

Transcript of Interview with Allen Vandever by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Allen Vandever

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 08/12/2022

Location (Interviewee): Chicago, Illinois

Location (Interviewer):

Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

Running a nonprofit called Childhood Fractured; working with contemporary art, preventing childhood sexual abuse, and supporting survivors; having a gallery space as a free coffee shop. A series “Life Narrative Paintings”, where while painting would talk about experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Running support groups for survivors, discussions around positive sexuality as survivors; continuing the support group during the pandemic. Maladaptive coping mechanisms as a survivor, harming self and harming others. Losing access to old self-care practices when things shut down; adapting with new self-care practices. How embodiment impacts perceptions of threats; being a large male and not worrying about being a target for violence and crime. Building up social media presence during the pandemic; a softer, but larger reach. Art shows/fairs shutting down; impact on professional artists; art sales as primary source of income. 72-year-old uncle dying early in the pandemic; grieving without a funeral. Pandemic getting in the way of travel for work; minivacations during the pandemic. Comparing business opening and mask wearing in cities and smaller towns. Struggling financially, selling off possessions, downsizing the home. Reflecting on one’s art without focusing on sales. Having donated to food banks pre-pandemic and using their services mid-pandemic. Soft opening of galleries; sales. Restaurants closing down; becoming unaffordable when reopening. Inflation overlapping with shrinking income. Surprise medical bills; fighting with insurance companies. Recent positive experiences with a local clinic after many years of less positive healthcare experiences. Having diabetes; reversing diabetes with exercise and diet. Free state health insurance for low-income people being better than for-profit insurance. For profit pharmaceutical companies, eg. the profit from daily use of PrEP vs. a single vaccine against HIV. Growing up in a mostly white environment; observations about race and racism changing with time. Media’s focus on Trump, that focus as a distraction from other important issues. COVID and the exodus from urban settings; missing friends who moved away. Homeschooling pre-teen/teenage son. VR counseling. Art after world changing events.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

Allen Vandever 00:07

Yes. Alan Vandever. It is August 12 9:29, Chicago, Illinois.

Kit Heintzman 00:14

And the year is 2022.

Allen Vandever 00:16

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:18

Do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Allen Vandever 00:27

Yes, I do.

Kit Heintzman 00:29

Thank you so much for being here today. Would you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you?

Allen Vandever 00:37

For sure. I am Alan Vandever. I'm a contemporary artist based out of Chicago. I'm an activist, a father, a husband, a friend to many I am about as outside of the box as you can possibly be I don't, I don't have a box anymore. I think I run a not for profit. We're called childhood fractured. We work on prevention and awareness of child sexual abuse through contemporary art. We have recently, in the process of expanding that, and we're focusing more on working with survivors and helping them become healthier. I guess probably more specifically healthier in their their sexual lives. Just because there's a lot of, from being sexually abused, there's a lot of sexual trauma. And we were also working with I should say, we're also working with adult sexual abuse survivors. And just trying to one of the things I just from doing this for years, realizing what people need the most help with, is regaining control and power of their sexuality [inaudible]. Yeah. So yeah. Let's see what else about me. I'm always experimenting with my art and figuring out ways to, I feel like with art, you need to make art that helps society, not just make it beautiful. I like to make art that makes people think I like to tell stories, tell that with my art and verbally tell stories. I have a new book coming out soon. So close. I've been dealing with publisher stuff. And it's been over a year long process of getting it published were almost there. Yeah, super excited about that. I've just recently, one of my best friends from college, moved here, and is helping me with the studio and in the non for profit. And we're starting a new venture called scannerdo where we're using new technology to create 3d scans of people and objects for the metaverse. And I'm really excited about this project. It, as an artist, it allows me to, I feel like create anything I ever imagined. It's it's just such a wonderful tool and the the possibilities seem almost endless. And then also, we're going to be using that for our not for profit to creating a safe space for people in the metaverse to ask survivors to come to. A virtual safe space. And then the next project after that is trying to work with counselors to create virtual counseling, instead of zoom counseling. With VR, you'll feel like you're in the room with the counselor. Yeah, so I'm really, really excited about that. Im in an interview. We're just starting the day here. So it's, we open at 10. So everyone's coming in. All right, so yeah, that's that's me. I could go on and on and on. So we'll start the questions.

Kit Heintzman 04:15

Would you tell me a story about your life during a pandemic?

Allen Vandever 04:20

Oh, pandemic, all right. Well, our nonprofit was doing wonderful. My art career was doing wonderful. And then came this pandemic. And before oh I should, yeah, so before the pandemic we were along with being a non for

profit and an art space. We were a free coffee shop. So everyone could come in here and get a free espresso, a free cappuccino. And it was a place where survivors could come and talk to other survivors and a safe space. And it was one working wonderful. You know, we'd have 50 to 60 people come through a day. And, you know, they would, it would even be that someone that was here working would have to talk with them they would talk with with each other. And just the joy of people walking in to a coffee shop, and ordering a latte, and handing it to them, and then being able to tell them that it's free. And that, that they could, you know, just the, it just put a smile on everyone's face. And then we talk to them and give them educational information about child sexual abuse, which is normally a very depressing topic. But because we had just given them the free coffee, and the place is full of beautiful colors, it never ended up being a depressing topic to talk, we always would have a very good positive, they would leave with a smile on their face. So we found a way to talk about this dark, gloomy subject in a bright, beautiful way. And then COVID happened. And as of the art world, it completely vanished. art world is based off of in person art shows, or art fairs or festivals. So basically, the art world yep it vanished, which was that was my main source of income. And then also, with the coffee shop, I obviously didn't want to be exposed to 50 to 100 people a day. So we shut down the coffee shop aspect of things, which was our biggest fundraiser, tool. And, yeah, so we went from being a fully staffed not for profit to having to let everyone go. And just basically for the first year being my wife and I and my son, running it, keeping it floating. So what I decided was that I would focus on social media, because I could still reach people through social media. So I have a friend who builds social media accounts. And I worked with him and he was nice enough to give us his services for free. He also owns the art gallery represents me so he does, so we have a business connection to so but he really wanted to help us out he had extra time because his art gallery was closed. So we built up amongst our accounts, we have over three and a 300,000 followers. So we can reach 30 plus 30 to 60,000 people a week with our message about child sexual abuse prevention and awareness, which we're reaching a lot more people, it's a lot much, it's a lot softer reach than the one on one personal interaction. And we also did speaking engagements. So obviously that ended to I really missed the boat, I didn't realize how the speaking engagement switched over to zoom. And I didn't I didn't have enough time to do that. Also, the book that's coming out soon use that time to finish the book. So I wrote a book and created a large following on social media to be able to get my message out there that we're trying to get before also to share my art. And yeah, I mean, I, you know, I really enjoyed the first year of, of pandemic, spending time with the family being home, my son being home from school, and homeschooling him, and working with the school through zoom. Yeah, I think that was a really beautiful gift. That's the way I like to look at it. We did, unfortunately, struggle financially. I ended up selling off every piece of coffee equipment for a lot less than I would have got for it if I would have held on to it for a little bit longer. But it got us through the times. And you know, I even had to sell both my cars and downsize our, our, our apartment. So, you know, going from a very, you know, yeah, it was it was all worth it. It was all good. made the most of it. I felt like the transitioning out of the pandemic was the more difficult part the art world still hasn't recovered. fundraising for the not for profit is it's just, it went from we could do a fundraiser and raise 10 to \$30,000. Almost easily I wouldn't say easily but you know, put the work in you can do it now. It just it doesn't. The old way doesn't work. And I haven't figured out the new way yet. You know, now we do fundraisers and we spend more money doing the fundraiser that we raise. It's a struggle still. And then yeah, the Art Gallery represents me, they're still not open. So they're open, but not to the public. So sales there are dismal compared to before. I've been trying to make the search the switch to be more online. But I feel like I saw most of my art from people getting to know me. And that's hard to do online. Yeah. But yeah, it's, it's such a career wise, financially terrible, interpersonal family, wonderful. That's my take away from COVID. I definitely, I think my art improved a lot, I definitely it was nice to have that time to reflect on my art and focus on not focus on having to sell it, but focusing on where I wanted it to go and how it took for it to develop. I'm sure I mean, I already look back at this time is very growth period, I

have a huge growth period of my life. So in that sense, it was wonderful. And even though the the finances from having the the coffee shop and the having as a fundraiser to fund our projects. It's nice to not have to it's freed up time, not having to run the coffee shop aspect of things. And it was interesting, we were just expanding right before the pandemic. Also, we had just got a second location, literally a month and a half before. pandemic, we signed the lease for our second location. We were starting build out there. And we took that opportunity to start rebuilding our original coffee shop. And then the company we partnered with went out of business during the pandemic. So yeah, so we pretty much every project that we're working on pre pandemic that was working, vanished. So, you know, I think being able to step back and reevaluate your life and figure out exactly what you want to do next is good. And I'm very happy that it's very much the same mission, the same goals as before the pandemic, but just in a slightly different way.

Kit Heintzman 12:58

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

Allen Vandever 13:03

Yeah. I think I heard about it like, right, when they first news first dropped it happening in China. I had some friends over and we're gonna watch a movie, and we turned on the TV and the TV's always on the news channel if it's not watching a movie. So it came up as a breaking story. And we sat around and talked is like, basically, we're all discarding it, you know, thinking, Oh, this will be just another flu. And, you know, it'll won't be that bad. And then it slowly got worse, got worse. I have an uncle who passed away. It was very early on, but they think it was COVID. So, you know, I did have that. And a lot of friends losing relatives. So you know, that was, that I tend not to dwell on that part of it. That was you know, it was hard. Yeah, I remember when they first announced the lockdown. And I remember as I'm gonna go out to eat, and I went to one restaurant, it was closed. What's another restaurant it was close and went to another restaurant, it was closed. It was like, it was a Sunday. I just couldn't figure out why all the restaurants were closed. And then I got home and I don't remember. I think someone called me. Yeah, someone called me that worked at a restaurant. And they were telling me how they're going to be unemployed. And their restaurant was shut down indefinitely. And just the idea of the, I don't know, the first thing that really hit me was the idea that you couldn't go out and eat. You couldn't order food. And that was just kind of a luxury that you know that I think that was just kind of a shock, but that was taken away.

Allen Vandever 15:05

Yeah, it was definitely. Hopefully a once in a lifetime experience. Yeah, I think probably out of all the events in the world that have happened is probably the biggest one in my lifetime. As an artist, I've really tried to look at this time, every great art movement, every great advancement in art. And I would say even on the technology comes from these type of tragedies, you know, wars, famines, it's, you know, if you go through art history, every great art movement came right after something like this. So I am trying to use that as my advantage of trying to work as hard as I can right now. And I know I've strayed from the original question, sorry. I have a tendency of doing that, but yeah, yeah, I'll let you go to the next question.

Kit Heintzman 16:09

Fun Facts about oral history interviews, you can do no wrong. So don't worry about straying. Don't worry about anything. You, you've mentioned losing an uncle, would you tell me a bit about who he was?

Allen Vandever 16:23

Yeah. So Earl Vandever is by my dad's oldest brother. We called him Earl, but his name was Walter, which was my grandfather's name, his father and my sons named Walter. So, I grew up really close with him and his family. We've all lived together for a while. We owned a family business, handmade furniture as a child. And so I grew up in a big wood shop with all my relatives, lots of really, really good memories of him. He was I wanna say 72. So he was older, but not, you know, most of the people in our family have lived into their 90s. So you know, he had another 20 years ahead of him. Yeah, he was a. As a child, you know, he was a really good role model.

Allen Vandever 17:32

And, you know, we, I feel like our after my grandfather died, we were still close family, but not as close as we were before. And we were just as close but we just didn't see each other as much I guess. We had family reunions every year and every family holiday together. But I guess as kids have kids. And then those kids have kids all kind of fragmented into other families. And so I didn't, I'd probably see him once a year. He lived in South Dakota. I live in Chicago. So but yeah, yeah. And definitely it was, you know, because the pandemic was going on, not going to his funeral was rough. So I don't really feel like I had a proper way of grieving him. So that was hard. Yeah. All right. Next question. This depressing one, move on.

Kit Heintzman 18:32

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure in the pre pandemic world?

Allen Vandever 18:41

Pre pandemic. Yeah. It was pretty decent. I would say, probably, five years before the pandemic, I found an amazing clinic here in Chicago called Howard Brown. And it is the best medical experience I've ever had. They're just there. They're there to help you. And you're not, you know, they don't think of you as making money. They think of you, you know, they're not trying to make money from you. They're trying to help you. And they are really strict with who they hire and just their staffing. Yeah, and I love supporting them as much as I can. In fact, I have an appointment with them and about an hour and a half. Um, oh right before I guess this was how I was diagnosed like, oh, I guess it was maybe two years before the pandemic with diabetes. And I went really strict on exercising, eating and I'm no longer diabetic. And I think I think I just tested right before the pandemic of not being diabetic. So that was kind of also like a shift of having had diabetes and not having diabetes, because with diabetes, you have like achy muscles, and you're tired in the evening a lot. Not having that anymore. I mean, I think I only had that for like a year, year and a half. But so the against going into the pandemic, the shift of being healthier, at the same time was, you know, and I did not get COVID, you know, for the whole thing. This, yeah, we definitely had a tight knit group of, like, 10 people that would come to the studio, and we would hang out with each other, but we were all not hanging out with anybody else. So, you know, artists, and activists that would come together and brainstorm and work together, and having my having the space for the non for profit separate from my home. You know, it was nice, because we could all come there and work together because everyone was working from home, but didn't like being alone. So we had like four or five different desks set up here for people to come in and work. But, but we were all being very, you know, strict with our not interacting with other people. So, you know, it was it was good. It was, it was very interesting. I know, I strayed away from the health care thing there again, let's go back to health care. Yeah. So prior to, you know, I think everything before I found the Howard Brown center was experiences were not so great, but not terrible. I remember, I played college football, and I had a spinal injury. And after the spinal injury, I started having problems with blacking out. And the doctor thought I had a adrenalin that's producing too much adrenaline. So he had scheduled for me to have some my

adrenaline glands removed. When I started doing some research on it, it was a, I would have been like super lethargic, and most people can become very obese after those surgeries. And as I was like, Oh, this does not sound good. So I wouldn't get a second opinion. And, you know, the doctors go through my charts. First thing, so I was spinal injury. And he's like, well, let's get some X rays of your neck. And um sure enough my neck um how it healed it was when I was when I tilt my head back, it would cut off the blood flow in my brain, shooting my blood pressure up and making me pass out. So like I said, that was a pretty negative experience with the health care system before before that, and then also with billing, you know, like, even though I had health insurance, you know, I would I remember, my mom had colon cancer. So I started at age 30, getting colonoscopies and every five years because she was like, 38 when she had colon cancer. And one of the colonoscopies I had the doctor arranged it set it up, just like you're supposed to. And I got a bill for \$6,000 and then, you know, fighting with them for. I never actually got anywhere I still owe them that money. But you know, I had insurance and the and for some reason they chose not to pay for it. And I don't know. So yeah, the insurance thing is a whole nother thing. Illinois has a great state insurance program. That if your incomes under a certain level, which it is now that the pandemic has happened, that now I have free health insurance, and this free health insurance has been better than any health insurance I've ever had. Which is insane. Because I used to spend a lot of money on insurance and now they have free health insurance. It literally covers everything. You know, there's no even when you get your prescriptions, there's no copay, and it's just I'm blown away that you know, I spent 1000s and 1000s of dollars every year on health insurance and now that I'm getting free health insurance, it doesn't. It's like 100% better yeah, that's I can't think of anything else about health. Pre pandemic health industry. Yeah, it's about it.

Kit Heintzman 24:29

Being in pre pandemic time, what was your day to day looking like?

Allen Vandever 24:36

So I would open my car while I get up, get my son ready for school, walk him to school. And then I would walk over the coffee shop probably be here by eight open up. Or and I always have like cup people already outside waiting give them their cup of coffee. I would start working on my art. I had a barista that came in and took over about 8:30. And then I would work on grant writing, working on my art projects. And I probably average two speaking engagements a month. So I'll be either planning for those are going to those, those were national, they're all over the country. So a lot of traveling with that. I did these the series called Live narrative paintings, where I would tell my story of the abuse that I went through and overcoming the abuse, while doing a painting about the whichever story I chose segment of the story I chose, I do a painting telling about that, and then have like a panel discussion afterwards. And then I would do that here at the gallery coffee shop, twice a month, and then usually the speaking engagements would involve that also, so probably four times a month, I would do that. And then I'd go pick my son up from school at three, get back to my daily schedule. And then he would come to the coffee shop and studio with me. You know, I really enjoyed that time, we've worked on art together, and sit down, do his homework. And then the three years before the pandemic, my wife was able to quit her job and help out with a non for profit. So she was here with us also. So the whole family was here. You know, I hired my best friends. So it was very family orientated. And, you know, one of them even ended up living with me, so was living with us, so we even live together. Yeah, it was it was even though I definitely enjoyed the when the pandemic started that first year of being less distracted and more family time, I definitely enjoyed it in a different way. The schedule, and I guess, yea I left this out in the evenings I would run we had a, we on Tuesday, we had a support group for survivors. Thursdays, we had a support group for survivors, but it was a sex positivity for survivors support group or discussion group. And then I had a art group art making group on Friday nights. And then not every Saturday,

but we could have different events on Saturdays too. And we were still we're back now having events on Wednesdays, Wednesdays Thursdays. We're switching for Fridays and Saturdays. Yeah. So we were still, we finally got back into being able to have I always kept the support group going. It definitely dwindled down to about four of us at a time. And we also were as part of that inner circle. That was where we were all quarantining with each other. But yeah, that was my schedule.

Kit Heintzman 28:34

And how did that change when the pandemic first hit?

Allen Vandever 28:38

Yeah, oh, they're just all went away. That was interesting. You know, I would still continue to go over to my shop, and, you know, see what I could get done. And first, it was like, a lot of re strategizing. You know, that's when I came up with the idea of the social media. Focusing on that. And right away, I decided to, it was funny, the book I had been working on, was ready to go, we're just finishing it up. And we're in try to get it into stores by that April. And then we realize that they're probably not going to be open in April. So we decided to rewrite it one more time. I worked on the book with another with a professional writer since I'm not a professional writer. So we did one more rewrite, which I think really made the book even that much better. So that was good. Yeah, and then, and I think it took the whole six months probably to create a new schedule. And I don't know I guess we really dove deep into the book at first and, adding on the social media aspect. Worked with my, like I said before my friend, Jason Gao, who the social media projects with a bunch of other people. So becoming part of that network was nice, it was all that was all virtual. But it was also a nice community. It was basically, we were bouncing our followers, I would collect, I would direct them to their sites, they would direct them to my sites. And they had already been doing this for a while. So they have very large sites. So it didn't take long to build up the sites. And then I guess I was saying earlier, that we were able to reach so many more people through the social media than we ever had before. And that, you know, we're saying we're reaching about 30,000 to 60,000 a week, but I wasn't thinking we're actually through their sights, probably even reaching more people per week. So I Yeah, we were probably at or when we were doing it full time, we were probably reaching. We're probably reaching post 100,000 people a week with our message, which, you know, and, or not do being able to do that and not spending money doing it was you know, it's a hard thing to measure, though, because the interaction was very minimal with that. And it's so it's hard to, you know, that that many people see it, but you don't know really what impact it had on them. And it was also really nice, because it was a very international crowd. So you know, a lot of conversations with people from Brazil, people from Turkey, people, you know, from all over the world. And that was interesting. And as someone who is working on prevention and awareness on child sexual abuse, just you know, yeah, I already knew from looking at statistics that happens everywhere. And it happens way more than most people realize. During the social media project, I guess, really like, just, I guess, I guess it was measurable because of the number of people who've messaged me about what happened to them, or thank you for doing this this happened to me. It made it even a little bit more real, I guess. I mean, it was real before but I guess real on a worldly level, not not just in our community level. So that motivated me. Yeah, I remember the question was, oh, the schedule? Yeah. Yeah. Now now I have a real strict schedule again, you know, I'm, you know, we're, like I said, the last three weeks, we're kind of not so strict, but it was kind of like vacation time, but vacation time without going anywhere. Summertime. Yeah. Next question.

Kit Heintzman 33:13

What was the last vacation you took?

Allen Vandever 33:17

Well, last summer, I went to my, my, my parents my well my dad and stepmom had a lake house, they lived in Minnesota on a lake. And they took the opportunity of so, lakefront properties and more, you know, properties or outside of the city, or a city that was more remote really went up in value. A lot of people were buying places to get away from the city during COVID. So they took advantage of that and sold their house for very nice profit. And then the, unfortunately though, they moved to Oregon, which is a lot farther away, but we went there to help them. It wasn't really a vacation, it was but we went there and help them move and pack up the house. You know, it wasn't where I was raised, but they moved there right after I right after college, my sister, brother, we're still at home. I'm the oldest. So that was kind of sad. You know, we'd spend every summer you know a couple of weeks on the lake at their house and doing boating and you know, all that fun stuff. So that was always our vacation spot and that's gone now. That was our first vacation since the pandemic started. So that was that's I guess really been our only vacation. Yeah, I'm really need a new vac I need to have a vacation when these days. Work used to I used to have like a lot of work vacations where I would go to New York for you know, to do a talk at a conference and then stay a couple extra days and see the sights and I miss doing that that that's definitely not in my schedule anymore.

Kit Heintzman 35:05

How did it feel to be traveling?

Allen Vandever 35:09

Ah, it was really nice to be out of the city. We would do short day excursions to like National Parks during the cov during COVID do tubing on like rivers and stuff like that, where, you know, it's almost like a water park, but not quite better in some ways, just floating down a river it was nice, hikes. But yeah, it was nice to be away from the city for a good amount of time and pre pandemic we were traveling a lot. So I had a summer tour of my live narrative paintings where we spent a month and a half on the road going from town to town, doing speaking engagements, and having a couple of days in between to see the sights and stuff, which, so that was my, my wife and my son and I did that. And that was that was actually a great vacation because I took my son, it wasn't well work vacation. But I took my son to all my favorite places that I ever went to was a child. So that was cool. That was kind of how we scheduled the the tour. Yeah, travel was definitely a wait I take that back. I did. I had two vacations last year. One of my friends had an extra ticket to or won to trip to Vegas, and they took me as their extra. So that was that was weird, though. That was a I don't know, that was Vegas during the pandemic, just being around so many people after quarantining was, I had one of my shots, but that was that was a weird, weird experience. So I guess that wasn't vacation, but it was so weird that I don't really think of it as a vacation. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 37:04

How did you come to decide to get vaccinated?

Allen Vandever 37:07

Ah, I guess for me, it wasn't even a decision to make. Just you know, I felt it was the right thing to do. I didn't, I didn't really fall into any of the concerns about vaccinations, I've never really well, I've, I've done the I know the history of the anti-vaccination movement and where it came from. And I guess just because of where it came from, it kind of makes me discredit it. So for me, it was just a, you know, this is I don't want to get COVID. So I

did it. And I never got COVID Because after I got vaccinated, I started interacting with the world again, and I've been healthy. So it worked.

Kit Heintzman 37:55

How easy was it for you to get vaccinated, how accessible was it?

Allen Vandever 37:59

It was really easy. Again, the Howard Brown Center that I was talking about the when we're talking about medical you know, they right away, they called me up and they're like, Would you like to make an appointment to get your, your, your vaccination, right when they first got it in, and I scheduled one for like three weeks out. And my wife and I made a vaccination date. So we went there together. And we've got to go into the doctor's office together and get our vaccinations at the same time. So that was kind of fun. We had a little picnic basket, and all the parks here were closed still. But there's a big cemetery right by our house. So we'd go for a little picnics in the cemetery. So after we got our shots, we went had a picnic in the cemetery. So it was a it was a fun, we made the most of it.

Kit Heintzman 38:55

What was important to you about maintaining the support group for survivors of sexual abuse during the pandemic?

Allen Vandever 39:02

Yeah. So you know, I had some people who kind of, I felt like kind of depended on it. And I wanted to keep that for them. So I didn't do a lot of advertising. Well, obviously, we wanted to keep it close knit for the quarantine. And I just never really liked the Zoom meetings and stuff. I think for like interviews and stuff like this, they're fine. But to like really talk about serious things and have someone breaking down on a Zoom meeting, you know, I didn't I didn't like that. So we just did the in person stuff. It was super important for you know, to build, keep that going for those people. And I know they really appreciated it. So that was definitely worth doing. So, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 39:47

There was so much going on in 2020. That wasn't just the pandemic and that was also true for 2021 and there's still a lot going on. I'm wondering what some of the other social and political issues have been on your mind. been over the last couple of years.

Allen Vandever 40:01

Yeah, you know, I was going into 2020 thinking, and this is going to be one of the best years ever. I was I was so excited for 2020. Here in Illinois, marijuana was legalized or so that was, you know, not having people going to jail for marijuana was a wonderful thing. And also, they were planning on I read a couple articles why they didn't do it, but there was a, they've actually they have a vaccine for AIDS, but they're still in the trials, but they weren't going to release it. Instead, they decided to go with prep, which is something that pharmaceutical people can sell to you every month to keep you from getting AIDS, where you could get a vaccine. I don't know. I think a lot of the research they directed towards COVID So they, so I was thinking, oh, you know, we're gonna have marijuana is no longer gonna be putting people in prison. And we're no longer have to worry about AIDS, because so I was like, you know, it's like, these are two really great historic things that are happening this year. And then instead COVID happened and that became a historic thing. Yeah. Then obviously, with the, the Black Lives movements,

I felt like that was really powerful. You know, it was, you know, I, I grew up in a time where it well, I shouldn't say a time I grew up in an environment where most, I lived all over the place. But most my, my parents were divorced, I'd go back and forth, but my dad always lived in a smaller city, small town, large town, small city, and South Dakota, about 20,000 people. And, you know, I grew up with it was really interesting. There were not a lot of African American people there, or minorities at all. But the ones I knew where it was a pretty cool situation, our mayor of our town, there might have only been a dozen African American families, but our mayor was African American, in this very small, mainly white town, and their children and other children that are at the school were in that, you know, looking back, it's not the best, but it was definitely different than, you know, inner city and more southern areas, probably the people that were of African American descent were very glamorized in our, my community like the because of like, again, I'm not saying this is good, but you know, because of sport athletes and musicians, I grew up thinking that they were the really cool kids, you know, because yeah, so my experience was different. And then when I would go to my mom's, we live in bigger, more metropolitan areas. I definitely did see some racism going on there. But because of my other upbringing, I never I didn't really understand that, I guess, as a child. And then as a teenager, I started, you know, seeing more violence and stuff. So, you know, I knew it was a problem than even before COVID. You know, I would say the last 10 years before that, you know, there is definitely a lot of this police violence and just, you know, people of other nationalities being treated different than or, or, yeah, I guess not. Nationalities they're here from America. People different I also think we're all one race for the human race. I don't want the word race. Different, people of different skin pigments. But, yeah, I'm glad that it happened. I'm not glad that the people got hurt, that hurt and died that made it happen. But I'm glad that you know, people finally took that opportunity to become politically active. And also I you know, I think even before that, when Trump got elected, I feel like a lot of people got re energized and became more political. One of the only good things to happen during that time Yeah. Yeah, so I, you know, it was definitely again, I'm glad I got to be here for that movements. And, you know, now I mean, we still have the abortion rights stuff. You know, that's, I mean, at least from my own beliefs, you know, I, that's almost a worse thing than the pandemic happening. And I know it's, yeah. That's such a small minority of our society can make such big rules and decisions for all everyone else is sad for me. But yeah, I know it's pretty politically charged topic. So on that one there. Any other questions?

Kit Heintzman 45:35

Oh, yeah. How do you feel about the government's handling of the pandemic?

Allen Vandever 45:44

Ah. You know [inaudible] I don't know. I mean, it was pretty amazing that they, the vaccine came out as fast as it did. That was wonderful. I don't know how much government that was. You know, I think that even without the government, that would have happened. I think the pharmaceuticals are kind of separate than the government. And they all had a rush to see who could do get theirs out first. So I think that would have happened anyways. I mean, from my perspective, I know there's a lot more going on, but what I saw that it was more of a distraction than anything. You know, the news definitely use Trump as a distraction. Because the silly things he would say, or stupid things he would say or. And that was also, you know, like, politically very it or socially very interesting, just to see people rally behind his thoughts. And people. I don't know, it was yeah, so that politically that made that interesting. their handling of it, though. I feel like the vaccine was developed very fast. And then the distribution of it was very fast. I, you know, I, I do think that they could have the anti vaxxers could have if people and the government wouldn't have supported their ideas on that. You know, there are definitely branches that did. It probably would have been a lot better. So I felt that was kind of wrong. But I don't know, it didn't you

know? Yeah. Mixed feelings. I mean, I would say overall good. But yeah, there's definitely some aspects of it that I didn't like.

Kit Heintzman 47:57

I'm curious, what does the word health mean to you?

Allen Vandever 48:01

Health? Well, as a survivor of child sexual abuse, part of I even consider myself more than a survivor and as a more than a survivor of child sexual abuse. Health has always been very important after I became a survivor. I think a big part of it was for me that I abused my health prior to becoming a survivor. Prior to getting therapy, I used alcohol as a way of coping with my with my trauma, and I played sports, which in itself wasn't a bad thing. But I pushed myself to the level of hurting myself and trying to hurt others. Honestly, if I'm going to be truthful, because I had a lot of anger and built up violence that yeah, it was, yeah. That was that was definitely interesting. Yeah, I feel like that. My feelings on health. I've always tried to be extremely helpful. I was a vegetarian for 12 years, trying to be helpful, healthy. And, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I guess next question.

Kit Heintzman 49:51

What are some of the things you want for your own health and the health of people around you?

Allen Vandever 49:57

Ah, you know, I strive to be healthy for myself and I want them to strive to be healthy for themselves. Eating healthy exercising is very important to me. I'm getting getting a little older. So I've been having some sport related well, I'm not doing sports now, because I kept on hurting myself doing sports. But you know, I definitely more gentle on my body now, I've had a torn meniscus and broken ankle and torn rotator cuff in the last 10 years from when I was still doing sport type activities. But now that I've had those and realizing that my body doesn't heal as fast as it used to, I'm definitely a lot more impact friendly at myself, I guess, as far as sports go and activities. Yeah, just being as healthy as I can I want to live as long as I can. So yeah. So health is very important.

Kit Heintzman 51:09

What does the word safety mean to you?

Allen Vandever 51:12

Ah, safe safety. Well, I feel blessed that I am a large male. Because I have, it gives me a privilege of not having to be fearful as much as other people. I don't walk down the street. And you know, I don't have to be fearful of being attacked or targeted for crimes. But I definitely see from that perspective, I can see how other people it can affect them. And, you know, that fear of violence and being targeted for crimes. You know? It's it's definitely not fair. And it's definitely, you know, a problem that. Yeah, we need to really, really continue to work on trying to make that better. You know, safety with your health, I guess just, you know, not being too risky. Taking any measurements you can to protect yourself. Yeah, okay. Next question.

Kit Heintzman 52:34

There's been this really narrow conversation about safety under the pandemic, in terms of safety phone COVID. I'm wondering in that teeny, tiny framework, what are some of the things that you've been doing to keep yourself safe?

Allen Vandever 52:47

Well, like I was saying earlier, in the beginning, it was just like a very, very small group of people. There's like probably five of us than then when I decided to start doing the support groups, again, that grew to 10 of us. And it was interesting, because some people actually, it was weird. During COVID, a lot of people left the city, I felt like a lot of my friends moved away. Either because they lost their jobs and have to move home with their family or get another job and have to relocate, so that, even though we kind of insulated in that group of 10, people kind of would leave and we find a new person to fill that spot. I mean, I think we would probably sometimes we're up to like 15 people that were in our safety pod Yeah. question was, how do I keep myself safe? Or healthy? So yeah.

Allen Vandever 53:53

Definitely, I wore my mask, everywhere I went. Avoided crowded situations. I did a little more shopping online than I wanted to in the beginning, but it seemed like the right thing to do. It was hard not being around older relatives, you know, and especially older relatives are ones that need you around. So that was that was difficult. I have, you know, grandparents that are in assisted living that were not allowed any visitors. Yeah, [inaudible] that's all I can think of for for that question.

Kit Heintzman 54:40

What are some of the things you noticed about other people in Chicago safety practices?

Allen Vandever 54:47

Um, well, in Chicago, well, I'm going to do a comparison. You know, I would go up to Wisconsin to go hiking or go to the national parks and you go to smaller towns and, you know, I was just like, I couldn't believe how loose they were being with they're not, well, not wearing masks and much larger crowded, and bars and restaurants being opened from here to here where everything was shut down. You know, Chicago was kind of like a ghost town for a while there there were hardly and cars on the street for, you know, a good four to six months, it was like you'd go for a walk, you know, on a street that used to be packed with people, and you'd be the only person on that street. And that was very, very different. So I think here in Chicago, I think we did a great job. And I know the importance of being in a much more populated area. That was we had to do that. And I guess, in rural areas was probably a little less important for them, because they're not as populated. But still, I felt like they're being a little reckless. But that's my own personal opinion. I don't like to judge. Yeah. Next question.

Kit Heintzman 55:57

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Allen Vandever 56:01

Oh, I'm very excited. For a number of reasons, the people in my life, the new art endeavors, the book coming out the world becoming new, I'm not gonna say, getting back to normal, but it's becoming new, and exciting to see what that newness is like, you know, the inflation, especially in the city has been a real, because it's, I'm making a lot less money than I used to almost probably down to 1/10 of what I used to make, and the cost of everything doubling and more than doubling and a lot of situations. You know, it makes it makes it difficult. Like I was saying earlier that, you know, now I have to have, you know, health care provided by the state because I don't make as much money and just even this summer a few times, I've had to go to food banks to get food just because I couldn't afford I would still go the grocery store and buy stuff. But my food budget didn't buy all the food I

needed. Which in the city, you know, it's I always say food prices are almost doubled. Definitely going out to eat is not you know, like it was before. This, it's you know, even, we would usually go out for brunch, because, you know, everything was under \$10 on the menu, and now it's like \$15 to \$20 for brunch, dishes less. So it's like, okay, well, that's not really a thing anymore. You know, I had avoided fast food for a long time. But now it's like, well, I can if I want to go out to eat, I guess [inaudible]. But I don't do that very often, either. So yeah, yeah. All right, next question.

Kit Heintzman 57:53

What were the safety precautions in the food bank like?

Allen Vandever 57:58

Um, that was you basically, I just went twice now. But you wait in a line outside, that's, you know, you're more six feet apart, and they bring you the boxes of food. And yeah, it was easy. Yeah, real quick. It means it's humbling. To do that, the only problem is, is your pride gets a little hurt. You know, the, you know, I used to donate coffee to them when we roasted coffee, and I would used to donate to them. And now I have to go there for their services. You know, it's definitely that's always an interesting experience. But, you know, like, I guess because I did donate to them prior now. I feel like I'm glad I did donate because now I feel like you know, that my karma paid off so.

Kit Heintzman 58:50

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Allen Vandever 58:55

You know, actually very similar to pre pandemic. You know, I'm still same goals to be the best artists I can be to be the best father I can be be the best partner, be the best friend. I have a goal in life that I know I will never reach, but it is my probably after those goals is probably my number one goal is to end child sexual abuse. I know I can't do it, but I am going to work as if I can. Because I feel like that's the only way we'll make a real difference in it. [background voice: Yeah] So yeah. So yeah, those are my goals.

Kit Heintzman 59:39

Do you think of the pandemic as a moment of trauma?

Allen Vandever 59:43

I'm sorry, my phone was ringing. What was that?

Kit Heintzman 59:46

Do you think of the pandemic as a moment of trauma?

Allen Vandever 59:53

No, I see it as a moment of growth for me, yeah. I've been through so much trauma that it's hard to for things to be traumatic for me. I've, you know, without going into the detail, I've which I am happy to go into detail, but it's a different type of interview. I feel like I've, you know, I've Yeah, I can never imagine anything worse to happen to me than what's happened to me in the past. And I've overcame that. So basically, any obstacle that comes my way is always seems small in comparison. So non [inaudible] non traumatic, because yeah, comparison. So, yeah, no,

yeah, I see it as a time of interpersonal growth. And I know that my family and friendships that I had, you know, during that time, we'll never be, we could never been as close and as good. If it wasn't for it, so yeah. From you know, like, basically, like I said earlier, you take away the financial end of things. Wonderful. And well, I mean, yeah, loss of lives, people being sick. I mean, that's I, I guess I try not to think about that too much. But I mean, people, you know, I've dealt with loss of lives before. So, you know, it was nothing new. But, you know, it's sad that this made that happen sooner. I guess. I used to do hospice work when I was younger, so very familiar with dealing with that type of feelings and issues. So it doesn't make it. It's still hard, but it makes it much easier.

Kit Heintzman 1:01:41

When you've needed support who's been supportive of you?

Allen Vandever 1:01:46

Ah, that's a good question. I, prior to COVID, I had, you know, become so many people's support. And I didn't I mean, my wife and my son, my mother and my father, sisters and brothers. You know, and I have a circle of good good friends. Yeah, I don't know. I'm Yeah. I could probably have I don't know. Yeah, it's, uh, you know, I used to have to have a really strong support system when I was especially going through my own healing process. And I've needed that much less and depended on that much less as a as I, the more I grow, but yeah, I guess my friends and family they're my support. They did a good job of it, too. So, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:02:49

Would you give an example of a time where, during the pandemic, were you turned to someone for support, and they were able to provide it?

Allen Vandever 1:03:00

My wife You know, I mean, she was there for me through the whole thing. So we were definitely are each other's support system. She teaches Aikido and runs Zen meditation, you know, at a school and that was closed down. So all her supports were gone to pretty much so we were each other support. Yeah. Let's go next question.

Kit Heintzman 1:03:48

What are some of the things you do to take care of yourself?

Allen Vandever 1:03:52

Ah, good question. That was a hard thing with the pandemic. Because most of the things I did prior to the pandemic were gone. The pandemic hit, I would go to this Korean bathhouse once a month. It's this amazing called King spa here in Chicago. And you know, going and soaking in the tubs and doing the saunas and even Oh, I I would not there but that also get a misuse that would come to my space and we actually had an area set up where they were able to see clients for their massage practice. And then I would always get a free massage for providing a space for them. So that was that those those two things and they were afraid they they really quarantined hard. And so that went away. Those my two main ones prior to that, going to movies, going to art openings, going to art museums, stuff like that were also my way of take care of myself and they were going on. So, yeah, there's definitely a I think maybe books became more important to me again, which was something when I was younger, that was important to me. It's a way of support and keeping myself healthy. going for walks. Yeah, it was definitely there was a void. And I definitely now thinking about that I definitely, that affected me. And I think I think I created my own. Again, with a group of 10 to 15 people, we would have, like, dinners

together and little. Yeah, parties and just hanging out and watching movies together, it was different, it was definitely different. It was more more just the small group of people taking care of each other compared to having all these wonderful tools that our society has provided us to make our selves feel better. So yeah, it was definitely interesting to see the world without all those comforts. Then a little humbling, too, because, you know, a lot of the parts of the world don't have that. I mean, most people can't get a weekly massage. Most people don't have a bathhouse that they can go to going out to eat, I guess that was probably an hour thing that used to us to, you know? Yeah. Oh, I used to go to live music all the time. And that was gone. And I'm slowly going back to live music. Man, it's crazy how expensive live music is now. Yeah, and that's that, I mean, this is slightly slightly the same, but different. In, even in the art world, like, you would never think of buying a ticket to go to an art opening, you know, like art openings were free. They had, they had snacks, sometimes even meals, they always had an open bar, things like that, that, you know, were just free, you know, and they were throwing a show and celebrating that show and inviting the community in to see that show and celebrate with them. And now those same places charge money, you know, it's like stuff that was free now cost money the botanical gardens here in Chicago. They were free, always free. And now it's 20 bucks a person to go there. You know, so it went from being a free service to now and you, you know, go there with your family at 60 bucks, you know, but it's just yeah, it's it's weird that things that the you took for granted. Now, it's just, it's weird, they have paid for everything. Or pay more like stomach like the king spa used to be, you get for \$21 You get a day pass through this special coupon that I knew about. And so you go to the spa for 24 hours, and they have like a movie theater in there and a restaurant. So it was like youd spent the whole day there. And there's just like an escape room a computer and do some work was there was you know, but now is \$56 to go there. So it's like, well, I can't do that maybe once a year. Because it's not just me. I gotta bring my whole family and that all adds up. Yeah. So, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:08:52

What's parenthood meant to you?

Allen Vandever 1:08:56

Um, yeah, I really, I would say the pandemic made my son and I I mean, we were always super close. But I think that, especially for it kind of worked out perfect. Because for him, it would have been sixth grade that he missed most of and then or sixth and seventh grade. Which, for me, were the hardest years in junior high. You know, that's where everyone I'd be like judges you and you were more self conscious about yourself or so you got you got to miss all that. Let's see how that has development. But yeah. Just being able to be with Him every day, you know, and we still have our morning routine where I get him up and we hang out before his online classes started. I did a lot more working at home so I'd be you know sitting there in the same room as he him doing his homework I'd be working on my computer, and then my wife would be there working on her computer. So it was. And then, you know, in between the breaks, we, you know, we talked about his classes. And even sometimes during his classes, we would, you know, have discussions about what they're learning. So I got to be part of his education. And I always wanted I, I've always wanted to homeschool, but know how much work that takes. And I mean, basically, it was a job. And I just, unfortunately don't have the time. But I felt like this gave me a little taste of that, which was nice. He, all through COVID, he became a straight A student, which he was always struggling the school before that, but I think the help of my partner and I being there with them, always taking his classes and talking about stuff and helping him made a world of difference. So he feels a lot more confident in himself, education wise. And I think that came from that, you know, just just turned 14 last week, and he still wants me to lay down in bed with him every night and talk about his day, you know, if he doesn't need, if I don't, he's not happy about it. So, you know, even with his like, friends, he wants to be that his friends hanging out here at the

studio with me. So, I mean, they're hanging out with each other, but they're, you know, they want to be in the same environment that I'm in were, when I was 14, I was not wanting to be around my parents. I was wanting to be, you know, out my friends doing. So I'm you know, yeah. And I think a lot of that's, I mean, I think a lot of that would have been the same, but I think COVID made it better. So yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:11:52

How much do you think he understood about what was going on the pandemic?

Allen Vandever 1:11:56

Yeah, I think he was good age to really understand it. You know, 12, maybe it's 12 or 11 when it first started, but yeah, he was definitely, you know, he was mature enough and understood, you know? Yeah, I think he was a good age for it to happen. But if it was happening his lifetime. Again, we had a pod of friends for him, that we're all quarantining, but then they can hang out with each other. He went on a lot of bike rides, we live right next to this really huge cemetery, just a block away. It has a lake in it with a island with a bridge that goes to it. And they have like a natural nature reserve area in it. So he got to go there and go bike riding and stuff. You know, it was just Yeah. Location really helped where we're at right now. Yeah. moved up to this neighborhood, because it has the wood definitely has been more spending than when we lived before, and maybe a little bit out of our budget, but it has one of the best school systems in the city. So then, along with that come, you know, other parts of the neighborhood being safe. And, yeah, yeah. So yeah, our relationship is wonderful. And I, I, you know, now that he's been back in school for a year, I kind of miss him during that eight hours hes gone kind of wish they could have continued, but he needs to socialize. And he has a good, great group of friends now. So yeah, I think it was overall the whole, I'd have to say, I think that it was better this way for him than if it would have not happened. Weird to say but if I'm honest with myself, I think it was better for him. He definitely knows how to use stuff on the computer, you know, even better than I do sometimes with his he had to turn it all the assignments and he, you know, create a good work ethic with like scheduling. And, yeah, I think it's really going to help him in his careers in the future. So

Kit Heintzman 1:14:11

I'm coming to the end of my questions, and I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and social sciences, so fields like literature and anthropology and sociology, what should we be doing right now to help us understand the human side of the pandemic?

Allen Vandever 1:14:27

Well, I think that it started right away, when the pandemic started. Having had a book written during that era, or finished writing during that time. And one of our interactions with pub publishers is that they're so overwhelmed because so many people took that opportunity to write books. So I think literature is gonna have a huge boom. You know, it's it's rare that you have that much free time and opportunity to not have distractions and be able to focus on your arts. So there's a lot I can say about that. And but I guess the short answer is I think that it's yeah, it's interesting. I think that I guess I talked about earlier where every great art movement, and I think that goes for literature and other humanities has happened after a major incident in the world. And I think this in some ways is one of the I think, well, definitely more people died from this than war. And it affected the entire world every every place in the world where wars are more just located in certain areas. So, you know, I think historically, it will have a bigger impact than anything else in my lifetime up to this point. Yeah, I definitely know that. I guess. Creativity as an artist. Like I'm really into the metaverse aspect of things and creating what ways of interacting

with people around the world without having to use jet fuel to get there and even with this, yeah, there. I think the leaps and bounds that have happened with Metaverse, technology and VR is I don't think hardly anybody understands. I mean, even us that are working to understand the wonders and amazing things we're going to be able to do because of it. It's yeah, it's you know, a lot of sci fi things where they kind of scare you out of it. But it's yeah, it's as an artist, it's, you know, the leaps and bounds we made with technology, during this time with those products is only things I dreamed of, I feel like I make all my dreams come true. And I feel like a lot of other artists and storytellers and we'll find that also in RDR. And just the accessibility, this little machine right here that we just purchased. You know, it does, what in three hours I can do what a whole team of people would spend a month on, like three years ago. You know, it will cost half a million dollars to do what I can do in three minutes. For you know, for I mean, I mean, yeah, it was, yeah, it's, it's just, yeah, I think we're gonna have a new renaissance of Arts and Humanities.

Kit Heintzman 1:18:06

What are some of the things that you'd wish you'd learned more about in history when you were growing up?

Allen Vandever 1:18:13

When I was growing up, I had a very good education. Not so much. I mean, the school was fine, but my parents educated me a lot. And family. What did I not learn? I grew up with my parents being in college. So I was the youngest. So I was definitely exposed to the university life and going, even going, being little going to lectures with them. So I kind of was a college kid as a kid. I don't really know of, I mean, I feel like I was, you know, I feel like in the school, you learn the basics, and they definitely, you know, in the 80s and 90s There was still some stuff they're telling you that was kind of one sided and not full truths. But I feel like you know, by the time I was old enough to for it to really matter in the 90s that, you know, that shift was already happening, you know, that. You know, the victors weren't the ones telling the stories anymore. It was everyone was telling the stories. So that was I think, yeah, I think that was a big push for, to, at least in my family and my circle of people to I've always been very education like, is like, the most important thing. You know, the education of life is like the greatest power that one could have was this education. So yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:20:06

And this is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough away in the future that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about the pandemic?

Allen Vandever 1:20:28

Well, I think the most amazing thing during the pandemic, historically is how people came together to keep each other safe. And how we did, even though I don't like having rules that control us, we all did the right things to make it less than what it could have been, you know, the definitely was a terrible and tragic thing that affected many people. But if we weren't quarantining, and people were interacting, it would have been a whole different experience. So I think just how I think how we all came together, and and how science came up with the vaccine so fast, and I think it's a really important moment in time showing how we can be united and work in community. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:21:24

Thank you so very much for the generosity of your time, and kind of thoughtfulness of your answers. These are all of the questions I know how to ask at the moment. But right now, I just want to open space. If there's anything you want to share that my questions haven't made room for. Please take some space and share it.

Allen Vandever 1:21:44

Yeah, I feel like we covered almost everything. [inaudible] I'm gonna be done in just a second. I'm gonna be done in like five minutes. Sorry, I got distracted there, answer. Anything we didn't cover I mean, I guess just re-emphasizing how, I guess where we're just, you know, that this has created a new opportunity for society to redefine itself. I know I feel that way with the art world, there are a lot of things about the art world in the past I didn't like and I personally am working really hard to try to make sure those things don't come back. Trying to write and talk and educate people and, you know, in guide the art world into I know, I'm just one person, but I'm still trying to, you know, go away from our mistakes of the past and try to improve on them. Because the old is been burned down and we have time we have an opportunity to rebuild. So and I think all society kind of has that opportunity to build in something better new. And I hope hope we do that instead of something worse. But I know I'm gonna do my most to make sure we're on the right path. So yeah, I think that's it. I know people need to get in. We're fully open for business now. So perfect timing.