DAN ROYLES: So this is Dan Royles interviewing Curtis Wadlington for the African American AIDS Activism Oral History Project on May 9, 2012, and we're in Curtis' home here in—West Philadelphia?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Mill Creek.

DAN ROYLES: Mill Creek. Great. So we'll start with the really kind of basic question, when and where were you born?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Philadelphia, 1957. Born in Cobbs Creek, I guess you would call it a working-class neighborhood. We were one of the first African American families to move in the neighborhood, primarily comprised of professionals. I remember the gentleman next door to me was one of the first African American FBI agents. We had Linda—I'm trying to think of her name, she's one of the best pediatricians at Children's Hospital. She lived down the street from us, we grew up with them. Hardy Williams, the state senator, I remember when he finished law school and him and my mom put together the local PTA. It was a really kind of "Leave it to Beaver" neighborhood in the middle of the city, really tight community.

DAN ROYLES: And what did your parents do as work?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: My father was a World War II veteran, and he went to work for the post office. In addition to that he had a couple of businesses on the side. He painted homes on the Main Line, and he did—I think they call it "set up." As the seasons changed he would go to the big houses and get the pool ready, and set up the furniture, and that kind of stuff. In addition to that, he was what they called back in the day a "huckster," and he used to sell

fruit out of the back of his station wagon around the city. So he was hard working. My mom was a homemaker, and she baby-sitted to get extra income.

DAN ROYLES: And you said that you were one of the first African American families in the neighborhood—what was that like?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: It wasn't trouble, I mean people were very welcoming. It was a primarily Jewish neighborhood that was transitioning. I remember particularly a woman who lived three doors away from us. Her name was Mrs. McCauselin. She was a master-level English teacher, and in the summertime (laughs) she used to gather us in her house, I mean, make us come in her house, and we would read. And we would play these games. I remember water horses—you put them in water and they turn into seahorses, and she would teach us little arts and crafts projects. But I really do credit her for my reading skills today. And it was funny, our parents would let this old white lady just bring us into her house. And she taught us. I think she really knew that they key to us advancing in society was that our reading skills had to be sharp. And so that was what most of the white neighbors in our neighborhood were like. They really saw themselves as, I guess, teachers and people that we could emulate or pass on information. So it was a real welcoming neighborhood, we didn't have any racial tension. And for a long while they slowly, the white families, slowly moved out. But they stayed for a while, and they were part of the community.

DAN ROYLES: You mentioned that your mom helped organize the local PTA. Were your parents active politically or in the community in other ways?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Oh my god, my mom and them were really active. And it probably

goes back to my grandfather and them, but I'll talk about that in a little bit. But my mom and them—in our house, something was always going on. As a matter of fact recently, and my mom just passed a couple of weeks ago, and there was an article about her in the *Tribune*, and it was funny to see the word "activist" next to her name. And we never thought about her like that because the things that she did, to us were just what you were supposed to do. But I remember our house was the central collection agency for the March of Dimes. And I remember the Girl Scout meetings, the Cub Scout meetings, the PTA meetings, in our home, the church ushers. There was always some meeting, an organization, in our home to help somebody. On primary night our house was the place where all of the workers came to get their flyers and their assignments and those kind of things. I remember just the energy in our house when Kennedy was running for president, and all of the people and the politicians coming through the house all night. So there was always something going on. The biggest thing I remember was my fear when my mom and them went to the March on Washington. I begged them not to go. I really thought that they were going to—something was going to happen in DC that day, and we were terrified. But I remember her saying, "We've got to go for y'all." And I remember we lived about seven blocks from the local elementary school, which had been there since the early 1900s, and my mom and them felt that, in the white neighborhood, little kids didn't walk seven and eight blocks to school. And they protested and lobbied, and forced the school district to build Add B. Anderson, it's at Sixty-First and Cobbs Creek Parkway. I'll never forget that. That really impressed me, to see our parents make a corner, where there was nothing, something go up. And I remember the same thing when Bartram High School, the schools were forced to integrate, and Bartram didn't want black students in it. It looked like something out of Mississippi when they tried

to get those kids in there with the thousands of cops. And I remember my father getting kids in his station wagon and escorting them into the school. But I also remember when my mother and a group of parents invited the principal, his name was Mr. Prioli, to our home, because she said, "You know what? I think they don't know that black people live like this." And he came to our home, and I'll never forget his face when he stepped on the porch, and he just kept looking up and down the street and going, "Oh my god. I can't believe this." He thought we lived like animals. He saw the block and the different professionals, and he was blown away. And somehow my mom knew that, that people's characterization of African Americans was, I guess, the media and all of the negative, but they never took the time to visit. So she invited him, and I remember that being one of the things that broke the stalemate at Bartram High School. So activism and community service has kind of always been a part of our family. My mom's, and my grandmother, in the 1910s, 1920s, they were in Duquesne, around Pittsburgh, and they were coal miners. My grandmother ran a boarding house for the miners who had come from across the country who were African American and couldn't find places to stay. And I remember my father always telling the stories about how he was four years old, and the pots were as big as him, but my grandmother would put him in the pots and make him clean them from the inside. And he mentioned a little about the strikes and things, but I got a sense that this thing about serving people was almost in our DNA. On my mom's side, her grandfather, his name was Dr. A. W. Woodards, he was one of the first African Americans with a PhD in theology in the country, and he was part of something called the African Union Methodist Protestant Church. They were the first independent black church in America. They chartered in 1813, I think it was in Wilmington, Delaware. I think the guy's name was John Spencer, that

founded it. But they refused—even back then they wanted serious independence. Other churches that had tried to exercise their independence really were either financed by other whites of the mainline religions, Methodists mostly. But this was a church who wanted their own autonomy, fully. And they were committed to service, and service to least of them, not so much the middle-class African Americans. And so when I look back on my mom's side and my pop's side, it's in us. I wish it wasn't, I really do sometimes. I wish I could just care about whether Britney Spears got her hair done or something like that. But I can't. And I'm still excited today, as I was twenty or thirty years ago. Still doing tons of community stuff. But it's in our family, I really believe that.

DAN ROYLES: Where did you go to high school?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: West Philadelphia High, not too far from here. Briefly I lived with my brother in Rome, New York. When I was there for three years, it was the safest city in America, and it really was. I mean, we would leave our doors open and come back to Philly for two and three days, and leave the door unlocked, and nothing would happen. But I went to high school there for one year and then I came back to Philadelphia. Upstate New York was just too quiet for me, I had to come back to the city. And we lived on a military base, and for some reason I was uncomfortable living on the SAC bases. I never knew what my brother did. He never would talk about it, he would just disappear for days. I knew he did something with chemicals because I knew that was his background in science and chemical research, but I don't know what he did for the military, and I never wanted to know. I still don't want to know what he did. But I don't know, I was uncomfortable living on the base. What was exciting, though, was seeing the latest military hardware, because you could see

the planes flying by at night when they were test flying stealth bombers, and stuff like that. So that was exciting. But I stayed there a year, at school there, and then came back to Philadelphia, to West Philly High.

DAN ROYLES: So you finished high school in Philadelphia.

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Yeah. I actually—when I came back from upstate New York, New York was on that regent system, and their school system, they were a lot more advanced than Philadelphia. And so when I came back, I remember the first day going to math class, and they were doing addition and multiplication problems, so I thought they were opening exercises or something, and the teacher said to me, "No, this is the classwork, you have the whole period to complete it." I was like, "There's only ten problems up there. Oh no, I'm in the wrong class." And they said to me that all of the advanced classes were full, and that I would have to stay there. And so I got bored, I realized that I could skip ten classes and take the test and pass, and I got disinterested and I started to party in school. What I did was, I actually stopped going, I went and started working. And I went and got my GED in New Jersey because they gave out diplomas, not GEDs, and they allowed you to take all of tests in one day. So I went to Camden, New Jersey, took the tests in one day, came out, and went to working real hard.

DAN ROYLES: What did you do?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Then I was working at Diversified Community Services. I was about sixteen, seventeen years old. My first job was with the Philadelphia Recreation Department. They had a summer youth program, and they had something called "play streets," where they would block off a street and the city would send two youth workers, and games, and

supplies. Once a week they'd send a bus to take you on trips, and send lunch every day, and I was one of the youth workers. So you had to organize activities on the block and those kind of things. So I really liked it and I was really good at it. To me, it was like playing. I was only like fourteen. So a couple years later I saw this article in the newspaper that said "Summer Camp Counselors." I think it was like 750 dollars for the whole summer. I said, "Whoa, I could do that!" But you had to be eighteen. And I was sixteen, so I said, "I'm going to just lie on the application." So I lied on the application, got the job. And when I got to the camp, they gave me the littlest kids, I think they were seven and eight years old. And oh my god, we had a ball. I changed the camp program for my group, and the kids had a ball. The camp director was like, "Oh my god, I can't believe it. I've got parents asking me, 'Who is this Mr. Curtis?' and can his kids come and get in his group.'" He said, "Man, what did you do?" So he said to me, "Can you help us revamp the whole camp program?" I'm like sixteen. So one day he comes to me and says, "I'm going to ask you a question, and I need you to give me an honest answer. So how old are you?" And I said, "Oh I'm eighteen." And he said, "Oh, okay. Because if you were sixteen, you know you could make double what the eighteen year-olds make, because I could get you in the summer youth program and the city would pay your salary, not the agency." And I said, "No, I'm sixteen! I'm sixteen! I'm sixteen!" So he said, "Okay, you just had to be honest, you're good." He said, "And I'm still going to move you." And so they moved me from the littlest kids to the oldest kids, who were fourteen. So now this is like playing with my friends. And after camp was over that summer, he asked if I would work on developing the program for their two summer camps, help get ready for the summer and the hiring of staff, those kind of things. And they wanted to develop something called a CIT program, for a yearlong program for thirteen to sixteen year olds, for

leadership development. And they would eventually employ them as counselors during the summer. So I helped them put that program together, and I worked for Diversified for—oh my God—for years, going to camp, and I even worked at their day care center in South Philadelphia. And I helped revamp their after-school programs for older kids. And so that's how I kind of got my feet wet in program development, and I don't know where I got the skills from, but it just came. It might have been a combination of just being young, and knowing what kids want to do. But some of it was having a sense of what you needed now for tomorrow. Even at a young age, there were some things that I knew that we needed to teach younger kids to get them ready for what would come tomorrow.

DAN ROYLES: And how long did you work for that program?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Diversified—I think until maybe my early twenties. But I worked with them off and on part time, because even when I didn't go to summer camp, I still worked in their CIT training program. We did winter camping, too. We would take the teenagers up into the mountains, into the snow, and do camping and those kind of things, and leadership training skills. And actually out of that is how I transitioned to my next job. The director of the last summer I spent at camp, Jake Roberts was his name, and he had a master's in education. And he wanted to put together a special education program and present it to the state. He was trying to create a model for special education for public schools. And he had got this grant money, and he said there was one component he didn't have. He thought that in the classroom for special education, you didn't need a professional, you actually needed a paraprofessional. And his structure was to send the kids out of the classroom for educational instruction, but what we would work on would be socialization,

particularly, in the classroom. And so he said to me, "You know, Curtis, you would be great for this job." And he convinced me. Of course, it was more money than I had ever—then it was like maybe twelve thousand, thirteen thousand a year, but I was like, "Oh my god!" And it was a very prestigious Main Line school that he had got to give him space in, Main Line Day School. And we developed the project, and I stayed there, I stayed at Main Line maybe six years. But that's where I developed my clinical skills. I worked with some very good psychiatrists, psychologists. And that's when I realized that I had the ability to communicate with kids and I guess you would say people in the community in a way that the professionals couldn't, and still get the same outcomes. So I remember this psychiatrist saying to me, "Listen, I can't deal with these kids, they're not going to sit in the session with me, but we've got to do this. So I'm going to teach you how to do this for me." And I remember the psychologist teaching me how to do home visits and process families through problem solving, and those kind of things. So I think that's where I honed my professional skills in terms of counseling, and I guess front-line intervention things, was at Main Line Day School with Jake. And actually out of that job I got my next job with Baptist Children's Services. There were maybe twenty kids that had come through my classroom who actually were in institutional care at a facility called Baptist Children's Services, and they did dependent and neglected care. And the Director of Education came to the school one day and said, "Mr. Wadlington, I don't know what you're doing. I don't know if you're paying them, I don't know if you're getting them high, but we have never seen our kids progress like this. They have never. Some of these kids have been with us eight years, they have never passed a grade, they struggle. What are you doing?" So she said, "I want to offer you a job." She said, "I want you to come and be Assistant Director of Education at Baptist

Children's Services." She said, "This is what you would be responsible for: the educational progress of"—I think it was like 125 kids. And it went from eleven thousand, they were offering me like twenty-two. I was like, oh this is a no-brainer. And what I wanted to do was, I really did, I had got a sense where I wanted to start having a wider effect. I wanted to get away from a group of twenty to, oh now I can have an impact on 125 kids, this is great. And then because it was so many kids, I usually worked with the principals, the vice principals, and the board of education when it came to my kids, because I had 125. So that's how I got what would later help BEBASHI, was my relationship with the school district down at Twenty-First and Parkway, and all of those relationships I had built, and skills that they had seen, and things that I had actually helped them with in terms of parent involvement in the schools. So it was almost like every job I went to, somebody saw what I did and came and would say, "Could you come and do that for me?" And so Diversified, Baptist Children's, and where the hell did I go after there? Oh, crime prevention. Me and my crazy self, I wanted to go to North Philly. I was going to go to North Philly, I've got to help the poorest of the poor, I'm going to North Philly! Oh my god, and we worked in a program, the Crime Prevention Association. They did a program for juvenile first offenders. We worked with Family Court. When a kid got locked up for the first time, they would send him to us. We would have to convince the judge that we could develop a community-based program and family supports so that the kid wouldn't have to be locked up, and then would report back to the judge at six months and show him progress. So they assigned me the project tower at Eleventh and York, and I got a wake up call about what people were really facing. You know, the parents addicted to drugs, the roaches, the rats. I remember spraying Raid on my pants before I would go into houses so that the roaches wouldn't—they would

be crawling up your legs and stuff, and you would have to act like there wasn't nothing going on, and that kind of thing. Or the parents would be on heroin and you'd be talking and all of a sudden they'd just (nods forward) they'd do this. And you had to sit and wait for them to wake back up. And sometimes you'd be waiting a half an hour because you had to get their signature, or you had to go over certain things, and consent. I even remember—it'll be on tape but I don't care—I remember having to say to parents, "I need you to go get high before we go to court. If you're not in that court, your son's not coming home, I'm telling you right now." Because one of the things I knew is, unlike crack, I never had a heroin addict parent who missed an appointment, who missed a court date, who missed an appointment at the doctor, never. When crack came, that was a whole different story, you couldn't even find them. So one of the things that I did understand is, as long as they were high, they were responsible. It's when they weren't high that they weren't responsible. And so what I tried to do was to keep the child home long enough to get them support services, and try to get the parent some support services and get into help. But I stayed at Diversified for a number of years, and I think that's where I started to see another side of human services, because I noticed at Diversified they had three community centers. There was one in West Philadelphia, one in the north, and one in the south. The one in South Philadelphia they had spent two million dollars on. I knew I had a bucket next to my desk at the one in North Philly, and the one in West Philly, you couldn't even use the back of it. And I remember going to board meetings and staff meetings and saying, "Before I say 'race,' y'all had better explain to me why that center looks like that down there, when in the numbers that you report, these are the families that you take pride in saying you service, not them. Something's wrong." And eventually I left because I just couldn't do it anymore, because I

knew that they were not going to give the resources that you really needed to do the job you did. That's when I decided I wasn't going to help people anymore, and I went to go make money. And I went to SoftSheen Products. Mr. Gardner was a black cosmetic chemist, and he had invented the jheri curl, and he needed a salesman. And I went to Chicago and got a job, came back to Philly and I was the Philadelphia representative, and became their number one salesman in the country, and made tons of money. But I got discouraged there because I couldn't believe that African Americans had that much money and were not socially responsible, that they were buying cars and all that kind of stuff. They were doing some good things because one of the things that Mr. Gardner was adamant about was African American women owning their own businesses. So he helped thousands of women set up salons across the country, giving them credit on product, teaching them how to buy property, even giving them loans. But they didn't get the part about social responsibility, and I mean they had—I had never seen that much money in my life. And so I got discouraged, and I think that's when I came back and tried to start working in human services again. I think that's when the epidemic might have just started, but I wasn't really paying attention. And I got into it because one of the kids I worked with in North Philly was in the hospital, and there was a social worker at Jefferson, and she said to me, "Curtis, there's a young guy here that keeps asking for you, and it's ironic that I knew you." And she said, "His family hasn't been to see him, he's been here for a month, could you come up and talk to him?" And so when I went up I recognized him, and his family were all heroin addicts, mother, father, sisters, brothers, everybody in the house. And he was dying from AIDS. Well to me it was unusual because he was black and he was eighteen. And so he told me that he was a male prostitute sometimes downtown, and that's where he thinks he got

it, and he thinks he gave it to his girlfriend. And it hit me then, they don't know this, do they? Because this is common. I remember going downtown, you would see the young guys down Eighteenth Street, down Twelfth, and the older or the more affluent white gay men would pick them up and they were taking pride in it, that they were making money and all that kind of stuff. It was like a side hustle to them. But I knew that in the community they couldn't tell nobody they did that. And I said, "Oh my god, this disease is going to wipe us out quietly, we've got to do something." And I remember one night I was coming home from the hospital. I didn't know nothing about anything. And I saw all of these black candles and signs, and I said, "What is this?" And I saw something about AIDS and, "Well, what is this?" So I went there in LOVE Park, and I went and I saw Rashidah, I had never met her before, and she had came up to the podium, and all these reporters and things. And so she reaches under the podium and she gets this huge black candle and she pulls it out and she says, "This is for all of the people who y'all will never care about, who you will never count in those numbers." And she publicly resigned from the board of directors of that gay agency, said she couldn't do it anymore, and she was going to commit her life to fighting for these people. Afterwards, I said, "I want to help you, whatever you need me to do!" I couldn't believe that somebody felt like I did. I said, "Whatever you need to do, I'll do whatever I can." And she was like, "Well who are you?" (laughs) And I told her, "I don't know nothing about this, my background is really human services, child welfare, but that's why I want it." Because I know that I knew then, and it still is the same way today, I knew then that the one voice that would get lost in this is that no one would talk about African American teenagers and the impact of AIDS. And through this whole thing, at every conference, in the planning committees, I go, "Okay, excuse me y'all, y'all forgot to put down a workshop for the—" "Oh

yeah, oh yeah, that's right, the kids." But that's when they're screwing to get it, and it shows up at twenty-five, how could y'all forget that? But always, that's what it was. So that was really my motivation to getting in was that young guy Bruce, and realizing that in the hood that this was going to do—and really because of the myth and the secrecy of how homosexuality was viewed in the hood, that we knew there was same-sex relationships that went from casual to friendship to they was in love, but we knew that a lot of times, outside, people didn't portray that. You didn't know who was gay and who wasn't. And it wasn't something that, you know, men wasn't going to talk about that, and women wasn't going to talk about the men that they knew that had been to prison. And so I went, "Oh my god, and if they try to talk about it, oh my god, I know they'd better not send no gay man down there to talk about no AIDS." And so we started BEBASHI and tried to say that there's another message besides John and his lover Rick, and that there's issues. One of the things that I realized early was, this was an opportunity for two groups to attach other issues. I knew that gay men could sensitize the country and push for gay marriage or equal rights, they could use the disease to do that. I knew that African Americans could finally get a reformed health care system, I knew that. And what myself and Rashidah tried to do was say, "Let's not avoid the fact that we know we have other hidden agendas. How are we going to get this done, and both of us get something? Because otherwise somebody's going to get used in this, and somebody's going to get what they want, and somebody's going to lose. But this time it won't be money. People will be dead. And we never were able to work that out. And I always say to people today, and I get criticized about it, I said, "But they got what they wanted, but we didn't." And the country is more sensitive to gay issues. They don't have a lot of the same battles as during the time of AIDS, because the country was

willing to let them die when AIDS first came out. I mean, it was horrible how we saw a part of America that we thought had died, when the viciousness that they came at gay men was just, I couldn't believe it. I was like, "Are you kidding?" But what really disturbed me more was what gay men turned around and did—not all, but some—turned around and did, in that fight with AIDS, to African Americans. I remember being in meetings and people saying stuff to us like, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you." I can remember many times jumping across the table, I mean literally jumping across the table, and saying, "I will kick your ass in here if you say something like that out of your mouth to me again or disrespect anybody. Don't write me a memo and insult me, because I'm going to come to your door. I can't play those games. People are dying, this shit is serious." I remember I didn't understand about how the gay community operated until a lot of African American gay men began to come and volunteer at the agency and talk to us about the prejudice, and how they couldn't get into clubs and I was like, "What? Are you kidding?" And they said, "Oh, Curtis, this is known. Everybody knows, it's across the country. It's notorious." They used to have this saying, that they're still white men. It doesn't matter if they're gay, they're still white men and they do act like it. So I didn't want to get into the fight but all I wanted to do was say that we have an opportunity to actually come together in a way that we probably won't get an opportunity to do again. We also have an opportunity for everybody to have a win-win. And why aren't we doing that? And I guess that's what I never could understand, because most of the organizations or most of the gay men that we met were not like that. It was the few that were in very powerful positions that made it difficult. They had connections on the Hill and into large private foundations that were throwing in money. In the entertainment industry, the money that came for AIDS was just ungodly. I remember when we couldn't

even get to African American entertainers to explain to them what the epidemic meant to them. They would keep them shielded from us. And whenever we would, I remember Dionne Warwick went off when she found out about AIDS in the black community, and that's how she separated from AmFAR and made her own foundation. I remember Patti LaBelle, when we finally got to her, and she said, "What?" and I said, "You don't understand. Right now, we've got black men that they're about to throw out in the street from Jefferson Hospital because they don't have no insurance. But those agencies, if he was white, I'm telling you, they'd chain theirself to that hospital door." We watched how ACT UP, who they would fight for and who they wouldn't fight for and those kind of things. When we finally got to the entertainers, we were able to get entertainment support and some of the finances there, but it was hard to personally really believe that existed in this country. Maybe I'm an optimist, but that was really hard for me to just kind of swallow. And then for gay men to do that—I sound like a grandmother—I really expected more from them. I really, really did, and I thought, "Okay, this is going to be all right, because they know what it's like to be stepped on, so we can do this." And I remember, they had the Lavender Health network. They had a health network that was already in place across the country, where they were delivering health services to gay men for years, and so all they really had to do was plug into this health network, advance it, that kind of thing. I said, "Oh yeah, this is going to be good." I had no idea that I was going to have to fight and almost go to jail just to get a brochure. I remember the fight just to get a brochure that black people would—like, "I can't take this brochure with two gay men on the front in the hood. What am I going to do with this?" They would not give us money. You know what me and Rashidah did? We broke into the office one night, and we stole paper, and we made brochures. We had stick drawings of

people having oral sex. And stole condoms. Because they wouldn't even give us money to get condoms to go and distribute condoms in the neighborhood. So we stole all this stuff, then we left. First we took supplies that we needed, and started an agency. But that's the kind of stuff that we—I mean, I'm sitting here now thinking of, we would have these meetings where they would postpone the conversation to talk about the targeted educational materials. "Oh, we'll get to that next week." But people are dying this week. We're right here, they're prostituting at the corner, why can't y'all do that? And finally, that night, Rashidah said, "You know what we're going to do?" I said, "Um-hm, I've got keys, and we've got to go in there and do what we've got to do." And that's how we started. And 1199C, the hospital and healthcare worker's union, those were the people that gave us the space. (laughs) They hid us. And they literally hid us. We had, it was like a goddamn closet. I remember, I was in the hallway with a chair, with a desk in front of me, and that was the office, with people coming by and I'm on the phone going, "Okay—are you waiting to get down? Oh no, that's mine, I'll move it out of your way." We stayed there for years doing that, but it was hard having to just deal with that it was that kind of prejudice and nobody knew. Nobody knew that in the gay community there was racism. Nobody knew. Everybody thought, you know, they're gay, they're happy, all of them. Black, white, Chinese, they're just gay. But it wasn't like that at all. And when the epidemic came, it really showed its true colors. And I'm angry today, but not angry enough to go and do AIDS activism again. But I'm angry that what we said would happen, happened. That the disease would almost disappear among gay men, and would skyrocket, and that would be okay because that's the country's history of disease and poor people. It's okay if it's among us in large numbers. After a while it becomes a way for people to make money: the drugs to treat it, the testing,

and those kind of things. So in a lot of ways it becomes advantageous, or at least that's what it appears to be if you look at a pattern of disease among African Americans. I remember when we first got into AIDS work, we were looking for African American epidemiologists. I think there were three in the whole country. And we realized that even in the scientific and scholarly community, that it was almost accepted, the disease pattern in poor communities. And to this day there's still no aggressive strategy, especially with diseases that can be contained, sexually transmitted diseases. If it was bird flu, or something like that, I'm sure we would have a different reaction. But I don't think it's my paranoia or oversensitivity to say that these patterns are reflective of something. I don't think they're intentional, I don't think that there's a group somewhere meeting in a dark room, saying, "This is what we do." I think it's just a result of us not fixing some systems, and allowing things to go on, and being comfortable with not paying attention to poor people, to women, to minorities. And I don't know if that's going to change, but I have great hope. And the only reason I do is because at school last semester, when I was a full time student with people from seventeen to twenty-five, I got a little hope. I said, "Wow, they're smart." Not wise at all, but very, very smart, and very open minded. They do not carry their parents' prejudices and things like that, and can be easily educated and, like my grandmother said, "easily shown the error of their ways." And that was amazing to me. So it gave me a sense that things will get better, but like what you're doing, we still have to expose those hidden things that we don't know about. Like how nobody knew that there was this prejudice in the gay community. I was like, "That doesn't even sound right, that can't be." And so I'm still angry, but hopeful. The only thing that I do with AIDS is every year for AIDS Day they do a big thing in West Philly at one of the recreation centers, and I go and I give a speech and some things. And I always

talk about testing. I still don't understand and don't agree with this mass, "Let's test everybody." Because I know that to test at a community event is ridiculous. I am not going to get tested at a community event in my neighborhood and try to walk out of that tent, room, or whatever, like they didn't just tell me I've got AIDS. Or nobody asking me. I'm not going to do that in the community. So I always say to people, "Show me the numbers of how many people you tested today. I know you spent fifty thousand dollars on this event and you had jugglers and passed out condoms and all that shit. But for fifty thousand dollars, show me how many people from this neighborhood, not from over there, because that's not what you said. You said you did this here for these people. How many of these residents actually came in here and got tested? I know the fuck they didn't. Because no fool would do that in the neighborhood they live in. But you all keep saying this, 'Come get tested.'" The other thing is, so when they've got AIDS, now what the fuck are you going to do? They don't have no insurance, they don't have no case manager, you've got all that shit in place? What are you going to, tell everybody and then don't have nothing for them? That doesn't make sense. Maybe we should spend money on prevention education. Maybe we should really still keep trying to push that. That if everybody was safe, it wouldn't matter if you had it and I had it and we were safe. You couldn't pass it on. Why won't y'all promote safe behavior instead of promoting, "Come and tell if you've been negative. Come and tell me if you've been fucking up your life." And then have nothing in place. And that stuff still exists to this day. Everybody's on this, "Well we've got to know the numbers, because the better we know the numbers—," but I know that AIDS services are not the same since gay men are not the majority of the clients. ActionAIDS is not the same. I had a physician tell me a few weeks ago, she said to me, "Curtis, do you know that ActionAIDS is recommending to their

clients that they switch pharmacies to a mail-order pharmacy?" And I said, "Oh." And she said, "Yeah, because the mail-order pharmacy gives ActionAIDS donations because they send them clients." I said, "Oh, well that's like fundraising." She said, "Yeah, well you're not a medical person. You can't do that with people with AIDS. So you go to the hospital tonight. Something's wrong, there's some complication. We change your whole set of medicines. You need them tomorrow. The mail-order people can't get them to you tomorrow. You can't use mail-order for people with AIDS and they know that." She said to me, "This smells like kickback." And I went, "They would have never did that." And then she said to me, "You know I had to call there and ask them why they had no presence—," I'm trying to think what it was. It was a meeting to talk about something to do with one of the rules in the Department of Welfare here in the city, I can't think of what it was. But she was trying to get them to attend, and she was trying to show them that, you know, "You guys used to do this in the past, you would act as advocates, and there was always somebody at these state planning meetings, these meetings that were talking about health care, but you guys aren't attending anymore and things are changing. Aren't your clients complaining? Well they were, but—." And so even the services in these large agencies have changed. They're not the activists they used to be. But their client population now mostly is eighty, ninety percent African American. And so that angers me. But what I wanted to do was I wanted to go back for just one second and to tell you why I really came into all of this. It had nothing really to do with my background. I remember saying to Rashidah after I said, "You know, I'll do anything to help you," I said to her, "And I want to tell you this: I'm a preacher. I grew up in the church and I know this is what God wants me to do." I said, "Rashidah, I know it." Well that whole other side of it caused me a whole lot of other drama. You know, people in

the church stopped talking to me. Churches that I preached at for years, I couldn't preach at no more. You know, "You messing with them faggots and that AIDS stuff." And all I knew is that people—black people—were dying, and they were dying alone and they were dying poor, and that wasn't right. And that everybody deserved hope. I don't give a shit who you was, I really believed that you had the right to have hope. And so that's really why I went to BEBASHI, because the educational things didn't start first. What we really did first, Rashidah and I, was, people who found out from their doctor or from the hospital that they had AIDS, the only place they could call were the white gay agencies. When they found out BEBASHI was around, whether we wanted to or not, those were the calls we got. (crying voice) "My husband just got diagnosed and I don't know what I'm going to do." And so we ended up going to houses, comforting families, trying to get them into the system, doing those kind of things. That was the ministry for me, to bring in hope. And I was able, because we were independent, to intertwine spiritual messages with what I was doing and read scriptures to the families and pray with them and that kind of stuff. And I don't know how many guys I sat with as they died in Jefferson because the priest or the chaplains wouldn't come in the room. And I remember the guy that said he wanted to die in his red dress and blond wig and the Catholic priest flipped. He was like (panicked voice), "I-I-I don't know what to do with that." I said, "I'm fine," and I remember going in and telling the guy that, "If I was you, I wouldn't wear them black shoes with that, you really should wear the gold ones," and busted out laughing. He said, "Reverend, are you saying—?" I said, "Jesus loves black heels, pumps, is what he likes." And so I would do stuff like that with them, and then I would be very serious letting them know what love really meant. That it didn't see the same way humans did, and that you'll feel it, you'll really understand it. And I share this

when I go and speak in churches all the time, that I remember there wasn't one time that I didn't feel the same thing in that room, the atmosphere, that I felt with ninety-year-old women who never drank. There was no difference. I felt the same exact thing. And almost the same answers. Those guys crying, and some of them talking about they could see Jesus and "I can't believe God loves me like this," and "Oh my God," and but that was what I wanted to do. I wanted people to know that no matter what you've experienced, that wasn't what life really was. That there was love in the world, there were people who wouldn't know you and not related to you, that could carry you, and I really wanted them to understand that. And to understand that God wasn't who—I don't care if it was your grandmother—presented him as. That's not who he is. If that were true, all of us would be dead. And that is what kept me excited and kept me going. And so I was able to marry my human service skills and my skills in spirituality and skills as a preacher to do the work. That's how we got into the churches and doing things across the country. So Rashidah brought the infectious disease structure and public health stuff, and I brought the—she had no idea about social work and human services, and especially children and youth, and the church side. And I didn't know about Islam. So here you had this Islamic teacher and this Baptist preacher who came to do AIDS. And that story people never really heard.

DAN ROYLES: So it sounds like you didn't have much experience with the white gay downtown community because that racism was very surprising to you. What was it like being black and gay in Philadelphia?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Well, this is what I would say to people: I don't know any of my friends that ever called themselves gay. And I remember a big fight I had one time. Me and

Rashidah were in California, and it was with the National Black Gay and Lesbian something. And we were the largest agency in the country, we were on the president's commission and all over the news. So they decided I needed to come out. And if I didn't—I had a slot to speak at the conference—they weren't going to let me speak. And I remember going through and telling them, "Fuck no, I ain't coming out." And I said to them, "First of all, I think it's intrusive for somebody to even ask you if you're gay. You want to know who I'm fucking and how I'm fucking them? Can I ask you that? Why the fuck would you ask me some shit like that? And why would you present yourself like that? 'Hi, I'm Tim and I'm gay.' 'Hi, I'm Tim and I suck dick. I eat toes.' What the fuck would you do that for?" That was me, that was my personal opinion. I said, "I don't think that promoting my sexuality as a feature of who I am should be in the front. 'Hi, I'm Curtis. And it ain't none of your business who I fuck. Is there anything else you want to know?' Because I'm not politically gay, I don't live in a gay community, most of my friends are not gay. So according to you, I'm not." And when I got into the community and found out what was going on, oh damn no, I don't want to be. I don't want to even be black and gay, because you all let this shit go on. I can't believe that you all ain't had no riot or protest, and this has been going on this long. And most of the guys that I grew up with never considered themselves gay. Some got married, and you know, they did, and then they stopped and they didn't. But what I always knew was, I would be judged for being an African American man before I would for being gay. And then I said to myself, "That's who I am." And what I do—still to this day when people ask me—it's none of your damn business what I do. What do you want to know about me? If you want to know how I feel about gay issues, I'll tell you just like I would about anything else, if you want to know how I feel about that. But what I do, that's not what motivates me

to think and feel like I do. That's historical. You know, I come from people who cared about everybody. That has nothing to do with that. A friend of mine said to me, "Curtis, but you have all those young people that could see you as a role model." So I'm not now? What the fuck are you talking about? But I am. You don't even live in the hood. Y'all get money and everybody moves. They see me every fucking day. What I pride myself on most is, when my friends come to this neighborhood, I always say to them, "Walk me to the store," because I just want them to see everybody go, "Hey Mr. Curtis," "Hey, oh hey." I said, "This is my neighborhood. This is what I wanted." And I'm sure people know what I do. But that's not why they like me. They like me because of these other things that I do for them, and that I won't allow them to even go there. And I try to work that out. So in the hood, what I knew growing up was, there were the guys that we called feminine. And it was strange. They teased them not a lot, just kind of teased them. But they were still part of the community. And I'll give you an example. A friend of mine, Tom, who was in the neighborhood. I guess Tommy must have been with every one of the little gang boys in the neighborhood. But as each of them had kids, Tommy would wear them out about being a father. And one of the things he would make sure they did was, all of their kids' birthdays or Christmas, he would make them buy them toys, have big parties, and he would help them plan. When Tommy died from AIDS, and I'll never forget this, I went to preach his funeral, and I was standing there looking out, and I mean the neighborhood was devastated. The girls who were going with these guys were devastated because he was the one that kept their men responsible to them and their kids. This gay man now, that they'd been screwing since they were little. All of this dynamic is going on, and I said, "Somehow I've got to let them know that this is nice, this is good, this is beautiful, but there's something else. Tommy got AIDS, y'all. And y'all

got to think about that. He did half this audience, and y'all did all of them women." And slowly it started to break out in the neighborhood, you know, this one died, that one died. But it wasn't what people would think it would be. Tommy wasn't beat up, abused, and all that. Somehow he found a place in the neighborhood. He had a function, I guess is what it was. Everybody knew if your little kid is having a birthday party, go to Tommy. He's going to do the house, he's going to do the toys. The guys even knew, I remember them avoiding him sometimes. "Man, I don't want to hear that shit today. I've got to walk across the street." And they would say, "I don't want to hear that faggot talking to me about how I've got to do my fucking kids." But he would, and they would listen. And they would listen to him. So when I think about being gay, you had more trouble when you went out of your neighborhood, to neighborhoods where people didn't know you. I do know that in high school there was a group of guys who—they were like prisoners, they were sixteen and seventeen, so I remember them, well I won't say his name—but they caught them, and they were raping boys. And it was so funny nobody looked at them negative. Like, I remember a guy they raped, like people teased him, but nobody kind of looked at these guys like, you're raping boys? Nobody did that. And it was ironic. Now, I think it was right after high school, in the group there was about four of these guys. Two of them actually ended up not marrying, but going together with these transsexuals, which was really interesting. And the other two ended up in prison. But I guess in the seventies and eighties, if you were an integral part of your community, you wouldn't have a lot of problem at home. It was when you left your neighborhood that you would. But some of it wasn't teasing to be afraid of. This was the stuff we learned at BEBASHI, was almost like birds and courtship practices, what African American and other minority groups did to court and to get with each other.

And so sometimes you could go out of your neighborhood and be confronted very aggressively by somebody, and think that they want to beat you up, but actually they don't. They actually want to have sex with you, but they don't know how to express it. And that was just strange. And we had guys that would tell us, "They pushed me—and hit me upside my head, and was grinding on me. All at the same time. And then I got his phone number." And I was like, "Oh wow, that's interesting." And so it made me think. This is what we understood at BEBASHI, and it still exists today. African American male sexuality, we don't talk about it enough with our sons and explain it. And as you get older, you definitely don't talk about it. And because of that, it makes discussions around things like AIDS and other things hard to have. But we did. We found ways to do it in high schools, even in elementary schools, to talk about same-sex behavior and urges, and those kind of things so that kids didn't grow up with what I saw as kind of confused, "You punched him because you wanted to feel him? Whoa, that's not good," kind of thing. But we didn't see the kind of prejudice I heard talked about in white gay men. The choir director at most churches was gay. The person who made all the prom gowns in the neighborhood, everybody knew him, Mr. Kenny. Everybody would go him for fabulous gowns. The hairdressers, they were my mom's friends. That kind of thing. Mr. Johnny might have been older and a little feminine, but he was the one you go to get to decorate. And we had to respect those people, you know, as kids we couldn't tease them. Our parents made us respect those people. And we never knew when we were younger, we never thought about it sexually, we just thought that there were people who act more like men, you know women, and men who act more like women. I mean, I was eighteen before I knew that men had sex and they did stuff. "What? That happens? You can do that? I didn't know, they should say this more." I was

getting ready to say something, but I remembered we're on the tape. So we didn't see it the same way. So I think that's why in the black community it was easier to step to compassion for people with AIDS, because we knew them. They weren't distant people. These were people that you came to love. It wasn't just that they made dresses. I remember the guy who did my sister's prom dress and how she walked out of there smiling. She had short hair and he made her feel like she was the most beautiful thing that ever happened. And I remember my mom thanking him and giving him extra money. So they did more than just do your hair and those kind of things, they provided an important function in the community. They raised some of us. So I guess when I went to look at my own sexuality, I didn't have to put a name on it, and I guess because I was fortunate of how we grew up. Nobody ever demanded it. What people did demand in my neighborhood was demand that your character come forth first. They didn't care what the hell you did. Were you good people? Am I safe with you, if I fell are you going to pick me up? Whether you got a wig or high heels on, it don't matter to me. And so what we had to concentrate on, being younger, was who we were going to be on the inside. And that's why I think, like I said before, that helping thing has always been here. But it wasn't a struggle, and I think that's what helped us understand AIDS at BEBASHI, because the framework, how we approached education around AIDS in the community had to be different because homosexuality was different. It wasn't the same way, there was no black gay community. There was no gayborhood in the black—you lived in the neighborhood with everybody else. And so the institutions people were connected to were not gay institutions, they were traditional. How do you crack a traditional institution that doesn't recognize that this behavior exists, but knows it does, and talk about it comfortably? That was some complicated shit. How are we going to talk

about homosexuality in church when everybody knows it is, but we can't. I was a preacher, so I knew the language. Rashidah used to go, "Go talk that 'church-ese' stuff, because I don't know how to do that." And so I would go and do that, and we were able to get the churches involved and see those different kind of messages. But that original question you asked was really the main thing that we had to deal with at BEBASHI was how the black community saw homosexuality, because if we didn't recognize it and figure out strategies of how to not so much get around it but deal with it, that we weren't going to be able to do this epidemic. You could not talk about that and talk about AIDS, you had to talk about sexual behavior, especially same-sex behavior. And so we were able to help people come to grips with that, you know, men is fucking, y'all, each other. In the church. Seriously. The deacon and the pastor, seriously, and we need to do something. Otherwise Sunday, y'all, ain't nobody in the choir. And so I think what did it was when a couple of very prominent churches lost their chairman of their deacon board, which was like the vice president in the church, and the pastors got scared and would call us at night. I remember the politicians, very well, they would call us at night and say, "My son just got diagnosed with AIDS, and I don't want nobody to know." And we'd have to go to the house and we couldn't say anything, and try to help them through the process without it getting in the media and all of that kind of stuff. But that knowledge of the culture of the black community and the knowledge of the culture of the gay community, looking at issues around homosexuality, issues around health care and those things, it made it harder for us to construct this message. But we knew that we could. Rashidah used to always say, "We did this before, in the sixties, when we had to. To get the right to vote and other things, we did this, Curtis, we can. Even though we don't have an organized, consistent network anymore like we did in the sixties, culturally those

systems still exist, we just have to tap into them." And so that's what we began to do. I was looking at that book today and I was looking at one of the reports, and I was going, "Damn." And I remember the days where we would speak three and four places in a day. With the kids in the morning at some place, medical professionals in the afternoon, at night go talk in a church, in the morning we're in DC testifying at a hearing and in the afternoon you're back talking to kids in the high school about AIDS, and then you're training the city fire workers. And I went, "Goddamn, did we do a lot." And we always had to do it in this message about this cultural context, this targeted, specific education that we had. It's like, we had to keep pushing to say, if it's not targeted, if it's not specific—even the subgroups of the target group were important. Women who are middle class, you could not give them the same message that you could women that were poor.

DAN ROYLES: How would those messages be different?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Because their social interactions were different. How they related to men, where they met men, those kind of things were different. What they saw as important or what they saw as proper or good was all different. There were certain words that if you would use with one group, you would totally turn them off and they wouldn't hear, as opposed to another group. The places that you'd find them at. If you wanted middle class women, they probably wouldn't be at the beauty salons during the week, the salon owners are coming to them in their homes. So we set up parties for them in their homes, and the middle-class women, that's what they were doing. They were doing nail parties and hair stuff. And then for the other women we would go into the beauty salons and take a beauty salon over on a Saturday and maybe offer half off of anything you would get, and

we'd run videos, and food, and those discussions. But we realized that they were distinctively different in their culture, music, food. And that if the messages were not targeted, they actually wouldn't hear them. This is what they would do: "Oh, they're talking about them." And so it meant, "That's their group, it's not us." But that's what had been happening with AIDS: "Oh, that's them sissies, they don't mean anything about us." And so we had to get them first to pay attention that it's not just them, and that it is all of us, even you. So we had to show the face of AIDS in a variety of different ways. The church lady with the hat, yes it's you. Your husband is doing boys on the weekend, okay? And I know you don't think deacon so-and-so, and you're seventy, but momma we've got to tell you this. But you couldn't tell her the same way. You needed a church lady in a hat to tell her, and throw some scriptures in and give an old story about greens and cooking something, and that kind of thing. And then when you go to the prisoners, I had to do the thug thing. We would do the prisoner release programs and we had to go, (deep voice) "Yeah, man—." I did those for a while until we hired a friend of mine, he had been in Graterford for twenty years, came out, changed his life around, became an excellent father. He was the one to talk to that particular group of men, and nobody could do them like he could. Because he could openly talk about homosexuality in prisons, and I couldn't even do that one. I could talk about what happened in the hood on the street, and you might get drunk and that, but he could talk about prevention in lock-up facilities. So we had to develop messages for all of these subgroups of this targeted education, and then find the proper people to communicate those messages, and train them and get them in. That was a challenge, because even though it was a scholarly approach to education and was known, I was verklempt that educators didn't use it. I just thought, "Man, they know this?" I said, "Why aren't they teaching school

like this?" And that just floored me. But what I did find out quickly was the people who did know it and were using it were advertisers. Goddammit, they had it down. And they got better at it. Today they're really good. Like last week I said to a friend of mine about the impact of culture and was relating it to what we're talking about now, how we had to target those messages. And I said, "I would constantly go to places and say that you can't ignore this culture, it is power." It's more powerful than the Greeks. And people would go, "Oh no, no no no," and I said, "It's called Mickey D's now. They got that from us. We've been calling it Mickey D's since I was five." We truncate and short everything because we've always said in the hood, white people take too long to explain shit and it's always complicated. Look, it's just Mickey D's. And now, they agree with us. Everything is short. When I heard the president say, "You go, girl" and snap his finger, I knew it. You hear it all over the country, it's like normal now, across classes. That's the power of culture. And that's what we had to talk about with AIDS, that you could see Asian kids listening to rap and turning their hat backwards and plaiting their hair in China. That's power. You're going to ignore that in the delivery of services? That's foolish. And so for years after BEBASHI I made a fortune doing those kind of trainings all across the country, helping agencies realize that part of the problem with recidivism and those things was that you were ignoring a dominant culture and that your clients know who Weezy is. You don't have to like his music, but damn, don't you know who Lil Wayne is? Come on, you know, just turn on the news every now and then. It really is important to who you serve. You don't have to like it, you don't have to promote it, but you do have to be aware of it. And you do have to say that it's important to them. You might not think so. So that's a lot of what BEBASHI was. We were not just activists. We were not just people who were hollering about, black people need their fair

share. We were educated. We were thinkers. Rashidah was academically trained. Even though I wasn't academically trained, I had been mentored by some of the smartest people in the country in child psychology and education. One of the things I didn't mention was I remember working for Dr. Victor Satinksy. He had something called the Satinsky Institute for [Human Resource Development]. His school was specific to socially and emotionally disturbed children with IQs above 135. These were kids who were smart as shit and plucky as I don't know what. But that wasn't his background. He's famous for inventing something called the Satinsky clamp. It's a surgical instrument. That was his claim to fame. But his passion was educating special [education] kids. And so I worked with people like that, and when the feds didn't ask us for research, we told them we needed it. They would give us money and never ask us to prove that what we did was effective. We wouldn't let them give us money without a research project attached to it, and we would have to fight them for the extra money to attach the research. This is government. That actually, in the midst of this epidemic, it actually made me change from Democrat to Republican. Because Republicans, they were the only people who asked for accountability. Democrats never did. They would just scream and holler that you need money, you need money, you need money, you need money, and just throw it at them. And they didn't care if you didn't know how to manage it, they didn't care if you wasn't going to get it five years later, but the Republicans were different. They wanted you to first prove you could do what you said you could do, and have you ever done it in the past? And if we give you the money, along the way you're going to have to prove that you're doing it. And after we stop giving this money to you, how are you going to keep on doing this? I was like, "That's what I'm talking about, y'all. That's what we should have been asking for." And so we started to attach research. That's how we got

involved with Villanova, and St. Joe's, and University of Penn. And we wanted to let people know that even though you'll see us in the hood, I'm in my jeans in the hood, I'm talking slang and all this kind of stuff, that's not who we are. We're intellectual. We thought this stuff out. We sat down with epidemiologists. We had some of the best. Dr. Helene Gayle and Dr. Howard Stevenson from Penn. We had some really notable people that sat with us and talked with us and strategized. We weren't just angry. And we were willing to give up anything. Rashidah broke up her damn marriage. I didn't have no damn relationships. You couldn't. It tore apart our families. She went through it. They wouldn't let her in the mosque to pray because she was "messing with them faggots," as they said. I went to preach and I remember the guy grabbing the back of my coat and said somebody had just told him that I did work with the sissies. In the middle of me preaching. I mean, we went through hell, but we wouldn't give up. I remember when I was the only preacher that, when drag queens would die from AIDS, I'd preach their funeral. Nobody else would. And now I'm a star because of it. Time has moved on. So now my preacher friends say, "That Curtis, man, you know he always did that stuff." Yes, what He told us to do—anybody. I don't know who y'all heard from, but I was told that we were supposed to love anybody, and especially the least of them. So we really wanted people to understand that this epidemic was not what it was perceived to be, and we wanted people who were in a position to help—politicians and people in the community—to understand that this is not a knee jerk reaction of activism. That even if you want to help, that you have to sit down at the table and you have to bring something. You can't just say that your brother died and you really care about people with AIDS. That's nice, and we can get you to deliver cookies. But we need somebody with a social work degree to build some systems. And it didn't go that way after a long time. It

didn't go that way. The fights we had with the NAACP national, the Urban League, and Black Caucus. Rashidah and I didn't talk a lot of stuff for years, just out of sheer embarrassment, that we didn't want to embarrass them. But I remember when we couldn't even get AIDS on the agenda at the Congressional Black Caucus weekends. Couldn't even get it on the agenda. I mean, the numbers were through the roof. They didn't want to talk about that. The black politicians we went to, that literally told us, and I would never name who, but literally said to us, "You let them faggots die. I don't care." And we had to say to them "I'm going to pull out the numbers for you. It is not the faggots dying. All these junkies live in your neighborhood. These are your constituents, and they're dying. Your prejudice is keeping you from servicing the people you're supposed to. And yes, if you give them money, the faggots going to get some too." I mean, stuff like that that we heard that we could not believe, even in our own community. But in the words of the preachers in the beginning, it was God. And they were serious about that. It was God who was doing this because they was homosexual. They were serious. And so when they did come in, they came chasing the money. And we had to fight for a while to keep our grants from other people. And they would say, "You all just want to own it." And we would say, "No, we just have experience, and you don't have none, and you're not going to do the work. And yes, the government will give you money because they still won't ask for an evaluation. They'll give it to you, they'll give you three hundred grand, and you won't do shit with it." And what they were looking for was—a lot of places, churches included—were looking for ways to supplement their decreasing budgets. So you get a grant, so now that person, they're going to pay half their salary through a multiple fund account and those kind of things to keep theirself afloat. But I think when other African American agencies and minority agencies began to be involved,

they went for the money. And they looked at us and other groups that had been doing the work around the country, in Atlanta, San Francisco, and Chicago almost as the enemy, because we would say straight up, "You don't have the experience, you're going to do more harm than good." So, I look at Philly now. There's no condom distribution. It's like we don't have to. But that's the basics. We always believed that from the day we stole that box of condoms. Like, when they talk about the basics, I mean, they're screwing now. Like right after school, thousands of kids are screwing, I'm serious, without condoms. So what we used to do, when BEBASHI was at its height, we had transportation hubs. We would pick the places in the city where at least three or more high schools intersected on their way home. Broad and Olney, Fifty-second and Market, Fifteenth and Market, Broad and Erie, and Hunting Park. We would have two outreach workers and a boom box. Turn the music on, the kids are going to gravitate, and just stand there and pass out condoms, and they're coming by the thousands. Just pass them out. Every Friday and Monday. And then we went up to three a week. That shit should still be going on. There should never be a chance where black gay men meet, that somebody ain't doing this. At the door when you take your money, I'm giving you a condom. It is unfair for this whole new group of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-old black gay men to come into a community of black gay men that is 80 percent infected and nobody says nothing. So even the guys that Rashidah and I know from COLOURS and those agencies, I look at them and go, "Y'all know I ain't got nothing to say to y'all. Y'all ain't even doing the basics." To pass out condoms on a corner doesn't take a major grant. That's nothing. But again, it's those same feelings that I remember hearing my mother and them say: "It don't take nothing to feed nobody. You could hand a hot dog out your damn window. You ain't got to have no meeting." She used to hate when they used to

talk about, "Well we need to meet about it, we're going to open up a soup kitchen," and my mother would say, "To hell with them, I'm going to get me a bag of chicken and pass it out on the damn corner. Because that's what they'll do because they don't really want to." And I think it was—was it my mom?—she used this quote, "With every bid for freedom, someone tells us 'Wait.'" I think it's Langston Hughes. She would say, "Don't ever wait. Don't ever wait. You go ahead and do what you have to do. Let them have the meeting, and you go out and do the work." And so that's kind of what Rashidah and I did. I worked for seven years, I didn't get a salary, I lived on food stamps. I remember the first three, Rashidah and I, we shared her food stamps. We had nothing. I was sleeping on somebody's couch because I had to give myself to this full time, and so I couldn't work at another job. And she finally worked out a deal with the health department, where they actually would pay her to do BEBASHI stuff if she did this other stuff for them around AIDS. And seven or eight years, we didn't have a dime. We would be in Washington at these big meetings, taped shoes, going, "I am so hungry, I hope they have snacks." (laughs) And we're loading up our pockets with this stuff. But we believed we were called to it. I swear, to us it was more spiritual than anything. We really believed that this is what God had chose us to do. And I remember the day when I was done. And I said to Rashidah, "Well, I'm going to go back and do my stuff now." And she said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm going back to church." And she goes, "For real?" And it was really hard. It was like divorcing somebody. We went through it, we really went through it. Because we had spent a very significant portion of our productive years, our thirties like this, every day, fighting the same things in our personal lives, with our families, with our friends, and nobody believing what we believed. That these people have value and worth and it wasn't right that somebody didn't tell them. And

it cost a lot, it really cost a lot. Sometimes I look back. Well, I used to, I don't anymore. I used to think that I was foolish. But I look back with so much pride now. The reason why I really want to do this is my grandkids, is that I want them to be able to later on go, "Look what Pop Pop did." And to encourage them to do something significant. In my church it's a line I say to the members, that if you're not actively involved in the life of another person, you can't validate your existence on Earth. You don't have a reason to be here. And I really believe that. So when I look back on that stuff, I look back with pride. If we hadn't have done what we did, AIDS in black America would be worse. And it wasn't just us, but it wasn't a large group. There were maybe twenty of us around the country, and we all knew each other. And that's what made us so strange. We couldn't believe that this small group of people are the only people that were getting this, and were willing to do something. So we were the largest, but there were BEBASHIs in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, and LA.

DAN ROYLES: Who were the people?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Sandra MacDonald was in Atlanta. It was a husband and wife in Baltimore, I can't remember their names. It was a husband and wife team, and they had a non-profit. In Chicago, it was a black gay men's group, and the same in San Francisco. That was what's-his-name, he became the head of the National Minority AIDS Council. But they were a black gay men's group. Oh no, that was National Black Lesbian and Gay Caucus. And even out of those groups there were only like two or three. I remember the first time we met in DC, and we all met each other. I'm trying to think of who brought us all together. It might have been Helene. I think Helene Gayle had just got to the CDC then, and I think she brought us together to say that you guys need to talk, and I think that Rashidah had finally

convinced NIH that they needed an advisory committee, a national advisory committee. And they pushed it to the CDC, and I think that's how Helene brought us together. And we met, and that's where all hell broke out from there. That's where all of us got on government review committees, and that's where we got to testify before a lot of the Senate committee hearings on AIDS. We really got to release the funding in terms of minority AIDS. I didn't even know that there existed an Office of Minority Health. I had no idea. That's when we got linked into them, got tons of money out of them. But that released that whole era. Now mind you, all of this regular Philadelphia stuff is going on at the same time. We're flying around the country like we're crazy. I mean, you could be in California in the morning and back home at night and then in the morning, you got to go back out to Nevada, and stuff like that. Because we were trying to do the national stuff and the local, because we really did understand that the money that we needed to do local stuff was going to have to come through NIH, CDC, to the city, and to the health department, and that we were going to need access to tons of money. So it made sense. And that if we didn't shape the agenda nationally, that money would never come down. So that's when we started doing a lot of that, and then out of that came international stuff. When people heard what we were doing in Philadelphia with AIDS, the Africans started calling us and saying, "Can you teach us?" And we said, "Nobody can do this in Africa!" And they said, "You don't understand. The village is just like the hood." I'll never forget when the guy said that. He said, "Black people are the same everywhere. And the village is just like the hood." He just wanted to know the structure. He said, "I don't need to know the language, just the structure." And we talked to him for hours about targeted, specific education, what things you add to the presentation, what things you highlight, and how to make them educational, and how you have to make

the cultural connection first. So, how we played music, and how when people came in the room, the music that was playing made them comfortable and able to hear certain messages. And they got it. And I remember going to Cameroon and watching my first presentation in the village, and I was so proud of them. I was like, "Oh my god, look, they did it!" And they were doing plays. They did these little plays, because that's what was the culture of the village, they were used to that. But how they did them and who the characters were, and the language they used, all of that structure they got from us. So the next thing we knew, we were international. I think the biggest thing was when the federal government actually asked us to sit down with the ANC and at that time Nelson Mandela was still in jail, Walter Sisulu was the head of the ANC at that time. And what they had done is—it was very impressive—they knew that they were going to win their freedom. So what they did was, the ANC was sending people to the United States to be educated to take cabinet positions. So they sent the people that were being trained for the Ministry of Health to BEBASHI through our federal government. So we got this request from the White House and something else to talk to these people. "Oh, we're so excited, the ANC, they're coming." And so we sat down and talked to them. One of the things we were really proud of was telling them about—what was the drug? The first drug they came out with for AIDS.

DAN ROYLES: AZT?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: AZT. And we were telling them to not let them dump that on y'all. We had talked to a physician at Kaiser Permanente, African American physician, we called him Dusty. Dr. Lawrence Sanders. I think he's the health commissioner in Atlanta now, and he might be a good person to talk to. DeKalb County Health Commissioner is what he was.

He had began to talk to us about what he was seeing in patients, and he believed that the protocol of megadoses and turning them down was ridiculous. He thought that they should go the opposite way, and give small doses and turn them up and see what happens, so that your eye won't fall out and all that kind of stuff. So that's what he was doing with his patients, and they were stabilizing much faster. And he was trying to do research around, does this disease and the medications affect different groups differently, African Americans, women, those kind of things. And was seeing some differences but had done no formal kind of research. And so we said to them, this is what one doctor's seeing, don't let them push AZT on you by the millions as a cure. And they held on for a long time. I remember on the news when the international community wore them out when I think Bill Clinton had negotiated some medication for them and they rejected it. And I said, "Whoa, they're still holding on, they're still holding on to the ideology that we had told them about disease, and to remember that the research hasn't really been done extensively enough, and how do these medications affect different population groups, what are the side effects in different population groups. So they sent them to us, and we began to train them in policy and administrative structure, how you administer programs that do outreach, client services, how do you link with medical institutions, what should be the role of government, the role of community groups, those kind of things. I remember we were very, very proud of that work that we did. In addition to that I remember when Walter Sisulu came to Philadelphia to raise money, and at the time, apartheid wasn't a big thing. And I remember having to get a friend of mine, a woman at my church, to give me a credit card so that I could rent two Lincolns, and me and a friend of mine act as a chauffeur. The city wouldn't recognize him, none of the black politicians wouldn't send cars. We had to go get him at the airport, treat

him like a king, our church, and take him around. And the places he was going. He went to the Academia House, I don't know who these people were, but he left with checks. I had never seen checks in this amount before. I mean, I was like, "Oh my god." We went to the carpenters' union hall. The carpenters' union gave him money. But we didn't go to no African American organizations, no churches, and they were really scared of that, I don't know why. They were really scared of that stuff. But we were there in the forefront, and still have those ties to this day. A friend of mine in South Africa always says—this shouldn't be on tape—"If you really need to get away, we can hide you." (laughs) He's always telling me, "Curtis, you've got friends. We can put you somewhere and they'll never find your ass." So they always have told me and Rashidah that we're friends of the country, always welcome. So we took pride in that progression from this local community group, and being able to have an impact on AIDS not only in the country, but around the world and so I guess too, that's why it's important that this be told. When my mom died, and going to look at her family history and stuff, that's why when you called, I realized how important this was. Because, and I talk about this at church a lot, the power of individuals as opposed to groups, that we still keep trivializing that and we can't. And I use it as a way to encourage people to say that, imagine the things that you've done for people. Well imagine if you weren't here, or you were drug-addicted, and you didn't do that. Then they wouldn't be who they are, and those people that they affected, and so how important it is that we pay attention to who we are and understand that it's connected to a lot of people, people that we won't even meet for years. But it's important. And like I was saying at the beginning, I really wish that I really gave a shit about Britney Spears' weave, I really do. I really wish that I could just turn this shit off one day and get excited that the Sixers are in the playoffs and let's have a

tailgate party. But can't, because I live in the hood and I keep seeing this shit every day. And still, it's not three thirty yet, but my doorbell will start ringing at three. I still tutor, this little boy up the street on special [education], the little girl around the corner, three times a week, doing math and stuff like that. Still speak around the corner at the high school once a month for assembly, and the church, we're doing nine thousand things because again, it's in my DNA, and somebody has to.

DAN ROYLES: Did you go anywhere else in Africa besides Cameroon?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: (pauses and laughs) I'm being cautious. Yes, I did, and I can't say where, because I didn't have a passport and I was specifically told not to go anywhere. But we moved. We went around. And when I got there, I didn't know the political structure of Cameroon, and I really didn't understand that it's more like, I guess, an oligarchy. There's families that have been dominant families in Cameroon for years, and so that's where the political power's set, and I just happened to meet, I was nice to, somebody that was in the family. So they showed me how to illegally transport across the border to other countries. They said, "You can't come here and not go to these places, they're right here." And so they did, they took me. After a couple of days, I left. Because when I went, I think I went with Helene's brother. I went with a group from the CDC, so we were kind of official government people, and that wasn't good sometimes when you're overseas, to be with that group, so I kind of separated from them, and moved out of the hotel, went into the village, and I met these people. And they started to take me around, and I was able to see Africa in a way that tourists never got a chance to. And to see artifacts. I can say this on tape. But I saw stuff that they were saying to me in two countries, that there were things that they would never let

the wide world see, because they were very conscious of how much they had lost. The other thing they told me about was the recycled artifact movement, how governments purposely bury stuff for people to dig up because they want to give them the trash, and they want to keep the good stuff. And so they said a lot of stuff that we have in this country is stuff that's old, but it's useless, because the explanation they gave to me is, artifacts that were used in any ceremonies or rituals have no significance after the ceremony's over, and they throw them away. So they're meaningless to us—to them, but to tourists and stuff, they love it. So they said, "That's the shit we sell, and we sell it to them by the tons." I went into museums that were in caves in the ground, and I saw shit that I went, "Oh my god, I can't believe this." So that gave me a lot of hope, because that was real discouraging when I would go and I would see the amount of people on the planes that were taking shit out. Even in the eighties, they were buying up everything they could and just massively taking stuff out. And when I found that out, it was really interesting. What was more interesting was, it made me understand how important preservation of culture was to them. So when I started to talk about AIDS, they immediately got it, that if we don't do this, all of this is gone, will disappear. That this is the shit that'll kill us. That nothing else will have done it, but this. And none of that stuff you've hidden will mean shit. There will nobody to explain it, everybody will be dead. And so they got that, and they immediately understood that the message—they didn't know how to express it as "targeted" or "specific," but they knew that this message couldn't be universal. Because they did those workshops in the village, the plays and stuff like that, but I remember them creating presentations specifically for Islamic men and Islamic women. And then the presentations they did for the Christian men and women were altogether different. So immediately they got it, and what motivated them

was preservation of culture. There was one village in Cameroon I went to, and they took me to this giant stone. I mean, it was huge, it was maybe as big as two stories, and it had all these etchings on it. And the guy called this little boy who was three years old, and he said, "Watch this." And he said something to him and the little boy went up on the smaller rock on the side of this bigger one, and started putting his hand there. And he said, every kid here knows where his family began, from the eleventh century to today. And I went, "Goddamn, that's some powerful shit." They knew who they were, and they knew where they were and how important place was. So it helped me understand that in formulating those messages, that we were right on track with what we perceived as being the things to pay attention to in order to communicate something important. That this thing about culture and the preservation of culture, even if it's just recognizing that it exists, and it's a vehicle for the communication of important information. That this wasn't new to us, this was ancient. And it was almost like it fit. Like you had to do it with this group of people this way, or if you didn't, you wouldn't get the message across. And I think that's what working in Africa kind of did for us. It gave us the confidence that we were doing the right thing. Because it worked with black people everywhere. And then we found out it wasn't just black people. It worked with any minority group. Any group that you worked with, targeted specific education was really the hallmark, and it still is. And I think that's what we're not doing. The last time the president talked about AIDS, that's why he did good. Because he made that mandate that the money from now on will be split in half. Half for research, and half for prevention. We've been trying to get the feds to do that for thirty years, and we had to wait for Barack Obama to do it. And I thought that he wasn't really paying attention to AIDS in a way that I would like him to, minority AIDS. But when he did that, that was

probably the biggest move in African American AIDS in the last ten years.

DAN ROYLES: How was it before?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Maybe—it was slipping. Maybe sixty-forty, maybe even seventy-thirty. 70 percent of the money was research-oriented, and that's where the bulk of the money was. The research grants were for two, three, four million. Pharmaceutical companies were involved. It was where the money really was, the outcomes of those research projects. And it served a purpose, because the treatment needed to get better. But what was sad was how they were spending prevention money. There were no new innovations in prevention. But y'all have had innovations in education, period, in America. But no innovations in AIDS education? Well that doesn't make no damn sense. Somehow AIDS ain't on laptops or text messages? What the hell is going on? I don't understand that. Because you couldn't write those kind of creative grants. Because you couldn't get the money, it was all tied up in the research. And then the government wanted to go through this thing, they were trying to build, what do you call them, facilities. Pharmaceutical facilities, I forget what you call them, when they need to run a line of test drugs, and they were trying to build their own rather than use the ones at pharmaceutical companies, so all the money got tied up there. So the president finally said that it's fifty-fifty, which means that now you probably still have to fight, but now there's more money available for prevention. I don't want to do that anymore. Because I think that because AIDS isn't what it was before, it's a manageable disease, it's not a death threat, you can live, it'll be all right. Actually, if you have AIDS, you probably get the best health care in the country, better than most people. So for that it can be good, but I do think we still need to do education, but it

can be integrated into what we already do. It just has to be. And if anything, I think in the future that's what I will do. And the stuff I do now, I always integrate AIDS and invite other agencies in that do AIDS presentations and things like that because it's now more a part of a message of living, of just living skills. Because from the eighties to now, the neighborhood and even the structure of family, I think 75 percent of the kids in Philadelphia who are African American grow up without fathers. So you can't ignore that in presentation of messages. It speaks to who should say the message and how is it received. If a man says it to a certain group, is it better perceived, so it brings all these new issues about education, period. So what I've been trying to do is to just integrate the message of sexual responsibility into any messages we give about life skills, and the general message of acceptance of other people. It doesn't matter what you do or how you do or who you do, so the messages are not so AIDS specific, but they're still important to integrate into anything you do. It's almost like AIDS isn't, in the African American community, people aren't as concerned as they would be. In terms of disease, it's cancer now that people are terrified of. And it's happening, that and heart disease, is happening to people younger. In the last week I've had [someone who was] thirty-five, had cancer, and was terrified. And Rashidah and I predicted that—that eventually you'd have to integrate the message. That's why we didn't want to do an AIDS agency, and we named it BEBASHI, because it wasn't going to be AIDS in the future, it would be some other stuff.

DAN ROYLES: You mentioned that ACT UP still failed to address the epidemic in the African American community. Are there any specific issues that they failed to address, or systems that they—?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: You know, one of the things that ACT UP was really good at besides calling attention to legislative or political issues, where legislation could take care of some things, whether it was local or state, what they were also good at is advocating for some of the policies, maybe that were in hospitals or in companies, that the companies didn't know how these policies affected this particular population. Some of them might have known. But they were good at identifying that and forcing people to change policy, whether it was how a person was admitted, what kind of insurance they needed. As the epidemic changed, they didn't care. I'll give you an example. A friend of mine, they were living in public housing, they were HIV positive, the public housing unit every winter would weather strip, so that your utility bill wasn't high. This particular winter, they didn't do it. But not only they didn't do it, they cut back on his subsidy for utilities. So over three months, his bill escalates. It's now a thousand dollars. So he can't pay, so he goes and asks an AIDS agency for help, and they had an emergency utility. But they said to him, "There's some requirements." One, you had to reduce the bill down to a certain amount of money, you could only do it one time, and once you did that, they could give you a grant. So he starts to try to reduce the bill down. Long story short, they ended up cutting his electricity off for a month. He got it back on, on his own. When he called to ask them about the grant program, they said to him he's not eligible. And this is what he said, he said, "Curtis, I find that ironic. You know why?" He said, "Something's strange, because the week before that, I called and I left a message on the tape about me being frustrated, and I said on the tape, 'When it was white gay men in here, y'all wouldn't have let this shit happen. But y'all let me sit in this damn apartment with no electricity for thirty freaking days.'" And didn't do nothing and he hung up. "And then when I call back now, you tell me I'm not even eligible for the program." And he said,

"That's when I just got off services." And he said, "I was so angry." And so what I said to him was, "That's the other story that nobody's talking about, that's what exists now." And I think it was a month prior to that, a mutual friend of ours had wanted to give some money to AIDS, and he said, "Curtis, where should I give the money? I'm going to write a check to BEBASHI." And I said, "Don't do that, they're actually not doing as much as I think they should be." I said, "If you really want your money to do something, give it to MANNA. They're doing what my momma and them did. While everybody else is arguing, they're feeding people, everyday. And there's no controversy in feeding, everybody get pork chops, and they don't care, and they're on time, and they're good." I said, "That's the only place that I know that you can be guaranteed that your money is doing what you wanted it to do. I don't know about any other place." So when this all went down, I got really angry because one of the things was, I gave him like three hundred and some dollars to help him with the bill, and I didn't really have that kind of money. And I said, that's about where it is. The advocacy is in, like before, the day-to-day living problems that come up for people with AIDS. Somebody needs to be talking to the electric company. And you can with the Pennsylvania Utility Commission. I did that before, you've got to be able to do that kind of stuff. Somebody should be talking to the hospitals and other institutions that impact, the Department of Welfare and all that. It doesn't happen anymore. And I know I can't fight, I don't feel like that right now. I can't do that. I have heart disease and I can't even get upset much no more, so I let a whole lot of stuff go. But I couldn't, I don't want to have that fight anymore. The only thing that I can do is say to people that I actually could show you how to do better by yourself. And that's a shame, that you'll do better accessing services on your own than you would through an agency. And if you have a network of friends and family

you could do very well, but even if you don't, you could probably fare better than you could with an agency. Just because there's not that much that they do. They don't really do the advocacy anymore. And that's why I can't understand this thing about testing. Because what's you're going to do is push people into those agencies, and it's not working out at all. And I don't know if we're ever going to see it. I mean, I don't think those agencies will be around much longer.

DAN ROYLES: Which agencies do you mean?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Any agencies that are AIDS specific, that that's all that they really do. It's going to be hard for them to exist as the disease normalizes more and more, and to secure the amount of funding. The government soon is going to integrate the services, so they're not going to give you that much money to just do that, when that social worker over there does it. So soon they'll integrate the services, and there won't be any need for specialized HIV and AIDS services, maybe outside of medical and those kind of things. So those agencies eventually will disappear just because of lack of funding. Some of the larger gay agencies, because that's not all they do, will always be around. Gay Men's Health Crisis, I think, will probably be here until my great grandchildren die, just because they do great work in the areas of health in general anyway and have a large system. But places like maybe ActionAIDS probably won't be around. BEBASHI, if they don't expand and start to do other stuff around sexual health. And all those agencies could morph to do something very important, especially with this coming generation whose libido is out of the goddamn ceiling. Oh, this is the perfect time to do sexual health and health-related information. Half the damn country's fat, they can't eat right. The smart move, if you just wanted to keep your

jobs and to just keep your basic structure, would be to morph into something integrated. But I don't think that a lot of agencies are going to be able to do that. And so they'll just disappear and treatment and services will probably be hospital based. But you know, now that I think back in the beginning I didn't think they should, but they probably should. Because it would have been easier for us to deal with and fight the hospital structure rather than something a lot wider. Because all they wanted was money. They just didn't want to give up money. They'd put a program in, but can you pay for it? We're not turning on the light, we're not giving you a room, you've got to bring every dime that you've got. And as long as you did that, you could take advantage of the other supports and the structure, and the accountability, which I think that's what these local agencies lost. They didn't professionalize fast enough. And so what got into the culture was, because I remember being at meetings and people being tense with each other, and then somebody finally admitting it's because he slept with his boyfriend. And how you know that this is not the community meeting of the bars getting ready to plan the local recreational festival, where it might be okay that you say kind of shit at a meeting, or even allow that sort of behavior to come into the atmosphere. That might be okay, but not here. This is professional, this is medical, psychological, how y'all bring that? And I think so much of that came in because in the beginning, like everybody, it was their friends, their lovers were dying, and they just wanted to do something. But we didn't need helpers, we needed professionals. And after the helpers came, we didn't know how to tell them that they couldn't be a part of it. And that was really hard. I remember the Ryan White Commission, and I did say it, that, "Listen, the requirement is not for you to be a member is not that your friend died from AIDS. Do you have a skill? Are you a social worker? Anything? Because we've got a list of shit we

need done. When we need cake baking—we'll call you. But right now we need a social worker and a PhD in such-and-such research. You know anybody?" And that happened in a lot of the agencies. How you got promoted was your service to the community. So you could be the head of a major AIDS agency that had no skill or background in social service or health care or anything. All it was is that your lover died and you was there everyday, and you wore the hospital out and made them give you that, and you spoke out in the paper, they had you in the paper a couple of times. But that didn't mean you had the skill. And as a result not only here, but across the country, they started indicting them. I think, Philadelphia Health Alternatives, when they indicted him—buying boots, and—I was so glad. Because they investigated us, BEBASHI, and we came up clean. No, the black people are not stealing the money. It ain't us this time. I was like, that's what y'all always do, y'all be looking at us. It was the one you never thought, with the boots and all of that stuff. But I think that our understanding that the structure had to be put together by professionals, then you bring in the volunteers, was really critical. Otherwise, we'd have never got that message out like that. God knows what we'd have been saying, but it wouldn't have been what we did, and we wouldn't have thought it out, we wouldn't have actually built curriculums and built trainings and had the don'ts and the dos. It wouldn't happen like that. And so I guess that's the thing that I'm really proudest of, and that I think that people misunderstood, because they only saw that part of us that did hoodies and talked in the hood, and they didn't understand that this came out of a whole thought process, and that we didn't just do that off the cuff, there's a method to that madness, trust me. And it can be evaluated, that kind of thing. And I'm a preacher, so we will talk for seven hours, until you tell us, "I've got enough." So at any time, you can.

DAN ROYLES: Do you have anything else that you want to say?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: No—I think that's it. Just people understanding. Just me being able to say those things, how hard that it was, the obstacles that we had, the prejudice that existed within the community, and where AIDS is now, and that we're set. The only thing that I would leave people with is that there's still room to integrate that message into anything that you're doing. You can't gather African American or poor people together and not talk about AIDS. I don't care what y'all doing. You have to integrate that message about sexual behavior, sexual responsibility, and you have to link it with the larger message of sexual responsibility. You cannot have kids and act like they're not yours. You can't do that. And those messages go together. And so that's my dream. Yeah, I think I did, I think I said everything I wanted to. The ideological stuff, how we both had hidden agendas, and we missed an opportunity for both of us to get something.

DAN ROYLES: You mean the white gay community—?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: —and the black community. That we both could have won. I believe as oddly as it is, that I don't know if it's directly because of AIDS, but I look at the health care system now and that's the stuff we were asking for around AIDS, that exists now.

DAN ROYLES: Like what?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Access to health care for the poorest of people, especially men. Single men, who weren't married, you were damn near on your own. If you weren't working, or if you worked and didn't have insurance, the access to health care centers, the

physicians that they put in health care centers, those kind of things. You know, Philly just got the other day, just announced I think it was sixty million to redo their health care centers. I was like, "Oh my god, I can't believe this. I can't fucking believe this." Because that would have saved the epidemic, way back then. But the healthcare centers were so fucked up, they couldn't deal with it. So those things are changing now. In-school health clinics. Just access to information and treatment, accessible. So that I have money, and that they're close to me. And those were things that we had been screaming about from the beginning of AIDS. And they're starting to take place. I don't know if it's so much AIDS related as it is just we're morphing and Obama came in with this agenda to finally say, "We're going to do something about health care. We've got to do something, it just can't stay like it is forever." And so the message for AIDS is real simple. We still don't do a good job with the basics. Just pass out condoms. Just talk to kids about having sex without wearing a condom. We will not still do that aggressively. And we're positioned now to do it better than ever. It's nothing—they show titties on TV. Oh, you can show a condom now, but they won't. They won't aggressively market the prevention of sexual diseases like they market sex. And it's like, but that was the problem before. We were the first people in the country to show a condom demonstration on TV. I remember the big thing, Channel 29, they couldn't believe we were going to do it. I said, "Oh yeah, and we're going to do it at somebody's house." Mrs. Fisher, she lived up in North Philly. She said, "Oh no, you can come to my house and do it." It was a big thing. There were no commercials on condoms, the networks were scared, and finally I think it was Fox said, "Okay, we'll do it, if we can find somebody that'll do it. If y'all will find somebody that'll do a condom demonstration on the TV, we'll film it, and if you find somebody to let them do it in their house." We found this lady in North Philly that said that

she had five sons, and all the boys in the neighborhood hung out at their house, and it was getting big, and, "You're damn right you can come to my house." And we came, and we used to have parties. We'd bring hot dogs and hamburgers and sodas and stuff, and we would sit around and talk about sex. I mean, just as wild and nasty as they wanted to, but we would educate them. And it would always end with us showing them how to use a condom, because they didn't. And then we'd give them condoms and lube and information packets.

DAN ROYLES: As part of BEBASHI.

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Um-hm. And it was a big thing to do that back in the day, and when Channel 29 showed that on the news, oh we got calls all over the country, good and bad. But now, shit. I can't understand. You can almost screw on TV, but they won't do this sexual disease prevention stuff. Not even the government. Not even condom companies. You used to see every now and then, like a Trojan commercial, and it's like, what the hell is wrong with us that we've relaxed the laws, even the unspoken moral shit that we had about sex and condoms is more relaxed. But we ain't aggressive. The door is open. You know, you could have dancing condoms on TV now, it wouldn't be shit. People would laugh. You don't see it. And that's my only thing, that it is easier now more than ever to do HIV education and nobody's doing it. But we're giving away all this money for AIDS. It doesn't make sense. So in my church there's a box of condoms in the back. It stays in the back. And I point out, it's Friday, Sunday, spring break coming up, I need to see everybody take one. Grandmom, you take some too and give them out to your grandkids, because I ain't going to tell that you're sneaking with the man around the corner, but take some. And you have to. Somebody has to keep saying—now I did say this summer that I was going to do the

lifesaver outreach, I would just do it on my own without no funding or nothing. And we used to do it with BEBASHI, we would dress the kids up in lifeguard stuff, shorts, big circle that said "Lifeguard" on it, and they would just take a boombox, stand on the corner, twenty, thirty minutes, and the kids would start coming. Pass out condoms, and go to another corner. And so I'm going to start to do that in this neighborhood this summer because what I noticed was, there were three little girls I saw pregnant between last summer and this. So that tells me that they're still doing it without condoms. And if nothing else, I'll do that starting this summer. But other than that, I'm doing community ministry, education and that kind of thing.

DAN ROYLES: Should we end there?

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Sure, you can, yeah. Is that enough? Is that okay?

DAN ROYLES: It's pretty good.

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Okay. All right.

DAN ROYLES: Thank you.

CURTIS WADLINGTON: Sure.

end of interview