

Episode 3: “Not Going Back” with Joey Terrill

YouSpeak Introduction:

Jasper: This is you speak radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by one institute and the outwards archive on Tongva land.

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Episode Introduction:

Madeline: My name is Madeleine. I'm an Asian-American high schooler from the Bay Area, California. I'm involved with my local Pride Center, currently working on producing a picture book for kids that celebrates queer history. In this episode, I spoke to Joey Terrill, a renowned artist who draws on aspects of his queer and Chicano identity to create beautiful paintings and performance art. We talked about the importance of seeing representation in the art world, his work documenting victims of the AIDS crisis through portraits as well as the many projects he's worked on as a director for the AIDS Healthcare Foundation. Lastly, we spoke about our own “coming out” journeys and how much progress the queer community has experienced since he was a child, creating a truly meaningful, intergenerational dialogue.

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Joey Terrill: AIDS brought out the worst and the best in human beings. I saw mothers and fathers reject their children because they had AIDS, even as they lay dying. I saw medical staff, whose career is to assist and help people, would not enter their rooms. But then, I also saw people rise up to the challenge in ways that, that I, I found very surprising and loving, and I like to think that I was part of that. Especially today, the LGBTQ community is a target, and I think that everyone has to come together as a chosen family and work together to fight this. I know I'm definitely not going back in anyone's closet.

Madeline: Thank you so much for sharing that. That's a good message. I'm inspired to keep preserving the stories of queer history because they're very valuable, and I think a lot of people in my generation maybe don't recognize that the work that you guys have done before. We should keep on talking about this and sharing it.

[MUSIC]

Interview Begins:

Madeline: My name is Madeline. I'm an Asian American high schooler from the San Francisco Bay Area.

Joey: My name is Joey Terrill, and I'm an artist. I live in Los Angeles, and I'm in my studio in Boyle Heights. In four months, I will turn sixty-nine years old. As far back as I can remember, I was always interested in art. Even as a toddler, I was already drawing and scribbling and then my father was an artist. He wasn't a professional artist; he was working class. He would paint and sculpt, and I grew up with his paintings on the walls and sculpture and furniture. Through kindergarten and first grade and second grade, I would work with my dad on things, and I thought, "Well, that's what people do. They make art," but I soon realized, "Well, no, not everybody makes art." But I always wanted to be an artist, so when I went to college, I majored in art.

Madeline: So it's something that's been a part of your life forever?

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Joey: Yes, it always has. Part of wanting to be an artist was also aligned with my absorbing popular culture. I loved popular culture. I loved magazines and comic books and and television. Back when I was young, we had three TV channels, and I would just absorb everything in magazines. Even when we go to the supermarket, I would love to look at the advertisements and illustrations. But I realized by the time I was approaching high school that I never saw myself— as a Latino, as a Chicano, as a Mexican-American— ever represented in popular culture. I certainly didn't see any gay or queer imagery that I could relate to in popular culture. That became my strategy for making art. I wanted to tell my narrative, tell my story, and investigate my two identities, being Chicano as well as being gay or queer and where the two intersected and where they clashed. That started me on my journey.

Madeline: So, art acts like, kind of, a vessel for you to express these intersecting identities.

Joey: That's been my strategy all along. Because of that, my work has been autobiographical. I've painted my friends, lovers, family, community. By the 1970s, late 70s or early 80s, once HIV or AIDS hit, my work started to become about the impact of AIDS on the gay male community. I was an activist, and my activism went into my art-making strategies as well. And, here today in 2024, I personally have been living with HIV for 44 years; never thought I was going to live this long, and I continue to make art that looks at and addresses my community, and now my elder community, because I find myself aging. And I'm thankful for that.

Madeline: Thank you for sharing that. What draws you to paintings as a style of art?

Joey: I was always drawing when I was a kid, with crayons and pencils and then colored pencils. When I was in sixth grade, there was these extracurricular courses that were being offered by a husband and wife: Mr. and Mrs. Provine. Mr. Provine taught art. Mrs. Provine taught music. I asked my mom if I could take those classes. She said, "Yeah, go ahead." And so that was my introduction to acrylic painting, and I fell in love. For about thirty years, I painted with acrylics. I was always weary of working in oils, for a number of reasons. It seemed like such a challenge to me, but in the year 2000, I took myself back to school. I went to Cal State LA and studied oil painting under the artist Tim Ebner. Since 2000, I've now incorporated oil as well as acrylic. I've always loved color, and I say that because some artists don't necessarily like color. That's fine. And Everyone has their own individual palette, and I appreciate artists who have a variety of palettes. But even today, I was working on a piece, and I was so involved in looking at the contrasting colors that I was using. It just makes me feel good. Whatever makes me feel good, I do.

[MUSIC]

Madeline: What are some challenges that you may have faced during your journey as an artist? How did you persist through these?

Joey: I really wasn't able to be "out" until about the age of 15. When I finally came out to my mom in high school, I came out with a bang. I was never in the closet. I really can't remember a time that I ever felt that I was somehow, closeted. In high school, I attempted to take a guy to the prom in 1973, and it was a Catholic, all-boys school. So you can imagine that kind of blew up and didn't happen, but that was okay. We all went out to a club and had a better time anyway. The challenges have been to be taken seriously as an artist. Back in the 70s, the art world, in general, was not open to queer investigation and art-making, even as some of the most famous American artists were gay or homosexual men I mean, from Andy Warhol to Rauschenberg. It was very, very conservative and patriarchal culture. The white male art was the predominant art that was being investigated, taken seriously, looked at and, of course, always from a Eurocentric perspective. So I would, I was rejected by several galleries over the years. Those were my biggest challenges. And, maybe just because I'm stubborn, I thought to myself, "Well, you know what? I'm going to keep on doing the art that I'm doing, and I'll just see where it goes." All these decades later, it's astounding to me that there's a whole new wave of investigation and evaluation of queer culture and imagery and art across the board, and museums are collecting my work now. It's been a long time coming. And so I don't take it for granted. I'm not one of these people that, got their MFA and then

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Joey: immediately were showing in Soho and making big money, so I'm very appreciative of where I'm at today.

Madeline: It's cool that you've seen how much progress has been made since you were in art school. I feel like my generation might sometimes take all the representation that we see for granted a bit, and it's important to recognize how much has changed.

Joey: I agree with you. I do think you take it for granted, but, I think if I was your age, I would do the same thing. You look at any programming, and there's so many options. You look at social media, and you are exposed to and have access to queer imagery, songs, music, paintings, events, so relish it. But always keep in mind, just as I have always done, that whatever progress has been made, it's because of the people that came before us. And I know as a queer youth myself, I really respected and looked towards the gay and lesbian elders in Los Angeles who would inform me and really help me with my coming to grips with my self-esteem and my identity. And that's why I'm really pleased to be part of this intergenerational conversation.

[MUSIC]

Madeline: Can you talk a little bit more about the art that you created of your friends during the AIDS crisis and why it was so meaningful to document these people?

Joey: By the time I was in my twenties, I recognized that I wasn't going to be a big famous artist. I wasn't going to be the Chicano Andy Warhol. As a day job, I determined that I would do work that I thought was important and meant something. I started out working in case management with the visually impaired um, at the Center for the Partially Sighted. When AIDS hit, the stigma, the marginalization, the vitriolic rhetoric that we all had to deal with was just horrible. It really meant that the gay, lesbian, transgender community, we had to come together and help ourselves. Because I was working at the Center for the Partially Sighted, it was important to me to contribute to this war on AIDS. When we saw our first patient who had AIDS-related sight loss, we needed to develop a program that was specific to the concerns of people living with HIV and AIDS. I always felt like our stories needed to be told. I remember being at a restaurant with some friends. Excuse me, um, and we had just come from a friend's funeral, and we were sitting there eating and talking about our friend, and at the next booth, there were some folks that were there, just having a great time, and they were laughing and, and jovial and talking. I remember thinking, "Oh, my God. AIDS is not part of their life. How do I make art about that so that I can get people to understand our humanity, our humanness?" I had always done portraits of friends and people, and I was doing portraits of people from Halloween parties that I used to throw in the early nineties. These parties were really fun. I would decorate the house for two weeks, it was so much fun, and it was a rebuke to all of the death and dying that was around us. Friends who were sick or weak— designers, musicians, artists, family members, friends— they knew that they could come and party and not have to concern themselves with their AIDS diagnosis. And of course, every year there'd be less and less people because they would die, but I sometimes would do paintings of people who had passed, and I just wanted to commemorate them. One project that I did in the late 80s, early 90s was a comic book that we made called "Chicos Modernos." It was illustrated by the artist Bruce Rapp. It was done through federal funding for HIV, and it was geared specifically to the Spanish-speaking, male hustlers and sex workers in Hollywood, many of whom did not identify as gay. And a lot of them were married or had girlfriends. And they thought of HIV as a gay disease, so it didn't affect them. Even if they were to choose to look at the information that was being provided at that time, a lot of the information was very clinical. It was updates on the latest science and clinical trials, of what was coming up for medications. With the comic book "Chicos Modernos," the characters educated themselves about HIV and gave good information and then listed phone numbers for resources. I thought to myself, "Oh, wow, this is great. I should be doing this. Why aren't I doing this?" About three months later, a friend from high school called me up and said, "Hey, do you know 'Chicos

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Joey: ““Modernos?”” I said, “Yeah, I do. I love that little comic book.” And they go, “Well, that’s our core program, and we want to do the second volume, but Bruce Rapp, the artist, is now too sick.” He was dying, so they asked me if I would do it, and I ended up doing– I’m sorry. I get a little emotional. I ended up doing the next three volumes of “Chicos Modernos.” It was wonderful. I think it really helped a lot of folks who wouldn’t have otherwise had the information that could minimize their risk, the risk to their families, their wives, their girlfriends, and anyone that they had sex with. When the comic book came out, the core program staff would go to Latino bars, and talk about “Chicos Modernos” and then offer them free to everybody there. The bartenders and staff would say, “You know what? We didn’t find any in the trash can. Everyone took them,” so we knew that we were successful in getting something that people weren’t going to be afraid of and that they could, you know, feel comfortable with. In fact, it was a Los Angeles County project, but we got requests and we ended up printing more to go to San Diego and Tijuana and San Francisco, the Bay area. Because of the Jesse Helms Amendment– Senator Jesse Helms was a right-wing, horrible human being– you couldn’t show anything in HIV prevention that showed or supported or indicated homosexuality. That was a challenge, but we got around that. Another project geared towards the Latino community was Viva, for gay and lesbian Latino Artists– men, women, trans, whoever was an artist, whether they worked in video, performance, or painting like myself. We produced a calendar, a *calendario*, that was similar to the calendars that you find in a lot of Mexican or Latino restaurants, *tiendas*, bakeries. Those were usually done with illustrations by the artist Jesus Delgado from Mexico, and they’re considered very kitschy but very popular visual imagery for Aztec and Mexica stories. I did one that was support our brothers with HIV. Instead of having the traditional Indio with the female princess, I turned it around, and I had two males. That was another way that we could get people to start to look at HIV and not be afraid of it and also indicate that we need to support each other. One of the series that I’ve gotten a lot of recognition for is my Still Life series. In 1997, I tested undetectable for the first time for the HIV virus. I always thought I was going to die because all my friends were dying around me. When the antiretrovirals came out, I immediately got on them and testing undetectable, it just blew my mind. But I felt so ambivalent: a) all these people around me had died; b) some of them took the same medications that I did. Why did they die, but I’m still alive? Most importantly, is that I was an advocate against the pharmaceutical industry and their price gouging for all of the medications that they were making billions off of. And this isn’t just related to HIV. Anyone who’s looked at healthcare systems in this country would know what I’m talking about. I couldn’t figure out how to do a specific painting from one image source that indicated all of my complex ideas about living in the age of the AIDS cocktail. What I would normally do if I was going to do a portrait of you, I’d look at a photo and work from one image source, but with this, it was a little bit different. I was sitting at my breakfast table with my Cheerios and my HIV medications, and I remember thinking, “Oh, this is this is kind of funny. It looks like a Tom Wesselmann still life.” If you’re not familiar with Tom Wesselmann still lifes from the 1960s, they were done to critique and celebrate American consumerism. I decided I’m going to do my own versions. I’ll do still lifes putting HIV medications in them, but queer-ize them and Mexican-ize them. So mine all start out with a foregrounded tabletop with a Mexican blanket or *serape*, and then I put a number of products and fruit and vegetables and foodstuffs that don’t necessarily go together. I wanted these still lifes to be, at the same time, familiar, but very enigmatic and mysterious, and maybe raise more questions than give answers. There was art about AIDS that was political *agitprop*, about grieving, *memento mori*. This, to me, was different. I wanted to do works that people could look at and maybe actually smile about and have some humor and supported the idea of life. I will continue to do those until I no longer have to take the medications or until there’s a cure or until I die, whichever comes first.

Madeline: Do you have a favorite piece you've ever created?

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Joey: I did this piece called "50 Christs" at Marc Selwyn Gallery in Beverly Hills. I took an image of one of my favorite Caravaggio paintings, "The Entombment of Christ," and cropped out the section that showed the dead Christ and the people that were bending over him, grieving. I did Xerox copies of it and painted them in different colors and then put them all together in the Andy Warhol tradition of repetition. I called it "50 Christs" because I stopped counting after I knew 50 people who had died from AIDS. I'm not talking about my clients. I'm not talking about the patients who died frequently that I was working with. I'm talking about my friends. I'm talking about my ex-boyfriends. I'm talking about the people that waited on me at restaurants, the people that I went to school with. It was just all around us at that time. By the time it was 50, I thought, "I can't keep track anymore." Every person— whether they were homeless, a drug addict, sex worker, a millionaire, an actor, famous or not— everyone deserves the reverence and empathy the way that one would consider the dead Christ. On some level, it was, it's very cathartic, very therapeutic for me. But I felt it was important to relay the fact that so many people died in such horrible circumstances without any love and support, except from their chosen families. The idea of chosen families in the queer community was never more important than during the AIDS crisis.

Madeline: Can you talk about your work as the Director of Global Advocacy and Partnerships for the AIDS Healthcare Foundation?

Joey: Back in 1986, there was a proposition on the California ballot, Proposition 64, sponsored by Lyndon LaRouche, who called for quarantining all people with HIV. The polls showed that 75% of the electorate would vote for it. The fear and stigma around HIV was so prominent and so heavy. And in fact, politicians talked about, that they could always reopen Manzanar, the camps where Japanese-Americans were interned, to place the people with HIV. That's how heavy it was. So I joined the Stop AIDS Quarantine Committee as a volunteer, and called voters, and urged them to not vote for it. We held rallies, and we won. We defeated it. The group then said, "We've got this great synergy. What are we going to do with this? What do we need?" So the group incorporated as AIDS Hospice Foundation and then worked to open the first HIV hospice in Los Angeles and named it after Chris Brownlee, who was one of the advocates. And I considered him a mentor, who eventually died of AIDS. Within a year or two, the AIDS Hospice Foundation reincorporated as AIDS Healthcare Foundation, providing health care and treatment for people with HIV and opening clinics. I worked for AHF about 20 years all together. I couldn't be a doctor. I couldn't be a nurse, but I was an advocate. We would do legislative visits up in Sacramento or Washington, D.C., improving access and education around HIV. I also was the activities coordinator at the Carl Bean House hospice. Within AHF, my last four years, I was director of Global Advocacy and Partnerships. I did not do it alone. I worked with some wonderful people as a team. We were covering five global bureaus, forty-four countries, 1.4 million people in care. Conference calls at all hours of the day with our African staff, our Asia bureau, Latin America bureau. Lots of traveling. I was able to visit Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Cambodia, China, Thailand, Mexico, Amsterdam, Haiti, Jamaica. It was always about meeting the other people who are living with HIV, and I could point out that I had been living with HIV for over thirty years, and I wasn't going to die. So if they took their medication, they weren't going to die. Many of them were young people, particularly in South Africa, a lot of young women and, and girls who contracted HIV or were born HIV positive. They had death all around them, so it really was important for them to hear, "Hey, you can get gray hair just like me. You can stay alive and have families and pursue your career and your dreams." In 2021, because my art career was taking off, I had to retire, so that I could focus on my art, which was like a dream come true for me. I've been living a dream, and I'm really thrilled. I like to think that I contributed on a global scale, helping people to continue their journeys to stay alive.

Madeline: That's amazing. I'm so impressed that the work you've done is so far-reaching. A lot of the times, thinking about the AIDS crisis, we only talk about what happened in the US, but you've really addressed the realities for people all over the world who have to deal with it. It's inspiring.

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Joey: It also really motivated my advocacy for the pharmaceutical industry and their price gouging because the same medicines that cost \$10,000 a year here were being provided for \$400, \$500 a year in sub-Saharan Africa and other countries because the other countries had the right to be able to negotiate lower pricing. In the United States, we don't have that. Until we provide a health care system for all Americans, we're just going to continue to have high death rates, whether it's infant mortality or people with diabetes or across the board. We could do a lot better in this country.

Madeline: I definitely agree.

Joey: AIDS brought out the worst and the best in human beings. I saw mothers and fathers reject their children because they had AIDS, even as they lay dying. I saw medical staff whose career is to assist and help people would not enter their rooms. But then, I also saw people rise up to the challenge in ways that, that I, I found very surprising and loving, and I like to think that I was part of that. Especially today, the LGBTQ community is a target, and I think that everyone has to come together as a chosen family and work together to fight this. I know I'm definitely not going back in anyone's closet.

Madeline: Thank you so much for sharing that. That's a good message

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Madeline: What advice would you give to young, creative people who want to become artists someday or are being told it's not a good career path?

Joey: It's really not a choice. Art chooses you. I never really wanted to go into medicine or law or any other career path. I always thought of myself as an artist. I would say for young artists, look at what is the concept or idea, and then determine what medium to use, whether that's performance, painting, installation, serigraphy, silk screening, drawing, ink. Look at all the other art that's out there. I've done this especially with some of my younger, Latinx colleagues. I say, "Go look at English portraiture from the 18th century. Go look at art from Africa. Go look at art from the 1950s. Go look at abstract expressionism." The more art that you look at informs you about your own identity and what you are most comfortable with in terms of your art production.

Madeline: Do you have any advice maybe you would give specifically to LGBTQ youth?

Joey: I would say that unlike families where you have your aunts, your uncles, your grandparents to be able to inform you and give your familial histories, as gay people or queer people, we don't always have that. We may be rejected by the people that we grew up with. Focus on developing a chosen family. I have a circle of friends that I developed in the 1970s when we were all in high school and in college. We used to go out and have fun and party and help each other and work through all the traumas. We are still friends today, and now we're coming together as chosen families because some of us are dying. It's been wonderful to see the amount of support that we give one another when somebody needs that support. Don't ever take for granted your chosen family. That is an essential part of having a fulfilling life and, dare I say it, a happy life.

Madeline: When I was growing up, I didn't see a lot of queer people in the media or in books in school or anything. I was just not exposed to those ideas, and I didn't really realize it about myself until high school. That was hard. To realize that what your parents expect for you doesn't line up with the life that you might want for yourself.

Joey: I don't want to make assumptions, but I have other friends who are Asian, and the pressure that they felt in their families to have certain levels of achievement not the least of which was to be able to, get married and have children, that was really strong. And it's similar in the Latino diaspora. Persons of color usually have a little bit more of a challenge at times. But congratulations on coming to your

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Joey: understanding of yourself at a fairly early age. I have met people that don't come out or identify as queer until they're in their forties.

Madeline: I definitely agree with what you said for people of color. Thank you for this conversation. I learned a lot about how the community mobilized during the AIDS crisis and all the different projects you worked on, especially expanding education about AIDS, access to health care, and going into the Latino community and making sure that people had the resources they needed. That's really amazing. I'm inspired to keep preserving the stories because they're very valuable. A lot of people in my generation maybe don't recognize the work that you guys have done before, and we should keep on talking about this and sharing it.

Joey: I admire you, for being involved in this intergenerational dialogue. It's a very rich history, and it's there for both generations. It's been a delight and a pleasure talking with you, and I think you've asked some very important questions. I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Interview Concludes.

[MUSIC]

YouSpeak Outro:

Jasper: This is...

Jasper, Milo, Kelly, Madeline, Charlotte, Ameer: YouSpeak Radio!

Jasper: We are Jasper Chen,

Milo: Milo Drake,

Madeline: Madeleine Lee,

Kelly: Kelly Hsu,

Charlotte: Charlotte Ly,

Ameer: Ameer Flores.

Jasper: With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by One Institute and The Outwords Archive on Tongva land.