



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Robert Vázquez-  
Pacheco, 2017 December 16-17

Funded by the Keith Haring Foundation.

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Vázquez-Pacheco on December 16 and 17, 2017. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Theodore Kerr for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Robert Vázquez-Pacheco and Theodore Kerr have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

THEODORE KERR: We sound great. So I'm just going to start. I say a little spiel [00:02:00] and then I'll ask you a first question, and then it's like the airplane takes off.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: So, this is Theodore Kerr, interviewing Robert Vázquez-Pacheco at the New School in New York, New York, on December 16, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Interview number one. Good morning, Robert.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Good morning.

THEODORE KERR: Thank you for agreeing to do this oral history with us.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My pleasure.

THEODORE KERR: Something that I think can be meaningful or can be nice, is to think about who is in the room with us, both literally and figuratively. So when you were coming this morning or when you got the email to be a part of this, were there people that you were thinking about? Yeah, just kind of people you want to bring into the room before we even start?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, you know, honestly, there are just—there are too many to try to bring into the room. But specifically, and because I'm going to be talking about Gran Fury, I'm thinking about Mark, Mark [. . . Simpson -RVP], who was a member of Gran Fury who died in '93, I think. [He died in 1996.] He's in the *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, actually, poster.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Okay, so we'll get to him. And then, it's also nice to think about: Who do you hope listens to this? Who do you think is the audience, and who do you hope is the audience?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: In terms of thinking who might listen to it, I would first and foremost say academics, and probably within academics I would say art historians. [00:04:00] Beyond that, I'm not exactly sure, because since it's an oral history, it brings in a lot of information that a lot of people are just not interested in. You know, just scroll, scroll, scroll, "When do we get to—okay, that's the part I want." And in terms of—what was the second part?

THEODORE KERR: Who do you hope listens to it?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Artists who are interested in making propaganda, essentially. And within that group, most especially artists of color who are interested in making propaganda.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, that's good. It's kind of nice, it kind of sets an intention to the conversation, both for us in the room but also, you know, the transcriber and the future listeners.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, the future listeners. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: So let's dive into that stuff that they'll scroll past.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: One question I like to ask is: What's your earliest memory?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My earliest memory is looking up and seeing this—what I learned later—this patterned dark blue medium, a little darker than cobalt blue. What I learned later is that it was—my mom had a rattan baby carriage, and I'm looking up at the cover of the baby carriage. So, I have no idea how early that is, but that is, you know, pretty early, because I just have this vision of seeing this blue thing.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, so that's—that's pretty early. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, that's really early.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And a perfectly useless memory, because there are more important things [laughs] that I should be remembering that I don't.

THEODORE KERR: You mean as a child?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, just in general. [00:06:00]

THEODORE KERR: That's a nice foundation. And if this is correct, you were born in the South Bronx?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No. I was born in Manhattan.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was born at what used to be called St. Luke's Hospital for Women, which is now simply St. Luke's Mount Sinai, right by Columbia. In 1956.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. And where did you grow up?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I grew up in the South Bronx. I grew up in a neighborhood that—I don't know if you remember, have seen the pictures of—was it Carter?—walking through the South Bronx, that it looked like Dresden after the blitz? I grew up not too far from there.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I grew up in housing projects for a large part of my youth.

THEODORE KERR: In that period of Carter walking through, you would have been a teenager around that time?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, yeah. What year was he? He was in the '70s, right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't know what year it was. '70, ah—I don't recall.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, it's okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So yeah, it was—well, it was—that was the neighborhood.

THEODORE KERR: And we should be clear, because I think we both know what we're talking about. We're talking about, like, the fires that people—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. We're talking about the very famous image of President Carter walking through a rubble-strewn—it turns out to be a block, a city block, and you can see some pieces of buildings around him.

THEODORE KERR: What was it to grow up during that time, in that place?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, you know—I mean, grateful I didn't grow up exactly there. So where I grew up we had more buildings and it didn't look as desolate as that was. [00:08:00] So, it was a revelation to me, to learn that I lived in a slum. We lived in housing projects. Well, first we lived in—I remember there was a time that we lived, again in the South Bronx—and as most Puerto Rican families that function, or I would say Latino families that sort of can function, like the Borg Collective—I grew up in a building that had all my relatives and a building with relatives next to me, and a building across the street with more relatives.

So my first understanding of neighborhood is actually community, and also family. I grew up in a neighborhood where, for example, everyone's mother, you know, took charge of everyone's kids. So it didn't matter what you were doing on the street because, you know, if Mrs. Wong saw you, Mrs. Wong—she's going to correct you and

she's going to tell your mom.

I also grew up in a setting that was multicultural. It wasn't mono-ethnic, you know, or mono-racial. So, I grew up with my friends who were Irish, and everybody was—a good number of immigrants, there were a lot of immigrants, and everyone was first generation. Most of the kids I grew up with back then were kids whose parents had been born in China or Germany or Greece, you know, or Africa or Cuba, et cetera, et cetera, and so we knew each other, you know, and lived in the same block. So I got used to—for me, I got used to sort of a multiethnic, a very diverse setting, which I actually appreciated when I was growing up.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I can imagine.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And then it changed. And then it changed because what happened was we started to go to—my parents finally moved out of that neighborhood into the housing projects, which were low-income housing [00:10:00] for working class families. You know, that's what they were designed for. So—and then, you know, unfortunately, that's not what they sort of stayed. You know, they turned into holding pens for people.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, what do you think—for someone who would be listening to this interview, maybe born in the '90s, how would you describe what housing projects were to families in the '50s and '60s, compared to how they may imagine them now?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were—when they started, they were large, they were clean, they were diverse buildings that, you know, that people—it was mainly working-class. And they were places that—I can't stress how diverse they were. Because, you know, we have the whole white flight of the late '60s, I think it was —'50s, '60s, I think it was—but they were very diverse. And so you had lots of different people living there from a lot of different backgrounds and a lot of different countries. I remember my friend Clifford. His father was a black Cuban and his mother was from Berlin. [Laughs.] So part of what I learned as well, was that there was this big world out there that was not limited to the housing projects, and it made me very curious about that world.

THEODORE KERR: Would you talk to your friends about their parents' experiences?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We would. We would talk—you know, as kids. I mean, this is, you know, when I lived there, I lived there from about the age of 10 until 18. So, we would talk about—you know, as much as we would, we would talk about our parents and school and what was on television and stuff like that. But I just remember, [00:12:00] one of the things that I remember very clearly are accents. You know? So how, you know, like, Clifford's mom would be, [demonstrates] "Robert," you know? [Laughs.] She had this very heavy—I can't do a German accent, but she would have this very heavy German accent, and I was always, you know, sort of, "What is that accent?" Because for me the only—you know, I knew English and I knew Spanish and that was it. So it was very interesting to sort of hear these people talk and use English in a different way.

THEODORE KERR: What did you guys speak at home?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Spanglish. Well actually, what—which I learned years later. My parents. My father was born in Puerto Rico, my mom was born here, and it turns out that when I was born, my parents did not want me to speak Spanish. For some people, I always have to explain this because they don't get it, you know, but it's not about cultural heritage. It's about not—you know, it's about getting access in this country and my parents realized it. My parents speak both Spanish and English fluently, so—but they had decided, "No Spanish for you because that's going to hold you up." And so they had decided not to teach me Spanish. But what happened was since they were both working, my grandmother was our babysitter, and she refused, refused, to speak English. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So we learned Spanish. And she knew English. I mean, she moved to New York in the '20s, I think. You know, right after World War I, so she knew English and could speak it perfectly well if she wanted to, but she did not speak English. So one of the things that we would have to do, my sister and I, is she would drag us along to stuff to make us "translate" for her, and it was like, [00:14:00] "You understand this, Grandma." [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: But she really wanted you to—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, she wanted us to translate, and it was like, "hmm." It was always something that confused me, because I know that her language skills were fine. But she liked to do that little old Puerto Rican lady—you know.

THEODORE KERR: Was it something that you and your sister talked about?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes. We didn't understand why, you know, and we got annoyed, like, "Why are you dragging me?" Because it meant—my grandmother was disabled, so she had to go to Social Security, you know, she had all these official things she had to go to, and doctors' appointments sometimes, and she would just drag us, you know, one of us. It was like, "You understand this." And it wasn't as if afterwards, we had to sit down and explain to her what had happened, because we didn't. She understood it perfectly.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think it was also emotional support for her?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Possibly, possibly. Although I don't know. Grandma was—[laughs].

THEODORE KERR: She was tough?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She was very tough. She was a very, very strong, strong woman. I come from a matriarchy, and this matriarchy is really, really, very strong-willed women.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And was her husband still alive?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were divorced actually.

THEODORE KERR: That's a big deal.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, they were divorced. She caught him in bed with a man when she was pregnant with my mother.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And so, they had another child after that and then they got divorced. And then she didn't remarry but she had another husband.

THEODORE KERR: Did you have a relationship with your—with her—I guess it would be your mom's dad.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes. My grandfather—I adored my grandfather. Yeah. He was a chef actually. He worked for Grace Line, which was an ocean liner that went to—an ocean liner company I guess, that went to [00:16:00] Latin America.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was a chef. So he would go out there, you know, on the cruises and he would be back for sometimes a couple of days, sometimes a week or two, and then he would be off again.

THEODORE KERR: And do you think of him—have you thought about his sexuality?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, I've written about his sexuality actually. Well, I mean, what I realized is that obviously, my grandfather was bisexual. That's, you know, sort of, period. [Laughs.] That's it, he was bisexual.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I mean, obviously, that wasn't something that was spoken about. Or I guess, certainly he wasn't going to talk about it with my grandmother.

THEODORE KERR: But did he have men around the house?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't know. No, because after that, I was—well, what happened was I think as a kid—once we were in the car with my father, my parents and my sister, and we saw—and my grandfather was—we're in the Bronx and he pulls up right next to us with a guy in the car with him. So, it was one of those, "Oh look it's Gra—" "Shut up."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Shut up," you know?

THEODORE KERR: Who was saying the shut up?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My mom. My mom, you know, did that turning around, with the look.

THEODORE KERR: With the big eyes. Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. So, after that, she decided that she didn't want me spending a lot of time with my grandfather, which is sad, and I feel that loss.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think it was because she was uncomfortable with his sexuality, or she didn't want to upset her mother?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think she was. Yeah, I think she was uncomfortable with his sexuality, I think. I could toss out another guess and say that perhaps she was [00:18:00] seeing where I was possibly going, you know? I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think that, like, as a kid were you—like how would you describe yourself as a kid?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was a bookworm. My grandmother taught me how to read and write, and once she taught me how to read that was it. So I was reading constantly and I was always drawing. So the two things that I was doing was drawing and reading. So, I was one of those kids where it was like, "Oh, go outside," you know, "Go outside and play." They never had to—I didn't want to go outside and play actually, and so I grew up fairly alone, because I didn't have a lot of friends. I was very happy to be reading in my room or drawing in my room, and that was okay.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And when you were drawing, were you sketching things in your life or from your imagination?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think it was work from my imagination. I mean, I remember being fascinated by Egypt at that time, having discovered all of that. So I remember that. But it was from imagination, and it was actually figurative, something that I haven't touched since childhood.

THEODORE KERR: When you say figurative, like—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, pictures of bodies, people moving, people doing things. Of course, you know, I think—I was going to say one or two superhero things, but they weren't as big as they are now, so no. Most definitely it was, you know—I remember one vividly—one vivid picture about some complicated thing about, like an archaeologist discovering a tomb, or something like that.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. But my family didn't—my family was not supportive in terms of the drawing, at all. They were very—they were opposed to my being an artist and they [00:20:00] didn't want me to do that at all.

THEODORE KERR: How did they communicate that with you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm the product of 12 years of Catholic education, so they kept sending me to Catholic school, even though I—because for them the options were—for a real education, you went to Catholic school. If not, you went to public school, and that was it. So, the question of possibly sending me to art school? No way in hell.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, "You're not going to learn anything useful." I remember my father saying, "Artists are famous after they're dead," you know, yadda yadda.

THEODORE KERR: So these were topics of discussion?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were for a little while, and then I stopped bringing it up because I realized that it just wasn't going to go anywhere.

THEODORE KERR: Did that affect your desire to draw?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It didn't affect my desire to draw, but it affected my choices in terms of what I was going to do with my life, because it made me think that, "Well, if I'm not going to—you know, if I can't do this, what am I going to do?"

THEODORE KERR: And your sister, was she creative as well?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, she wasn't actually.

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, she was not creative, no.

THEODORE KERR: And a reader, was she a reader?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not much, not much. I was the—my parents both read for pleasure. I remember my father read Zane Grey, who writes—he was very popular like at the turn of the century. He wrote cowboy shit, you know, which is just sort of amazing to me, that my father, this Puerto Rican from the mountains, is reading cowboy stuff. It's like, "Okay."

But my mom read everything. She read bestsellers. [00:22:00] My mom—it's very interesting, my mom didn't have a filter for us in the way that you would think. My mother would read, for example, Jacqueline Susann, and when she finished it, I could read it if I wanted to. You know? My mom would take us to the movies to see what she wanted to see. If it was an R-rated movie, that's fine. So, I remember, my sister and I saw Bond movies. And to this day, I remain a Bond fan.

THEODORE KERR: They're sexy films.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They are sexy films. But then we saw stuff like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, you know, which is about—I think it's about a teacher having sex with a young girl, in a girls school, or something like that. We saw *Women in Love*.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, we saw stuff that is just sort of not appropriate for kids, and there was no context for it. So we would go, we would see it and that was it, and then there was no discussion afterwards about, you know, "What's this weird"—you don't discuss sex with my mother. So there was never a, "When he was naked in the"—mm-mm [negative], that ain't happening. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: And what about with your friends? Would you be like, "You'll never guess what I saw today"?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I did and they were like, "Why are you going to see that?" They didn't understand why my mother would take us to see movies that they just considered boring.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Because they were adult films.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, they were essentially adult films.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I mean, I also saw stuff like—I think it was *The French Connection*, and there was a whole bunch of things that we saw that were sort of fun to watch and that my mom was like—oh, *Klute*, that whole thing with Jane—

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly, because she wanted to see it. And she wanted someone to go with, so she took me and my sister.

THEODORE KERR: Did your parents have friends in the house?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No. I grew up—hold on a second. I'm thinking how to frame this.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, we'll both take sips. [00:24:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. Alright. I grew up in a very traditional Puerto Rican family in that it was very closely knit, but also religious, but not religious in—I mean, although my family is ostensibly Catholic, I grew up in what is called Santeria now, a syncretic religion. That's the religion that I grew up in, actually. So you can imagine sort of going to Catholic school and that's what actually I was—you know, that's what was happening at home. So we would go to church, because I had—for example, I had to go to church for school, so I had to go to church in the morning at school and on the weekends, and my mom would go to church. I just remember sort of thinking like, "How can you do this?" You know, because these are so totally different. But what happened, because of that, was that my family didn't actually socialize a lot, so my mother never had people over to the—only family.

THEODORE KERR: Because the idea that Santeria was shameful or people wouldn't understand?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think both. I don't know if they had a lot of shame about it, but I know that it

most definitely was something that you just didn't want to discuss if people did not understand, and depending on who it was, the situation. For example, it's, you know, it's devil worship according to the Catholic church. So I think it was that, and because consequently in that, in the house you have all this stuff. Oh, God, you have all of this crap all over the place, you know, that's sort of affiliated with it, that are religious objects, and I think my mom just didn't want to have people over for that as well.

THEODORE KERR: Are you talking about candles and icons?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Absolutely, yeah, yeah, exactly. Candles and statues [00:26:00] and all sorts of stuff.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. So it was bizarre. It was bizarre to go to school. People would say what—you know, go in on Monday and my friends were like, "What did you do?" And I had been at a séance over the weekend, or at some sort of religious thing, you know, where there was animal sacrifices. So it was like, "What did you do for your weekend?" "Nothing."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So I grew up realizing that there were things that you had to hide. Then, sort of combine that with growing up—my father was a Marine drill sergeant. Yeah, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah [laughs], that's intense.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, we did not get along, at all.

THEODORE KERR: From an early age?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think so, from an early age. Because he saw that his son was an intellectual and not sort of a rough and tumble traditional boy that he wanted, or not the son that he wanted, and so he sort of distanced himself from me when I was growing up, because I wasn't this son. I remember he gave me once—he gave my sister and I presents sort of randomly, which was sort of a surprise. And he gave me a softball glove, and I sort of looked at it like, "What am I supposed to do with this?" [Laughs.] You know? It was like—and I thought, "Oh, I guess he wants me"—you know. But he just gave it to me, it wasn't like, "Let's go play ball." He just gave it to me.

THEODORE KERR: It was a tool, not an invitation.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, sort of, you know. Or a test.

THEODORE KERR: A test. How old do you think you were at that gift?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Ten maybe, 11. Yeah, I was still relatively young. It was before junior high school. Yeah, so I think that that was—for him, I was a disappointment, [00:28:00] because I wasn't the kind of son he wanted. So what I realized was that I had to be very circumspect about what I sort of showed of myself, which is one of the reasons why being a reader then, I just said, "Alright, I'm just going to isolate myself and not deal with it," because he and I would get into fights. You know, this is the Vietnam War, we were going at it.

THEODORE KERR: Because of difference of opinion?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Difference of opinion, and his sort of, you know, "All artists are dead," and things like, "You want to be"—growing up, I think I wanted to be a social worker, I remember saying once. And he said, "You know I would like"—he said, "I would take all social workers and put them on a goddamned raft and put them in the middle of the ocean and let them figure out what to do." You know? And I went, "Oh, thanks, Dad." [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Wow, that's an intense thing to hear.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's like—yeah, it's like, "Thanks Dad, alright," you know? It's like, "Okay, you're a dick. Okay." [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Did that somehow convey his relationship with the state, or his relationship with help?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, I'm not exactly clear. Now, I want to say that we didn't talk for 20



years, but we have a great relationship now and I've been able to ask him about things. So he's been able to clarify some stuff for me sometimes, which is really good. You know, you grow up believing something and then when they tell you something you're like, "Oh, my God, [laughs] that's not what it was at all."

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Are you thinking of something specifically?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, not necessarily. My parents were divorced, he remarried, he had kids from a second marriage, but he also had kids from women that he was seeing before he married my mom. So, once [00:30:00] we started learning about my other siblings, I just said to him, "Listen, can you just give me a list of how many brothers and sisters I have?" [Laughs.] I grew up thinking I only had one, but I now have two sisters and an older brother. And he was like, "I think there are more but I'm not sure." That's what he said, like, "I think there are more but I'm not sure."

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Wow. When did you meet these other siblings?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I have not met either of them in person.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My younger sister, Dolores, we chat on Facebook. She moved to Indiana, became a Republican, bought my niece a gun, and so we don't really talk to each other very much. My older brother, I've never met. And my father has no interest in having his children meet.

THEODORE KERR: And do you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't care, you know? I could meet my older brother. That would be fine. It would be interesting to see sort of what he looks like. My father doesn't even have pictures of him, so it would be interesting to see what he looks like and to meet him. You know, that's my father.

THEODORE KERR: And did your mom remarry? I can't remember.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No.

THEODORE KERR: No, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She did not. She did not remarry. She never wanted to get married, is what we learned later on.

THEODORE KERR: Even to your dad?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And did they both end up staying in New York?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, they both—yeah. He's in the Bronx and she's in Westchester.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. And you still talk to both of them.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And I still talk to both of them. They talk to each other on a regular basis.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow. Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They talk to each other every day, you know?

THEODORE KERR: What do you think they talk about?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exes, exes.

THEODORE KERR: Exes. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Alright? Exes. To go to the conversation we were having earlier, exes. It's very sweet, they call each other by the nicknames that they have for each other, [00:32:00] that they had for each other when I was growing up. So it's always—I always get a real kick out of the fact that they call each other by their nicknames, you know, sort of their pet names, still.

THEODORE KERR: Were they young when they started their family?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. He was, let's see—my dad was 25 and my mother was 24, maybe. Something like that.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, so they were relatively—23 and 24, that's what it was. Yeah, so relatively.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And your sister, she still lives in the area?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No. My sister lives in Florida and she's a year younger than me actually.

THEODORE KERR: And as you've been repairing your relationship with your dad, has she—like does she have the same trajectory with your parents that you do?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes. Well, when my father—when my parents got divorced, I was 18. I was in college, I remember. I remember the phone call in the dorm. My mother called and said, "Your father and I are getting a divorce." I was like, "Yay! Good." My sister was—I think she was upset, because it was sort of the classic, you know, the father pays attention to this daughter and the mother pays attention to her son, you know. And that's how it was. So for her, she was much more invested in her relationship with my father than I was. I mean, I had sort of written—I had truly written off my father by going into junior high school, I think, and realized that that was it.

THEODORE KERR: And so what was informing—like it sounds like from a young age you were reading, and you were developing a politic, and I was wondering, like, what else was kind of informing? What are other influences that you had as a young man?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think that it was my grandfather, my mother's father, came to New York because he was involved with, I think, [00:34:00] part of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement. So in growing up, I had heard about that.

THEODORE KERR: Her German father was part of that?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, no, he wasn't German. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Wait. Why did I think he was German?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because I mentioned a friend of mine whose parents were German and Cuban.

THEODORE KERR: I thought your mother—this whole time we were talking, I saw your mother—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —as German?

THEODORE KERR: —as German. She's not.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, she's not. [Laughs.] She's not German.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, so your mother's father—so your grandfather—was part of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was and so he left, with good reason, because it was very dangerous to stay there. So I knew about that. There were things that I realized. One of the things I realized was that obviously, we're dark-skinned, and we see white people and the world is very different. Our world is different from their world. And then growing up, what I saw was—you know, I saw *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver* and *My Three Sons*. I saw these perfect white families. You know, and I would be sitting there sort of looking around going, "This is not us. What is up with that? And why are we, you know, not around?"

Then, at the same time that that was happening, it was also—the Black Panthers were around and the Young Lords, which is a Puerto Rican group, was around as well. So I was—you know, being a smart kid, I was paying attention to the stuff that was happening. So I was beginning to become more politicized and most definitely taking on a leftist perspective, especially since my father, you know—since my father was—I was dealing with the military-church complex, you know. And what I realized was that I was becoming a person that would be opposite to that. So I was not supportive of organized religion and I was not supportive of the military, and then I started to develop sort of a more racialized consciousness. And doing that, I think as a kid—in junior high school, I went to a Catholic school that was an all boy's school, for boys with averages of 95 and over. So it was 150 boys on the Upper West Side. On the Upper West Side when the Upper West Side was sort of shitty, so when

Amsterdam Avenue was not an avenue you walked down.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But what we did was we cut school, and Central Park was a block away, and Strawberry Fields was a block away. So we would cut school, go to the park, hang out with hippies, you know? This is 1968.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. So, we hung out with hippies, listened to all of that—you know, listened to sort of the talk. I started smoking pot when I was 12, you know, I learned—I tell people I learned my drug use from hippies, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Like the real ones.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. And the real sort of drugs, you know, the Huxley, open the *Doors of Perception*, all of that stuff. Not like, "Let's get fucked up and have a good time," that's not what I learned. What I learned was the whole meditation, you know, taking acid to get a different perspective on the world and stuff like that. So that was—that stayed with me, I think.

But that was what also showed me, you know—because hanging out with hippies, people were talking about politics, and the Vietnam War and everything else. So I think that from a [00:38:00] relatively early age, I had a consciousness of at least what was right and wrong. Then, as time passed and I started to see that, for example the projects that I lived in, were changing. And suddenly all the white people who lived in—you know, my friend Clifford, my friend Daniel, my friend Edgar Wong, everybody moved. And the people that were left were essentially African Americans and at that time Puerto Ricans. It was like, "Hey, what happened? What happened?"

THEODORE KERR: Right, and you literally saw it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I saw it. I saw the change. But then, going to Catholic school, the change wasn't reflected, because at Catholic school there was much more—I mean, when I went into Catholic school, when I went into Cardinal Hayes, which was my high school, it was 2,000 boys, but it was like maybe 75 Puerto Ricans. And maybe 100—yeah, maybe double the number of African Americans. And everybody else was, you know, Irish, Italian, Polish, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

THEODORE KERR: So it was like an almost inverse, like where you lived was diverse—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: —but it's becoming black and brown.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. I grew up surrounded with kids who were middle-class. I mean, I didn't see a color television set until I was 19 years old, you know, and it was sort of like "Ooooooh." [Laughs.] I didn't experience air conditioning until years later, you know, because, I mean—we grew up, we didn't have that stuff. For me, people who grew up in a house was exotic. I grew up in apartments.

THEODORE KERR: Did you all talk about race in the home? [00:40:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We did. We did. We talked about white people, which is typical. And we talked about—and what I saw, which was fascinating to me, was some of my grandmother's issues, because, whoa. You know, I had already seen—as I was growing up I had seen racism.

I remember there were riots here in New York, in Harlem, in the '70s, I think. And weirdly enough, living in the Bronx, my parents would send me to school, you know, and the trains go through Harlem. So there were these riots happening in Harlem and my mother was like, "Go to school." [Laughs.] You know? You're sending your child through what possibly might be a war zone, [laughs] but you know how parents are: "Go to school." But I saw all that stuff and I realized what was happening and I could see that, I could see racism. I could see how it was affecting people and why people were angry.

THEODORE KERR: Did you say why people were angry?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, why people were angry. So I remember seeing all of that as I was growing up and becoming very conscious of it. Then, what I learned as well was—as Puerto Ricans, we would distinguish ourselves. We would call blacks literally using the Spanish word, *negros*. So *negro* means black, which is—the fun part is that that's my parents' nickname for each other. He calls her—she calls him *negro* and he calls her

*negra*, which is a term of endearment for Latinos, or for those of us who are Afro-Latino. But then, we were very—my family is very clear about the fact that we were not African Americans, alright, and would get very offended when people would say, "Oh, you're"—we're not African Americans, we're [00:42:00]—you know.

THEODORE KERR: Because it was an erasure of the Puerto Rican—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly. It happens in the United States. It's like—it's frustrating, because there are a lot of us that are dark-skinned and have African descent but we're not African Americans. But they're not—that doesn't exist. The conversation in this country is between white people and black people, period. And the rest of us watch, which is very frustrating. And unfortunately, within that conversation, both the blacks ignore us and the whites ignore us as well. But what I had learned was there was also the prejudice from some members of my family toward African Americans. So it was like, "Oh, they're animals." I remember my grandmother saying something like that. My aunt Hilda used to hate African Americans. She's a little lighter than me. She used to hate African Americans. It's like, what the hell is going on here? My grandmother would tell us, "Well, you know, we're dark because we have Indian blood, Native American blood."

THEODORE KERR: And that was preferred over?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That was preferable. I just remember when she said that to me, I think I was 11 or 12 already. And I already had a big mouth, I already would make observations that would make people uncomfortable or get me in trouble. But I said, "Well Grandma"—because my grandmother had curly black hair, and so it was like, you know, she had what was commonly called bad hair. And it was like, "Grandma, Native Americans don't have hair like that," you know? And she was like, "Shut up." And it was like, okay, so we're going to deny. That was an interesting sort of thing, perspective, to say, "Oh, we're going to deny our African heritage then," okay? So it's like, alright, well, [00:44:00] that's a new one.

THEODORE KERR: How did that impact you, as somebody who—I'm sure you were perceived in many different ways when you were on the street?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: One of the things—in situations, yeah, I mean people generally were confused by me and people still are confused by me. It's only in New York City or in Puerto Rico that people recognize that I'm a Puerto Rican, because people see enough Puerto Ricans to understand the type. Anywhere else I go, I become exotic. I become sort of a weird African American. When I'm in the South they're like, "Y'all mixed, right, boy?" You know, that kind of stuff. It's like, "Ah, no."

THEODORE KERR: There's like a sense of familiarity but—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But they understand that I'm not—you know. Well, the fun part is my birth certificate says white, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I love it.

THEODORE KERR: Like, just imagine airports for you.

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, my birth certificate says white. I tell people, "I'm white, you know, I'm officially white."

THEODORE KERR: "I'm legally white."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. What it did was have me develop this consciousness about different identities that I had, you know? And that the identities were different. So for example, I knew that I was a gay man from fairly early on, and my first realization about my sexuality was I remember that—and it came to me, that I liked sitting in men's laps more than I liked sitting in women's laps. So when the men in my family grabbed me, I liked that, that felt good. When the women—"No, let me go," you know? And I realized that.

THEODORE KERR: But you're talking as, like, a toddler.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was talking about being a little kid, yeah, maybe five or six. And I realized that it felt differently for me. [00:46:00] You know? And I realized that. So I realized that I was different, and then in growing up—so there was that one identity about sort of sexuality and stuff that I had, that I was different from everybody else. And then there was sort of the family stuff which—again, the family religious stuff that made me different from everyone else as well. So we have the sexuality that sort of had to be hidden, the religious life that also had to be hidden, you know? And then sort of the weirdness about being Puerto Rican in essentially

what people consider a binary society, which then was strange as well. So it became—of course all identities are very difficult to negotiate, but it was hard to sort of figure out. Then of course, I was an intellectual, so I wasn't like normal boys were.

THEODORE KERR: So you're dealing with gender, sexuality, geography, race, nationality—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. Race, class.

THEODORE KERR: —religion.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, so all of that stuff was stuff that I had to juggle as I was growing up.

THEODORE KERR: And different audiences, if I'm hearing you correctly.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, absolutely.

THEODORE KERR: Like some things were open. You could be open about the religion to your family, because you were all in the same boat.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. But we couldn't talk about it to anyone else. The weird thing in terms of sexuality was that I grew up—there were a lot of gay men and lesbians in my family and they're out. So I grew up with my aunt Celia, and Celia lived with a woman for years. She had kids. Both of them had kids and they lived together for years, and my family would refer to Celia as strange.

THEODORE KERR: Your family would call her strange.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Strange, yeah, when they talked about her, like she was strange.

THEODORE KERR: That's a translation or that's the word?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, they said "strange," you know. [00:48:00] You know, just, "You know how strange she is," stuff like that.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I grew up with—and they were all out. So at no time when I grew up, did I ever see my family directing homophobia towards someone. My cousin Joey, who was is a huge, flamboyant fag, you know—people at weddings and stuff would say, "Joey, when are you getting married?" "When I find the right man," and everybody would laugh.

So I had a really strange experience of seeing, "Oh, well my family is positive about being gay," you know? I thought "Alright, well, they seem to be okay with it." They weren't but it looked like it was. So I'm glad that I didn't have that experience where people felt that they couldn't be in their family. My family doesn't—my family—one thing I realized, they don't kick people out. They may disagree with you but they don't say, "We'll never talk to you again."

THEODORE KERR: Are you talking about your family unit: your mother, your father, your sister? Or even—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My larger family unit. They were always very accepting, which I'm very, very glad they are, and especially with the AIDS epidemic, they were pretty amazing. I can talk about that later. They were always very accepting, so that was a weird sort of, "Okay, well I guess I'm not going to come out to my family, despite the fact that everyone is sort of cool with everybody else, but something tells me my Marine drill sergeant father would not be as cool with son being gay."

THEODORE KERR: And you never heard him saying little remarks?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I did, I heard them. Yeah, I heard homophobic remarks in passing all the time. "Oh, you know, he's a fag," you know. So there was that also weird thing about [00:50:00]—acceptance of the gay men and lesbians in the family is I guess because they were family members. So that was fine, but then anywhere else, then they were fags and dykes and freaks.

I remember once, years later, my early 20s—something is on television, I forgot what it was about—with gay men in it. I remember we were at my grandmother's house and my aunts were talking about, "Well, you know

they were fags," and I went, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm a fag." They went, "No you're not, you're not a fag, like, you know, you're not them, you're not like them."

THEODORE KERR: And so it was also about presentation and gender.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Possibly, possibly. I think it was also about—I also think it was race and ethnicity as well.

THEODORE KERR: Because why?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because I think—you didn't see—I think they were shooting stuff in the Village, or something like that, there was a lot of white gay men. So, when I pointed it out they were like, "Oh no, you're not part of them, you're different. You're different from what they are."

THEODORE KERR: Right, right, because white gay men were their own special thing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They're white gay men. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Right. I'm sure we'll talk about that later. Did you end up having to come out to your family?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I came out when I was 17 actually, finally. It wasn't something that was planned, I think. But I came out when I was 17. I just—I told my mom. And by then, I think, my father wasn't living with us and my mom said, "I'll deal with the rest of the family." That's what she told me.

THEODORE KERR: Including your sister?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Did I come out to my sister? I don't remember if I did come out to my sister. My sister and I didn't get along because she was daddy's girl, so, you know—so I avoided her. And she went to public school. [00:52:00]

Well, and also, as I said, I grew up in a matriarchy. Very few men in my family. What happened was that I was my mother's—I didn't deal with my father's family at all. My father didn't deal with his family, so I never met the Vazquez folks at all. I met the Pachecos. And so my grandmother had always wanted to have sons. She had eight kids. Well, she gave birth to eight children: four boys and four girls. All four boys died, the four girls lived. One of the boys lived for six months, whose name was? Robert.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, exactly. So I was named after him, and so we—and so it was—what was I talking about? I just lost that.

THEODORE KERR: Sexuality, sister, coming out.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, I didn't tell my sister. So I didn't tell my sister. We weren't close. She went to public school, I went to Catholic school. She was one of the girls, that's what it was.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, you were—yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was the one male, so I grew up with my own bedroom. From early on, I had my own room, you know? My own toys. I didn't not get hand-me-downs. You know? So consequently, Robert doesn't share very well.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: He says in third person.

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So I grew up, like—you know, I was a little prince.

THEODORE KERR: But still in a matriarchy.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, but I was a prince. So I grew up with the very confusing messages that the women had. Because women, by themselves, talk about men in a very different way than they do. And so for me, they would talk about men in front of me. But I wasn't a man, you know? I wasn't a man. [00:54:00] But they would talk about me in front of me.

I remember—I have a very vivid memory as a kid, sometimes when there were social situations where the men

were in the living room and the women were in the kitchen, I would stand at the doorway, you know? Because I couldn't be with the men. I didn't do sports and all of that macho stuff, and I couldn't be with the women because they would only allow me so far before they would say, "You're a male." But what I got were these messages about men, which is very interesting. So I was socialized—being socialized by women, I deal with men, in some ways, I think the way that women do. You know?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Years later, it's changed and I can sort of turn on the male aggression stuff, but it was like, "Okay, how do you get around a man? What do you do to get them to give you what you want?" And stuff like that, but I grew up with messages about men that were—you know.

THEODORE KERR: Like what?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Men were useless, men only want one thing, you should just have men—you know, get a man to pay your bills and support you. He's not necessary, you don't need him to raise your kids.

THEODORE KERR: So this is confusing as a little man who wants to be with men. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, exactly. It was very confusing. So I grew up listening to all of these inconsistencies constantly. It was like, what? So yeah, growing up was confusing actually, because I was trying to juggle a lot of different situations that—and there was really no one to help explain to me what was happening.

THEODORE KERR: Because peers—what were your—like, you were a reader, so it seems like you had more books than sometimes friends.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I totally had more books than friends.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] So, I'm guessing—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I had very few friends. I had very few friends. My grandmother [00:56:00] used to call me *la anima sola*, which translates to the solitary soul, because—and it remains to this day. Given my choice, I will always opt for being by myself, as opposed to being with other people. Always. I've learned to be much more extroverted, and people are always shocked when they learn that actually I'm much—you know, that I don't like being with people, like, "Oh, I would think that you like being social, you're so good at being around people." I had to learn to do that. I had to learn to do that. But I grew up and I would isolate myself, so I had very few friends growing up. I had a couple of friends, two or three, and that was about it.

THEODORE KERR: Was it a friendship of convenience? Meaning, like, were you friends with them because you knew you had to have some friends, or was there a deep connection?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: One of the guys that I grew up with—my friend Julio—we met when we were in grade school, and then we ended up in the same high school. Or, no—did we go to junior high school together? Yeah. So, Julio and I knew each other from like, you know, second grade. Julio was very effeminate, and also another intellectual. But Julio was straight. The time passed and I realized, "Oh, he's not what I think he is." So I grew up with very few friends and had no interest in developing friendships at all.

THEODORE KERR: Right. Because you were getting what you needed from culture and books.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, from culture and books and everything else, so I really didn't need to hang out with people.

THEODORE KERR: But the gay stuff—like, was it something that was an embodied understanding? Were you experimenting? That was a fancy way of saying, like, were you having sex with other boys, were you kissing boys?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh yeah, yeah, the—oh no, 1968 is a big year. I discovered [00:58:00] pot and masturbation that year.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: With the hippies. Both?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, not with the hippies actually, with Richie Perez, in the stairway of the housing projects that my grandmother lived in, who had discovered it and said, "I have to show you something."

THEODORE KERR: Really, literally?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. He was literally—he was one of the kids from the block that I knew. We would hang out a little, but he was like, "I have to show you something." And I guess he was going around showing everybody. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: He was like the village recruiter. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. So I remember that. So I would see—so I was very clear, by the time that I was 12, that I was—oh, by the time I was 12, I knew I was gay. And started to look for other gay men to see if I could—you know?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: One of the things that I found were the older gay men in my family—who, as I started getting older, started hitting on me—like, distant cousins like, "Oh, you should come over for, you know, come hang out," and stuff like that, and I was like, "Why is he inviting me?" I was really naïve, I have to say, I was. People don't believe that there was a time that there was a really innocent Robert—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And there really was a very innocent Robert that was like, "Okay, I'll come over," you know? And part of my mind was like, "I wonder what's going to happen." What happened was I ended up having sex with these, you know, cousins of mine, since I was 14, I think, when suddenly all the interest materialized.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And these were positive experiences?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were positive experiences, which—and it always makes me think about how—you know, what was it? The [01:00:00] whole Kevin Spacey, not Kevin Spacey—but what do I want to talk about? Oh, that's what it was: The movie *Call Me by Your Name* is about the guy who is 24, I think it is, and the kid is 17. And it's clear in that that it's not rape, it's not sexual abuse, it's not assault. And I think that people forget that. People forget that teenagers actually are sexual beings, they want to have sex. And not every time—you know, the 30-year-old men that I had sex with when I was 18 or something, they weren't abusing me. They were not—they wanted to have sex with me and I wanted to have sex with them and did, and could walk away from the experience with a general, like, thumbs up, thumbs down.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, but aside from that, it wasn't—you know, it was not a negative experience at all. And I think that acknowledging that makes people very uncomfortable, because we're talking about the sexuality of young teenagers and children, but teenagers especially. Not every 18-year-old or 16-year-old has been raped by an older guy.

THEODORE KERR: Right. What about when you were, like, from 14 to 18? Were you thinking about—like, was issues of power dynamics a thing that you were thinking about? The fact that they were older, did that mean that they had more power over you, or these were not things that—?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: These were not things that occurred to me, actually.

THEODORE KERR: And when you look back?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: What I realized pretty early on, is that in that situation, I had a certain degree of power as well, because all I needed to say was, "This man touched me." You know? And the society's—the machine would immediately start.

THEODORE KERR: So you were aware of that.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was aware of that, yeah, that you could—that, you know, in that situation. [01:02:00]

THEODORE KERR: Were you aware that youth is a power as well?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't think so.



[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track01.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't think I was aware of youth as a power. Or it wasn't—I think I knew it, not necessarily consciously.

THEODORE KERR: How was this impacting your self-esteem? How did you know and like and not like yourself?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, I knew that I was different. And I grew up understanding that I was different from my family and from a lot of people I knew, and I knew that I was different in a variety of ways. I knew, for example, that I was smart, and I was much smarter than a lot of people around me, and consequently learned that that can be good and bad. Similarly, I learned about sexuality. So as I started to collect all this stuff and say, "Okay, well, what works, what doesn't work, what can I use to my advantage?" And once I realized that, "Alright, I like guys. I don't like girls sexually, so, okay, how do I deal with this?" That's when I started to have more interest in guys, just to get laid [laughs], than to be social, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative] [laughs], right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So what happened was—and this is a story that people love, when I tell this story. When I was in high school, I was the president of the library club.

THEODORE KERR: You were?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was, yes, the president of the library club, for four years, and everyone was just like, "You're a president!" Yes, I was the president of the library club, okay.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I also had the keys to a room. [Laughs.] The microfiche room was right by the library, right? And so there were old microfiche machines in there, you know, and that was it, and it was mostly empty. I had the keys to it, [00:02:00] so, you know, I would take boys in there to fuck. It was sort of my private, you know—my sort of private playroom.

THEODORE KERR: The presidency was corrupt.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] I wasn't hurting anybody.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Before Bill Clinton there was Robert.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: And was this fellow students?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, absolutely.

THEODORE KERR: And this was in high school?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: This was in high school, in Catholic high school.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: In Catholic high school. And it was not easy to do, you know, because they were fairly regimented, so they kept your—you know, but there were times when, like, it was a study period.

THEODORE KERR: Was it boys that you think were also gay? Was it—like, how did that happen?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: There were—I think that there were boys that I had conversations with. I'm trying to remember an example. For example, there were boys that were—now looking back, some were gay, some were not, but I think that—I don't remember how we would get into that conversation, but I do remember those sort of vague conversations you have with someone when you're trying to figure out, "So are you—? So how's your girlfriend?" You know, stuff like that. And it was pretty clear. I mean, I wasn't out in that I was running around telling everyone I was gay, but it was fairly—I was fairly—I wasn't hiding the fact that I wasn't interested in girls at all.

THEODORE KERR: You weren't having girlfriends.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, I couldn't be bothered, you know, having girlfriends. And I didn't know any girls, except for the women in my family and my cousins. [00:04:00] So I literally grew up, except for one of my friends' sisters, who went to the girls'—our sister school—she had sort of a crush on me and it was sort of sad. It

was like, "No, I'm sorry." But yeah, I just didn't—I wasn't interested in girls. And so, you know, I said it. I think at one point in time, someone even said to me in the lunchroom, "You're gay aren't you?" He said, "Oh, you're gay," and I said, "Well, you know, the only"—and I was a smart ass. I said, "The only way you would know if I'm gay is if you were sucking my dick, Tony. Were you sucking my dick, Tony?"

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I remember doing that in the lunchroom and everybody was aghast. And he looked at me, he had no answer. He was like, "No, I wasn't." "Oh, you're denying it?" You know?

THEODORE KERR: Oh [laughs], you had fun.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, yeah, I could be—no, I could be a little monster. From that moment on in high school, no one said anything to me about gay.

THEODORE KERR: And none of the boys that you had sex with in the microfiche room retaliated?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, none of them did, none of them did. None of them did actually. And some of them, actually years later, tried to get in touch with me. One guy who was—I bumped into one day, many, many years later. And I forgot—we were in DC and we were on P Street, which is sort of the gay street, and at one point he said something and I went, "You're gay?" And he went, "Yeah." He said, "Well, I know you're gay, everybody did." And I said, "Yeah, I know that, but you were gay?" He said yeah. I said, "Why didn't you tell me?" Of course, because he was really cute [laughs], but it was like, "Why didn't you tell me?" He said, "Well, I was scared." [00:06:00] And I realized that there were a lot of guys in school that were closeted. This is 2,000 boys, so, you know, obviously there were more. And there were students there having sex with teachers. You know, with the priests and stuff like that. Which I did as well, and again I wasn't—I didn't consider myself abused in any way. But yeah, and years later is when it was fun to meet up with people and have them tell you who the priest was they were having sex with.

THEODORE KERR: Like the big debriefing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, exactly, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, I didn't mean that as a joke, though, but that's quite funny.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Did race and ethnicity play into this? Like were you—was there—were you thinking about attraction in relationship to identity, both in terms of sexuality and race?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was not thinking of attraction in terms of race or ethnicity. There it was availability. So, you know, you were black, you were white, Puerto Rican. You're male; that was the most important part.

THEODORE KERR: And did availability mean willingness to—like you got the vibe and then the conversation started?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, right, right, and then the conversation started. Or I was approached because, you know—because of having sort of that reputation of being—he's a little strange. And because I was—I'm a person that moves. I generally try to stay on the outskirts of groups, so but what that means is that I travel through groups very easily. One of my teachers once pulled me aside in high school and said to me, "Gee, you're interesting to me because you can hang out with the Latinos, you can hang out with the stoners, you can hang out with the kids who listen to rock." He said, "You can hang out with the football players," [00:08:00] he said, "But you're not a member of any of those groups." Because I was interested in—you know, I was interested, so.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And do you think that that was—I don't mean to psychoanalyze, but I think that's also interesting in relationship to the levels of hiding or veils that you had to have.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And so if you were a mover, then you could keep all the veils at different heights.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, exactly. Yeah, I could put on a different mask or put on another persona, depending on what the situation was. Yeah, definitely.

THEODORE KERR: I think also, because of your intellect, as a smart person you're probably always gathering

information too. So every interaction is a fact-finding mission. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly, and because I was a person who was—for example, I was small. I sort of still remain thin, but I was skinny as a kid, I was really skinny as a kid, much to the frustration of my family. Because I remember growing up, the assumption was that if your child was skinny, that you weren't feeding your child properly, which then reflected on my mom. That was not true. I ate like a horse as a kid. I have a high metabolism, I still have a high metabolism. I can eat and eat and eat. But I was really skinny and I was small, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So what that meant—for example, my father gave me advice about getting into fights one day. And he said, "You know what? Kick them in the nuts and take them down." He said, "You're small."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He said, "You're small, you know, kick them and then take them down, and then you know, do what you have to do, because you're not going to last doing anything else." So it was one of the more practical pieces of advice that my father gave me—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was like, you know, that stayed with me.

THEODORE KERR: That stayed with you, yeah, yeah. [00:10:00] Did you take art classes when you were in high school?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: There were none. You don't take art classes in Catholic school. You take religion.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, that's your option.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And that was part of the huge problem, that there were no arts and crafts classes in school, and my parents did not want me to do that. So I ended up—to function creatively, I joined the glee club and learned some music. But visual arts were not at all encouraged in school.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. And the library, which must have felt like its own universe.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The library of love.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: The library of love.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Or maybe the library of lust is probably more like it.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I'm guessing. Was it also a place where you—like were there—I guess you'll have to tell me, like, were there even art books, then, in the Catholic school?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: There were some art books, yeah. There were art books in the Catholic school. There was art around. For example, I remember our literature textbooks always had photographs of famous paintings. Just recently, I was at the National Gallery in DC, and I started—strangely enough, I saw one painting and went, "That's the painting, you know, that is the painting from my literature book." And then I located them, a good number of them, in the National Gallery.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, which was sort of like a surprise, like, wow, you know? So we didn't go to museums. And the problem too, was that the junior high school that I went to was an experimental school for the archdiocese, so we had a curriculum which was not a typical curriculum. We learned advanced math, and in terms of literature, [00:12:00] we read stuff that was not just the canon. I remember, for example, we read Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*. Which is really intense and has—still, you know, I still carry that book with me, and all of the imagery in that.

So the arts were there, but not part of our lives. They took us—in junior high school, we would have field trips, because we were these smart kids, so they took us. The Museum of Natural History was literally two blocks away from the school, so we would go to the museums and do that. But aside from that, I had no exposure to art,

except for, I guess, for film. That's the other thing that I became, was then a film buff. But in terms of—no, it wasn't around, and it wasn't easily accessible. So for a good period of time when I was growing up, I had to just sort of stop, cut it out of my life, because—you know. And I couldn't understand or figure out how to do that. I wasn't—how to include it into my life. I mean, I would do stuff, I could do drawings and sell—I would do drawings and graffiti stuff, I remember, and sell them to my—students in school.

THEODORE KERR: Your classmates?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, my classmates.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But aside from that, there was—and I had no understanding of it. I mean, there was no one in my family who was—I only had one—I had musicians in my family, but no visual artists at all.

THEODORE KERR: Well, and it does seem like another world, especially if you have no entrée into it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right, and especially [00:14:00] because you don't see other Puerto Rican artists at all, so you never see, so you would never see. I never saw anyone looking like me in any of these settings at all, or, you know, in discussions of art.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah. I think that's interesting.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So in some ways, what it starts to tell young people is that it's not possible for you.

THEODORE KERR: That's right, yeah. And so in high school, were there pressures for you to think about what your future was going to look like?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, please, my family wanted me to be the first Puerto Rican President.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was an A student. Well, I was an A student and it didn't take long for me to realize that I was an A student, and it didn't take long for me to question, "Why do I need to be an A student?" So that became the frustration of all my teachers. Now, I was bored. I was bored in school. That's all it was, I was bored. They give us the history textbook, and I would read my history textbook in, like, two weeks, before—you know, just reading it.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right, like as a book.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, as a book, so I would read it. So when the class came, it was not—I had no desire to, like, be the—I knew the answer to that, so it was like, "I know this," you know? Alright, so I raised my hand, so you did a good job. Okay, period. And that was it. So for me, I just said, "Well, there's no need for me to do this."

THEODORE KERR: Is that also a lack of not having to prove anything? Like, because often the kid raising his hand is the kid who has something to prove.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I didn't. Right, it could—yeah, yeah, definitely. I didn't feel like—I didn't have to prove anything to anyone, you know? And part of that is sort of that arrogance of youth, because it was like, "I'm smart and I know I'm smart, [00:16:00] and I know that I'm smarter than a lot of people around me, and it's apparent that I'm smarter than a lot of people around me. They're all idiots." So, consequently, you know, it was like, "Do I have to prove that I'm smart to my teachers? Why?" You know? And part of me was saying, "Is this going to improve my life?" Not necessarily in those words, but it was like, "No, I don't have to."

THEODORE KERR: Right, like, why do I have to sweat, if I don't—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: What's it going to get me?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, what's it going to get me? So, I went to college because I was supposed to go to college.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you mind if we pause?

[Audio break.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So as I said, we had no art classes at all. We were not—but I still found ways to work and to do visual work. I just realized—one of the things that I remembered was that, strangely enough, in Santeria, people are initiated to become a priest or a priestess, and they celebrate that every year, and it's like a birthday. You have a big feast and stuff like that. And you actually take everything and put it out on display.

THEODORE KERR: What's everything?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Everything is statues. There are—what happens, you know, it's—Santeria is the worship of particular gods, and these gods essentially are nature gods. So it's, you know, ocean, river, thunder, woods, et cetera, et cetera. Each of those—the presence of that god is in a stone that you do a particular ritual and stuff for. That stone is then kept in—it's never out. [00:18:00] It's put into a ceramic enclosure. Generally a soup tureen is what they use. And so depending on how you go, some people go with huge Italian things with lots of gold, whatever. And they're all based—and they each have a particular color, which is based on the particular god, but you generally never show them. So what you do is you would—in the celebration, you would take them out and then you would cover them with a piece of fabric, a nice piece of fabric, and do an altar.

So, what my grandmother did was she had me paint—what she asked me to do was to paint images. And because it's a syncretic religion, each African god has a Catholic saint, you know? So what she had me do was paint the images of the saints on these pieces of fabric that would cover them. So I did these very detailed paintings of these saints that were done in enamel, because I had no idea. The only paint that I knew of was model paint, that we could see, and so of course I would get fucking high, but I did these very intricate paintings that I remember. I have no idea what's happened to them now. I don't think anyone has them anymore. But that was a way—and I did this for my grandmother for several years. That was a way that my family sort of acknowledged that I had some sort of visual talent, and consequently, people would see it and go, "Wow, you're really good," and stuff like that, but that's as far—you know, it wasn't like, [00:20:00] "Oh you should go to a gallery," you know?

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: None of that. It was just like, "Oh, you're really good." It's like sort of handy that you can do that. I remember that it was very important for me to be able to do something that could be acknowledged and could be seen, although only by the relatives and that was it. But still, it was a way that I was able to do some kind of visual work.

THEODORE KERR: And was it a similar vibe as to when you would sell works to your friends at school? Like was it that someone saw you could draw really well and said, "Oh, can you draw me a picture of that?"

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Kind of, yeah, I think so. It was much more—well, obviously it was much more complicated. Because in school it would just be—I could sketch something that was—and this was actually sitting down to paint on a piece—painting on fabric with oils.

THEODORE KERR: And taking hours, days?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Taking—I don't know how long, but it took a while. Because the images were not that large, you know? And these are sort of traditional Catholic images of virgins and all of that stuff, which is probably why I retain an interest in religious art. Having had to produce Catholic religious art as a—you know, when I was growing up.

THEODORE KERR: When you were in the Catholic school and you were attending church, was the architecture interesting or the iconography within the building interesting to you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The iconography of the church was—well, Mass was—well, when I was growing up, before Vatican II, Mass was fascinating, because Mass was in Latin and it was much more of a ritual. You had this man wearing this kaftan, who was standing with his back to you, speaking in a language you didn't understand, and you had incense and candles and flowers and music.

THEODORE KERR: Right. So it's closer [00:22:00] to some of—it was, like, still a bland—I don't want to say bland, but it was closer to what you were used to.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. It had no religious significance for me, because I had stopped sort of believing in the Catholic church, and then Jesus stuff, by my first communion. When I turned 10, I had stopped. I was like, "This is bullshit," you know? But, I liked the ritual of it. Then, as I got older, I disliked it because then it was like, you know, "Do I really have to get up early to go? It's cold, it's snowing, why do I have to go to Mass? Does Jesus really care?"

THEODORE KERR: Right. Did you have faith still?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No.

THEODORE KERR: No?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not in Catholicism. Not in Catholicism. With some faith, you know, in the religion that I grew up in. But I also saw, as I was growing up, that it was filled with all sorts of stuff that was—you know, superstitions and stuff that were sort of like, [exhales]—so I walked away from that as well.

THEODORE KERR: And so you—in your life, you saw the difference between—after Vatican II.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh yeah, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Can you speak about that a bit?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sure. Well, they turned around the altar. You could see what the priest was doing now. Before, he was standing there with the kaftan, and he would be—and you didn't know what he was doing. But he turned around. The altars, you know—he stopped using the high altar in the back and they put a second altar where he could face you. Things were now in English, as opposed to Latin. And so it became a much less mysterious experience, which I know that a lot of people—I think a lot of old Catholics regret that, because it wasn't this magical, mystical experience any more. It became fairly mundane.

THEODORE KERR: Right, yeah, and easier to critique. [00:24:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes. So then he turned around and I saw him. He was speaking in English. You know, it had nothing for me. What do you do? You know, you would go into church, stand up, sit down, kneel. You stand up, sit down, kneel, for an hour. But it was a change because, suddenly, the church became more accessible. So you could understand what was happening. It didn't do anything or me. I disliked it just as much as I did before, but it was a huge change in the church.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I think it's one of those things that if you know about, it's the most obvious and interesting thing, and if you don't know about it, you can't imagine that this monumental change happened in people's lifetime.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: With a very old thing.

So I wanted to get back to the idea of you making these drawings for your—for the anniversary every year. Was it something that you had to remake every year?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not every year. Well, it depends on what my grandmother wanted.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So, there were times when she—there was a year she was like, "Oh, I don't want to do this one again," you know? But it was only my grandmother, which was the interesting thing about it. The rest of my family didn't—you know, like my mom, who became a *santera* as well, didn't have me do that for her, which was sort of—you know? Years later I thought, "That's weird. Grandma, I would do this for, but Mom would not want me to do that for her." So it was very interesting that my grandmother acknowledged my ability, but my parents didn't want to.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I mean, your grandma did a lot of special things for you.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She did, actually. She did do a lot of special things for me. She was pretty much one of the most influential people in my life because—you know. [00:22:00] And in ways that I'm still sort of figuring out now. I was her boy, that was sort of the weird thing about it. Although I was my mother's son, I was my grandmother's son. She had always wanted a son, so I was her son. So probably—you know, I would never say that I was spoiled, but I'm sure if I could get my female cousins in here and my sister—

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: I'm sure.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —they would have a totally different take on it.

THEODORE KERR: And did you and your grandmother talk about your sexuality?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, not—no, we didn't talk about it, no. We didn't talk about my sexuality. My mom—we never talked about sexuality actually.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Although, I'm pretty sure that everybody knew, you know? So it wasn't, you know, when I came out to my mother, that my mother was like, "What a surprise!" Which is always sometimes disappointing. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, right. When you deliver a line, you want it to land.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was like, "Really, you didn't know?"

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: And so you went to college here?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I went to State University of Oswego.

THEODORE KERR: Wait, I don't—I'm sorry, I don't know what that is.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not very many people do. It's up on Lake Ontario.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's the town of Oswego and there's New York State University. SUNY at Oswego is up there. College of Arts and Sciences, I think it's called.

THEODORE KERR: And what did you study?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I only went to school for a year. I went to school because— well, first I realized that I would not—because of my choice not to be a good student, you know? I think one of the first times that I started to understand consequences—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Like, Robert, the fact that you decided you were going to be a B-plus student or a B-minus student, means that you're not going to go to an A-plus school. So that was all knocked out for me. So I chose the State University of Oswego because it was the farthest I could get from my family and remain in the state.

I don't even think that it mattered that I remained in the state. It didn't, because I remember there was—I got a full scholarship to some school in Ohio, and my parents were like, "You're not going to Ohio, no." And I was fully like, "Yes, I'll go!" Because I wanted to get out of the housing projects, you know, I wanted to get away from this. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to already start experiencing the world. So I went to the State University up there. It's in the Snowbelt. It's rural New York, and if you know rural New York—I don't think that people understand rural New York at all.

THEODORE KERR: No.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They think of New York and they think of the city and it's like, no, actually, they're not necessarily hillbillies, but they're pretty fucking close up there, despite the fact they we're in New York State. So, I went up there to be away from my family. It's in the Snowbelt, which means it snows incessantly up there. I mean, it snows like, you know, a good four feet of snow. That was my first experience with that kind of weather, and that totally freaked me out.

But I went up there, as I said, to get away from the family. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I went to college because I was told I should go to college, and because—that's it, because I think I was told I should go to college and I couldn't figure out what else to do.

THEODORE KERR: Right, and your dad didn't even bother to try to get you to go to the military.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh no, he did. He did. [00:30:00]

THEODORE KERR: He did.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He did. He sort of floated it in front of me once and, you know, he got the hairy eyeball. "Well, you know you should go in," and I just looked at him like, "Really? Really?"

THEODORE KERR: "Are you meeting me for the first time?"

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Really. Those conversations didn't stick, huh? So yeah, I'm sure he would have wanted me to go into the military. But yeah, that wasn't even—I didn't consider that.

Yeah, it was the School of Arts and Sciences. I remember getting up there to the dorm. This is the first time I was away from my family for an extensive amount of time. The only other time had been when I went away to camp once, and that was sort of a weird experience. I'm a city kid, and so going to camp meant—and we lived in these sort of lean-tos. We didn't have cabins, you know, so you had a floor, a roof, four walls and bunk beds and then it was open. I got there and I was horrified. It was like, "What the fuck is this? Why aren't there—you know, why don't we have all our walls and doors and windows?" Stuff like that. I had never seen that much green. I mean, I had been to parks and stuff like that, but I had never seen that much green before in my life.

So I got into the dorm and it turned out that the floor of the dorm that I was in was the jock floor. I learned, you know. Because we got up there—I remember loading the trunk onto whatever it was, and then getting it up, the elevator doors opening, and a football flying by. And I went, "Oh, fuck, [00:32:00] really?" Sure enough, it was the jock floor. So I was just absolutely horrified by that, because my roommate, this guy Larry, was an absolute football jock. When I got up there, I thought to myself, "This is going to be hell," you know?

But what happened was that going down in the elevator, when I was going down, I bumped into two guys on the floor who were below us, who were potheads, and they were talking about getting stoned. They were complaining that the guy in their room was like a jock, and so it was like, "Ah! This is the opportunity." And so I switched floors. So I was able to switch floors and moved into the floor, which was—[laughs] you know, instead of the football flying by, you would see clouds of weed. So I was there and that actually is what made it livable, the fact that I switched floors, got away from the jocks, and hung out with the potheads and other musicians, artists, and folks who were up there.

THEODORE KERR: In that year, did you make friends?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I did. I did. In that year, the rooms had three people in them, and so I acquired a girlfriend and a boyfriend, and made some friends. Yeah, I made a bunch of friends while I was there. I was not with my family. I could live sort of—there was not a lot of—there was not stuff I had to hide. I didn't have to hide the whole religious thing in school. It didn't make any difference in college.

THEODORE KERR: It was [00:34:00] far away.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. People didn't know what the fuck it was anyway. This was upstate New York, so they had no clue. And also, it was obvious, you know, that up there, people were out. There were guys who were gay and it was not such a big deal either, so I didn't necessarily have to hide my sexuality. So I ended up with one of my roommates becoming my—I was going to say first boyfriend, but he wasn't my first boyfriend. But we dated for—we were together for a bit.

THEODORE KERR: Meaning that you had a boyfriend before that, or he wasn't a boyfriend?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I had a boyfriend before that. I was the president of the library club and I was dating the captain of the basketball team.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was my boyfriend. Unfortunately, I could not be the homecoming queen.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Wow, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, yeah. I don't know how that happened. But yes, so I had had sort of boyfriends by then. A couple. So yeah, Jim and I just sort of—I don't know how it—I actually do not recall. He is now, like, married, went straight, with kids, living in Utica.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, yeah. That doesn't sound fun for me, but—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Wow, I mean, this says that you were emotionally maturing.



ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I realized that—well, living in a room with three people means that you can't be the solitary person, you know? So no matter how solitary I wanted to be, it didn't matter because I was living in this room with three other people, so they were going to be in the room. That was okay. You know, that didn't bother me, because we got along. For the first time, I had the sense of feeling that I was in a group of people, or with a group of people, I got along with. So it became a bunch of us, and we were known [00:36:00] as, like, the potheads. Two of us actually were pot dealers, by coincidence.

So, we were able to sort of hang out and go to classes and stuff like that, and it was a totally different experience for me. But because it was not—because I walked away from the very, very restrictive, repressive atmosphere of Catholic school—going to college, what happened was I stopped going to class. Class was now optional, you know? So I didn't go. My drug use changed, because when I was in high school, I was taking acid a lot, to get through class. So I would be tripping, sitting in class, and it actually made it tolerable for me and it made it interesting for me. But I didn't have to do—you know, I didn't have to sort of self-medicate in that way when I got to college. Now it became totally recreational. So I was able to be in a group, a small group of men and women who became friends, got along, and hung out.

THEODORE KERR: Was it interesting to be in close quarters with—in school with women, because you had been to an all-boys school?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, it was, actually. It was interesting. Although in some ways it was still similar because, you know, I was in a male dorm.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. But yes, it was interesting. And because I had grown up with women, I was comfortable with them. I wasn't one of these gay men that—"Oh, I hate women." I didn't hate women, I grew up with women, so I got along with them. So it was fine. Well, it was totally different. It was night and day. [00:38:00] I mean, I had to wear uniforms from second grade up until I graduated high school. Now, I could wear whatever the fuck I wanted. We had haircut checks in school.

THEODORE KERR: So that is a huge—this is a big shift.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: This is a huge shift. I'm not in New York City, so I've already left my base of operations. I'm not surrounded by Latinos actually at all. I mean, there was a very small group of Latinos on campus, as well as a small group of African Americans on campus, and what I realized was they stayed together all the time, and I thought, "Why do I want to do that? I mean, why do I want to sit here with people who look like me, sound like me, and have a similar experience?" That just bores me. I knew a couple of African Americans and a couple Latinos, but we rarely hung out, because I was like, you know, "We're going to sit here and listen to salsa? I did that with my family for the first part of my life, I'm not going to do that." So I started to meet all these people from around the state, which was interesting. And got a sense of "Oh, alright"—oh, and non-Catholics. I met Jews. [Laughs.] I met Jews and Protestants.

It was years later that I realized like I had been living, essentially, in a Catholic—aside from the Santeria, I had been living in a Catholic world. You know? And my friends were Catholic, the people I went to school with were Catholic. Suddenly, I wasn't surrounded by Catholics anymore. So that was really interesting, to especially hang out with my Jewish friends. But then it was also—so I met folks from—you know, I met people from all over. And it was really fun, because—I was really obnoxious, because people would say, "Where are you from?" And I would say, "The city."

THEODORE KERR: [00:40:00] And they would say, "Albany?" [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly. That was the first time people started questioning me, like, "Oh, what city is that?" It's like, "Well, yeah." I learned that. But what happened was, once I realized that I didn't have to go to class—well, I did have to go, but I chose not to. I stopped going. Because first, I was presented with things that were not interesting to me. Like we were studying—oceanography was the first science class that I had to take. I have no interest in oceanography. In my English class, I had—although some of my teachers—graduating from high school, some of my teachers said, "You should be a writer." They said, "You're very articulate, you write really well, you should become a writer." So I think that that was sort of in the back of my mind, that maybe I'll become a writer. The visual artist, I had tossed out, unfortunately. And so I said, "Alright, I'll become a writer." But what happened was I went to my first class in English, and the first day in class, I corrected my teacher three times.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Like for grammar?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For grammar and for two things about Shakespeare. "No, that character is in blah blah blah." So, you know, from that moment on, I could see that, "Alright, he and I are not going to get along."

I've just publicly shamed him coming out of the gate, so I thought, "Alright." And then the other classes, I wasn't interested in.

Then what happened was that my boyfriend Jim, who was one of the pot dealers, was a really bad dealer. He's one of these dealers who would show up [00:42:00] with weed, you know, "Let's get stoned!" And it was like, you haven't sold anything. And being much more pragmatic than he was, I took over his business. So I started selling weed, but at the same time—I started selling weed, which is fine. I stopped going to—I really stopped going to class, so my first year I failed out. And my parents were like, "Well, you know, what the fuck is this?" I thought, "Well, I'll do better next year." That's what I said: "I'll do better next year." I got back up there and I had no desire to. And I started looking for work, to see—what happened? I was no longer in the dorm, we moved out of the dorm.

THEODORE KERR: You and Jim?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Jim and I. Well, what happened was there were a group of us. There were about 10 of us—five men, five women, something like that—and we found this big old Victorian house in town. And so we moved in, to do sort of a communal thing. What happened was there were four couples and two singles, and each of the four couples got a bedroom, and then one of the single folks, I think, got a small room, and then there was the attic that they took.

Jim and I—while we were there, Jim and I broke up. I moved up into the attic. And then he actually had a girlfriend. By that time, I realized, I had realized, "Okay, I'm gay, obviously, this is what I'm doing." And then he obviously realized that he was not. Or he was still having—I'm sorry, he was still having questions about it.

So in the second year of college, [00:44:00] what happened was that we—I didn't even know what I was studying. I wasn't even bothering to study. My parents were sort of like, "What the fuck?" My parents had been divorced, my mother was living with my sister, and my mother was sort of like, "What the fuck are you doing up there?" You know, "We're paying for you to do what?" It really was like Robert on vacation sort of. But what happened was there was an incident in the—the house that I was in, was myself and an African American guy whose name is Al, and everyone else was white. So what happened was—and I also lived with a girl, the young woman who had been my girlfriend the first year. She was dating my ex-roommate. It's—you know?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, a small town.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, and incestuous. So she was dating my other roommate from my first year. They got together. What happened was that one day, someone—I actually know who did. She had her rent money sort of visible in one spot, and I had walked into her room and walked out, you know, and I knew that someone else had walked in after me, but what happened was that her money was missing and they accused me. It was actually the first time that I had a very clear, like, "Oh, you're doing this because I'm dark-skinned, aren't you? Because you don't think that any of the white folks would do this at all." So it was like, "Oh, alright, cool." So I left. I just—I was furious. I was telling them I didn't do this, and I actually confronted the guy who had stolen it, and I said, "Bruce, why did you do this?" He said, "I didn't do this," and I said, "You did do this." [00:46:00]

So I ended up leaving school in the middle of the second year, at the end of the first semester, and got back to New York. What happened was that Jim said to—Jim called me. He had gone home. He was in Utica during the break, and he said, "I have a cousin who's living in Miami. Why don't we hitchhike down to Miami?"

THEODORE KERR: After you guys had broken up?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: After we had broken up. So what happened was we got sort of back together again and we actually took a bus. We left. I told my parents I'm out of here, I'm not going back to school, I have no interest in school. They were like, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I have no clue, I'm just leaving." So he and I grabbed a bus to Miami. It's a day on the bus, I don't recommend it to anyone. And we got to Miami. We were 19 maybe, 19 or 20. No money, no education outside of high school. No idea what life is in Miami. He's from upstate New York and I'm from New York City, so of course I'm carrying around my arrogant New Yorker chip, constantly, like, "Where are you from? The city." For years, I would say that to people. "I'm from the city, the city."

And so we were down there and what happened was we were homeless for about four days. Going into shelters, food kitchens. After the fourth day I said, "I am not doing any more of this stuff. I am sorry. I am not doing this shit." I walked into, I guess, the state employment agency or something like that, to look for a job. [00:48:00] And that day, I got two job interviews and then I said, "Alright, we need a place to live." So, there was sort of this SRO that we had seen, and I walked up to the guy who managed it. Alright, this is '75, okay?

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I remember when I started talking to him. He had an afro. I had an afro, he had an afro, and he was wearing like a Kiana shirt and hot pants and stuff. That was our super, yeah. And his girlfriend used to dress like him. First, we didn't know what his story was, until we saw the person he was with and it's like, "Oh, that's a woman who is sort of wearing what he's wearing." It was like, "Okay, now we know." So, in the course of several hours, I got a job and a place to live. So, we ended up moving in and I became the manager of a military hat factory. Yeah, it was run by this old Jewish couple and they made hats for the Air Force and the Marines, strangely enough.

THEODORE KERR: Yes, strangely enough.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Strangely enough, for the Air Force and the Marines. I had a hundred seamstresses who were Cuban, none of whom spoke English. So I became the—you know, first I was the assistant. I think they wanted me to be the cleanup guy, the assistant, something like that. I ended up managing the factory because my boss realized that I could talk to the—since I spoke Spanish fluently, I could talk to the women and we could communicate fairly easily. He liked me, and because I was the poor, young, Puerto Rican boy by himself, you know, the skinny boy, [00:50:00] it was there, I got adopted by—I had like a hundred Cuban mothers.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, my God. [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Some of whom wanted to set me up with their daughters.

THEODORE KERR: With their daughters, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But at the same time that I was there, that I got down there, I developed a heroin addiction. So [laughs], I would be sitting in my office, you know, a knock on the door. I just shot up, you know, because I was using, and it was like, "Okay, the Air Force is here to do the inspection." Alright, let's do this, you know? And I would do all this stuff. How I got away with it is still something that I don't understand, because in my recollection—or maybe I wasn't as obvious as I thought I was, in terms of using, but what I realized when I was down there was that I was very unhappy. We're going to pause now because I have to pee again.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So, we're good?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, we're good.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So, throughout this entire process, high school to college, I haven't stopped drawing. I'm drawing constantly. I'm reading and drawing constantly. I'm developing this kind of visual language that I found fascinating, this abstract—I was more interested in abstraction than in reality. Again, one of my arrogant, "Robert in his 20s" assessments, like: "Are you going to paint it so it looks real? Why not just take a picture? That's just a waste of time, you know, and materials. Why do you want to copy reality? That makes no sense to me." [00:52:00]

So I was fascinated by abstraction, and I was fascinated with Mayan art and Egyptian art, first and foremost. So that sort of was part of what I was doing when I was drawing. I think I even have stuff from that time. At the same time, I was looking at European art history. For example, the first book that I owned, I think—yeah, I think the first book that I owned was this book about Michelangelo that I stole from the high school library, because I was sort of fascinated with—did you go—have you seen the show?

THEODORE KERR: No, I haven't seen it yet.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's amazing.

THEODORE KERR: The one up at the Met?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The one up at the Met. So it's become—so he actually became sort of the first artist that I was aware of, and then of course I'm a gay man, of course, and was fascinated by. So as I was growing older, I mean, I kept working, I kept drawing, I kept doing things. So people knew that I was sort of visually oriented in school. But again, without understanding what the resources were or anyone to give me sort of direction as to what happened, I always thought to myself—I mean, when I was a kid, I thought of myself as—when people say what are you, when I was a smaller kid I was like, "Oh, I'm going to be an artist. I'm a visual artist, that's what I want to be." Then as I was growing up, I had to give that away, because it didn't seem feasible.

So I think that what happens is when I got to Florida, I was depressed, because I had found that life in New York was not the life that I wanted, life in upstate New York was certainly not the life that I wanted, and I was in Miami

and I had no idea what to do. I was the manager of a fucking military hat company. It was like, "You're [00:54:00] getting back at me, aren't you?"

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was, like, you fuck with your father about being a Marine, you know, you argue with him and stuff like that, and look at what you're doing. You're making uniforms.

So I told you, I was really unhappy, so I was doing heroin, I was drinking. I was a functioning addict. I was doing my job without any problem. And nobody, I think, knew what was happening. But I just didn't know what I was going to do, and I realized that I had this love of art, of drawing, of being creative, and I couldn't figure out how I could do anything about that. So it was really difficult to—it was a really difficult period for me.

Finally, when I was down there and I went to see a doctor in Miami after about a year, and he's doing a variety of tests on me. And he said, "You know, you keep going and you can fuck up your liver pretty effectively in about a year if you continue doing this." So I went, "Oh, well"—part of me went, "Oh, okay cool, I've got a year," you know? But the other one was like, "Oh, what are you doing? What are you doing? You have to do something." So I stopped using. It wasn't as horrific for me as it has been for other people and is for other people, so I was able to walk away.

THEODORE KERR: But Jim was using as well?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, Jim was not using. Jim was just drinking. Jim was going through a quart of Tanqueray a day, or so. Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. And the heroin was something you found on your own?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. Well, I had known. I mean, I had known about it. I had tried it in high school. What happened was that when we got to Florida, [00:56:00] being in the shelters, I met a lot of shady people [laughs], some of whom were very useful.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? And consequently, a couple of those guys—because when I got there it was like, "Oh, I need a weed connection." And from the weed connection, you know, I said—and let me say, pot is not a gateway drug. But I started to, you know, started to experiment, and heroin was great because heroin made me feel good, given the situation that I was in.

THEODORE KERR: How would you describe it emotionally, the situation you were in?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I felt very frustrated and confused. I felt that there was this path or this life that I wanted to follow, I wanted to lead, but I had no idea how to get there. I didn't have that sort of—you know, there are some people that have that single-minded drive, that, "This is what I want to do in my life," you know? "I'm a painter and I'm going to paint," and they do it. I didn't have that kind of drive to do that. One, because I think I'm also way too aware of the world, and too very much interested in what's happening around me, to sort of narrow my focus in that way. So I was—you know, the relationship was okay, but, I mean, the job sucked. We had no social life at all, you know. We would be home and get high, and I didn't know what to do.

THEODORE KERR: Like big, big picture, you didn't know what to do.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, I had no clue.

THEODORE KERR: Like existential.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I had no clue what to do. I was standing there at the beginning of my life going, "I have no idea what I'm going to do with the rest of this."

THEODORE KERR: And you hadn't seen examples of other lives that you were like, [00:58:00] "That's what I want."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, not at all, not at all. I had not seen anything. So I was still reading, I was doing some drawing, not very much, and working. And I was there for two years. In that time, what I did start to discover was sort of a sex life, you know. It's the '70s. [Laughs.] You know, cue the disco music.

THEODORE KERR: Totally. And you're two young men.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly. I am a smart—you know, pretty. I would flinch when guys would say that

to me.

THEODORE KERR: When they would say you were pretty?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Pretty, yeah. You know, because I grew up with—because I grew up with my macho father, it doesn't mean that the macho stuff did not take in any way.

THEODORE KERR: So if someone said you were a hunk that was okay, but pretty?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I didn't like pretty, you know? Yeah, pretty was like—

THEODORE KERR: To quote Beyoncé, "pretty hurts."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] So I was—you know, that would frustrate me. Because of course, my image of masculinity was something that was developed by women. I learned about men from women, not from men necessarily. I observed men and saw things in their behavior that I didn't like and that I didn't want to emulate, but I ended up growing up with these very mixed messages about masculinity from the women in my family. They were a bunch of bitter women, bitter Latinas, you know, so that was quite confusing for me.

It was the mid-'70s, it was the Bicentennial, and so I started going out. Jim and I stopped having sex not too long [01:00:00] after we both sort of—you know, once he's drinking and I started using, we were not interested. And I think that our—sort of what happened between us had ended. He had a really difficult time finding work. He was Irish, of Irish descent, long black hair and blue eyes. Sort of that—what's it called? Black Irish. And for whatever reason, he could not find work. So he ended up doing jobs that were really shitty.

And I had a job that was essentially great. My boss loved me. If I had stayed, I probably would have ended up owning the factory. He was very much, he and his wife—he was an old Jewish man and his wife, and they really loved me, you know? So my situation was fine. Jim was really miserable and so he left after a while. And then when I was living there by myself it was like, "Oh, wait a minute, I can go out."

THEODORE KERR: "I'm an adult in the world."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I'm an adult in the world. My rent is paid [laughs], you know, I'm not hurting. Let me start hanging out and doing stuff. So, consequently, it was the '70s in Miami. '76, the year I discovered poppers, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So that was—so, what happened was I was there and I was unhappy. When Jim left I was by myself. I didn't feel I was connected to anyone down there, even though I don't like to be connected to people.

THEODORE KERR: You wanted a community.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I wanted some sort of community and I found that I could not—you know, that the occasional guys that I was fucking with did not make a community, and the Cubans that I knew were too similar to my family for me to have any desire to be next to them at all. So I felt very isolated down there. I had no concept [01:02:00] of any sort of art scene. There was no art scene in the '70s in Miami.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track02.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Miami was filled with rabid Cubans and dying Jews, that was it. So there was nothing there. So I was there going, "What am I going to do?" The first thing I did was I stopped using heroin. And then I said, "You know what? Let me go back up to New York. Let me go back up to New York and figure out what I want to do."

THEODORE KERR: Because it was familiar or because you still had that idea, like, that's the city?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think it was familiar. Two things. One, it was familiar, but two, it was New York. It was like, "You know what? This is the center of the universe." You know?

THEODORE KERR: It wasn't just your hometown.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. It wasn't just my hometown, it was New York City. Everything is in New York City, you know, I can figure it out there. And especially, I thought to myself, if I'm going to be—if I

wanted, in any way, to be any sort of artist, then I have to be back in New York. So that's what I did, in 1976. At the end of '76, I moved back up to New York and moved in with my family for—I lived with my mother and my sister.

THEODORE KERR: Wow, and you were 20?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Twenty-one.

THEODORE KERR: Twenty-one, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, around there. Yeah, 21, 21. I moved in with my mother and my sister. That was hellish. Hellish and fun at the same time, because one of the things that happened was—growing up surrounded by these women, my mother was very certain—you know, said to me, "I don't want you"—and my parents used to say this all the time: "I do not want you to depend on anyone. I want you to be able to take care of yourself, be self-sufficient." So what happened was my mother taught me how to cook. You know, all the domestic arts, I knew them. I knew them better than my sister did. So that, for example, when my sister is going on a date, my sister said, "Could you iron this for me?" Or, "Could you sew this?" So, that's what I would do for my sister.

THEODORE KERR: That's nice. [00:02:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But at the same time what happens is—I was living there, my mother had moved to Parkchester, which is like Stuyvesant Town, up in the Bronx. What happened was some of my relatives, especially my cousin Joey, had moved up there, and was just mere feet away from where my mom lived. And this was my out gay cousin. So, what I started to do was I started to hang out with him. I was looking for work and got work. I got some jobs in, you know, manual stuff. I mean mailroom clerk, and shipping and delivery stuff. Because I didn't have a—you know, I had decided after college—when I left I said, "I'm not going to school, I don't need it." You know?

And I had realized that I wanted the world. I wanted to see the world and experience the world, and I wasn't going to do it sitting in a classroom and studying, and learning a shitload of things that I realized that I would never need in my life. So for example, the oceanography. Not that I have anything against oceanography or oceanographers, but it was like, "You know what? I'm not interested in this shit." I'm sorry, I don't use calculus, still don't use it. So college—I had written off college, because it wasn't going to give me at least that kind of academic thing, and for some—art school wasn't possible for me. So I returned to New York, lived with my mom, and started hanging out with my cousin Joey. I think that's where I sort of came into my own as a gay man.

THEODORE KERR: And he's like five years older than you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was 11—hold on. He was 10 years older than me.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was 10 years older than me, so he was in his early 30s. I was in my [00:04:00] 20s. And so it was the '70s. I became—I was a young gay man living in New York City. You know, unfortunately with my mom and my sister. So I sort of experienced that whole—and it was really interesting because at that time, you know, I started to understand sort of a network of gay men, how important it is to have that sort of network around you. So I would hang out with my cousin and his friends, who were all older than me. They were all around his age. And it was a bunch of Latino gay men. And so that was—so, I got to sort of hang out with them and sort of see what that life was like, which was actually a lot of fun. What happened was—as what happens as a young gay man—you go out into the world. And there was a time where—it still happens. There was a time where the bars were not as segregated.

THEODORE KERR: Are you talking about race, age, gender?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm talking about all of them, including class. There was a time in the bars that everybody went to the bars. Everybody went to the bars, period, so that you would meet everyone there. So for example, because I was well-spoken, I met older men who—and I remember one of them would say to me, "You know, you're the only one I can take out, you know how to behave." I know. And at the time, part of me was like, "Fuck you." And the other time it was like, "Oh yeah, take me out." You know?

THEODORE KERR: Right, yeah, of course. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Yeah sure, sure." So what happened was I started going out and meeting all of these different people and starting [00:06:00] to see the world differently. I was with a guy. I was dating this guy who was an illustrator, who one day said, "Dress up a little bit and meet me here." He was an illustrator. He did

children's books. His editor was Jackie O. And so we went to lunch with Jackie O.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I know. I didn't say anything. I was just, you know, a total fan boy, like—you know? I talked and stuff like that. But, so, what I realized was—and then I realized that, "Oh, you know, as a gay man, your access to things change." Your access to the world can change because of the relationships you have with people.

THEODORE KERR: And you're talking about, as a gay man, your relationships with gay men?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: With gay men and with the world, because what happened was, for example, with the gay—I started to go to situations that I realized that I never would have ended up. Like, I had met one of the Cartier heirs at some bar, who then—you know, we fucked around a couple of times. But I went to some party at his place and his penthouse is like, "Oh, is that a Degas on the wall? Yeah, it's a real one." You know? That kind of stuff.

So, I mean what I found was that because I was young, because I was smart, and because I was pretty, doors opened. Which is, you know, just the typical tale of youth, doors opened for me. But for a kid who grew up essentially working poor, in a real shitty neighborhood, suddenly the world opened up in a way that was astounding, absolutely astounding.

At the same time is when I started to see sort of—I had known them [00:08:00] before but they became blatantly apparent, things like the inequities about gender, the inequities in class and stuff like that. You know, I just started to see this stuff, so a more active racial consciousness started forming at that time. I met guys who were black and white. I met some German count from Bavaria, who wanted me to move back to Bavaria with him, and it's like I'm not—you know, I'm like "No, I'm not sitting in some Schloss."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: What am I doing here? You know? It was that kind of weird world that opened up for me. A world of money, essentially, a world of money suddenly. It was like, wow, you know? And I thought, "Hmm, this is interesting." And what it did was it allowed me to see the world from a different perspective.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Did you start to meet artists or did art become more a part of your life?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I started to meet artists, yes. I started to meet artists, although by that time, living with my mom, I was not doing anything arts related. I was not doing anything arts related, or writing or anything. That came later. But I started to meet artists. I started to go to museums. I started to—

THEODORE KERR: As part of that homo-social world.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, exactly, exactly. And finally realizing, "Oh, I can do this on my own." So for example, I remember going to see *The Treasures of Tutankhamen*.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, what's this?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The Met had a show. They had a show of all the King Tut stuff, in the '70s some time, and I remember going to see that and just sort of realizing like, "Oh, my God, this is what museums do [00:10:00] and I can do this." Finally, the world of art, or the visual arts, if you will, suddenly became available, if not to actually make work, but at least to participate and see it.

And so that's part of what happened, is that I was—I got to go to some Met soirée things and stuff like that, just from the guys that I would meet. One of the things I realized—one of the things that I should back up with actually—is when I was growing up, they [demonstrates accent] talk like they're from the Bronx, okay? The Spanish is just Puerto Rican Spanish, but everybody else [demonstrates accent] talks like—you know, like they [demonstrates accent] talk like New Yorkers.

So one of the things that I realized that I was not going to do was talk like my family. So I made a very—as I was growing up, made a very clear attempt to drop my New York accent, which I did. It only surfaces if I'm really tired or really fucked up, and it's only a couple of words that you can tell, but I decided to drop that and develop this very neutral accent.

So when people would see me and I opened up my mouth and started speaking, they would be thoroughly confused by me, which still happens if I speak to people on the phone and they don't see me, and then when they see me they're—you know? And it's always fun for me, because I'll just go, "Oh, I'm sorry I'm not white. You thought I was white, didn't you? Sorry. [Laughs.] No, not all of us, you know? Not all of us are like that."

But because I did that and cultivated that, [00:12:00] and so I realized that that was one of the things that helped me move into that homo-social world. So people would, you know—and what happened as well is when I was—I would go out to the clubs with my cousin and his friends, and we would go out to the Latino gay clubs. There were two in the Bronx. There was one that was called El Exclusivo, which mean the Exclusive in Spanish, and the other one was El Apartamento, the Apartment.

THEODORE KERR: Was it literally an apartment?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was literally—it was actually an empty building, and like on the third floor, the entire third floor was a club.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, my God. Do you remember where?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was down in the South Bronx. It was like at 141st Street and 3rd Avenue, something like that.

THEODORE KERR: And how did you hear about it? Well, your cousins knew about it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My cousins. I was in the Latino gay network, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. And who was there? Latino gay guys.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, everybody was there. My first experience of gay bars were that they were not strictly gay. So when you went to the bars—well, when I went to the Latino bars, everyone was there. So the lesbians were there, and the gay men were there, and drag queens were there, and everybody was there.

THEODORE KERR: Everyone was Latino, or no?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Everyone was pretty much Latino, except for the occasional white guy who would walk in, and everyone would say like, "Ah, we know what—you know, the great white hunter has arrived."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But everyone was Latino there, and we would listen to disco music and salsa, and stuff like that. There were drag shows. I'll always remember one of the transgender—now what we I guess would call transgender women—would always tell me, "You know, you have such good bone structure." You know where I'm going. "You know, you're small and you have such nice—you know, [00:14:00] you should do drag."

THEODORE KERR: "You're pretty," yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly. "You should do drag." And it was like, "I'm not doing drag!" But I remember—and so the lesbians did security, and everybody would go. So my first sort of experience in gay bars was that everybody went to the gay bar and it was perfectly normal and natural to see gay men and lesbians hang out together. But what I also realized, as I was learning about the Latino gay world, is that the Latino gay world was very much defined by, if you will, gender roles. So you had sort of the more masculine guys and you had the queens. And that's the way it was divided. So you were either butch or you were femme, and the same way that the lesbians were.

THEODORE KERR: And do you think that that correlated to top and—was that a way of signifying top and bottom?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That was—exactly, that's what I was going to say, it signified top and bottom.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So what happened for me was that I had never picked a side.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So it became very—so even then there at the bars, I confused people, because I wasn't overly femme and I wasn't very macho. So they never knew what to—you know, and I remember people were like, "So what do you do, what are you into?" Sort of like, "What's wrong with you?" You know? So that made it—you know, it was a little difficult but it was fun. I could care less.

THEODORE KERR: Because you were again, like, standing in the kitchen door.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was, exactly. I was standing there, sort of on the bridge, again. So that was



interesting but it was funny. It went on for several years, actually. And I met—and it [00:16:00] was funny, because it was—I met my grandfather's sister at the bar once.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My grand-aunt was in a suit on a date with some woman. So it was fun and what happened was—so I was living this life where I was hanging out with my cousin and doing the Latino gay stuff. I was also meeting guys of other ethnicities, mainly white—a couple black guys but mainly white—who would then take me to things because I could behave.

So I was realizing like, "Oh, my God"—I found myself again, in two worlds that did not seem to be coming together. Or I didn't—I had not developed the group of folks that could help me bridge the differences that I was experiencing in those worlds. More and more, throughout this whole thing, especially being, then, surrounded by Latino gay men and seeing what the Latino gay male life was, as opposed to the white gay male life was. So, for example, like poverty. You start to see that, you know, jokes about welfare—with the groups of Latino gay men that I knew, jokes about welfare, we would all laugh and talk about it, and everyone had an experience with it. But not when I moved in—you know, not in the white world. They did not have—you know, did not talk about it. It was something that was filled with shame. You know, drug abuse and prison was something that were common topics. They were sort of the realities of our lives, but not the realities of those lives. And so more and more, I started seeing these—you know, started understanding the different worlds that I was inhabiting [00:18:00] and that I was moving through, and once again understanding that I don't feel comfortable in any of these.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? None of these are my world.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. This idea that—it seems to me that you're also saying, like, this idea of having to choose was not something you were interested in pursuing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, exactly. I didn't want to choose, you know, because—and I've always felt this. The minute you make a choice, then you close a door, you know. And sometimes you make the choice, you close the door, that's fine. But it was like, "No, why do I—why?" Because I said, "You know what, I grew up in such"—what I found was such a small limited world of people who did not want to look—I lived with family members who never go to Manhattan, who lived in the Bronx and never went to Manhattan.

THEODORE KERR: Because they felt like it wasn't for them?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was that they didn't go. They just didn't go to Manhattan. "There's nothing for me in Manhattan," you know? And I was like, "How can you do that?" So, in many ways I'm still like that with my family. Now they call me a freak affectionately, but it's sort of like, "Why can't you do"—you know? So like, the young generation or young Latinos in my family, we have—you know, I tell them, "Go! Please get out of the fucking Bronx."

So—but I realized that you have to have—for me, my drive, my hunger was to experience the world, to experience the world in all of its complexities. And the minute that you deny me that experience, I really get pissed off, you know, and say, "Why can't I do this?" As I was in my early 20s, I was beginning to have that experience of, "Wait a minute, why can't I do this? Why can't I just"—you know, and having the experiences of walking into places and being stopped, you know, walking with what might be my white date, going in and they're looking at me like, [00:20:00] "Who are you?"

THEODORE KERR: Or making assumptions about who you are to him.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. So it was—I was learning and beginning to see the world in a way that was very different. In a way that was—I mean, my vision of the world was always racialized, obviously. But it was now becoming much more conscious and I was beginning to see the effects of what that racialization were.

THEODORE KERR: Were you giving dispatches to your mom and sister? Were you like, "You'll never guess what I saw today"?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sometimes, sometimes. I remember going to the Cockring.

THEODORE KERR: This is a sex club?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: This was—no, it's just—

THEODORE KERR: Just a bar?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Just a bar at the end of Christopher Street, where Bailey House is now.

THEODORE KERR: Okay [laughs], wonderful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, that was the Christopher Street Hotel, and the first floor was the Cockring. The Cockring had a stamp. It was circular and it said "Cockring" on it.

THEODORE KERR: It said cock and then the ring, or it said Cockring?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It had a ring, a circle, and then it said Cockring, in like Arial or Futura.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And they would stamp you there.

THEODORE KERR: Right in the web between your thumb and your finger.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, well because I have E.T. hands and I have these—so they would stamp me right there. And so I remember having breakfast—I think they stamped me on this hand, on my right hand—and I was having breakfast with my mother and my sister, and my mother was like, "What's that on your hand?" You know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And kind of like, "Oh." So I'm like, "I don't know, what's that on my hand?" And I went, "Oh, Cockring, okay. Oh, just a stamp from the club that I was in last night." Because my mother did not want to—I mean, my mother acknowledged that I was gay, she understood that I was a gay man. She did not want to talk about it. She did not want to know about it at all.

THEODORE KERR: Like the specificity or the sex?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The specificity of it. She didn't want to hear about, "Oh, I was at"—you know? I mean, if I told her what I was doing, it would have to be thoroughly neutral: [00:22:00] "I was with friends at some place." My mother was very, very anti-drug. So she did not—she had no idea of the fact that I was using recreational drugs at all. At the same time, my mother worked in a hospital. This is back in the day when drug reps would walk around and give people samples.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So my mother had this night table drawer that had Darvon and Seconal, and I mean, all of these—so it was like, "Candy!" Although, you know, you had to be judicious, because she would notice if they were all gone or something like that.

THEODORE KERR: All at once?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, but you know. My mother was totally anti-pills—she's still anti-pills—so that, you know, she would get these medicines and then she would just toss them into the drawer.

THEODORE KERR: Like even for well-being?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She has to talk herself into taking medication and pills and stuff like that. It's something that my sister and I have given up on, and it's reached a point now where it's like, "Well, die then, just die."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, "Just die. What do you want me to tell you? Die, you know, that's all." And so I was always—you know, so I had all of these drugs, access to these drugs, but my mother didn't know that I was taking them at all. She didn't figure out that I was using drugs until she found a joint in my bedroom after I moved out for college, that was like a joint I had lost three or four years ago. She was like, "Are you using drugs?" It was like, "Not that one."

THEODORE KERR: Right, not any more. I have a question about the Bronx. There's the famous cruising staircase. Do you know it? It's like this huge set of stairs outside, and like, one side was the police station and the other side was for cruising. [00:24:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: In the Bronx?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Is it 161 or—it's like right at a train stop. I can bring you a picture tomorrow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Okay, okay. Was it around—

THEODORE KERR: But did you cruise?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, it was hard to cruise up there, because there were not any specific cruising areas that I knew of or that my friends—well, two things. First was people would talk about tearooms all the time and I had no idea what they were. I thought they were tearooms.

THEODORE KERR: As you would. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But people were talking about tearooms all the time. So that was part of something that was talked about. So what happened was, one day—the old train stations and the subways in New York, especially the elevated ones, were much more complicated. You know, subways had bathrooms. There was a time all the subway stations had toilets in them.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. And guess who would use them, you know? So there were train stations that were notorious for people fucking around in the—in the '70s, guys fucking around in the bathrooms in particular train stations. Until they closed them, it became sort of, like, just, you know, you went in to have sex. You didn't necessarily go in to pee or anything else.

But one day—the old train stations, they had these—you would be up on the platform, you would come downstairs—I'm talking about the elevated trains—and you would have bathrooms on sort of this mezzanine level. And they had waiting rooms outside of them. So, it would have a room that was maybe half of the size of this room, with a bench that went all the way around, and windows, and then the stalls and stuff were inside. You went through a door and they were inside.

And so one day [00:26:00] I'm coming back home and my cousin and a bunch of his friends are sitting in sort of the waiting room, smoking cigarettes, you know? And I was like, "This is a weird place for them to be hanging out." So, you know, so I walk in like, "Hey!" And we start talking. The train pulls up, the guys go into the bathroom. They go into the bathroom after. And when they walked in I went, "Oh, this is a tearoom."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because I had visions of tearooms, like, you know, queens drinking tea.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right, you were thinking Victorian, nice lace.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. And so it was like, "Oh, no, this is a tearoom." That's where I started to understand the whole sort of surreptitious cruising places where guys were going. I knew that guys were going into the park and I knew guys were getting picked up in cars and stuff like that. And so I started to see sort of the hidden sexual world of gay men in my early 20s, living here in New York. There were some places that were ostensibly gay. Like there was a section in Riis Park that was gay. There was a section in Orchard Beach that was gay. So I learned about the various gay sections. I was a little too shy to go have sex outside, so I never went to the tearooms. I never went to the bathhouses. I knew about the bathhouses as well. I had gone down to see the piers. I don't swim. Those piers were, you know—so it was like, "I'm not going out there," [00:28:00] you know, I don't—for me it's like, "Dangerous sex, I don't need to have that, I don't need that thrill."

THEODORE KERR: Do you think you're a romantic?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was.

THEODORE KERR: Oh [laughs]!

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Okay, Latino music, we have *boleros*, which are love songs. If you ever listened to boleros—the stuff that I was growing up with, when I was growing up in the '60s and '70s—the tone is very intense in boleros. "I love you so much that I'm never going to see you again. I'm clawing my eyes out, so I never see again, because I will never see you." That kind of super fucked up, you know, romance stuff. That was considered normal, that was okay. "Oh, I love that song! That song is so pretty! I wish someone would kill themselves over me!"

You know, that kind of—and that's what I grew up with and that's what I saw as romance. I thought that's really profoundly fucked up, and I also found that it was also really manipulative, because you're singing like, "I'm

going to hurt myself if you don't love me," so you make the choice of either loving the person or they hurt themselves. So I also began to get this very cynical perspective about love and romance, because I thought it was—I would tell people, "Romance manipulates you, so I am not a romantic, because I do not want to manipulate someone I'm with and I did not want to be manipulated." But it was—I don't know, it was either shyness or a desire for privacy, that I just did not want—and I think it was scary. I mean, I don't want to go to have sex in a place [00:30:00] where I might get arrested. That's not a thrill for me, the fact that I might get arrested.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, so you didn't grow up with the mindset that what you were doing was illicit, in the same way that maybe earlier generations did?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, I knew it was illicit. I knew that society didn't approve of it. At no point in my life growing up, even when I started to think of myself as homosexual, did I think it was wrong. I never thought it was wrong. I had heard what the church said, but I also saw the priests fucking the students. I had heard what some other men in my family said, and I also knew that they were fucking around with guys. So, you know, I knew that there was a very public world that said one thing, but the reality of the world was something very different.

I'm happy to say that I never ever had the experience of that intense self-hate that people have as a gay man. I'm glad to say I didn't have that, you know? So it made me—in some ways, it made me very proud, but it also made me very naïve in thinking that, "Oh, you know, alright, so I'll just be out and about and talk and that's it."

THEODORE KERR: Live my life, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly, without any—you know. So, it was—so there was a weirdness about that, that I saw in the world. So add all of the other stuff and you can understand Robert in his 20s, you know? And this is just the 20s.

So what happened was I ended up moving in with this guy who lived in Hempstead. Again, I will pick a place that is as far from my family as possible. I never considered actually leaving New York, because [00:32:00] although I hadn't traveled enough, I said to myself, "There is no other place in this fucking country like this, so there's just no way that I'm going to survive in any other place."

So I ended up living in Hempstead for about two years, with a guy who—and working. I started working in retail. That—when I was with Mike—is when I started painting again. Living with him is when I started to buy canvases and paint, and actually started to draw and started to do this stuff. So sort of at that time, I reconnected with that aspect of my life. And I did a lot of—again, I had no concept of gallery or representation or what to do. It was, "This is something I like to do and this is something that I need to do." Part of me realized that. Part of me realized that, that no matter what my quote-unquote career in the art world, it doesn't make any fucking difference to me. The important thing is for me to do it, because it is this drive that I've had my entire life, is to create.

I'm fortunate in that I can switch genres. So, I write really well and I've been published and stuff like that. So I have, I'm glad to say—if I want to, I have multiple venues.

THEODORE KERR: For release.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For release, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: And James—that's his name, right? That you lived with?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, I lived with Miguel, Mike.

THEODORE KERR: Mike, sorry.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: James was high school.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Mike was supportive?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He was supportive, he was supportive. [00:34:00] He was—I was early 20s. Mike was early 30s. He had a wife and two kids, he had gotten divorced, realized that he was gay. I moved in with him. He was—so, what happened was—it was the first time for him living with a guy. I had lived with guys before already, but it was the first time for him living with a guy. So part of what happened was that he went into husband mode with me, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Like, he knew how to be a husband—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, and he would try to do that with me and I was like, "That's not going to work, dude. Sorry brother, I'm not your wife. Your wife, she's over there, okay, I'm not your wife." So that was sort of—that was, again, a learning experience, because I had not been with—the men that I had been with either knew nothing like I did, and sort of developed whatever the relationship was, or were already out gay men who were living their lives that way. Mike was a man who was shifting from sort of the straight world to the gay world. So what happened was that we would have these exchanges sometimes where I was just, you know—because it was like, "Dude, I'm a man as well. You know? So he would say stuff to me and I'd just look at him like, "I'm sorry, did you notice what I have here?" You know?

THEODORE KERR: Right. "Who are you talking to?"

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, who are you talking to this way? Some of them got intense, some of them got violent. He was quite shocked one day when he pissed me off. I was cooking in the kitchen and he came in and started harassing me about shit and I was cutting vegetables up and I told him, "You've got to leave the kitchen now because you're pissing me off," and I said, "I don't want to put down this knife." [00:36:00] And I just looked at him. He spoke for a little and then he kept talking as he walked out of the room. I threw the knife in his direction. It went into the door, I threw it so hard, and he just turned around, and I said, "I told you don't fuck with me, Mike, alright? And I told you stop acting as if I'm your wife. I'm not your wife."

But at the same time, he was very supportive of me. I was working in retail, at A&S, which was there in Hempstead. And I was painting and doing visual work, so that was sort of fun. Then what happened was that he would have custody of his kids on the weekends, every other weekend, so every other weekend I was stepmom, for a while.

THEODORE KERR: And so you were co-parenting for a bit.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For a bit. Not very long, until I said, "I'm not doing this shit any more. They're your kids." And they were spoiled. He was doing the typical divorced dad, like, "Oh, no, you're not doing that. No, you're not going to eat all that." And I was like, "You know what? I'm parenting these kids." I don't want to have any kids, you know?

So I stopped, and so what we started doing was on the weekends when he had his kids, I would go into the city and I would stay with my mom or friends or whatever. So once again, I was living this weird life of—during the week in the suburbs, and on the weekends in the city. It wasn't hidden, because I told him very clearly, I said, "If this is the way it's going to be, if you think that I'm going to hang out and go out and not fuck over the course of the weekend, you're mistaken."

So we lived like that for a while, where he was—and he became resentful because he was grabbing the kids and I would come home. "Well, what did you do this weekend?" "Well, I went out with Phil." And with him, you know—and of course being the bitch that I was, I would go [00:38:00] "Well, you know, we went to blah blah blah, and he took me by the trucks." You know? "Well, you know, they took me to this place called the Mind Shaft."

At that time, I started to go out—while I was with Mike, on the weekends, I started to go out sort of in the broader gay world in New York. I was doing some of it when I was in the Bronx, when I had returned, you know, going to the Ice Palace and stuff like that. But I also started to go to the other gay bars and clubs around the city, and so I started to see a different world. I remember the first time I went into what's essentially a white gay bar, and I didn't see any women, which I thought was weird. My first thought was, "Who does security?"

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Amazing, amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? The dykes were always doing security in all the bars I went to, so it was like, "Alright, okay, no women." And it was like, "No women. This is kind of weird. Why?" And then, what I realized was sort of everyone was gender-neutral. There wasn't a hyper-masculine, hyper-feminine male roles. Everybody was essentially, if you will, "normal."

So what happened was it showed me: "Oh, wait a minute, you don't have to be either country or rock and roll, alright." It was the one of the first times I said, "Okay, this is a place I can be. This feels normal and natural to me, that I don't have to subscribe to a particular gender role [00:40:00] at all." So that's when I started to—because of that, then I said, "Alright, well, I want to see the rest of the gay bars in New York," and I started to do that. I lived with Mike, moved to Hempstead, was in Hempstead for a couple of years, moved back into the city, moved into my aunt's apartment, who was in the Bronx. She moved to California.

The minute that I left New York, my family started to think about—they saw that it was possible to leave New York. So for years I would hear, and still occasionally hear, "Oh, when Robert left the family." That's the way it was framed. But you realize, my mother and her sisters lived near each other all of their lives. You know? So suddenly, two of my aunts moved to California. It was like, "Wow!" So I ended up having her apartment up in the

Bronx, a big two-bedroom basement apartment with stucco ceilings that were peaked.

THEODORE KERR: Oh yeah, of course, yeah. I make that face because for the first 20 years of my life those were the only ceilings I knew. Sorry, I didn't know they had names, but yeah, okay. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't know what it's called.

THEODORE KERR: And you want to touch it but it's too far.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But also for me it was like, "Why?" And I was like, "I want to get rid of these and how do you get rid of a stucco ceiling with all that shit?" You know, I mean, there are hundreds, hundreds of peaks on there.

So I lived there and I was working at Chase Manhattan Bank. [00:42:00] And what happened was, when I was living there then, I was living alone. I was living alone for the first time in my life. I broke up with Mike and it's funny because I will always remember this. We were driving back to Long Island. We were on the Whitestone Bridge. We were having an argument and I lost it. It was pouring rain, almost no visibility on the bridge, and I lost it and started screaming at him, like you know, just rage. And he freaked out. He was like, "You are going to kill us both on the bridge. Let us wait until we get home. Calm down." And I said, "That's it, I'm done with you, I'm done." I remember one of the first things I did was I had done a painting that he really, really liked, that was in the bedroom, it was over the bedroom wall. The first thing I did when I got home was take it off the wall and put it by the door and saying, "I'm moving out."

So I was living up there, living for the first time, by myself, and sort of deciding, "Okay, well, what do I do?" I was in my early 20s. I had enough money to cover all my needs, with enough money to go out, and so that's what I did. At the same time that I was doing that, I would always—growing up as a Catholic boy, there are things about Catholicism still that I admire. One is sort of the sense of altruism, and you help people. You help people. You help people not for your benefit. You just help people because you have to help people. So, what happened was when I was in college, I joined—they had a drug counseling [00:44:00] crisis intervention center when I was in college. And I joined it, and became a crisis intervention counselor. It was very funny—you know, there weren't really many crises out there in a college town, which was considered a party town. So, my Saturday nights were pill IDs. We had a *PDR*.

THEODORE KERR: What's *PDR*?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: A *Physicians Desk Reference*, which was sort of a huge, massive book, that had photographs of all pills and drugs, and told you what they looked like, and had the contra. And so my weekends were, "What are the contraindications?"

THEODORE KERR: Like, if somebody would come to you, or somebody would OD, you would try to figure out what they took?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Or if someone called me and said, "I have such and such a pill. What does it do?"

THEODORE KERR: Oh, before they took it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, sometimes before they took it, sometimes after they took it. Yes, so it was like, "Okay," you know. And essentially it was like—you couldn't say, "Don't take it with booze." Because, "Ah, great!" You know? It's like, "You can't drink too much with this, okay? You have to be careful with this." And that's what I did. I did more counseling as well, but the fun part was the pill ID. "What color? Is it like—what color, is it pink?"

And so living there, I realized that I wanted to feel a connection. Living by myself, up in the Bronx, in the mid-'70s, I realized that I wanted to feel—or later '70s—I wanted to feel a connection to a gay community that was more than just fucking. I had some friends. I had sort of outgrown my cousin and his friends, because they were sort of doing the same thing over and over, and I was like, "Guys, are you going into Manhattan? Are you doing this?" No. They were sort of doing the same thing, so it was like, "Alright, I'm bored with this. I'm not doing this anymore." [00:46:00]

So what happened—I don't know how I came across this information, but I learned about what was said in the Gay Switchboard. I volunteered and started working on the Gay Switchboard. I was working at Chase Manhattan during the day. I was single. And at that time—this is now the late '70s. Around—I think that around that time is when I became infected with HIV, because I remember having the flu that's not the flu. And it's weird, there are a lot of things that I don't remember in my life, but I remember that because I also took a couple of days off from work and I remember that it was—I just remember very vividly it was really cold. It was one of those really—it was really cold and slushy outside. So it was one of those days, and it was like that for several days. I was

home and I was feeling shitty, but not shitty enough to—you know, not really shitty enough to feel discomforted, but feeling bad. And then it cleared up and then I was fine. Or I thought I was fine.

THEODORE KERR: And you remember it?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I remember that. You know, I remember that very clearly. Of course, you know, remembering—I have no idea who I—you know, how I got—not how I got infected, but who, you know, who infected me.

THEODORE KERR: Sure.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Who knows?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's my favorite line: "It was the '70s."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: When I was living with Mike, I would go to visit my friend Phil. Phil was this big, muscular sort of football build guy, very sweet. He did some sort of social work stuff and had—he lived on 14th Street, and had very small [00:48:00] arches.

THEODORE KERR: In his feet? [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. So he walked on his tippy toes, sort of walked on his toes, and he was a massive guy. So you can imagine a big guy walking like that. So we would go out. I would show up on Friday—Phil, his friend Maria, who was a beautiful Latina bisexual woman—and the three of us would go out.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And troll, you know, come home with whatever we came home with. And that was always fun. You know, it was like, "Okay, now what is—there's six of us in this bed."

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative], beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So that was a lot of fun. And again, the same way that I realized that you didn't have to pick a club or pick a side about sexuality, I thought, oh, you know, it felt that way at the same time. Back then it was like, "Oh, you don't necessarily have to"—you know, so we would come home and sometimes it would be—it was like, "Are you straight?" Yeah, you're straight, whatever, we would fuck. That's all, and that was it. It was later that sort of the—you know, it started to separate and people were saying, "Okay, well, you have to be this or you have to be that." I'm sure that the epidemic has its part in that as well. So in that—I know that that's when I was infected, in the late '70s, early '80s. So I was infected, I like to say, the old-fashioned way.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] What's the new-fashioned way?

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Maybe this is a good time to end this one.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sure, yes, because now we're talking about—now we're going to start talking about AIDS. AIDS and art. [00:50:00]

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. So is there anything that you want to make sure that we bring up next time? Like there's probably lots of things but is there anything that you're like, "If we don't"—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Specifically, yeah, no, I don't think so actually.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't think so.

THEODORE KERR: Is there any place you want to start tomorrow?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We can start from where we left off, unless you have something that you want to?

THEODORE KERR: No, your brain is a gift to both of us.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Okay, so thank you for today, and I'll see you tomorrow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Great. Thank you.

THEODORE KERR: Thank you.

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track03.]

THEODORE KERR: This is Theodore Kerr, interviewing Robert, at the New School, on December 17, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Interview number two. Hi, Robert, welcome back.

[Side conversation.]

THEODORE KERR: So yesterday—let's say the card is eight hours, we're now at 4:51. So we had a good conversation yesterday.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes we did.

THEODORE KERR: And we ended on—I think literally, the last phrase you said was like, "Tomorrow, we can talk about art and AIDS."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, we had reached that point.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, and we had reached the point—I think we were in your 20s, late 20s.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was in my mid-20s.

THEODORE KERR: Mid-20s.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was living in the Bronx, in a two-bedroom apartment up in—oh, what section of the Bronx is it? I forgot. Anyway, northern Bronx.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So, at that time, I was working at Chase Manhattan Bank and I was actually—I actually sat on the first customer service sort of phone bank, for ATMs, when ATMs were rolled out.

THEODORE KERR: And this is while you were also working the Gay Switchboard?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, this is—yes.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Phones were my life at that time. So, I was volunteering at the Gay Switchboard, and their offices were on East 23rd Street, between Lexington and [00:02:00] Park, I think. In any case, I was volunteering there. You had to do a three-hour shift. So I would do a three-hour shift. You know, I worked about every week. One of the most vivid recollections I have about the Switchboard was that we had three computer printouts. Do you remember the paper with the—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, the perforated edges.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, perforated edges. So we had three computer printouts. And they were for the bars in New York City, and they were on the wall. One had the bars in alphabetical order; one had the bars by, what I like to say, genre; and one had the bars according to location. So, part of—as when I was working at Farnham, which was the name of the drug intervention crisis line that I worked at upstate—I did pill IDs at Farnham, I did bar IDs at the Gay Switchboard, in addition to other stuff as well. So, you know, people would call and say, "I'm on the Upper West Side, what's there?"

THEODORE KERR: Oh, on the Gay Switchboard, not the Chase Manhattan switchboard.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, on the Gay Switchboard, I'm sorry.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm sorry.



THEODORE KERR: No you're good.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: On the Gay Switchboard, yes. On the Chase Manhattan switchboard, I'm sure we got similar questions. But this is now '79, '80. And I remember going to—so the Switchboard had its Christmas party, and I went to the Christmas party. It was on the Upper West Side, someone's apartment, and I was standing in the kitchen. I remember I had a beer, I was standing in the kitchen, next to the garbage can, and there was another guy standing on the other side of the garbage can. Someone walked into the kitchen and said, "Where's the trash?" [00:04:00] And we looked at each other, you know, and started laughing, and consequently, we started talking.

His name is Jeff. He's a nice Jewish boy from Long Island City, and we started talking and I ended up going home with him and spent the night. Then in the morning, I got up—he lived on the Upper West Side, he lived on 82nd Street between Columbus and Amsterdam—and I walked down to 68th Street, I think, to a movie theater that was down there, which is now Century 21, that used to be a movie theater, and I saw *Taxi zum Klo* there. It's one of the first gay films.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's about a gay couple in Berlin, who lived in Berlin. They depicted sex, graphic sex, you know, so they showed water sports and guys in S&M and, you know, all this stuff. It was actually a pretty groundbreaking film. So I remember seeing that. As years passed and I would mention the movie, people say, "Oh, I saw that movie at that theater," you know, because that was the only place it was playing. So I saw it then, and then after that, Jeff and I started seeing each other.

He had been a very religious Jewish boy, and so he had gone to Yeshiva University. He had been studying to become a rabbi and decided that he didn't want to be a rabbi, so he worked for Social Security. So we started dating. And, like, on our second or third date, he invited me over for dinner. He cooked dinner for me, and he made the worst meatloaf I've ever had in my life. And I told him that. I'm not—you know, I just—I'm not good at [00:06:00]—I'm thinking of the Spanish word *disimular*. Disimular means to sort of fake something, and I've never been good at that. I don't have a poker face, so you can always tell with me. And any time I'm trying to be tactful, people are always like, "Uh oh," or, "Robert, do you have an opinion?" When I say, "Oh, no, no," they're like, "Oh, God, it's going to be bad."

So he made this meatloaf, I got a couple of bites in, and I said, "This is terrible," I just said it like that, like, "This is terrible." He said, "It's my mother's recipe." I said, "Your mother's a bad cook," and I said, "What's the recipe?" She put matzo meal, you know, into the meatloaf. And so it was like, "Oh, this is horrible." I said, "Let me take you out to eat. Let's go out to eat because this meatloaf [laughs] absolutely sucks."

So, later on he said that that's one of the things that really made him fall in love with me, is the fact that I had done that without any hesitation, like, "Oh that's terrible." So Jeff and I were together for six years. Jeff was the love of my life, I can say that in retrospect, and after looking at all the rest of the husbands, you know?

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Of course he's the one that died when we were still together, so, you know, one gets—they tend to get a halo after that.

THEODORE KERR: Right, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So what happened was—we were dating. I was 25, he was 30, and so he said, "Come live with me." We were seeing each other six months and he said, "Come live with me," and I said, "Absolutely." I think that—oh right, one other thing, just—we had been seeing each other for a while, and so I was at his apartment one night, and [00:08:00] we had gone to bed. He thought I was asleep and he started talking to me, thinking that I was asleep, saying, you know, "I don't know how to do this. I really love you and I don't know if you're going to feel good about that, I'm really scared." You know, and he did all of this, and I didn't move. I was lying there and I just said, "Jeff, I love you too. Just go to sleep."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] Yeah. So we were together as I said, six years. On July 3, 1981—which I think is the date of the first *Times* article—we were at Jones Beach. Jeff read the *Times* religiously. Through Jeff, I—well, through the Gay Switchboard and with Jeff, I started sort of discovering the gay world. I went to, you know, first Gay Pride stuff, and started socializing with other gay couples and stuff like that. So it's a very different life than the life that I had led before. But we were in the beach and we read the article. We were at the beach with friends and I remember someone—when we read it, it was like—because there were three cases or four cases in San Francisco. I remember someone sitting on the blanket said, "Well, you know those sluts in San

Francisco."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, New Yorkers always think everybody else is sluttier, and the rest of the country thinks that New Yorkers are actually pigs. So that was our first inkling that something was happening. Not too long after that, we had a couple of friends who started getting sick and dying very quickly. We didn't know what was happening. [00:10:00] Working on the Switchboard, I was—as were others on the Switchboard—getting calls. People were scared and people didn't know what it was. And these are the days when it was "the gay disease." So we started to—you know, we were concerned, we didn't know what was happening.

Later on, in August maybe, Jeff started—maybe August or so, Jeff started finding spots on himself, these little spots, and we didn't know what they were. We went to our doctor, who wasn't sure what they were either. And we had a gay doctor. It was so funny—meeting Jeff, it was like I suddenly discovered sort of the mirror gay world. You can have a gay doctor or you can have a gay cook. You know what I mean? I hadn't thought, you know—for some reason it had never occurred to me that life was like that, or you could do that. So we went to our gay doctor, who was very sweet, although when I first went to a checkup for him he said to me, "Wow, I wish you weren't my patient," and it was like, "Ah, thanks, doc."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: "Let's get that exam going." [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Okay, yeah, well, I'm going to be very careful about this exam."

And so they sent him to an oncologist. And I remember that Jeff—the spots were getting bigger. We had friends that were getting sick, and nobody knew what it was. These are in the days of—I think it had already advanced to GRID. [00:12:00] So, we were—we went to—he had a doctor's appointment and I remember his doctor's name was Craig Metroka, who became a very famous specialist. So Jeff went to Metroka's office, which was in NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital on the Upper East Side, and he called me and said, "Could you meet me there?"

Now, he went to the doctor's office—it was September 19th. It was his birthday. He was turning 31 and I had planned a surprise party for his 31st birthday. My friend Roy and I had been working on it. Roy had the keys and I was like, "You have to go buy everything. I have to keep him distracted because he'll notice shit. So I will keep him distracted and you get there, call people, get everybody there."

I go to the doctor's office, right, and I'll always remember this. This scene resonates on a lot of different levels but one of the levels it resonates is cinematically, because the old NewYork-Presbyterian lobby was large. It used to be very big and had huge windows. And it was fall, so there was this gorgeous golden light coming in, you know, in the afternoon in the late summer, and you could see bars of shadow across. I was looking across the room, into the—the elevators were on the far side, so I was standing there and the light was coming in and I was looking for him. I looked toward the elevators and the elevator doors opened, and he came out and he looked at me and I went up to him and he started crying, and he collapsed into my arms. [00:14:00] I had to pull him aside and sit down, and try to comfort him, to find out what was happening. At the same time, I had to cancel the surprise party, you know? [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: And this is not text phone time.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly [laughs], this is not text. So it was like, "Okay, I have to get"—I was running sort of on two channels: I have to get away from him because I have to do this, but at the same time, you know, I have to be here with him. So what happened was I went over to him and I said, "Sweetie, alright, hold on, I just"—I said, "I have to pee, I really have to pee." I said, "I know this is not the best time, but I really have to pee, so just sit here for a moment and let me pee." So I ran off to find a phone, called Roy, and said, "Cancel the party." He's like, "What?" He said, "Everybody's here." I said, "Cancel the party." I said, "Jeff is—what I can tell you is Jeff is really sick and he is not in the mood for a party." So he canceled the party.

I love Roy. Roy died many years ago. He was a crazy Texan and he was wonderful. He got everybody out, told everybody, "We think that Jeff is sick, we'll let you know," and he said they grabbed everything. He said to someone, "Why don't you grab everything and go over to so and so's house," and I said, "Guys, go—he needs to go continue the party someplace else at someone else's apartment," which I'm told the folks did, although everyone was concerned about Jeff. Got Jeff home. He was, you know—and it turned out that he had Kaposi Sarcoma. I don't even think that we knew that it was an opportunistic infection yet, I'm not sure.

In any case, we got home and [00:16:00] he was crying and upset, and I had actually just—that's right, I had been living with him for three months. So he said to me at one point, "Listen, you don't have to stay, I don't know what's going to happen here. You don't have to stay with me. You can go, it's perfectly okay." And I just—I

looked at him, I said, "I will never leave you," you know, "forget that." I remember that later on that day, we had unprotected sex and he was like, "I don't think"—I said, "Shut up." I said, "If you have anything, I already have it, alright, or you already—so it doesn't make any difference." So we were together for six years, living there. His health got worse. It was the days of—but it took a while, it took about six years. These are the days that, you know, he went into the hospital to get tests and the nurses would not walk into the room, or they would put on the biohazard gear, or the orderlies would leave food trays in the hallway, stuff like that. I had to pull out my South Bronx stuff to get people to do stuff for him, because everyone was scared.

One of the things that I'll always be grateful to my family for was—well, two things happened. One was that he told his parents, and they sort of didn't know what to do and didn't know if they should hug him or anything else when he told them, and they didn't know what to do. I told my family and we went up to see my family not too long after that, and they had gotten him a birthday cake, but when he walked in everyone hugged him and kissed him. Yeah, it's—you know, these are the days when it was like, [00:18:00] "Is it from water? Is it a mosquito bite?" My family was fearless. You know, they were like, "Yes, you're a member of the family." I think I told you, my family is like the Borg Collective—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —and they are. Once you're in, you're in, and for life, you know? So they were very supportive. He got sort of the family support that he needed from my family. And consequently, every holiday or anything else over the course of the years, even when he was getting sicker, it was like, "You drag your sick ass up here, period." You know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "We don't care, just come up." And that was great. My grandmother would sit with him and hold his hand and stuff as they were chatting. So that was—in the beginning of the epidemic, there were these days when everyone was quite afraid, you know, and worried, because no one knew what was happening. Just recently, the American Psychological, Psychiatric Association—whatever the club is for shrinks—had declared that homosexuality was not a disease. So, for the first time in a very long time, gay men were not medicalized. Our lives were not a condition or a disease. And then the epidemic came and we had to go right back into the arms of the doctors.

So, Jeff would—we lived on the Upper West Side. He worked in the South Bronx. Jeff would bike to work every day, unless the weather was bad.

THEODORE KERR: Wait, from the South Bronx to where?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: To the Upper West Side.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. He would bike. He had great legs.

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Unless it was—you know, unless the weather was bad, he would bike up to his office, [00:20:00] and he continued to do it until he could no longer get on the bike.

So we continued working on the Switchboard, and we started to get calls. At the Switchboard then, we were sort of floundering. We were trying to get information and no one had any information, and there's nothing more frustrating, when someone calls you looking for help and you cannot help them. So what we saw were more friends getting sick, and I think that what happened was that we were just—we were scared. Because we didn't know what was happening, and what we saw was friends and lovers getting sick. Finally, they figured out that it was AIDS, finally they figured out what was happening, but, you know, it didn't help, because everyone—there was nothing to do. So, essentially, it really was—I think for many people, becoming HIV-positive, at that time, became a death sentence for a lot of people.

So we had to figure out what to do, both how to—I mean, Jeff and I were good. We were good in that we loved each other a lot, we supported each other, so we were good. So we said, "Okay, well, what do we"—we looked out and we said, "What do we do in our community? Because this is horrific, so we have to do something." We started doing research, you know, and trying to learn as much as we can, getting information about—those are the days, too, that people started collecting information about doctors. It was like, "This doctor is not an asshole," you know. So in small ways we were able to do that. [00:22:00]

Jeff and I had always had an open relationship—and I've always been in open relationships—so what happened is

as he started getting more ill, his health would flag. We would go out, we would go dancing and stuff. I love to go dancing, so we would—I used to love to go dancing, I should say.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I really don't do that much anymore. But we would go dancing. We went to the Saint and to the Paradise Garage, and stuff like that. The fun thing about Jeff is—the nice Jewish boy—like, I introduced him to pork and bacon—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —you know, all that stuff. And introduced him to drugs and everything. So, we were—we would go out. But what happened was that he started getting more and more sick, so he didn't have the energy to go out to the clubs. So he said, "Well, why don't you go out?" By that time we had stopped having sex, so he said, "Why don't you go out?" And I was like, "I don't know." I said, "I'm not crazy about going out without you, and knowing you're sitting here at home by yourself." And he said, "No, no, it's fine, go out." He said, "Go out, you know, both of us shouldn't be sitting here." I remember at one point he said, "Both of us shouldn't be sitting here waiting for me to die," you know? And I went, "I'm not waiting for you to die."

But then, so what happened was I started going out with friends. On the weekends we would go out, or I would go out and Jeff would be home. The only rule was that whatever happened, I had to tell him everything in explicit detail.

THEODORE KERR: Oh [laughs], my God!

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So if I went out to have—if I ended up having sex with someone, I had to come home and tell him. And the rule was you never stayed overnight, [00:24:00] you come home. The rule he gave me, which was fine. I honored it. It was not a problem. It was actually very much fun, you know, because I might come into the house at, like, five in the morning sometimes, you know. And I would bring bagels and the *Times* and he would wake up and we would sit in bed and I would recount the evening to him, you know, which was really funny, with editorial comments obviously.

THEODORE KERR: And that's a big shift in the relationship, a bit, no?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. I mean, it was clear that it had shifted into my becoming his caretaker, you know? Which is fine, you know, I mean, when he—you know, it just reminds me when he said, "You can leave," it was like, "I'm not leaving. I love you, you're my man. I'm staying here with you. No matter what happens, I'm staying here with you."

THEODORE KERR: I read, in an interview that you had done, you said this beautiful line. It was: "I've never been negative."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And I thought that was so powerful, and I wonder if you want to just talk a little bit about how you understood your own—how you understood the idea of a status, an HIV status at that time. And if that was true, if that's still true, something like this.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, I mean, early on, when Jeff went to see the doctor—who later became infamous, I was told, Dr. Downs—one of the things that happened was that my glands, my lymph nodes, had swollen. The one on my left side, I think had swollen, and has always been swollen. So the doctor said, "It's swollen, I'm not sure what the means." Because there were no tests or anything, to figure anything out. [00:26:00] And he said, "So, maybe you should consider that you might be infected." He said, "I don't know, it could be something else." I had swelling around my crotch. It was so funny, I remember I went in to see him and he was like—and we were worried. He was like, "Oh, God."

THEODORE KERR: The doctor was?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The doctor was worried that all my lymph nodes were blowing up and that something horrific was happening. At one point he's, like, pressing against it and he went, "Oh! It's a hernia."

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] It was like, "Oh, great."

THEODORE KERR: Phew. "I'm in my 20s and I have a hernia, great." [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, great, you know, who have I been lifting? [Laughs.] So we—but aside from that, my health was fine. So with that swelling of the lymph node, it meant something, but we didn't know what. So, from that moment on, I thought to myself, "You know what, in all honesty, I probably am infected." From the amount of sex I had, and I'm not—you know, from the amount of sex I had before I met Jeff—and just Jeff and I having sex in, you know, threesomes and blah blah blah—you know, it was like "Sure, it would be amazing that I didn't." So when I said that line: negative didn't exist.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? Negative didn't exist and when people started using the designations "positive" and "negative," I had already been positive for years.

THEODORE KERR: That you assumed or that you knew?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I assumed—I knew in 1987, knew for certain, when I got tested. But just, I knew it. I just knew that I couldn't have walked away [00:28:00] from—you know. Given the amount of sex that I had, I just knew that I couldn't walk away sort of untouched. I knew that was happening.

THEODORE KERR: And I think—yeah, that makes sense. And do you—when the test came out, was it something that you were interested in taking?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not when it first came out, because part of me just said, "Well, you're already infected, you already know this." Yeah, so I mean in a very—for me, in a very real way, I lived my life and then I became positive.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Oh, that's—you're really—there's a subtle thing there that you're saying, like, there was no such thing as positive and negative.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: There was no such thing as positive and negative, and so I lived my life in that time before positive and negative. And then suddenly, when positive and negative were established, I was positive.

THEODORE KERR: Because you were living with the virus regardless.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I had been living with the virus. Now, you know, thinking back, I had been living with the virus since probably 1980, since I had that flu thing. That was one of the things that we talked about. Jeff was very scared about the fact that he had possibly infected me. He was very, very worried about that. And I said, "You know, sweetie, don't worry about it."

THEODORE KERR: And was that true for you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, I didn't care. I have no idea who—I know probably how—obviously, I know how I got infected—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I didn't know who. So what happened was Jeff got progressively sicker and sicker, and we continued life. He went to work for as much as he could and the on the weekends, we would spend a good chunk of the time together and then I would go out. [00:30:00] And what happened in that time was that going out and going dancing became my therapy. I would go to the Paradise Garage, because I'm a house music aficionado. Well, what I would do was—we had memberships to the Saint and the Garage, and what I would do was that—I had friends who would go to the Saint. I would go to the Saint early, when they were there, you know, and go and say hi, everybody would chat and everything else. Then I would leave and go to the Paradise Garage, because I thought the music at the Saint sucked.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Okay. So you would go for the social hour.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I would go for like this social hour at the Saint and then I would go to the Paradise Garage to dance, and I would do that on weekends. I wouldn't say every weekend, but a lot.

So what happened—I'm assembling the timeline in my head. So Jeff is getting more and more sick and the doctors are giving him chemo. His hair fell out. His hair started to fall out and it was patchy. I came home one day and his hair was patchy. I went, "This is absolutely ridiculous, you look terrible. Let's shave your head." He went, "Really?" I said, "Yeah, let's shave your head." So I shaved his head and he kept his head shaved after that. The KS legions had started on his legs and started to envelop his legs, his calves and his thigh, and then it started to spread over his body, which meant that he was in pain.

THEODORE KERR: They went to his feet, or no?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, it didn't go to his feet, but it went into his legs, which meant he had to stop biking. Because of the chemo, I said, "Well, you need to smoke weed," you know, so I got him—we [00:32:00] started getting weed regularly so that it would offset the effects of the chemo. During that time, my sister and his sister both became pregnant around the same time and they both gave birth. This is around maybe 1984. He had a little girl, I think her name was Bonnie. And my sister had my nephew, Christopher. And they gave birth around the same time too. He went to see his sister with his family. His family didn't like me at all.

THEODORE KERR: Because of homophobia, because of racism?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think it was a combination of homophobia and racism, you know? And I was a smartass. His mother would come visit and she would start to clean our bathroom, and she would clean it with toilet paper, so there would be little pieces of toilet paper in the bathroom. So the next time she showed up, I put cleaning supplies in the middle of the bathroom floor, with a note that said, "If you want to clean my bathroom, why don't you do it properly."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She stopped visiting after that, you know? So he went to the hospital to see his sister, to see the baby. Nobody touched him. They didn't let him hold the baby. He came back and he was devastated. My sister gave birth around that time. We went to the hospital to see her. I will always remember this. My sister is sitting up in the hospital bed with *Vogue*. You know?

THEODORE KERR: The magazine?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, with a copy of *Vogue* and her face is totally made up.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm like, "I'm sorry, what did you come here for?" [Laughs.] So the nurse brought Christopher in, and she said to the nurse, "Give it to him, give the baby to Jeff."

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And she said, "Jeff, [00:34:00] this is your nephew." Again, my family was absolutely, you know—I'm really blessed with my family in terms of the epidemic. So, you know, he held the baby and he started crying, and I told her, you know, I just went [whispers] "his bitch sister blah blah blah." And she's like, "Alright, you know, we know." So Elaine said, "Alright, get rid of those shoes, you're a Puerto Rican now."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I cracked up and he started crying. So that was really sweet. But I just remember that—I remember how alone he would feel. There are people—you know, he would see people that he had been physically affectionate with and stuff, and they would hesitate to touch him. There were some people who were like, you know, hug and kiss without any problem. But there are people who became very conscious of any physical contact with him, including his family.

THEODORE KERR: In this time, like, you're having multiple social lives, right? Like you're having the social life with your family, your life with Jeff, and then your life on the weekends in the clubs.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: What were the conversations being had in the clubs? Was anybody talking about—?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Some people were—yes, some people were talking about what was happening, and we were hearing stories. For example, I remember, I had an African American friend whose name is Darnell, a quite fabulous black man. One day at the club, my friend Jack tells me, "Did you hear about Darnell?" I went no. This is maybe 1985. I said, "No, what happened?" He said, "He's got AIDS. He's really, really sick. So, he's decided—so he [00:36:00] maxed out his credit cards, got on a plane, went to Paris and committed suicide." Part of us were horrified but part of us were like, "Oh, my God, that's so fabulous!"

THEODORE KERR: Exactly, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? That is so fabulous. So there was conversation. There was fear. People didn't know what was happening, people were unclear, and everyone was also responding to the increased

homophobia that we were seeing then. So, there were multiple—I'm sure you've heard multiple stories of gay men who have—you know, in their dealings with doctors and any kind of medical professionals, which was horrific.

One of the things that I did was I became a resource in that, you know, people were like, "Could you—?" If I could do it, I would go with them. Like, "Can you go to the doctor with me? Can you do something?" You know? And I would do stuff like that. It's like, "Sure, I'll help you out." Because, you know—because I realize, I'm a big mouth. So if something needs to happen and you need a big mouth, I have no problems in helping.

THEODORE KERR: And what did that look like?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We would go into the hospital—I mean, I remember going into a doctor's office on the Upper East Side, with my friend Simcha, Jeff's friend Simcha. He was very nervous, so he asked me to go with him, and so I sat with him. And then he asked me to go into the doctor's office with him, and the doctor said, "Who are you?" I said, "He asked me here for emotional support." I said, "Do you have issues with your patient having emotional support?" So it turned out he was positive, and the doctor told him, "Well, you know, we looked at the things that we think that you have AIDS, probably. That's what I'm thinking, you probably have"—like that, like, "You probably have AIDS." And I said, [00:38:00] "Jesus Christ," I said, "Can you correct your fucking bedside manner?" And the doctor looked at me and I went, "Come on Simcha." I said, "You obviously need another doctor." I said, "This guy's a douche." So I remember then we walked out and I brought him home. He was devastated. I said, "Come home to AIDS central—

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —with us," and so we went. He came over and Jeff talked to him and stuff. So it was very strange, to have people—we heard people getting sick, but they were always getting sick in—I should say, it was sort of, if you will, a conspiracy of whispers. [Whispers] "Did you hear about blah blah blah?" You know, it was always that, [whispers] "Did you know?" It was always like that, like, [whispers] "Did you hear that so and so got sick?" You know? I have to admit, I started to get frustrated. It was like, "Why are we whispering? This is the reality."

THEODORE KERR: And where did the frustration come? Because Jeff was—couldn't hide it?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, I think, because it was like: Don't be afraid of being—of having a disease. And do not—I mean, I grew up surrounded by people in ill health. So it was like, you know, you can't do—like my grandmother was crippled because she got hit by a car and one of her legs was shorter than the other. She was always on crutches or used a cane and stuff like that. And so she was very sort of, like, "Do not look at me as a lesser person because I have—you know, because now I'm disabled." She was clear about that. With my aunt, who had incredibly high blood pressure and stuff—it was just watching people who were sick, you know. I had relatives with cancer. And everyone retained a sense of pride in themselves. They didn't have a sense [00:40:00] of shame. And what I saw was that with the disease, this sense of shame came back to gay men. We had just sort of started—you know, we had just gone through our whole gay pride thing, so we were becoming sort of assertive and beginning to claim our place in the world. But then when the disease came, all of the shame, all of the latent homophobia, all of that stuff materialized.

We had several deaths and we went through the—we went through those situations where people had not come out to their families. You know, all of those stories about my friend Brian who died, he had not come out to his family at all, they had no idea he was gay. So we tried to talk to them, they were very resentful, you know, and all of that—they threw out everything in his apartment. Or friends who then had to move back to—you know, I had a friend who had to move back to rural Tennessee. So it was all of that that was swirling around us at that time. We were frightened. But I said, "Well, you know, we're scared of this, but we have to keep living, we have to keep going."

THEODORE KERR: Did you have a sense of HIV/AIDS outside of the gay community?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I did not. I did not, although, you know, I mean—what was it now? No, I don't. I'm sorry, when you said that, it just made me think of jokes. Jokes of the time, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Can you share some?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I know, you're looking that way. "What's the worst part about telling your family you have AIDS?"

THEODORE KERR: What?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Coming out as a Haitian." [00:42:00]

THEODORE KERR: Oh yeah, okay.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I've heard different versions of this.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes. Or the "Four H Club:" whores, homosexuals, Haitians, and I forgot what the other one was.

THEODORE KERR: Heroin addicts.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Heroin addicts, yeah. Yeah, that kind of stuff.

THEODORE KERR: What's—I mean, this is not funny, just for the historical record. "What's the hardest part about rollerblading?"

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: What?

THEODORE KERR: "Telling your mom you have HIV."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Do you get it? Because the idea that people who Rollerblade are gay and gay people have HIV.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, right, right. No, I got it.

THEODORE KERR: When I first heard that joke I was like, "Oh, my God, like, you need a historian to help unpack that."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah really, really. "What's the difference between a mosquito"—and this is not AIDS related, we'll stop. But: "What's the difference between a mosquito and a gay man?"

THEODORE KERR: What?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "A mosquito stops sucking when you smack it."

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: But also, there is something about HIV related to that, don't you think? Because of this fear that mosquitoes passed HIV.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Mosquitoes, right, right.

THEODORE KERR: It plays on that kind of idea that we're already equating both as disease vectors.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: So I have heard lots of stories of, like, how HIV impacted the gay community, but what we don't have—and you're well aware of this. What we don't have on record is how it affected people of color at the time. Gay, straight, or otherwise.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's very interesting. My experience with that—I had friends of color and they were—we talked about it, but I didn't hear anything from anyone about family problems or anything else. But, what happened this one day, my aunt called me and said to me, "I think Joey has it."

THEODORE KERR: Your older cousin?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: My fabulous older cousin. It was like, "What?" She said, "Yeah, I think Joey has—you know, you should call him." [00:44:00] And I went, "Oh, yeah, of course." So I called him and he was whispering to me on the phone. He lived alone and he had not come out to the family about it. But what happened was because of Jeff, my family started reading the newspapers and started to follow the news. And so they started to put two and two together, and they were like, "You know, your cousin Daniel, you know, and, you know, Joey." So they started putting it together and telling me. So what happened was that, you know, I said to him, "Well, what are you doing? Have you told the family? He's like, "No, I'm not telling anybody." You know, "No, I'm not telling anyone." And I said, "Please don't do that." I said, "Please don't die alone." I said, "I'll come visit



you, I'll come see you, I'll come help you. Don't do that." But he didn't want that, so he just died sort of very afraid and very—and alone.

THEODORE KERR: Because he had already been out about his sexuality to the family.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, totally. Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: But there was some sort of shame around HIV.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: There was a shame around HIV, and I think that shame was most definitely also in communities of color, and for gay men who were not necessarily out to their family. I mean, the interesting thing about HIV and AIDS was to see how many gay men were not out. It was quite surprising, to find out that men who were like flamboyant cheerleaders at the parade were like—their family thought they were still good Christian boys.

THEODORE KERR: And how did your family react when you shared your status with them?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were upset.

THEODORE KERR: What does upset mean?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: They were, they—what I did was I told my mom. I remember she cried and she said, "Well, you know, let's see what happens." [00:46:00] She said, "Listen, I'll tell the family." She did that for me, you know, she told everyone. She told—[inaudible]. There's an expression in Spanish that is *radio bamba*. It means like—it translates to "lip radio," but meaning, like, people talk constantly.

THEODORE KERR: Like telephone?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly. Like telephone, exactly. So what I realized too—at one point in time I thought, "Oh, this is a perfect chance for my mother to just sort of gossip, you know?" So she told the rest of the family, you know? And everyone—no one said anything directly to me. You know when you—an excuse to be around people and everybody knows something, and so they'll sort of hug you a little tighter, you know, and how—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] That was how you knew they knew.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, yeah. And because everyone started getting paranoid when I were to ever get sick. It's like, "Oh, you're coughing?!" "Yeah, I'm coughing, Ma." Or "You're sneezing. Are you alright? You don't look good." In some ways, that was the curse of AIDS for me with my family, because then everybody was hyperaware of my health. And it was like, "Leave me alone." [Laughs.] You know? "I'm okay, I'll let you know."

In communities of color, I think what I saw was a lot of shame, a lot of shame, which is really heartbreaking. And of course, you know, we started to hear, in the various religious institutions, about, you know, "AIDS is God's punishment," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

THEODORE KERR: I think for—this is research, in talking to friends. There's also the idea of HIV—people had the fear that HIV proved that their families were right, that somehow, like, they were quote-unquote bad for being gay, and that somehow—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, punishment.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, and I'm not saying this is the truth with Joey, [00:48:00] because your family was different, but a lot of times people would be out about their sexuality and then in about their status, because they couldn't bear the I-told-you-so's.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. And I think part of that—yeah, most definitely part of that was what affected Joey, that he did not want to tell people because of that. He did not want that reaction. But he isolated himself and it really broke my heart, because he was, in some ways, my mentor as a gay man. I mean, I looked up to him. I actually have written a story about him that's been published in an anthology.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So he's—you know, so it was really sad when he died. When he died, I remember he had a condo and my aunt Hilda moved into his condo, and [laughs] she was going through his closets and found his porn and his sex toys. And she said, "Hey, can you come over, I have some stuff for you from Joey."

THEODORE KERR: That's tough.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly. "Oh, what?: "Yeah, I have some stuff for you that belonged to Joey." That's all she said. You know? Then I show up and it's two shopping bags; one of sex toys and one of porn, and I'm like "Oh, ah, oh, like, thanks, Aunt Hilda, for the bag of dildos."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Used cousin dildos.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, used by my dead cousin. Thank you.

THEODORE KERR: And then in the social circles, was there a difference in how, like, different geography communities, different race communities, or different economic status communities were talking about HIV within the gay community? Does that question make sense?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It does make sense. But I'm trying to think about sort of who I was dealing with and where, and at the time. [00:50:00] I think that the community—obviously the community that was at the forefront of HIV at the time was the gay male community. Even pre-ACT UP, you know, people who were becoming assertive who were hearing about what's happening. So there was a very clear sense of danger that the community had, that there was a threat to the community. You could see that in conversation. You know, people were confused. In communities of color, people were not talking loudly. You know, they were not as open and vocal as white gay men were, so people were getting sick and dying but—

THEODORE KERR: And why do you think that is?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm not sure.

THEODORE KERR: And I'm not trying to make you the representative of all people of color. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I am. I have been, I have been.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] True story.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Sometimes I think: What would the epidemic have looked like if Haitian people had been the community that had their versions of ACT UP? Can you imagine how history would be different?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It would be very different. It would be very different. I think that part of what was—I think one of the things that was happening in the community was—in the communities of color, is that people of color were used to substandard medical care. So that people didn't necessarily go to the doctors, because the doctors were not particularly good, or because they didn't have access to stuff. You know? So, you could see the economic [00:52:00] disparities, where some doctors or people were saying, "Well, you know, you should eat better." Well, you know, when you live in the hood, you know, the quality of vegetables ain't that great.

So I think that what we were beginning to see were sort of the difference in class and race, in the epidemic. I certainly started to see that, in that some people had access to stuff and some people didn't have access to stuff. In the clubs, people just didn't want to talk about it because it was like, we're here dancing, let's just dance. I was very grateful for that, because I was dealing with it in the rest of my life.

THEODORE KERR: I think for me, it also shows that homophobia is real, but in the US, white supremacy will trump homophobia. And so the reason why, like—if we're going to go back to the H's, the reason why the people who were doing heroin weren't leading the movement is because of respectability politics. Nobody wanted to take lessons from people who did heroin. No one wanted to take lessons from people from Haiti. And so in a way, because gay people who were white could be "presentable" or "respectable"—I'm using air quotes there—that's why they were listened to.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. Well, but also at that time, we had the innocent victims: We had the hemophiliacs. So we started to see the tropes—sort of the standard tropes of the evil sexually predatory gay man, you know, and then those disgusting heroin addicts—but then you had the poor unfortunate hemophiliacs.

THEODORE KERR: Like the nice wives from the Midwest.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And did you feel—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Ryan White. [00:54:00]

THEODORE KERR: Did you feel a sense of solidarity when that—like, what was it to be going home to Jeff, but then seeing news reports about Ryan White? Not that those were happening at the same time actually.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, I don't think they were. I'm not sure when Ryan White was. He was later.

THEODORE KERR: He was later, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I remember the news reports that people were—you know, this—the news reports were all of this incendiary, you know, "Oh, my God, you know, they have this horrible disease and they're all dying and we don't know, and they're all dying and it's terrible. They're homosexuals." So what we saw was an increased amount of homophobia, and homophobia in places that people were not sort of expecting. We started to hear stories about people whose family—like Jeff's family. Jeff's family would deal with him, but in a very specific way. We heard about people who—a friend of ours, who his family just stopped talking to him. One who got disinherited, because—you know? So we did see that. We saw both the latent homophobia that gay men were having, was starting to come up, but then AIDS also became an excuse for people to start to actually articulate their homophobia. The years passed and I started to connect things, and to start to understand that AIDS was affecting people in different ways and that this was a disease that was very much unlike any other disease we had ever seen before.

So Jeff sort of got [00:56:00] increasingly ill and increasingly sort of—he became much more delicate and much more fragile. We used to sleep together and we had a queen-size bed, and we would always sort of cuddle before we would go to sleep. I'm one of these people that I'll cuddle with you for ten minutes before going to sleep and then get the fuck off me, get away from me, and don't disturb me while I'm sleeping. So we would cuddle. And every boyfriend I've ever had is a cuddler.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So two things: They cuddle and they are not awake in the morning.

THEODORE KERR: Right [laughs], you have a type.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, I do have a type. So what happened is that we couldn't be physically affectionate with each other because he was in pain. At this time, we saw *Young Frankenstein*, the film, the Mel Brooks film, and there's a scene when Gene Wilder is saying goodbye to Madeline Kahn, and she's going to a party, and he's going to kiss her and she's like "No, no, no, no, don't kiss me because I just had my face done." He's going to hug her and she says, "No, no. Taffeta, darling." So what happened was that that became the phrase for Jeff. If I was hugging him, touching him too much or hugging him or whatever it was like, "Taffeta, darling."

THEODORE KERR: Oh, my God. I see.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So it just was like, "Okay." What happened was that we got a king-size bed, so that he could sleep on one side of the bed. We had two cats, I think. He could sleep on one side of the bed and I could sleep on the other side of the bed, and we would sort of kiss and that was it. I'm really physically affectionate, which is typical for Latinos. We are people that [00:58:00]—you know, we touch each other, and we touch strangers. It was a shock to meet, like, WASPs and white people, to find out that you people don't touch each other. I would go to kiss people and, "Really? Oh, Lord."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But it meant that we would—sometimes we would be sitting on the sofa together and, you know, we would just barely touch each other. Because he started getting lesions on his arms. So that was hard, to not be physically affectionate with him. Obviously we had stopped having sex a while ago.

So what happened was there was a weekend that came up in February. This is 1986. Jeff spent the weekend on the phone with folks, calling up people he knew, calling up—he called up members of my family. You know, he spoke to—which I love—he spoke to my grandmother, who actually would speak to him in English, because he was the chosen, you know—

THEODORE KERR: Right. She broke a rule for him, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —son-in-law. Right. So he spoke to my aunts and my sister and he spoke to other of his close friends. Later on, my aunt Hilda said to me, "You know, when he called me that day, I felt as if he was saying goodbye." Well, it turned out that that night, we went to bed and when I woke up, I woke up around four o'clock in the morning. He had died in his sleep.

I remember I grabbed him, and I just started crying. And I just cried. And I got up and I called my friend Robert

[01:00:00] Scarcelli, who was a designer I knew at the time. Robert said, "I'm on my way over." I said, "Alright." I went downstairs, so we were there. It was a snowstorm, one of those horrible New York snowstorms was everywhere. Four in the morning. I was holding him, crying. When I met Jeff, I had quit smoking. After I was holding him and I was sitting, I was sitting there holding his foot, crying over his foot, you know. And at some point, I went, "You know this is ridiculous, let go of the man's foot." And then I thought to myself, "Oh, you're not going to make it through this without cigarettes." So I got up, got dressed, went to the corner, bought two packs of cigarettes.

THEODORE KERR: Beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I came back upstairs, lit a cigarette, and then dialed 9-1-1.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We lived across the street from a police station actually, so—and I am not a fan of cops. I've worked with organizations that deal with police brutality and police in general, so I'm not a big fan of cops. But I have to say that at this time, the two cops that came up were great. They were really sweet, you know. When they came and they picked up his body, the EMS I guess came in to grab his body, and one of the cops said, "No." He said, "Turn around." He said, "Light your cigarette and turn around." He said, "Don't look." He said, "You don't want to remember this." And I was grateful to him for that, you know? Because I'm glad I didn't see them take him out. So they took him and then I called his family, and he had—Jeff had made up a will and he had [01:02:00] said to me—he was very organized. He was a Virgo. He was very anal in a way.

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track05.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So he said, "Okay, I did my will." He said, "Obviously, you get everything, but," he said, "I want"—and he was very specific. I remember, he, like, sat forward when we were talking. We were at the dinner table, and he sat forward, and he said, "My parents are dealing with the funeral." I went—and he said, "No, let them do it." He said, "Let them pay for it and let them do it, okay?" He said, "Don't you do it." He said, "Do a memorial or whatever, but let them do it."

And so I called his family, so they took over. His father came over, and we talked briefly, and then his father left. Then, since he was, I guess, a reformed Jew—is the designation, or the team name—he was—you know, Jews, you bury people immediately and then you sit in mourning, Shiva. I love that for the Jews. They're really practical. Do not buy flowers, do not spend money on the dead. I firmly believe that: No flowers on the dead.

So what happened was they set up his funeral. They didn't tell me. His mom was adamant not to tell me, and so his father called me. He snuck out and called me and said, "Robert, listen, the service is here. I'm going to take him to the cemetery. You should come." So what happened was I called a friend from the Switchboard who had a car and said, "Listen, this is what's happening." He said, "Alright, I'll be right there." So we hopped in the car and went out to Queens, and I walked in and his mother sort of looked at me, like—and I looked at her like, "bitch." I thought, "I will deal with you later." [00:02:00]

Went through whatever the service was, and as we were going out, they took out the coffin, put it in the hearse, we were going out to the cars to get out to the cemetery, which is somewhere in Jersey somewhere. I have no idea where Jeff is buried, which just feels—I wish I knew where he was buried. But we went out there, and just as we were getting into the cars, his sister came up to me and she was crying. She was like, "Oh, I feel so bad. I'm so sorry." I said, "Really, you feel bad?" I said, "Good!" I said, "I hope you feel fucking guilty, and guilty for the rest of your life." And I just—you know, I took the knife and stabbed her and turned it, you know? "Do you know how much you made your brother suffer? You know, you and your mother are just, you know, you're monsters." And she was sobbing. And I have to say, I had a sense of satisfaction sitting there.

Went out to Jersey. In a traditional Jewish funeral, men cover—men bury the person and they—the family members do it, and they shovel the dirt into the grave. I didn't know this. So I'm there, you know—I'm alone because my friend Harvey got me there but he couldn't get me—he couldn't go out to Jersey with me, so I had gotten a ride with someone who took me out there. So I was standing there by myself, with essentially his friends and relatives—or none of his friends, I shouldn't say that. It was his relatives and his parents' friends, or something like that, and so I didn't know anyone. I'm standing there in this cemetery, on a fucking freezing February morning, burying Jeff. I'm standing there and one of the guys hands me a shovel. And he said to me, "You know [00:04:00] it's a mitzvah to do this." Do you know what a mitzvah is?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-mm [negative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's a blessing.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Listen, I've lost all the Yiddish that I knew, but I knew a lot of Yiddish. [Laughs.] So he handed me the shovel and he said, "You don't have to do a lot." So I picked up the shovel and I started shoveling dirt onto the coffin. I remember the sound of the dirt hitting the coffin. And I stood there as I was shoveling, and I said, "You know Jeff," I said, "Baby, when I told you that I was with you until the end, I didn't literally mean to the end."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Alright? I did not sign up for this part."

THEODORE KERR: "I overextended myself."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. "You did not tell me about what's coming." So, you know, we got back, and that was when—we got back and we had a memorial service for Jeff. I was very sad, although in some ways, we had both sort of been preparing for it for a while. What happened was that two days afterwards the landlord called me and said, "Jeff has died. He's the leaseholder, so you have to move out." So I called Jeff's lawyer, Steve. And Steve said, "Oh, Robert, don't worry about that, give me the landlord's number." And he called the landlord and he said, "I'm representing Mr. Vazquez, [00:06:00] and I'm going to tell you now that I'm a good friend of his. I do work for him pro bono." He said, "I will keep your ass in court for as long as he wants me to." He said, "And it's not going to cost him anything."

So the landlord called me and said, "Listen, we have an apartment that is a little cheaper, and we're wondering if you would be interested in taking it." So I went to see it and I decided to move, because it had been Jeff's place first, and the place just held too many memories for me. The days after he died, I would just remember seeing him on the sofa, seeing him in bed, you know, just—and I went, "I can't do this." So I moved to the Upper East Side. I don't know why. And at that time, I realized that I needed to start to—well, a couple of things happened. One is that I felt—I had started painting again when I met Jeff.

THEODORE KERR: Wait, I'm going to pause here.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sure.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: What happened was that I did start painting again, but before that I want to talk about my job. Because I went from Chase Manhattan to—when I moved in with Jeff, I was still working at Chase. And then, I left Chase to go work for—to run the office of this guy. Let me see how to put this. [00:08:00]

I had met this older man. He was relatively well-off, Michael. Michael and I became fuck-buddies, and Michael was sort of clued in to the white-gay-men-with-money circuit. For example, we were able to—and so Jeff knew Michael. Jeff had known Michael and he knew Michael, and Michael became fairly smitten with me, you know. Although I told him, "I'm not leaving Jeff, despite the fact that you have money."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] "That's how much I like Jeff."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, that's how much I love Jeff, that I'm not going to go off with a rich man. So Michael had me working for him. He had an office, working with insurance stuff, and so I ran his small office and his business. He's the man who introduced me to opera actually. I mean, he's responsible for making me the opera queen that I am today. What happened too, is that when I left from Michael's, I got a job, again, doing sort of office administrative stuff. I had no clue as to what I wanted to do in terms of work. I mean, Jeff's illness had sort of sidetracked me in that, but I had started—so I started to work for a lighting design company, running the office there. I started to learn about design, and I started to learn about architecture and lighting and all of this stuff, which was fascinating [00:10:00] to me and I really loved it. And I realized, "Oh, this is something I can get into."

Then at the same time, working at the lighting design company, there were two staff people there—two of the designers, who were very—and they were like, "Well, why don't you paint?" We were talking about stuff and they were like, "Why aren't you painting?" I went, "Yeah, why aren't I painting?" So I had started to paint, but then as Jeff's illness started getting more and more severe, I felt like I just didn't have the energy to do it. And so I stopped again and I sort of put it aside and said, "I may or may not do this again, I don't know." But I realized that I just didn't have the psychic energy to work on creating things like that, when my mind was much too focused on what was happening in the real world, if you will. But I did learn about architecture. I took classes in architecture and rendering and all this stuff. So I became—and that actually started my love of architecture and design as well.

So what happened was that I started doing lighting design, and then Jeff died. I was working at a business that

did commercial interiors, that was called ISD. It was one of the biggest ones in the country at the time. I started working there, and when Jeff—it was really sweet, when Jeff died they gave me time off, and a shitload of the staff showed up at his memorial service, which is really sweet. [00:12:00] So when he died, you know, I just—I didn't know what to do, so I kept working in lighting design. I moved to work in a smaller company, and after a while—not that long, maybe a year or so—I just started to feel like—oh, wait, before that.

Jeff died in February of 1986. In March of 1986, I turned 30. My friends—this is terrible. One of the things that happened was that at one period when we were together, Jeff and I, we were like sniping at each other and we were, like, over each other, you know? And so Michael bought a guesthouse in St. Croix and said, "Do you want to work at the guesthouse for a while? And, you know, sort of be staff and bartender and all that." You know, I said to Jeff, "Look, Michael offered me this job and I'm going to do it." And he said, "I think it's a good idea." I said, "We're not over. You know that?" I told him, "You know that, right?" And he said "No, I know that." I said, "We're together," I said, "but I'm going down there because I can't stand your fucking face for a while, and come down whenever you can." Which is what we did, and so he bounced back and forth.

There's a whole other series of stories about working in the guesthouse, but I ended up with a friend who lived in Minneapolis who, when Jeff died, he called me and we talked. Then for my birthday he said, "Come out here to Minneapolis for your birthday." I had a really hot spot, so I was like, "Sure, let's get away." So my boss was like, "Go, take the time, we'll figure it out. [00:14:00] It's not going to go on your vacation time. You know, just go." So I went to Minneapolis for a week, which was great, and came back to design. And I felt it was good to get out there. The epidemic was not as visible in the Midwest at that point in time, certainly not in Minneapolis. So when I came back, I was working in design and I had started to reach—I was starting to become frustrated with work, because the work that we were doing was essentially working for rich people. And I just—I did not feel, you know—and of course it was a situation where in design at that time, you didn't see any people of color. So once again it was Robert's—as my grandmother—there's an expression in Spanish that says "a fly in a glass of milk." So I was—that's how I was feeling like, you know, "What is happening here and who are these people that I'm working for and why am I doing this?"

So, at that time, I met a friend, one of my closest friends, his name is David Kirschenbaum. And we became facilitators in a consciousness—I met him through the conscious—it was a gay male consciousness-raising group that had the unfortunate name of Gay Circles. But it was essentially a CR group, which was cool. It was at the Center, at the Gay and Lesbian Center here in New York. It was on Mondays. We were up on the third floor. And so what would happen was that David and I would leave. David and I were really [00:16:00] good friends, we became really good friends. He's one of those people that I just miss every day, because one of the things that we went through was understanding that we were—at one point, we looked at each other and said, "Are we boyfriends or are we friends?" I said, "Well, the way I go through boyfriends, I think we should just like be friends, you know? I think you'll last longer." So we decided on that. So we would go down the stairs and we would always walk into the ACT UP meeting, and we had no idea what it was. Finally, like walking three or four times, I said to David, "What the fuck, let's—you know, because we would walk in and people would be—you know, the room would be filled with people, and people were talking about stuff, talking about AIDS and stuff like that. We didn't know what it was until finally I said, "Well, let's find out what this is."

THEODORE KERR: Is it that there were so many rooms at that time, of people talking about HIV, that a roomful of people talking about HIV wasn't unique? Or is it that—like, what made it possible to walk by the first few times?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think, simply, we were tired and, you know—yeah, I think it was about—it wasn't a conscious, like, "Let's not do this." It was a roomful of people, people were yelling, and it's like, "Oh, no, I just went through two and a half hours of consciousness raising with these guys, I'm not going to deal—I can't deal with anything else." So part of it was just that sort of, like, brain overload. Until the second or probably the third time we passed, and then it clicked, you know, that, "What are they talking about?" So it wasn't—there were no other people talking about it. People were talking [00:18:00] in that room.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. In your circles, at Gay Circles, were people bringing in HIV?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Very, very slightly. Very slightly, because it was more about developing—that was about sort of, "Who are you as a gay man? What is your history as a gay man? Where do you feel you have—you know, that you feel that you look at your life with a certain degree of homophobia?" So that was what it was. So we didn't deal with HIV, because HIV was sort of too big a topic, and what we were trying to do is getting guys and helping guys to sort of develop a basic consciousness about themselves as gay men. What did that mean, living in a world as a gay man, and what was the community that you were in? So in that respect, we didn't.

THEODORE KERR: And to be clear—it was like the job was—you were a little bit disillusioned with the job, and then you and David started the Gay Circles as a kind of like, "I need some positive"—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: David was there. It had started. I bumped into them. I don't know how I bumped into them, but I bumped into them and then I joined up, and immediately, they asked me to become a facilitator—because that's also what the problem with me is, that I go into situations sometimes and people will say, "He's really competent, let's get him to do it." So I became a facilitator, and a couple of people from the Switchboard were actually there as well, which is interesting.

So I was working in design, on Charles Street, so I was not far from the Center. We would have the Gay Circles meetings and sort of by the third time David and I walked through, and we stopped, we decided to stop. And we started listening and we were, "Alright, okay, this is about AIDS." Then, okay, we were both like, "Okay, this has our attention." So, [00:20:00] when we were there, we stopped and we were listening to people and what happened was they announced their talent—the first ACT UP talent show, and I said to David, "Let's go to the ACT UP talent show." I said, "Let's see how these people hang out. Let's see how they socialize."

So we went to the talent show, had a blast, and decided, "Okay, let's"—there was sort of a cycle of Gay Circles that had finished, and so we no longer had that. We could have started a new Monday responsibility and we decided not to. We decided to go down to the ACT UP meeting instead. At that first meeting, we were standing—it was on the ground floor of the Center and we were standing at the doorway, and the room was slowly filling up with people and David was like, "Where are we going to sit?" I said, "Wait a minute." I said, "Let's locate the power corner." And so, you know—and he was like, "What?" I said, "Be quiet." And I just, like, watched the room and I said to him, "It's there. Come." So we went, walked over there, and planted ourselves in the middle of a group which was Maxine Wolfe, Avram, you know, the big—

THEODORE KERR: But how did you—what were the cues that that was the power corner?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I have no idea. To this day I cannot tell you why. I cannot consciously tell you why. I think there was a subtle understanding of the way that the people were, the way that people responded to them, the way that it was obviously—there was a little distance between [00:22:00] this group and everyone else. And they sort of moved with just probably a little more authority or confidence, or something like that, that I picked up on, I think. Because to this day I couldn't tell you really how I knew that that's where it was.

THEODORE KERR: And is that a philosophy that you had had previously? Were you someone who was, like, aware of power dynamics?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, not at all, not at all. Later on, I developed all of those understandings but no, not at all. Unless it was—I think I probably responded in the same way, the way I did there, although it wasn't necessarily conscious, you know, that unconsciously I would say, "Okay, let's do this." One of the things that I realized is that I can draw attention to myself easily, without doing anything. I could walk into a room and people do that. So we went to the power corner and we're standing there and the guy was—I forgot who was writing on the board, somebody was writing. They had a chalkboard there and someone was writing on the chalkboard. I was working in design, so I had learned, of course, architectural lettering. So the guy was writing something and I sort of said—I turned and said to David, "What the fuck is that scribble?" And I went up to the guy and I said, "Give me the chalk."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And I erased what he wrote and I started writing what he had—and people got up and applauded, because it was the first time they could actually read what he had written on the chalkboard.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So I became the chalk queen, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And then not too long after that, they had elections. ACT UP had elections. And I hate—you know, [00:24:00] I hate being a grunt. I will do the work, I'm very happy to, but it's like, "You know what, I'm too smart for this shit." So, what I did was—they had elections for the coordinating committee, I think is what was called in ACT UP, which is sort of the board. They dealt with the business. That's all they did, they dealt with the business of an organization that had like 400 people in it.

THEODORE KERR: And when you say the business, you mean, like, the managing of people?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Managing of stuff. Money, handling money.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Like, "This affinity group wants to do this, we have to find money for them to do

this. We have to call the lawyers and"—you know, sort of the day-to-day mundane stuff is the stuff we dealt with.

THEODORE KERR: And people can look this up, but do you remember how many people were on the coordinating committee?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think about seven. It was myself, David Kirschenbaum— my friend David—Deb Levine, who was—I think she was with a women's group. Andrew Miller. And a couple of other people, I forgot who it was.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So what happened was there was an election, and so I said, "Alright, let me become elected." So I threw my hat into the ring. There were two people who were looking at the job. It was called the at-large coordinator. I would be responsible for the membership.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Making sure that the members—keeping track of membership lists. But one of the jobs I had was to talk to people who came in, who were at the ACT UP meeting for the first time. [00:26:00] But before that—so we had to do a pitch in front of the group so they could elect us. And so it was me and this woman, I forgot her name—Emily—were running for the at-large member. And I got up and I said, "Wow, this is a liberal white man's nightmare, you have to choose between a person of color or a woman."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I went, "Wow." I said, "I don't want to be in your shoes." I got elected. David decided to run for treasurer, and he got elected.

THEODORE KERR: And David is a white gay man?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: David was a white, Jewish—Mr. Kirschenbaum was a nice, white Jewish boy from the suburbs. A sweetheart. Oh, God, I loved him.

THEODORE KERR: And is this the—I did a little bit of research, obviously. And is this the David that did the work up in Queens, when there was the beating of Julio?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, because we were working together. Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So at that time—I'm trying to remember this now. Okay, so I became the at-large member, so my job was when people came into the meeting, at the beginning of the meeting, I would get up and I would say—you know, I would do a spiel: "Hey you know, I'm ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO and I'm the at-large member. I'm in charge of membership." I said, "I want the people who are here for the first time to come with me." I said, "I want to give you a little information and background and then you can come back to the meeting, just to let you know how things work." And so I would pull people off. One of the people that I did that with was Charles King.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow. Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, he was—people called him Jesus. And it was like [00:28:00]—I remember the first time he came in, I pulled him aside, we were talking, and it was like, "Who's the Jesus?" [Laughs.] You know?

THEODORE KERR: Because why?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because he had the long hair and the beard, and so it was like, "Oh, my God."

THEODORE KERR: Did people know he was a preacher? Was he a preacher around that time?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm not sure.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm not sure. The weird thing about ACT UP is that you could be in very intense situations with people and know absolutely nothing about their lives. So I would do that. I recently saw *BPM*, the



French movie about—and the movie starts with a guy doing what I would do in ACT UP. And I lost it watching that, because it was like, "Oh, my God, that's what I used to do. You know, that's exactly what I did."

THEODORE KERR: I'm so glad you said that, because that movie also—it helps you understand how important that position that you held was. Because you were introducing people into a world—you were introducing people into an evening that was going to change the rest of their world. They wouldn't see the world the same way again.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: So you were their doula into this new world.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] The other thing that I would do is—so consequently, I became one of the ACT UP members who was accessible, and people who came in after that would know me. One of the other things that I would do is—just before the end of the meeting, I would do a pitch. And I would tell people this is a movement about health. "Consequently," I said, "You must take care of yourself." I said, "Please don't skip doctors' appointments for meetings." I said, "I'm giving you official ACT UP permission. If you want to go to the movies instead of going to a meeting, you have my permission to do that. Alright? If you—whatever you need to"—I said, "You must take care of yourself. We'll never get through this fight unless you take care of yourself." [00:30:00] For years after that, people would—well, one of the weird things was that after that, I mean, I became known, people knew me. But when you're in front of a room of 400 people—you know, I knew some people, and many I didn't know at all. But everybody knew me.

And so what was weird was then as I would move through the city in my life, I would bump into people: "Hey, Robert, how are you?" And for me, as a gay man of a certain age, seeing these guys, my first reaction is, "Hmm, did I sleep with him?" You know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Not that I—unfortunately, not that I remember every man I slept with. But I was like—and they were like, "Yeah, you know what, I took your advice last week. I was supposed to go to blah blah blah, and instead, you know, I went to eat with my friend and did that." I went, "Great!" So it was good. I mean, I felt like I was doing something that was very helpful. It was a little disconcerting because I felt like, "Wow, I never know when I'm going to bump into a person from ACT UP." And depending on what the situation is [laughs], you know, I don't know if I want to bump into a person from ACT UP.

So we did that, and at that time, I decided that—I got more and more frustrated with working in design, with these—what I realize now were these rich, self-indulgent white people who were spending thousands of dollars on—I designed a chandelier for one of the Coca-Cola heirs that at the end cost \$10,000. And so I was looking at that, going, "What the fuck? This is not right. These people are spending all this money on this stuff. Meanwhile, people don't have health insurance, people are getting sick." [00:32:00]

At that time, I started to develop a consciousness about politics, about things like class and race, and I deepened my understanding of gender stuff. At that time is when I really started to become a more concretely politicized person with actual understanding and views of stuff. And I became obnoxious. [Laughs.] For example, I attempted feminism with the women in my family, which is a mistake.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For example, the women in my family serve the men first at dinner, and then they serve themselves. And that would drive me crazy. It's like, "Why are you serving him first? Why don't you—you know? I'll serve you." "No, this is the way we do it." I remember that battle and finally going, "You know what, you're not going to win this." You know? "So let this go. Alright, let this go." These are fairly strong, empowered women in my family anyway, so it's like—there are no shrinking violets there.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. You were trying to tell them what it was to be a woman. Meanwhile, they were like, "We know."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "We know what it is, okay? And we also know how to deal with men. Okay?" So I gave up on that one. In ACT UP, we would have the meetings, Monday meetings, about 400 people.

THEODORE KERR: And by then, Gay Circles—you just—?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We had—David and I walked away.

THEODORE KERR: You walked away. Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: David and I had walked away. We had said, "This is way more important than that." So we had walked away from Gay Circles. So what happened was that we would have our meeting on Monday, the main meeting. Then we had the coordinating committee [00:34:00] meeting, and then there were various meetings from the affinity groups, et cetera, et cetera. Early on, when I became the at-large member, at that time—oh, mostly through the classic ACT UP period—there were always very few people of color there. But what happened was that Robert Garcia and Ortez Alderson, who was an African American man from Chicago, I think—Ortez would get up and berate the room on a regular basis, on racism. Berate them, you know? You know, "You motherfuckers don't—blah blah blah." You know? So, we had the thought that, "Well, you know, we need an affinity group for people of color." So we started the Majority Action. We said, "You know what, we're not a minority, so we're going to call it the Majority Action Group."

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And so we had—I remember the first meeting, there were like 10 people there. You know, not just people of color, because we weren't limiting it to people of color. But we were specific about we're looking at the issues around HIV and AIDS and people of color. And so we worked on—we got together and started that. Majority Action started meeting and talking, and started having conversations. Some of that trickled down into the room, although it was difficult to do. Because when you get up and talk to what essentially was probably 400 gay white men, and talk to them about their privilege and entitlement, it ain't going to go far.

THEODORE KERR: While they feel that their lives are at risk.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. They heard it, they realized it, and I will say that—people were like, "Okay." I will say that we were able to change people's consciousness and give them [00:36:00] a sort of broader consciousness about race, which was good. From the beginning, ACT UP tried to do stuff with people of color, so that was—so we did that. At that time, I decided that I wasn't—I didn't want to work for rich people anymore, and the PWA—what was it called? The PWA Health Group was looking for a manager. They were the buyers club in New York. And so I went to work there, at the buyers club. This was in Chelsea. I forgot what street. I think it was 21st Street or something like that.

THEODORE KERR: And this is early '90s?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: This is late '80s, early '90s. It was in what we called the AIDS—I called it the AIDS Victim Building, which actually people started to call it as well. Using the term "AIDS victim" was not—has never been cool, which is why I love using it. Because—what was it? On the top floor was the PWA Coalition. On the second floor was the buyers club. And we shared the floor with the Testing the Limits Collective. And then on the first floor was CRE, which did clinical trials. So it was the AIDS building. And so it was a very bizarre experience to work there because celebrities would show up to walk through the building.

THEODORE KERR: Not AIDS celebrities, but, like [laughs], American celebrities.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, yes, you know, like Lauren Hutton. They would just sort of wander through and talk to people, which is sort of, like—you know, what are you, celebrity tourists, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Right, or like, as if Princess Diana was visiting people in the hospital.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly. So we were there, [00:38:00] selling what Derek Hodel, who was the manager there, would call snake oil. That's when we started to see—this is in the late '80s. I don't think we even had AZT yet. People were desperate for stuff and what we saw was that the only people who could afford to buy this were essentially middle-class white gay men, who could buy this stuff, because none of this stuff was cheap. None of the stuff that we were selling was cheap. And so what I realized was if this was working—none of it worked, but if it was—

THEODORE KERR: This is, like, holistic attempts? This is like—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, this is—yeah, this is like dextran sulfate, some drug that they got from Japan. Or lipid, fat lipids, stuff like that. Essentially—as Derek said, essentially, we were selling snake oil. But what I saw was, "Wow, if this works, who's going to have access to it?" So it started making—I started thinking about questions of access now, and who gets treated, who doesn't get treated, who can go to the doctor, who can't go to the doctor, et cetera, et cetera. So I became very aware of that.

At the same time I was working in AIDS at the buyers club, I was going to my job in design, and I was in ACT UP. So when I wasn't working, I was essentially doing something that was AIDS-related. And that went on for a while, for several years I think. [00:40:00]

THEODORE KERR: Can I ask you a question?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sure.

THEODORE KERR: Painting comes in and out of your life. And I'm wondering—and you can just push back and stay, "Stop being a hippie, Ted." But is there a way in which your activism at times is your creative outlet?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Absolutely, absolutely. What I've realized is that I have this—I have this burning, which is not an STD, within me, that I have to do something. And what I've realized is that, for me, I had narrowly thought that that desire to create, that energy to create, was only satisfied by painting. As time passed, I realized that—you know, you bring it—you have whatever that energy is, you bring it into whatever you're doing. So that creativity shows up in a variety of places, you know, and takes on different forms. And it took me a long time to realize that, a long time to be able to not berate myself for not working in a particular way.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And I'm hearing that as we've been speaking the last two days, there's like an—there's —it seems in you, there's an egalitarian desire to make sure your creativity is shared. And so something like Gay Circles is as much of a creative and important outlet as painting.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. And it manifested itself early, when I volunteered, at the age of 18, at that drug counseling intervention center. I had no fucking training in any of that shit, but I had a drive to do this and an understanding that I can actually—that I can talk to people.

THEODORE KERR: And that life force can somehow be of use.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly. [00:42:00]

THEODORE KERR: And so I just want to suggest that in a way, although it is a shame that people don't have access to early art education, and your education was an example of, like—there weren't Puerto Ricans on the cover of *Art Forum* when you were growing up, or *Art Forum* wasn't in your school even, or something like that—there's a way in which you, because of that lack, then adapted. And so creativity wasn't just something that became a commercial or private enterprise.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. It became an engine.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And I think that's really important to these interviews, because we're talking about the intersection of art and AIDS, and we can talk about photographs and paintings and artworks and visual artwork and stuff like that, but we can also talk about how creative people lived through and with the epidemic. And it seems to me that we can point to visual production that you've done, but I want to highlight, for listeners and readers, that that's not the only way that we can understand creative output in the face of a plague.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, very true, very true. What did I do? Yeah, I learned—you know, I finally figured that out several years ago and was able to forgive myself. And I realize too that, you know—and in that, I also realized that, unfortunately, my family was trying to do a good thing for me. And I guess ultimately it was, because the quality of education that I got at a Catholic school is way better than the quality of education I would get in public school. And I survived Catholic school. Who knows if I would have survived public school. But I was resentful because I thought if I had gone to art school, my life would have been way different. Because I would have been doing something that I had wanted, something that was basic to me and that I had wanted to do all my life. I grew up—as [00:44:00] a child, I said, "I am an artist, I want to be an artist, that's what I want to do." And unfortunately my family said, "No, that's not what you're doing." You know? So it was always a struggle, but you're absolutely right. I mean, I would bring that creativity to everything that I was doing, and that energy into everything I was doing.

THEODORE KERR: Right, like to be the greeter at ACT UP, you're having to negotiate—like, the same thing that a visual artwork on a wall can do if it's powerful, you were doing. You were meeting people where they were at and you were providing a surface so that people could come through.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. I was giving them a safe surface for them to understand, in that room. Which was way intimidating, to walk into that room.

THEODORE KERR: Exactly.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: People were like, "Oh, there's one person that I can talk to and the one person that I know here." You know?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Also, there's a way in which, like, we talk a lot about social practice in the art world, and yet you could—I mean, literally, Gran Fury is an example of social practice, but your work

before and after Gran Fury is also—you could think about how Gay Circles, for example, or how your work within ACT UP, outside of Gran Fury, is also that. So, I hear you about, like, what would have been different if you had gone to art school. But I mean, racism and homophobia still would have existed and you may have left art school more disillusioned than you ever were out of it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right, absolutely. Or I might have actually become one of those artists that becomes consumed by that stuff, you know, by only working on stuff about race and gender and class constantly, which consequently means that they get shuffled: "Oh, put them in that pile." So, you know, I wonder about it. I still harbor a certain degree of resentment but, you know, whatever, it's fine.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, that's an engine too. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: I got you off track, I'm sorry.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, it's fine, it's fine. You're absolutely right, though. It's a good digression.

So, I was [00:46:00] doing AIDS. I was single. One of the things that happened after Jeff died was that I could not sleep with men anymore, because I would lay awake listening to their breathing. It took me a while to realize that, that I would—and I would just be just lying there, listening to them breathing, and I became very paranoid about that. So I realized that I couldn't sleep with him. It took me about a year or so, a year and a half, to finally be able to let that go.

One of the things that made me join ACT UP was that I had this rage at what had happened. I was furious at what had happened to Jeff and how he had been treated. I was infuriated. I was just—you know, I could have burst into flames at some point, because I was so mad. I was also infuriated at the injustice of what had happened, at the injustice that was happening. And then as I was becoming more and more politically aware, I became more and more pissed off, you know, because I was seeing. I was beginning to understand how women were being treated. I had an understanding, a firsthand understanding, of how people of color are treated, you know, because I knew that. But then I started to understand the institutional stuff and all of that, and consequently, as a gay man. So I started to put all of this stuff together and I was just super pissed off. Gregg Bordowitz used to say—some people would ask him sort of about his emotional rage and [00:48:00] being in ACT UP, and he said, "Well, you know, we go from anger to rage."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So I was working at the health group. I was also doing the books at the health group. I'm not good with math so, you know, I wasn't good. I could do everything else, but when it came to reconciling the books at the end of the day—because it was a cash business, you know, so, nope. I couldn't do it, I could not. I would screw up, I could not do it.

So, one of the board of directors there at the buyers group, was Michael Callen. He was also one of the founders of PWA Coalition. So one of the things that I did when I was there, working at the health group, was that I knew all the folks at Testing the Limits. I still am friends with David and Sandra.

THEODORE KERR: Wait, say their last names, David and Sandra, if you know them. Sorry, no pressure, I'm sorry.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's Sandra Elgear. I forget what David's name is. [Meieran -RVP]

THEODORE KERR: That's okay, we can do this when we go over the transcripts.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. The other woman, Robin something, and I forgot what her last name is as well. [Hutt -RVP]

THEODORE KERR: Is it with an S?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, I think so.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, Shward, [ph] or something like this.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. So we would—and so one of the things that happened is that—we knew them. We were on the same floor and so we would hang out. It was a really interesting collection of people that

sort of came together. The CRE people were the people doing treatment and research, and so we were [00:50:00] getting information about treatment and research. At the same time, we were upstairs where not only did we sell stuff, but we were counseling people, because we had a counter. There were three of us that worked at the counter: Carl George, who is a filmmaker; and Joey, Joey Walsh, who came from [demonstrates accent] Avenue U in Brooklyn, whose boyfriend was very sick, and did a—Carl did a movie about Joey and David that's called, something—

THEODORE KERR: Oh, the one with the needles.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, that's beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Something *Mon Amour*. Yeah. [DHPG *Mon Amour*, a film by Carl George -RVP]

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So he did that film. And so part of—so there, we're getting—and then of course there were the folks from the PWA Coalition. And *Testing the Limits*. So we were in the middle, sort of in the hub, of what was happening, and listening to what was happening. We were listening to what was happening with the coalition and what their struggles were, and then of course the research. And one of the things that I started to do was I would help out with *Testing the Limits*. So when they went to shoot demos, I would carry the sound deck or do stuff like that for them. So I started to do that as well. Sound decks were fucking heavy back then.

THEODORE KERR: I can imagine.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was just ridiculous. But we started to do that to help them out, which is great, and we sort of developed this community there. So, since I was not doing well with math and the books, I got another job, and I ended up—by this point in time, after the PWA Health Group, I realized that I could only do work that was socially conscious. I could not go back to doing anything—anything, working for a bank, working for a design firm. That's not—I'm never going to do that again.

THEODORE KERR: You were ruined. You were [00:52:00] ruined for life.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was actually ruined, and I was also ruined from making money. So I got infected by the nonprofit bug—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —you know, and have stayed there, unfortunately.

THEODORE KERR: Talk about a death sentence.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But what I did was I went to work at the Anti-Violence Project.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And at the same time, David Kirschenbaum, my sweetie, went to work there as well, and became—so we were there together, which was really fun. It got difficult, but it was—we were there, and I ended up being, *da-da!*, the coordinator of the hotline and community education.

THEODORE KERR: Wow, uh-huh [affirmative]. And this is perfect for you at this time.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was out there talking about police violence, about violence against gay men and lesbians, and all that, about homophobia. There were cases that happened—there was a time when I was there, or just before I was there, and this is probably '90, probably 1990. A case had been settled where, on the Jersey Turnpike, the Jersey State Police would send guys in as bait, you know? And so they would set up these sting operations to bust guys in the rest stops. They were taken to court and they found that—you know, they lost the case. AVP was tasked with doing anti-homophobia trainings with them.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow. [00:54:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. And then Matt Foreman, who was the director at the time, and I, would get in the car. He would rent a car and we would go down to Jersey. The state police academy was located in Fort Dix. And Matt was actually the perfect person to go with that, because Matt was absolutely fearless. So we would go down there once a month maybe, and do a homophobia thing. And, you know, Matt was sort of like, "Listen you assholes," and then I would talk. I would start off with, "Okay, so," I said, "We can start with sort of terms of

affection, like you can call me a fag or a spick and I would call you a pig, or"—you know? I said, "We can go back to the '60s and I'll call you a honky," you know. I said, "But I mean—and if you guys stay in that place, you're not going to learn anything."

And so we did that, we would go and talk to them. I have no idea what effect we had at all. What I remember the first time we went there, when we went to Fort Dix, I was like, "Oh, my God, again, it's the fucking military in my life!" You know? It's like I'm plagued by the military. But I think we had some effect, some good effect on them, hopefully we did.

THEODORE KERR: Sure. And this is in the middle—like we're still in the crisis years, what people would call the crisis years.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, we're still in the crisis years. We're still in the weekly, several weekly funerals. Yes, people were dying. And at this time people were dying, you know, you were seeing—it was so bizarre. I went to get my HIV test actually—I have to back up—in 1987. I got the results, and I got the results on Valentine's Day actually. Well, you know my thing about romance, so it was like—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, exactly, it's fitting. Yeah. [00:56:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was fitting. But what happened was that I got the results and then I went to a coordinator committee meeting, because we had the coordinating committee. I got my results and then hopped in a cab and went to the meeting. It was a fun meeting when we were being stressed, because coordinating committee was always—people were always considering the coordinating committee like this evil cabal that tried to run the organization.

THEODORE KERR: Of course.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We were, like, "Are you kidding, people? You know, this is ridiculous." It could be stressful with the floor. And so I remember, I think it was Deb, brought in one day, candles and incense, and she lit the incense and put the candles out, and we had—that was the day that I came in after getting my HIV diagnosis. I remember that the person who told me said, "Well, you know, you're HIV-positive, so let me give you some pamphlets." I said, "That's okay." I said, "That's okay." I said, "I'm in ACT UP."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And he sort of backed away from me like, "Okay, well obviously, you know what you're doing." So when I found out, it wasn't a surprise at all.

THEODORE KERR: Right. Did it feel like a confirmation? Or that's crude?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, no, it felt like a confirmation. I knew. I had known for the longest time. I had been practicing safer sex since that time, so I knew that—you know, I knew it, and then this was just confirmation, to tell me, "You actually"—you know. I was immediately out about it with everybody. Immediately. And to this day, I remain public about my status. So I remember—so then I became HIV-positive [00:58:00] and started—sort of had the authority of talking about shit as an HIV-positive man, you know.

THEODORE KERR: Which you hadn't felt before because it wasn't confirmed.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because it wasn't confirmed, because it was just a suspicion on my part.

THEODORE KERR: And did people just assume?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think they did. I think they did. One of my closest friends was diagnosed with HIV several years ago, but the funniest thing was they said—when he started telling people, people said, "Oh, we thought you were positive for years."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: "You're only now? Okay."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Really? You know, really?" So, yeah. That, and I started priding myself by saying, "I earned my AIDS the old-fashioned way, okay?"

THEODORE KERR: Right. You said that yesterday and I still don't—like the old way was what? What's the old-fashioned way?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, just having—there were people who were becoming infected through

needles, there were people becoming infected sort of by accident and stuff like that. And it was like, "No, I fucked around enough that I know that I earned it from fucking around so much, that of course I encountered someone with the virus, because I was a slut." And I'm not doing slut-shaming, because I feel a certain degree of pride in that.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah, no, it's the opposite. It's a banner you're wearing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: And I think also, to be clear, you can still get it the old-fashioned way. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You can definitely get it the old-fashioned way. Well, the old-fashioned way, without condoms—I mean, I met guys who became infected, you know, that the condom failed.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. Should we focus for a second?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Sure.

THEODORE KERR: I feel like—so, if we're following chronology, ACT UP is like full throttle, you're working with AVP, and you're now in a new phase of your life. You're living—[01:00:00]—like so, you've been a while living with HIV confirmedly. And I'm curious about, like, how is ACT UP shaping you? And I know that we're going to get to, like—so a theme of your life is, you've said, you go into a room, people see that you're capable, and all of a sudden you find yourself in the middle of the action.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right.

THEODORE KERR: I assume that's going to—we know what's coming right now. We know what art and activism and you finding yourself at the middle of things.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, it's all going to come to—yeah, it all comes together at this point.

THEODORE KERR: This is where it's starting to happen.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, this is where it comes. Because what happens is that I was single, I was living on the Upper East Side, I was working at AVP, I was going to ACT UP meetings, and I had started painting again.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And so finally, I was working.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, and you're doing abstract?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, I'm doing abstract.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm doing abstraction. I'm doing color field stuff and abstraction. But I'm painting. That's—you know, I was painting again, which is great, it made me very happy. So I was like, "Okay, finally, I think I can sort of start to maybe move in this direction." What happened was that—as I said, at this time too, this is the horrible time. This is when you would watch people who were healthy and just, you know, suddenly sort of decay in front of you. The weirdest thing for me was being an HIV-positive man for so long and staying sort of in the same place—

THEODORE KERR: —health-wise.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Health-wise, and watching people go from being negative to dying. [01:02:00] And I'm like—and just watching it over and over—

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track06.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —again. I am glad to say that I do not have survivor's guilt. I am not feeling guilty about living. I have always been very confused: Why was I able to survive all this stuff? Because it certainly, for a long time in my life, was not anything that I was doing. But I was there. David became infected when I was—you know, when I—and died, you know, one of my closest friends. And I lost several close friends that way, that suddenly got sick and died. So there was also—in addition to sort of all this stuff that was happening, there was this huge sense of loss. It's a real loss. I mean, we were losing people that—losing people important in ACT UP

and people that were important in our lives, and losing people that were colleagues, losing people that you didn't like—died as well.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, say that. Yeah, people never talk about that.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, I always talk about that. I've always said that some people have died from the epidemic and I'm really happy that they did.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? So, I'm okay with that.

THEODORE KERR: You're like, "I'll put it on the record."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'll put it on the record. I have no problem saying that.

So we were watching this. There's also this sense of shellshock. You're standing on a battlefield and—or, I'll use myself. I'm standing on this battlefield and I'm fighting and I see people fighting with me, and everyone around me is dying. But I don't have the time to mourn them. All I can do is acknowledge their death and keep fighting. That was my life for several years. I'm pretty sure I wasn't very much fun. What did I do? I talked about AIDS [00:02:00] all the time. AIDS was my life. Even working at AVP, you know, because then at AVP it was AIDS and then it was homophobia. I was talking about homophobia and domestic violence and police brutality and stuff like that. So in some ways, my life was consumed by all of this nightmarish shit, all the fucked up stuff that people can do to each other. I was able to move through it and to say, "This can change. We can change this."

One of the things that drove me to ACT UP was a sense that social change was possible. I looked at the epidemic and what I saw was the nexus of all of these societal ills. We saw homophobia, we saw sexism, we saw class stuff. All of this stuff was there, and I thought, "You know what, this is a unique opportunity to start to tackle some of this stuff. You know what, it might be possible for us to change the world here." It didn't happen. It did not happen. People were not ready to engage in the broader fights, and that was a real disappointment for me.

THEODORE KERR: But you felt—there were moments in your life where you felt that people were?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, yeah, I felt that there were moments when people were like, "Yes, we understand this issue, how it's affecting women, and yes, we are going to fight for women because we need to do that." It's like, "Yes guys, yes, broaden it." You know? And it's like, "Broaden it, connect with women's organizations." I was always like, "Let's connect with women's health organizations [00:04:00] and work together. Let's work with the folks that are doing anti-racism stuff." Because we were already sort of on the cutting edge.

THEODORE KERR: AIDS was already intersectional.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. It had been intersectional from the beginning.

THEODORE KERR: When you say "beginning," what do you mean when you say "beginning"?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: From the earliest reports about HIV, we learned that it was essentially—I was going to say under—underserved, underprivileged populations, although that's not right. It was gay men, it was immigrants, it was drug users. These are people that did not have particularly positive standings in the world. Women were totally ignored. So you could see, from the beginning, that it was a disease that affected people that most of society didn't want to deal with at all from the beginning. And from the beginning, it was stuff like access to treatment, going to a doctor. Which, in communities of color, is not a simple thing.

What I saw was that ACT UP could help to start to change stuff, but I think that my—I was too ambitious. Because what would have had to have happened was people had to take their fucking heads out of their asses about AIDS and start to actually look at stuff like racism, or look at stuff like [00:06:00] gender privilege, and people didn't want to do that. People didn't want to do that, you know?

THEODORE KERR: What did they want to do?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: People wanted to essentially save their lives, which was good, and save the lives of others, because it wasn't that self-absorbed, but—oh, here it is. The problem was that for the white gay men in ACT UP, they saw that the system needed to be fixed. Okay?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For the people of color and the women, we saw that the system didn't work at all,



needed to be scrapped, and we needed to get something new, something different, and that was a problem. That's essentially what the problem was. So for myself and for a bunch of people there, we were like, "No, no, no, just because we get the doctors talking doesn't mean shit unless we start to look at insurance."

So that was my frustration with ACT UP, is that they didn't want to go—you know, they didn't want to look at that. People wanted to sort of—"let's tweak the system, let's get it working." And sure enough, in some way, with the advent of protease, that's what happened. Once people got medication, they took off and ACT UP sort of fell into whatever, oblivion for a little while. But that's exactly what happened.

THEODORE KERR: And did you stay with—when do you think you're—when did you leave? If that's even a statement.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, it's later on.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, good.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But that understanding was one of the things that started to—you know, I got, and I started to feel frustrated with ACT UP about. Because it was like—you know? And then, working at the Anti-Violence Project, I started to feel like, "Guys, you know, you guys are not doing anything in Spanish. [00:00:00] You're not addressing people of color." So I was starting to feel that again, the frustration.

THEODORE KERR: But did you have comrades in ACT UP that felt the way you felt?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Several people did.

THEODORE KERR: Like within the majority taskforce?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Majority Action?

THEODORE KERR: Sorry, Majority Action.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No.

THEODORE KERR: No. Oh, interesting.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no. They were very like, "We've got to do the race thing."

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's interesting, because my perspective is always broader. It's like, "Yes, yes, obviously we have to do the race thing, but we also have to do the gender thing and we have to do the class thing because they're all related." Again, people don't—you know, it becomes difficult. But there were some people, yeah, that totally were there. Especially Maxine and a couple people, who were veterans from, like, the [00:00:00] women's lib war and stuff, so who understood that, you know?

Because what I was—I was thinking essentially like a hippie, you know? And so that thought—people weren't thinking that way anymore and didn't want to. So I was there, living through this hell, and what I liked about *BPM* as well is that—you know what, these are horrific times, they were horrific times. My mother once said to me, "You were in a war." You know, this was a war. But it was also—we had a lot of fun. For example, when I was the at-large, I would tell people, "Yes, a lot of guys here are available. They're angry AIDS activists, but they are available, if you're interested."

So I was there at AVP and I had reached a point now, where I said, [00:10:00] "Okay, I'm working in community and this is where I need to be. I need to be working in community." But AVP was not broad enough for me. I realized that they weren't doing a lot of stuff. So what happened was I got a job and I did what a lot of people did. At that time, when we started to see some success at ACT UP, we started to see AIDS organizations springing up, and we started to think, "Well, if we work in AIDS organizations then this can be helpful. You know, this can help people, we can help people. We can sort of advance the cause."

So I went to work at the Minority Taskforce on AIDS. I decided, "Okay, you know what? I've had enough of the white boys. I need to work in communities of color because we are getting the short end of the stick here." So I went to work at the Minority AIDS Taskforce. Part of what happens is, going there, I walked in and I was an activist. So that got people both pissed off, but also people much more interested and much more active in what was happening. The Minority AIDS Taskforce was essentially—they dealt with African Americans, and I immediately walked in and said, "I'm sorry, are African Americans the only minority in the United States?" Everyone was like, "Uhhh." I said, "You know, kids, I'm black but I'm not African American." So I pushed for them to start to think about doing work in the Latino community. At that time, Apicha had been founded, so people

were doing work in the API community. [00:12:00] But later on, HAF—Hispanic AIDS Forum—Latino Commission on AIDS, they showed up and started to do that kind of work as well, but in the beginning, at the Minority AIDS—I have to pause. Hold on.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Alright, so, what I neglected to mention is that the way that you also move in organizations is developing individual relationships with people. You develop friends. And also, as a gay man, you fuck. So when I was in ACT UP, Gregg Bordowitz and I became boyfriends for a period of time. When we broke up, he started seeing Zoe Leonard. I was Vito Russo's last boyfriend, and so I saw Vito for a bit, and got to—and actually had the opportunity of seeing Larry Kramer not in, sort of, you know, scold mode.

THEODORE KERR: Because you dated him or because of—?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because I dated Vito. Larry and Vito were good friends, and Vito would do movie nights and have Larry come over. Vito was a huge Judy Garland fan. I detest Judy Garland. But in any case—

THEODORE KERR: I know. I think I read somewhere, you don't like musicals. That made me like you more. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, I don't like musicals actually. Correction. I like *West Side Story* because it's about Puerto Ricans. Even though there's rarely been a Puerto Rican in it. But yes, I don't like musicals. I fell asleep in *Le Mis* twice. [00:14:00]

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So Gregg and I—and Gregg was also in Testing the Limits. And when he moved to GMHC and I was working at the Minority Taskforce, he was doing the videos, the safer sex videos and stuff like that, with Jean Carlomusto. I still have one on VHS actually.

So I went—let's see, where were we? I was painting again, that's what I was talking about. I was painting again, living on the Upper East Side, working at, now, the Minority Taskforce on AIDS, and painting. And attending ACT UP meetings. I had started to go to ACT UP less, when I started at the—actually, when I started at the health group, because I was working in AIDS all day, and so I thought, "You know what, I can scale back."

When I was at the Minority Taskforce, Deb Levine came to ACT UP with an offer from Creative Time, where she used to work. Creative Time was doing this festival and wanted to offer a space for ACT UP to do something. Now, ACT UP had already done *The Window*, which is considered Gran Fury's first piece, although it isn't. ACT UP had already done *The Window* at the New Museum. So this is several years later—I think in '90 or '91—and the space they had was at El Museo del Barrio. Which of course, as soon as it's said, all eyes turn to the Puerto Rican who's in the room like, "Oh, Robert, we know that you're sort of an artist." [00:16:00] So I went, "Alright, let's do this." So we had been given a corridor in the Museo and what we did was we blew up the instructions—you know condoms, they used to hand them out with a little thing, like how to put on a condom?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: What we did was we took those—and at that time, we hadn't found any that were translated. So we had it translated and did them in Spanish and made them into blowups. And what we did—we postered the wall with that. There was a 16th century baptismal font in the middle of that corridor, and we filled it with condoms. Every day the Museo staff would take the condoms out of the baptismal font, you know? I never knew what they did with them.

THEODORE KERR: They used them.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Every day we would come back and fill them up again. So I worked on that with Deb Levine. I actually had people from the Hispanic AIDS Forum involved. They helped to do the translation and to talk, so it was a great opportunity for them to do something—as well as ACT UP, but more the Hispanic AIDS Forum was able to do that. There was my first time about, "Let's put something in a museum that is not considered art." And so that was the first time that I thought, "Oh, wait a minute, we can put this stuff together. We can start putting this stuff together." So I went, "Alright," so we did it. Then, the festival ended and we got called by University of Ohio [00:18:00] at Columbus maybe, in Columbus, Ohio, who did the first show about art and AIDS.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow. What makes you say that, that it was the first?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think it was the first. It was the first that I've ever heard of. I don't think I had heard of anybody else doing anything about it, but I didn't have my ear to the ground.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. What year was this, do you think?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Probably '90 or '91. So I went to that. I had heard about Gran Fury. And Gran Fury was mysterious, you know, because they were closed. They were the closed affinity group, so nobody knew who was in Gran Fury. People knew that some—it was so funny, everyone had a suspicion—"Oh, so and so is in it," but no one knew, because Gran Fury started and initially, when they did *The Window*, it was 50 people that pulled it together. But after that, what happened was the collective—in order to do work, you couldn't have 50 people walking in and out of a room, so you had to close it and that's what they had done.

So what happened was we're on a panel. I got invited to the show of artists, people doing art about AIDS. They had invited Gran Fury, a bunch of other artists. I remember there was this guy who did—[phone rings] I'm sorry.

THEODORE KERR: That's okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I had been—there was a guy who did this piece that were—you know the plastic jugs from water coolers?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Or it was a gallon bottle. It was large plastic containers in any case, and what they were—and he said, "This is how much saliva it takes for you to develop HIV." And it was some ridiculous amount of—

So I was on a panel and Tom Kalin was on the panel, who was a member of Gran Fury. We were talking and I said—we [00:20:00] were talking about art, and I said, "Well, you know, I don't see a lot of work by people of color in general, but certainly not about AIDS." I was talking about, "That's a problem," and then I specifically called out Gran Fury and I said something like, "I'm sure that Gran Fury doesn't have any people of color in it at all." Then it ended, the panel ended. I got back to New York. Not too long after we got back, very shortly after we got back, I got a call from Tom: "Do you want to join Gran Fury?" Again, I had that reaction like, "Oh, why did you open your mouth? Why did you open your mouth?" Okay, once again, I said, "Sure, let me join."

So I went in to Gran Fury, and that's where the sort of Gran Fury stuff started then. Before that, Gran Fury had done a poster. They had done—the first sort of official Gran Fury piece was the *1 in 61* poster, which talks about black and Hispanic kids. Every one in 61 black men have AIDS. They had done it, and they had done bilingual editions of it. I went up to El Barrio by myself, to wheat-paste, and I wheat-pasted posters up there by myself, one or two nights. You know, I did it, because it was like, "You know what, putting this in Spanish and talking about Latinos, and doing it in the West Village or in the East Village, unless you're going to go to the housing projects all the way at the end, it doesn't mean anything, it's just show."

So I did that, and then after that, I was part of Fury, and [00:22:00] started to collaborate with them on the various works that we did. For me, it was a way to be creative in a specific way, in the arts, that was important to me. It was a way to be political. It was a way to have at least some sort of representation of people of color in what I considered a very important, you know—

THEODORE KERR: And to be clear, you were the only person of color in Gran Fury.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was and remain the only person of color. Mark Simpson had some Native American blood, I think [laughs] which I snooted him, like, "Oh, whatever white boy." [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. And was that a dynamic—well, I don't want to cut you off.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, go ahead.

THEODORE KERR: Was there a way in which that was a live dynamic within the room? Like was it—were you often—did you feel like you had to be a spokesperson for people of color?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I always feel as if I have to be the spokesperson for people of color, because I feel a responsibility as a person of color. This is interesting, that white people don't know that people of color—we have—we feel this, we're given this. Although it may not be—you know, it may be subtle. It may not be they tell you this, but sort of that whole "uplift the race" thing, I think it was W.E.B. Du Bois said. And that is a real thing that happens with people of color in our communities. So I felt like I was a spokesmodel for people of color. I also felt that I was a spokesmodel for poor people, because I grew up [00:24:00] working poor, and everyone else in Gran Fury grew up, let us say middle class, nice middle-class families.

So there was that class stuff and the racial stuff that I felt that I had to talk about, and did. Fortunately, in many discussions at Fury, I didn't have to sort of take them to task for being racially insensitive or anything like that. Marlene was also part of it. Marlene and I would talk, you know, refer to ourselves sort of as—Avram, myself, and

Marlene were the emotional minorities.

THEODORE KERR: That's beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Everyone else was a WASP, essentially. And so we were able to—you know, so any issue that talked about race or anything else was—you know. Obviously, one of the things that automatically happened, although it would have happened anyway I think, in *Gran Fury*, is that of course our work became bilingual, because it had to be. *Kissing Doesn't Kill* is not in Spanish, I just realized.

THEODORE KERR: Is that possible?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't know if it's possible. I've never seen it in Spanish.

THEODORE KERR: I don't think I have either.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I have to check that.

THEODORE KERR: That's interesting.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I just realized. But everything else was—everything else became—oh, the other one that wasn't bilingual was *Men Use Condoms Or Beat It*.

So I didn't have to bring up, necessarily bring up, race and stuff like that. The only time that we had sort of a disagreement about that was when we did the *Women Don't Get AIDS. They Just Die From It*. And the image that the folks in *Fury* chose were white beauty queens. And this was going up in several places, but one of the places [00:26:00] were bus stops in LA.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: I wish the recording could see your eyes. They went very big.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: And why did they go very big?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because I thought—because when we heard that—when they told me that, I said, "Who do you think takes a bus in LA?" I said, "Who do you think takes a bus in LA? It's not very many white people. It's people of color," I said. I said, "Obviously, I'm not a woman, I do not try to speak for women, but I will just say that I do not think that women of color are going to look at white beauty queens and feel a connection with them at all."

THEODORE KERR: With that poster though, the text is so big. Do people see the women, do you think?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't think—they're vague because of the text. But I remember arguing that. I said, "No, I don't want to use white beauty queens. Can we find women of color? There have to be beauty pageants with women of color. Or Miss Universe or something, that you have different ethnicities. But we got—Avram and I got outvoted in that one."

THEODORE KERR: So it was like the two of you against the room.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The two of us against the room.

THEODORE KERR: Because they wanted—they were like—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. They wanted to do that.

THEODORE KERR: What was their argument for it? Do you remember?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That they disagreed. They thought that people would pick it up anyway, understand it. That women would understand it. You know, it would sort of transcend the whole racial thing.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I have a memory, and I may be wrong about this. But I just have a memory of someone saying something along the lines of, "Well, if I was a woman of color," or something like that. Something like that. I have a memory of this and I just remember thinking to myself, "Well, my work is done

here, they've—people have obviously incorporated [00:28:00] the experience of people of color into themselves and can now speak for them." So at that point in time I went, "Fuck this." I walked away from Gran Fury.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was like, "No." You know? When you say something like that, and when it was like, "Wait a minute, guys, I'm telling you, as the person of color in the room, that I don't think this is the right thing to do." And I got outvoted, so I went, "Alright, well"—you know. The one time that I sort of used my person of color authority stuff—the one time I played the race card—didn't work. And I went, "Alright, well, this is useless, you know. I don't need to do this anymore then." So I walked away from Gran Fury at that time.

THEODORE KERR: And, like, did you leave them a note, did you make an announcement to them, or was it just, like, you didn't go to the next meeting?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I just said like, "I'm done, I'm done." You know? It's interesting, because I realized that at the same time I was doing this, I was also working with—talking about creativity, I had started writing by then. I had started writing poetry, and I had written an essay that came out in *Outweek* that talked about fetishizing people of color. It was called—there was a Julia Roberts movie that had come out at the time that was called *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and I wrote a piece that was called "No Longer Sleeping with the Enemy." It was a real vitriolic piece about how Puerto Rican gay men, or men of color, get fetishized by white gay men, and how problematic that is and how fucked up that is. I wrote that. And so for a while, it came out [00:30:00]—for a year after that, I became the diva of race relations.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was on panels, talking about, you know—once again it was like, "Robert, you opened up your mouth and now you have to deal with the consequences of it." It's never been a lesson I've learned, you know? I'll always open up my mouth and then consequently, something will happen. It's like, I'll open my mouth, the door opens, and then you have to walk—I have to walk in. I can't not walk in. So I did that for a year. I had intense conversations with good friends of mine who dated men of color.

THEODORE KERR: But also, how did this affect your dating life, because white men were in your wheelhouse. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes, they were. I was dating a Puerto Rican. I was dating men, I was—well, I was dating anybody. It was equal opportunity. You know, "male" is—

THEODORE KERR: That was the defining factor.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, exactly. So what happened was a lot of white guys got pissed off at me.

THEODORE KERR: Of course.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: White men who I had slept with got pissed off at me. White men who I had slept with had become very defensive, because they were like, "Was I fetishizing you?" It just seemed more annoying to me that when you meet a white guy who is hitting on you and calls you Papi, you know? Papi is what my father calls me. Papi is a term of affection, you know? And it is, and they're using it properly. But for me, that is a term that my father uses.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. You have to earn it.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. But no, it's my father uses that term for me.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That's my father's nickname for me. He calls me Papi. So, guys calling me Papi, I don't need you calling—don't call me, please don't call me Papi, alright? Because that has a totally different association for me, and it's not sex. But it is sort of a go-to: "Oh, you're Puerto Rican, we can say this and this will work on you." So again, I had men who had slept with who were [00:32:00] angry at me, white men who were defensive, lots of men of color who were really supportive. Charles—

THEODORE KERR: —King?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, Charles Rice-González.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, Charles Rice-González.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He had accepted an award once, and I was in the room. And he said, "I also want to thank Robert Vazquez, for his piece in *Outweek* about no longer sleeping with the enemy, that talked about how gay men of color get fetishized by white men, you know, and what's wrong with that." He said, "That was one of the seminal experiences in my consciousness that helped me define myself as a gay man of color." I was like, wow, you know. I was surprised by that, but also flattered.

So it certainly cut into my dating for a while. And for a while I just didn't want to date white men. This is, I think, the period where I moved into my angry-person-of-color phase and I was just pissed off. I was just pissed off at white people and pissed off at racism and stuff, and pissed off at all sorts of stuff. I became highly aware of the daily indignities that you have to experience in this country as a person of color. Things that people are surprised at and shocked at when you start to explain to them. The fact that people would not—you know, that I lived uptown, I lived on the Upper East Side, I could not get a cab taking me uptown because I was a black person. A white person can get a cab, and white people would line up in front of me and get cabs and they would not stop for me. And it was like, "That's a real thing that happens and that's a thing that takes its toll on you." Or, you know, security will follow me in a store.

Barbara Smith—I don't know if you know Barbara Smith [00:34:00]—once said that—she once said, "Listen, I get into my Mercedes and I'm listening to opera. And I drive to the 7-11," she said, "And you know what, when I walk into that 7-11—despite everything, when I walk into that 7-11, I'm a nigger who can steal something, who might steal something." I mean, so that is really—in that time, I started to see that. It was something I started to see at AVP as well, that they weren't dealing—they really weren't trying to deal with people of color at all. And I was becoming increasingly frustrated and then you get the angry person of color and then the white people get all nervous. So I wrote that piece.

After that—and I was writing—I started to write. Writing sort of became the clearest way that I was being creative. I was writing poetry. Other Countries—do you know the Other Countries collective?—was meeting. I had thought to myself, "I'm not going to—alright, the visual arts stuff, I'm doing it with Gran Fury kind of." And we were meeting once a week. So that's sort of covered. I was finding that I was feeling this ability to express myself through writing, so I was writing. So Other Countries did—oh, what happened? At that time, after that article in *Outweek*, more people of color—because people of color—I associated with people of color but because ACT UP was so white, a lot of people did not want to deal with them, and consequently, didn't necessarily want to deal with me. And I was like, "You know, [00:36:00] we can use them." What I tell people is that we can use them. "They're willing to go to bat for some of this stuff, for us," you know? But unfortunately, that wasn't happening.

There was a very famous Latino writer for one of the daily Spanish newspapers here in New York. I think it was *El Diario*. Juan Méndez. We never got along. I don't know why. Part of it is—and there was also the Latino—

THEODORE KERR: —Caucus?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Caucus, thank you—that I was sort of part of, but by then I had sort of moved away. And there were tensions with me and the Latino Caucus, because they were all from Puerto Rico and they had very, very—or Latin America—and they had various sort of judgmental opinions of, for example, Puerto Ricans from New York. New Yoricans. So it was like, "Oh, they were more authentically Puerto Rican, consequently more authentically Latino, because"—you know. So there was all of that stuff that was happening.

But what happened was, as I started to do more work, I started to see more people of color—about AIDS, when I was at the Minority AIDS Taskforce—and I started to associate with a variety of artists. I met up with Other Countries, you know? And Other Countries had a poetry reading one year that I went to. I read a very beautiful but very intense love poem that I had written. I was smitten with this guy at the time. His name is George Ayala, who works with gay men—

THEODORE KERR: Oh, I love George. Yeah, he's friends with Pato.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: He's friends with Pato. I know Pato [00:38:00] as well.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, wonderful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So I read it at the thing, and it was—I'm told it was the swooning poem of the evening.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Everyone was just like, "Oh, my God, it's so beautiful." I read it, and Essex Hemphill read right after me, and I feel honored. He said to me, "Wow," you know. He said, "Wow." He said, "You know, we could have ended that right here, because," he said, "that's just absolutely beautiful." And so Essex

and I became friends. So I worked in Other Countries, so I was doing stuff with Other Countries at this time.

At the Minority AIDS Taskforce, I am talking about AIDS. I was director of education and something else but I forgot what. And so I was out talking about AIDS all the time, running the program. I would go out with the outreach workers, you know, I would go out and come downtown or go to Hunters Point and hang out with—I'll say the politically incorrect words—I would hang out with the trannie hookers and get them condoms, and we would duck and hide from the—and I would be with them and duck and hide from the police and talk to them. I went to bathhouses to do safer sex stuff. So I was doing all of this AIDS stuff. In addition to that, I was writing. Other Countries decided to do *Sojourner*, their first, their second?

THEODORE KERR: A journal?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Their second book, their second anthology.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was their second anthology. Of course, because it's Robert, I am on the board of Other Countries. Which was an interesting experience, because I walked into Other Countries the way I did with GMAD and stuff, you know. I did that same thing with [00:40:00] Gay Men of African Descent. I would walk in, I would say, "You know what, y'all? You're not the only people of African descent here, and you have to start to understand that, because there are a lot of us who are not African American and suffer the same indignities—and in the Caribbean, even worse forms of slavery, because picking cotton is nothing compared to sugar farming, to getting sugar cane, at all. Picking cotton is a day in the park, you know? You're chopping down trees with a big knife, in the Caribbean." So in any case—and that's just the beginning of it. So I would do that, I would say, "You know what, you have to do this."

I also was going to, at the same time, the first meeting of Latino Gay Men of New York—that there hadn't been a Latino gay man organization in the longest time. I went to the first meetings, and at the first meetings there—again, this is where Robert really was highly racialized. At the first meetings, I was—you know, we were talking about stuff, and I was making comments like, "Well, there's also racism in the Latino community because a white Latino is going to get a different reception than a Latino of color," which is not something that Latinos like to talk about. So we started there. But then at the first meetings, these guys showed up with their white boyfriends at the meeting, and I said, "These guys have got to go."

THEODORE KERR: The white boyfriends?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The white boyfriends have to go, they cannot be here. People were like, "Why?" And it's like, "Because this is a meeting for Latino gay men." I said, "You do not become Latino by injection, okay? So they have to go." It was a big, huge fight at Latino Gay Men in the beginning, about not letting—and I was [00:42:00]—myself and Manolo Guzmán, who teaches here in New York somewhere, I forgot the university. He's Puerto Rican as well, but he was born on the island. We were both adamant about, "No. No white men." In the same token, no black men, no Asian men, no. This is a Latino space, period.

And so what happened is we finally came to that—and it really was a battle, and it really—it was myself and Manolo against like 50 people, arguing, and we were not backing down. Finally, it became part of the rules in the organization, that it would only be Latinos; it was a Latino-only space. And so what happened was, we were meeting at the Center and the Center had rules about you can't bar anyone from meetings, in the beginning. SO: "No problem, I'll be at the door. I'll stand at the door, you guys have the meeting. I'm very happy to stand at the door." And I would stand at the door, and white guys would come and I would go, "No, you can't come in. You can't come in, you're not a Latino, this is Latino only." "Well, you know the Center"—"I don't give a fuck about what the Center says, you're not coming in. This is not your space, white man, go away."

I ended up—at that time too, I worked at Meat, which was a club that was on 14th Street, which was a gay male club. I worked the door there as well, would do the same thing, like, "Sorry, you're a straight guy, you can't come in. Sorry, you're straight women, go party with your gay friend someplace else." So I was becoming this sort of—you know, in all of the different roles that I was taking, I had taken on this sort of role of an enforcer. And I was very clear about, "No, we respect these spaces." Consequently, [00:44:00] people found out about me and so I was asked several times, like when I went to conferences at youth institutes: "Could you please, you know—can you go to the door and just sit there and make sure that the space is safe so that people don't try to get in?" No problem. I did it for women institutes as well. They were like, "Could you do this? We don't want to have a woman wasting her time doing this." No problem, no problem. And I did that several times, you know, I was like, "Go away." Because I'm very clear about the fact that we need to have—individuals need to have spaces that they feel safe in. And you have to respect those spaces, period, that's it. It's very simple. You have to respect those spaces.

THEODORE KERR: And do you think, also, that different conversations happen based on who is in the room?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh absolutely, different conversations happen. I remember doing—after writing that piece for [. . . *Outweek* -RVP], I got invited to do a talk at a conference of the progressive folks. Predominantly white people, but a lot of progressive people who were doing anti-racism work, anti-sexism work, et cetera. A cool group. So I got up to speak and I started talking about race, and I immediately said, "Okay, wait." I said, "What I need you people to do here is to not go into liberal white guilt mode, okay? Put that off for later." I said, "I need you to engage with me and listen to me, alright, so we can start to figure out what to do, because if you just keep feeling guilty, we're not getting anywhere, you know, we're not changing."

So I was doing all of this shit. Other Countries put out their anthology, which was called *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*. I actually have two pieces in it, surprisingly enough. I have a poem in it [00:46:00] and a short essay. The poem is going to be coming out again in an anthology of work of black gay men in the '80s.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, amazing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. '80s and early '90s. It's going to be there. Then at that time, what I started to do—I was writing, I was speaking. I was speaking about a host of stuff. One of the things that happened at that time, once I joined Gran Fury, is that Gran Fury was invited to be on panels and to talks, stuff like that. We had to do some sort of presentation—I forgot at what museum it was—and we had never come up with that. Gran Fury, we were very sort of relaxed about a lot of this stuff. I mean, we take it seriously, but we also sort of laugh at a grain of—you know, we take it with a grain of salt. We're very clear about certain things, like we don't make art objects. And we're very clear about that, that we don't make art objects, and that our work is not for the gallery. It's not designed for a gallery, it's not supposed to be in a gallery. It is for the streets. It is for people to see and to engage.

But we had to do a presentation. So Donald, Marlene and I—Marlene McCarty, Donald Moffett, and I—got together and pulled together sort of what we called the Gran Fury Road Show. It is intense, because we talk about—we use some of the information from the first—from *The Window*, let the record show. It had an LED readout that had statistical information in it, and so we used some of that information, while we were displaying pictures of our work and then other work as well. [00:48:00] And so we developed that, and that became sort of the talking—you know, our talking thing. Nobody in Gran Fury likes to talk in public, generally. It's very rare that we will get together on a panel. Most of them just don't want to do it, and have never wanted to do it.

What happened was, at that time, I had been—I was already a talking head. I was already used to talking publicly, at AVP, at Minority AIDS. So I was doing it. So I said, "Alright, I'll take it on," and I thought to myself, "Yeah, let people think that Gran Fury is a bunch of colored people. You know? I'm okay with that." So I took that on. And so I started to be, in some ways, the public face of Gran Fury. Which is fine, you know?

I've always been very clear: what happens, any time—we used to have a policy that no Gran Fury member could talk by themselves. You always had to have two, because there were 10 of us in the collective. You always have to have two. After a while, nobody wanted to talk, you know? So it's like—I've always said, "It's really important to be out there and talking to people about stuff. It's really important to do that." It's very important to educate people. So I would take that on and do talking gigs for Gran Fury.

So what happened was, when we did that *Women Don't Get AIDS. They Just Die From It*, I distanced myself from Gran Fury. We weren't doing that much work anyway. I don't think we did—no, we didn't do anything after that, I think. I think everyone had reached a point where everyone was tired, and then Mark Simpson started to get sick. So we sort of put it on hiatus and what I did is I moved down to Philadelphia. There, I worked at the Minority AIDS Coalition. [00:50:00] I showed up in Philadelphia as a name. And consequently, as a name, ended up getting pulled for all sorts of stuff constantly. What happened was that while I was there I was invited to the first national conference for the national lesbian and gay Latino organization, LLEGO. I went to their first conference, which was, I think, somewhere in Texas. This is one of the first times I went to a conference. It was actually the first time I went to a hotel.

THEODORE KERR: What do you mean?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I had never stayed in a hotel before. I had never stayed in a hotel before, and so this whole sort of getting on a plane and going someplace, that was new to me. So I went to that conference. I forgot what I was—I did something there, they pulled me out. I was—I had—in the Latino community, I had a reputation of being a firebrand dealing with AIDS. In the white community I was a loose cannon. So, I was invited to talk, I spoke. I don't know what I said, but got back and then when LLEGO found out—they were located in DC. When they found out I was in Philadelphia, the executive director and their director of programs came up to Philadelphia to meet me, to woo me.

THEODORE KERR: To change jobs?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes. Well, eventually. They asked me, "Are you interested?" And so I met with



them twice and I said sure. I moved down to DC, to work in LLEGO, which was [00:52:00] great but difficult. It's funny, because what I did was I started sort of in generic gay organizations, and one of the things that I learned in generic gay organizations is that people of color concerns don't come into the picture. You're either gay or you're colored. So that made me go into people of color organizations, and then the people of color organizations—fortunately the one that I went to is African American, where it was like, "Oh, we're not all people of color together, we're only African Americans." So I had—so it was like winnowing down to—finally, I ended up at LLEGO. And they were predominantly Mexican, but that was okay and it was very funny. I worked there for a couple of years. I came up to see my family, my Spanish had developed Mexican words and a slight Mexican accent. My family was horrified. They were horrified. They were like, "I can't believe you sound like a Mexican."

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, you know, let me say that the myth of pan-Latino unity doesn't exist. We do that for white people, alright?

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We do that for the New York One commercial.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Somos Latinos!" No, we're not actually. One of the first things that Latinos will do when they meet another Latino is ask them where you're from. "What are you?" Those relationships between countries are not always amicable. So sometimes, you know, a Venezuelan meeting a Columbian, they're not going to get along for a variety of reasons. I saw that in the Latino Caucus in ACT UP, where they were like, "We have to do this in Puerto Rico, we have to do this in Puerto Rico." And I was like, "What the fuck? We have Latinos here in New York. Why aren't we doing work here?" So LLEGO, I did—you know, [00:54:00] I was working there.

THEODORE KERR: And you moved. So you weren't in—you didn't have your apartment.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I moved from New York to Philadelphia, with—I had reached a point where I was tired of New York. New York for me—I moved in, I think, it was 1992. New York for me was filled with dead people. New York for me was filled with the memory of all these people. David had died, Robert had died, Jeff had died, my cousin. I had all of these people just—people that were close to me had died and then there was the larger group of people that I knew that died. So New York was just—I mean, it was like the death city for me, because I would walk through the city and see places and it was like, "Oh, so and so used to live there." I do that now about places but that's because I'm old and I've lived in New York for most of my life, so, you know, I can look at places and remember what was there. But walking through the city and remembering the people was difficult.

I went to San Francisco in the early '90s, to visit a friend actually, that's what it was. And I walked through the Castro and it was sort of—New York didn't have the same sort of high-density gay neighborhood that was the Castro. But walking through the Castro was depressing, because there were all these empty apartments, and you just knew that this was—this had been filled. This had been a vibrant community of gay men, who are all gone now. Who are all gone. So New York became that symbol for me, of loss, and so I had to get out. I met someone and we moved out of New York together. I refer to him as the aberration because he was very different from everyone else, and when we got there we realized that we didn't want to be in a relationship. [00:56:00] We got there and we realized that we had both used each other to get out of New York.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative], beautiful, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Which was great. So we left—so I left—to go to DC. And so I was working in—so, I ended up, I was doing technical assistance in DC. I am now firmly in the grip of nonprofit land. I know the language, I know everything. I have issues with nonprofits, very big issues with nonprofits, but in any case, I went down there. So I was doing technical assistance around the country, so we were helping. I had acquired—

THEODORE KERR: But IT now would mean you're helping with computers. I think you weren't helping with computers.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, technical assistance is literally helping them—I did grant writing. When I was at the Minority Taskforce on AIDS, I was living on the Lower East Side, and I had done some work with needle exchange. Well, the needle exchange had gotten a storefront and needed money, and they applied, and they need a grant for amfAR. I forgot who it was that pulled me in and said, "We need your help." I said, "What do you want?" "Oh, we have to write this grant." I said, "I've never written a grant before in my life, I don't know." They were like, "We need your help." "Fine, fine." We wrote the grant, we got \$150,000. It started the

Needle Exchange in New York.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So, I went on the board of Needle Exchange then. They said, "Can you go on the board?" So I did that. So what happened was I acquired—I guess acquired the ability to write grants really well and become successful. I'm a good grant writer. I'm a very good grant writer, actually. So I acquired that ability, so when I was at LLEGO and they found out that I was a good grant writer, I ended up doing two things. One is that I ended up writing grants for the organization there, which, you know, if you've ever worked in [00:58:00] nonprofit, that's the shit that happens. They toss it on to you. And so I did that, but then I also did the technical assistance for grant writing for Latino organizations around the country and went to do grant writing seminars for them. I also did them here in New York for organizations of color. I very clearly said, "I'm only doing organizations of color. I will help you with grant writing and teach you grant writing." So I did that. In that time, when I was at LLEGO, I traveled around the United States a lot. I was gone maybe three weeks out of a month. I no longer had plants. I had an apartment that held my shit and I was on the road a lot. What happened was—and I think I told you this, I mentioned this. I ended up going to every fucking gay bar, Latino gay bar, in the United States.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Latinos—you know, one of the things that we—we're social. We're social people and being social with people is very important for us, along with being polite, believe it or not. And that means that you eat with people, you socialize people. Even in business stuff, you have—you know, you pull it out of business to connect. It's very important to connect with other people. Which is fine, I do that, that's part of me. But part of that meant that I would do the training, one- or two-day training, whatever. And then of course we would have to go out to eat, because people had to show me—because I was a New Yorker, so people had to show me their town.

THEODORE KERR: That their place was good too.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. "Oh, this is"—and you know, I would constantly hear that: "Oh, this is not"—"Yes, sweetie, you don't have to say that, I know this is not New York City."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Right, yeah. [01:00:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "We're in Omaha, I know that."

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. "I want to see what Omaha looks like."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, show me Omaha. So we would go out to eat, but then of course we would have to go out to the Latino gay bar. And at the Latino gay bar, what I learned was that Latino drag queens know four songs that they do. And they do them all over the country, alright? So for me, that was the death of going to see drag shows for me after that. It was like, "I can't do this again," you know? And especially drag queens, because I knew what the playlist was going to be. But it did get me around the country and it did get me to see the United States and experience that, and see life for Latinos in different areas and get a sense of what the Latino gay and lesbian communities were—the LGBT Latino communities were—around the country.

All of this, at this time—or backtracking, I'm sorry. I just need to write down my history so I get it chronologically myself. When I was at the Minority AIDS Taskforce, we were approached by Dr. Cladd Stevens, who is at the New York Blood Bank. They were writing a proposal to do a vaccine trial, an HIV vaccine trial, and they approached the Minority Taskforce to talk about it. As the director of education, I went to the meeting. And as they were talking—and, you know, I was there with David. It's not David Barr. It's another David, who did treatment stuff at GMHC, and I forgot what his name is. We sat there and there were other people from a bunch of organizations. Nobody was particularly interested, but David and I heard it and at the end we said, "Wait a minute, does that mean that they may possibly be injecting live HIV virus [01:02:00] into people? Wait a minute."

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track07.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So that got us both into the world of vaccines. I ended up—I wrote a piece that is in the *AIDS Vaccine Handbook*, about AIDS and communities. We did a white paper and I wrote about communities. I wrote about HIV vaccine and community. Consequently, then I became—it launched me sort of into AIDS treatment information and stuff like that, and vaccine stuff, which nobody was doing. Which really scared me, because they were starting up trials, starting to get money to do HIV vaccine trials and nobody knew anything about them. And especially no people of color know anything about it. Because I also, weirdly enough, became one of the people of color who knew about treatment. There was only a handful of people of color in the country who knew that, who did that.

THEODORE KERR: And why do you think there was that disparity?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was science. I mean, partially science.

THEODORE KERR: And just, like, the inherent structural racism of the science world?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, of the science world. Also, the issues—people of color communities are not abstract. It's about housing, it's about food, it's about actual medical care. It's about prison. These things are not abstractions. In some level, the HIV vaccine conversation was an abstraction.

THEODORE KERR: And it wasn't about people living with HIV, it was about prevention.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. It was, exactly, about prevention. The ironic thing was most of my career in HIV was about doing prevention work, although I used to tell people I was a prevention failure, but I would do prevention work. So what happened was, at that same time, I got pulled into doing AIDS treatment stuff, ended up speaking at conferences and panels, because [00:02:00] there were no people of color. No, well, there were a few. There were a handful of people of color talking about treatment, for whatever reason. Moisés Agosto—we were roommates actually, and we were like two of the—literally, there were like maybe five of us and we were the two Latinos who happened to be Puerto Ricans.

So we ended up—so I ended up then suddenly doing the treatment stuff and having conversations and talking to people about HIV treatment, sort of trying to demystify it in the Latino community. You know, not to be worried. "Yes, it's science, yes it's—but you can learn it. I learned it, you can learn it." So I started to do that vaccine treatment stuff. So I'm doing Other Countries. I was doing Other Countries until I left New York. And when I was in DC, I was doing vaccine stuff, I was doing treatment stuff, I was doing grant-making and other stuff in LLEGO, and writing. So that's, and that's what I—you know that's what I—

THEODORE KERR: And Gran Fury was on the backburner.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Gran Fury was—after that piece I was like, "Whatever." Unfortunately, when I was gone, Mark Simpson got sick and he died. I have a real regret for not being around for that, and I have—I harbor a little resentment because it's like, "You guys didn't tell me?" Somebody could have emailed me. I've had the same fucking email address for the past 30 years. When people tell me, "I lost your email address," it's like, "Girl, no you didn't, you have it, it hasn't changed." So, you know, he died, which is—his death is what got Fury to do the last piece, [00:04:00] the *Four Questions*.

THEODORE KERR: By then did you—were you back—did you join the band again?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: When I came back to New York, Fury—so I was in DC for two years. I got sick. I started to develop—I've never had an OI, but I also—in the height of the epidemic, from, like—I would say from '88, when I started to go to an AIDS doctor, until '95—no, until today—I've never had an opportunistic infection, but I have had weird [laughs] illnesses that have hospitalized me. So I got sick in DC with something that gave me fevers of 104. I had left LLEGO by that time. When I was in Philadelphia, I had been working with a Latino theater group and had written pieces about AIDS in Puerto Rico, that they were doing.

I got sick and I said, "Alright, you know what, I'm sick here." LLEGO had run out of money for me, so now I was in DC, sort of I've got to figure out what to do. Now, what I learned when I got out of DC is that if you're not in the game, then you're not anybody. So part of what I realized—what I learned was that the people that I had spoken to as colleagues and stuff, who were my colleagues, once I was not working there, couldn't be bothered. I would tell people, "You want to go to a movie? Do you want to go out to dinner?" "No. We're not discussing business, you know."

What I also saw, what was great for me—so I got to go—I went to policy meetings when I was at LLEGO. [00:06:00] I went to the first White House Conference on AIDS, under Clinton. I also did—I also went to—I had a friend who was a psychologist and a researcher, who worked for a company that was called, I think, ABT. Was it called ABT? He sat in at the vaccine—there were vaccine meetings. It was called the HIV Vaccine Working Group. Fauci had been there and then a bunch of people, so I sat there. I was invited to sit there, to participate as a community representative, because I had written that piece on community, because I was out there talking about treatment and clinical trials. So I did that for a couple of years.

Michael was one of the researchers there, who was an out gay man. We became friends. He said to me, "I'm your fan." He said, "You're constantly telling these doctors"—at one point, I was talking to a doctor. You know, I don't have a college education. I'm from high school. I'm from a poor family, and I was talking once, and I said to a doctor, "You know what, you're looking at me as if something from a petri dish is talking to you." And I said, "What the fuck do you think you're going to be able to accomplish if you look a community person like that?" So one of the things that I did there constantly was taking him to task about talking to people, not just people of

color, just people in communities, and doing things.

I remember being at a conference where they did a trial where what they did was—they did two groups that they wanted to look at: gay men and injection drug users. What they did was, they said—as incentives, they realized that the gay men did it because of commitment to community, and so they conducted a trial in that community. With the [00:08:00] injection drug users, they offered the money. And I raised my hand I said, "I'm just curious"—exactly, you know where I'm going. "I'm just curious, did you offer the gay men money at all or do they not need money or want money?" I said, "And, you know, the converse of that: Did you ask the injection drug users if they would be willing to do something because it's important to their community?" And once again, I got that scientist look like, "What, you're talking to me?"

And with that—you know, in the treatment stuff, I started to see that sort of shit about racism, which I ended up starting to see in ACT UP already, about in the sciences and stuff like that. So I come back to—DC is not working for me. I'm doing some—I loved living in DC, and doing some freelance work, but nothing. Came back to New York, check in with the band. The band isn't doing anything. The band is talking, doing some talking gigs, and that's about it. We weren't doing anything else. What happens is—essentially Gran Fury is on hiatus and everyone is dealing with—you know? I mean, Gran Fury is not all working artists. When we started, Donald Moffett and Marlene were graphic designers doing advertising stuff, and they developed their careers. Avram was doing whatever Avram does. I'm never, ever clear about whatever Avram does for money, but, you know—and Tom was doing his video stuff. Loring wasn't doing anything because Loring is a Rockefeller. [00:10:00] Richard Elovich is a playwright.

So almost everyone had sort of working relationships in the arts, except for myself, and Loring was an artist as well. And Mark Simpson had been a painter. So everyone were essentially working artists, except for myself and Michael Nesline. Michael Nesline, who is a member of Gran Fury who moved to Texas, is a nurse—which was, because of that, was also something that we would always bring into the Gran Fury meetings. Like, "No, that's art speak," you know? Or, "No, you're getting lost in fucking theory, art theory," you know? "People are not going to engage in that." So in some ways, Michael and I had the responsibility, I guess. We took on the responsibility of sort of bringing everything down to earth sometimes, so it didn't fly off into the ether.

So I got back to New York and Gran Fury was on hiatus. We hadn't done anything. After the *Four Questions* and Mark died, everybody was tired, everyone went to do work. So for the rest of the '90s I think, we didn't do anything, and it wasn't until—I don't remember the year of the retrospective.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, like 2011?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, 2011, we got offered that.

THEODORE KERR: At the Grey Art Gallery.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I had still been talking about Gran Fury, so I had Gran Fury slides, and so I would still, over time, when people asked, do presentations and talk about Fury. I had been writing and so my focus had been writing and getting shit out there and getting shit published, and writing on a variety of topics. [00:12:00] So, when we got—we were approached by the gallery, the 80 West—whatever the name of the gallery is.

THEODORE KERR: The NYU Gallery.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, the NYU Gallery. Not Grey, but the other one.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: About doing a retrospective. And so it's like, "Oh, let's get the band together," which we did, except for Richard. Richard didn't—Richard and Donald actually were not that involved in doing the retrospective. They just felt that they—you know, they had moved on, and I understood that. Part of what was happening for us in Gran Fury is that we had done Gran Fury, you know, we had done the work we had done. We were all very happy and very proud, you know, and we all stood by the work we had done. And we're done, we're done. So that was it. So what happened was it was now 25 years later. The opportunity came for us to do a retrospective, most importantly to show people, and this was our reasoning: "This is Gran Fury work, this is not. We did this and this and this. We did not do that and that and that." Because, you know, a lot gets ascribed to us.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, interesting. Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And so we wanted to sort of come up with a catalogue résumé, you know, of our work, which is one of the reasons why we did that. It was very bizarre because it's the first time all our work is

together. And, you know, I work with posters and bus size, and some of the pieces were done in full size. So it was sort of fun, but also like, wow, you know, to get these huge Gran Fury pieces around us. I am in *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which haunts me till today. And so it's always bizarre, [00:14:00] because *Kissing Doesn't Kill* for me is the piece that obviously—it has my image in it, you know? Robert in his early 30s. So it's the piece that I feel most connected to, and also one of those pieces—that I think I mentioned this when I talked last week—proudest about, because it's a piece that moved beyond AIDS. But the interesting thing—

THEODORE KERR: What makes you say that? What's wrong with something—are you saying that there's anything wrong with the piece just being within AIDS?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No, no, not at all. What I'm saying—well, sometimes it can be, because sometimes the focus becomes very narrow. It can become very narrow. And you lose things in that focus, and unless the piece is—and in AIDS, unless you're willing to take something that, you know, goes beyond sort of very narrow parameters, the piece, people are going to look at it and say, "Oh, that's about AIDS." Boom, done. Not, "Oh, that's about women and AIDS, or that's about"—you know.

So what happened was that since the piece is celebratory, it took on a life as a symbol of LGBT pride in some ways. And so in the gigs that I would do, going around the country, I did—I would sometimes—you know, I would meet people that had the poster in their office, in their home, on their refrigerator, and generally, I don't talk about it. If I see it, I don't say, "It's me." But I would see it and think—you know? And sometimes people would connect: "Oh, wait a minute, you're"—and people would say, you know, "This poster, it changed"—you know how people talk.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, of course.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's like, "This poster changed my life because it was this very positive image." [00:16:00] And I would get it from everybody. I would get it from lesbians, from gay men. I get it from people of color.

THEODORE KERR: Of course.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It was like, "This was very positive for us." You know? So, that became for me, something that was like, "Wow, that's great! It's great that we were able to do this. It's great that we were able to help people beyond what our purpose was in this piece." So that for me, the poster kind of symbolized, for example, the desire that I had for that broader social change work that I wanted ACT UP to do. This was the Gran Fury piece that became—talked about broader social change. And I'm very happy with that. And I love it because of that. I'm of course—I'm also depressed because it shows me with hair [laughs] and it shows me: "Oh, your hair was falling out," because that's when I see when I see that poster, it's like, "Oh, your hair is falling out."

But so we pulled it together [laughs] and did the retrospective, which was quite successful, I think. And what it did was it put us back on the map, which was not our intention. Our intention was to do it sort of closed, to say, "Alright, this is what Gran Fury did, alright? Alright, just for you to know, we did this, we didn't do that, we're done. And we're done." But that's not what happened. What happened was that in doing that retrospective, people became conscious of Gran Fury again. For example, the art world became conscious of us again, and then by that time now, 25 years later, we had become like [00:18:00] the historical forbearers of AIDS art and AIDS propaganda. And by that time, we had become Gran Fury. Now, we had always been Gran Fury, but now we were like the doyennes of AIDS—and I like to say AIDS propaganda.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And also just social activism propaganda.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, social activism propaganda as well. And that was fine, although what happened was then people wanted us to talk, people wanted us to do things. And of course, as is typical in Gran Fury, nobody wanted to do anything [laughs], you know? And so I thought, "Okay"—once again I went, "Alright, obviously, I think this is important. I think that we should be out there talking to it. Just because everyone doesn't feel like dealing with it any more doesn't mean that we should just shut up about the work that we did." So I ended up going out to do—I started to do the Gran Fury talks.

THEODORE KERR: The road show begins again.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, the road show begins again. Which I still—I'm committed to doing, I'm fine about it. I think that I do that road show and Avram does his Flash Collective stuff. So we still are doing—you know, Avram and I, I think, still sort of have our hand in the pie about doing stuff like that. I always work with young artists of color, anybody who asks me, that's fine. But we were able to do that. Consequently, that's how I ended up in Tacoma, doing the *AIDS Art in America*. *AIDS Art in America* [Art AIDS America] did *Let the Record Show*. They put up an image of it, because you cannot, you can't pull together *The Window* yet, it's all gone. Which is one of the things—also, one of the things that I like about our work is that our work is ephemera. It's

not made to last.

THEODORE KERR: Wait. So you were in Tacoma?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I was in Tacoma, Washington. [00:20:00] I did the closing talk for *AIDS Art in America* [Art AIDS America].

THEODORE KERR: Wow, I didn't know that.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I did the old Gran Fury talk. I modified it a little, but I did the old Gran Fury talk, and then I did like an hour question-and-answer. I also sat in the meeting of the museum, with the Black AIDS Mobilization.

THEODORE KERR: It was the Tacoma Action Committee. Yeah, TAC.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Thank you, yeah. So I sat in the meeting with them.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, wow.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Which I think was—it was helpful for them, for the young artists there, that we talked about it. It helped out everybody actually, because it soothed the museum, who was totally freaked out. There are really good people, there are really good people in Tacoma, and they really are sort of socially aware and socially conscious and stuff like that. Unfortunately, as is their blindness, it shows sometimes when you don't have people of color in something.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. But were the two curators there as well?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Like was Jonathan and Rock there?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Rock was there, Jonathan was not.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Rock is a sweetie and that whole—yeah, that whole thing got him. He was just—well, you know, it was a typical [laughs]—it triggered the white liberal guilt stuff for him, so he was feeling really, really bad about everything. And so with the museums committed to doing stuff, you know, they're committing to do a variety of things and it's like, "Good, do it."

THEODORE KERR: When you saw the show, did you have similar thoughts? Did representation cross your mind?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Representation is always on my mind. I walk into any situation and I always scan the room to see if there are other people of color there and how many people of color are there. It is automatic. [00:22:00] And generally, if I'm with someone, I will comment and say, "Oh, great, I'm once again, the only person of color in this room. Yay! I get to represent every other person of color in the world." And I've done that as a joke sometimes, like: "Now I'm speaking for Tasmania." But yes—you know, it happens. I went to—when I was in DC, they did a benefit at the Kennedy Center, for HRC.

THEODORE KERR: The Human Rights Campaign.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Human Rights Campaign. And they showed *Angels in America*, right? My friend Michael, who I had mentioned before, who was living in DC as well, invited me. He didn't tell me what it was. Now this is DC, and DC is a swamp, morally and physically. It's retched. If you've been to DC in the summer, you know how horrific it is. Well, he invited me to this thing. I had been out bouncing around, so I'm in shorts and sneakers, and I have to tell you that I went to important policy meetings, sometimes in the last minute, showing up in shorts and sneakers and stuff and going, "Hey, you said it was an emergency, you know, I'm not going home to change into business wear."

We showed up at that, so we showed up at this. They had a talk beforehand and they had—and they were showing—it was a benefit. It was a high-powered benefit. I show up in shorts and sneakers, no one else is dressed like this. Everyone else is power suits because it's Washington, DC. I walk in, and the only other person of color in there is one of the waiters, an older African American man. So I'm looking around and I see, once again, I'm the only one. Okay, once again, I'm the only person of color—one of the few people of color in the room—and I'm also not dressed in any way appropriately. [00:24:00] So you can just see my value in the eyes of the Washington folks just lower. Well, Patsy Kelley [sic. Fleming], who was the first AIDS czar, is from New York and I know her. She walked in. Everyone knew her and went, "Huh, it's Patsy Kelley." I'm standing there with

Michael and she sees me and she walks over: "Robert, how are you?" And I'm like, "Hey, Patsy, how are you, sweetie?" And so we start talking. So we start talking. Immediately, I'm on the radar of everyone in the room. Everyone was like, "Who is that?" Well, the next person to walk in is Donna Shalala.

THEODORE KERR: Who's Donna Shalala?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: She was the Secretary of Health under Clinton. She walks up on Patsy Kelley. So we're talking, I start telling a dirty joke. So I'm standing there, the only person of color in this room, not dressed appropriately at all, and I'm hanging out with the AIDS—whatever her title was, the director of AIDS office, or something like that, for the White House—and the Secretary of Health.

THEODORE KERR: Right. At a benefit, showing an important AIDS film. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right. Suddenly, I have become an important person, and a mysterious person because no one knows who the fuck I am.

THEODORE KERR: And you're an outsider. Like, you also have mysterious—because you're not dressed.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, I'm clearly an outsider, but I'm clearly not an outsider. Who walks in after Shalala? Hillary Clinton. I chat with Hillary, you know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Right. In your shorts.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Who said, like, "Nice outfit," you know?

So we see it and we come out and there's a reception. We go out into the reception. Unlike the first time in the reception, [00:26:00] now everybody wants to talk to me. I left. I had one drink and I left. I said, "Fuck you all." But once again, it was sort of like this, "Oh, my God, you know, what is it?" I think that's one of the most frustrating parts about being—both as a gay man and as a person of color, it's that your experience of racism in this country is never-ending, it's everywhere. It's everywhere. And I think that's something that people don't understand, that it's everywhere. And it becomes very frustrating and very disheartening to try to do that, because you realize that you're always going to be fighting. Luckily for me, I got pissed off enough that I will continue to fight. But I know a lot of people who are just like, "I can't do this. You know, I just can't do this." Especially working in nonprofits. And one of the big issues that I have about nonprofits is that they use people's commitments. They use the fact that you feel strongly about this to pay you like shit and demand that you do a lot of work. I've seen that over and over again in the nonprofits that I worked in.

But anyway, back to Fury. So we did the retrospective. Now people are calling to see the work. During the retrospective, we got to have a talk with Occupy Wall Street. We were invited to talk at Occupy Wall Street, to talk to whatever their arts committee was. Which was very funny, because we walk in—we're all middle-aged, you know? So we're talking, we start talking, and we're trying to tell them like you don't understand the world that we were working in now, [00:28:00] alright, because this is pre-computer. So posters and everything become physical labor. You literally make them. As you know, you're not on the keyboard, you make them. So, we were trying to tell them—they were trying to get tips from us and we talked about slogan stuff and a couple of things like that, but it was like, "Beyond that, you guys need to figure it out because this is your world now."

One of the things we've always liked to do in Fury is—we always wanted to have, if we could, put up a website, you know, with our work, that we could—and we were going to say, you know, the title of the website, something like *Steal This Work* or something, you know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Just take it, you know, because that's what we want you to do. We want you to take it and use it. So it becomes—but unfortunately, what happens is that, one, it's—our work, we have to give—we have to do really high resolution stuff and that can be expensive because it takes up a lot of space, which is why we don't have a website.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. But do you guys think that Gran Fury suffers from a lack of exposure?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I don't care.

THEODORE KERR: Right. Yeah, and I think people—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, no, the website is about making the stuff available to people.

THEODORE KERR: So that people can make it physical.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly.

THEODORE KERR: That's why it has high resolution.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right, so people can take it, copy it and then use it. That's the reason why. No, it's not about exposure. Honestly, I think we're all over our exposure, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Right, right, right. And then, I guess, like thinking about the last part of this interview—is like in the last—at least in my understanding, and you can push back—is there was a long period where people didn't talk about HIV. You know, like from '96 to 2008-ish. And then there was this kind of—and definitely the Gran Fury retrospective was part of this kind of explosion, where there's been now, Oscar-nominated films, touring exhibitions, and books upon books. [00:30:00] You know? And we're in a new era, where we're both looking backwards and forwards, and I'm just wondering if you want to say anything about—if you experienced a period of silence around HIV, or how this explosion of renewed attention feels.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I think is it 1995, that protease?

THEODORE KERR: '96.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: '96, when it arrived.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, '95, '96, and I think if you're on trials, it's different understanding.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: '95, '96. What I experienced was—what I started seeing—and by that time I was back in New York. What I started seeing was that—already—once we had protease, what we saw is what I call white flight. Suddenly, we saw all of these people—all of these white gay men had been working in AIDS, you know, working in AIDS in the United States. Suddenly, international work became interesting, you know, or people started doing something else. And it was like, "Wait a minute, the epidemic hasn't changed in communities of color." A couple of months ago, the *Times* had a story about black gay men.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, Linda Villarosa's piece.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Fuck you. Fuck you. This is not new. This has been from the fucking beginning of the epidemic, that black gay men have been suffering. From the fucking beginning of the epidemic. How dare you do something and say, "Oh, look what's happening now." It's been happening for 30 fucking years, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Oh, I was so infuriated by that piece. But what happened is, you know, the best and the brightest decided, "Well, AIDS has been solved." My fear, you know, that people were working to do this and were not going to think broader, is what happened. They didn't think broader and everyone went off to do stuff, you know, to do other things. So what we had then, were people who were working in AIDS [00:32:00]—you know, there was a time that people who were working in AIDS, they had given up their careers, they did work out of commitment, stuff like that. Unfortunately, our relative success as AIDS activists means that we helped to create AIDS Inc. For example, I thought that when I went into service stuff, I realized that was a mistake, that doing this work in service was not actually what needed to happen. What needed to happen was to continue to push on the political front and the public consciousness and stuff like that. That's actually what I realized I should have stayed doing, instead of talking to people about condoms.

I'm not saying it doesn't have any value, but I realize that because of that, the anger dissipated. And since the anger of people of color is not visible in this country generally, or ascribed to crime, AIDS fell off the map. I mean, I remember hearing comments about how people working in GMHC, were complaining about the quality of clients they had, because they didn't have gay men dying like Violetta in *La Traviata*, you know? They had active addicts and people with mental illness, and not the pretty clients. Or you had communities of color who have to be—sometimes you have to hold their hand, to get people through these processes. That's what the AIDS—AIDS became an epidemic of the poor.

THEODORE KERR: And I think what you helpfully say throughout these interviews, is that it's always been an epidemic of the poor, but there was just a brief [00:34:00] flash of time where there was also a bunch of people with power who also had it, and they used their access and they helped themselves and helped others along the way, and then there was flight.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, exactly. And it's very frustrating to see that, because what I look at is—and ACT UP did amazing work, work that we have to thank women's collectives, women's health collectives, all of the movements like Gay Liberation and the Black Panthers. We have—ACT UP comes with a history that we



have to be grateful for. The people that went before us, who did all this work.

But unfortunately, the epidemic essentially didn't change in communities of color. Which is profoundly frustrating for me, because it's like, "Wait a minute now. These are my people that I've been fighting for all along and yes, I've been able to help other people, but I mean, my people are still screwed." You know, so it's very frustrating, to see how that has changed, and now, that organizations are beginning to do stuff like—now that we have protease, everything changed. Everything changed. I didn't go on AIDS meds until 1995, because there was nothing there and I wasn't going to take any of the shit that they had out there. Everything changed and we haven't recovered from that.

THEODORE KERR: I agree, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And also now, what's happened is that we also are responsible for the creation of institutions that are interested in maintaining the institution. I say all the time, that I feel guilty, you know, I feel angry at that result, that we just—ACT UP didn't think. They weren't thinking far enough ahead, [00:36:00] which was always a problem. They also never thought in terms of coalitions. You know, you don't have to fight alone. You can possibly find common ground with other groups, to fight together to address things, but ACT UP didn't do that, they didn't play well with others, which was a frustration for me.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And what about PrEP and PrEP? PrEP has also changed things again.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: PrEP has changed things again, and when I first heard about PrEP, my first reaction was, "Oh, more money for the pharmaceuticals." Still, yes, it has changed everything.

THEODORE KERR: And also more money for negative people, more resources for negative people.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because we have to save negative people, because negative people are the ones who are important, you know? And that's another thing that has always been.

THEODORE KERR: But we should remember that the transcripts don't see your eyes, so you should be—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: —clear [laughs], that you said that with irony, that you said that with frustration.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right [laughs], with an eye roll.

THEODORE KERR: With eye rolls [laughs], quotation marks.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah. Which has always been a problem, you know. And it always, in many ways, has been the main focus, broadly about—it's always, "Let's save," you know?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Those HIV-positives, they've done—you know, they're dirty, nasty people, they've got the disease, whatever."

THEODORE KERR: Well, that's what HIV criminalization is about.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Absolutely.

THEODORE KERR: It's about criminalizing people with the virus, to protect—

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's also a new—I'm sorry, it's also a new way to criminalize people of color, who don't have the same resources. So in some ways, you're accusing them of a crime that, you know what, they don't—they're not using the same playbook. So I mean, today, it's very frustrating, to see what's happening today. It's just [00:38:00]—it's frustrating. It's also sad, you know?

As I said before, these agencies now, are committed to keeping their doors open. That is not the purpose of—I've always been—like when we talked about Fury and we said, "Well, we should, you know, we should disband." At one point in time, we talked about, "Well, what should we do?" I think it was '92 or '93. We were all like, "Alright enough, what should we do?" I made a suggestion that went over as well as a fart in church. I said, "Okay, listen, let's keep the Gran Fury brand, okay? But let's, each of us, find the person to come into Gran Fury and take our place, have 10 new people sitting at Gran Fury. Most people don't know who we are, you know?" Still to this day people don't know who the members of Gran Fury are. "Have them do work. If the work goes in a different direction"—

THEODORE KERR: —"so be it."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "Whatever."

THEODORE KERR: Right. "They're talking about Palestinian liberation, so what?"

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly, but the important thing is we have—we got this bully pulpit, don't give it up. We don't have to do it, but don't give it up. You know? Which is one of the things that I always emphasize. It's like, "No, it cannot be about the individual. You have to move beyond the individual." So, when I walked away from AIDS, I very happily walked away from AIDS. People would call me to come back to do stuff and I would say, "Find someone new." I'm an AIDS dinosaur, you know, I'm from back in the day. Get someone new to do this work.

THEODORE KERR: AIDS OG. [Laughs]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, really. Exactly, AIDS OG. I mean, get someone new to do this, you know? You have to. There's no way that you can sustain a movement when you have a particular generation that's just sitting there, [00:40:00] and that's what's happened with AIDS. It's happened with the executive directors of a lot of these organizations, it's happened with the boards of these organizations, is that they just start to do it. Or, what really pisses me off now is they're trying to transition into becoming, for example, health clinics. So they're no longer AIDS clinics.

THEODORE KERR: Why does that annoy you?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because they're broadening—for example, taking the name AIDS out of the organization, which is like: Where did you come from? You came from this, you should acknowledge that that is your history.

THEODORE KERR: But what if they turn into health organizations and keep that AIDS, like, on their "About" page?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: If they do it—you know, if they acknowledge it. There are organizations that are totally trying to wipe that out and get rid of that history.

THEODORE KERR: Right. I do always wonder, like, how do we transition these AIDS organizations into organizations for everyone. You know, like in Philadelphia, there's Bebash, and their total history is in HIV/AIDS, and now they've opened the door. They keep AIDS in the story. Same with God's Love We Deliver.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Bebash?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm wondering if that's—was that run by Rashidah Hassan?

THEODORE KERR: I don't know.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Okay. I just—I'm finding what worries me is how AIDS disappears.

THEODORE KERR: Yes.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: For example, when you have a health clinic that you have AIDS specialists, that one thing. When you generalize it, you're not going to have those AIDS health specialists.

THEODORE KERR: That's right. Yeah. Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You need those specialists to be able to do that kind of work, broaden it. I'm all for broadening. Yes, broaden it, but let's be clear that HIV remains an issue. It remains an issue in communities of color, although everyone acts as if it's fine. And with PrEP, everyone—no one is looking disgusting any more. You know, you're not seeing anyone with—you know, with that Skeletor look on their face. You don't see that any more. I mean, I vividly [00:42:00] remember that stuff, but you don't see that anymore. People are healthy.

It's like the barebacking—I remember the barebacking controversy. Yes, I am going to open that door. [Laughs.] Now, you can't see him smirking and smiling as I started to say this.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] You just sold me out.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: With a little bit of anticipation, you know?

I remember the beginning of the barebacking stuff, which I just—I have to say, I found comical. "Oh, my God! There are gay men having sex without condoms. Oh, my God! What are those sluts doing? What are those evil sluts doing?" The moment that I found out—I had been practicing safer sex in the early '80s until, you know—and then I found out that I was positive. But since then—from the early '80s, I had always tried to serosort. With Jeff, but later on, sort of as a single man, I did serosorting. I did not—I told people, "I do not have sex with negative men, period." Period, you know? I used to say, "There are a variety of reasons why. Aside from worrying about it, I don't want anyone coming back to me saying, 'You infected me,' you know?" And that HIV criminalization shit, that's what people do.

And so suddenly there was this whole outcry about gay men, especially about HIV-positive gay men, who were having sex with other HIV-positive men. Reinfection is a myth. It's a myth. I've been saying it's a myth for the longest time, [00:44:00] since the early '90s, because I kept saying that—people were saying, "Well, there's a chance of reinfection." "Show me the proof, show me the data. Where is the scientific data that tells me that this is real?" What do people point out? People point out, like, one case, you know? It's like: Do you know how many HIV-positive people are having sex with each other?

THEODORE KERR: Do you also think people conflate people becoming immune to some medication, with reinfection? Because I think what happens is people think about reinfection because their meds don't work anymore, which is real. But sometimes people just grow out of meds. I don't know if that's the proper term, but like, meds just stop working for them.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, they stop working for them. It's, for example, one of the reasons why—when AZT became available and those early drugs became available, there are some people that flocked to them immediately, and then became resistant. So I went, "Mm-mm [negative]," you know. I had learned enough about the science, to say, "No, no, no, I'm not going to do anything until we have some certainty." But yes, I think there is that, you know? But there's also this bullshit judgmental shit about gay men and sex that has come back, that came back with the AIDS epidemic.

THEODORE KERR: And then came back with PrEP.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, and then came back with PrEP. I mean, we became vectors of infection, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Do you remember "The Anus is a Graveyard," or something like that, poster?

THEODORE KERR: The essay by Leo Bersani, yeah, right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, that kind of stupid puritanical shit that affects not only people and the way they live, but it affects public policy and it affects treatment.

THEODORE KERR: Right. So even if people aren't reading it, it's like, what does the—what's the cultural conversation?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, it's there. Right, exactly, what's the cultural conversation around you? And it becomes judgmental. With PrEP, I just—I'm sort of—I'm happy that [00:46:00] negative men can have sex like positive men, you know?

THEODORE KERR: What does that mean?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That HIV-negative gay men can have sex without condoms.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, I see what you're saying. I thought you were going to say on medication. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But I mean, we also don't know what the long-term effects of these medications are. And to take a person who is healthy and put them on an HIV medication, what's going to happen to them?

THEODORE KERR: Right, and maybe nothing.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Maybe nothing, but we don't know. And in the meantime, the pharmaceuticals are making money hand over fist again. They still are, which no one discusses. It's like, wait a minute, why haven't these AIDS medications become generic by now?

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. I mean, it is interesting that the takeaway from a movie like *How to Survive a Plague* should be like, "Oh, activism made pharmaceuticals rich." Or that should be one takeaway.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. Oh, but it is, right.

THEODORE KERR: There's lots of takeaways.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: One is dating Peter Staley.

THEODORE KERR: You dated Peter Staley?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: No. I had sex with Peter Staley. I didn't date Peter Staley, but *How to Survive a Plague*, for me, was the life and times of Peter Staley.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I detest the movie. I detest the movie because it just—you know, it was essentially ACT UP as white boys. There were no women and there were no people of color, period. And it was five of them in treatment. David France had a crush on Peter Staley, that's why he—that's one of the things that helped.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, okay. Helped, hurt, you know.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, exactly. So, he called me afterwards, because I—

THEODORE KERR: Who called you afterwards?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: David France called me, because I posted something on Facebook saying I didn't like the movie, you know, I just found it really annoying. All the visuals from the ACT UP meetings always showed just a bunch of white gay men, period, and the room was never like that. But they didn't—and so he then contacted me and [00:48:00] wanted to talk to me. What did I do? I triggered liberal white guilt.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: And he called me. "You know, we want to do a companion disc." I said, "No, David, no David." I said, "You cannot." I said, "You cannot tell me that, you know, we're going to—that people of color are going to be added to this conversation."

THEODORE KERR: Right, on a companion disc.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, in a companion disc. I am not doing that. Some other—another—a black guy actually, who was in ACT UP, actually did it. You know, he sat down and did it. But I went, "No, no, no, I'm not going to." And I said, "I'm not going to help you clean this shit up. As far as I'm concerned, I said, "I don't like this movie. I don't support this movie." And I'm very public about that. Andrew Miller, who I adore, calls it the Peter Staley story.

THEODORE KERR: Right, right. So for you, what's—I mean, this can be our second-last question, how about that? What do you think is the difference between *How to Survive a Plague* and *BPM*?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: *BPM* is actually—what *How to Survive a Plague* does, it gives you the melodrama of a bunch of white guys with AIDS. "Oh, my God, you know, we're suffering." What *BPM* shows you is the reality of what people were doing at that time. It shows you the political funeral. It shows you people getting sick and dying. It shows you, for example, one of the guys, the protagonists who dies, and all of the members of ACT UP show up at the house with the mother. You know, that's real, I did that.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know? And Sarah Schulman—

THEODORE KERR: Oh, *United in Anger*.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: —Jim Hubbard. That is a much better movie, a much better movie, to [00:50:00] show you what ACT UP was. *How to Survive a Plague* is not about ACT UP.

THEODORE KERR: Correct, yeah.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It's about a bunch of privileged white men and their problems with the AIDS epidemic. I love Peter, you know, and I love Mark, but it is. It's about the white boys, and my fear is that that's

what becomes the AIDS movie, is that. It's not the other film. It's not the more realistic film, which is not as pretty, it's not as well done, it's much messier, it's much sloppier, and that's exactly what ACT UP was.

THEODORE KERR: Right, and that's what AIDS is. [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That's what AIDS is, exactly. And so *BPM*—I love *BPM*.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, me too.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I'm jealous, I'm angry that it was the fucking French who did this.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Yeah, the Americans might have won the war to call it HIV, but the French won the representation.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Absolutely, absolutely. And it's like, Paris ACT UP [Bronx cheer], you know?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: The fun part is, like, "Oh, you're dressing like us, you know."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: "You took our fashion cues didn't you?"

THEODORE KERR: "You took our fashion."

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: But it is a realistic depiction of it. One of the things that happens in *BPM* is that in the first meeting, you have a woman and a person of color who are not just sitting in the audience, up talking to the group, in positions of power. That's the reality of what was happening. So for *BPM*, it's accurate, it is very accurate. I mean, you see, for example, young men struggling with mortality. I had no idea, at the age of 25, when I am with Jeff, that mortality would be an actual real part of my life, and that I would live my life watching people die.

THEODORE KERR: Right, yeah. [00:52:00]

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: I also learned, from the epidemic, that death can be a blessing.

THEODORE KERR: Because of?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Because when people are in pain and they're suffering, let them die. And I've helped people die, you know. I've helped people die, and I've realized that death can be your friend. I'm not—you know, I've never really been afraid of death before, but I realize what a positive thing it can be.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: So—but *BPM* is—unfortunately it's not in the Oscars, of course it's not in the Oscars.

THEODORE KERR: No. No, it didn't make the cut.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It did not make the cut.

THEODORE KERR: But it's beautiful.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: It is beautiful, actually. It is beautiful, and I appreciate it. I appreciate someone finally sharing, "This is what we did."

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah, and the pleasure and the sensuality and the bravery, and the hard work that you all did.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Exactly, and all of the pain and all the frustration and all the anger. All of that showed up and I'm very grateful to them for that.

THEODORE KERR: So, last question is: It's 2017, the crisis is not over, art is still able to be made. What can art do? Like, what—here you are, someone who has lived these two important streams: your creativity, living with HIV, being part of romantic and nonromantic communities. I'm just wondering, like what—can art save lives? You know, that's a good question from *Gran Fury*.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yes. Yes, it can. And I say that very specifically because I've had people come up to me to say, "I saw your work and your work saved my life."

THEODORE KERR: And what do they mean when they say that, do you think?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: That it helps them to have some sort of understanding or some sort of consciousness, or it sparks something [00:54:00] for them that then allows them to do something.

THEODORE KERR: Like a will to live or a will to get educated?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Possibly. Right, exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Or hear the messages that are being shared with them.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Right, right. Or, you know, depending on the Gran Fury piece, that you know what, it's not as horrific as we thought. Men use condoms or beat it, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, right, right.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: You know, it's not as horrific as we thought it was. So it can, I mean, it can. The problem is that—the problem is the art world. You know? I mean, and the fact that there's a hierarchy of art, you know?

THEODORE KERR: That's ridiculous.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Yeah, which is ridiculous. But yes, it can. It actually can save lives. And it's easy, the best example: Gran Fury model our shows after advertising, because advertising is amazing. They sell us everything, you know? They know exactly how to do it, exactly how to trigger people's responses. And so art can do that. Art can mobilize people. So I think it can.

What do we see now? I don't know, because we're living in such a complex world now, and images, we respond to images very differently than we did before, with the Internet and our telephones.

I mean, when we did—when Gran Fury did work, a person walking the street in New York City was engaged in the dialogue. They were engaged in the dialogue with the city and the city street and the people around them. And you would see things and you would react to things. And so consequently, for Fury, and for the *Silence = Death* collective, it was that [00:56:00] fact that people are walking down the street can see something and then go to look at it. Whereas now, people walk down the street and they're not engaged. That was one of the discussions we had with Occupy. It was like, we did stuff when people would wheat-paste and people would look at it. People don't look at shit wheat-pasted any more, you know? So the question is: How do you engage people now? You know? That's a bigger question. I've decided to teach myself Photoshop.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, good.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: Well, I mean that, and the fact that—for a bunch of reasons. One, I've said to—I've floated it at Fury, you know, "Do you want to get the band back?" And everyone is like, No. We've sort of moved on. And I'm cool with that, you know, that's fine. But I said, "You know what, but shit still has to be done." And so I'm thinking, "Well, you know, I do have this Gran Fury experience, so maybe I can parlay that into something, to start getting some things out there into the world." I think the most important thing is to do something. I was saying this at the panel. The most important thing, you have to—we are not—you like to think of yourself as a passive observer of life, but you're not. You know? And as they say, if you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem.

But yes, it can. I think it can. I think it can save lives. And I think it does save lives.

THEODORE KERR: I think so too. Should we end it there?

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: We can end it there.

THEODORE KERR: Okay, thank you.

ROBERT VÁZQUEZ-PACHECO: [Laughs.] Thank you.

[END OF vazque17\_1of1\_sd\_track08.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]