did.

And then we got into Spring Branch, because that’s where I was living at
the time with mom, and then I told him again, “Do you have to go straight straight
home?”

And he said, “Well, I don’t know where else to go. We’re already here,”
and he pulled into the parking lot of the Unitarian Church on Wirt Road over
there, because that’s where our friend used to go to church and we were familiar
with that. And so we pulled into the back parking lot there. Their parking lot was
in the back, so you can’t even see the streets. It was pretty dark back there.

So we were back there and we were talking and I asked if I could kiss him
and everything else, and so we started fooling around a little bit, but we didn’t really do anything, no penetration or blowjobs or anything, nothing like that. We just messed around. And then he said, “I’ve got to get you home,” and then he got me home.

For me, that was our first date. That’s not how he sees it. Then when I initially came home, and this was before I even found out — I came home because of my uncle, but before they told me that — I came home because he was sick, but before they told me he had HIV. And so I was there, and I went to a friend’s house for a party, and James was there, and of course, I was staring. And my friend told me — the same friend that we had gone to visit that night and she wasn’t there. We’re all older now, three or four years older now, and I went to that party. James was there, and that’s how she told me. She said, “Oh, and James is going to be here.”

I said, “Oh, I’m there.”

She knew exactly what to say. So I was there. And then at one point, she said, “You need to stop staring at him like that.”

I said [sound]. I said, “I can’t help it,” because — I’m here talking a lot — for some reason back then, it seems a little stupid now, but for some reason, I could talk with James and everything, but I also felt really clumsy about talking with him too, and he was fun. And I remember that we had a long talk there at the party, and then we went downstairs, and then he said, “Do you want to go?”

And I said, “Yeah, of course.” So I went with him. We went downstairs and we were talking in his car, and he gave me a ride home. We really didn’t do anything that night. I did kiss him goodbye, though. And then we actually went
out several times that summer, and then he went back school and I had my family to deal with after that, and we really didn’t really spend too much time together again.

And in 1995, after my mother died, it was one of those nights that my friends wanted me to go out with them. And this wasn’t the first time. This was probably about two months into it. I went out with them, and my ex-boyfriend, the one I was with when I was in high school, the one who thought James was a little stuck on himself, he’s the one that invited me out. He said, “Come on out. We’re going to have some drinks. I’ll buy you a drink.”

And I was not really in the mood, but he insisted. He was an ex-boyfriend, so he knew how to insist, and so I said okay.

He said, “Besides, I think we have a surprise for you.” So I went over there, walked in, and the surprise was James. And when James was in high school, he still had a little, I guess a little roundness, it was baby fat or something on him still. And then when he was in college, when we met after Carol’s party, Carol’s party and everything, he’d slimmed down a lot. He wasn’t skinny, but he’d slimmed down a lot. And then now, when I’m seeing him again three years later, three or four years later at JR’s, when we were walking in, he was sitting there in the corner, wearing all black T-shirt, black pants, black shoes, black everything, but he’d been working out, and he had curves, he had muscles, he had nice pecs. I remember he was always cute, but he was hot now.

And so we just gravitated to each other. We got there and I said, “Hi.” He gave me a big hug and a kiss. And when I gave him a big old hug and a kiss and everything, it’s like I was, like, standing in between his legs, and then afterwards,
I didn’t know what to do. And so I was talking with some friends, and I was still between his legs. And at one point, he just turned me around, and just like I was leaning up against him now, and he had his arms around me.

And that was like for me, that was the first kind of real intimacy that he had initiated, and it meant a lot to me at that point. It meant a lot to me at that point.

This is why this is important. I just remembered why I’m telling you this story. So you know about how I found out I was HIV positive, and my mother always kind of wanted me to — she thought she liked me better — I don’t know how to put it. She thought me more fulfilled when I was in a relationship.

MORRISSEY: You mentioned that, yeah.

VARGAS: Well, when she died, I was so affected by her death, I felt so different than the person that I was, I remember thinking to myself, how can I be with — anyone I meet is not going to really know — they’re going to know this is me, that dark, kind of more serious, reserved, quiet person, and that’s not really who I am. That’s who I’ve become because of all of this, but that’s not really who I am. That’s not how I was when I was in high school and in college, and that’s not — and I kept on thinking, how can I be with somebody who’s not going to really know who I really am?

And I kept on thinking, then, the only people I can think of who really know, who really know people from — you know, have known me a long time, and that’s not going to happen. And so that night when Bill called me and invited me out to go with them and James was there and he initiated that intimacy, I remember getting home, and I don’t know. I almost starting crying, was crying, I
almost want to cry now, because thinking about this and writing about this in journals, the idea that how can I be with somebody who doesn’t really know who I am? The only folks who really know who I am are my friends who knew me in high school, knew me in college, saw me through some of this. And James really wasn’t there when going through my mother — he met my mother a number of times, but not during this period.

And then he was there, and we started dating, and I hadn’t told him I was HIV positive. And we really hadn’t had sex, and then one day I was going out with this — kind of seeing this other guy, and I used to run every day to work and back, and then I would also work out, and so I was much more fit then too. I had abs back then, hey. I don’t anymore. And this guy and I used to go to movies together, kind of dating, but again, I was still kind of hesitant about sex and everything, and even part of my sex back then was that I knew I was positive and I didn’t want to even have to even broach the subject, so it was like I wasn’t going to be having sex.

And I’m not sure if he really wanted that or not, but we spent a lot of time together, a lot of time together, his place, my place, going to movies, going to dinner. And this night, after the gym, we were going to dinner. And so okay. Fine. So I’m going to my apartment. He lives across the street in his apartment.

I was in the shower, and he was going to come on over, and we were going to get together and go to dinner. Well, I’m in my shower, and I’m out of my shower now, and there’s a knock on my door. I said, “You know what? He’s early.”

But I went over there, and I just had my towel, and I kind of opened the
door like this [indicating], and I was just going to tell him, “Come on in, but I’m not really ready yet.”

And it was James. Again, all black, wearing all black. He was in a black phase back then. That’s all he wore. And he was standing there, looking again very hot with all his muscles, and he just stood there and he said, “Can I come in?”

I was holding my tongue. I said, “Uh, yeah, but I’m going to go to dinner.”

And he said, “Oh, that’s okay.”

And I said, “Come on in.”

And he had flowers behind his back, and I thought they were really nice, and I told him that I really liked the flowers. “I’m not sure if we can go out tonight or anything, because I’m about to go out to dinner with a friend of mine.”

He said, “With your boyfriend?”

I said, “Well, not really. Kind of. Not really. Kind of, maybe. I don’t know. But we haven’t ever done anything. Nothing has been consummated, James.”

And the entire time he’s talking this, he’s walking towards me, and I’m kind of backing up. I’m thinking I have a towel, and I’m backing up and we’re talking. I said, “Well, kind of.” And he’s walking up, and then I bumped up against my door, my bedroom door. And I then I said, “But you know, but we haven’t really, like, done anything,” and he reached around and he opened the bedroom door, and I didn’t really fall back, but I did feel it open, and I kind of panicked at that point. I wasn’t hard or anything. I wasn’t aroused. I just kind of
panicked because I realized that, oh, wait, he’s pushing me into my bedroom, and of course I want to, but there’s a lot of information I need to let you know.

And so we got into the bedroom and everything, and he kissed me, and I told him, “I have to tell you something.”

He said, “You already told me about the guy.”

I said, “I know,” but then I backed out of it. I said, “But we’re about to go to dinner, and he’s about to come over, and I need to get dressed.”

And he said, “Well, okay.” And he said, “Well, do you want me to come back?”

And I said, “Well” — because I really wanted to tell him. I said, “Well” — I did something really stupid. I said, “Well, let me see if he’s okay with you joining us for dinner.” Oh, yeah, I was dumb there. I was so young, my god.

And so before I was even dressed, he was knocking on the door too, and James opened it. I said, “James, could you get that. I think it’s” — his name was James too, but I called him Jimmy. I said, “I think it’s Jimmy,” and he opened the door, and Jimmy was there.

And Jimmy said, “Well, hello.” How did he say it? It was funny. It was funny, the way he said it, because I could tell it was like he liked what he saw too. “Hello.” I can’t remember how he said, and anyway.

And I heard from the bedroom, and I was trying to put my clothes on really fast. I said, “Oh, great. Now they’re going to hook up.”

And so I got dressed and went out there, and I introduced them to each other and everything. I told him, “James is an old friend of mine from high
school,” and everything. I said, “Is it okay if he joins us for dinner?”

And he said, “Yeah, sure.”

So we all went out for dinner and everything, and then we came back after it was over and everything. It was clear when we were out to dinner that — because James was just staring at me, and I was just looking at him and smiling and everything, so it was clear there was a connection here and not as much here, no, and I felt really bad about that. But then again, I kept on telling myself, but I don’t even know if this was a relationship or not. I don’t know.

And so James took me home, and that night again, I think he was thinking he was going to get some, but instead we had a talk, and that’s when I told him everything that was going on with my mother. I didn’t tell him yet about me. I told him everything that was going on, and he said he was really sorry that I was going through all that. Why didn’t I call him.

And I said, “Well, I didn’t think about it.” I said, “I’ve just been really focused on them.” And then I told him, because she had passed away.

[BRIEF INTERRUPTION]

VARGAS: And so I did end up, after about two hours, talking about what I went through with my mom and her passing and everything else, and what I thought, and then here he was. And I didn’t want to get it — I told him I’m not sure — I said, “I know that you want to have sex, and I want to,” and then I had to tell him my HIV status, and that was another three hours.

We were talking, and he started crying. I cried when I told him, and then he started crying. And I remember he said something like, “God, if I’d been here” — what is it that he — you know, “If I hadn’t waited so long to try to get
together with you and to be with you again, then maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”

And I told him not. Don’t even think like that. That had nothing to do with this. What happens, happens, and this is the situation.

And so we fooled around that night. We really didn’t have sex or anything like that. We had a little oral sex, but that was it, but we really didn’t. And afterwards and everything, I just felt like, oh, that was that. He probably won’t call back again now. Hey, at least I fooled around with James Williams again.

But he did come back, and he kept coming back. And so yeah, yeah. And part of my dark years and everything, James was there during all those dark years. You know, he ended up dabbling in the — actually, he told me he ended up dabbling in those things way before I had; he just hadn’t in a while. And now he was again with me, and so we both kind of went into a dark period. He had a lot more experience with some of that stuff than I did. I didn’t even know that. And we kind of both went into that dark period together. And so sometimes we had protected sex, and sometimes we had unprotected sex, but basically it was the safer of the unprotected. So yeah, that was it. That was it. And so we ended up we’re still together, all these years.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, you said 20 years you celebrated last October.

VARGAS: Exactly, that’s what we just finished. One of the reasons — you know, we have conversations about the last times, the last time we had dinner with our parents, the last time that we had fun with them, the last family trips together. We had numerous conversations about that and how you never really know.
Sometimes you know, and sometimes there are times when you don’t really know if that was the last time or not until it happens. And because of that, then that’s when we told each other, well, not with us.

When I go to work in the morning, even if he’s asleep, I kiss him and I say I love him and I give him another kiss and I go to work. And the same thing with him. Even if he’s going to the corner store, he gives me a kiss. So anytime we move away from each other, to go to work, to go to the store, to go for our exercise, bike ride, whatever, any of that stuff, walk the dog, we always give each other a kiss before we walk out the door, and we still do that.

MORRISSEY: You guys get it.

VARGAS: Yeah, well, yeah, you know, we do. But I keep on thinking we get it, but it’s so sad sometimes, I think. I think of my nieces and nephews in their relationships and the troubles that they have, and they are the corners of — my brothers used to do this and my niece has done this once, come over to our place and, “I just need to talk to you-all,” because we’ve been together for so long, and so we’ll sit there and talk to them. Some of it was really silly stuff; but some of it, no, it’s hurtful stuff, poor things.

And so when you say we get it, something I’ve shared with my niece — my nieces, now — is that all these things that cause a lot of pain sometimes, we’re going to move through that. Just like the good times never last, the bad times don’t either, and you’re going to move through that. And when you get to the other end of it all, you can look back at all that stuff that caused the pain, but you’re going to see that there are different ways you can be now, either as a result of that pain, something you learned, or something to avoid, but you’re going — so
yeah, we get it, and when you say we get it, the thing that pops in my mind is, and we get it because of all that other loss that we experienced.

So many people that aren’t here anymore, and all of those folks, all of those funerals, our own family, and not everybody — like with my uncle, when I had seen him, when he had passed away, I had seen him that very night, earlier in the evening, and when I left, it was like, “Oh, I’ll see you later, Tio,” and we didn’t even hug, kiss, or anything. Just sort of, as I’m walking, “I’m going to take off, and I’ll see you tomorrow,” and just walk out, not even realizing that that was going to be the last words we ever said to each other. All of that, and that’s why we get it, because it’s been drilled home so many times.

Yeah, that’s the only thing else I have to share, is that I’m really fortunate and grateful for the relationship I have and everything we’ve been through, the going getting into the drug use, getting out of the drug use, different stuff, all that stuff, the losses, and we’re still together, yeah, and we still love each other.

MORRISSEY: That’s great.

VARGAS: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: That’s great. Well, that’s a real blessing.

VARGAS: Yeah, we’re poor as hell, but hey. But you know, it does make everything else easier.

MORRISSEY: Well, you don’t care about the money.

VARGAS: Not so much, no. Hey, so long as I have a roof over my head and the bills are paid and there’s food there, hey, I’m fine.

MORRISSEY: There you go.

VARGAS: Yeah, but I do have to start thinking about this now, now that — you know,
before 1996, you didn’t think you were going to live long enough for retirement. You didn’t think you were going to live long enough for any of that stuff. So even part of my work and everything in the AIDS service center organization field was about trying to see what good I can do in the world in the time I had, but now I’m realizing that I have a lot more time than I originally thought, yeah. I still have a lot more time. It’s already 16 years into the new millennium, and I never thought I’d even see it.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, that’s great, fantastic.

VARGAS: That’s all I’ve got to say —

MORRISSEY: Steven, thank you very much.

VARGAS: — six hours later.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much. This is a great contribution to the project.

VARGAS: Oh.

MORRISSEY: It is.

[END OF AUDIO PART 7]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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Michelle Galvan, Steven Vargas, and Grace Olivares at the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA) for a pre-ACA (Affordable Care Act) open enrollment event televised on Univision. 2012.

Modelle Brudner, Steven Vargas, Kathy Luhn (Harris County Judge Ed Emmett’s Chief of Staff) receiving the first county resolution for National Latino AIDS Awareness Day. Houston, TX. October 15, 2013.

Regina Aikens, Rear Admiral Kenneth Castro, MD, Jen Hadayia, Steven Vargas. NHAS Region IV and VI Bi-Regional Meeting. Atlanta, GA. August 2014.

Houston Mayor Annise Parker and Council Member Ed Gonzalez presenting Houston City Council National Latino AIDS Awareness Day Proclamation and flanked by the Latino HIV Task Force. The Houston Latino HIV Task Force represents ten organizations in Houston and Harris County. Houston City Hall, Houston, TX. October 1, 2014.

Steven Vargas, Cynthia Aguries, Council Member Ed Gonzales, Frank Gonzales. Houston City Council National Latino AIDS Awareness Day Proclamation received by the Latino HIV Task Force. Houston City Hall, Houston, TX. October 1, 2014.
Tracy Gorden (Ryan White Planning Council Vice-Chair), Steven Vargas, Modelle Brudner receiving World AIDS Day Proclamation from Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. Houston, TX. November 2015.
