

THE BODY AS AN ARCHIVE

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VISUAL AIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript: River Huston + Glammy Rose Spencer

Recorded: July 23, 2022, Santa Monica CA

[00:00:02.840] - River

My name's River Huston. I've been HIV positive for--that I know of--for 32 years, and I live here in Los Angeles, California, with my little dog, Bruno.

[00:00:39.190] - Glammy

I am Glammy Rose Spencer. I've been HIV positive for 10 years. I'm a proud HIV positive transgender woman. I'm 36 years old, and I live in the Bay Area, California.

[00:00:54.490] - River

She's my new best friend.

[00:00:56.850] - Glammy

Yes.

[00:00:59.820] - River

We have been talking all day about so many different things. And I think I would just like to... I'd like to start on some of the things that I wanted to ask that I didn't want us to get into because I wanted to wait till now. Some of those things really were about... One of the things... I'll bring it to me, then I'm going to bring it to you. One of the things that I struggle with as a person living with HIV was always being put in the HIV box. And also for me, being thrown into the white and then perceived straight woman box. And that is just how we're perceived. The boxes are checked off. I felt like that a lot of my life was breaking out of those boxes. And one of the ways that I broke out of those boxes was through art. I wanted to be, just be a creative. That's who I was. That's how I identified, as a creative person. And I wanted to be seen as a creative person. That's how I felt most comfortable. I was a I was a writer, I was a performer, I was a painter, and I was a photographer.

[00:02:35.300] - River

That's my comfortable skin. I wanted to ask you about what your journey was as far as where your skin took you.

[00:02:46.240] - Glammy

Oh, gosh. I think I always wanted to be an artist, and I always was an artist. I would always be drawing when I was a kid. I just loved art so much. I wanted to be an artist when I grew up from a young age. Even now, just wonder, what is an artist? In my classroom, it says, "You are an artist." I'm a middle school art teacher, and try to get kids to stop questioning themselves and facilitate space where they make art and they feel like artists, and I call them artists. But even now, it's like, how do you embody it? What does it really mean to make an artist? Are you still an artist if you're not full-time artist? In terms of the journey in my skin, it's still a journey as a transgender woman. I had no representation growing up. My first time

I... It was like Maury Povich show. Then the first time I saw a trans woman on TV was on America's Next Top Model, and they treated her like dirt. It wasn't until much later in life that I was able to say, I am a woman and realized...

[00:04:05.140] - Glammy

I was always like, I was kind of suppressing my own femininity. As I said earlier, when I finally did let it out, it just came out hard, and I was just like, Oh, nails, glitter, makeup, everything, pink, everything. My room is all pink. Everything's pink. Part of it is like,

[00:05:02.700] - Glammy

In our country, I knew that my revolution included me being femme and me being proud. But I wasn't able to say I'm a woman until I was 30 years old. Now I'm 36. I guess it was six years ago. And part of that is just deconstructing what it means to be a woman.

[00:05:37.590] - River

What did you feel that you... What did you call yourself?

[00:05:44.600] - Glammy

I don't even know.

[00:05:46.360] - River

Because I relate to that. I relate to... Even though it's completely different, it's completely different. But it's like the world always wants to define you. The world wants to check off boxes. And it's also we wanted to find ourselves somehow to have something to hold on to, to somehow find a path to go down that gives you direction. One of the things that I say is that I just didn't have a map. I didn't have a map. I didn't have a manual, nothing to give me anything and to look at me. Well, now that I'm in my element, which is like, I will get nuder if it happens because I love being naked. But normally, I look like a vegetarian cookbook author. I look like someone's... I used to say mom, now grandma. No one would ever suspect the life I lived. And one of the things that I have found in my 60s, and it's only recently, is what a treasure I am. What a gem. What an amazing human being. It took me a long time to get here, but it's not defined by any limits, by any definitions. It was, I think, when I let all the definitions fall away, that I became free.

[00:07:28.590] - River

In some ways, for me what I call the juice. I define the juice, my femininity, the juice to walk down the street and have heads turn. When heads stopped turning, which was about 15, 20 years ago, that when you walk down the street and no one looks at you anymore. At first, it's really confusing because I was cute, I was adorable, and then suddenly that's gone. Then you go through these phases of mourning and grief. Then you reach this spot of, and like I said just recently, of freedom. I don't think I've ever been happier. I think at other times in my life, at other times, I have said, I don't care what people think, and a

million other things. I love my body. I love the way I look. I didn't. But I can say now that the truth is I really do. I really don't care what people think, and I really do feel free. But I can say that the one constant thing through it all, through everything, has always been the art. The poetry in the beginning was the cathartic thing that saved me. It was the thing that also made me very controversial.

[00:09:21.330] - River

I was named (Bucks County, PA) Poet Laureate, and I wrote a poem about living with HIV and still wanting to have sex. And it really was the word "fuck" that caused the uproar. It was said three times in the poem, and they wanted me to take it out of the poem, at the ceremony where I would get the award. And I said, Okay. And the week before I was given the award, they asked me to go to the Young Woman's Christian Association to read a poem. And this was before they knew anything about me. I had just been awarded the Poet Laureate, and I read a poem about what women really want. When I got to the courthouse to get this other award, they wanted to see the copy of the poem. When I showed it to them and I said "fuck" in it, they said, "You can't say this word in this courthouse." And I said, "All right, all right, I won't say it." And they said, "You promise not to say it." And I said, "No. Okay, I won't say it." And so I go in, I do the poem, I don't say "fuck." And there's still an outrage.

[00:10:54.050] - River

There's an outrage because I think what the headline said was something like, They found the topic of AIDS annoying. I have always turned all that shit around into humor. And so, of course, in the end, I made jokes about it. I don't think I was really as hurt with anything. I was always shocked that people would get so upset about it. But I think I just had to just keep moving forward with it. And then later on, with the poetry, I turned the experience of them being upset with my poems into a one-woman show, *Sex, Cellulite, and Large Farm Equipment: One Girl's Guide to Living and Dying*. That included doing a condom demonstration where I got indicted by the District Attorney in New Jersey. Those were my two things in the show, as well as a husband who died. Well, he committed suicide as he was dying of AIDS because they wouldn't go in his room to bring his food because they were too afraid. They were too afraid to change his sheets. And so he killed himself. And this whole like history. I feel like I lived through a war. I just lived through a war.

[00:12:36.010] - River

And the art saved me. And as we talked earlier, the humor saved me. And so that's been my journey. And you said earlier, what is an artist? And what does it mean? And I think, in my opinion, and I'm glad that you have it in your kids' classroom, you *are* an artist if you say you are, right? If you say you are, then you are one. And I really believe that. It's not about making money or making a living or anything like that. It's just simply about creating. I feel that the journey to freedom is taking away definitions of who we think we should be or who we think the world thinks we should be. Tell me a story. Tell me even-

[00:13:35.570] - Glammy

I have questions for you, but I also like your story, brought up so much about my story, too. I think... We're talking about how art and how humor has been by our side.

[00:13:55.000] - Glammy

I'll say when I seroconverted 10 years ago, something bad happened to me. And I was really shocked. I was an AIDS activist for years. In my head, I was only having safe sex, and I didn't think that I would get it. And it was before PrEP was available. And when I got it, I wasn't sad. All I could do is just crack jokes. I was just like, joke, joke, joke for three days. The way I told people, I was like, "You want to hear the positive news? Did you hear the positive news?" Then I got this HIV tattoo, which is so stupid. But when life gives you AIDS, make lemonade. I have my little pink lemonade tattoo. Hopefully a camera can see it. If not, we're good. Humor has been such a big part of me coping with everything in life, and it still is. I would say it's my primary tool, I think, for both of us. It just comes naturally. It's just how we deal with everything, which is one of the reasons I was so excited when we got paired together is just similar maybe dark senses of humor that is just how we deal with the world.

[00:15:09.840] - Glammy

I will say that art has also really been there for me. I started drawing stumps as a metaphor for people who I had lost before I seroconverted. Then when I became a HIV positive, the only thing that... I was grateful that I had an artistic vocabulary to communicate what I was going through. Maybe as I was processing HIV, I made a red forest, or lately, I've been making paintings out of my own blood, or this one, specifically to remember trans women that I've lost, added glitter eye makeup on top of it. I feel grateful that I had art by my side, and it was so weird. I also just happened to study art and AIDS in college. When I found out I was poz, I just looked around my room and laughed. It was like, well, I'm already obsessed with AIDS. But I felt really grateful to be, I guess, grounded in a history that I think you lived through that I just had read and learned about. I guess I still feel... I guess in my work, the trees are the elders in the poz community or people who've been living with it in a long time.

[00:16:49.340] - Glammy

The sprouts are the new generation. It's like, how are they all in conversation together? So much of my work is about grieving. Unfortunately, even though I wasn't... I was born in '86, and I seroconverted in 2011, 2012. I have just experienced so much loss, and so much loss of HIV positive people, transgender people in my community. It just feels constant in this way. Even COVID, it's like... I guess my question for you is if you can speak to, I guess, art and grieving and how you deal with it. How do you do it?

[00:17:46.530] - River

Yeah, it's a funny thing. Well, not really funny, but... Okay, I'll tell you an AIDS joke. You tell me AIDS joke, okay? Here's my AIDS joke. I loved your AIDS joke. You already told one. I actually used to do AIDS comedy in the comedy clubs. I'd start like... I found out I was HIV positive in my last year at college, and the audience would look really like, "What the fuck? This is supposed to be comedy?" And I go, "I know, I know. But you know what's worse? Dating. But I found a great way to date, at least for me. I use a gun. Say you love me. Say HIV doesn't matter. I always have safe sex. I take out the bullets." Anyway, I got fired for my very last speaking job a few years ago for that one. AIDS and gun joke. Anyway, and no consent. Rape, AIDS, and guns. Anyway, I was always totally incorrect. But my grieving, the reason I bring that up is my poetry is so dark. It's so dark. I did end up speaking for 28 years at colleges around the country on sexual assault, sex positive messages as well.

[00:19:27.150] - River

What I didn't realize when I was talking about sexual assault was how many times I'd been raped because I didn't consider them rape. I was raped when I was 14 by six men over the course of an evening and then thrown out of a vehicle into a ditch naked and left to die. I was found because a dog kept barking. It was February in Pennsylvania, and I was rushed to the emergency room. There was no counselor. This is 1974. No counselor, there's no... But it was called. No one even asked me if I was raped. I mean, all I remember was the doctor looking at me with disgust on his face. My mother with disgust on her face. Then I was sent to a therapist who told me I had a problem with men and he could to help me with that, and I ended up giving him blow jobs. And then from then on, I don't know, I don't know how many times, the technical definition of rape, probably nine or ten, twelve times that I was raped. And my bar was the six men beating me up and throwing me in a ditch.

[00:20:53.880] - River

That's rape, right? Just because someone puts a pillow over your face and has sex with you and you're really drunk, is that rape? I mean, you didn't break your nose, right? Or just because you say no and they have sex with you and it's over in a minute, is that rape? I don't know. Is it really? And yeah, it's all rape. It's all rape. And so my poetry reflected that, and it's really freaking dark. And then people started to die. And... Everybody. Everybody died. Some people, they just love so much. You just couldn't believe. They were really young. They were really young. And then they just were never coming back. And then there were colleagues, and they were friends, and there were people you knew of, and they died. And so I wrote about it. That's how I dealt with it in my poetry. And my poetry was so dark and so hard to read that I had to make jokes in between the poems. So it was very... What is it? When negative and positive?

[00:22:39.440] - Glammy

Discombobulated.

[00:22:40.550] - River

Oh, okay. There's a thing they say for positive of a negative couples. But anyway.

[00:22:46.520] - Glammy

Serodiscordant.

[00:22:47.320] - River

Yeah, it was discordant because I'd be like, tell this terribly dark poem, and then I'd tell a joke. It was how I coped. Writing for me was so cathartic. I have a poem called "The Goodbye Girls," and each paragraph was for one of my girlfriends that died.

[00:24:59.920] - River

It lets it all out. When I'm painting, I feel like I'm... I don't know if other artists feel this way. When I make a painting, I go, "That's beautiful." I always say that. Every painting I make, I just go, "God damn it, that's beautiful." I'm probably the only artist who just loves every painting I make. I don't think there's a painting I make that I don't think is fucking great. I have to try and check my ego at the door. On Facebook or Insta to not go, "Is that just fabulous? Have you ever met an artist greater than me?" But I really try to be humble and not do that. And so, yeah, to answer your question, art saves me, baby.

[00:26:30.280] - Glammy

I want to thank you for just being so vulnerable with me and with us, whoever is watching this. Just sharing, I feel so grateful that we're in conversation together and that I get to talk with you and really inspired by your journey. There are certain things like... I have also experienced sexualized violence, and it took me a long time to name it as rape, and I just feel really empowered by hearing you talk about it. I also like, art has been there for me throughout everything. I think that's how you know you're an artist. It's like, you just can't not make it. You just... When I don't make art, I'm just not okay. I'm just not happy. I have shared that I lost a lot of friends and the tree stumps or whatever the metaphor I've used, but I also guess I want to talk about two portraits of my friend Emma and my friend Simon, who are both really important to me. That Emma, I lost over four years ago I know. And Simon, I lost a few months ago. I think sometimes for me, when I'm grieving, I also just need to start by painting their portrait.

[00:28:13.700] - Glammy

I don't even know if I'm like... I'm not like you where I'm like, "I'm the best artist in the world." I'm more of the self-deprecating kind. But I'll start by just sitting with their face and painting them and painting how I remember them. They're both two really important friends to me who now I consider my ancestors. I just can memorialize people. Art can be this way where... I created a mural at the high school I was working at. At this school, I lost eight students. In different years. Actually, one was from another school, so seven students. It's like, "How do you grieve? What do you do in those moments?" For me, it's like, Get the chalk. We're going to make some chalk murals right now. Then we created like a... Got some kids together, we created a memorial mural in a garden with herbs that support with grief. It was really beautiful and powerful to be painting alongside kids as we're grieving and healing and painting together, and crying and laughing and all of the things that comes with grief, but really just have a place to put it because it doesn't make sense. It's like, "Well, what do you do?"

[00:29:57.320] - Glammy

Art can just be a site of remembrance and can be really powerful and important. Simon was a good friend of mine who was also a lover or like a former lover. We weren't currently seeing each other, but we were friends. When I, seroconverted and came out to them, they responded by just flirting with me and sexting, and it was the best response. Then when they seroconverted, I just reached out and offered love and support. But it doesn't get any easier. It's still so painful in it, and it hits you in weird ways. You think you're good. And then all of a sudden, I was crying for hours on my drive here because I was just processing it. Especially with capitalism, having us, it's just like, I'm working, I got to hold it together for kids, but also we're humans. I don't know. But I'm grateful to have art by my side. I will say, too, it has saved my life as well.

[00:31:41.410] - River

Yeah. I think we're lucky in that way that we have something... Not everyone has this. And in reality, when we let ourselves be free with art, like people a lot of times, will ask me to teach art to adults, and I'm not into it. Just so not into it. I have taught art all over the world, and only my favorite group is preschoolers. They are the best abstract artists in the world, and they also love their art as much as I love mine.

[00:32:22.990] - Glammy

They don't second guess it.

[00:32:24.030] - River

They are like, "Look at what I made!" They love it. I, I just feel like when we let ourselves do that, it is the most healing space to go when we're in pain. It's such a... And then the plus side of it is you've referenced Simon a couple of times, and every time I just look up there. That painting will be forever in my mind. I'll think about him. I love that you use the word ancestor. Because I mean, I've never thought of it that way for the people I lost. My family was not that great. But my friends were fantastic. They were the ones. They were the ones that just loved you to death. Just they got you, and they just loved you. It sounds like Simon was that person. One time, I was dying in the hospital. I don't know if you ever had a friend that makes your pain and suffering, they love that drama, right? I'm dying. And my husband, I had a husband once. I had several, actually, but they all died. I didn't do it. Anyway, he was a good one, though. He was, I'm dying, and this person called to see how I was doing.

[00:34:16.520] - River

And he puts his hand over the phone and he said, "It's so-and-so." And he goes, "Should I just tell her you're dead?" I go, "Yeah." It was such a great moment. I love having people in my life that at the worst moment in my life that can make me laugh. At the worst moment in our life can just... I loved what you said. You want to hear the good news, the positive news?

[00:34:57.550] - Glammy

They were not. They didn't laugh. When I told them, they were like, one person crying. I was like, It's okay. It's okay. It's going to be okay. You know the HIV meds have come a long way. It's not a death sentence. All the things were...

[00:35:16.810] - River

When I used to tell people when it hadn't come a long way, and they would break down. When I would tell people I was positive, they would cry, and I would comfort them. It's okay. You'll live. I thought it was hilarious. But I try not to laugh for their sake.

[00:35:39.130] - Glammy

Oh, my God.

[00:35:40.710] - River

You'll be okay.

[00:35:42.820] - Glammy

I was surprised when I found out I had HIV, and the doctor had never told anyone before. I was just in for routine blood work. I have had risks, and this wasn't one of those times, so I thought, until I realized what had happened. He was like, I've never told anyone this before. I was like, "You're doing great." He said, "So are you."

[00:36:12.710] - River

The lady that I told, the lady who told me, she cried. I was handing her the tissues. Do you need these?

[00:36:25.010] - Glammy

I got STD tested with a partner years video, and they were like, "We have something to tell you. You're HIV positive." I'm like, I know. I don't have my intake form. I'm like, I've been positive. They're like, "Oh, okay, bye." I actually feel this way with a lot of... There's a lot of... These days, I feel like a lot of money and a lot of attention goes into prevention. And once you're already living with HIV it's like... Yeah, it's just like, okay.

[00:37:03.740] - River

Well, in some ways, though, I do have to say that I never took advantage of anything. There were a lot of services. There are a lot of services for people. Back then, anyway, there were a lot of services. I never did support groups. I didn't go on disability until I became unable to get out of bed, which was... When I was in Mexico, I literally I couldn't walk, I couldn't see, and I couldn't take care of myself anymore. And that's when I went on disability. And then moving in to this place, this is literally an old age home for people with HIV. I found out all these services that I had no idea existed for everything. I have a social worker now, and she calls me up at Christmas. We have for seniors with HIV, now they're getting real specific. Seniors with HIV, we have a \$500 grant for you if you would like to buy a piece of furniture. But it was so every single thing for a person with HIV, every little, I don't know, service that you have has so much red tape. I finally I gave up on the piece of furniture.

[00:38:31.690] - River

It just... Nothing was right. I said, "Never mind. I don't want it." But the best thing that I got out of all of everything during the pandemic is I met a group of women. I call them my girls. They are long term HIV positive survivors with mental health issues on Zoom. And I reference them a lot. I did this monologue for a play, and I referenced them three times. I have to say my long term HIV positive women's group with mental health issues, Zoom group. I always get it wrong. But I never knew what support was until I met

the these women, and we're all so different. We are all so different. I do not miss a Wednesday or Friday. I can't miss it.

[00:39:39.040] - Glammy

I love that.

[00:39:39.860] - River

I adore them, and I just feel so loved. I feel so completely, totally, unconditionally loved. I went to AA for a time, and they say they love you there unconditionally, right? I went and told my mother that, I said, "Ma, in AA, they love you unconditionally." She goes, "They do not. I don't even love you unconditionally." I'm like, oh, my God. But I experienced that there.

[00:40:18.920] - River

I don't know. It seems like you've experienced it.

[00:40:24.940] - Glammy

I don't always love institutions. And there was a support group at the doctor that I saw, and it just wasn't... It was just too clinical. So me and a bunch of friends would hang out in the park. And it was our own little support group. And that group saved my life. We saved each other's lives so many times just by being there for each other, giving each other meds when we run out of meds. I don't know if it's always... I feel like all poz people, it's whenever bureaucracy is preventing you from getting your meds, your friends come through. And that's how we keep each other alive sometimes. But also just being there for each other in hard times. I needed to speak with people who just understood what I was going through.

[00:41:18.330] - River

I agree. I didn't always think it was important until my HIV-positive long-term survivor with mental health issues woman's group on Zoom because it was just like, oh, my God, they really get you. My psychiatrist is on the group, too. He's gay, and he's very feminine gay. I don't know how you define that. He's the love of my life. He doesn't talk during the group, but he wears a curler. He's the most... I've never had a doctor that I have his home number, I have his text, I have his cell number. I could call him 24/7, and he will respond immediately. I've never had a health professional like that in my life. If I need a prescription, if I need help, he will get me through the system. I've had to fire hundreds of doctors. I'm not even exaggerating. The insults that I've had to field, and I bet that you have had to deal with a bunch of assholes as well, and idiots, and uninformed people. Would you like to comment?

[00:42:54.580] - Glammy

Yeah, I think there's so much to speak to with that. I have a lot of medical trauma at this point. Doctors, I think before I went on meds to get me to go on meds, they would use really intense scare tactics of people dying of AIDS to try to just scare me into it, which did not work for me. I don't like being told what

to do in general. I did go on meds, and I'm glad I did. I just... I, I have really small veins. So when they are drawing my blood, sometimes they'll assume--I'm poz--they'll just assume I'm an IV drug user and treat me like shit. And it's like, even if I was an IV drug user, IV drug users deserve dignity and respect. Not to mention just a lot of doctors are not trans-informed. I actually think it's really important. I still think we have a long... Even in 2022, we have a long ways to go in having testing and prevention and care be affirming for trans people and trans people living with HIV. Trans women, especially trans women of color, are at higher risk of HIV. A lot of it is changing the life conditions that put trans people at higher risk in the first place, the lack of employment opportunities, and just put us in higher risk situations.

[00:44:25.820] - Glammy

But a lot of it is just the materials doesn't speak to us. The amount of times I've been tested, and my doctor, not, but they just don't register my body. They're like, "Oh, well, do you want a pap smear? Are you pregnant?" I don't exist. I think it's really... Now, we were talking earlier about, I just finally got a monkeypox vaccine, and we're seeing all these parallels. I'm really activated with the monkeypox because it's this new disease that's affecting men who have sex with men. At the Bathhouse in Berkeley, where they were handing them out, which is cool that a bath house is handing them out, but they were prioritizing people who were paying to get in the club, and so the community put pressure on them to change it. But who gets into the club? It's cis gay men with money. If you're not a cis gay man with money, you don't get access to this vaccine. A lot of, especially trans people, are at just as high risk, but we're not being studied on, we're not being reported.

[00:45:29.820] - River

I mean, we're in different clubs, but the same treatment. My joke is I was always assumed to be a prostitute and a junkie, a whore and a junkie. I'm like, "Yes, so what? I was. Fuck you! I'm also a PhD, bitch!" But the thing was that it was just the lack of respect, so much disrespect, and also dismissive, and no information to give me because I was not of... I just was not of the main group that they were used to treating with HIV. The book that I wrote on women and HIV, all the women had just the same kind of treatment--dismissed, just dismissed, and their symptoms, dismissed. They can't tolerate the dosage of the drugs, dismissed. I fought 15 years not to take the drugs. I didn't want to take the drugs. I feel at this point, after 32 years of becoming very involved as a very proactive patient, as a partner with... That's why I love my psychiatrist. We're partners. We are straight-out partners. He has actually been a doctor as long as I've been a patient. So we both agree that we're on that same level. I am a professional on this.

[00:47:12.290] - River

I know about this. I've been to every international conference on HIV/AIDS since Germany, in the beginning. I've spoken at most of them. I've been involved. I've been an activist about getting women into clinical studies. They didn't want to put women in clinical studies because we complicated the study design. Just the general treatment, the general treatment, the shittiness of it. Why don't women want to go see the doctor? Because you know you're going to be treated like a piece of garbage. I thought it was only me, but it's not. If you're outside of a certain population, you're just so alone with it. You think that you're insane. You think, I'm taking it too personal. I'm nutty.

[00:48:09.180] - Glammy

I'm curious about, just like the book you wrote about women with HIV, and I think you've already spoken to it, but what inspired you to write that book, and why did it need... Why did those stories need to be told?

[00:48:23.130] - River

Well, at the time that I wrote it, the treatment, it was actually in 1996 was when HAART first came out, and that was the first hope that people might actually live. It was the first... That people were actually being resurrected from the dead. Up until then, you were just going to die. Now people who were on their deathbeds were being resurrected. But the idea of the book was these women are going to live and die, and no one's going to know their story. I just wanted them... Here's what bothered me the most was, and this is why I got involved with this oral history thing, was that someone else was going to tell their story the way they wanted to tell it, instead of having them tell it the way they wanted to tell it. And in the book, I wanted to be as true to their story as it was. I typed it as they spoke it, and I edited it with them. Anything they said they didn't want in it, I took it out. Anything they wanted to add in it, I put it in. I wanted it to be their story, truly their story.

[00:49:42.830] - River

That's why I wrote it. One of them, to leave something that was hers because so many women died, and we didn't even know. Back then, if you came out positive, your husband could lose his job. If you're a straight woman, your kids--Ryan White, you know? I wrote it because it just had to be written. One of the things that has happened to me a lot is I offend people. I just do. I offend people. It's like I feel unsteady in the words that I say. I don't know. I don't know what the right thing always is to say. I only know my own truth. I can observe things, but how can I walk in your shoes? I could sit with a group of women of color. I've had many times when we're putting a conference together because it's mainly women of color that I have sat with, with women in HIV conferences. And I've listened, and I, I felt like just treading lightly, sit back and listen. Just try to listen. Try to understand. It was like saying things to you earlier. Can I just ask you a few things? I thought, ask you some things because I'm not sure.

[00:51:18.090] - River

I don't want to fuck up. I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. I just want to know.

[00:51:25.530] - Glammy

It's interesting because I don't know if we talked about this on camera. You did a little bit how even before cancel culture was a thing, you were canceled by just the press just for saying the word "fuck." Did that affect your career at the time?

[00:51:44.160] - River

Well, changed courses, whereas I was an educator, and I was very proud to be going, I went to colleges and high schools and middle schools and prisons. I went everywhere to talk about not just HIV, but safe sex, eroticizing safe sex, communication. All that was gone. No one would let me in. They'd actually... I'd

show up, someone would hire me, and I'd show up. The PTA would get wind of it, and they literally would have parents lock arms around the school, so I wouldn't be going in.

[00:52:18.650] - Glammy

Oh, my gosh.

[00:52:19.720] - River

So I was canceled before there was social media, and so that's why I had to do a one-woman show. They can't... In entertainment, you can get away with a lot more. But now, you can't. Now, you can and you can't. But it's gotten a lot narrower. My jam is come up, comedy. I love comedians, and I have loved comedians. I love comedians, and I know that I want to say to people who are offended by comedians is like, it's comedy. This is what they do. The comedians are like... If they made people upset, they did their job because they...

[00:53:20.600] - River

I know, but they created a conversation.

[00:53:23.180] - Glammy

I'll let you speak and then I have a retort.

[00:53:24.870] - River

They created a conversation. They got people yacking.

[00:53:29.840] - Glammy

Yeah, That's true. I think humor is the most powerful thing as we talked about. It's how we grieve, it's how we deal with the world. I think humor can subvert. It can be also a really powerful tool for subverting systems of oppression. Getting people to laugh at themselves can be one of the most effective tools for change. But I also think a lot of humor can reinforce systems of oppression. And it's like, do you really need to make that the butt of your joke, especially if that's outside of your own experience? In my opinion, it's just not funny.

[00:54:09.730] - River

And that I agree. I always feel... I can make an AIDS joke. I have AIDS. I can make it.

[00:54:16.900] - Glammy

We can make AIDS jokes and Jewish jokes until the sun goes down. Oh, my God.

[00:54:22.120] - River

But I also could make some straight white men jokes, too.

[00:54:26.950] - Glammy

Right, yes, but they have power.

[00:54:28.020] - River

I would make... But I wouldn't make gay men jokes. I don't really know gay men jokes.

[00:54:34.230] - Glammy

I might.

[00:54:35.920] - River

But you might, I don't know. Let's see. I wouldn't do Presbyterian jokes. No, I wouldn't do Evangelic... I wouldn't do... What other jokes would I do? I wouldn't do Trump jokes, honestly. I wouldn't do it because it's too divisive. When I'm doing a joke, I want people to have fun and have a good time. I don't think that it serves a purpose. I did one time, one time, very weirdly, I was in Idaho, and I was doing a comedy show. I have done actually straight on out comedy, and I don't know why the hell these people hired me. I'm in Idaho, Iowa, not even Idaho. Idaho would have been better. I'm in Iowa, and I'm in the front row. I think George Bush was running against Al Gore, right? And I don't even remember the joke I made about George Bush. It just came out of my mouth. I think it was during when they were doing the Hanging Chads or something like that. And no one laughed. There were a few giggles, right? And I thought, oh, that show didn't go great. And then the next day, the ladies who hired me were driving me to the airport, and no one's really talking and everything.

[00:55:57.360] - River

Then the one lady turned around, she said, "You know, you're really funny, and we're Republicans." And I don't know why that struck me, but it just did... I guess it is this. Okay, I know I'm rambling. You'll probably have to edit this. But the reason I say all that is that I learned it wasn't that funny. It had no purpose. If I'm making jokes about politics, which is so divisive... There are two camps these days, or maybe three or four, as far as politics go. I'm preaching to a choir of mine. I'm going to make someone angry. I'm not making a point. Do you know what I mean?

[00:56:56.140] - Glammy

I do know what you mean.

[00:56:57.140] - River

And so I just skip it. So someone's making jokes about, say, if they're not trans, and they're making jokes about trans people.

[00:57:05.180] - Glammy

Which happens a lot.

[00:57:06.130] - River

And they do. Or they're making jokes about AIDS, which always slightly pisses me off. I want to say, someone made an AIDS joke the other day, and I thought I could improve upon that so much better. I can't even remember what it was. But it's just like, stay in your lane when it comes to comedy.

[00:57:30.230] - Glammy

One thing that we were talking about, we were talking about people we've lost, and I've referred to them as ancestors. I'm wondering, have you communicated with people that you've lost before?

[00:57:48.510] - River

Yeah. Well, I had mentioned to you earlier. There's rings of people that that have died. And the one, I guess the one that always, Donald Ray Huston, the person who probably gave me HIV, not that I hold a grudge or anything like that, but we were in a rock and roll band together, and then he died. And I, at one point, changed my whole life and went back to college and started to get really into fitness. I was just a runner. I just ran, ran and ran. And I taught, back then it was aerobics. I taught aerobics, and then I gave massages, and then I ran. Then I compulsively cleaned my apartment. Then one day this lady came over and she said to me, she bought a friend who was a psychic, and she's like, 'Someone is trying to speak.' And I'm like, and she says, "No, he wants me to tell you to give a smooch to the pooch." And I'm like, "That's what my husband always said to my dog." And I'm like, I just was... I never... What? And then she said, "He wants me to tell you to stop running and start writing."

[00:59:36.490] - River

And I did. And I wrote songs, and I wrote poetry, and they effortless became books. And then I wrote for Poz Magazine from the very first issue for ten years. And nothing. Every book that I wrote was asked of me to be... I never sent in a manuscript. I... Everything was effort. It was like he's been watching over me. And the whole time that I wrote, the whole time, I just felt him there. I don't want to cry again, but I always just felt him. I just felt him. Almost like he was just sitting on this windowsill. I moved from New York to Pennsylvania. I just always felt him there. And then just one day, he was gone. And then there was my dad. My dad loved me so much. Not all of us get parents that love us. My dad didn't just love me. He admired me. When I cleaned out his apartment, there's just stacks of articles about me. He saved everything, anything ever written about me. Photographs and letters. He loved me so much. And when he died, we had him cremated. And when I was going through security, I was living in St. Thomas at the time, I had to go through security. It was the only thing, no carry on. Just me and my dad in the bag, in a

container. And TSA wanted to know what's in the container, and I just about lose it. It's my dad. And they wanted to put him through the machine. It was almost like, no. But I finally let him put dad through the X-ray, and I spread his ashes. He never got to visit me in St. Thomas, but I spread his ashes. He loved the idea that I lived on this island. He loved the idea that I was adventurous and wild, and that I lived this free and amazing life. He always thought I was amazing. And so I would walk down the street at night, and this light would blink on and off. And I swear to you, I always thought it was my dad. I always thought it was my dad. And then one time, I brought it up to one of my husbands, and he said, "Oh, that's a light sensor," right? But then one time, I was in a parking lot, and I was feeling exceptionally sad.

[01:02:53.150] - River

It was just on the road, alone in a parking lot somewhere in Florida. And I was just standing by my car, just so lonely. And all the lights in the parking lot, all the lights went out, just like that. And I thought, "Oh, it's probably a sensor." And then all the lights came on. I just felt so loved. I just knew it was my dad. So, yeah, I believe in ghosts.

[01:03:30.470] - Glammy

I believe in ghosts, too. I think I lit a candle after Simon passed, and it was flickering on and off completely. I was like, What does It doesn't mean. If I googled it, and it means the spirit's with you. I would say in other ways, through dreams for me, I'll just have pretty vivid dreams of people I lost in conversations that are really healing. When I was having surgery recently, and a surgeon was holding my hand, and I could feel it was like my grandma used to hold our hands, like everyone in her life, and I felt her with me. I think there's little ways, even the song "Running Up That Hill" by Kate Bush, which is trending right now because of Stranger Things, which is amazing because this is my song that I used to grieve my friend Emma and then my friend Diddy, who also passed this way. We would sing it together in karaoke, and she also passed. It's been this song that I've been grieving trans women to. I learned it on the piano. I will say music is also just an expression for me. I don't put music on the Visual AIDS registry, but it's a way for me to just get it out.

[01:04:59.920] - Glammy

Just seeing this song trend right now and seeing it everywhere, I feel them every time, to the point where I walked out and kids were on the playground, some middle schoolers who I would never expect, who never would have been Kate Bush fans, belting it at the top of their lungs and really feeling it, really feeling the words. I just feel them with me.

[01:05:27.550] - River

It's just too powerful to not be true. You know? So no one ever really does. I always hope that they're a better version of themselves because my husband was an asshole.

[01:05:55.020] - Glammy

I think it's good to not put... Not put people on pedestals, alive and dead. We're all humans. We all make mistakes. Nobody's perfect.

[01:06:08.540] - River

I truly agree with that. And that's why I love... I don't like funerals. I don't even like wakes. But I like memorials where we could be honest and just talk and laugh. It's important to remember people. I always joke about dying with all my friends. Everyone gets a will every year because I update it depending on how they behave. Everyone knows what's going to happen with all my shit. Everyone has everyone's phone number so that none of my art gets thrown out because it's so great. I... And it's only recently, recently, I decided I was going to live. The irony of that is that... I don't know if anyone does this with you, but when you have a disease like HIV, they'll say, "Well, you know you could get hit by a bus." Have you heard that one? Yeah. Okay. So whether I live the next five minutes, I know, or get hit by that bus, or in my family, where everyone lives to be 100, and I live another 32 years or wherever long, I decided that the next chunk of time, I stop wanting to die. I want to live. I want it to be a big art project.

[01:08:02.870] - River

I just want the next 32 years to be a huge art project. By accepting the terms of living in this apartment, which is phenomenal, I also can't make money, and that's okay. So that means I do everything for free, which is really an amazing blessing. Like, whatever you want me to do, sure, I'll do it. Just got to do it for free. Give me a gift card. No, I didn't say that. But it's just... I think death... I'm not afraid of it at all. My thought, actually, when I had a spiritual awakening thing about this death thing, I was like, "You know you're going to live. So why do every morning wake up hoping to die? Why don't you just embrace it? Give it up for God's sakes." And then it hit me. Oh, that was the lesson. Now you're going to die. I'm the person, if I'm getting a massage, and she goes, I feel a lump. I'm like, "Oh, what would it be stage four?" But now it's like, I don't have the gusto. Oh, I want to live. People will say, "What's your bucket list?" Or, "What do you want to do?"

[01:09:39.030] - River

I just want to have a day where I don't feel nauseous or have to chug Pepto. Or, I could just eat something without throwing it up, or I can stay awake later than 6:00. You know? That's all. But I feel... I don't know. I actually kind of feel hopeful. If any of my friends heard this, they'd die. They'd be like, "Who the fuck is that?" But actually, I have informed them all that I'm feeling hopeful, and they're happy for me. And you got to know me while I'm hopeful. You didn't have to know me, where I keep talking about my stage four cancer dreams.

[01:10:36.670] - Glammy

I grew up... I was so suicidal in high school. I don't think my family, who will probably watch this, knows that. I think so many queer and trans kids are. For me, so much of my mental health journey has been about transitioning and just being who I was meant to be and giving myself what I didn't have. But it is wild working with the youth now because most of the queer trans youth I work with are extremely suicidal.

Most of my friends are suicidal. It's just this thing where I used to I really spend all my energy trying to keep everyone alive. Then I think through program, have just admitted that I'm powerless over other people's life. That was really hard for me to just be like, there's actually nothing that I can do. There's so many people I care about that I want them to stay alive, but I know that it's going to be okay. No matter what happens, even if they are no longer alive, they will be okay. I don't know. I used to wrestle with it all the time, and I like... And I think just through accepting that, I've known a type of piece that I didn't know before.

[01:12:21.660] - River

Do you still feel suicidal?

[01:12:26.450] - Glammy

No, actually. I'm one of the least suicidal people that I know. Not most of the time. I have my moments, but no.

[01:12:35.640] - River

Me neither. It's really pleasant.

[01:12:38.880] - Glammy

Yes.

[01:12:39.660] - River

You know how people, they talk about going to sleep, counting sheep? I would go to sleep, counting ways to commit suicide. Then as I got older, I got more creative because I didn't want anyone to know I committed suicide. Getting a really powerful helium balloon, right? I get a gun, and then I tie the gun to the balloon, and I'd shoot myself, and then it would take the gun away. I could go on and on, but I won't.

[01:13:08.540] - Glammy

I see your level of dedication and fantasy.

[01:13:13.040] - River

I told you I'm creative.

[01:13:15.500] - Glammy

Have you tried painting?

[01:13:18.270] - River

I'm a great painter! I'm so good!

[01:13:23.230] - Glammy

You should try to writing poetry!

[01:13:25.460] - River

Did I tell you? I love my poems too. I can't get over how good they are.

[01:13:33.730] - Glammy

You're good.