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Interviewee: Pat Saunders

Interviewer: Corine Lehigh

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Abstract:

Pat Mastandrea Sanders was a hair stylist in Boston before moving up to advertising and marketing for 300 salons across the country. One fateful day she slipped on an ice cube and hit her head. Her life changed forever. Unable to work due to memory loss, Pat decided to give her time to various AIDS/HIV advocacy groups in the Lancaster County area. Pat worked with the Lancaster AIDS Project, Betty Finney House, and American Red Cross Foundation's yearly Oscar Party. She hand wrote hundreds of letters each year to celebrities requesting donated materials and the response she got was incredible. Pat also discusses LGBTQ in the Age of the Trump/Pence presidency.

CL: Okay so we're going to start out with some basic biographical information, just to get ya talking and then we'll move from there.

PS: Okay

CL: So, My name is Corine Lehigh and this is Kailey Zengo and we are going to be interviewing you for the LGBT Center of Central PA. Is that okay?

PS: Yes, that's fine.

CL: Okay, and what's your name?

PS: My name is Pat Mastandrea Saunders.

CL: Okay, and do you just want to tell us a little bit about where you grew up.

PS: Sure, I grew up in Bost, I was born in Boston. I grew up in the suburbs of Boston and I lived there until I was 24 and then I moved here to Lancaster.

CL: Okay, and your family?

PS: I have three brothers and three sisters. And...

CL: So, you went to your elementary school, what elementary school did you go to?

PS: Riverdale

CL: Riverdale?

PS: Riverdale in Dedham, Massachusetts.

CL: And is your family still live up there in Boston?

PS: All but one, but one brother

CL: Okay and where did you go to high school?

PS: I went to high school in Canton, Canton High School for two years, and then I went to the Henry O. Peabody School for Girls

CL: And what was that like?

PS: Well that was, it was a vocational school and that's where I, I took hairdressing classes. And I graduated from there being able to be a hairdresser.

CL: And when did you graduate?

PS: 1965.

CL: Okay and after that you got a job...

PS: In Boston.

CL: In Boston. Doing what, hairdressing?

PS: Yes, I was a hair stylist.

CL: And for how long?

PS: I was in Boston for four years and then I got a job in Canton, in the town I lived in. And then I got married and moved here. And was here for ten years before I moved back to Boston.

CL: Okay and when I read that article that you sent me, it said that you worked at a large firm. Is that correct?

PS: Yes when I was in New York. I, I was a hairstylist for almost, I guess 20 years and I got promoted for the company that I worked for to do marketing and advertising for 300 salons.

CL: Wow.

PS: So I was living in New York at the time.

CL: And what was that like?

PS: That was my dream come true. My dream was to live in New York. Live and work in New York. And I got to do that, it was wonderful. I loved it.

CL: And, do you want to explain why you're not doing that any more?

PS: I had accident where I had a head injury. I slipped on an ice cube in the kitchen of my office. And I woke up in a hospital and it was almost like I had a stroke, my whole right side didn't work I was in a wheelchair for three months and I ended up being disabled from that. I was never able to work again.

CL: Now did you stay in New York or did you go to Boston after that?

PS: No, I, I could not stay in New York. I had a house in New Jersey and I ended up losing everything. So I, I moved to Carlisle, Pennsylvania and then from there to Boiling Springs.

CL: And you said that you were considered disabled at that time. So what did you do?

PS: So because I had the head injury I had severe memory loss and confusion problems. So I had collected antiques for years so I sold antiques and I had a little shop for a year and I couldn't do it. I wasn't able to maintain it. So I put things in antique co-ops and that worked out well because I had no money coming in. I needed to support myself.

CL: Okay and you want to talk about the charity work you did after that?

PS: So what happened was I realized that I didn't have money but I had time. And my two best friends from Lancaster had died from AIDS, so I found out about the Lancaster AIDS Project and that they were doing auctions and I got involved in that. And I did that for the Lancaster AIDS Project for several years and then I moved to the Betty Finney House volunteering for them, because one of the things that struck me was all the medicine in the world wasn't going to help people if they didn't have a roof over their head. Because there'd be, I found out they would have to leave the shelters in the morning and not be able to go back until 5 o'clock at night. So I thought housing was more important and that's why I transitioned to them. And then at the same time I was approached to do fundraising for the American Red Cross because they had an Oscar Party every year and their money went to HIV and AIDS education. So I did that for many years as well.

CL: And what did you do with them?

PS: I wrote letters, just letter after letter after letter. I, there were, I remember I was reading through the articles I had and I think one year I wrote like 400 letters to celebrities to get, because before with the Lancaster AIDS Project it was the Art Against AIDS, it was just an art auction and then I met a brother and sister who were volunteering with them and they were getting business donations and then they thought it might be a good idea to write to celebrities. And that's how I started.

CL: Did you get a good response?

PS: I, it was fantastic. It was amazing. Because it was the early 90s and it was before all this craziness that's going on now and I would get, I would, all my letters were handwritten which I think really helped and then my local paper in Carlisle did an article about me, so what I did was copy that article and I would send a copy of that article to every person that I wrote a letter to. So it legitimized me and AIDS was in the forefront in the early 90s and so I had just tremendous responses. I was just so grateful for all the things that I got.

KZ: There's a problem with the video camera, it just said check battery pack.

CL: Okay hold on one sec and we will figure out what's going wrong, we do have that recorded though so...

PS: Okay.

KZ: And it said check battery pack and then this went from two minutes to one to ...

CL: do you have an extra battery in there?

KZ: I do not know.

CL: I think there is an extra battery in there.

KZ: It was supposed to be fully charged. Sorry! Is it literally just a battery or ?

CL: Yeah it's like this.

KZ: I don't think so. I mean it's still recording so..

CL: For now. Alright.

KZ: It was supposed, everything supposed to come like pre-

CL: Right and that far pocket is it in that?

KZ: Nope just the SIM cards.

CL: Alright give me the charger part here, the charger, yeah. Let's see this.

KZ: I'm Sorry!

PS: It's okay.

CL: And that part too, can I see that Kailey? Thank you, See if we can do this all at the same time.

KZ: There's batteries.

CL: Those are for the microphones. Not another battery, though? Alright, did you stop this?

KZ: Nope.

CL: Alright let's stop it.

[Stopped recording due to low battery issues]

PS: Lancaster AIDS Project, Betty Finney House, and the American Red Cross.

CL: Okay, so where did you want to start with these? Personal? Letters from celebrities?

KZ: Hey you want to attach your mic?

CL: Oh sorry!

PS: You're a mess! [Laughs]

CL: I know! I'm falling apart!

PS: I know I have more too, I just happened to find, I had a file folder that I had these in. But, But I have some more, but, but you can have all of this.

CL: Okay we'll have to get a thing for you to sign, but, so these are your letters from celebrities confirming donations. Is there anything specific you wanted to go over with these?

PS: So, yeah like this is from the estate of Keith Herring. Which I was saying to you before they sent bottles of wine. And this particular one was Andy Warhol had designed the label. And the value of it was 500 dollars. Now the bottle, I believe at the time went for over a thousand dollars. I mean it was just so exciting to get such wonderful items. Judith Leiber who designed handbags sent us items. Peter Max the artist every year he sent us fabulous things. Elizabeth Taylor, every year. Bette Midler, every year.

CL: Did you often, I know you said you wrote tons and tons of letters each year, did you find that there were certain people who wouldn't send things back? Or was it kind of just an overall response that you were getting lots of things back?

PS: There, the people, (chuckles) the people that denied it very often were sports people, like Michael Jordan wasn't it Michael Jordan that was diagnosed with... I got a letter that he did his own charity. But the majority of people who didn't do it just didn't bother. I got a letter from Andrew Lloyd Weber saying he was aghast because people were selling things that with his autograph, so he couldn't possibly send anything. I was like, "Oh good Lord!"

[CL and KZ laugh]

PS: But at the time, again it was a perfect time. I knew who, pretty much who to write to. You know people that had spoken out or you know I thought, I thought might be receptive. And I was, like I said, very lucky. There were a lot of TV shows, Whoopi Goldberg sent something every year. The, the shows, the television shows at the time like *Cheers*, *Fraiser* they were all great, *Will and Grace* I think I mentioned. Charles Burrows, who produced *Cheers*, sent the *Cheers* scripts. I loved getting the scripts, because it was so much fun. All the presidents, that's the other thing I loved. Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, George Bush, they all sent photographs, which were very popular.

CL: That's fantastic.

PS: And singers, lots of singers and authors. Authors are just amazing.

CL: That's awesome. So we have here some of your stuff from the Art Against AIDS Lancaster Project, did you want to tell us a little bit more about that? Oh, we have several here.

PS: Yeah, you got quite a few. So I, Art Against, I thought I had started in '92 and I actually found out I started in '91. Because I found this from 1991. So the Art Against AIDS originally was like I said just artwork. And then I started writing letters... It was just an amazing thing, because the people who went to the auctions supported the AIDS cause, you know 100%. So they paid, like I had, one year I was cashier-ing. This was before I, I chaired an event, and I had people dropping checks in my lap. And I'd say, well what is that for? And they'd say, well we were going to spend 500 dollars on a painting but it went for more than that so here's the money. I mean it was just amazing to me to see this. You know and the people that came forward, like Ellen Wascou, who was on, I think it was WGAL, and she was on, let me see if, and on the radio, she was on the radio so it couldn't have been WGAL. But she chaired, she was the MC every year. She volunteered her time every year. So, that was really awesome, you know, that you had people like that, that were just so kind and willing to help out. And at the time too, the Susquehanna, the group of chefs did the food for us, you know it was just, it was just an amazing thing to see all these people come together and people like John [referring to the owner of the home she is in] is an artist you know donated paintings every year and were so kind to do that.

CL: So was the fundraiser all that Art Against AIDS did or did they have other things in the community that they, that they helped with?

PS: Well, Lancaster AIDS Project had their own offices downtown and, so they did testing and you know they donate, they helped with money situations, you know, before, like sometimes with bills and things that people needed help with. But like I said that's why I moved on from there, because of my feelings about housing. But the auctions were really interesting.

CL: And then when you worked for the Benny Finney, or Betty Finney House, you want to tell us a little about that and your work that you did there and kind of what the Betty Finney House, what they did?

PS: So the Betty Finney House, the money that they raised, Betty Finney was a professor at Millersville (University) and it was named after her. And so they believed in trying to assist people with housing. So they paid peoples' rents, found them places, there was an actual Betty Finney house where there were some apartments people could live in. So it was, it was an amazing situation to be able to help in that way.

CL: And the fundraising is how they were able to fund helping out those people with their housing?

PS: That and donations and whatever grants, lots of grants were written at the time.

CL: That's amazing, and you worked there from '96-2001?

PS: Yes, that's when they stopped.

CL: And did they start in '96 or where they...

PS: No they had been established but I didn't know about them.

CL: Okay, so between the Art Against the AIDS and the Betty Finney House, I know you said you felt like the most important thing was finding housing for them, would you say then that you enjoyed your work at Betty Finney more or ?

PS: I did enjoy it more. It was, it was less political. You know the Lancaster AIDS Project I found there was state involved and like I, I collected articles one year, I had a group of them, and the woman who was running the Lancaster AIDS project at the time took some of the donations that had come in and gave them to another county, Franklin County I think it was. And I was like, well no I didn't do it for them, I did it for here. And I had a love of Lancaster County and I wanted it to go to people here, and she treated it like she owned it. And I felt bad about that, so I, Betty Finney House wasn't like that at all. And they won, if you can give me the Betty Finney folders I think..

CL: Okay, here are your folders for Betty Finney.

PS: So not only did they help with, with you know housing, but they also, I don't, I wish I remember which , which folder it was, they, they won an award from President George Bush for, I'm sorry I can't remember the name of it. I think it was called Points of Light. But it was a national, you know a national thing which was very exciting. And then, at Betty Finney House there was a gentleman named John Bunteman who I worked with on the auctions and he was just the most amazing person. And he ended up passing away. And he was creative and we did really wonderful, you know when you get to look at these you'll see. I mean some of the ideas we did one with the Wizard of Oz as the theme. We did a Viva Las Vegas. I mean it was just, and they, he, he was so great at being able to talk people into donating things for us to decorate. Like we did it out of the Lancaster Airport and we draped the walls in one of the hangers, and he knew someone that owned a company that supplied decorations for stage shows, like Elton John and

things like that and we got to go into their warehouse and pick out whatever we wanted. I mean it was just, it was just amazing. I'm sorry I...

CL: No, no that's okay. Here I can take care of this for you. Okay and you're wanting to donate these to the...

PS: You may, yes there's some of the programs from the different events and the press releases and tickets and I tried to pull out as much as I could.

CL: Okay, we don't have any of the donation forms with us, because you know you can write it off for your taxes, so I'll email that to you, once we get back to Harrisburg.

PS: Okay. That's one I think you saw.

CL: Yeah this is the one you sent me surrounded with all the stuff here. And then this is the copy of the letter that you sent?

PS: That was the press release that went out about me and that was another, that was the original photo that the paper took, but when I put that other letter together I used the photo from Lancaster AIDS Project because I thought it made more sense rather than it being in my house. You know, because it was the actual items that had been donated.

CL: So let's talk a little about the work that you did with the American Red Cross in the late '90s.

PS: So the American Red Cross had a fundraiser on Oscar night and their money that they raised went to HIV and AIDS education. And I love that, that they were educating people about it, so I did the same thing for them, in that I wrote letters to get donations and it was funny because, like Bette Midler donated gowns usually for that and it was, it was really a fun thing, because then the business donations they'd make up these great baskets and people could donate on the baskets, and they'd do raffles and people who'd come, you know see the articles, people would come all dressed in Hollywood garb, it was really fun, but most important it was for a good cause. I mean that was the thing.

CL: And how did you know all of the, how did you get into knowing who to send information to, what got you into doing this? I mean besides, you know.

PS: What happened was I just, like I'd watch a television show, and I'd say gee, I you know, like Joan Rivers at the time had her own show, so I'd just, I did research. You know, I'd go to the library there was a book that you could get addresses or what I'd do I'd video tape shows and see the name of the producer or I'd hear some, I'd take notes all the time, here the name of somebody's agent, like CAA (Creative Artists Agency), and that was gold mine because once I knew somebody's agent I could write to the agent and the agent, you know, they would pass the letters along. So, it was just, I just did research. I just tried to figure out the best way to, to get the things because I wanted to have as many items as possible.

CL: That's awesome. Anything else you want to talk about with those three charitable foundations and your work with them?

PS: Jerre Freiberg, that ran the Betty Finney House, was the most amazing person, because he was a very calming influence. He cared about the clients so much and you know we still send Christmas cards to each other. I, I just loved how committed he was and how wonderful he was. And, that, that helped because they did everything to make it comfortable for me. Like and then like my friends here, the last month before the auction that I chaired in 1995 they moved a bed into their den so that I could stay here, because I was driving over an hour from Boiling Springs every day the last, every single day for the last month because it was so much work to do. Mick Kauffman, he would probably be a really good person for you to interview as well. I mean he was, I saw him last night, he was at Lancaster AIDS Project and he was totally committed to, to the work. And then he worked with Betty Finney House as well. So the sad part about it is so many people are gone, you know. It's like John Bunteman, I mentioned before, was just, he was brilliant at what he did and when you work with people that are that committed that care it makes you care that much more. And I, I loved every minute of it. I loved being able to help, to feel like I was making a difference because I think as I said, I, I didn't have any money to give. I couldn't donate money, but the one thing I had was time and, and it turns out I found out that in many ways that was more important. Because no one else was doing that.

CL: Yeah you absolutely made a, a difference. Kailey do you have any questions that you wanted to ask her?

KZ: yeah, I was thinking, you were talking about your family were they aware of all of your involvement or with these organizations like did, you mentioned you had siblings did they help you at all?

PS: Yes, oh I'm glad you asked me that. I have a brother that's a photographer and not only did he donate items but he would get some of his friends, photographer friends, he owned a business that, that photographers could go in and develop their, he had dark rooms and they could go in and develop. And he would get them to donate things for my auctions. So I always thought that was wonderful. And my youngest brother is gay, so I mean he ended up coming from Massachusetts for the first auction that I chaired so that he could be here to support me. So my family, all of my siblings were very supportive.

CL: That's fantastic! Good question!

PS: Yeah it was a great question.

KZ: I actually had another question. You were talking about how you got Jimmy Carter, I think you said Bush to give photographs for the auctions as well, which I found interesting because during the AIDS epidemic obviously Reagan was so resilient to addressing... until Ryan White, until people pushed him to do so, so you found that you got a response from those presidents despite the fact that Reagan hadn't really addressed?

PS: I did, Jimmy Carter, George Bush, who was the other one I said?

KZ: I forget.

PS: Oh, Gerald Ford. All three and every year. So, yeah I found that amazing because it wasn't until Clinton before a president mentioned the word AIDS, but they were, they were willing to help and then George Bush Sr. is the one that with the Betty Finney House did the Points of Light, I think it was called, awarded them, which was a, you know, presidential accolade. I mean it was just wonderful, so yeah that's, I found that amazing too and people that, this is interesting too, because people who normally would not have gone to an AIDS auction went because there was a Republican item that that they wanted. So it was interesting.

CL: Cool! Anything else? Is there more that you wanted to tell us or go over about your life, or your work with the charities or what you're doing now?

PS: I don't think so. I, I'm just grateful that I was able to do what I did do at the time and I was really sad when all these organizations stopped doing fundraising, because I felt the more awareness there was the better and, and it got harder, I know it got harder for each, every year to get more things, because all of a sudden everybody was doing auctions. I know even for myself, you know, little high schools were writing to celebrities and you know they, you know for little fundraisers for that. So it got harder and harder to get items. And I'm glad I'm not doing it today because I know I wouldn't, I would get hardly anything.

KZ: You think?

PS: Oh, I know, because what happens is, what started happening after the first five or six years that I started doing it, I would get facsimile photographs, so what that means is, there'd be one photograph that the celebrity signed and then they just made copies. So they weren't, it wasn't an actual item. Now some people didn't mind that, but I made sure that they, the people knew that this was not an authentic signature. So, you know, that was disheartening when that happened. So they'd send 'em to this, the minute I saw the address, the return address on an envelope, I knew it wasn't gonna be anything good because it was an agency that was sending these out, celebrities just got, probably, you know some of them just got inundated with requests, and just gave up trying to help.

CL: What do you think, if I can ask your opinion you don't have to ask this, answer this if you don't want. What do you think about the current LGBTQ discourse that's going on now with legalization and our current president saying he's going to be getting rid of it, and that kind of stuff, how do you think, how do you feel it is presently compared to in the early 90s.

PS: The difference is, is that they didn't talk about it then. Now it's disgraceful what's going on. When you see a Vice President who thinks that conversion therapy is going to change people, I mean I know, I can say from personal experience, my youngest brother, who is sixteen years younger than me, I knew when he was two years old he was gay. There was no question in my mind. You know, I had been around enough gay people from being a hairstylist and he was very flamboyant and very out there and, you know, to this day he's even more flamboyant and more out there. But to say that people chose this or, or you can you know pray it away, whatever they

want to use for an excuse, is disgraceful. And I think that the present administration has not done their job in terms of making people aware that all this hate is not something that should be allowed. And, and in fact I believe that he likes enflaming it, you know, with his tweets and all the things that he does, it just breaks my heart. Because I think, we've, we're going backwards. I really fear for the gay community because of the hatred. We, and especially the transgender problems with the bathrooms and all of that its like what is wrong with these people? Like I just don't understand how they could be so hateful. So I totally disagree with what's happening at this point, and actually it's, it's mobilized me more in terms of being educating myself, as far as the government is concerned. I'm watching every news show there is now, and I'm doing research and I'm, I've, you know, joined the Democratic Club and, you know, I want to be involved in something that I never even thought about before. So it's sad, I think it's very sad. I'm worried for the country.

CL: Do you think that because of how backwards things are getting that you will want to do, obviously, you said that you don't think you'd be able to get the same kind of donations, but do you think that what's going on now is going to make you more active in the AIDS and HIV community again?

PS: Well, I certainly will speak out, I mean, I, I think that because things had changed I had moved away and I wasn't involved with anything, it didn't seem like there was a need for it or a want for it, but I, I definitely would speak out, I don't know what else I would do. But I, I would stand up for and speak up for anybody that had anything negative to say.

CL: And you currently live in North Carolina, you said?

PS: Virginia, Southwest Virginia.

CL: I was close. Okay. So I had seen in the news the other day they have that in Alabama, one of the theaters won't play *Beauty in the Beast*.

PS: I saw that, because one of the gay characters.

CL: Yeah, It's just, it is definitely getting absolutely frightening to where everything is moving backward. So...

PS: Well, our President did not denounce any of the hatred that was going on during his campaign. And hasn't since he became President. So people think that it's okay to shoot people. I mean those men that were from India that got shot because the man thought they were Muslims. I mean, and and the involvement with the KKK, I mean it's just, it's horrific.

CL: Yeah. Wow. Yeah. It definitely is frightening because it does seem like we are going back to, especially for LGBTQ it seems like we are going backward in time. And the only thing we can do is more projects like this where we're, you know, trying to get the word out of the stuff that you did in the early 90s, so I definitely think that the things that you did and through this project will help to create a legacy that'll make people our age want to get involved in it. So, we definitely thank you for everything that you've done.

PS: Thank you.

KZ: Yeah, thank you.

CL: Anything else you want to go over before we're finished?

PS: I can't think of anything.

CL: Kailey, any more questions?
[Grandfather clock begins to chime]

CL: Right on time!

[laughter]

PS: How funny is that?

CL: Alright, so unless there's anything else we'll end this then.

PS: Okay then.

CL: Okay sounds good, thank you.