

DAN ROYLES: So this is Dan Royles interviewing Michael Hinson for the African-American AIDS Activism Oral history project on February 19, 2013 at the William Way Community Center in Center City, Philadelphia. And hopefully this third attempt to the start will be the lucky one. So, I'll start again with a simple question which is when and where were you born?

MICHAEL HINSON: I was born in Wilmington, Delaware in December of 1966 and I grew up in Hemingway, South Carolina and Wilmington, Delaware. My parents were divorced, so I grew up in both places.

DAN ROYLES: Can you just tell a little bit about your early life?

MICHAEL HINSON: Sure. My parents were divorced when I was three years old. And so at that time, my dad was in the military. He was nineteen and my mom was fourteen. They were married pretty young. My mom and dad had some marital problems. My dad was in the military and he was going away for a tour in Vietnam and decided that he didn't want me to be raised by my very, very, very young mother. So he placed me with his parents, my grandparents, who I was raised by until my grandmother passed away when I was twelve. And I met my mom the year before. So, sort of like my grandmother must have sort of knew something was going on or whatever, so she had me to meet my mom the year before. She passed away the next year. And I started my trips back and forth to South Carolina to live my mother and then moved back to Delaware living with my grandfather. I never actually lived with my dad when he returned from the war. I never actually lived with him. I always lived with my grandparents either my grandmother or my grandfather. And then, I stayed with my uncles and aunts here and there when I was a teenager going through my teenager

thing. But primarily lived in Wilmington, Delaware and Hemingway, South Carolina. I went to a, sort of, what they call a desegregated school. And so, I took a bus every morning to go about forty-five minutes from home to go to school where the population was pretty much about 85 percent white and 15 percent black in terms of school. And so there I sort of got involved in a lot of different like the human relations group and student council and I was the president of my class and all that kind of stuff. I was involved in theater and music and dance and sort of the artsy-fartsy crew of the school, coloring my sneakers and all that kind of weird stuff. And then, I actually went back to South Carolina when I was in eleventh grade and was really just trying to build a better relationship with my mother who I really didn't even meet until I was about eleven years old. So I spent some more time there and then decided that I didn't want to graduate from a school in the South. So I went back to my old school and that's where I graduated from, Dickinson High School in Newport, Delaware. And then I, sort of again, trying to understand who I was, I moved to Philadelphia. My uncle was a recruiter for the marines. He was on his last two years of duty here as a recruiter and I moved in with him and got a job at a bank and from there just got interested in sort of culture here. While I was at the bank, I auditioned for Philadelphia Dance Company and was accepted in to the training program. I was in the training program for probably about seven years. And in the second company, I did performances then joined some other companies here and in New York and was going back and forth for rehearsals here and rehearsals in New York working full time, getting up at five o'clock in the morning, going to the gym, going to work by nine, getting off of work, going to the studio, rehearsing all night long, and just doing the same thing over and over again. And one day, I was walking through Love Park and they were having a HIV candlelight vigil and Rashidah Hassan, or at

that time, Rashidah Hassan but Rashidah Abdul Khabeer, who is my mentor, was speaking and I just became like crazy, crazy in love with anything she said and motivated me to really be involved in, sort of, activism. I never really considered myself to be an activist. I never really embraced the term itself. I really didn't come from that kind of background. I was definitely taught to care about the people around me, but I wasn't taught about it in a way to think of it as some kind of power. It was just something that was a responsibility. And so, I knew I was always, from the Human Relations Commission in high school to student government to being president in my class, all of those things, those were never for me about activism or about power. It was about responsibility, and it was just something that was innate. It was taught to me, and it was innate for me, too. It was just something that I did very naturally. So I did that while working with BEBASHI, Blacks Educating Blacks about Sexual Health Issues, under Rashidah's direction—she really killed me a lot. But then branched off and helped to found an organization called the COLOURS Organization. And oh, at that time, we founded COLOURS Magazine and then I founded COLOURS Organization and worked there for about seven years then joined the mayor's staff as an assistant manager and director and worked on LGBT issues, public health issues, homelessness, child welfare, and education issues. Those were my primary public policy focuses in the administration. And then, once I left the administration, I worked at the Urban Affairs Coalition for a little while, again, helping with the COLOURS Organization who was experiencing some problems at the time. And after that, I joined the staff of the International Federation of Black Prides which has since changed its name to the Center for Black Equity, which is located in Washington, D.C. And there, I serve the Director of Policy and Programs for the Center for Black Equity. I have an undergraduate degree in

Legal Studies and a master's in Public Administration, and I'm currently a D.P.A. student at Capella in Public Administration.

DAN ROYLES: You said that you were taught to care about people around you. Where did that come from?

MICHAEL HINSON: My grandmother. One of the earliest memories that I have about, sort of, that kind of caring—I mean, it was evident in our house. My grandmother had eleven children. I was raised in the household with my grandmother's eleven children, from time to time, them going in and out of the house. But I was the only child in the household. And so, I was raised in the house where I constantly saw no matter how much it strained my grandmother's health or strained her pressure or strained her finances or my grandfather's finances, I always saw them giving more than they were receiving. My grandmother was sure to make me attend church even if she wasn't going. I went to church every Sunday. I went to a Methodist Church, I went to a Presbyterian Church, I went to a Holiness Church. Somewhere along the line, while she alive, I was going to church. And so it was sort of always there. And so I remember one day one of my uncles who was murdered, after this happened, but he was murdered, and he had a friend, my uncle William, he had a friend who was transgender. And there was never a question about his sexual orientation or his gender identity. At least, I didn't ever hear a question about it. But, I do remember there being sort of this joke about him having this friend who was transgender. At that time, of course, I didn't know that the person was transgender. They used other terms during that time. But I remember there being this joke about it. And my grandmother, she kind of fussed at my uncles, the people in the family who made the joke. And I was there and she

said, sort of like you never want to bring harm to people, even spoken harm to people. It's sort of this sense that you never know what role that person might play in your life later on. And so you never want to like just bring any kind of harm, emotional harm or physical harm, to people, and you want to respect everybody. She was very adamant about even at that time, me not even understanding what a transgender was or what the derogatory terms that they were using at that time to sort of pick fun at my uncle. She wanted to remind them, and had me in the atmosphere where I was also reminded, that it wasn't okay to make of fun of people. And so that was like one of the earliest moments that I had of sort of knowing that I needed to be respectful of people and embrace people who are different than me. I remember when I was in third grade, I was always very, very... I don't even know what the word is, but I was always very excited or very drawn to religion, probably because I went to church every Sunday. But I wasn't just drawn in to Christianity. And so one of the guys who lived around the corner from us—my grandparents lived in a pretty nice neighborhood in Wilmington—and one of the guys lives around the corner from us, he was white and his parents practiced Hinduism and they had a shrine set up in their house and they would teach yoga and then they would take trips to the ashram, to Gurudev's ashram in Pennsylvania. And I was like really, really crazy about learning yoga and learning this experience. And so, I studied with them for a while and got to go to the ashram. And it was at the ashram, actually—I was staying at the ashram one weekend and I'd never actually seen Gurudev. I'd seen pictures of him and I always thought, "Wow, how could he be so beautiful?" It was a whisper to me, like I couldn't say it out loud, because what would people think of me thinking about this man being so beautiful. And he was just absolutely, absolutely stunning and it wasn't just his physical appearance. It was like he had this sort of

light around him. So when I was staying at the ashram that weekend with them, I got up really early in the morning. It was sort of like the sun was just coming out and I got to see him walk from his cabin to the cabin where the shrine was. And I was like, "Oh my God." To me, it was like he was walking on air. And I think it was at that moment that I really pretty much knew that my attraction to men wasn't just, sort of, a make-up kind of thing. It really was an attraction.

DAN ROYLES: When you were growing up, you mentioned your uncle. Was there anybody else in your life or in your community that you remembered being identified as gay or lesbian or same sex desiring or whatever term people would use?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah, definitely. By the time I was a teenager, I had lots of friends who were gay, most of them older, not folks in my age group. I sort of led a double kind of life around that time. I had a couple of girlfriends but I had a couple of steady, not at the same time, but I had girlfriends. And I ran track and played soccer and did all of those kinds of things. And so, I had friends who were gay that were older and not in my school, sort of, circle. They were in another circle and so, I would, sort of, have to do this dash from once circle to another circle and try to keep those things separated as much as possible. At some point, it really wasn't possible to keep it as separated as I thought I could keep it. And I remember one time I was at home in South Carolina at my parents' and my mother, she just asked me, "What's going on with you?" I'm like, "What are you talking about, what's going on with me?" And I remember her saying that my girlfriend who lived in Delaware at that time called her and said that something was going on with me and she didn't know what it was and that they really needed to get to the bottom of it because she didn't know and she

thought it was something very serious. And so my girlfriend knew what she wanted to say to my mother but she didn't say it. And so, she just led my mother to have a conversation with me. And my mother asked me, and she asked me if I was on drugs, and I'm like, "On drugs? No." And so, I just decided, at that point, that I was going to tell her that I was gay and that I had an attraction. And not just that I was gay, but that I was struggling with it at that time because I was at home in the South with my parents at that time. And God knows like being gay in the south where we live, where everybody is related, is in the Bible Belt, is very Christian, and my parents were known in the community and so, it really wasn't just something that you could sort of just bust out the seams and be like, "Oh, I'm happy and I'm gay." You know, like, "I'm queer, I'm here, and I'm staying here." No, it wasn't that kind of environment. And so, I remember talking to my mom about it. And my mom just telling me at that time she's like, "You know, I may not understand it and I may not want it for you because I think it can be a very lonely life but you're my child and I'm going to love you no matter what and da da da da da da da, and she gave the whole speech. Which was very endearing at that time for my mom and I who were really developing our relationship for her to be that understanding. And not just my mom, my stepfather who would probably kill me if he heard me call him "stepfather," but my dad, they were all very accepting. My birth dad, I never actually told him that I was gay. Although, I'm sure he knew just based on some of the conversations and the friends. I never hid any of my friends from him. He passed away about seven years ago. We had a really great relationship even though I never lived with him. I got to a point with both of my parents, forgiving them for whatever obstacles in their life prevented them from being parenting figures to me. But I always respected them and have respect and love for them because they're my parents in their minds, in each one

of their minds, because I actually sat down and had a conversation with both of them because I was always feeling so hurt and unloved because I didn't have my parents around. So I had a conversation with them that led them to both help me understand how much they loved me and that their actions, in their mind at least, was about them loving me, not about them not loving me. And so, it really helped me to understand that we all have challenges, and that their challenge was that they had a child at a young age and didn't have the skills to raise the child and so they made decisions about the caring of me that they felt would be better for me than what they could provide. And so today, I am this person because of their actions and because of my grandparents and my uncles and my aunts and my mentors—Rashidah, Tyrone, and David—and all of my friends. It's been a journey to get to that level of acceptance about my experience, but it is what it is.

DAN ROYLES: How old were you, at that point, coming out to your mother?

MICHAEL HINSON: I was, I want to say I was fifteen, around fourteen, fifteen.

DAN ROYLES: How did the rest of your family react?

MICHAEL HINSON: I actually didn't come out to the rest of my family. I think what ended up happening was my mother and father, because they accepted me. When I say my mother and father, I'm talking about my mother and my stepfather. I just lived and I didn't hide anything. I have two brothers and three sisters. And so, it's just like a normal thing. I'm who I am and they know that I'm gay, and they've met my exes and my ex's husband to my parent's house and stayed at my parents and stayed at my sibling's house. And I've had my parents come and stay at my house. My brother used to live with me and my ex-partner.

With my brothers and sisters, we didn't actually have a conversation about it. We just lived

the experience and that's how it happened. In my last relationship, which ended about a year and a half ago, I remember my youngest brother calling me. He would see me come home a couple of times and my partner wasn't with me and was like, "What's going on with you all? What happened to Julian?" You know, what happened to my ex? And so, it's just like that kind of thing. And I remember one time we were at my brother's house. My brother actually played professional basketball. And so, I remembered one time we were at his house and we were in his poolroom and my dad and my brother were talking, and my brother was like, "You know, we should have a birthday party for you." And my dad was like, "Well, we could have a birthday party for him but you have to make sure you talk to—" talking about my partner, saying, "You have to make sure you run everything through him and make sure is everything is okay." And it wasn't even a conversation. It's just the way that it is.

DAN ROYLES: You mentioned the death of your uncle. Do you want to talk a little more about that?

MICHAEL HINSON: It was weird. My uncle, he was—I think, he always thought of himself as a sort of an outsider in the group, in the family. He was my second to the youngest uncle. He had a girlfriend. We really don't know what happened, but he had a girlfriend, and he had a baby. He went to go and visit his girlfriend and we got a call that one of his girlfriend's ex-boyfriends came to the house and was chasing my uncle around with a gun and he shot my uncle and my uncle died. My uncle was nineteen. My uncle died. It was a really weird experience when he passed away. I had seen death because my grandmother passed away. And I didn't—now I remember not really understanding it, the impact that death could

have on you. I remember when my grandmother passed away I was sitting in the family car. I was like amazed to be riding in a limousine like I didn't have any sense of that this was forever in that seeing her in a casket and seeing her dead meant that I was never going to see her again or that it was even something that I should be really, really, really, really, really sad about. I didn't understand it like that. And then when my uncle died, it was sort of almost the same kind of feeling but it was like, wow how does this keep happening? What is this really about? And I would say it really wasn't until I started seeing so much death in terms of my friends dying from HIV that I really began to understand just how tragic death could be. And then when my grandfather died, my grandfather died three months before my birth dad died, and that experience probably was the lowest point in my life. I remembered when grandfather died I just couldn't—I lost probably about fifty pounds when my grandfather died. I just couldn't focus. I was actually working in the government at that time and I really couldn't focus. And I know everybody was like, "What's going on? What's going on?" I just couldn't focus. When my grandfather died, it reminded me of everything that my grandmother stood for, and everything that she stood for in terms of my life. And so, what it brought up for me was how they impacted my life. How they unselfishly gave so much of themselves just so that I could have all the experiences that I had and that this was closing a door on that. No matter how much death I had seen, and I'd seen a lot in terms of my friends, I just wasn't ready for death to be closed because I never realized that chapters of it were closing when my grandmother died, or when my uncle died, and my friends. I didn't understand death in that way at that point. And it was when my grandfather died, and I remember my birth dad was at the funeral, and he was really trying to get me to a point where I could just have a little bit more strength

than I had, and I couldn't get it. I just couldn't get it. And I remember thinking and screaming and saying, "I don't know what I would do if my dad died." Like my whole—I really thought that it was really not just closing a chapter for them in my life but also closing a chapter for me. And then three months later, my dad died. And I couldn't—it was almost like I was prepared for his death. So I went back to being this really strong person who just sort of sat in to help make the arrangements and help do the things, say my poem at his funeral and just keep on going.

DAN ROYLES: Do you remember how you first became aware of AIDS or what would become known as AIDS if that term wasn't used yet. Do you remember how that entered into your consciousness?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah, I mean, the first thing was just hearing Rashidah speak. And there for me it was not so much about AIDS. It was really about me thinking I had a responsibility to be involved and to help people. And so I volunteered to learn more about the issue, and during my course of volunteering to learn more about the issue, I decided that I would become a buddy to a person living with HIV. And the interesting thing is the person who I was assigned was this white gay man from Kentucky who had just moved to the city to get care here. It was really, really funny because I was assigned to him and he was living in one of the AIDS houses, as they sort of called them at the time. And I would go up to visit him, and he didn't have any family here and he was really isolated. And the whole sort of purpose of the house was so that people wouldn't be isolated, so that they could be in a house with other people who were living with HIV or at that time, living with AIDS, but not so much of the living aspect was the focus of it. But he was feeling so much isolation and I

remembered just feeling like this isn't okay that he is feeling like people aren't paying him any attention, people aren't giving him the time, he's not getting the care that he thinks he needs or deserves. And I went in to Rashidah's office and David Fair was there, and Rashidah and David had served on the board of Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives which is now the Mazzoni Center. And I was just fussing at David, basically like I'm like this seventeen-year-old kid and I'm telling these adults off about how this guy's living in this house and he's isolated, and he's not getting the care that he needs and it's not right, and that you all aren't doing what you're supposed to do and blah blah blah blah blah blah, and they were sort of looking at me laughing like, okay, you're telling us off, like, okay. And they always bring that story up because I really was very passionate about this man getting the kind of care—and not just care, but being treated in a dignified manner. Unfortunately at that time, AIDS just wasn't a dignified disease and people didn't understand that people still needed to be treated with dignity. And the thing was that we were all learning a lot about the disease at that time, but we also were sort of learning about all these different cultures. Like, I didn't grow up with white gay men. I grew up with white men and white folks, obviously. I went to a school that was primarily white. But in terms of gay culture and then this man being from the South, from Kentucky, and me being in Philadelphia not knowing a lot about the city culture and that kind of thing, so we were all sort of—and I was—learning a lot about all of these different cultures at the time. So the idea of someone having the disease that in our mind was deadly, that was highly contagious, but at the same time, just innately knowing that people still had a right to dignity, was something that I tried to live up to and try to pressure other folks to live up to

even as we were sort of trying to figure out how far do we go with this because there were so many unanswered questions about what it actually was.

DAN ROYLES: When you encountered white gay culture, what was different, or surprising, or...?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, there are a lot of different things. The manner of activism, I wasn't really used to. I definitely wasn't used to sort of this openness and the shouting. I was obviously from a very religious background in terms of the way that I was raised. But also just as a person, I'm deeply committed to my spirituality and my spiritual growth. And so I never sort of understood this in-your-face kind of thing. I was always kind of taught to be a little more out of your face, and smile. But there wasn't a lot of room for that here, or at least in my understanding or my interpretation of people's actions at that time. There wasn't a lot of room so I had to learn very quickly how to manage some of the relationships and some of the conversations and some of the behavior. It was all kind of new. The other thing is that I was always very... one thing, I understood racism from South Carolina, from being bussed to school in Wilmington, Delaware to Newport. I understood racism very, very well. And I experience what I perceive, even today, as a lot of racism in the gay community here in Philadelphia. It was very odd to me, especially for people who were... we were sort of joined by the hip in one way, like through this activism that I was learning. We were joined to the hip in that way. But in so many other ways, there was no hip action. [chuckles] We weren't joined together, and that was kind of odd for me in the beginning. So I had to really learn how to manage that in getting myself beyond it, but also try to move other folks beyond it as well.

DAN ROYLES: How did that racism manifest?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, socially, it manifested in just separations of social environments, like very distinct separations of social environments, from not being welcomed to certain social atmospheres, bars, and clubs, and groups, and those kinds of things, to what I perceived as not just racism but all the other sort of -isms mixed up in it: classism and some other stuff. And in those ways, it was about—as an example, I remember a person who is actually, I consider a really good friend now who very early on really fought tooth and nail against an idea that culturally, black gay men needed to have resources that understood their language, that understood their behavior, that understood their culture, that they needed to have special attention around this disease, around AIDS, around HIV, that they needed to have special attention. There were group of us who were saying, “We don’t live in this community.” Like we didn’t have a gayborhood that we lived in. We lived in North Philadelphia, or we lived in West Philadelphia. And not to say that white gay men didn’t live in other sections of the city, but you could always sort of find this hub where white gay men lived and socialized and were accepted outside of other communities that they were connected to. And you didn’t really see, and you still don’t see, black gay men socializing or moving out of their communities in that way. And some of that is based on desire not to do that and some of it is just based on, sort of, there are lines that are drawn in certain places historically and even today, that are outside of sort of comfort zones either internally or externally, and people make choices based on that. And so I remember this one person writing to the Governor and saying, “You should make sure that this group, that these folks,” who were all black folks at that time, me and a small group of friends who were petitioning for some support for COLOURS, saying that we shouldn’t get funded to do any

work in the black gay community around HIV. And I remember thinking, how could you feel like you could petition the government to provide services primarily to white gay men, but that other folks, black, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander communities shouldn't do the same thing where there are very distinct, not just class lines and social lines and language lines and geographic lines that are drawn that prevent you from saving those folks' lives or providing information to help save their lives. And so I remember experiencing that as racism and discrimination and classism and a whole lot of other -isms that today, I'm glad that with that particular person, we don't have that same issue and we've since become really, really, really good friends and allies in a number of different areas.

DAN ROYLES: When you were an AIDS buddy, what group was that through?

MICHAEL HINSON: It was through Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives.

DAN ROYLES: Okay. And when you happened on the vigil in the park where Rashidah was speaking, can you tell me a little about what that was like, that experience, that moment?

MICHAEL HINSON: There were tons of people there. And I had not ever been in a crowd like that. I just never... I'm not a crowd kind of person. So, I'd never been in a crowd like that. Everybody had candles and people were crying and people had all kinds of emotions, but they were clearly activists, and they were clearly protesting and they were clearly trying to draw attention to HIV. And I came across the park and I saw all of this action happening and I was listening to Rashidah and I'm like, "Wow, that woman is amazing." And she's Muslim, and she's black, and she's like laying it down like really... I probably have only heard a couple speeches that—President Obama's speech that he gave when he accepted the DNC's nomination was one of those experiences for me, Rashidah's speech. I

just haven't heard that many speeches where people have been so purposeful, so thoughtful, so powerful, but at the same time, so passionate and embracing than I heard from her. And that was enough to awaken this sort of dormant spirit in me that my grandparents instilled in me to want to be involved. And so it really, I wish I could say it was, at that point, it was really about the cause, but it was really about being awakened again through her talking in to her spirit that led me to want to be involved and still not really embracing, sort of, this idea of being an activist or being even at that point, not even embracing the whole LGBT terms, like I hadn't really fully thought all of that out. And it's funny, like even today I look back at it and I say, "How did I get to—," like, I don't remember when I actually got to the point where I was like, "I'm an activist and I'm a member of the LGBT community," like all of that was sort of like, it sort of just transitioned its way in and it grew on me. I didn't really seek it out in that way, but it was in me and it was awakened through hearing and pretty much re-hearing the kinds of thoughts that I've always heard in my environment with my grandparents that Rashidah sort of reawakened those things and got me moving, got me on track.

DAN ROYLES: How did other people respond to the speech, in the moment, in the vigil?

MICHAEL HINSON: I think some people were hurt by it. Because it was—if you weren't used to somebody sort of telling you like it was and standing up for—you know, it's funny because she wasn't standing up... I mean, she certainly was standing up for herself because she's an African American woman, right? But she's not an African American woman living with HIV, she's not a black gay man living with HIV. She was a nurse. She was a nurse professional, an infectious disease practitioner who just cared enough to say, "Enough is

enough and we have to do better than we're doing." And so, some people were hurt by that. They hadn't been used to hearing a person like her say these things to the activists who were predominantly white gay men at the time. They weren't used to a black straight woman, a black Muslim woman, and not just a black Muslim woman who sort of—this was a black Muslim woman who wore traditional Muslim clothing, speaking very forthright and very powerful, but also from the standpoint of knowing factually, as a nurse, as an infectious disease practitioner, what was happening as a sort of community motivator and organizer, what we needed to do to move forward in preventing this disease not just among black gay men who were, at the time, her primary focus, but also with black women and black children. And then from there with Latino populations, she really helped to open or spurn a response not just from African Americans, but Latinos and from Asian Pacific Islander communities and organizations, and definitely in partnership with a lot of white gay men who she worked with at that time in Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives until that day when she resigned and founded BEBASHI. So that day, it sort of reawakened the spirit inside of me to want to be involved.

DAN ROYLES: And when you went to go work with BEBASHI, what did you do there?

MICHAEL HINSON: I made a fool of myself. It was funny because at that time there were primarily four people: Rashidah and Curtis Wadlington, Reverend Wadlington who recently passed away, and David Fair, and David helped to arrange for BEBASHI to get an office at 1199C with Henry Nicholas and all of the union folks. And so I sort of—again, I was pretty young of that time and I sort of was in this environment with Henry Nicholas, the head of the Hospital Workers Healthcare Union, and David Fair, and Rashidah Hassan, and Curtis

Wadlington, and Glenn Johnson, and all of these sort of powerful political people. And I'm sort of just trying to find myself and do my little bit, be involved, and come from work and sit in office and learn. And I remember her telling me that she wasn't going to send me out to do any presentations or anything until she was sure that I was ready and that I understood the information to be able to go out to the community and share this information and represent the organization. And so, she would actually give us papers and we would have to study, study, study, study, study. It was like school, basically. You have to study and then you would have to sit in front of a panel of people. I forgot, oh my God, there was this once scientist that his son died, Mr. Henkins? I forgot what this man's last name was, but his son died of HIV. His son's name was Michael as well. His son died of HIV. He was a retired scientist at one of the drug companies. And she would have us sit in front of this group of people. It was maybe like seven or eight people who we would have to sit in front of, and we would have to do a presentation of basically a HIV 101 presentation and we'd have to take questions from this panel. And until you were able to pass this panel, which took me a couple of times, you weren't able to go out and talk about the disease. And so she was serious about making sure that people got the information and that they didn't get the wrong information. And of course, the information was developing, so there wasn't just the test but there was the re-test. And then you've got to get the new information and then you have to know where people can go to get help and resources. And then once I passed this speaker's bureau exam, they started sending me out to presentations at churches, at schools, and all of these places. And that was... I thought I was signing up to sort of be involved and help out. I didn't realize I was signing up to like get this education and become an activist and all of that kind of stuff. But I think she knew, she was clear, at

least her intentions were clear about what she wanted the group of us to be responsible for and responsible to. And so that's sort of how it happened.

DAN ROYLES: And how long were you there at BEBASHI?

MICHAEL HINSON: Oh my gosh, probably all my life. In one way or another, I volunteered there while I was working at the bank and studying at Philadanco. And I was there for a while, a long time. And then I actually took a job there briefly, and that experience, it was kind of interesting. It was sort of like, Rashidah was my mother. She's like my mother. I actually call her "umi." Umi is mother in Islam. So I actually call her, to this day, "umi." I've had these kind of experiences with my umis, with my mom, and with my grandmother. I had these experiences and so, we actually went through a little rough patch at one point. And... I had to find myself during that rough patch. And we had to re-find our relationship during that rough patch, and we were able to do that mostly because she is a really, really gracious person. And so, my time at BEBASHI, I just say I was the BEBASHI child, basically. I was like the young child who sort of grew up with Rashidah, and David, and Curtis. They were my mentors. And so I really grew up in that environment and then was sort of set free to do some other things and grow independently of them but remain committed with them to this day. Tyrone, Rashidah, and David—I consider them, and they certainly accept the responsibility of being responsible for my mentorship.

DAN ROYLES: So tell me about the beginning of COLOURS or how that came into existence.

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah. Elliot Prescott who used to work with me at BEBASHI actually came up with the idea to start *COLOURS Magazine*. And at the time he approached me and said that he wanted to do this, and I agreed to work with him on *COLOURS Magazine*. There

weren't any reading materials that targeted black gay men any place. It just didn't exist. There was certain Stanley Bennett Clay out in California, had done *SBC*, and then I think there was probably one other magazine. But they were sort of up and down, but it just, there weren't a lot of reading materials for black gay men, and Elliot said that he wanted to do this magazine. So we started doing *COLOURS Magazine*. I had, of course, obviously a lot of friends that were writers and friends in the arts, and so I was able to pull in a lot of different friends. Kevin Love, who is a fashion designer, he did like fashion shoots and pulled together his friends and came up with story lines for *COLOURS Magazine*, and different writers volunteered to come up with story lines, worked with different groups like Adodi to contribute to the magazine. Sadly, a lot of the guys who were there in the very beginning lost their life to HIV disease. And so, at some point, maybe a year or so more after we started the magazine and we actually were distributing the magazine in Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and Atlanta, like at different gay bookstores primarily—in Washington, D.C. After a couple of years, people started saying—basically, they were saying, “This is cute. Like, you have a magazine and you raise some issues and you provide some information about where to get tested and about HIV and about, sort of, the social issues and so on and so on. But what about, sort of, a place for us to get together and talk and meet and socialize and learn in person? That doesn't exist for us.” And so, from that point, I made a decision that we need to have a place. And it was interesting, I don't think most of the folks at the time wanted to go along for that particular ride, but it was one that I really felt like we needed to do it to go to the next level and be responsible to the people who were reading the magazines, who asked for us to do more and we could do more. And so I actually started making a little bit of fuss here and there, making some

friends and some frenemies... enemies that is, and started asking for some resources to bring black gay men together. And I remember Estelle Richman was the Commissioner of Public Health at the time. And there was some money that had historically been given to Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives to do outreach to communities of color. I want to say it was 100... was it 120? Yeah, it was \$120,000 that the Health Department have been giving to PCHA, which is now Mazzoni, at the time to do outreach, HIV prevention outreach to communities of color. And this was after Rashidah had separated from them and started BEBASHI, and there was still really no focus on black gay men except for the work that Rashidah was doing, and then the work that PCHA was doing, and I said that it was unacceptable and that the city was not committing any specific resources to black gay men, and met with Estelle and voiced the concern about it. And then there was sort of this tentative agreement that this \$120,000 that historically had been given to PCHA would be given to other groups, or would be available to other groups. And so I actually met with Chris Bartlett and David Acosta, and we sat down and decided together that we would split three ways, \$40,000 for Safeguards, which Chris Bartlett was the director of, and GALAEI, which David Acosta was the director of, and COLOURS to split up three ways this \$120,000. And that's where got our sort of first government grant. We'd already received a grant from the Philadelphia Foundation to help out with doing a couple of support groups. It was like, I think, \$9,000 or \$10,000. And we were able to do some a couple of support groups and have a place where the groups could meet. And then we got that \$40,000 grant from the city and then from there, we started growing and growing and growing, and by the time I left COLOURS after seven years, the budget was like \$1.3 million. And I left and went into government.

DAN ROYLES: So what year did COLOURS start?

MICHAEL HINSON: We started in 1991. That's when we started, as all volunteers. We didn't receive our 501(c)(3) until 1994. And that's when we sort of officially started receiving financial support for the organization.

DAN ROYLES: So the magazine started before?

MICHAEL HINSON: So the magazine existed before the organization.

DAN ROYLES: Okay. And so then how did you become part of the HIV Community Planning Group in the city?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah. I... how did I become...? I was nominated somehow. I don't even remember like who nominated me or something but I know that I got a letter from the commissioner asking me if I would join the HIV—at that time, it was called the Community Planning Group, the CPG—if I would join the CPG and I said, "Yeah, I would join the CPG." And once I joined the CPG, members of the CPG sort of were positioning or asking me, not really pressuring, but if I would become the community chair because the way that the feds had set it up is the city automatically held one of the chairs, positions, and then the community members or the group itself could select a community co-chair. And so I was actually selected by the larger group as the community co-chair which I served as the first co-chair of the CPG for the city. And then when the city combined the Ryan White Planning Council with the CPG and formed the HIV Commission, I was selected as the co-chair of the HIV Commission along with Dale Grundy. And so then I served there as well.

DAN ROYLES: What did the Community Planning Group do?

MICHAEL HINSON: So the Community Planning Group, the CPG, prioritized the communities, the populations, the prevention services, they prioritize prevention services for the different populations and communities and then sort of directed, in terms of prioritization, the amounts of money that would be available in different categories for community organizations to write grants or proposals for the city. We didn't actually review their proposals, but we set the priorities, in terms of the populations, the amount of money that would be available in each category. So, we actually wrote the plan that the city used and submitted to the Federal Government as its blueprint for responding to HIV prevention. And then once the CPG joined with the Ryan White Planning Council and became known as the HIV Commission, then the commission had the responsibility for both prevention and care-related activities. So there was a lot of money involved in terms of the responsibility of the Commission, and of the CPG, afterwards in terms of directing the priorities for HIV planning prevention and care services.

DAN ROYLES: What was it like serving in that kind of a role?

MICHAEL HINSON: It was difficult. It was... I don't think I was certainly... I was prepared in the sense that having been brought up with David Fair, Rashidah Hassan, and Tyrone Smith and, you know, all of these people, having been brought up by them, you get an education that is amazing. But you're talking about roughly about fifty people who served on the Commission who were hospital executives and heads of \$30-million organizations and doctors and nurses and lawyers and community activists and people living with HIV, and you're responsible—and government, people from state government, and from city government. In this position, you're responsible for managing not just the, sort of, the

staffing components and the commission itself with all of these personalities. The chairs were responsible for managing that whole experience. But at the end of it all, we were really responsible for managing the city's response to HIV in terms of prevention and care, which meant that we were not only responsible to the fifty people participating in the process, but we were responsible to the entire city. Because otherwise, there weren't going to be services in North Philadelphia; otherwise, there weren't going to be services in hard-hit communities in Southwest Philly, where there weren't really any services happening during that time. And you were dealing with a really fast evolving and changing epidemic in terms of who was affected, what the political base was, what the power base was, what the media was saying or not saying, who was the face of HIV at that time, and then dealing with all of the other stigma. Not just the stigma from HIV disease, but the stigma from homophobia, the stigma of transphobia, the stigma of people who use or abuse drugs, injection drug users. You were dealing with so many different moving parts. It was a really, really difficult experience to manage. But it was something that we had to do and I'm sure—I say this, sort of, frenemies kind of thing—that there were mistakes that were made and most of those mistakes were made out of ignorance, out of not knowing, out of growing into... my own leadership, or growing into the leadership that people were helping me to understand and helping the environment to understand. So there were mistakes that were made, and there were challenges that probably could have been handled differently, but we all did the best that we thought we could do at that time.

DAN ROYLES: Do you mean personal mistakes or as the commission?

MICHAEL HINSON: Oh, I think there were mistakes, there were personal mistakes. I mean, I was young. I was from sort of this South Carolina and Delaware environment not used to dealing with all of these people and all of these personalities and all of this stuff, and so I'm sure that there were personal mistakes that were made that really was about inexperience for me. But there were also mistakes that were made in terms of some of the kinds of decisions and some of the kinds of focus or not having the kind of focus at times that we perhaps needed to have. But again, everybody that was involved, was involved because they believed we had to do something and so it was sort of that thing that sort of kept us drawn by the hip with each other and so we were able to sort of see that as our connection even though there were numerous, numerous obstacles to our being connected in so many other ways.

DAN ROYLES: What was the funding situation like during those years you were on the Planning Council?

MICHAEL HINSON: Do you mean the amount of money? Do you mean like...?

DAN ROYLES: Yeah. How much money was there? Where was it coming from?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah. The money came primarily... for the Planning Council, we managed money from the city, and then we managed money from the federal government. And so the money from the city was from the City General Fund. In fact, the city of Philadelphia historically was one of the first cities to carve out city general funding for HIV activities through the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office. So the city was really set a precedence in terms of providing services or providing resources for services in that way.

And so the city would contribute resources and then through the federal government,

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through HHS and the CDC, we received money for prevention services and we received money for care services. And I want to say we did very well in the beginning. We did very, very well because we had so many thoughtful people, David Fair and some of the other directors of the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office and then the members of the commission and a lot of people living with HIV who were very, very, very... Arnold Jackson and Hal Carter and Dale Grundy and Rick Britt and... Diane and Stacy and Varee, and all these amazing women who were living with HIV at that time. Willie and a bunch of Latino folks who were involved at that time—Carmen and all of these folks. Unfortunately, a lot of those names are people who passed away from HIV. But during that time, these folks were involved and they really, really fought for really good, thoughtful, and responsible HIV prevention and care plans. And so we always really got good reviews from the federal government from both the Ryan White side, the care side, and from the prevention side. And so, I would say, at different times, there was somewhere in the neighborhood \$30, \$35, \$45 million that we would be responsible for.

DAN ROYLES: So, those names that you mentioned, were these people pushing for targeted prevention and care for people of color?

MICHAEL HINSON: Primarily for people of color. Certainly, at that time, we had a whole bunch of white gay men who were involved: Heshie Zinman, Chris Bartlett, and Mark, and Ted, and a lot of—Joe Cronauer—and there were a lot of folks who were involved at that time. And then there were a number of organizations: Dorothy Mann at the Family Planning Council, some folks at University of Pennsylvania. I remember this one, Dennis, I forgot his last name, but Alvin, at Temple, actually, he was the Director of HIV Dentistry or something

at Temple. And he was very involved as a professional, as a dentist, but also as a Latino man involved in and interested in what was happening in Latino communities. And so these folks were definitely working and really conscious about the lack of attention in people of color communities. But I don't think any of them thought about it in a way that meant not caring about what was happening in white gay communities. And so there were just a ton of folks who were involved during that time at the commission and at the Community Planning Group. There was a lot of tension. Folks hadn't been used to sitting at the same table with each other. There were folks who were involved that have become used to doing things a certain way, and understood it based on their interactions with their friends and they had done their thing, and in many respects, it was absolutely what was needed for any other doors to be opened. And at that time, I don't think we all understood it that way. We didn't embrace it that way. We understood it and felt it as tension. And so there were times when we had little table pushings and shouting and that kind of thing. But I'm really happy today that most of those experiences were really turned into really, really, really good partnerships and friendships with a number for those folks who early on probably wished that we could kill each other. [laughs]

DAN ROYLES: When you talk about those folks, you don't have to use specific names, but who are you talking about, kind of generally?

MICHAEL HINSON: Mostly, it depended on what it was. There were sort of these institutional pushbacks. The larger organizations wanting to sort of—in our mind—wanting to sort of dominate the conversation and did not understand sort of this design that we were working under in terms of representation, inclusion, or inclusion,

representation, and parity. And so there was, sort of, folks got to the point where they understood that the disease looked a certain way and that it was starting to look another way. And that the representation needed to look like those who the disease was looking like at the time, so people understood that part of it. And then they understood that we needed to be included in conversations, but had very little understanding about what parity actually meant, and how powerful parity actually had to be if folks were going to be sitting at the same table. And so I think that most of the struggles that we had in terms of the power dynamics were around this idea that just because folks were sitting at the table didn't mean that everyone had a voice at the table. And so, we had to work really, really, really work hard on helping people to understand what giving voice and having voice was actually like, even if we were represented and included at the table.

DAN ROYLES: Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, it's pretty difficult to sit at a table as a person who wasn't, sort of, invited to dinner, you sort of forced your way to dinner. It's pretty difficult to sit at the dinner and watch the folks who are used to having lobster and caviar have lobster and caviar and you still have the pickings of the pig. And that just basically means that culturally, there were certain groups, organizationally, and sort of social groups that were used to having being powerful, and there were certain groups that weren't used to be powerful in those conversations. And at times, the groups who were powerful didn't give opportunity for the groups that weren't powerful, and at other times, the group that weren't powerful didn't step up to the plate and hold on or catch a grip of power that was in their reach. And so at times, we found ourselves at odds in those different places. And so

you had white gay men who were used to being the sort of out-front voice of the disease, not being willing to have black women participate in the conversation, or women, period, participate in the conversation. There were times where you had large organizations who had millions of dollars not understanding why it was necessary for, sort of, mom-and-pop or pop-and-pop organizations in the neighborhoods to have a voice, and how it could actually enhance their power if, in fact, these voices were included in the conversation in terms of having a voice and giving voice to the issue. And so there was a lot of tension around having that kind of understanding in terms of community mobilization and the power of mobilization beyond that which people were comfortable with, in terms of their social environments, or their geographic environments, or their identity politics, and so on and so on. But we've gotten a lot better at that today. We've been forced to.

DAN ROYLES: So, when you left COLOURS, that was '90...

MICHAEL HINSON: I left COLOURS in 2001.

DAN ROYLES: Okay.

MICHAEL HINSON: I was the director from '94 to 2001.

DAN ROYLES: Okay. Was that when you became part of the Street administration?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yes.

DAN ROYLES: Okay. So, when he was running for mayor, there is some division within the gay community about his candidacy.

MICHAEL HINSON: Right.

DAN ROYLES: Why did other people oppose him and why did you support him?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, I think that some of it was identity politics on their part, and on my part, and on the group of us who sort of supported him, and then on the folks who didn't support him. Some of it was identity politics. I mean, there was this big struggle earlier, before, while he was president of the City Council. And the big struggle was about domestic partnerships. So there was this one group of people who believed that domestic partnership legislation should have only been available as it was enacted for same-sex couples. There was a group of us, again from our identity politics, who believed that because domestic partnerships presented an opportunity where it could have eventually led to health benefits for folks who didn't have benefits before. We didn't see that as something that should just be for same-sex couples. We thought that it should absolutely be available for same-sex couples. But we also thought that it should be available to everybody. Like, in my mind, it wasn't morally right to offer benefits to anyone that wasn't available to everyone and some people on other side didn't see that way. They thought that other people, that heterosexual, unmarried couples had an opportunity to get married and therefore, they would be able to get these benefits. Well, in my mind at that time and even today, there are tons of folks, for whatever reason, make a choice not to get married. And it's not in my thinking that that means that that person or those people, who perhaps are in committed relationships, pay taxes and pay their bills and live their lives hold themselves out as a couple, shouldn't have the kinds of health benefits to prevent disease and preserve life in a way that other people have. And I still hold on to that today and I think that that was a major reason why I supported then-president of council John Street, and then as mayor, Mayor Street. I supported him because of that. Because he believed that everybody,

regardless of sexual orientation, should have the opportunity to these benefits, and was willing to have legislation that opened that opportunity for people. Some people didn't believe that's what he really believed. They thought that he was just putting that out because he didn't want gay people to have it. I don't know in his head or in anybody's head, I'm not inside, all I know is that I believe that everybody has a right to have health benefits and everybody needs them. Especially having seen the way that people died and the way that people didn't get the kind of care that other people had, who had the kind of insurance that they had, or the kind of resources that they had. I really believe and still today thankful for ACA that people will have an opportunity to have better healthcare coverage to prevent disease and to preserve a quality of life that we all deserve. And so that was the reason why I supported him at that time. Yeah, that's the reason why I supported him at that time. That's what I believed and I believed that that's what he believed and I was willing to stand up against the tide of folks who didn't. The interesting thing is he had, twenty years before that time, voted to include sexual orientation as a protection in the city's Fair Practices Ordinance. So it was like, how could this community be so short-sighted to think that a person, a man, who twenty years earlier, where it wasn't in vogue to sort of support these kind of ideals supported these protections for sexual orientation, inclusion or protection, in this Fair Practices Ordinance. How could they be so short-sighted now to not support him, or not think that he would support... us as LGBT folks in the way that he eventually supported us as mayor. I think most people unfortunately bit a lot of words after his term was over because there hadn't been, even with the big love fest that we all have for former mayor and governor Rendell, who obviously was and is a huge friend to the LGBT community. But I don't think there have been any mayors other than John Street who

proposed the kind of work and the kinds of legislation and the kinds of programming and responsibility that a mayor could do for LGBT communities. I mean, you walk through the gayborhood and you see the LGBT signs, the rainbow signs up, throughout the gayborhood. How did that happen? It happened because John Street embraced the idea and said to me, "Make sure that it gets done." The Mazzoni Center was not the LGBT clinic that it is today. And the mayor embraced the idea, even though the former health commissioner and other folks in the administration didn't want to give the money. The mayor said, "Make it happen," and so he said to me, "Make this happen, because I want it to happen." And so I had to meet with the health commissioner numerous times to say, "Look, this is a priority of the administration and this is the priority of our community. And even under these sort of dwindling financial times, we don't have the amount of resources that I'm asking for, no is not an answer to this priority and we have to do something." And so we were able to find money to have the clinic open twice a week for a couple of hours a day, and so eventually, it grew and grew and grew to be a full time LGBT health center, you know, that it is today. But that happened under the Street administration. Bethel House, LGBT housing for young people under the care of the Department of Human Services, it happened under the Street administration. This enormous funding for... we had three prides at that time. Black Gay Pride, Equality Forum, and then of course Philly Pride Presents, which has the largest pride activity in the city, the June Pride Parade, Winter Pride, and I think they just announced another one, but we were funding all of these organizations at the time. We brought in the United States Conference on AIDS, for the first time hosted here in Philadelphia. We had to come up with tons of money to host that. We did a collaboration with the rapper Common and with... oh my God, what did the people up in New York... oh my God, the big media

conglomerate. I can't think of their name but we did this thing with this—have you heard of Barnstormers in New York? It's an artist group. Barnstormers is this artist group. They do, sort of, this social activism through art. And so they came in with Common, oh God, I can't think of, what is the name? The media conglomerate, owns MTV and...

DAN ROYLES: Oh, Viacom.

MICHAEL HINSON: Viacom. And so they approached me because they had known that we were being so active about our HIV activities in the city. They approached me about doing this project with them called "The Know." And so, we did The Know here and we went in Center City, and we painted the streets, and painted buildings, and painted buses, and painted the surroundings. And we did this big project with the rapper Common. And it took lots of money to do that. And the mayor was all for that. Just so many countless times that the mayor showed his true vision for the LGBT community. The gender identity legislation that passed on that we actually came up with as an administration and asked Councilman DiCicco to introduce, and Councilman DiCicco's office worked with us in refining the language for the legislation and got that passed through City Council. And so folks really, at the end of his term, really understood that he really was committed to our community, and he was committed through a vision and sort of strategies that he knew he could make things happen, that were perhaps different than way that other people wanted it to happen, but look at the result. I could tell you, there were numerous times—we're sitting here at the William Way Center—there were numerous times both during his first election and then during his second term where he took the resources that he collected during his inauguration and donated money to the William Way Center. Or he would call and say, or

Dolph [Goldenburg], who was the director at that time, would call and say, “Look, we’re running short. This is happening. We have this emergency. This is happening. We need to—,” and the mayor would call over and say, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on right now but I need you to get focused on finding \$50,000 for the William Way Center.” Or he donated \$100,000 for the elevator for the William Way Center, or more. There were just numerous times when that was sort of the focus of the administration. And so I never, when I was in the administration, I didn’t really embrace, sort of, this thought of being a representative of the mayor as a person who sort of goes out and hands out citations and waves and stuff, like I really just did have a lot of time to do that kind of stuff. I really was involved in policy and involved in legislation and involved in programs and making sure that we got money to our communities and making sure that all the other priorities that the administration had, because I couldn’t work in the administration and just work on LGBT issues and think that that would address all of the sort of concerns, and problems, or even opportunities for the LGBT community. And so I worked with the Police Department, I worked with the Department of Human Services, the Department of Health, with our housing, I helped to write the city’s ten-year plan to end homelessness. So I was with the School District of Philadelphia, which isn’t a city agency, it was at that time a state agency. And so I wasn’t sitting back just thinking about LGBT from the focus or the lens of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community in sort of, the normal way or the sort of activist strategy that would be used normally by sort of external groups to get their government to do something. I was working in the government and working with all of these different government institutions, non-government institutions, colleges, and educational institutions to find all of the different places where these communities intersected, and

where these issues intersected. And so I think, at the end of the second term, people really, really had a lot of praise for the mayor and for the direction and for the opportunities that the mayor opened up while he was in office.

DAN ROYLES: And then you went back to COLOURS. When was that?

MICHAEL HINSON: I went back to COLOURS about six months after I left the administration.

DAN ROYLES: Okay.

MICHAEL HINSON: I went back to COLOURS. There were some challenging times that the organization was experiencing with the former director and with the current director. So, I went back and worked with the, at that time, Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, which is now the Urban Affairs Coalition and helped to do some stabilization there. And quite honestly, I could tell you that I actually began to be really overwhelmed with some of the responsibility at that time and what I now sort of just recognize as being burned out from, again, as I said earlier, I hadn't really embraced or thought of myself as an activist. I think everybody else thought of me that way. And so I knew that I had a lot of responsibility. I was taught to understand that I had a lot of responsibility as a person. And I always knew that I was going to be a leader. I never not believed that, from the time I was a child, I just knew inherently that I had a cause, that I had a purpose for being here. But I didn't understand that it could come all come crashing down. I was really preparing myself to exit around the time that it all came crashing down. I'd started looking at the organization and helping it to understand what its focus would be in the future and what the structure of the organization needed to be in the future, and started putting in some

folks in the place that they could understand what their position should be in the organization, and if they should in fact be there, because there were some folks who had outgrown the organization and just didn't know that they had outgrown the organization and that they needed to do something, that they needed to follow their own dreams, and that this part of the dream for them was at the end of it, like it was for me. And so one day I was at home and I woke up and I was just crying uncontrollably, like I couldn't control myself. I didn't have suicidal thoughts at all, but I was just so overwhelmed with everything, and like being responsible all the time, and being this responsible person, and being involved in this activity and this activity, and being on this board and that board, and being involved with COLOURS and helping to strengthen COLOURS, and then being involved with the LGBT community, and being involved with political communities, and all of this different stuff, and the NAACP, and all of these groups that I was involved with. And I woke up that morning and I was like, I just can't, like I was getting probably no more than three hours of sleep for about a year and a half. And it was crazy like I literally was like, I would go to sleep, I would wake up, and in my sleep, I would be thinking what I had to do. And I would be like really, really thinking about what I had to decide, that I would have to wake up and I would have to do something because I couldn't sleep. And then this day, I woke up and I was just like crying like I was just, my spirit was just so over it. It was so tired of it. And I just said, "I can't do it anymore. I can't do it anymore." And I told them that I just couldn't do it anymore. And so, I took a break from doing anything HIV related, anything political, anything LGBT, like I did none of that stuff. I started to recommit myself to my life, and to my focus. And I got really deeply involved with my education and got really deeply involved with my spiritual growth and just divorced myself, not really

divorced, but sort of secluded myself from being social or being involved in any activities. I resigned from all the boards and all of that stuff. And then, after probably about a year or so, maybe not a year, maybe six months or so, I sort of slowly started working more with the Federation of Black Prides, which is now the Center for Black Equity, and then started working there full time and have been there for almost two and a half years. So I had an emotional breakdown is what that all comes out to. I had this emotional breakdown that was very, very difficult for me. I went to therapy. I took medication for a little while to help me sleep and to help just like calm my nerves down. I was having a, what did my doctor call it? Episodic... it was like an episode of depression, basically. And it was really brought on by this overload of work that I had. And so now, I'm still not, like I only signed on to the board of Clear Channel Communications Philadelphia. I'm on the board of the Union Benevolence Association, which is a foundation board. And those are pretty much the only two organizations whose boards I actually serve on and do any other kind of volunteer work for. I did some political organizing for Sherrie Cohen's campaign as an organizer. But other than that, and some organizing obviously for the Obama campaign, and for the Clinton campaign prior to the Obama campaign. I was an early Clinton supporter, and then went on to the Obama campaign. But other than that, I haven't been involved in much here. I work in D.C. and I travel a lot around the country for my work in D.C. with the Center for Black Equity, so I'm not very active here. Yeah... focused on me.

DAN ROYLES: Yeah.

MICHAEL HINSON: Got back to me.

DAN ROYLES: Going back a little bit, between the time when you started COLOURS, and then when you came back to it years later, how did the organization change between those two points?

MICHAEL HINSON: Yeah. We lost a lot of money during that time. By the time I left COLOURS, like I said, the organization was up to about \$1.3 million budget and had some improprieties that happened with the director who took over after I left. That was a very painful period. It was someone who I obviously trusted and helped to groom in some ways. I still love her very much as a person. But the organization lost a lot of money during that period. It didn't lose a lot of focus. It still understood what its focus was. It still had a committed group of people who felt responsible for the organization, but did lose a lot of money. And probably in some ways some of the growth that the organization would have normally experienced, it lost that just because the attention was on saving the organization and not on growing the community as it had been. And so I think that it is, even today, it's at a point where there is unfortunately, at least in my opinion and in the opinion of some others, there is sort of a lack of focus again in terms of black gay men here in the city that needs to re-find itself. The action, the activity, the activism needs to re-find it self again for a number of reasons, and primary among them is lifesaving reasons.

DAN ROYLES: When you were executive director in the '90s, what kind of work did the organization do?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, whatever we could think of at the time, we did. We did support groups, we did prevention groups, we did prevention activities, we did support groups; we did *COLOURS Magazine*, we did case management and social services, we did youth

activities, we did smoking cessation programs, we did theater programs, we obviously did a lot of writing for the magazine, did a lot of activism. People sort of got involved in the political aspect of organizing. We did a lot of collaborations with non-HIV groups or non-LGBT groups, the NAACP, and some of these other organizations. We did a lot of media stuff, getting the voice out there, getting the face out there, getting the issues out there, a lot of interacting with groups and organizations who were different and didn't agree with us on a lot of issues to try to build some intersection with some of the racial communities, some of our own racial and geographic communities. So the organization, we really took on a lot of faces. We started out primarily as an all-male organization and we grew it to include women and women's voices, transgender individuals, which we, as an organization and as individuals, we struggled a lot with. Not me personally, again, having been raised by my grandparents and the first experience I had was around this sort of transgender sort of experience with my uncle and his friend that I spoke about. So, it wasn't me per se, but I remember sitting in some of the groups and some of the guys talked about how they didn't want to be around drag queens, and they didn't want to be around the transgenders, and they didn't always use the transgender term. So we struggled with some of that, some of that part of it. And luckily for me, having had my earlier experiences and then having friends who were transgender as well, was able to move the organization in a direction that, sort of all of the alphabets, as many as we understood at that time, LGBT had active voices in the management in terms of the board of the organization, the advisory board of the organization, as staff in the organization, and as running some of the programs and the groups. So it was pretty... as comprehensive as we could think we needed to be is what we aspired to be. And so when we heard about grants that were looking at fellow funding for

housing, we responded to those things. We weren't successful, but we knew that it was something that we needed to do. When we heard about grants around substance use, and substance abuse, we knew that it was something that was affecting our communities and we needed to be involved in it and so, we were involved in looking at programming as broadly as it was represented in the lives of people who are around us.

DAN ROYLES: When you talk about reaching out to groups that didn't agree with you necessarily, what kind of groups are you talking about?

MICHAEL HINSON: The faith groups, church groups, even some of the civic organizations didn't always have the same, didn't always have the, sort of, an embracing mentality in terms of LGBT issues or even HIV issues. And so, we found ourselves obviously doing a lot of work with the NAACP. And then with different churches, going to different churches, going under sort of the title of HIV prevention and HIV care, HIV disease in black communities or in people with color communities, but being able to also talk about homophobia and the impact of homophobia and how that sort of acts as a road map to decisions or bad decisions in some ways around the behavior that leads to HIV and other kinds of health disparities or disparate issues.

DAN ROYLES: And with COLOURS, when your designing or setting up HIV programming, prevention or education, what did you do to make it speak specifically to black gay men?

MICHAEL HINSON: We listened mostly to what people were saying they needed, as opposed to—we didn't read a lot of books. There obviously weren't a lot of studies available to us at the time on proven effective programs for black gay men at that time. And so we really listened, and we looked at how people learned and how people socialized and

where they socialized and we looked for those opportunities, and so we obviously had the magazine. From the magazine, people said they wanted to have groups where they could actually talk in person to each other and build a family sort of support system for each other. And then, we know that culturally, as black people, we have sort of like the drumming voice, like there's this thing that happens out socially this big voice thing that happens and people hear the voice and so they connect onto it. And so we were able to find people who were natural leaders in the community who, sort of like the training that BEBASHI gave me, we were able to give to individuals who could take it back to their groups that weren't necessarily part of my group, but they had their own groups like the vogue community, the house community which we were very active in early on, before any community. So we started doing balls and those kind of things before anybody thought that they should even do anything with that part of the gay community, the LGBT community. And so we really listened and looked at what people were asking for, and sometimes crying, for in a way that they socialized and the way that they met each other. In the way that they learned, like how were people actually learning? They were learning from their friends who didn't have the proper information, so we needed to arm their friends with the proper information so that they can pass it off to them. They were learning from the things that they were reading, and so we needed to have something that they could read. They were learning from television, so we did PSAs. One of the PSAs—I wrote this poem called "One In Three." It basically, sort of, used the statistic that one in three black gay men was infected with HIV, and it was based on, sort of, the early six-city study, that found that, in those six cities, that one out of three black gay men was infected with HIV. And so I wrote this poem about it and we turned that poem into a commercial, and then we bought air

time using local artists, voice-over artists, and myself, and poets who did it and we bought air time and the One in Three commercial was aired here at Philadelphia, in Delaware, New Jersey, New York, sort of the Northeast Corridor, stopping at New York. And I remember my dad, at that time my birth dad was living, and he called me up and he's like, "I saw you on television!" He was all excited, and he was all happy. It's like all this work that I was doing all this time, it was him seeing me on television doing this poem that he, sort of, I don't really think he was making a connection to the actual issue itself, but it was like, "My son was on television!" and it was like "Wow!" And he didn't think, like he didn't realize or the people, not just my dad, but they didn't really realize. You know, it's like, we bought air time, we created this commercial, this PSA, with grant dollars, we created this, we bought air time on the television and on radio, and so it was not like somebody hired us to do this. We were hiring them to show our issue or show our work. But to everybody else, it's like this amazing thing happened. This black gay group or these black folks or my dad—his son—was on television doing this poem about saving the community. So we did those kind of things. Some of the things worked very well and some of the things didn't work so well. We did two different documentaries that we worked on, using mostly local artists. We used Brent Hill who is a documentarian or a local filmmaker here. His father is a pretty famous basketball player and organizer that organizes Sonny Hill League and Brent was a filmmaker who we had worked with, and he had done some photography for the magazine. But then he was also a filmmaker, and so we approached him about doing a documentary about black gay men, because part of the thought was that if we could show black gay men and black gay communities in a positive light, then some of the homophobia would disappear. But also some of the internalized homophobia within the community would

disappear so that people could stand prouder and stand taller and begin to make some decisions that they felt better about themselves, and that those decisions would lead to less HIV infection. Which we still believe today, obviously, in the number of the programs that have been proven to show that, sort of, motivation theory as a way that people will embrace behavior change. And so, we tried all those things. At that time that we were doing all those things, we didn't think like, "There's like theory behind this stuff and there's like science and stuff." We didn't think about any of that. We just knew that there were people next to us and they were learning this particular way or they weren't getting this thing in this way that other people were getting it. And so, we tried those things and some of those things—it's like you have a cup full of pencils and you throw the pencils up and some of them land back in the cup and the other ones land outside the cup. But we didn't stop throwing the cup up. We kept going and so we just kept trying and kept trying.

DAN ROYLES: You have a couple of quotations in your email signature that I want to talk about if that's okay?

MICHAEL HINSON: Okay.

DAN ROYLES: The first is or one of them is from Bayard Rustin and it's, "We can agitate the right questions by probing at the contradictions." What does that mean to you?

MICHAEL HINSON: Well, I'm pretty much an agitator and I think leaders in general, knowingly or unknowingly, agitate. They sort of set the stage for... things can look very, very perfect depending on the lens that you're looking through at that particular thing or that stage and other people are looking at it and things aren't so perfect. And so, I'm always looking to see where the imperfections are and how those imperfections show up in my life

and show up in other people's lives. And when we don't sort of act as an agitator, we become complacent. And in that complacency, people get lost, feelings get lost, lives get lost, growth gets lost. And through the teachings of my grandparents and my mentors, I have been taught not to be satisfied with the way that things are even if things are great, to not be satisfied with them because they can always be better. And so, agitating comes to me in that way, if that makes sense. And actually, all of the Yoruba proverb, and the, it's not really a proverb, but saying from Mahatma Gandhi, all sort of are relative in the same way, with sort of these three very, very different.... The Yoruba proverb is a proverb based on a spiritual teaching, sort of like the books of the Bible kind of thing from a Yoruba perspective called Odu. And so, the Odu, the proverb that speaks sort of about agitating in its own way and Bayard Rustin from the Civil Rights Movement and then Mahatma Gandhi from an earlier civil rights movement or human rights movement. From these very three different avenues of folks and three different cultures of folks, Mahatma Gandhi, the Yorubas in Nigeria, or Bayard Rustin outside of Philadelphia and Chester, working with Dr. King and all of the Civil Rights giants. But over all of these generations, the proverb, being hundreds of thousands of years old and Mahatma Gandhi from his era, and then Bayard Rustin from the Civil Rights era, from all of these very different and distinct eras, the same voice that basically says to us as humans that we have to, we're responsible for making our paths better and in doing so, making the paths of everything around us better as a result. And so that, sort of, my little stool box that I stand on. That's my guidance to make myself better and make the world better. And those teachings, those proverbs, those sayings are sort of symbolically representatives of that innate thing which I believe is my responsibility.

DAN ROYLES: That maybe is a good lead into the next question which is, what do you want your legacy to be for the work that you do?

MICHAEL HINSON: At the heart of it all, I'm just like a country boy who just likes to be involved and likes to do stuff. Like, I'm a Sagittarius I'm always going to be involved in this and that and be pulling my brains out, and working up to the last minute. I'm going to probably go out that way, like working up to the last minute. I don't think about legacy like I don't know if you could... I know people think about it but I don't think about it. I don't think about what is my legacy going to be because hopefully the time that I think about what my legacy is going to be is the time that I think about what I'm going to do next. It's like the moment that I begin to think that I've made some point, it's like, okay, what's the next point? I'm not satisfied with that point. Like, what's the next thing? And so, probably what people will remember me by, hopefully, is just by being a person that cares, and a person that does, and person that's responsible. That feels responsible for leaving the world a better place for me, for myself, for my own growth, both in physical and in spirit, but also for the world that I live in and the people that I'm surrounded by and the environment that I live in. I mean, I care. I was taught to care. So I think that's what people will hopefully remember but in terms of like a legacy moment, I dread the thought that people would connect me with any one particular thing because then, I don't know, I kind of feel like if you... like, I write, I told you I write. I write a lot. I have like books and books and books of stuff, of poetry and stuff that I've written and obviously work. And when I write my personal stuff, I very, very, very, very seldom date it. In the beginning, I never ever dated it because I always thought like, I don't want people to sort of associate me with one thing. Like I don't people to look at my work and say, "At this point in time, this was who he

was and this was his legacy,” or, “This is what he did and this is what he was going through at this time, this is why he was feeling like—.” I’m not interested in any of that kind of stuff. That doesn’t move me in any kind of way to think about legacy. It doesn’t move me. I’m not inspired by that. I do what I’m naturally responsible for doing, what I believe I’m naturally responsible for doing, nothing more, nothing less. I do believe that I’m a little piece of this puzzle in that you, and Tyrone, and Rashidah, and everybody else have different shapes and sizes and maybe even bigger pieces of the puzzle than I have, and together, we complete a puzzle. And when my time comes for an end, I don’t know if the puzzle’s going to be completed or not. But you know, it’s only going to be a piece of it. You know what I mean? But it’s going to be an important piece of it because without it, the other pieces aren’t connected. But there’s no legacy moment for me, or thought of having a legacy moment. And I really hope that I never ever get trained enough to think that I deserve to have a legacy moment. I just don’t believe in it.

DAN ROYLES: I have no more questions.

MICHAEL HINSON: Okay.

DAN ROYLES: So, is there anything that you didn’t get to say, or wanted to say, or want to add?

MICHAEL HINSON: No. I’m good.

DAN ROYLES: No? Well, thank you very much.

MICHAEL HINSON: You’re welcome. Thank you.