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Interviewee: Dr. Eric Selvey

Interviewer: Jennifer Ott

Date: April 9, 2015

Place: Midtown Scholar Bookstore, 1302 North Third Street; Harrisburg, PA 17102

Transcriber: Jennifer Ott

*Note: For words highlighted in yellow spelling is not determined.

Abstract:

Dr. Eric Selvey was born and raised in Harrisburg, PA. He attended optometry school in Philadelphia, but returned to the Harrisburg area after graduating. In his interview he discusses his relationship with his mother and grandmother — and coming out to them in his younger days. He goes on to discuss his prolific activist work including his involvement with Lily White and Company, which raised thousands of dollars for local AIDS related organizations including SCAAN and other gay causes. Dr. Selvey worked on the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission, which fostered community relationships between the diverse Harrisburg populations. He was an active member of SCAAN, and also worked to create the local LGBT publication Crossroads. Dr. Selvey explains that he is most proud of his work on developing Harrisburg's Pride Festival, and his instrumental role in organizing the first Fall Achievement Benefit (FAB) in Harrisburg. The interview concludes with a discussion of changes the LGBT community has encountered and what challenges they continue to face.

JO: I'm Jennifer Ott and today is Wednesday April 9, 2015, and I'm interviewing Dr. Eric Selvey at the Midtown Scholar Bookstore in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for the Oral History Project of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania. Dr. Selvey, is it okay for me to ask you a few questions about your life?

ES: Yes.

JO: Could you please state your name and that you are willing to participate in the interview?

ES: I'm Dr. Eric Selvey. I am willing to participate in this interview.

JO: Can you sign this consent form for me?

ES: Sure. [Signs form] I have to laugh. You say a few questions, like what's — what's a few? Just sign it for right now?

JO: Just a page front and back. Yep, just your signature where it says —

ES: Down at the bottom?

JO: interview — narrator.

ES: Thank-you.

JO: That's a doctor signature.

ES: Yeah, that's it. Absolutely. [Laughing]

JO: Thank-you very much.

ES: You're welcome.

JO: Okay, if at any time you want the recording to be stopped just let us know and we'll do that and if there's any questions you don't want to answer, just let us know and we'll move on.

ES: Okay.

JO: Okay. Alright, so we'll begin with — Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

ES: I'm from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and I went through the Harrisburg School District, which, yea — school district. I then went to HACC [Harrisburg Area Community College] for two years, and then I graduated with a —[coughs] excuse me — I graduated with an Associate in Arts degree in Biology. Then I went to Elizabethtown College for two years — Yea E-Town— Bachelor of Science in Biology, and then I went to the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia and picked up another Bachelors of Science degree in Biology and then a Doctorate in Optometry.

JO: Alright. And —

ES: I graduated in 198— 1984 from there.

JO: And you've been an optometrist all those years since?

ES: Yes.

JO: Okay. Do you have any religious affiliation in your life?

ES: I did when I was a young person. I was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, AME, here in Harrisburg. I was a — since Sunday school superintendent, a teacher, members of certain boards and then when I graduated from optometry school — went to church, but after about a year or two I just stopped going, I'd like to think of myself more as spiritualist now. I believe — I believe in God, believe in Jesus, but I don't think I have to go to a church in order to carry on the work of Christ.

JO: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Either immediate family or any partners?

ES: I was brought up by grandmother and my mother. My grandmother was my mother's mother, so it was the three of us living — I'm an only child, no brothers and sisters, so no nieces and nephews — boo hoo. And my grandmother has since past, she lived to 104 though, and my mother's still here, which is good. She will be — in fact she'll become 80 years old this year. I am right now 55, and I think that's all. And I've been in Harrisburg ever since I graduated.

JO: Can you tell us a little bit about coming out with your family? Those experiences?

ES: [laughing] I can tell you about that. I guess I didn't really realize or fully accept that I was gay until I was in Philadelphia going to school there, that was when I went to optometry school,

and I guess it was probably the early 80s that I realized that. I mean I had gay dalliances as a late teen, since 16 years of age here in Harrisburg, but I always thought at that time because — it was confusing for me because I was a member of the church, and of course you know those tales that go along with that in terms of, “Oh, this is the wrong thing to do,” but yet, it was who I was, and then going to Philadelphia and doing those things, you figure, “Well, no one knows you in Philadelphia. No one knows you in a city that — away from your home.” So I started going to bars, of course after I was 21 which is true. And I always was jealous — I always here these stories even present day I hear these stories of people that I grew up with, “Oh, yeah we used to go to the Harrisburg places when I was 18 and 19.” And I’m like, “You did?” [Laughing] “Alright, why didn’t ya take me?” [Laughing] But I thought, you know, at that time I probably would have thought, “Oh, no. I can’t do that. I’m not 21.” So I probably wouldn’t have done it. I — I came — so the first part of coming out is coming out to yourself, so I came out to myself I think when I was 22, I accepted — just like, “Well, you know this is probably who God meant me to be.” And, of course as my future experiences with the gay community a real test. I think that it’s something that I was supposed to do, because well thing that have happened after that, which — which is great as far as I’m concerned. So, I came out to my grandmother first because I think it was my grandmother who — they, they know — grandmothers know. Parent know. But my grandmother said something to me— she said, “You know, your mother thinks that you’re gay.” And — and my grandmother — and I guess at that point she was probably in her late 70s, 80s, but she said I love you anyway, so and then my mom and I had the talk maybe a few years after that — we’re talking about maybe the late 80s. And how that came about was we were — Mother’s Day late 80s, but it’s — came out because at that point I was a member of the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission, and I said to her, “Well, you know the way I got on to the commission I think was because I had to write a letter to the mayor.”— Who was Mayor Stephen Reed — and I had said in the letter that I was an African American, but I was also gay. And I had said this to my mom. And you know, of course when you say something like that because that’s a way of coming out, you kinda look at the facial expressions, and she didn’t — nothing changed. Now she didn’t say, “Well I don’t care what the situation is, I love you just the same.” It was just, “Okay.” And it was just like a matter of fact conversation. So, and that’s basically how I came out to her. And then you have to come out, you know, when you’re coming out in a city like Philadelphia, which is very easy to come out in Philadelphia, but when you come back — [laughing] it’s like, “Okay, so I wanna go to the bars, I wanna go to the gay bars,” and the first bar that I went to was the Neptune, which seems to be everybody’s experience who was out at, you know in the 80s. But, of course I had to look around, you know when I got to the door I was like, “Oh okay, I hope nobody sees me.” And at that point I was 24, and I would go into the Neptune or go into — whatever bars were there at the time, eventually get to the point, “Well, I don’t care. I don’t care who sees me coming in or coming out of the bar.” And for that matter, who were in — who — the people that are in those bars because you tend to remember or realize that, “Oh, these people are in there for the same reason why I’m there.”

JO: Do you think there is an additional challenge to being African American and gay in this area, or just gay in general in the African American community?

ES: Not for me. I didn’t see it that way, I’m sure other people have had those experiences but because I didn’t really — by the time I got back to Harrisburg, we were living in the projects — I

grew up in the Smith Homes which are off of Cameron Street in Harrisburg, but because I really hadn't come out to neighbors, it was really not a big thing for me. I didn't really have a lot of high school fr — I had some high school friends, but they were — the majority of them were white, because of the classes that I was in when I went through high school. I was an accelerated program. There were blacks and there were whites in those accelerated programs, but I gravitated for whatever reason more to the white kids. So, when I came back from — I graduated high school in 1977, when I came back after college, after optometry school in '84 — we kinda picked up those friendships for a couple of years, but I never really came out to those people, you know as gay. I think a lot of those people and people that I grew up with in high school, probably figured it out or found out because of my exposure on television in interviews and things like that with the Pride Festival and with the — the Human — Harrisburg Human Relations Commission.

JO: Let's — let's get to some of that exposure. Can you tell me about your work with the Lily White and Company troupe?

ES: Yeah. I guess I was dating somebody and we were in a relationship — very, very short time in 1986, and that person — I won't mention the name cause I don't think that I'd be the proper way to bring out, maybe out that person — but that person was a member of this — this drag troupe called Lily White and Company. And they would come over to our apartment and others would come to our apartment and we would — they would plan these shows, and at that time the Lily White and Company was a troupe that I guess started in the early 80s, so this was when I was in Philadelphia at optometry school, so by the time I came back in 1984 I knew nothing about Lily White and Company and by '86 I still really didn't even know much about drag — well, you know what drag was — I had remembered my first year in optometry school I went to New Hope with some people in my class and we — I saw my first drag show. Not really fully remembering what it was, but I do remember a drag performer performing a Totie Fields act. And you — I don't even know if you know who Totie Fields was. [Laughing] Totie Fields was a comedienne — she was a wonderful comedienne who at by the late 70s had lost I think both her legs, but she was so funny. And if you ever get a chance to YouTube her, you know you got to do it, because her routines were just hilarious. She was on like the level of — I'm going to mention some names you're probably not going to know who they are — but like Phyllis Diller. But your know think about people like Joan Rivers and some of the other comediennes that are out there today she was one of the pioneers of — of — of female comedy or comedy performed by females. And I saw this — this performer doing a Totie Fields act and it dawned on me what she was doing but I never really knew that that was drag and it was years later that I realized that's what that was. A male performer that was dressed up as a woman, performing to a recording and I thought, "Oh, this is really interesting." So anyway they would do these shows, Lily White and Company would do these shows and the money would go to the AIDS organization which by 1986 was SCAAN, the South Central AIDS Assistance Network, and I would sit in on these meetings and I knew a lot about pop music and I always thought it would be kinda cool — that cer — particular songs could be performed and acted by performers in a show. So the idea — I think it was 1987 — the idea came up — either '87 or '88 to do a hotel show. And that meant — well actually the first — no I take that back — the first one was doing the shows down at the Stallions and they, Paul Foltz who — AKA Lily White — came up with

the idea of doing fairy tales. Fairy tale characters performing certain numbers. Like, Chicken Little performing “Stormy Weather” and I don’t know if you know the song or not but it was a disco version of “Stormy Weather” so that’s basically what it was and what I ended up doing in that particular show the — Little Red Riding Hood and I was dressed up as the Big Bad Wolf and we would do the song — it was called “Little Red Riding Hood” which is an old mid-60s song by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs and there was a performer, he was dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood and she also did, this performer did “Whose Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” that’s a Barbara Streisand version of that song. So, she did that and I was on the stage and then we did “Hey, There Little Red Riding Hood” and that was it. And so Paul’s idea was then to take this concept and make it a production a two act production from start to end and it would tell a story and that was kinda like my involvement in Lily White and Company and then we per — we created others shows as well and the first hotel show was really, really popular — I think it was 7— it was ’88 or ’89. We did them down at what was then the Holiday Inn downtown, it’s now the Crown Plaza, and one of our — one of our allies was Heidi Newhouse, who worked at Polyclinic — or no, worked at Harrisburg Hospital — met a friend of mine whose house I happened to eventually buy Dwight Dissinger who was the — the manager. I think he was the catering manager at the Holiday Inn. She approached him and said, “You know” — they got to talking and he said, “You know, it would be wonderful to have the show in the ballrooms down there.” And I think there’s like three or four ballrooms, they can be opened up and becomes a grand ballroom. And we could put a lot of — they’ll be room for a stage and but yet they’ll be also tables there. So our job was to fill the seats and get a stage set up there. And the show — I think this was our *Around the World in 80 Days* show [laughing] where it was a group of tourists that went around the world and we took all these songs from different media — they could be songs from the 60s, they could be songs from Broadway, they could be songs from television and we would put them all together and have these little stories and then have all the people start — they leave the United States, they go all the way —all around the world and these songs would be — would describe different countries and then we would all come back to the United States and so that was the show. And the trick was — we always thought the hardest thing would be to fill these seats, because we’re talking about maybe 100 to 150 seats, maybe 200 seats I don’t remember. And we thought — and this is the late 80s, and we’re thinking, “How in the world are we going to fill these seats.” Well, we didn’t have hard — we didn’t have long to fill these seats because by that point — God bless the bars because the bars were very, very — very, very helpful. They — they would purchase tables, so the Neptune would purchase a table and I guess the tables had six to eight people and at that point I think it was the Strawberry purchased a table, the Stallions purchased a table. And don’t know if there was — the Rose purchased a table, La Rose, Rouge. And so that wasn’t hard. And then other people who had come to some of the shows at the Stallions, they bought tickets. So it was very, very easy to actually fill these seats. And I think we did quite a few major — quite a few major shows down there over the course of 10 years I guess.

JO: And — the participants in Lily White were mostly amateur drag queens? It was people who had professions is that correct or were there —

ES: Well they were all amateurs. There was no one that was a professional drag queen, I mean Jim Baily, that’s a professional, that’s a female impressionist, but none of them were female

impressionists. They were all people that looked to perform and this was their way of performing and that was my way of performing. I wasn't a drag performer, although they had gotten me into a dress one or two times — talk about that — but I was more like one of the boys. There were boy performers, cause you had to get boy performers to probably do duets with the drag performers. And that made it more fun, because you can kinda play off of one another. There were serious numbers, there were funny numbers, there were group numbers, there were solo numbers so it — that — and that's was what Paul wanted. He wanted to do something like that cause it was easy for — and all the drag queens liked to do — lot of drag performers love to do the — the current hit and you know I hate to say this — no I don't hate to say this — flail around their arms, cause I — and it's interesting, you know, it's like, "Okay, so what are you going to do with number?" And there are some drag performers that are out there now that are wonderful to watch because they have a sense of theater, or they have a sense of what the song is about. If you know what the song's about, I'm — you — you have me as a captive — a member of the captive audience because you have a total understanding of that song and you're entertaining me now. And — and that's what Paul liked. And Paul loved the idea of someone came up with a song and that person or persons said, "You know, and this is what we want to do with this song. And here's how were going to perform it." And if Paul laughed or if the rest the company laughed, then it was nothing that Paul had to do with the song because it's like, "Okay, I don't I have to work on this." But what Paul did and what I did as eventually choreographing and directing shows, was that we would be given a song and they would perform it the way that they wanted to do it and then you — but your sitting there — I always sit there as a director or as a choreographer and think, "Well, that's not bad, but here's what we can do [to] it to make it better, or make it more enjoyable." And then you work with the performer and the performer works with you because sometimes your ideas as a director don't really mesh with what their concept is. So you have to kinda find these happy meeting grounds to — to do — to do the number. And you're probably gonna ask how they got me into a dress. [Laughing] Well, as — as a member of — first of all as with Lily White and Company we created a board and we — we had to pick our officers. At one point I ended up becoming president, and these hotel shows we would do every other year. Because they're such as massive undertaking that rehearsal time and all that — that we couldn't really do these things every year, cause the membership would just get burned out. Although they were fun to do, we would have rehearsals two times a week, I think Tuesdays and Thursdays of course when it got to close to the show we'd have them more often. But one of the goals that I had was if we could cr — if we could raise X number of dollars, then I — I — I always had a goal: \$10,000.00. If we can raise \$10,000.00 in a particular year, then that's great. And so one of the charter members of Lily White and Company — his name's Jack Sours — he — he said, "Alright, well, here's the thing. If — If — If we raise \$10,000.00 I want to you to do something for us." And I said, "Well, okay. What is it? And he said, "Well, we want you to drag." Now see I was one who said I would never put on a dress. I would never do that. Not because I didn't want to do drag, it's just that — well first of all I had to shave the mustache. And you talk about me shaving a mustache that I had since I was 16. Trimmed it yes, shaved it no. [Laughing] And something I really didn't have a desire for but, I thought, "Okay, if you need the incentive, then okay, let's do it." So sure enough I knew full well that by the time it came to start rehearsals for our next hotel show, we'll do it. And that show was the *History of the World Show*, which actually was my concept cause I thought, "Well we can start beginning of

time and then we can go up to present day.” And once again take all these songs from different media, and work different historical perspectives to these songs. So I said, “Okay, fine. But I get to pick the song.” [Laughing] So I did, and it — and the song I did was Tina Turner’s — let’s see, what — it was from the *Private Dancer* album — “I Might Have Been Queen.” I think that’s the song. Which was not a hit, but it — it had the — the album itself had “Private Dancer,” had “What’s Love Got to Do With It” on it so, it was a big album and everybody knew the album. And I did it and I did it as Cleopatra. And my job was to not tell a lot of people — let it be a surprise. And we do have a show, we have — it’s on tape and the — the intro music for that number starts and I’m behind the curtain and I step out and you hear the people, “Oh my God, it’s Eric!” So, I wasn’t [a] very good drag queen or I wasn’t [Laughing] — cause people knew who — who it was, but — but that number brought in a lot of — a lot of dollars and that was — so that’s probably the only drag number I probably have ever done with Lily White and Company.

JO: Do you have a — was that your favorite performance you got to do or do you have another one that more memorable for you?

ES: I — I — I like to think that a lot of performances that I did with Lily White and Company — I can’t pick any favorites, because they were all fun to do. Lot of the group numbers that I wasn’t spotlighted in, but had a part with either choreographing or just performing in were fun. Just like — there’s an opening number of the — it was the *Around the World in 80 Days* — we opened with — I think it was “All of the World,” which was a song that the Electric Light Orchestra does in the Xanadu movie [song is called “All Over the World”], and your nodding, it’s like, “Oh yeah, I know what Xanadu is.” Makes me feel good. [Laughing] but it was a song that I had suggested cause we were trying to come up with — the group of us who was — who were putting the show together, it’s like, well we can do this number and we can do this number, we do this number. And you know, Paul’s looking for an opening number so how we gonna open this show and eventually I said, “I think there’s a song we can use and so — and I played the song for Paul and I said, “Well, we got an opening number, so…” and that was a fun number to do and I was like in a chorus of like 3 or 4 guys doing the whole shuffle off to Buffalo diagonally upstage during one part of the song and that was it, but that was a fun song to do, so all the performances that I did, all the numbers that I did, I enjoyed doing. It wasn’t like you were assigned a number and whether not you didn’t want to do it, you did it. It was like something that if you — Paul was good at saying, “I think that you would be good in this number.” Or I’d say, “I’d like to do this particular number. I think this could work.” So there wasn’t really a favorite.

JO: Was there ever a challenge in doing it this area putting on these performances? Did the troupe ever get met with any, you know, adversity from the public?

ES: Not that I know of.

JO: Okay.

ES: It wasn’t — I don’t think we ever really fully advertised like, “Oh, one night only. It’s Lily White and Company and you, know we’d perform —” Or advertise just like in the — during — through the television or radio. I mean, the way that we advertised these shows were basically word of mouth. By the time our set — our first hotel show was finished, or was over a lot of

people knew about Lily White and Company. And people would always ask, “So, when’s — when are you going to do your next hotel show?” And we — after the first show we didn’t really know. We thought we would probably do one every year, but we realized that it was kind of hard to do these shows every year. So what we ended up doing — we ended up doing a Christmas show, and we did them at the Paper Moon, which was — which is now Mangia Qui— but the paper moon was part of the Neptune, so we’d — and Frank bless his heart, offered to the space to us to shows there and we could collect money and of course the money towards the AIDS organizations or the gay organizations. Of course we would cover our costs for props and things like that, but we donated a lot of the money that we brought in. So we would do a —a ho — we would do a Christmas show, we would do a show sometime in the spring, which was also at the Paper Moon, and then that was it for the one year. I think that was the year after the ho — the first hotel show. And then the next year it would be doing a Christmas Show and then doing the hotel show. So I forgot what the question was [Laughing] that you asked me. I think I answered ...

JO: No, that was — you answered it.

ES: Oh, okay. [Laughing]

JO: You — you mentioned that the fundraising from these shows went to AIDS organizations or gay organizations, and I know you worked with SCAAN (South Central AIDS Assistance Network) — can you tell me a little bit about what kind of work you did with SCAAN?

ES: Yeah. I had found out about SCAAN, I think — it was either 1985, probably ’85, ’86. And I wanted to get involved with something — that was my first involvement basically with some— with anything that had to with the gay community, so I don’t know how it happened, but I ended up going to a meeting of people from SCAAN. At that point I think Roger Beatty was the head of SCAAN, and I went to the first meeting and I don’t know if it was — I don’t know if that was the election or just a regular meeting, but eventually — either that meeting or the next meeting — I ended up becoming secretary of the organization. Which is kind of odd because I had only — I’d only been a member of the organization maybe a few months and that was it. What was really interesting the first few years —because of the stigma of AIDS, was that none of the — all the people — we had allies — we had straight people, we had lesbians, we had gays. It was a good melting pot of people that were there. And I remember the first set of minutes that I wrote and typed up. It had the first and second names of the people that were there at the meeting. And I remember somebody said, I don’t remember who it was, he said, “I don’t feel comfortable having the second name on these — on the printed minutes and I understood that and I guess because maybe the minutes before that it was, “Eric S.” or “Larry W.” or “Roger B.” So I understood that and I knew in the back of my mind that somewhere along the line there — especially if the organization gets money from the state, cause at that point it had not gotten any money from the state yet — that the minutes are going to have to have the first and last names of at least the committee or the officers and people that are on the board, but I guess they were not there yet. So, my involvement initially with SCAAN was basically once again with the gay community in terms of getting people to whatever events we had, or whatever fundraisers that we had and at that point I don’t know how hard AIDS or HIV had hit Harrisburg, but I knew that one person — I knew a person who had died of AIDS and how that had effected those that I

socialized with in the bars and these people knew this person, and I think that maybe that was the reason why I got involved with SCAAN, because I knew that person, but not as well as these other people knew him. I thought, “I think this is something that I need to get involved with.” And as it turned out, this person also had a dream of starting a gay men’s chorus, so, and as that turned out, the person that I was seeing —had a relationship with — who kind of got me into Lily White and Company, well that person eventually became the first director of the gay men’s chorus.

JO: Nice segue, can you tell me about what you did with the Gay Men’s Chorus?

ES: Well, I didn’t really do anything with the gay men’s chorus at the beginning, other than just going to the concerts.

JO: Okay.

ES: Okay, I was more or less just a supporter. Nothing more, nothing less. I did have a relationship with it later on, within the last 10 years. I was a board member of the men’s chorus for about 3 — let’s see, 2 years — about 3 years. And that’s been the extent of my involvement with the men’s chorus.

JO: Okay. You mentioned knowing at least casually a person who had passed away from AIDS as sort of the impetus for you getting involved. Do you think your medical background also made you an asset? Cause you said they made you —

ES: No, not really.

JO: No?

ES: I hadn’t seen any — as an optometrist — of course I had to know the ocular science of what HIV did to the eye, and — but other than that, no. I think it was more or less something that I needed to get involved — this — this was an easy way for me to get involved with something to have to do — that affected peop— the gay community. Nothing more, nothing less.

JO: Okay, can you tell me about your work with Crossroads Magazine?

ES: Yeah. Oh yeah. [Laughing] I was — I was in San Francisco — this is probably about 1993, ’93 I think. And I just went to visit and had noticed the plethora of gay and lesbian publications that were in the bars. And I —and I thought to myself, “You know, this is kinds odd. I don’t know why Harrisburg doesn’t have anything like that.” I mean basically, we were getting 2 papers free on a weekly basis from Philadelphia, the PGN — which is *Philadelphia Gay News* which the bars still get and **AuCourant (Sp?)** which has since faded away and I don’t know if there was another one or not, but — but you know we were getting stuff from Philadelphia but I thought to myself, “You know, there’s a lot of stuff that’s going on in Harrisburg that’s affecting the gay community and — gay and lesbian community — and why is it that we don’t have anything like that.” So, I thought I would start it. So, myself and Chuck **Atwell (Sp?)** got together, we started talking about it, and said, “You know, it’s something we should do.” So, we produced a prototype which I — I know I gave you the printed, the — the glossy covers and glossy editions that we had, but didn’t give you the prototype, and I didn’t think about that till we

started talking about this — I'll have to find it, which was just basically run on just a copier, but it was something that we handed out at the 19 — I think it was 9 — I'm a say 95 or 96 Pride Festival. And, we gave those away and let people know that this was coming. And then we produced our first issue — I don't remember, it's '96 or '97 — I think it was, well it had to be 9 — no, it was 9 — late 9 — early '96 probably. I think there was about — only about 4 or 5 issues. We decided to do it as a bimonthly. We put it together. We had thought that it would be the best way that — that people would be impressed by — by something like this. Something produced in Harrisburg and something that people would be proud of — the community would be proud of it. The hardest this was to get advertisers. And I am very, very thankful for the advertisers that we had. We had some that would advertise in every issue. But, learning very quickly that, that was the way that a — a magazine or publication, newspaper — be it a newspaper, be it a magazine — that's how they make the money, it's not subscriptions, it's the advertisers. They are the ones that keep it afloat. And eventually there were — Chuck kinda fell away from the project, so it was me and Shelly Howler, and Daryl Morris. There's three of us that kinda kept it alive for about a year, two years and then it was just — just got to be too much, cause we just didn't have the money to keep it going. And a lot of people probably — I always get this question — “Are we ever going to bring it back?” Well that was 19 — the last issue was 1997 folks, it's now 2015 — it ain't coming back. I mean there's — there's a publication now — the Voice, which is out there now. Which is a wonderful publication and because, you know, because there are other venues that are out there now in terms of publication and — and — and social media, you can advertise gay/lesbian/transgendered events and no one really bats an eye at it anymore. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I did the project, cause I — I would be sitting here thinking now if I done it, “Gee I wonder if.” You know and , “Why didn't I do it.” So I'm glad I did it. I think it was successful to a certain point, certain extent. We got the message across. We had a lot of people that wanted to write, and they wrote. We didn't pay our writers, I wish we could have paid our writers. But people were very, very happy to see their things published and — and that's what they were very happy about. And it was a fun thing to put together, so I'm glad that we did it. I'm very, very proud of it.

JO: Was the magazine focused a lot on HIV/AIDS or was it just a general gay...

ES: Just a general, just a general. And the — the only thing that we didn't have — we didn't have any — we had no pornograph — pornography. That was one of the things we didn't want. And that's what a lot of people liked about it, because although a lot of people wanted to see me as a centerfold, but no, that was not going to happen. [laughing] And I mean we'd joke about that and always thought that was really, really funny, but no I didn't want to do that. And it was just one of those things that we — we had things about drag, we had things — articles about SCAAN, we had one of the articles was when SCAAN had folded and it became — I forget the — Lancaster AIDS Project — Lancaster AIDS Project took it over. [SCAAN and Lancaster AIDS project merged to become AIDS Community Alliance, now called ALDER] And I forget what it's called now, but... We had just articles about all sorts of things in these issues. And looking back — that — in those two years, you know, there was a lot of things that were happening. You know Pridefestival and FAB [Fall Achievement Benefit] — a lot of things that were going on at that time, that even the gay community didn't really know about. But they —

hopefully they learned a lot just by reading these articles — the things that were going on in their community.

JO: You mentioned you were on the Human Relations Commission. What motivated you to do that? And what kind of work did you do on that?

ES: One of my — one of my friends who I met through Lily White and Company worked in city hall. And he was one of the performers — one of the drag performers in Lily White and Company. And he said well there's an opening — there's a few openings on the Human Relations Commission, and I thought, "Okay, this is interesting." And he said, "There's no gay representation on the Human Relations (stumbles over words) — Human Relations Commission. The Human Relations Commission in Harrisburg — Harrisburg Human Relations Commission — HHRC— was created after the 1968/69 riots in Harrisburg. It was the — that —late 60s was really turbulent time in the nation as well as in Harrisburg. There were riots and then a lot of them were race related and so this commission was created in order to solve those problems. And I think the gay element was added to that — I believe in the early 80s I believe. So, you're supposed to take care of like, things like accommodation, discrimination, and accommodation, rents, housing — I can't think right now, but it had everything that the state commission had initially back in the early 70s when it was created, except the one component that the state didn't have and that was the protections for homosexuals. And that I think was added in the early 80s. So by the time '88 rolled around '88/'89 I had a — I — I ran for the — to become president of SCAAN and there was a rule in the bylaws that if you ran for one office you couldn't hold the other office, so I ran for president of SCAAN and lost that election, so I was no longer on the board of SCAAN, but it just so happened that I had been chosen by the mayor to be on the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission. And so I became a commissioner, and eventually became chairman of the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission and we basically had — we had a staff that was paid by the city who would investigate complaints — discriminatory complaints and they would resolve them. There was a period in the early 90s there had been some gay bashings — oh they were —they were — and I don't know if they were actually gay bashings or if they were just people that just happened to be lurking in the shadows of the bar area downtown and were mugging people because they were gay, so I don't know if they were doing it because they were gay or because they wanted money or what — or if they say gay people as easy targets — so it's kinda hard to say that they were gay — if it was actually gay bashing because they were attacking these people because they were gay. But, so that actually came up before the commission because we had to solve the problem of, "Well how are we going to get more protection for the area and eventually we got more through the commission — through the Harrisburg Police — they patrolled that area more often, especially on the weekends, Fridays and Saturdays. And seeing that all that activity, thank-God subsided. And I guess I was on the commission till about the early 00s — [Laughing] the early 21st century. And then — it was around the time that I kinda got out of a lot of stuff by that point. Kinda retired from the — the activities. There were a lot.

JO: Is there a particular one of these endeavors that you're the most proud of or feel you were able to make the biggest difference?

ES: With the commission you mean?

JO: Well with just any of the — SCAAN, or Lily White, or the Commission — just any that you are particularly proud of.

ES: I'm proud of all of them. I think the proudest I — I am of it is number one the FAB, Fall Achievement Benefit. And that started I think in '96. I guess I was talking with Tish Frederick, Latisha Frederick, we call her Tish — she was a lawyer that — that lived in Harrisburg and she was my lawyer through *Crossroads*, and I don't even know we got together. But she was telling me stories about how it — I guess it — she was from Huston [Texas] and how Huston gays and lesbians got together once a year to celebrate their own. And she said, "Why can't we have something like that in Harrisburg?" And I said to her, "Yeah, why can't we." So her and I kinda co-chaired the first Fall Achievement Benefit and I believe it was in '96. And that was a really big success, and we still have them in Harrisburg thank goodness. In '97 I kind of fell away from that cause I was so involved — I was involved with the Pride Festival, I was involved with Lily White and Company, and I — and Tish had asked me, "You know, you're so involved, why don't you back out?" And I agreed with her cause at that point, that was kinda like a turning point in my life. I said, "Yeah, I will still support it, but yeah I have got to back away from the activities," and that was just one of them. And I was glad to back off from that because there were a lot of great people that — that were on that committee that had — that helped make the '96 effort, the first effort such a success, and I knew full well that it's like, "Yeah, by all means, I will back out." So I'm — I'm proud of that cause her and I co-chaired the first one. And then, I guess I'm kinda proudest of my work with the Pride Festival. I had been a part of the Pride Festival since '9 — I think '93 I believe — '93/'94. I had chaired it three years. I think one of my proudest achievements with Pride Festival was early on, there was a — a committee prior to my involvement with the Pride Festival, who I — at that time we — they were having the Pride Festivals up at Ski Roundtop [Lewisberry, Pennsylvania] and they were — the committee was afraid of drag queens being at the festival. Now — yeah I know. I know. [Response to interviewer reaction] — Now here's how all this went down. Lily White and Company had a booth the first year. I guess it was called dunk a drag. [Laughing] Now, this sounds innocent enough, where we would have a person dressed in drag. We would have a dunking booth. And we would — people would pay to buy balls — three chances to dunk the drag queen. And we had members that — that would get up in the drag booth and they — the dunking booth — and they would be dunked. So, this this was a fun thing. Well, it's innocent enough, but there were some people who were thinking well this is promoting violence against women. And so, you know, you take something — something so innocent and then make it not so innocent. But the biggest problem that some of the committee members of that Pride Festival effort and I don't wh— even what it was called at the time — I don't know if it was called Pride or not or if it was called Unity or whatever. They were afraid of the media coming to our event and just taking pictures of drag queens, and thinking — and having the public think that all men wanna walk around in dresses. And that's what they gay life was all about. And of course there are people that do feel that way. They — they — they think that way and we're also talking about the early 90s and were talking about you know we were living in an era of Jesse Helms who was a senator from North Carolina, was very anti-gay, and there were other people were even in this area that would rather have the gays and lesbians stay in the closet, and so they were afraid of that. The — the committee was afraid of this. And at that time I was president of Lily White and Company,

and I was very much opposed to this type of discrimination within our community — within the gay community. And word had gotten out somehow that the committee was not going to allow us to have little dunking — dunk a drag both. And I remember one of the — there was actually a — a com— community meeting about this issue. Where there were people that were from the organizing committee of the Pride Festival and there were people that were coming to speak of defense of our dunk-a-drag effort. And I remember one person, **Nicki Knerr**, who had — she had along with her committee, did — they put on the Unity Festivals, which was the precursor to the present day Pride Festivals, she had them at her house in Mechanicsburg. I mean imagine a person who's donating her property in order to have a Pride Festival. I mean this is something that — in this day and age would be unheard of but, her and her group would have these — would have annual Pride Festivals. I think she had maybe two if not three of these— and this is before it moved to Ski Roundtop. But she got up at this community meeting and I will never forget what she said. She said, "You know the gay community is like a smorgasbord. And you know, you may like one part. You may like the leather part of it, you may like that drag part of it — you may not like, you know, these other parts of the — of the gay community. And that's okay because that's a smorgasbord, you— you pick what you like and you move on. And you have — but you have to be inclusive of everybody." And I remember that to this very day. She said that. So we had that meeting, and then there was another meeting where I was a repre— civil representative of Lily White and Company. There a member from the committee who we debated this issue at a rehearsal of the — at that time it was known as the — the Harrisburg Men's Chorus, which of course was the Gay Men's Chorus, which is now— that's what they're known now, but at that time they were known as Harrisburg Men's Chorus. And the reason why we were having this is because the men's chorus was gonna back out of performing at that Pride Festival because they were going to this in unity with us, because of another arts part of the community being denied doing what we wanted to do. So, I didn't want to see that happen, so we took twenty, thirty minutes to — to argue, or discuss — it was peaceful— it was a dis— you know, it was a discussion of where we were coming from. And try to convince — I was trying to convince the — the men's chorus to stay, but I realized at the same time, I'm trying to convince my worthy opponent that what you guys are doing is wrong, because you're denying a part of the gay community from taking part in a Pride Festival. And it's like, how can you call yourself a Unity Festival when we — we're not seeming to be united. How you can call yourself a Pride Festival when you're not proud of the parts that make up the gay community. So, I basically said, "Look, as President of Lily White and Company, I've written a letter—" which I had. By that point I wrote a letter and I was going to send it to the Men's — to the Philadelphia Gay News and send it to **AuCourant (sp?)** and also too at that time — I guess we were also getting papers from Baltimore [Maryland], and we were getting — I knew that they were getting people from these areas to come to our Pride Festival — and say, "This is what's going on in Harrisburg." And "You people need to know what's going on in Harrisburg." And luckily the committee who were putting on the Pride Festival backed away. They said, "Okay, you guys could do this." And — at — shortly after the Pride Festival had ended that the committee realized that, "You know what, we don't really want to do this anymore after all of that. It got kinda controversial, we didn't want it to get that way — maybe another group of people should get together and put this on." And that's how the current Pride Festival got formed. And I ended up being on the committee for that and eventually chairing it three years. Chaired it in — for the nine— I think it

was '97 — '96/'97. So for the '97 Pride Festival and again for the '99 and the 2000 Pride Festival. What I'm most proud of is that it is now on the riverfront. And how that happened — well what happened was [laughing] we — the Pride Festival went from Ski Roundtop to Reservoir Park and then because Reservoir Park was so hilly, that some people were saying, "Well, you know, we do have some members that are handicapped" — that's not the word to use, but sorry — physically disabled— and parking was an issue in that area. And some people didn't feel safe parking in that area. So, we decided well maybe we should look for another place to have it, and we ended up at HACC [Harrisburg Area Community College], so we were there for two years, and then we found out that some of the board members at HACC were not really pleased with the idea of having a Pride Festival at HACC, which was kinda odd, because having a festival on a college grounds just — I don't know, I thought that was a great idea, but there were some members of the HACC board that didn't really want us there. And it's not as if anything occurred, I mean, all those festivals that we had there — I think there were two festivals we there — I think '96 and '97. They were pretty eventless — I mean they were peaceful— we had our protestors up there, but what Pride Festival in this country doesn't have protestors there. But they were off ground — the protestors were, and they were peaceful and our people didn't interact with them you know in a violent manner, I mean granted, they —our people probably shouted at them and you know, that's — that's to be expected. But no — nobody came to blows. And so it's like, okay well if HACC doesn't want us, what are we gonna do? So it just so happened [laughing] it just so happens that in the 90s — '93 or '94 I became judge of elections in my ward. In fact, the ward that we — we're sitting in right now, the ward goes from Verbeke Street up to Boyd Street, south to north and from Front Street up to 6th — yeah, up to 6th. And so, I — one election day, I think it was — it was a primary election day— it might have been '98. Tina Manoogian-King, who was the director of Parks and Rec for the city of Harrisburg, who lived in this ward said — and she came to vote and then she said, "You know, Eric can I talk to you for a moment?" I said, "Yeah, yeah, fine." So, we walked outside the polling place and she said, "You know, we really would like to have the Pride Festival back in Harrisburg. And there's a lot of places where you can have it, but why don't you look around and you know, see what appeals to you." And I said, "Okay." So a group of us started walking around. One of the places that we thought would have been rather interesting would have been, was City Island. Now, City Island itself, there's a history to that because there was a lot of gay sex that occurred on City Island. It was even written up in an article in the Sunday *Patriot News* back in the mid 6— mid — mid 60s right [says this making fun of his misspeaking], the mid-80s about people that were paying for sex on City Island now, I've been — I will admit— I had been one of those people, not paying for sex or having been paid for sex, but that was a place that I went in my late teens and even until — probably up until the late, or mid-80s. I went over there. I made a lot of friendship over there, people. And then by that point though I'd stopped going over there for that purpose. And —but, somebody came up with the idea, "Well, why don't we have the Pride Festival on City Island." And I said, "I don't think that's really a good idea to do that." Because we're talking about a — having a Pride Festival 10 years after— 10 or plus years after this article came out and people were still equating City Island with gay sex, so eh, let's, let's go someplace else, let's look other where, elsewhere. We thought about going back to Reservoir Park, and we thought, "Well, let's go to this high part of Reservoir Park," and we walked around there and we thought, "This would be a good place, so let's mark that down." We come to find

out later of course that was not to be because that was where National Civil War Museum was going to go, and— which had not at that point been built yet. So, we thought, “Okay, we can’t do that.” And of course that kind of took away from the reason why we took it away, or why it was taken away from Reservoir Park to begin with. So we thought, “Okay, let’s find someplace else.” And eventually we decided, “Well, why don’t we do it on the Riverfront? The city has their things on the Riverfront, there’s Kipona, the Fourth of July— why don’t we do our thing on — at — on the Riverfront?” And we knew we couldn’t do whole Riverfront like they do, or did at that point from the Harvey Taylor Bridge down to the Market Street Bridge. Well we thought, “Why don’t we do it from Market Street down to the beginning where Shipoke begins?” And that included in front of the John Harris Mansion. And we thought, “Yeah, this’ll be a great place. There’s a lot of shade — much more shade than in was from where they have their Festivals now. And my only thing was let’s not have anything around the John Harris grave, but we can strategically put our stage — which is fun. So, I’m very proud of that because it’s still down there all that — all that time. And one of the things that we had — we — we had confronted with when we first told people we were having it on the Riverfront — people were saying, “Are you nuts? Whose gonna come out to the Pride Festival” It’s in the open.” Cause when we were at Reservoir Park you— well okay that’s still kinda open, but it really wasn’t open. And of course HACC, well people weren’t out walking up and down a Riverfront. I mean you have to kinda drive to HACC in order to get there. So, this would be actually the first Pride Festival that was going to be out in the open. And our community members, not everybody, but our community members — “Oh, I’m not going to that. It’s out in the open.” Well once again, you — you kind of miss the idea of what Pride is all about. I mean, you’re kind of — you’re — you’re showing yourself that you’re proud of who you are. And if you’re not proud of that, then okay fi— I understand that, I got it, I understood it. So one of the things we had to do was I thought we had to advertise early to get people comfortable with the fact that we’re going to have this Pride Festival on the Riverfront. So we started advertising it in March to let people get the idea of that sinking in, and we’re talking about four months before the Festival. All the Pride Festivals were held in July, and the reason why they were held in July was because we didn’t want to compete with all the other Pride Festivals that usually went on in June. Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Washington — they are all held in June basically is Pride month. So we decided— not we, but it was decided early on that Pride Festivals in Harrisburg would be in July. And they ended up being the last weekend of July as they are now. So, the other thing that we had to do was we had to get a performer that was going to pull people down [laughing] you know, to the Pride Festival. So, if you didn’t want to come for the booze, you didn’t want to come down for the food, if you didn’t want to come down for the comradery, maybe you would come down for the entertainment. And somebody on the entertainment committee of Pride decided you know what we can get CeCe Peniston who at that time was a well-known name. She had hits in the — in the early and mid-‘90s and so we got CeCe Peniston to perform. And that was fun being around her for that weekend. So that was — I think that was probably my — the thing that I’m most proud of with my association with the Pride Festival. And that— and that it’s still down there to this very day.

JO: A while back you referenced a turning point in your life when you sort of stepped back from a lot of these activities. Can you elaborate on what that was all about?

ES: Yeah. By 1997 I had been involved with, at that point was — I had been involved — I was involved with the — with FAB, and I was involved with the Pride Festival, and I was involved with Lily White and Company. I was also involved with trying to keep *Crossroads* afloat. And at the same time I was working. [Laughing] So I was involved with like all these things and I was starting to get burned out and that was basically when I said to myself, “You know what? I need to let some things go. And by the time ’97 rolled — or, yeah, — ’97 rolled around I had — *Crossroads* was kinda coming — I had to — I realized that *Crossroads* was not going to survive that much longer. Lily White and Company itself was kind of fading because unfortunately we had lost some members, some to HIV— to AIDS, some because some of the people used to perform in Lily White and Company— they were kind of burned out as well. They had lives, and so a lot of the organization — a lot of the organizational activities behind the scenes fell on a few people. And I was one of those people. Paul was another one. I think it probably affected Paul more than me. And we realized that Lily White couldn’t really go on anymore. Pride Festival I was still involved with that, but I couldn’t be involved with it that much. At the — I also lost my job in the — in the early — the late summer of ’97. So that was a part of it. And — I’m just trying to think — and then of course FAB, I kinda drew away from that, but I still, you know, went to the FAB. I still went to FAB in ’97. I think I went to FAB in ’97. So, and I was still on the Human Relations Commission. I — in fact, at that time I was still chairing the Human Relations Commission. So, it was just too much for one person to do. And that’s why I had to kinda back off. And by the time 2000 rolled around, which was my third year of chairing the Festival, I — I said, “Okay, I need to step off.” Because at the time I’d been on the Festival Board probably since ’93/’94. And I needed to — to — it was time for new blood to come in, and other people to run the board. And so I — I — and I — and by the year after that — one or two years after that I dropped off the commission. So I kinda went into retirement from organizations and committees and things like that.

JO: What changes have you seen in the LGBT community from the — your early days here in Harrisburg till now?

ES: People are more open. They’re out. They’re proud of who they are. I remember many people when I came out in Harrisburg in ’84 — they were — they were talking about — they were talking about maybe going to Lily White shows and going to drag shows. I like to think that Lily White and Company made drag legitimate in Harrisburg. Because we — because now a days, it’s nothing for anybody to go to a drag show. God bless the Stallions, because the Stallions now a days, I mean they have a drag thing going on almost every week. Which is phenomenal. When I got involved with something like that, I’ll talk about that shortly, but — but because of — of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and — and — and — even in the early — the late 80s, early 90s Geraldo Rivera had a show and he would have drag queens on the show and people liked Geraldo and they saw these drag shows and these drag performers and people went like, “Well, why don’t — why isn’t there anything like this in Harrisburg?” And then people heard about Lily White and Company and heard — and we were basically the drag troupe in Harrisburg, and people — that’s why people came to our shows and they found that this is a group of people men and women — and women — there were also women. I should also say and I didn’t say this earlier, but there were also women who were performers and who you know, were on stage and also behind stage who helped out with Lily White and Company as well. And there were people that came to the

shows that — I don't think they really had a dog (???) in terms of what they thought about gay people, they just came because they wanted to be entertained and that the entertainment was raising money for something that it — at that point I like to think that a lot of people knew somebody unfortunately who was affected or infected with HIV. So I think that a lot to do with it as well. And then fast forward till today, where there's a lot of performers out there now — that's one of the changes because there's a lot of young people now that want to get into drag. There's a lot of young people now that are out because, you know, they have a lot of — of family friends or family and friends who know that they're gay and it's like no big deal. And I think that's the biggest change that — that people can be who they are. I haven't really heard of any instances last few years about — concerning gay bashing or anything like that. And, You know, I'm sure that there are people that are still around here who — who feel that homosexuals and that gay people should still, you know — shouldn't be loud and promote their agenda. But, you don't hear those voices too much. And I think a lot of people are more or less live and let live.

JO: Do you think there's a difference between being here in Harrisburg and like the larger Central Pennsylvania area and discrimination, cause I mean people being out here is more and more common. Do you think it's still a problem in the surrounding areas?

ES: Well I think the biggest issue that we have now in Harrisburg is actually a statewide problem and that is it's legal to discriminate against gays and lesbians and transgendered people in state of Pennsylvania. It's not legal to do that within certain pockets of Pennsylvania— it's not legal to do that in Philadelphia, it's not legal to do that in Pittsburgh, it's not legal to do that in Allentown. It's not legal to do that in Harrisburg, and but people still — I know that there are people that are still working outside of Harrisburg — people that work over in Camp Hill who are in— who are probably in fear of their jobs if they come out. Because they can be fired because of being gay or being transgendered. So that's still a big issue here in Pennsylvania. So, when I came out in Harrisburg, you would always here about these people about my friends and people that socialized with who ended up going to New York City and going to Philadelphia and going to Baltimore because they felt more free to be themselves in those areas than it was here in Harrisburg. Although Harrisburg, has— has a profec—has the protections, but not outside of Harrisburg, which is unfortunate, and that's something that I'm hoping that changes very, very quickly. So that — that I find — that issue is still the same today as it was thirty years ago.

JO: Are there any other challenges that you can see facing young people today that are LGBT in this area?

ES: I don't associate with the young people—

JO: Sure.

ES: I mean I see them, and I talk to them, and I think, you know — I always think in the back of my mind, “Gosh, you guys have it so much easier now than you did thirty years ago.” And I hear myself go like, “You know when I was a young man of twenty years old.” [says this in a voice imitating an old man] You know, when I was where you were type of thing, so I hear myself in the back of my mind saying that. You know, Louie Marven [director of the LGBT Center of Central PA] and I had a conversation with Louie and he had — he asked me that same question

and it was — and every once in a while — I — that question comes back to me cause I don't know how to answer that question because I don't know what it's like to be a young gay or a lesbian individual in 2015. I don't know what kind of challenges they have. I'm sure they are not the same as it was in — in 1985, but I'm sure they have their challenges now, I just don't know what they are.

JO: Alright, have we missed any— is there any gaps that I'm forgetting to ask you about?

ES: I don't think so. I think we covered a lot of stuff.

JO: We did. [both laughing] My notes are —

ES: And it's still sunlight outside so— I haven't talked your ears off.

JO: Yes, and we haven't run out of tape. [both laughing] Alright, well thank-you for your time. I appreciate.

ES: You're welcome. One thing I do want to say. I can add is the — and I think I said this earlier, but I think a lot of things cannot — my appreciation for the — the bars in Harrisburg. Whether it be — well the Neptune and the Strawberry, La Rose, la Rose /Rouge — which we called The Rose, Stallions, the Brownstone — I'm trying to think of all of them — the D-Gem, which was the lesbian bar up on Front Street. I used to DJ there as a matter of fact. I did that for about two years. That was fun. But they whenever I wanted — whenever I was involved with something whether it be the Pride Festival, or Lily White and Company or FAB and whatever I — I went to the bar owners or the managers and I said, "You know, hey, we're doing something. We're having a fundraiser for something, can we put the poster up?" Or "Can we have a fundraiser at your bar?" And they all said, "But of course. You can do this. You can put the things up or we can have something here." And the bar owners and managers had been nothing but extraordinarily helpful in putting these things together for us. And all the people that have helped me, you know, realize what I wanted to see happen. Whether it be with the Pride Festival or with *Crossroads* or with FAB or with Lily White and Company — I — and then those are people that are just — there's just so many people that have helped me see or realize my vision or my dreams of what things could be, you know, in the community here. I — I just wanna say a thank-you to those people. And that's it.

JO: Alright. That's great, and if you have any materials or photos to corroborate some of those things let us know and we'll get them to the archive too.

ES: I have a lot. I have a lot. Yes I do. So yes, I will look through those. Yeah.

JO: Alright. Thank-you.

ES: Thank-you.

End of video