

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

Interviewee: Georgia King

Interviewer: Brendan Burke

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Brendan Burke: Okay, and we're recording. So, this is Brendan Burke, interviewer. I'm here with Georgia King. Uh it's Saturday, April 11, 2026, at 1:34 p.m. We're here at the Greater Community AIDS Project [GCAP] office at John Street in Champaign, Illinois. So if we just start off, um if you want to start off by introducing yourself and just tell me a little bit about yourself.

Georgia King: Okay, my name is Georgia King. I live in Monticello. I've been connected with GCAP for about 35 years. I got connected with GCAP when I found out my son was HIV positive. So, I became very involved thereafter.

BB: Okay, so you said, so we're in Champaign. Monticello—how far of a drive is that?

GK: It's about, uh, I think it's maybe 25 miles, something like that.

BB: All right, so how did you get involved with GCAP here in Champaign, then?

GK: Well, when I found out my son was...was...by the time he was diagnosed, he was full blown AIDS. I had absolutely knew nothing about AIDS. I knew my son was gay, but I knew nothing about AIDS. So I got in the telephone book, and I looked up underneath AIDS, and I found the Greater Community—at that time, it was, uh, wasn't called the Greater Community AIDS Project. So, I called them and got involved with them.

BB: What was it called, then? Was it the Gay Community AIDS Project?

GK: Yes. Gay Community AIDS Project. I'm sorry. I almost forgot the name, yes.

BB: No, you're all good.

GK: And I hesitated in calling because I thought, well, I'm not gay. Are they, you know, are they going to have to be able to help me or tell me anything? And the person that I got a hold of, and I think it's someone you've already talked to too, is Jerry Carden.

BB: Oh yes, yes.

GK: And he was the one that answered the phone that night. And so he told me about the meetings that they had for mothers, and I started going to them, and then I started getting very involved in GCAP.

BB: So what year would that have been?

GK: 1989.

BB: Wow, okay. Um yeah, I was gonna say, on the topic of Jerry Carden, he told me it might be difficult to get you to sit still for a long period of time. So, thank you for sitting with me today. I think he used—the word he used to describe you is dynamo is what he said in the email. So, if you could take me back to when you first became involved in the organization, you said it was around '89. Is there a particular memory that stands out as like your first GCAP event or something like that?

GK: Well, the thing that stuck out, in my mind more than anything, is how little people knew, how scared people were.

BB: Yeah.

GK: They didn't think they could shake someone's hand. They didn't think they could hug 'em. They didn't think they could do anything, you know, and, and the main thing we needed to do was to educate people. To, for them to actually know how they actually, you know, could be involved. But my involvement with the mothers, it was absolutely wonderful because a lot of the gentlemen, and I, they were there at the meetings, their families had turned against them because they didn't understand it. And so they really didn't have a mother figure, so I kind of fell in like a mother to a lot of them. And I tried to reach out, and I spoke to a lot of parents, uh, tried to get them to understand so their sons would not be alone.

BB: Yeah.

GK: So, I did a lot of work with parents for quite a while.

BB: So, when you say these, like, mother's events, were these just for mothers of, like, PWAs or were they, like, sort of mixed events with, like, sons and mothers?

GK: It was mainly the mothers, but the sons came too. So the sons would come to the meetings also.

BB: Okay.

GK: So...and I got to be very close with some of the mothers. There were three mothers, about the only mothers that really participated, and I became very close with them.

BB: Yeah. You mentioned that you became a sort of mother figure for, like, other people. What exactly did that look like? Were you...

GK: Well, they could talk to me. And a lot of times, I, I would ask if I could talk to their parents, and they sent me up to talk to the parents, and that helped, because I think when they could look at another person—especially one mother to another mother—it meant something, you know, okay, well, she's going through that, so, you know, maybe I can ask her questions. Because like I said, I was as green, as green could be about AIDS. I absolutely knew nothing, knew nothing about AIDS. Nothing.

BB: Yeah.

GK: I had heard it on the television, and it was like out in California and like your bigger cities. So I just kind of let it fly by. It didn't really mean anything to me because, oh, well, that's not gonna hit here. Well, guess what? It did.

BB: Right. So, you're saying you didn't really, like, know a lot about AIDS at first was that, did you start learning about it when your son got diagnosed?

GK: Yes, I started reading everything I could get a hold of.

BB: So, do you remember anything in particular, like when you first started doing that research? Was there like a, was it a news article? Did you go to, like, a library? Like what was the work you started doing?

GK: Well, of course, we didn't have the internet then.

BB: Yeah.

GK: So I couldn't look at that. So I just, I would talk to medical people, and I would read articles. There was a lot of articles in the newspaper because everybody was scared. So, I depended upon a lot on newspapers and like I said, with getting involved with the group, I got educated on the true facts about AIDS. Yeah.

BB: So something you mentioned was, uh, at that time, there was a lot of stigma. People thought you can't touch people with AIDS and all this stuff, and you would reach out to parents.

I think you said about just sort of, like, educate them. So, what sort of work did GCAP do in those days that you remember being a part of to sort of spread that education?

GK: Education was the main thing.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And uh Jerry Carden was the big one behind that. And as a little bit later on, I got involved too. I got into the Speakers' Bureau where we would go around to all the schools and, uh, we had a class at the University of Illinois that we spoke to every semester.

BB: Oh great.

GK: Uh, and then, we're like on World AIDS Day, we were able to get into a lot of the schools. I went through to every school in Piatt County and spoke.

BB: Wow.

GK: To try to educate people.

BB: So, are there any particular places, either in Champaign or just the surrounding counties, like you mentioned, that are particularly sort of, like, meaningful when you think about your time with GCAP? Is there any sort of location that stands out of like, oh, "that's where we would always meet" or is it here?

GK: Well, probably this house means more to me than anything.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because I don't know whether Jerry told you, but I'm one of the ones who helped establish this house.

BB: No, he did not.

GK: Yes.

BB: Okay, so is this house, is it just, is, does someone live here, or is it just?

GK: Well, it's for people with, that are HIV positive or full-blown AIDS. Uh we have five bedrooms.

BB: Wow.

GK: Two bathrooms, two kitchens, and they are able to live here. We charge them absolutely nothing. Every room has got a television in it. They're hooked up to the internet. And like I said, they pay nothing.

BB: Wow.

GK: We just try to help people get on their feet.

BB: And is it still in use today?

GK: Oh, yes. Yes.

BB: Wow.

GK: Most of the time, it's full.

BB: Wow. So how do you, I know you said, you don't charge people to live here. So how does that work sort of getting, like, you know, giving the beds out? Like, is there...

GK: Well, we've been getting, we get grants.

BB: Oh, okay.

GK: We have been very lucky with, with the state of Illinois. We have a very, very good name with the state.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because we've been involved with them and been getting money from them for at least, at least 20 years I know of, and it may be more than that.

BB: Yeah, because in the archival research, I saw the grant funding.

GK: Yes. Yes, we had to have grant funding. But when we first started out, we had nothing.

BB: Yeah.

GK: There was an organization called, uh, Prairie AIDS, and back then there was such a stigma that we couldn't hardly go out and have events because probably no one had come to them. So we tied up with this organization on Prairie AIDS. It was several Jewish mothers that we got involved with, and they would have events for us, you know, soup suppers and different things, earn money, and funnel it to us.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And then we would use the money. And we bought, when we bought this house, they helped us do that. We had absolutely no, at that time, no funding whatsoever. And it was all done by the gay community who gave us money and with Prairie AIDS.

BB: Yeah.

GK: I mean, we did it on our own. We didn't, I really don't know how we did it because we had no money.

BB: Yeah, yeah. So when did you buy this house?

GK: Oh, I think it's right here on the plaque. I'll look and see, right here. I can't remember. There was over 400, there's over 4,000 hours that were turned in. See, my son died in '90. I would say '92.

BB: '92, okay.

GK: '91 or '92, right in there.

BB: Oh, would it be, yeah, 1993? That's...

GK: Yeah, exactly.

BB: This article says dated in '93 right here.

GK: Yeah.

BB: Okay. Right. So then, um, you said that you were one of the people that established this house. Um, can you take me back to when you did that? So what was sort of like the first step, whose idea was it to come up with the idea of making this house a location that we'd have?

GK: Well, all of us in a group, you know, not going back down just to the whole group that used to meet together. Once a month, we would have a meeting and, uh, several of them, we'd seen that people were needing housing because what was happening, when they would find out they were positive, well, they were getting sick, then they would lose their job. Well, if they lost their job, that meant they lost their house because they had no money coming in.

BB: Right.

GK: So we see that there was a great need for housing. And so we decided that's what we would do. So we found this house, and we bought it, but then we had to really, we tore it apart.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And I think that's why that article says '93. I think that's probably when maybe the house opened. I'd have to read that to make sure.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because we worked on it for two years. Because I worked on this house every Saturday of my life for two years.

BB: Wow.

GK: Getting it...

BB: So when you say working on it...

GK: Up to code. We had to get it up to code.

BB: Got it.

GK: We had to knock out walls, you know, so that we could make them, like, one of them was a living room, we had to turn it into a bedroom.

BB: Sure. So did you guys do all that construction yourself or...

GK: Yes.

BB: ...Did you have to, like, hire outside work?

GK: No.

BB: Wow.

GK: Well, to my knowledge, we had a, one of the, uh, ladies, so one of the mother's husband was an architect. And so he did the drawings for us. And we had to bring everything up to code. You know, like we had to have fireproof doors. We had to have this, we had to have that, so, you know, we had to do all of that.

BB: And why, right here on, like, in Champaign specifically, was there a reason why, you know, I live on campus, it was not, did not take me long to get here. Was that intentional?

GK: Well, here's what we wanted, and it's changed a little bit since then. We wanted it on a bus route, which it still is.

BB: Yes.

GK: We wanted it very close to a grocery store. Well there used to be a large grocery store there.

BB: Okay.

GK: Now it's no longer there, but they still can go to, um, it's a drugstore over there where it sells...

BB: Yeah, I think there's, yeah, there's Circle K.

GK: Yeah, there's one. There's places where you could buy milk or something like that.

BB: Sure.

GK: But that was our main, and we wanted it close to downtown.

BB: Yes.

GK: So they could walk, and there were things that they needed downtown.

BB: Amazing. Wow. All right, well, so this kind of leads into my next sort of question. Today's a Saturday. You mentioned that for like two years you were spending a lot of Saturdays here.

GK: Every Saturday.

BB: So can you just walk me through what a typical Saturday looked like for you back in, you know, the early '90s when you were working with GCAP, like, what was a Saturday and what on those weekends where you were, you know, making this house what it is?

GK: Well, we usually would show up here, like, probably around 8 o'clock in the morning, and sometimes we were knocking off plaster, sometimes we were pulling off wood, and as we got further along, then we were painting and just doing all the things that we do to convert a house. And then, um, Michael's Catering. I don't know whether you've heard that name before. Michael Catering every Saturday we were here brought us box lunches. And I would say, on the average, there was probably maybe...12 of us that came every, every Saturday and worked on it.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Sometimes there was a few more and a few less. And there were four of us. As a matter of fact, the names are there on the plaque. The four that were the head people that got this going.

BB: Wow. And so how did that volunteer work fit into your day-to-day life? Like did you also have, you know, a job and all that stuff?

GK: I'm self-employed.

BB: Okay.

GK: So I've been in business for over 50, well, about 55 years. I'm a painter and a wallpaper hanger.

BB: Oh, okay.

GK: So that kind of went along.

BB: Yeah, right.

GK: And I was raised with a hammer and saw because my whole family was contractors.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And one thing that I think is really something neat is the fact that this was the first house in downstate Illinois.

BB: Really?

GK: Yes. We went to Chicago and visited a couple of them up there, kind of get an idea of what we needed to do here.

BB: Sure. Wow.

GK: But that's kind of an accomplishment.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And we did it all without any government funding.

BB: For sure. So being the only house in downstate Illinois, have you guys ever encountered problems where you didn't have enough space for people?

GK: Well, we definitely could use more space.

BB: Yeah.

GK: We could use more space now. The sad part is, a lot of people think that AIDS is gone.

BB: Yes.

GK: Because of all the medication...

BB: Yeah, PrEP and all these others.

GK: They don't realize thousands and thousands are being diagnosed every single day. People just, they think, they just kind of got hardened to it. Because now there's so many medications, they hear about all the medications, but they don't understand the expense that goes along with those medications.

BB: Right.

GK: They're not cheap.

BB: Yeah. My gosh. Um...so for this project, um, one of the biggest things I've been doing in terms of research is archival research. So I've been going to the Student Life and Culture Archives. They have, you know, boxes of old pamphlets and things like that from, um, from GCAP's, like, sort of early days. One of the ones that really stood out to me for the purposes of my project. I have a picture of it that I'd be happy to show you. Um, but it kind of goes along with the quilt. It's like right on here. It's this Names Benefit Concert that was about displaying AIDS quilts made locally for the Names Project dated Saturday, October 15, at 8p.m. Do you, were you ever at this event?

GK: I have, uh, my son has a panel there.

BB: Yeah, so, um...

GK: That was, what, two years ago?

BB: Well, this one, I believe so, yeah. So were you at this concert specifically?

GK: Oh yeah, yeah.

BB: So do you remember, you know, what that event was like? Is there a specific moment that stood out or?

GK: Oh, it's really something when you walk around and see the quilts and you read the history of these quilts about the individuals and everything. It's really...

BB: Because they have one at the Spurlock Museum right now, which I got the opportunity to go.

GK: I was the one that arranged that for them. They used to be stored here in a closet.

BB: Really?

GK: Underneath those stairs there. And it's just gonna be a matter of time 'till they were just, they were gone.

BB: Sure.

GK: Those need to be stored in spatial temperatures and everything.

BB: Right, right

GK: So, we got the idea of asking Spurlock if they would work with us.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And they were thrilled, they were thrilled to death to do it. Matter of fact, they put on the quilt display.

BB: Yeah, no, and on that topic, I was there last month because they have the display going right now. Um and I understand in my research, Greg Downey was your son.

GK: Yes.

BB: So that was actually the first quilt that they showed us.

GK: Oh, really?

BB: It was, yeah. And it really stood out because one of the reasons they showed it was it was the only one, at least they had on display, that had actual pictures of who the person was.

Um and I understand in the research, you were the one that made Greg's quilt. So is there any sort of specific moment that stands out for you when you reflect on making the quilt, doing the actual work of putting it together?

GK: Well, to me, it was just putting him in memory, you know?

BB: Yeah.

GK: It's for other people to see.

BB: Definitely.

GK: And, yeah, I don't know whether you realize, and I'm not sure exactly what year it was. We brought a portion of the quilt here.

BB: Of the, the, like, the...

GK: The big part.

BB: The national one, yes.

GK: And when we did, we did everything, you know, they have an opening ceremony that they do, which is very, very impressive. And I, I got to be part of that. And they open up just like they do, when it's shown, and then they have a closing ceremony, and I also organized, uh, well, I did one or two, I know I did one for sure, and I'm not sure, two times organized to go see the quilt in its entirety, and it'll never be shown in its entirety again.

BB: Yeah.

GK: The last time it was shown in its entirety, we organized a group and we went there because it is so large now that there's no way. There is no way.

BB: Definitely.

GK: But it still goes out, sections of it, so you can request, you know, a section, and if there's a particular quilt panel you want, like when it came here, I asked for my son's quilt panel...

BB: Yeah

GK: ...and it was there.

BB: Yeah. So, if you could walk me through that, so when you made the quilt, where did you send it off to? Was it sent off to...

GK: Well, you do two.

BB: Okay.

GK: You send one to San Francisco.

BB: Got it.

GK: And then there's one that's kept locally.

BB: Got it, all right. So then, um, one thing that always strikes me about the quilts is how different and unique each one of them are.

GK: They are.

BB: And, like, the Spurlock Museum, they do a really, really nice job of doing sort of these like testimonials and showing these videos.

GK: Yes.

BB: Um, I saw the one that you were in, um, sort of explaining, you know, why, so in some, they explained like why the quilt is constructed the way it is. For the one you made for Greg's, was there, like, how did that design idea come to you? Was it just...

GK: Well, I wanted a picture on there when he was a baby and when he was an adult. And that poem, and I, I had had that poem given to me, and for some reason, that poem just kind of stuck with me, you know.

BB: Yeah.

GK: To me, it just kind of summed up my feelings for my son.

BB: It's beautiful. I have it in my nose. It's beautiful.

GK: Yeah.

BB: Yeah. And so when you went through that, uh, when you went through that process, was there anything, um, because I remember in the video, you said something that was along the lines of, uh, "seeing it is still obviously difficult..."

GK: Oh yeah.

BB: "...but when you're actually physically making it, it felt, like..." Do you, I can't remember the exact words you used.

GK: Well, you know, when I was making it, I really didn't get emotional about it, why I don't know. I still get emotional when I see it now.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Sorry.

BB: Oh, take your time.

GK: Greg was a very special person. And, um, one of his requests, before he died, was he wanted to go see the AIDS quilt.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And it was in Chicago at McCormick Place. And we went there, and I had to rent a special—it was like a wheelchair but it laid it more back like a bed.

BB: Sure.

GK: So that, you know, so that he was comfortable, because he was in very, very bad shape when he went. I probably shouldn't have taken him, but it was something he really wanted to do. So he got to go to see the quilt. He said, "I wanna see the quilt."

BB: Yeah.

GK: He died there days later.

BB: Wow. So is Greg someone that you would go work and do GCAP events with or is this something that you sort of did separately? Um...

GK: Well, Greg wasn't around here. Greg was in Louisville, Kentucky.

BB: Right.

GK: That's where he lived.

BB: Okay.

GK: And, um, when he came back, when he, I seen that he, there's no way he was going to be able to stay down there. I brought him home, and then he used to go to the events with me.

But not very long because he didn't live very long.

BB: Oh, I see. Um, so when you first started getting involved, did you tell him, or is it just sort of...

GK: Well, he knew. That was one of his requests.

BB: Oh.

GK: Before he died, he said, "Mother, I want you to do one thing for me. I want you to be involved and do everything you can do because you're a strong person and I want you to make a difference because I can't.

BB: Yeah.

GK: So, here I am. All these years later.

BB: Yeah right.

GK: He died in 1990 and I've been...

BB: So, you've been working with GCAP, obviously, since 1990, it's 2026 now. So how has the work, has the work changed at all...

GK: A lot.

BB: ...from when you originally started? All right, so if you could tell me about that.

GK: Because when it was, when it was first, when AIDS first came out it was death sentence.

BB: Right.

GK: It was a death sentence. It's just that plain and simple.

BB: Right.

GK: Anybody who made it through it was a miracle.

BB: Right.

GK: And because my son, there was ADT and DDI, were the two, the first two medicines.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And he couldn't do it. He tried both of them. They started doing liver damage.

BB: Yeah.

GK: That was the end of that. So, there was nothing for him. Now today, they can live.

BB: Yeah.

GK: The medicine is not cheap, but they can live, and really, uh, the virus is being detectable. So, but the bottom line is, there is still no cure.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And that's what I hope I live long enough to see the day there's a cure.

BB: For sure. And so, when you do GCAP events, so, like, you know, today's Saturday, I don't know if you guys have any events going on, like what, when you do work for GCAP, today, like I know there's a mailing list, Jerry Carden, he was like he had cc'd me on different meetings you guys do.

GK: Yeah.

BB: So what does the work, day-to-day work, look like today? Like I know, obviously you said back in the '90s you were, like, building this house and making this place so what does the work look like today?

GK: Well, I take care of the house. Every time something goes wrong, I'm the one to make sure that it gets fixed and everything. And we still have, you know, we have events and everything, but mainly what we do now is take care of our clients. Now, we have clients other than people who live in this house.

BB: Yeah.

GK: We have several clients that do not live in the house. Some of them have lived in the house and then moved on. And we've really got some very good success stories. Matter of fact, I just was helping yesterday, one of them had been here for quite a while, had been here for a year and a half, he was trying to get back on his feet, get a job, well, he did, got a job. We got him an apartment, and we gathered up stuff from everybody. Furnished his apartment for him, you know, and we've had several real big success stories.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because a lot of times when they come here, I mean, they have nothing. They're lucky if they got any clothes to even bring with them.

BB: Sure.

GK: So... It's... it's very rewarding to see...

BB: Definitely.

GK: ...when we've made a difference in someone's life.

BB: So one thing, obviously, we talked about a lot about how, you know, the medicine is advancing, and it's becoming much, it's no longer a death sentence right away, so to speak.

GK: Right.

BB: If someone gets an HIV diagnosis now, but cost is something that I noticed you kept mentioning. So is there any work in particular that GCAP does to address that, or is there any just...

GK: Well, there's really not a lot we can do.

BB: Yeah.

GK: The price, you know, with drugs, the price is what the price is.

BB: Right.

GK: But now, um, people are able, are able to come here of course. See, we have a food pantry there.

BB: Yeah.

GK: They can come here and get any kind of food that they want. Uh, we help with rent when people aren't able to pay their—for people away from here, that are HIA positive.

BB: Sure.

GK: They can't pay their rent. We help them pay their rent. We've helped pay medicine. There's even a couple of times where we had to pay towards their funeral.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And I mean, GCAP does, I can't even begin to tell you all the things that GCAP does.

BB: Right.

GK: It's an absolutely wonderful organization. It's too bad that more people don't know all the good work that's been done.

BB: Yeah. And why do you think that is?

GK: Well, people that are doing all this are people who really care, people who have been affected by it and want to make a difference.

BB: Yeah.

GK: I mean, our entire board, I don't think there's a single board member that we have that hasn't been touched by either a friend, so that gets your attention when, when, when there's something personal.

BB: Right. Because that's something I notice even in all the archival work. It's always very personal and the archival stuff that I look at where it's, it's the newsletters from back like when GCAP first got started, it was always very personal to the experience of the people that are a part of this. Um, I mean, I notice these posters behind you that are framed. Um, can you tell me about these? So, what are, what were these a part of?

GK: I'm not really sure where those came from. They were sent to us by an organization, an AIDS organization, and we liked them so well that we framed them.

BB: So is this sort of, like, obviously, I mean, it has, you know, GCAP all over it. "HIV's still out there." A lot of these posters. Um, I noticed GCAP, especially in its early days, there was a lot of pamphlets and things...

GK: Yes.

BB: ...that were set out that were sort of informational.

GK: Yes, and they used to take them to bars and everything.

BB: Oh, okay.

GK: And kind of sneak them in, you know? And same with condoms. They would sneak the condoms in, you know, because like I said, things have changed a lot.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Back then it was...it was really a taboo. It really was. And people, they didn't want any part of it, I think. If you don't know anything about it, then maybe it won't happen, you know?

BB: Yeah. So when you say they would sneak in these pamphlets, were these just like information packets on how to...

GK: They were little things that they'd hand out and they could fold them and put them.

BB: I think I saw them, were they called like "Safer Sex..."

GK: Yeah and they were tiny and they could put them in their pockets.

BB: Yeah.

GK: No one else would even, you know, it's not like a handout, great big pamphlets for everyone to see. You just have this little thing and it told all the ways to, you know, to protect yourself.

BB: So, when you say they would, like, do it with condoms as well, like, sneak them into places, was this sort of like a coordinated thing that you would do?

GK: Oh yeah. Everybody knew, they could always come to GCAP, and in every event we ever had, there's always a big large jar of condoms.

BB: And so, uh, was there any bars in particular that GCAP would want to like stake out or...

GK: There was the one on Chester Street.

BB: Okay.

GK: Chester Street Bar.

BB: And was there a reason for that, or was it just because it was popular?

GK: A lot of gay...

BB: Yeah.

GK: Going out there. It was just a real good place to... We had drag shows, they've done drag shows for us for...to help finance different things.

BB: For sure. So, when it comes to, obviously, building this house was a group effort, you said you looked at houses in Chicago to sort of...

GK: Yeah, to see how they did it.

BB: Yeah, so if you can tell me about that, like, were those trips you went on together as GCAP, like, what were those?

GK: Two or three people went up there.

BB: Yeah, and so would you tour these houses or what was it like?

GK: Yeah, just two of the houses, see kind of, get an idea from them, how, how they were established. And, see, not only did we have to do a house, we had to get all the policies and procedures and all of that. And that's where Prairie AIDS came in because they were really involved with us, so we'd have meetings, and there's a gal from, she since passed away from the Health Center, that worked with us and we made all the rules and regulations for this house.

BB: Yeah. So, Prairie AIDS, that's something that's come up a lot.

GK: Yeah.

BB: Can you tell me what that is?

GK: Well, that was the organization. Well, it's no longer in existence. That was the organization that I told you was, kind of, the organization that everybody, that was okay, you know?

BB: Oh, okay.

GK: That was the Jewish, most of them were Jewish women.

BB: Oh, that was Prairie AIDS. Got it. Okay. I didn't realize that was the same thing. So, um, was Prairie Aids, because I know you said you, like, looked up in the phone book when you first were getting involved in AIDS advocacy. So was GCAP where you went to first?

GK: Yes, and then...but then I found out about Prairie AIDS.

BB: Got it.

GK: But I went to GCAP first. But unfortunately, both of the women that were really involved and helped us a lot. They've both since passed away, but there's a lot of work that went into it, you know, because like I said, you have to have rules and regulations, and we met, we met at least every week 'till we could get everything lined up. Of course, I was involved in that too. So, that's, I'm so glad that we're getting a lot of this written down because there's only really two

people around here that, there's some surprise mother individuals, but the main two people that know about GCAP is Jerry Carden and myself.

BB: Yeah. No, I mean, even doing the archival research, it was, like, I can tell you, I went to, so the Student—I don't know if you've been there before—but the Student Life and Culture Archives it's phenomenal. They just have boxes of all the local organizations. I asked for the GCAP box and there was like three things in it. Thankfully, there was an alumni who she did a ton of research on GCAP way back in the day and her alumni papers were stored there. So that's where I got the bulk of my archival research because she had like folders upon folders of different pamphlets and, like, financial statements and all these things from GCAP, but the actual GCAP box itself had maybe two or three pamphlets in it...

GK: That's sad.

BB: ...and there's not much online. And so that's...

GK: Jerry Carden has been—I can't say enough about Jerry Carden.

BB: I know. I mean because he originally, like, I, he's been, he was instrumental in making this happen. Oh yeah. He was phenomenal. I did so much research on him for this project.

GK: And, you know, he was the first chair of GCAP, too.

BB: Oh, that I did not know. Okay.

GK: Yeah, he was first chair of GCAP.

BB: All right.

GK: And he was one, see, GCAP was in 1980. What's he was? 1984, right? '84 for '85.

BB: That would line up with the dates that I saw.

GK: Right along in that. And he was one of, you know, 'cause he was losing friends, and they knew they had to do something, you know. They had to find out. So that's why they started meeting. They'd meet and then get anything, they'd get their hands on to read and they'd share with each other because back then we didn't have the internet.

BB: Right, exactly.

GK: And I was like, people, a lot of people don't realize that, you know, we didn't really have a lot.

BB: Right.

GK: It's just knowledge of people that knew. You know, Jerry lost a lot of his friends. I did too. I mean, I almost had to pull away for a while because it seemed like I was going to a funeral every month. I mean, people are just dying right and left, right and left, you know, just it was so heartbreaking. But that has stopped. I haven't gone to a funeral for someone who died of AIDS in I don't know when. Which has, that's wonderful.

BB: That is, yes.

GK: But I'll say, it was, it was just, it was a very dark time. It really was.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Of course, I live in a small town—Monticello, a little old tiny town.

BB: Right.

GK: You know, and I made, I made it public. I mean, there was all kinds of articles about me in the paper, whether you've seen any of them or not. There's been a lot of them. And I thought, if I can't say my son died of AIDS, and I've accepted it, how can I expect other people to understand and accept it?

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because I'm very well known. So, and people told me, said, "Georgia, when I've heard it happened to you," said, "you, it made me think, if it happened to you, it could probably happen to me too." You know? So...

BB: Yeah. Did you have any reservations about, sort of, going public? You said you're from a small town. Was there ever any...

GK: Nope.

BB: When you would pop up in the paper, was it scary or...

GK: Nope.

BB: No?

GK: Nope.

BB: Not at all?

GK: Not at all. Because I figured if people judge me for that, and they want nothing to do about, with me because of that, they probably wouldn't have anyway.

BB: Yeah. So when you mentioned that sometimes people would approach you and say like, "oh my gosh, if it this has happened to you, it could happen to me," um, how does that feel when people, you know, say, is it comforting? Is it?

GK: I feel like I've done the right thing.

BB: That's good.

GK: I feel like I've done the right thing to speak out.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And every time I would go and give a talk, whether it be into school, wherever it was, there was never a time that afterwards, someone did come up to me and say, you know, "my cousin died of AIDS," or "my uncle died." Every single time I spoke, someone would come to me, and it had touched their life.

BB: Right. So is there any, when you do these talks, is there any one that, like, a moment like that? Is there any one that stands out above the rest of someone approaching you?

GK: Not really just.

BB: No? They just blend together?

GK: They all, well I'll tell you something, but really, this goes back to the AIDS quilts, something, and I will never, never, never forget it. When we were viewing the AIDS quilt, there was just one panel, and on the bottom of it, the note said, "I tried and tried to get a hold of your parents to tell them what happened to you. Maybe someday they'll walk by this and see." I have never forgot that.

BB: Wow. And where was that?

GK: Washington, D.C. That was D.C. when they had the quilt...

BB: On the Mall?

GK: Yeah. You can't imagine what that was like to see that quilt in the Mall.

BB: Yeah.

GK: It was unreal. For one monument to the other monument.

BB: Yeah.

GK: The only president that ever went to see it, that I know of, was, um, Bill Clinton.

BB: Yes, I think that's still true.

GK: Bill Clinton and Hillary were there, and I'd seen them. And what was the vice president's name?

BB: Al Gore.

GK: Al Gore and his wife, the four were there.

BB: Did you, like, speak with them, or was it...

GK: No, but I knew they were there.

BB: Yeah. Wow.

GK: And then, to my knowledge, that is the only...

BB: That's still true, I believe too. Yeah. Um, so that was, do you remember what year that would have been? It would have been in the '90s, obviously.

GK: Yes, it was.

BB: Yeah. Um...

GK: I even, at that time, which...or maybe this next time. I can't remember if it was at that time, it wouldn't have been because we wouldn't have marched against him. We marched against one

of the presidents, and I can't, I've never done anything like that, but they wouldn't even acknowledge AIDS. I can't remember which president it was.

BB: One of the Bush's?

GK: It was one of the Bush's. I think it was Bush Sr.

BB: Okay. So that would have been early '90s.

GK: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, wow. So were you in D.C. when you did that? So walk me through, was that...

GK: I've just never done anything like that my whole life. I'm not a protester.

BB: Yeah.

GK: I'm not. But that was, I mean, they weren't even acknowledging anything.

BB: Right. So is that, was that something that GCAP was a part of or was that something you did individually?

GK: Well, GCAP was a part of it, but I mean, there were thousands of people. There were thousands marching. It was really something.

BB: So do you remember where were you in the, where were you in front of, like, the White House?

GK: Oh, yeah.

BB: Yeah, wow.

GK: Yeah.

BB: So, when you go to events like that where you're in, you know, the nation's capital, surrounded by thousands of other people, like, what did that feel like? Because it's something that...

GK: Well it's a feeling you can't really...It's just hard to...to express what it was like to see.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And when I was, when I was looking at my son's quilt, all the, and you could tell they were mothers and fathers, were all around at the different quilts and everything, and it just...it's just...a feeling you don't forget.

BB: Yeah.

GK: A lot of times, the parents, they realize there's other parents, because I did this too. They just go up and hug one of the parents, you know, one of the mothers hugs another mother.

BB: Yeah. Incredible.

GK: I hate that people don't realize it's still a problem. It bothers me.

BB: Yeah. And so, do you have any thoughts as to why you think that is today?

GK: Well, just time has gone on and, they've, medicines have been developed.

BB: Sure.

GK: Which is making people live longer, so people just kind of turn a deaf ear to it, you know, if, uh, well, there's medicines and everything. You just take a pill, everything'll be fine, you know, well, that'd be nice if that's the way it was.

BB: Right.

GK: But it's not quite that way.

BB: So, is there any work that you've tried to do, like, personally or with GCAP to sort of address that? Like, I know we, you said, kind of from the beginning, education was always GCAP's sort of goal. So, in this age now, where it's, I know you, you keep mentioning in the early days, like without the internet it was very difficult to get things across. But in this age today where, you know, we do have the internet, but then, you know, the medicines are advancing. Um, has that sort of changed or affected?

GK: It has changed and we've had a lot of articles in the paper too. You know, GCAP has had articles.

BB: Sure.

GK: Talking about the advancement and...there's a lot of medicines now. A lot of them, I don't even understand, 'cause I just knew the first two, and they were not very successful.

BB: For sure.

GK: And there's very few people that were infected at the very start. There's still a lot that are still alive.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Who's done there? And I had a grandson who's 21, he doesn't even know it, you know, other than what I've told him about AIDS. The younger generation doesn't know.

BB: He's about my age. Yeah.

GK: They don't know.

BB: No, I mean, I will, I mean, just, like, even when I told you, I went to that event at Spurlock, that was with a class actually. It was a...

GK: Oh yeah?

BB: Yeah, it was with one of our class. I take a, it's sexual communication class.

GK: That's what I used to speak to.

BB: Yeah, at the university. And so, um, that was the class that we went with, and I will say even among my peers, like, obviously, I, do a lot of research on this stuff, so I, I would say am more educated on the topic than the average 21-year-old, but it's like a lot of my peers like...

GK: They have no idea.

BB: They didn't even realize, like, some of them didn't even realize that women could get AIDS and it's like, oh, there's just such a lack of education among my, like, my generation, like people that are younger. Um, do you like, do you hope to sort of start doing, you know, speaking to classes like that more again?

GK: Well, I would, anytime I've been asked to speak I have. And so does Jerry. He and I were the Speakers' Bureau—well we were part of it. There were others too, but we went everywhere.

Like, it was real connected with the University of Illinois because of sex education classes.

BB: Right.

GK: Every, every semester, we would speak to one of them.

BB: Right. So, does that still happen or have you not done that?

GK: No, I don't think it happens anymore.

BB: Okay.

GK: Whether they've just quit doing it or what, bringing speakers in I don't know.

BB: Yeah.

GK: I have not been asked in a long time.

BB: So do you remember when, 'cause you said you would go like every semester, do you remember a specific time when it would, when it started to decline, where you were no longer...

GK: I would say about five years ago.

BB: Okay, so, oh, around the, so, 2020, around the pandemic?

GK: Yeah.

BB: Okay.

GK: Yeah. I don't know, Jerry still, I don't know but Jerry hasn't said anything to me about speaking anymore, so I don't...

BB: Yeah. So, do you think the pandemic played a role in that?

GK: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure.

BB: And why do you, do you, why do you think, I mean it'd just be speculating, but why do you, do you think there's a reason why the work hasn't started up again?

GK: Well, because probably I haven't been asked, but, you know, as you said, your generation and generation is coming on. I don't think it means that much to them, you know?

BB: Yeah.

GK: They don't see their friends dying of it, you know? So, you know, they're... We're kind of hard to it, I guess.

BB: Yeah.

GK: It's been here, now there's medicine, and people are living, and, you know, it's easy just not to think about it anymore.

BB: Yeah.

GK: But if one of their family members showed up with it, they'd start thinking about it real fast again.

BB: For sure.

GK: I don't even know, I don't even know of anyone who has been diagnosed in the last few years with AIDS other than the ones I see coming here to the house.

BB: Sure, sure.

GK: But I'm just saying outside. And there's still, there's still a certain amount of stigma with it, but it is so much better than it was. There's no comparison because it was really bad. I mean, people, well, in Indiana, there was a family that got it through blood transfusion. They burnt their house to the ground.

BB: Oh my gosh.

GK: I mean, that's why we didn't even tell. When we started a Champaign house, this address was never given out. Never even out.

BB: Right.

GK: So, no one around here even knew what this house was.

BB: To this day, do you think that's true? I mean, 'cause I didn't even know that this was...

GK: I don't think very many people know to this day. We don't advertise it.

BB: No.

GK: This address is never to be put in an article, but I, we were told, a couple of times it has, somehow, it's got into something, but we do not normally. But we've never, I will say, we've never had any problems, and I should knock on wood, you know, we've never had any problems here.

BB: Yeah. Because I noticed, like, obviously, even walking in, there's a lot of security cameras and all that.

GK: I had all of them put in.

BB: Yeah, oh so you were the one that...

GK: They're right up there on that tele—

BB: Yeah, oh my gosh. Um, so in terms of security, like...

GK: We just did that just for our own protection. Like the other day, somebody tore out our, you notice the brick out here?

BB: I did notice that.

GK: On this side, they got it this last week, we found, we put off the camera, found out who did it, went to them, and they've already come and fixed it. This one, we did not find it because our camera didn't quite get it good enough, so we had another camera installed. Now we've got it. Now if somebody hits them again, we'll know.

BB: Yeah. Was it just like vandalism, or was it?

GK: No, I think they hit it with their car. They pulled in and that's what he did over here.

BB: Oh.

GK: He pulled in, and the funny thing is, he wasn't even supposed to be in this on this side of the house. He was supposed to be two houses down. They had the wrong house.

BB: Yeah.

GK: But we got his vehicle, we knew who it was, the whole nine yards, and it got fixed within 24 hours.

BB: Wow.

GK: Because we told, we said, we will not, we don't want to cause problems. We will not turn it into the police. But if you come fix it, but if you don't fix it, we're turning it in. Because we had it on camera.

BB: Yeah, I know.

GK: And we have the cameras inside the house too, just only in the common areas. Because when you have that many people living together, some of them will say, "Well, Johnny did this or he did this." We can look on the camera, and we'll see if Johnny did what they said he did, you know? So it's just for our protection.

BB: For sure.

GK: And really for the people in the house. It's for their protection too.

BB: Yeah. Because the people that live here, is it, um, I know you said you were kind of the one that like upkeep the house. Is it largely just like they sort of keep to themselves or is it...

GK: Well, no, they communicate with each other and most of them, they got jobs and they have duties in the house. We give them duties about cleaning the bathrooms. Each one has their own thing, "you have to take the garbage out." We give them things they have to do, but as far as charging them anything to live here, they pay nothing.

BB: Yeah. So, have you ever had any problems? Has the house been able to stay relatively like private and under the radar? Have you had any, like, I know you mentioned, sometimes the address does get out, like, have you ever had any, you know, protest issues or anything like that happen here?

GK: Nope. There hasn't been anything hateful said to us or anything.

BB: That's great.

GK: And our house looks nice. You know? It's not run down or anything.

BB: No, not at all.

GK: It's very nice.

BB: Because when I pulled up, I was like, "am I in the right place?" I was like, it was just a house. I was like, "is this an office?" Yeah. Um, so just sort of, I guess, in closing here, Jerry Carden, that's a name that's come up a lot. He put us in contact with each other. Um, but the reason he did, he described you as one of GCAP's "most dedicated and active," that's a direct quote, "volunteers to date." It's been almost 40 years or over that since the organization was founded, so after all that time, what keeps you coming back, especially since you've, like you mentioned, like, you know less and less people you know are dying of it. What keeps you...

GK: The promise I made to my son. He made me promise that until the day there was a cure, I'd be involved.

BB: Yeah. And so, until that, even if a cure were to come out tomorrow...

GK: I probably wouldn't stop.

BB: You still wouldn't stop?

GK: No. It's been a big part of my life. It's something I feel like that I have done that is an accomplishment. Very few people know how much time. Most of people, a lot of my friends don't even know how involved I am. It's not because I'm ashamed of it. It's just I don't feel the need to say, well, I did this and I did that.

BB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GK: I'm not that kind of a person.

BB: For sure.

GK: So...

BB: So, when it comes to...something you mentioned is it's unfortunate that you know, GCAP's history isn't better, you know, documented and people know these things. So, if someone were to be doing, you know, research into the organization, 10, 20, 30 years from now, what, above all else, would you want people researching it in the future to, like, know about this organization?

GK: How much of a difference we made.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Because we have made a difference. It's amazing when we go, uh, we set up tables with different events and everything. It still amazes me how many people will say, well, "how did you know about GCAP?" "No, I never heard of GCAP." It still blows my mind that a lot of people still don't know about us.

BB: Yeah. I mean, I didn't know about it until very recently when I was doing very tailored research on local organizations. Um, I guess something that is interesting is there's this weird, it's like on the one hand, you want people to know about it, and then you also mentioned, like, privacy is like super important. Um, is there, do you ever feel a tension between that? Is there, like, is there ever a concern if the organization is too public? You would get backlash or...

GK: No, not really.

BB: No?

GK: Not really.

BB: Not at all?

GK: Because I feel like, I don't know. I think people that found out about us, some of them, might not understand what we're doing, but then a lot of other people might be happy because maybe their family's been touched by it. And you, uh, we actually, uh, have seven counties that we, that we help. I don't know whether you knew that or not.

BB: I didn't know it was seven. I knew you helped, I knew it was bigger than just, like, Champaign.

GK: Yeah. Yeah, there's seven counties.

BB: Wow. Amazing. Um, and so how many people, like, obviously GCAP's very volunteer funded, so my understanding is there's like a board of some sort, just how does that sort of organizational structure work?

GK: Well, we have, I'm chairman of the board.

BB: Okay.

GK: And we have meetings every month.

BB: Got it.

GK: Our executive director will come there and fill us in on what's going on and everything, and we, of course, find out what our finances are and what's going on there and everything. And we've been very, very lucky that for a not-for-profit organization that we've been able to sustain financially. But I told you, I kind of worry with the government right now, you know, all the cutbacks and everything, I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop when we'll be cut off.

BB: So, have any of those funding cuts hit you guys?

GK: Nope, no haven't hurt us yet. Our governor, though, is in very big support of, you know, organizations that are helping.

BB: So is a lot of that funding primarily from the state or...

GK: It's state.

BB: Okay, so it's not the federal government.

GK: Well, we get some from the federal, mainly from the state.

BB: Got it.

GK: And then, uh, we get help, you know, from other, some local organizations now too, you know, some local grants.

BB: Yeah.

GK: Like city Urbana. We get money from them. So, we've been, we've been pretty fortunate, really.

BB: Yeah. And this, you know, you mentioned, like, obviously, it's a different political time we're living in with all these funding and stuff like that. Have you felt a shift in these past 10 years when, you know, we started like the past 10 years have been a very politically unique time in this country. Has GCAP felt that or is the work...

GK: Somehow we've, we've made it through it. I don't know how, but we've made it through it.

BB: That's terrific.

GK: We have individuals that have given us some pretty fair...we had one man who left us his estate. We get several thousand dollars every year from that estate until, well, 10,000 to be exact every year.

BB: Was that someone that lived here or is that...

GK: Yes, it had been very, been very active with GCAP, been a real good support of ours.

BB: Wow. It's wonderful.

GK: So, I mean, we've had different ones step up and give us money.

BB: Yeah. So, if you were to...you said, you know, the work never stops with you, like, even if there was a cure tomorrow, you would continue doing it.

GK: Probably.

BB: Um, is there any, sort of, like thing you'd want to tell people that, you know, have never been involved in GCAP, but even if it doesn't affect their personal lives. It's something I noticed we talked a lot about here is it seems like when AIDS touches you personally, you feel the stronger connection to it. Is there something you would hope people would do like, would you? Do you know people that AIDS hasn't touched them personally would get involved with more before, you know, it touches their personal life? Is there anything you would want to say to the people out there that it's...

GK: Well, I don't know whether it'd do any good because it seems like in life we kind of float along our own little world until something hits us.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And then it changes things for us. I don't like, I don't expect my friends to, uh, be a big supporter of GCAP. They've been a big supporter of me and helped me and talk to me and everything, but it's just kind of hard unless you haven't been affected by it in some way.

BB: Yeah.

GK: It's like anything else, you know? Anything, you know? Cancer.

BB: Sure.

GK: A lot of people: "what's cancer?" Cancer's a word, and until it hits them. And then they realize. I think that's the way with anything.

BB: Yeah.

GK: And as time is going on, it seems like it, like I said, it's just people have kind of forgot it.

BB: Yeah.

GK: But...but it's there. If you've been doing research, you know the figures. I mean, it's, it's still there.

BB: It is.

GK: People are being diagnosed every day.

BB: Yeah. Well, thank you so much and we'll be off, uh, the record now.