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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

ALEX HARSLEY

By Sarah Dziedzic

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Alex Harsley at 4th Steet Photo Gallery, Photo via seniorplanet.org

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Alex Harsley

Sound-bite

"Alex Harsley is the name. I was born in 1938, in South Carolina; a place outside Rockhill called Newport. And I've always been interested in learning about everything. So when I was born and raised, I was always given an extra hand of being taught how to do all kinds of interesting things. So that was my beginning..."

"…So I got that peace of mind early on, so I could stay focused on mainly keeping this gallery active and alive. So when people come in, they looking around: 'Oh! You changed things!' [laughs] I say, 'Yeah, that's very important. I do that every night.'

It's like a routine, for me, to actually change the show every night. Especially the window. I have a running group of people who count on my window, in terms of information. So I have to always keep that in the back of my mind, I have to always change the window. Because they're counting on what I'm putting in the window, in terms of learning something from it. Occasionally, I put something in the window, they come in, and they ask about it. A whole conversation about something in the past, about some individual, whatever happened, whatever. It's mainly a communication medium that I use, in terms of displays.

All the images here in the gallery, essentially, is not for me. It took a while for me to take my ideas, in terms of what I really wanted to do, off the wall, and put what the public really wanted. And being able to satisfy that public, in terms of information that I'm now providing them. So…they essentially educated me, in terms of their needs. They kind of, like, told me, if you want to survive, you've got to satisfy our needs. So I had no problem about doing that because most of the things that they like I fall in love with! Things I normally was ignoring. All of a sudden, I say, that's beautiful. I should have put that stuff out earlier!"

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Additional Quotes

"…that was the whole nature of the gallery: to give the artist a chance to show what they really wanted to show, without any kind of censorship attached to it… So the workshop that I had, and the situation I had, you had a myriad of different people with different ideas about who they are and what they're really all about. That will actually add to the overall inquiries, in terms of who are the people you want to reach, in terms of the information that you've providing on the wall? And to me, that became very critical, that information on the wall. So the information, first and foremost, had to be deciphered completely by the artist who was creating that. Once they deciphered that, now they have a better understanding of what that information is really all about. And what part of the mind that information's going to and how it's affecting that individual in their mind because now it's affecting them.

So we were passing around photographs, looking at those photographs, and having some sort of comment about those photographs. So it really wasn't about aggression but more about—oh, let me take a better look at that now. So each time there's a workshop happening, the information began to grow, in terms of the individual understanding about that information over that period of time. So once that information came to light, now go back and make a nice print of that. That was the process. Making master prints. Because now you got to compete with the best. Competing with the best means that you have to become a master technician in the dark room.

So with me, I knew all of that but, yet and all, I took a side turn and I created a mess. The reason I created the mess was because I wanted people to know, this is what I like to do, and this is what I'm going to do. This is my art form. Over the period of time, I had to pack up from that, put nice clean images on the wall, say, "Okay." [laughs, claps hands] But I still got this other stuff going on." (Harsley p. 25–26)

"So that has been my way of communicating with most of the people in the neighborhood. Like, some of the kids I photographed when they were little tots, now they're big—they're scary people now! [laughs] But then, you know, I have their respect because they know just how important I am to their family, in terms of information that I've captured at a very critical time of their evolution, in terms of being here in the neighborhood. Ain't too many people left, essentially, because most of the people got a certain amount of mobility, and some people bought a house out in the country, and that was the end of that. And the rest that decided they wanted to stay, managed to stay. We have major actors and major artists, who have made this their home—despite the fact that what it used to be, and what it can be. It wasn't about that. This was their home. Right around the corner is Phil Glass, my favorite musician. This is where he lives at. As well a lot of different photographers. Right around the corner was Robert Frank. I became very close friends with him.

It's always been about this gallery, and what this gallery represents far outside of me. More people respect the gallery, rather than respecting me, but, yet in all, I come along with the package." (Harsley p. 35)

"So it's more about that than anything else, in terms of the neighborhood. Because it's constantly undergoing changes, in terms of people coming and going and the diversity of people that's moving into the neighborhood. You have people living in this building here who have estates out there in Long Island. You have people who, basically, have mental problems who have the whole apartment to themselves. You have this whole first group of people living here in this building—in fact in the neighborhood itself. My whole idea, basically, was to have an ongoing part of the conversation with all these different people. Some I don't say nothing at all to because, you know, they're a little too far out for me. So I leave them alone. But yeah, it's been an interesting journey with me, in this neighborhood, being who I am because initially there was major push to get rid of most of the Black people here on the Lower East Side, by the way. Somehow or another, I managed to survive all of that." (Harsley p. 36–37)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Alex Harsley

Alex Harsley was born on a farm in South Carolina, where he spent the first ten years of his life being trained to farm. When his mother decided to relocate to New York City to work, he advocated for himself, his brother, and his sister to join her, which they did in 1948. He attended a public school across the street from where he lived in the Morrisania section of the Bronx.

As an adult, Harsley worked as a messenger, traveling around the city and noticing what he was interested in looking at and photographing; he bought a camera, and taught himself how it worked and how to use it. He got a job at the New York City District Attorney's office in 1958, and was the first Black photographer hired by the office. After a time in the Army, he returned to New York and worked as a freelance photographer doing photojournalistic work, where he honed his ability to construct an image that can tell a story. During this time, he photographed Black political leaders, musicians, life in Harlem, and various people and cityscapes, quickly amassing thousands of images.

As payment for a photography job in 1971, Harsley was set up with a non-profit arts organization, which he called Minority Photographers, Inc. For over fifty years, he has used this organization to support marginalized photographers, particularly by educational sessions, salons, mentoring, career advising, and collaborations with artists. In 1973, Harsley opened the 4th Street Photo Gallery, noting that it was necessary to establish a place to show not only his own work but the work of other Black photographers. Within a decade, the gallery was known as a springboard into the world of fine art photography, and has continued to support and launch careers in teaching and art-making, and to function alongside Minority Photographers, Inc.

Today, the 4th Street Photo Gallery features Harsley's photographic prints—which he changes daily—vintage cameras and technology related to photography, and work by other artists. He continues to create new work and to advocate for a museum of photography to focus on the medium's history and technological advances in the photographic industry, artifacts used in the photographic process, and the contribution of photographers to the broader field of fine art.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Okay. So, before we begin, I'm going to read a living land acknowledgment. Today, we're on the land of the Lenape people, who were dispossessed from this land, and now live in diaspora. We express gratitude to the Lenape people for their stewardship of this land, for continuing contributing to its geography, and ecology, and for the ongoing use of their language as place names.

Today is June 10th, 2022, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Alex Harsley for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. We're conducting this interview remotely and connecting via video call. Okay. So, as a starting point, can you say your name, and give yourself a brief introduction?

Harsley: Alex Harsley is the name. I was born in 1938, in South Carolina; a place outside Rockhill called Newport. And I've always been interested in learning about everything. So when I was born and raised, I was always given an extra hand of being taught how to do all kinds of interesting things. So that was my beginning.

Dziedzic: What were some of the things that you were taught?

Harsley: At the time I didn't really understand what was being taught. It was only after I came to New York City and got involved in education, that I learned I already knew what they were trying to teach me. Mainly metallurgy, making iron, and then turning that over and making horse shoes.

I could always remember them explaining to me how to do that and wondering why do I want to do this. It was always about making compromises, in terms of what people wanted to teach me to learn. And fortunately, I took the time to learn and all that learning expertise have turned over into all the areas I've gotten involved in over the period of my life.

Dziedzic: And what was that area like of South Carolina where you grew up?

Harsley: It was extremely rural. I mean, there was a dirt road leading back down off the main concrete highway, it was about a mile back there on the road. So I always remember anytime I see dust coming down the road, it would tell me that somebody's been lost, and they can go by the house and come back the other way because there's no road ending out there. So I always remember that part.

And along the road there was different fields. Main field was sugar cane. The other field was peanuts. And then—it just goes on and on, in terms of the different fields. The other field was all cotton. So the family that I grew up with essentially came out of the 1800s. And there was no electricity, I always remember that. There was no electricity. Electricity only came in after I was getting ready to leave, which is kind of interesting. Because when I look back at 1938—1938 was an interesting period of time, in terms of technology. And that's what I was born into. Mainly, the beginning of the atomic age, in terms of the leading-edge technology that would be somehow or other discovered and put back into the public sector.

So I've been rather interested in all the things that I learned as a kid, growing up to be a farmer. Mind you, I was trained to be a farmer. I still have the knack for planting things and growing things. I like that idea of actually treating something out of seed, and putting it into the ground, and having it grow, and out of it comes this fruit that you can eat. That's the kind of environment that I came from. [00:04:36]

When I came to New York City, all of that changed, essentially. Now, there's electricity, there's radio, the uncommon thing of TV. So the whole communication medium was changing. And I was able to go to libraries, which was very important to me, to kind of, like, get into different kind of periodicals, to see what was going on that I would be interested in. I always went to one section of the library. I remember that, the 629 sections [laughs]. That was dealing with automobiles and anything mechanical. Then after that, it was the periodicals area. We had *Life Magazine*, we had *National Geographic*, etc., on and on.

From all of that I began to get an interest in, I would say, photography, basically. I didn't know it at the time. Because that was always somewhat of a ghost in my past, that I was always trying to leave behind me. Because as a child, I was taken in to a photo studio and photographed. It was so interesting to me that I never got a chance to say, "Well, what actually happened? How did you do that?" But that came much, much more later, when I finally got into photography and I learned different techniques, in terms of printing, developing film, etc.

So yes, it's been an interesting voyage to this place here, to actually having a gallery. To actually work in this medium for pretty close to sixty-some years, and creating all this interesting content that I realize now that there's a large interest, in terms of the public.

Dziedzic: Yeah, absolutely. Can you tell me the circumstances of you and your family coming to New York City?

Harsley: Yeah, it was a matter of economics. After the war, the farm basically began to fall into disrepair. Weeds began to grow up in areas that used to be planted. Because most of the young men that was supposed to be helping with the farm got drafted, and most of them didn't come back, and the ones that did come back had issues. So my mother basically had no way of supporting her new family, so she decided to come to New York City, and then send money back. But I didn't like that arrangement, I wanted out of there. So I forced the issue, and then she had to come get me and my brother and sister, and bring us up here, out of all the weirdness that was getting ready to take place down in the South.

After, say 1948, '49, things began to change radically. I had no issues with white; I had no issues with Black. In fact, I didn't know the value of what people were talking about, in terms of equal rights. Because yes, I drink out of my water fountain that says it's for me and me only. Weird stuff. I looked at it differently. [laughs] And being able to sit in the movies up in the balcony, which was the best seats. [laughs]

When all the Civil Rights things began to take hold, I kind of, like, went back to my earlier childhood, in terms of what I didn't know about all of that, and how I managed to escape those kind of feelings. So even nowadays, I have no, I would say, negative feelings about any group of people. Because as I grew up, I begin to communicate with all these different people that I had no knowledge of, because it was much more interesting, to me, to learn from them about what they knew. And I could supplement that information in me and take it even further than that. So that has always been the clue for me to getting more and more educated on my own. Because when I came to New York City, back in 1948, I got enrolled in a local public school. They decided that the grade I was supposed to be in, they decided I wasn't smart enough to be in that grade, so they put me back to the third grade from the fourth grade. And that destroyed my

whole feeling about the educational system. After that I began to study on my own, and learn about things that normally is not taught in the schools. Mainly technologies.

My mother, basically, she was the key to getting me here to New York City. She could have gone any other place, but this became the place. Wound up in a place called the Bronx, Morrisania section. The school was directly across the street from where I lived. In fact, right around the corner was the play street, Kelly Street, and most of the young boys there was, kinda like, a little big younger and a little bit older than me. So I fell in the middle of all of this. So now, I'm protected all the way around. Got a chance to tour the city, going all over the place, just wandering. Our favorite place was to go into Bronx Park, and go to the river, etc.

So it was an interesting journey into life here in New York City. [00:10:01]

Dziedzic: What kind of work was your mother doing in New York?

Harsley: Oh. She worked as a maid, naturally. But the people she chose to work for were very important people. I didn't know that at the time; smart woman. So the last person that she worked for, before she passed away, or retired, the great-grandfather invented the automatic transmission. And the young girl that she was taking care of, it was her grandfather. And everything was willed to her. So that's the history of my connection to the rest of the world, in terms of my mother and how she chose the right kind of path go on, in order to support me and my brother and sister. But at the time, I didn't realize how much of a burden it was to her, but she pulled through. We survived and prospered, out of all of that.

The women back then, from when I was growing up, was the major players in the family. They controlled the family. And the men, basically, they was like sidetracked in the raising of the family. And came to New York, it was all turned around. I didn't quite understand that all of a sudden, you know, the women don't have that power in this environment. I guess because of the technology. And over the years I've learned that the effects of that have had detrimental effects on the culture, in terms of the kids, and the kind of oversight that they have nowadays.

When I was growing up at that age, I was taught right and wrong, in terms of what you do and what you don't do. You have to always think about yourself first. And once you do that, you think about everybody else, in terms of <u>your</u> values. So my whole value was basically to love everybody, to get along with everybody. Which is, to me, was very essential. And that

allowed me, essentially, I would say, to have more motivation to move up and into the system without any kind of biasness, in terms of the people I had to deal with.

I realize, with some people, they have bad feelings, but I could get around those, if I only think about it and don't let that bother me, and make them my friends. So that has always been my, I would say, my "out", in terms of: "We don't want you around here." I say, "Fine, okay. I'll find a way back in again." [laughs]

And so, coming out on the Lower East Side, it was like all the training I had as a kid now had to come into play, in terms of surviving this rather interesting environment that was constantly undergoing changes, and to set up shop, and survive all of those changes. And in the process of that, helping many thousands of people overcome those changes that they were dealing with, and prosper from some of the changes that they get involved in. Especially if they became photographers or wanted to go deeper into the arts. It was my role, essentially, to provide access—in other words, to keep the door open, to come in. "You want to talk, fine. You want to hang out, fine."

So that's been the ongoing thing with the gallery. Because initially, when I started all of this, I had no idea what I was getting into because I was given a non-profit art organization out of a deal from a lawyer who wanted me to photograph something, and the deal was, if I photograph that for him, he would create a non-profit art organization for me. In a way, a lot of people were looking out for me, in terms of what they believed I was good at. That person basically helped me get into this world of photography, without me actually understanding that I now I have a non-profit art organization—but what am I supposed to do with it?

Out of nothing I grew a very large organization and spread it all the way around the world. And out of all that, I came to the conclusion, at this point, that there's a major problem in the photographic industry. There's a major problem in the photographic technologies. Mainly, there's no real home, or no educational umbrella, for the entire idea of photography. So I come up to the conclusion that there should be a museum somewhere in this town since this was the original place where photography got its beginning and, essentially, grew. We had Eastman Kodak and the likes of thousands of other people who basically used photography to become somebody. And out of all of that, despite the popularity of the medium, there's no place, there's no home for it any place in the world. I think that's kind of ironic. [00:15:19]

So for the past three years, I've been busy trying to lobby for a photographic museum. But at the same time, I've got to think about my own survival at the end of the hour, in terms of being able to keep up with the expenses. It's a double-edged kind of situation that I've been dealing with, in terms of balancing. Sometimes, I have to put some of the priority things on the back shelf and deal with more important things that may need survival on a day-to-day basis.

But yes, in the meantime, I think people should be thinking about a photography museum. Now, what is a photography museum? It will have everything photography, including latest technology and any kind of advanced thing dealing even with the cellphone. Because photography came through this whole system in a rather unusual manner in so much as, when I was going to church as a kid, there was always these Dos and Don'ts about religion. When I got into photography, and I started researching it, I rediscovered those Dos and Don'ts. What are those Dos and Don'ts? Well, first and foremost, there's the negative process, and there's positive process. The positive process came out of France; the negative process came out of England. Now, which was the best? Well, in a way, you would say, well, the negative process was the best since it employed more people to try to keep it right. The positive process didn't require that many people to keep it right. Economically, the negative process prospered across the board, even to today, in terms of the negative process.

But then the cellphone, I try to explain to people, the first image that goes into the cellphone is processed as a negative. Out of the negative comes the positive image. And somehow or other, that law that was set in place back in 1839, 1840, 1841 by the Royal Photographic Society still hold, in terms of the negative side of photography.

So that flipped over into when photography began to move and got into the whole thing dealing with color, and got into TV. So again, you know, there's the whole idea of how many people would be employed using this process, as opposed to using another process to be explored. So it's always been about economics, this whole thing of photography.

So over the years, most of that has faded away because it has become more about artificial intelligence [A.I.], and more and more people come in here expressing a need to get back to the past. Most of these cameras that I collected over a period of many years that nobody wanted—they didn't even say "ah ha, ha, ha"—now they've become extremely popular. And in the process of that, the industry has become completely caught off-guard, in terms of supplying the necessary film, chemicals, etc., to the industry. That's all over with. But yet, more and more

people want to get into what they call film photography. So it's become a recurring conversation when you get into the whole idea of the photographic technology and artificial intelligence. I love working in artificial intelligence. I like working alongside all of this intelligence because now it allows me more deeper access into things that I want to know more about that's connected to something I had no idea that now I can put that piece together. That's how that works.

So, the whole idea of the process that's going on nowadays, film cameras—people fall in love with this stuff. Can you imagine?

Dziedzic: You know, as a matter of fact, after I left the gallery yesterday, I saw two people on the street. One of them was holding an analog camera, and another person came up to him, and said, "Can you tell me about that camera?" And they had a whole conversation, two strangers on the street. [00:19:54]

Harsley: That's what's happening. There's a lot of reverse thinking going on, dealing with the technology because most of the people who are coming into the technologies don't really want that kind of pictorial thing in front of them. They want to actually control that process themselves. I guess that comes out of a very specific need, dealing with the intellectual needs that they have now. In other words, with A.I., we're getting dumb, dumb, dumb, and dumber. But in the process of that, older people like me kinda like embraces artificial intelligence. While at the same time, the younger groups coming, 17, 18 years old, they don't want nothing to do with this. Yes, they got a cellphone but it stays in their pockets—more and more and more. And the A.I. industry is doing its best to basically keep them interested, coming with all these different innovations, but at the same time they're losing that public very slowly.

So that's going to turn around into what? Well, I guess more and more artists are going to be turned into, I would say, the more crafts. What do I mean by the crafts? Well, you got painting, you got sculpture, etc., as opposed to the electronic medium. The electronic medium is basically just for what we're using it for now [a video call]. So it's going to get even more and more sophisticated. But at the same time, more and more people are going to be leaving it. Interesting.

Dziedzic: Yeah, it is. And I definitely understand and agree with your reasoning about a photography museum since it's been such a big component of our lives.

Harsley: That's the only way it can be turned around again: to make people more aware of the evolution of the process. Because most people don't really understand what it's really all about, in terms of how it evolved, in terms of what was actually learned from it. Say, early on, we came up with the smoke chambers, in photography. Out of the smoke chambers, they figured out the atomic structure of time, and then eventually, that flipped over to 1937, '38, they finally figured out how to make the atomic bomb.

And then, later, in 1992, they came out with the floppy disk. How many people know about floppy disks? [laughs] Two-megabyte floppy disk! Big time! [laughs] And eventually, you get down to flash drives. I just picked up a flash drive from the floor, it say 134 MB. I say, wow this little thing got 134 MB? That's what's happening. I can take that little thing and stick it into my computer, and all that information will come out. But I don't have that kind of system. I'm like, left out of all of that. Apparently, there's a lot of people that have been left out of the technologies. But you know, that's the way it is. It just keeps on moving.

Dziedzic: Can you take me through your evolution of different technologies? I'd like to hear about your beginning to actually take photos?

Harsley: The first of my involvement in photography—I was surprised at just how good I was at doing it once I got the handle of it. Because my first inquiry was: how does the camera work? In terms of capturing an image. Under normal circumstances, any time I wanted to know about something, I would take it apart. But taking apart the camera, I realized, I wouldn't be able to put it back together. At least I got a chance to understand what the component part was. So I'm looking at one part and get a picture of that, and look in the book and say, "That's what that is," and, "That's what that is."

Then I went out and bought me a camera. I bought a used camera without really knowing there was something wrong with it. It had light leaks around the images, so now I had to buy another camera. Then eventually I bought a brand new camera: Nikon, with all the lenses. I bought a Canon, with all the lenses. Then I got to the point, now, where most of the images I was

taking—I'm surprised most people can't take the same pictures I can—but I had to realize, I have a special talent to see through the viewfinder, in terms of what was a good image, what's a bad image, in terms of lighting and composition. So I captured images just as fast as I could see them. And out of all those images, each one becomes a work of art, in terms of the visual information that's in it. [00:25:12]

So, early on, I got a job working at the district attorney's office. Prior to that I was working as a messenger. Working as a messenger allowed me to float through the city and just look. Go through stores, looking, and I got an idea about what I was really interested in. One of the main things I was interested in initially, coming out of the South, was Victrolas. So when I came up here, I had to build me a sound system. So now I have to research, in terms of what's required, to build a sound system.

At the same time, I was getting deeper into photography. What do I mean by deeper into photography? I had specific ideas about the kinds of images I wanted. So I would, say, go down to Times Square, with a long telephoto lens just to capture people. I would go to Coney Island just to capture people. I would go on the Staten Island Ferry just to capture the landscape of New York City from a distance. I would go to Central Park to get the beauty of that reality up there; it's so pleasant. I would go to the river and photograph boats going up and down the river. So it was a continued evolution of me getting deeper into the whole history of New York City—visually, mind you.

And over the years, I've managed to hold on to, I'd say about forty percent of that information. Because I shot every day, developed the film, put it away, over that period of time. Like most photographers, I did not stash undeveloped film someplace and forget about it. I always developed. It was a practice that I gave myself to be able to keep up what I was doing. So early on, I photographed different performers in the Apollo Theater. I would take the train down and walk across 125th Street to the Apollo Theater. So there, I got a chance to photograph the likes of Miles Davis, and all the other folks who was active during that time. Ray Charles. So, now I have my 180-millimeter telephoto lens on my Nikon. And that was my lens. I would go three rows back—perfect—and I could get the full image of them from that distance. Over the years, all of that information, I'd say most of that information has been lost. But at least I have bits and pieces of it.

Over that period of time, I had gone into the Army. I don't know what I did with my stuff at that point in time. I come out of the Army, I decided I wanted to do freelance work. So I hooked up with a freelance photography organization and started doing photojournalistic work. Because coming from the district attorney's office, I learned a lot about how to actually construct an image. But then, to photograph a reality, to have it say something, all you have to do is put a few words to it, and it really will highlight that. So a lot of writers like to work with me because they knew I would present the right kind of image that would help their words to take on meaning.

So it was very early on, in the South, that I learned how to see things. And one of my "see things," I was taught how to look across the field to discover any part of the farm that was having problems. I had to be able to separate the overall landscape into very specific sectors. So I became a master at landscape photographer from all that, and I loved doing landscape photography nowadays. So I have to go back and look at some of my work now, now that I've fallen in love with landscape photography. It took a while to get out of people [as subjects], but that has happened. Now I'm going in more about landscape. But in order for me to keep an ongoing thing, to at least keep the door open, I still have to—people are still interested in people images. So I have to come up with interesting people images, like a little kid pointing up at something, somebody sitting on top of a van looking up at planes flying up into the air. On and on and on. [00:30:02]

So over that period of time, I have all this information, and the idea, initially, was for me to print all that stuff up. So I took out about ten years to do that. And now, I've gotten three quarters through printing most of the important stuff in my collection. The first part was to print silver gelatin prints. Sixteen by twenty, twenty by twenty-fours. So I took about three years out in order to do that. Then the digital process came in. Now I realize I got a better idea about what I want to do because now it's much more easier to print. What do I mean by much more easier? I could print in the daylight now. I don't have to be stuck in the darkness with someone banging on the door saying, "Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?" [laughs]

Dziedzic: [laughs] Right.

Harsley: So now I do the inkjet process, and over the years, I learned how to master that, which was rather interesting. For a while I was pretty close to giving up on the process. But fortunately they upgraded the technology, so now I could get pretty close to what I'm looking for, in terms of a print. So, essentially, it saved me. But yes, a lot of people want to get into film photography because they don't really understand what new technology is, in terms of easy access. So when they come here, I try to explain to them, "Well, if you going to get into film photography, the best way to do that is, yes, to do the film, but scan that information into a computer, so you need to get a scanner and a printer. Because, I found, that's the best way to get a digital image, is to use that analog film because they have all that necessary information in there, and once it flipped over into digital, it become even more wonderful, in terms of the process of what you can pull out of that.

So with the museum, in terms of the new technologies, the old technologies, that's very important, in terms of education. We have millions of billionaires [laughs]—can you imagine a million billionaires? [laughs]

Dziedzic: Oh, gosh. I mean, that's the dream, right? I guess. That we're all rich?

Harsley: Eventually, we'll reach the right year, and somebody will put up a couple of million dollars, and open up a photographic museum. So far, there's enough people around who understand the whole history, and that's fading very fast—who can actually put it together the right way, in terms of the way it should go together, in terms of the overall history. Most of the people that I know are in their sixties and seventies, which means that that whole area of knowledge is quickly shutting down. So it's becoming more and more critical, in terms of people who can be used to put this whole history together.

The people that I worked with over a period of time, I've been trying to get them interested in creating the whole history museum, but I can't really get any traction in that area. Well, that's the feeling that I get. But I feel that, eventually, they would realize that their collection, the evolution, will go by the past and wind up in the dumpster. The only way to preserve that is to have a place for it to go, where other people can admire and appreciate the pieces that was held together, in terms of their collections. So that's very important for me at this point of my journey in this photographic world.

When people come here, I have everything out and exposed. When I first came back here, after I—initially I decided I wanted to go minimalism, so I went minimalism for about four years until I decided that I need to start putting more artifacts up to let people know where this was all coming from. That's how I came around to just sticking cameras on the wall. When I was a kid, I would go to different people's homes, they would have different things on the wall. [laughs] So I'm carrying on that tradition. Everything that used to be very important, now can be stuck on a wall and admired for how it helped me to get to this place in my life. So that's the whole idea of hanging these cameras on the wall. It's like the end. Literally, the end of all of that. [00:34:53]

Prior to that, these cameras are very important. It was the ultimate dream to get these cameras. But then after a couple of years, cellphones just blew that whole thing out of the water. But now that next generation coming back, saying, I want a camera. I want a camera. So the whole idea of a museum is taking hold, fortunately, in terms of necessity. Necessity, mind you.

Dziedzic: What was your original plan when you did open the gallery back in 1971?

Harsley: What happened initially was that there was very little access to, I would say, the underprivileged getting into the fine arts of photography. It was—in a way, still is—a very proprietary area of people who have everything. Early on, the likes of [Henri] Cartier-Bresson. Do realize who Cartier Bresson is?

Dziedzic: No, I don't.

Harsley: Cartier, jewelry, lots of money?

Dziedzic: Ok, yeah.

Harsley: So when I decided that I wanted to have shows, there was no place for me to have shows, okay? So I had to open up that whole idea of shows, so I selected places that people gathered. Mainly, theaters, in the lobby of theaters—people had to wait for the next movie. So I put shows up there, there was a place called the Elgin Theater over on 8th Avenue, that's where I started having shows. I kind of dominated that space, pretty close to three years. Then I started

putting up shows in bars. Then I started putting up shows in theaters, in the lobbies. And everybody looks very happy, and now I got a chance to let other photographers explore the realm of Blacks showing their work. And then the work became more and more controversial, in terms of the content. At that point I realized, oh, okay, I need to find a home for all of this, where photographers can show what they want to show.

So then I opened up the gallery in 1973. By 1980s—in mid-'80s—I had the best of the best showing up there because this was the place for them to get a springboard into the fine arts of photography. Most of those people who came through here became extremely successful, in terms of earning a decent income from the knowledge that they gained in the photographic process. And then out of that, in the late '90s, other artists began to show up here asking me to help them do different projects. And out of that they kind of, like, really prospered because now they were able to step out of that realm that they were known for into the technologies. And that kind of, like, gave them a upper hand, in terms of, okay, now you don't have to go into process. Initially, the whole idea was process. In other words, you go and do all kind of complex things and create this interesting piece out of the complex. You don't have to do that anymore. It's much more simpler than that. The whole idea, basically, is to do something. It doesn't matter what you're doing as long as you do something. But don't let people know what you're doing. You just put it up.

So, that was the beginning of all that. In the 2000s, I began to work with a lot of artists who was coming into the medium, had no real idea where they wanted to go, but, in terms of collaborating here with the other artists, they got a better idea. Most moved to the West Coast, others moved to Germany. Others moved to England. There was a major migration out of the city. Most of the artists I was working with who had places down here got squeezed out. To me, it was the most horrendous thing to happen that nobody paid any attention to. How many of the artists got squeezed out of the real estate thing down here? I mean, these were great, great people, in terms of work that they were creating, in terms of the amount of energy they was putting into the medium to satisfy the historical needs of the emerging public that would need that kind of information.

Like, you mentioned that whole idea about the land that we are on. This photographer went deep into all of that and did a whole documentation on those areas and produced books.

Yet, you don't hear about that. Again, if the museum was there, at least you would have access to that information. [00:40:17]

So when I started all this, it was basically out of conversation. What do I mean by conversation? To create a space where people can discuss their ideas of what they wanted to do with each other. One of the earlier recipients—he's now a major professor at an institution up in Massachusetts—Abelardo Morell, he was one of the beginning people that I worked with at the onset of creating all of this here, back in the mid-'70s. Along with him, there was another photographer, named Zoë. I worked with her for a couple of years. She's now very successful out on the West Coast. So, to me, it was just moving from one person to another person. That's always, you know, my objective. People come to me, and they express some sort of need, and I just have to kick in despite the facts of "I don't want to do that anymore." But I just do it because I realize that it's very important they come to me and ask me for help.

Dziedzic: You mentioned being aware of new technologies, and digital technologies, is one of the ways that you've helped some people kind of transition through time. What are some of the other kinds of ways that you helped younger artists and photographers?

Harsley: It was mainly psychological. Because folks get turned around. I mean, sometimes you go to the wrong place to get a show. I say, you can't go to that thing; they're not interested in what you're doing. This is where you need to go. And try to set them off on the right trail, rather than them becoming a little bit upset and confused for not being accepted, in terms of what they're doing. So to me, it was a matter of them understanding all of the various languages that's out there.

One of the people that I was working with, he was working very deep into the whole thing in North Africa, and changing religions that was taking place there. His name was Sulaiman Ellison. He had the most complete history of that area before it changed over to what it has become today. Then he wanted to have a book, but he never got around having a book. Another photographer managed to steal his glory [Chester Higgins], and have a book about the images of that area, and that was the end of that conversation. So most photographers that I work with have these interesting historical collections that, eventually, if they don't come to the surface will be lost forever.

That's where I started off at, and there's where I'm still working at, in terms of helping people who have issues in understanding what they're doing, in terms of people out there that needs that. I explain to my youngest students that they represent X amount of people who can't do what they're doing. As long as you realize that, that would be your audience, those would be the people that support you, when you get deeper into this thing, or whatever you want to do. So yes, that critical little bit of information is the key to understanding who they are, in terms of their role. So I explain to them, okay, you're going to school, now. You realize how many people graduated from that school? That's your competition. As long as you understand that, and know how to deal with that, and step outside that exclusion area, and become a real person, and then realize you have an audience of what you're doing. How do you reach that audience?

You go back into the institution again, have shows. You do talks. You explain to them how you got to that place. So what I do, essentially, is to help them transition deeper into the arts. What do I mean by deeper into the arts? Well, it's a very difficult area to survive in because each achievement is only one temporary achievement. It's basically, from what I've been thinking about, in terms of my own thing, it's being able to survive. And survival is the key. How do you survive? You have to have people pat you on the back and say, "That's great work." That's the first. [00:45:01]

Dziedzic: [laughs] Right.

Harsley: Then you count on your family [laughs] to help you with your financial humps, and realize they're making a very important investment, in terms of their family's name is going to be somebody, through you. It's all about, you know, the psychological values that you get out of getting into the arts. Like I said, it was very exclusive. In fact, it's still very exclusive, in terms of being able to survive in the arts. A lot of artists I helped get into that exclusive area where, now, they don't have to worry about money. They got nice teaching tenure jobs. I try to get most people that got into college—"You make sure you get tenure, okay?" They say, "What's tenure?" "Don't worry about it, just ask for tenure." [laughs] I got them into nice colleges, mainly Yale.

So the things that I wanted, I realized I couldn't have. Because somehow, none of my values doesn't fit into all of that. But I know people who basically have those same values, and it's been very easy for them to get into that without them having real issues. So that has always

been my inquiry: to understand the sense of who they really and transpose that into, I'd say, economical access, in terms of how they can use that to get deeper into the arts, and basically, to continue to survive and thrive in it. And be very happy doing what they're doing over the period of time.

I try to provide that kind of motivation, in terms of inspiration, in terms of how I managed to get this place here with a lack of a college education—got squeezed out of college early on, forced into the vocational trades. But at the same time, like I say, I was born and raised to be in that area. So when it came time for me to study in that area, I decided I didn't want to do that. Now, how do I get around to realize I don't want to do that? Because it made too much noise. You stayed dirty all of the time. And you work from sunrise to sunset. [laughs] And I always wanted time to think. So I was always being reprimanded for thinking. They thought I was sleeping—"Why are you always so sleepy all the time? Wake up!" So I finally got the space to think, put everything together, and turn all that back around, and help all kinds of people, essentially. I guess that was my calling, just a matter of what I had to go through in order to get to this place in my head.

I'm surprised most of the time how I've managed to survive, despite all of the—I mean, I lived in a very dangerous environment, by the way. I think about some of the things that I did, like eating poison, without really understanding you ain't supposed to do that. I wanted to taste it, by the way. What do I mean by poison? They had this special molasses that they poured around the cotton to keep the boll weevils to keep from eating it. And it smelled so good, I decided to taste it. I was sick for a couple of days but I didn't die. [laughs] And all kinds of other situations, like coming to New York City, not really understanding electricity and deciding to touch it; getting shocked. [laughs] Okay, don't do that no more.

Dziedzic: Well, like you said, your impulse was to take something apart when you didn't understand it so that you can come to understand it.

Harsley: Yeah, yeah. Going out and playing in very dangerous areas, like roller-skating, bicycle riding, flying through red lights, everybody shaking their hands at me. [laughs] But, you know, it's being able to survive all of that, and getting to this place and being a little more mature about being responsible. Being responsible means that I have to be very careful about what I used to

do, as opposed to what I'm doing nowadays. I've stopped riding my bicycle, running through the red lights. I stopped riding upstate New York because back in 2017 I got ambushed and almost didn't survive that. So now, I realize, I just have to be even more careful because now I'm in that interesting area of being knowledgeable and in a way helpful to a lot of people who still need my help, so I have to be responsible. So when they do show up, I'm in the right state of mind to actually help them along. Otherwise, I can't imagine I'd get in a bad state of mind and start turning people away, and I would feel very sorry about that afterwards. [00:50:30]

I have to feel good inside myself, [laughs] for not being mean to people. By the way, early on I was very mean.

Dziedzic: Is that so? How did that—

Harsley: I mean, coming out of the South and being forced to do all kinds of different things with no time in between, it turns a person into being very selfish about their time. Because I was born in an environment that, it's barely, I would say, a hundred years beyond slavery. So the way I was raised and abused, I was like a slave, essentially. And I was treated just like a slave. I was barely fed, barely taken care of and, essentially, abused. I got whipped consistently because I used to make stupid mistakes because I didn't know. But then every time I got whipped—okay, I don't have to worry about getting whipped for that anymore. It was an ongoing thing.

So when I came to New York I was basically a seriously abused child, and I had to get out of all of that, and realize that I can't bring that along with me. I can't be fighting everybody. So instead, I decided to just be friendly with everybody. So in my neighborhood, there was Jewish kids, there was Italian kids, Blacks. I was born into that kind of environment. Hello?

Dziedzic: I'm here. What kind of head space were you in when you decided take on this nonprofit, Minority Photographers, Inc.?

Harsley: When I moved to the Village, I got a chance to explore my newly found freedom of being completely detached from everything. I got a job working in a color lab and I made enough money in one day to pay all of my expenses, and the rest of the money was put over into partying. I got around an interesting group of people, and most of them was in college studying

to be different things. So it was kind of like inspiration to me to be around that kind of environment, in terms of people just striving to become somebody.

Then, at the same time, I kinda, like, put the photography thing aside and just engaged in riding my motorcycle. And then, I got into the early philosophy—1400s all way up into the 1900s. Essentially, what I was looking for is, like, an excuse for what I was feeling and how I was feeling, in terms of somebody already got into those feelings, so what are those feelings really all about? Coming out of the South, I was always introduced to the feelings of the spiritual thing. But beyond the spiritual thing was the initial reality of, "Okay, you go to church on Sunday, do you practice going to church every day? Do you take these rules around with you every day and use all these rules that you've been preached to, about how you should be?"

So when I came to here, in New York City, all of that kind of like came to the forefront of my early religious training. Because once I got to the city, my mother forced me to go to Sunday school on Sunday morning. And go to Sunday—I forgot what it's called. I went three times a week to religious training and to church for some strange reason. So when I finally got down here, now I want to turn that information over and look a little bit deeper into the whole philosophy of people who actually got into those areas of thinking. [00:55:19]

One of the earliest people that I got into was a guy named Epictetus. Out of Epictetus, came Schopenhauer. After Schopenhauer came Hughes, and it just goes on and on from there. Because each one of those individuals was kind of, like, creating a whole new universe, in terms of the new pattern of thinking beyond religion. Because the whole idea, essentially, as I got deeper into that, was the disconnect civilization from the whole idea and the idealism of religion, in terms of Dos and Don'ts, to open up their minds so they could be more receptive to whatever's out there, and build around that. Prior to that, it was almost impossible for people to dream.

A lot of people don't know that, just how unimportant they were made, in terms of what they knew. Because they had to be kept in ignorance for reasons known and unknown. So, in a way, that's still going on, around the world. The whole idea with philosophy was to untangle that kind of thinking and give it more of a coherent understanding, so people can actually get some sort of uses out of it to supplement how they feel about everything, and be a little bit more positive about things. So they don't have to be confined to those areas of thinking anymore.

Dziedzic: Yeah.

Harsley: So that was the beginning of me getting into the whole photography thing, when I first got the nonprofit art organization. After that, it just bulged into all different kinds of areas of research. Essentially, in the late ’60s, I got involved in the whole idea about going to the moon. So I subscribed to, okay, what technology’s going to be used to photograph the moon? So that was my beginning into the technology area of the visual information thing.

Then they decided they wanted to send out this satellite to explore the deeper part of the universe. One megabyte of memory. [laughs]

Dziedzic: [laughs] The whole universe.

Harsley: But somehow or other, it’s still working, it’s still sending back information that they trying to decipher. I used to go to the movies a lot to get an understanding about the illusions. One of the movies I went to see was about Voyager. Voyager had gone beyond our solar system. It was on the outer premises of that. Now, it’s sending back some interesting information but that information can’t be deciphered. In the movie, it came back with everything that it discovered. This huge bundle of information that was getting ready to destroy the Earth. They had to figure out how to get this thing—what was this coming toward the Earth? What is it? They discovered it was Voyager that was sent out many years prior to that. Now, it was coming back with all the information that was sent out together. So the only that could stop it was the scientists who sent that information, realized the only way to communicate with Voyager was through a whale. And the whale would send out the information to tell it what it to do. And there was only one whale left. So that kind of said a lot to me, in terms of, you know, where we’re headed without really any true understanding.

So, yesterday, I’m looking—I follow a lot of the information about the technological area. One of the most important things is they just created this massive telescope to look deeper into space. It got whacked by a meteorite [laughs] but they figured it’s not going to create that much damage. But it’s an ongoing process, in terms of what’s available, with the iPhone, in terms of technology. Normally, I was using a computer. But once I got the iPhone, I don’t have to use the computer anymore to research things. So I could tap-tap things, in terms of what’s going on. [01:00:01]

I use Google a lot since me and Google have finally figured out how to get along, without them shutting me down. Because I put a lot of information on there, that artificial intelligence don't like.

Dziedzic: What kind of information?

Harsley: I put an image of something stupid and I called it the Quantum Mechanics Entanglement. [laughs] They didn't like that.

Dziedzic: Huh. So people are coming across your work and Google is not pleased with your titles?

Harsley: No, no, it's artificial intelligence. It's the computer that they're using. It's one of the fastest computers in the world that they're using. Most people don't realize that. To actually decipher information that's coming in and going out. So, they have all kinds of information, but they can't let that information out. So, what I try to do is leak some out. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Leak some to the people?

Harsley: It's an ongoing research project. It's kind of like an adventure to come up with some idea. Say, when the virus struck. Now, I have to take and look: okay, what's going on with this virus? What's going to be done about this virus? The first thing I discovered was that it's going to be a proprietary solution to it all. I say, that's not going to help. So then I look even deeper. Now, I get into the whole white papers. I know I'm going deeper when I get into the white papers. Because people don't get into the white papers. These are papers that was done years prior to that that's been published in the Google research network. So it's been a while since I've been able to get into those areas because most of the stuff I've been doing, it's just peripheral information. It has nothing to do with advanced research or advanced thinking. But if people really want to know, there's a whole network of papers that's being presented from different kind of ideas. So anytime somebody want to get a doctoral degree, those papers are published through Google. That's where most of the research stuff lies now. They have all the vast amount of

information that's there, available to the public. It has to be proprietary for the public to actually access, so that information cannot be shut down nor censored. But yet if you come in the wrong way, they block you.

Dziedzic: I can't help but think about parallels to the art world, with what you're describing, with this.

Harsley: Well, the museum essentially got caught off guard. That's another subject. [audio cuts out briefly] [01:03:23] All of a sudden all these white folks showing up on TV. [laughs] All these showing up in the museums. What kind of legitimacy is that, I would say. You know, those people should not have to go wait for that kind of situation to occur before they got into those spaces. They would be much more inclusive to people to be able to include everything.

Even on TV, nowadays—when I used to go to the movies, there were characters with no teeth, and all kinds of weird things going on. Now, everybody has gone through this facial treatment. Everything is all clean and perfect. Not everybody should look that way. Those people that don't look that way is now totally discriminated against. Because the personality that they put in, in terms of being on TV: they got they teeth done, they got the facial thing done. They look all clean. Not raggedy like they've been living in the garbage for the past three days.

I see them making a movie here. Everybody's been made up. You know, that's not true. Come on now. Let's go back to the rough areas. Let's show people where we're coming from. You know, that didn't happen overnight. But somehow or another, because of the advertisers, they want everybody to look clean. And be clean. So that's kind of, like, shutting down. [01:04:56]

Even in the arts, you know? Everything's going into minimalism because it has no mess in it at all, and there's no controversy around it. So it's a much more safer thing to put into museums. Rather than when I came into it, the whole idea was to get that kind of information into the museum, heavy-duty journalistic stuff that was happening in the early '70s and really came to pop in the '80s. If that information didn't come out, I'm pretty sure that would not have gone away, in terms of the public saying, "Wait a minute now—we've got to do something about this."

Then you ask, well, what is the role of museums? When I came to the world of museums, essentially, MoMA was basically into photojournalism, with what was happening in World War II and the Korean conflict. You don't see that anymore. And they have these huge collections with that information. It says something about the curatorial people that they bring in to front for what they're doing, give it a level of legitimacy. But yet, in all, the people they bring in doesn't really represent the true nature and culture of America. Somehow or another, the true nature and culture of America gets completely overlooked. It's more about the powers that be.

So when I came into it, the whole idea was to get people in there who could basically sustain themselves and prosper, while at the same time adding to that culture.

Dziedzic: And adding to the broader society's understanding of society and humanity, in a way.

Harsley: Right, right, right, right, right.

Dziedzic: And because that didn't happen, in a broad scale way, we're at a really weird place now.

Harsley: Yeah, I know. If I go to the MoMA, I'm looked on very suspiciously, okay? They don't know me. They don't know the amount of work I've done there. But yet, I'm looked on as very suspicious. I remember going to a meeting there and they were talking about photography. I got stopped every other two feet, "Where you going? What you doing? What do you want here?" And that's what's going on because I didn't look that way. My shoes run-over, I got dirty pants on. I look that way for a very specific reason.

Dziedzic: Which is?

Harsley: Most of the people who come into those museums put on their best to show up. I don't have that anymore. I don't have a suit. [laughs] I don't have a decent pair of silk stockings, okay? [laughs]I have to wash my underwear every night. It's that simple. It's all about survival. A good pair of shoes? I would love to have a good pair of shoes. When I first came to New York, got a job, I wore thirty, forty dollar shoes. Then, eventually, I got into boots for five hundred dollars.

[brand unclear] [01:08:34] I dressed well. I wore custom-made suits. That's all in the past. I can't do that anymore. So when I show up at these different ceremonies, people looking at me, "Who are you?" [laughs] I said, I'm the one that started all this, excuse me!

Dziedzic: Right! And, you're an artist.

Harsley: [laughs] But most people don't know about my successes, unless they look, or unless I shoot them a link. But like I say, that's all temporary. Unless you know about that, and search for that, I literally don't exist. People come into the gallery, say, "How long you been here? Really? I walk by here all the time. I never seen you." There's other realities that you're focusing on.

Dziedzic: So what kind of conversations were you having with some of the photographers that you were mentoring in those early days? What were some of the strategies around, you know, getting work that shows life and culture? [01:09:47]

Harsley: The first of those instances was, essentially, getting into the institutions. My institution that I needed to get into, in terms of getting other artists into, it was the buzzing area of the photographic journalism thing. That person's name was [Benedict] Ben Fernandez. He was running the New School for Social Research in the photography department. He came out of a situation where this one individual, who was editor of *Mademoiselle*, Alexey Brodovitch, decided to gather up some people—artists, photographers—and make them great. So that was my thing. To follow along what he did. Now, how do you make somebody great? You have to, first and foremost, give them the necessary impetus and the idea about being competitive in a very competitive environment.

So at that point, I began to have workshops at the New School for Social Research with Ben Fernandez. And out of that came the nonprofit art organization that I subsequently did get. But I had no idea that I was going to get this deep into all of that because my first inquiry, essentially, with him was: how do I get some photographers in here to have shows? And the first part of that was, well, we need some people to work here. So different photographers got jobs working at the New School for Social Research. Out of that, some of them expanded into becoming photojournalists at the *New York Times*.

So Brodovitch helped a lot of photographers really get into—one of the main photographers that I admired was a photographer named Hiro [Yasuhiro Wakabayashi], from Japan. And I kinda, like, seen him as a challenge as to what I can do, in terms of his techniques. So, I studied a lot of techniques that I found compatible with what I wanted to really get into. So Hiro was major techniques. And the other person was Ben Fernandez, in terms of taking a role, in terms of helping people get into the system.

After Ben Fernandez, I kind of like took over his job and started having workshops in my apartment. And those workshops grew into every night. It got to a point where I used to have workshops every eight days, in terms of how it changed around in order to accommodate everybody. So they came from all over to actually engage in these workshops. Now, what was happening at the workshops? We're sitting around with a cheap bottle of wine, some cheese, and we had nice, pleasant conversation in the dark. Then, I would gather up some photographers, and we'd go up and camp out overnight in the Catskills. So I did a lot of that with them. So they got a chance, first and foremost, to get out of the city. They hang out together, as a group.

Then I did a lot of touring through the Bronx, when the Bronx was literally falling apart to show them what was happening up there. And it was very dangerous, but I had the most dangerous people that was joining Minority Photographers, by the way—the worst of the worst. [laughs]—so nobody messed with me. [laughs] So I decided to go up to the Bronx and hang out. I went up to the Bronx and hung out, and just took around having everybody photograph the reality that that was happening there.

And then after that, once I got the gallery going, I had kind of, like, diverse—I got into films. So I began to show a lot of films. The kind of films I showed was more of a historical nature about earlier photography, in terms of early filmmaking. And most of the stuff I showed here, most people would say, "Why are you doing that?" It's art. Excuse me. [laughs] Because I was always separating art from any kind of controversy that most people seen as it.

So in 1985, '84, I had a show here about a Japanese photographer that really got me into hot water without me really understanding what I was actually getting involved in. And all of a sudden, the whole neighborhood turned against me saying I hated women. So all those people who were nice to me, smiled at me, now I got really dirty looks. It took me pretty close to thirty years to get me out of all of that. At least it was a good education for me, in terms of the kind of shows I was going to be having here and the kind of content that was basically a little more

controversial. I had to keep a very low PR program going on with the controversial shows because that was the whole nature of the gallery: to give the artist a chance to show what they really wanted to show, without any kind of censorship attached to it. [01:15:18]

Which today, is becoming even more critical, in terms of information sources. Like I say, most of the information that people are looking for, in terms of different inquiries, it's there, it's just a matter of where you want to go looking for it and find it. In all the years that I've been researching, which I started back in 1965, when I realized I knew very little about photography and I needed to take time off from working in a job and get more deeper into the whole research of photography. That's when I really took on this whole thing of understanding the whole idea of controversy because most of the people that I studied, some of the philosophers, especially Epictetus and Socrates and all these other weird folks who had different ways of thinking about things at a very critical time. You go into Aristotle and all these other weird dudes, who decide to change their whole idea about matter and how just controversial that was, in terms of the people who were trying to control all that.

So over the years, all of those controls have been relaxed. But at the same time, due to artificial intelligence, it has inherited all of those controls without it even knowing that. So that's the only critical fact. But like I say, there's ways of getting around that if you really want the real information because that information is very easily accessed, especially at the very onset of photography technologies.

In 1839, was the essential beginning. In 1891, the whole idea about the iPhone took precedent over the technologies. For that, that individual got a Nobel Peace Prize. His name was Gabriel Lippmann. So all these names, nobody didn't really know about, in terms of the innovation they put in place to keep all this together. You can mention the likes of Einstein, but there are other people that Einstein was counting on for his ideas to actually be formalized. It takes more than one person to formalize an idea, in terms of the ideas they bring in with them.

So the workshop that I had, and the situation I had, you had a myriad of different people with different ideas about who they are and what they're really all about. That will actually add to the overall inquiries, in terms of who are the people you want to reach, in terms of the information that you've providing on the wall? And to me, that became very critical, that information on the wall. So the information, first and foremost, had to be deciphered completely by the artist who was creating that. Once they deciphered that, now they have a better

understanding of what that information is really all about. And what part of the mind that information's going to and how it's affecting that individual in their mind because now it's affecting them.

So we were passing around photographs, looking at those photographs, and having some sort of comment about those photographs. So it really wasn't about aggression but more about—oh, let me take a better look at that now. So each time there's a workshop happening, the information began to grow, in terms of the individual understanding about that information over that period of time. So once that information came to light, now go back and make a nice print of that. That was the process. Making master prints. Because now you got to compete with the best. Competing with the best means that you have to become a master technician in the dark room.

So with me, I knew all of that but, yet and all, I took a side turn and I created a mess. The reason I created the mess was because I wanted people to know, this is what I like to do, and this is what I'm going to do. This is my art form. Over the period of time, I had to pack up from that, put nice clean images on the wall, say, "Okay." [laughs, claps hands] But I still got this other stuff going on.

Dziedzic: So I want to go back to talking about, in your workshops, taking a group of people to the Bronx, for example, at a time when the Bronx was really devastated from fire and neglect. So can you give me an example of how, as a group, you're looking at photographs like this. What are the different interpretations? [01:20:13]

Harsley: Most of the different people that came to the workshops had issues. Some of them was coming directly out of the mental institutions, others working on a doctoral degree—dealing with synopsis, in terms of how drugs and labor transmit from one synopsis into another synopsis—pure criminals, a few photographers in the middle of all of this. But it was mainly the concrete side of life, of people that kind of, like, was drawn to me, because I advertised in various medias. One of the main areas I advertised, I put, "Photographers wanted to participate & those with long-term objectives." And that kind of, like, was the main lure that I got people like that in here. Because they, essentially, had gotten to the end of their life and they needed something to hold on to in order move further <u>into</u> life. So those are the people who basically

came here. They were preparing to enter into higher education, without any about what they were going to study, in terms of higher education.

Most of them, after that, decided to go into photography. Why photography? Because it essentially included everything. You not only have to be a great photographer, you have to also be a great writer. Have to be great at PR. I mean, you have to be great at a lot of different things, in order to actually get this thing to work for you. Because photography's just one small part of the whole communication mechanism that's out there, in order to open up the keys to different doors, to get in, in order to be a photographer.

That was the whole idea of these workshops, was to understand the mechanics of actually becoming somebody. Like, a lot of people basically got into writing. I always tried to get most of the people who come in nowadays to get into writing. Because I tell them that photography's very easy, but writing, I think, is an interesting skill that you should get into picking up because that can supplement what you're actually doing. And I think that is the most important area of the culture nowadays, mainly writing. Because you're able to reach a very specific part of people's minds, as opposed to the photographic images. Most people don't know how to read photographic images. They're just looking at the picture. You're dealing with a very high level of people who basically don't understand what they're looking at in the first place. You got to create all this PR about what they should be looking at. But, you know, that's not the way it works, not really.

So by writing something about what you're doing, you know, it gives a more broader view about what it's really all about. Especially if you want to produce a book. And most photographers who do books, somehow or another, they haven't really quite worked! Because the public is not really into that kind of information yet because they're interested in instant information. What's instant information? Those thirty-second apps.

Dziedzic: Right. You know, about ten years ago, I co-taught an after-school class called Literacy Through Photography—I wish I knew about your work, at that time. This class was for fourth and fifth graders. There was a writing component, but it was a lot about learning about where you are, and where you come from, by taking photographs.

Harsley: That's right. That's the vulnerable area of the education system, when kids get into the fifth grade and the kind of information they're allowed to access. I don't know what's going on nowadays, in terms of education, but there's a school right down the block from the gallery. Every year, one of the teachers come and take on the idea of having each one of the kids in that school, create a piece of art and putting that piece of art on the wall—on the fence outside the school. So it's, like, a very interesting area about what's really going on in kids' minds that a lot of people don't pay too much attention to. [01:24:58]

Over the period of years that they've been doing that, I notice more and more of the images that they're putting out there have brown faces. So if anybody really want to take a better look at what's going on in the educational world, dealing with kids with emotional problems, art is basically the way out for them because now they're able to truly express how they feel, and basically, the main conversation that they're dealing with inside of their minds that doesn't come out in the classroom setting but do come out in the artistic setting if they are allowed that kind of freedom to explore those regions.

I feel that art basically should be the main source that they would be fed, in terms of the whole history of art, different artists working in that area. Because their emotional issues, basically, can be opened up and explored, and put something in that basically will be beneficial to them in the long run. Rather than try to teach them A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K. Instead, like I say, the whole thing of art has always been very exclusive to most people, in terms of education, so when you get into the areas of kids—so my daughters, they went to a school where the whole idea of art was kind of, like, the main topic. They came out, and they prospered. But most schools don't have those kind of teachers, who basically know how to focus in on those areas, to get the kids interested in those areas.

In the long run, I feel that the whole educational thing, in terms of what I was doing, should be a little bit more focused, in terms of providing art education. Because when I was in school, there was an amazing thing about art education, especially music. I was kind of, like, taught a lot about European music that I had no knowledge of. But at the same time, it was part of the curriculum that I was taught, in terms of understanding the different types of music. But that kind of diversity apparently has gone away, in terms of people actually—they have jobs and that's the end of the day with them.

Dziedzic: You mentioned your daughters. I know one of your daughters curated your show with Pioneer Works a few years ago and I wanted to ask what it was like work with her, on that.

Harsley: [laughs] It was very interesting. I had to bite my lips, bite my tongue. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Yes. I guessed it might be something like that.

Harsley: [laughs] And stay out of the way. It was interesting. But I was able to do that. She did this wonderful job of putting all that together. Amazing how she came out of the woodwork and just controlled the whole thing. Even composing music afterwards and setting all that up. Yet and all, that's not her main interest. Her main interest, basically, is the sciences. And because of her education, she's able to actually help other people, including me, do different things, that normally I wouldn't have access to. And she have that kind of psychological access. So she's now my backup, in terms of a more, say, complex things I need to be doing like talking on this cellphone. [laughs] Do you think I know how to do that? Of course not. I had to have a tutorial, if I remember.

So, Kendra, essentially, is a genius. In many ways, more than one. She's extremely talented. Folk singer. Great folk singer. She got very deep into—what's that called now, it's a carbon—anyway, she got very deep into this whole idea of coming out with these different particles in carbon—graphene. She became a graphene specialist. And there's still pretty close to ten, fifteen billion dollars of research money that's available in that area. So fortunately, she hasn't disappeared or gone too deep into that area—she's still hanging with me. [laughs] [01:30:10]

Yes, she's now teaching up at City College. She helps other students get deep into the sciences. She come up with different projects to stimulate their interest in it. And essentially, she's, somehow or another, took over and is running the whole show up there.

Dziedzic: That's great. So I want to ask you some questions about the neighborhood. So can you tell me again when you moved downtown, and where you first lived?

Harsley: When I first moved down here, I moved into a place—501 East 11th Street. I found out there was a history to 501 East 11th Street. In terms of, it was, like, a primary artist refuge. And there was a major incident, and the police came in, and beat everybody up, and forced everybody out. Back there in the ’30s. That’s the place I moved into. It was still that kind of environment. Most of the people who lived there were students. So, there was parties every night. It was like, they had this little foyer inside with a water fountain and everything was facing inward. So it was always very quiet except for when I had my parties. Nobody complained about the parties since everybody invited everybody to come. I had the best drinks, and I had the best drugs. So, they couldn’t say no.

Out of that came this group of people that I begin to communicate with. Then I got deeper into working into a photo lab. In the photo lab, I realized I knew practically everything, it was just a matter of how I was going to use that information. And I took over the photo lab. I was making a huge chunk of money. I was managing the best color lab in New York City. Then it got to a point where I realized I need to get out of that. Just focusing on what I really didn’t know. That was 1968.

So by 1971, I got to know some people who was helping Nixon become president, speech writer. Out of that came my access to whatever knowledge I wanted to get. I told him I wanted to meet a certain person, who was the last of the historical people, to write something about the photochemical process. So they set up a meeting with me and him, and I got to know him, and talk to him continuously, and he explained to me that the whole process was over. And that the whole electronic process will be taking over the photochemical process.

Then, the conversation got all the way back around to, well, what am I supposed to do now? Well, I could move through the different systems, trying to explore different aspects of what was going to slowly but surely become unknown. But to keep a running interest in terms of researching those different areas of the photo chemical process. But then shortly afterwards, he died of a massive brain hemorrhage, and then I was left alone. And that was somewhat of a shock, to me, to be left alone with the level of knowledge that I had that kind of, like, in a way, had the tendency of driving me crazy.

So I had to find a way out of all of that. Finding a way out all of that came through the Minority Photographers, whereby I was able to surround myself with people, and still be able to go deeper, in terms of research, and explore those areas of research through them. So you can

see, it served many purposes, in terms of me being justified, in terms of what I'm doing, in terms of my quest for ongoing knowledge. Ongoing knowledge—it's like going to a library, picking up a book, and just reading and all of a sudden finding an interest. To me, that's always been kind of like the quest. To be able to just pick up any kind of information, get interested in it, and then learn something from it in the process. [01:35:11]

So, photography, it opens up all these different doors of knowledge. And it's just a matter of how that kind of knowledge actually comes together. So at this point in time, I'm looking at all this stuff around me. And one of the main books I try to keep out, and most people don't realize, is this book here [holds up book]. This was the beginning of the electronic process: Xerox! Okay? From there, it evolved into what it is today. They haven't changed that much. And the Victrola, with the record. That hasn't changed at all, interestingly. They've gone to solid state, but it's essentially the same thing within a solid-state device, in terms of storing information. To me, it was just a matter keeping up with all of that. And then getting that necessary information.

So I got the real book about what was supposed to happen, and all the projecting ideas, about when it was going to actually take place. So this book came out 1965. By 1990, '91, they finally figured out how to get it to work. And that's when it all changed. It's just a matter of how many people was going to be left out. The first system that came out, was the DOS system. So, a lot of photographers decided they were going to go into computers and digital process. But once they got into that new technology, it simply was not user friendly. To me, it was just a matter of waiting time before it became user-friendly, and letting other artists know it would eventually become user-friendly and be very easy to use. You just have to be patient with it. Don't come in too early with this stuff here.

So a lot of that took place in the workshops during the '90s as this thing began to come out. "Do you have a fax machine?" "What's that?" [laughs] "You don't have a fax machine?" So it all came all the way back around from this, in terms of easy communication. So now, I can talk to you without any kind of FCC license to communicate. Prior to that, I would need a license to communicate because it was much more complex, in terms of communication.

Even the photography thing changed over, in the late '50s, in terms of the resolution. And essentially, that was put in place in order to prevent people from actually knowing too much about different things. And then, I think, during the 2000s, they decided to take out the other

filter. The other filter got into HD. So, essentially, with photography, you had to spend a lot of money to get a good lens that could resolve information. When I got into photography early on, working at the district attorney's office, I had access to that information without really knowing it. I could take pictures at night with a 400-millimeter lens and that 4x5 would show it completely clear, like a 15-millimeter lens. That lens is not available to the ordinary public. But when I got into photography, I realized, okay, I could buy that kind of lens because that's what I need, I need that kind of resolution coming out of that lens. I don't need that kind of lens to make anything look worse.

So even with the cellphones—I'm actually pushing technology, to get better, and better, and better, in terms of resolution. So, to me, it's a matter of playing along with A.I., and helping A.I. figure out how to make a better image. When my cellphone got updated, all that information got put into my cellphone. So now, I have the leading innovation in my cellphone dealing with imaging, although it's the same old technology that's there in the front. Then the reason I could tell that is when I upload the photograph into the computer that I took with the cellphone, I get much better resolution now. They finally got rid of the proprietary software that prevented me from saving it. That took some doing! I would manipulate the image and get it to look even better. And then I had to I realize that I couldn't save it. Had to go back to being normal. [01:40:25]

But slowly, surely, they're releasing that proprietary software, so at least I can use my software, which goes back to the late '70s, '80s, '90s, in terms of Photoshop. So people say, "I use Lightroom." I got Lightroom on my computer—I know even know how to open it up. I have Photoshop that's—not opening that up [laughs]. I look at it.

Dziedzic: [laughs] That way you can tell people that you have it. So there you go. [laughs]

Harsley: "I got Lightroom on the cellphone." I say, what you need Lightroom on the cellphone for? [laughs] I'm already doing what I want to do. So I'm still a little bit old-fashioned, in terms of how I'm dealing with the technologies. It takes a while for me to adapt into technology. Like, somebody gave me a scanner. I looked at it for pretty close to six months, sitting in the corner there. I decided to put the disc into the computer, load it up, and then see what I could do with it. And I was surprised with what I could do with it. I scanned for pretty close to five years,

continuously. Fortunately, I had the time to actually do that. It's paying off nowadays because, now, at least I can go back to some of that stuff now and it's already been fine-tuned, so all I gotta do is push a button to come out with the same—I say "clone." So I don't have to worry about anything changing, unless I change the ink. As long as I'm using same ink with the same printer, it's like a clone of the other original that I printed something like three or four years ago. Interesting. Whereas, if I worked in a darkroom, that was impossible. It was one of a kind. And even if you tried hard, you could not—something went wrong. [laughs]

So with the new digital process, I'm liking having it, essentially. And the whole idea is to get to the photographer who want to get the film. Okay, you need to combine the two. Otherwise, you're not going to be able to make prints because the chemical's not there, and most of the chemicals that's there, you cannot use anymore, because they're all illegal. And I think that's the conflict with working with the photo chemical process. Most of those chemicals, essentially, was deadly. And when I got into working in the darkroom, that was the first thing that was explained to me, about a boy being poisoned. A lot of photographers didn't heed that—wasn't told about that. One of the main photographers, Eugene Smith, he was one of the photographers who basically passed away from chemical poisoning. He drank a lot in order to quell the pain. A lot of people don't know that about that. And a lot of other photographers, essentially, you know, came down with a lot of ailments because they're ingesting the bad chemicals through their hands or what have you. And I was always told to use tongs, and if possible gloves. And to avoid smelling it. Always have good ventilation coming off all those chemicals.

One year, about fifteen years ago, I spilled the bottle of hydrochloric acid.

Dziedzic: Yikes.

Harsley: I never recovered my sense—I cannot smell anymore! [laughs]

Dziedzic: Wow!

Harsley: I can barely taste things. Yup. Killed all those senses.

Dziedzic: Wow. What a tragedy.

Harsley: I had to learn how to breathe again, by the way. Because breathing—there's a sensation when you breathe. I lost that sensation. Hydrochloric acid. I used to go to auctions, and buy all these weird chemicals people trying to get rid of. I realized: leave that over there, you don't need that. Hydrochloric acid was an interesting bleach, to bleach the prints. [01:45:06]

Dziedzic: Wow. Dangerous.

Harsley: Yeah, most of the chemicals were. Most of the chemicals have skull and on bones on the can.

Dziedzic: Yeah. I have another question about the neighborhood.

Harsley: Most people really have never had a chance to communicate with hyper-intellectual Black people, okay? Most of the Black people they communicated with get squeezed out early on, turned to drinking and drugs, and that was the end of they life. So when I showed up down here, that's how they seen me, essentially. Because they wasn't used to communicating with intellectual people like me. And I had to realize that.

My first goal, essentially, was to reach into some of the more important people in the neighborhood, open up a communication line with them, through my photography—take some photographs of them, give them the images. And eventually, I kind of, like, started this whole thing, where anytime I saw any of them together as a family, I would photograph them as a family. Then I began to get more, and more, and more respect, in terms of who I am and what I'm really all about, and my justification for being in this neighborhood. Like, I'm not just here to take things from the neighborhood, I'm here to add to the neighborhood. Especially your history. So more and more people in the neighborhood realize just how important it is, in terms of their history, and the information that I have about who they are and what they're really all about. That all started back in the '70s, when I first showed up here.

So some of the images that I took, they came back and say, you know, I need that image. So for me to go and find them and give them the image because now they realize just how important they are, in terms of history. So many of them get into—

INTERRUPTION

Dziedzic: You have a visitor there?

Harsley: Yeah, yeah. Somebody's at the door.

So that has been my way of communicating with most of the people in the neighborhood. Like, some of the kids I photographed when they were little tots, now they're big—they're scary people now! [laughs] But then, you know, I have their respect because they know just how important I am to their family, in terms of information that I've captured at a very critical time of their evolution, in terms of being here in the neighborhood. Ain't too many people left, essentially, because most of the people got a certain amount of mobility, and some people bought a house out in the country, and that was the end of that. And the rest that decided they wanted to stay, managed to stay. We have major actors and major artists, who have made this their home—despite the fact that what it used to be, and what it can be. It wasn't about that. This was their home. Right around the corner is Phil Glass, my favorite musician. This is where he lives at. As well a lot of different photographers. Right around the corner was Robert Frank. I became very close friends with him.

It's always been about this gallery, and what this gallery represents far outside of me. More people respect the gallery, rather than respecting me, but, yet in all, I come along with the package. So that's become somewhat acceptable despite some of the things they see me doing. They say, "What you doing?" Like working on the car. People don't work on their cars anymore. When they see you with the hood up working on the car, that's quite unusual. When I came up, that was a natural thing for people to do. They fix their own cars. And I still like to fix my own car because, like I explained, I was brought up to know that, how to do different things. It's just a matter of how I went about figuring out how to troubleshoot things. Then go about repairing it. [01:50:02]

Even in photography, it's almost the same thing. When something goes wrong, how do you go about repairing it? Early on, like I said, I took apart the camera and now I know. If anything's going wrong with the camera, I know what the effects of that is nowadays. So most people say—they look at the camera, and they say, there's something wrong with all of these

cameras. It's just a matter of whether or not you're working in that area to discover that problem. Most of the time, people won't never discover the problem. Because they don't work in that area. But with me I need to work in multiple areas so I need to have access to all the different tools that's in that camera. Because it's more demanding to me, to understand, if I can get that image. Someone asked me, "Can you do this?" I say, "Yes, of course." I realized that my camera's capable of doing it. It's just up to me do it, because they don't know whether or not it's the right or wrong way. I'll just have to make it as clean and perfect as possible. So I got away with a lot of that, in terms of people asking, "Can you?" I say, "Of course!" But in the interim, I learned. And over the years, I had all kinds of interesting assignments.

One of my main assignments was doing lighting upstate in a place called Andes. I worked up there for fifteen years. So in a way, it was like a vacation for me to get away from the city, to be in the country over a period of time. To get a good breath of air, in the country like where I grew up in. To be in a little small town, to walk around, in the quietness of it all. To hear the cows and the things coming out. It allowed me to be here, everyday, everyday, without feeling that I need to go out and do something. So I got that peace of mind early on, so I could stay focused on mainly keeping this gallery active and alive. So when people come in, they looking around: "Oh! You changed things!" [laughs] I say, "Yeah, that's very important. I do that every night."

It's like a routine, for me, to actually change the show every night. Especially the window. I have a running group of people who count on my window, in terms of information. So I have to always keep that in the back of my mind, I have to always change the window. Because they're counting on what I'm putting in the window, in terms of learning something from it. Occasionally, I put something in the window, they come in, and they ask about it. A whole conversation about something in the past, about some individual, whatever happened, whatever. It's mainly a communication medium that I use, in terms of displays.

All the images here in the gallery, essentially, is not for me. It took a while for me to take my ideas, in terms of what I really wanted to do, off the wall, and put what the public really wanted. And being able to satisfy that public, in terms of information that I'm now providing them. So, it's been a very—they essentially educated me, in terms of their needs. They kind of, like, told me, if you want to survive, you've got to satisfy our needs. So I had no problem about doing that because most of the things that they like I fall in love with! Things I normally was

ignoring. All of a sudden, I say, that's beautiful. I should have put that stuff out earlier! I probably wouldn't have had as much trouble as I've had.

So it's more about that than anything else, in terms of the neighborhood. Because it's constantly undergoing changes, in terms of people coming and going and the diversity of people that's moving into the neighborhood. You have people living in this building here who have estates out there in Long Island. You have people who, basically, have mental problems who have the whole apartment to themselves. You have this whole first group of people living here in this building—in fact in the neighborhood itself. My whole idea, basically, was to have an ongoing part of the conversation with all these different people. Some I don't say nothing at all to because, you know, they're a little too far out for me. So I leave them alone. But yeah, it's been an interesting journey with me, in this neighborhood, being who I am because initially there was major push to get rid of most of the Black people here on the Lower East Side, by the way. Somehow or another, I managed to survive all of that. [01:55:04]

You talk about the Indians, you know, them moving out. I always think about the people that used to have this place down here. And it came to mind that they were glad to get rid of all of this, especially the Battery area, because they figured it was cursed. And they were glad to take a few trinkets and get out of there and say now it's ours, now you deal with it. Because all of the different things that have happened over that period of time in that area is even more profound. Because in my research, I went back and took a look at the early history of what was happening during the '60s, when I used to go down that area, there, and go into the Syrian village looking for different kind of pieces. They would go to auction by all these weird government surplus stuff, and I would go down there to find different pieces to put together to create all kind of weird things. Then, all of a sudden, they got shut down.

Then I got a newspaper from the *Wall Street Journal* from 1908. There was an article in there about what was getting ready to happen on the Lower East Side, and that was going to be the demise of the Syrian village. They finally figured out that that area there had been brought not too far from the surface and they'd be able to create this "financial district." That was the first instant that that area was going to be the financial district of the world. But very few people know about that area of that history, in terms of what actually happened. So I like going down there and looking at the monuments of where the agreements was made, and the people who

actually made those agreements, and then looking uptown, and realizing that a lot of different changes have occurred down here.

One of the people who lived in one of the buildings, he was one of the richest people in the world. But, you know, that information doesn't come out unless you really take a deeper research. What I'm saying is, there's lots of different information that needs to be disclosed about that history, in terms of essays, some of the more important rituals that took place prior to that, especially with the indigenous people who lived here. Because when I was brought up in the South, I was always told that I have a lot of mixed bloods in me, mainly the Indigenous people in South Carolina. And I didn't quite understand what they were talking about, "my mixed bloods." And now, I kind of have a better understanding about essentially who I really am, far outside of the whole complexion thing. It's more about what's inside of my brain, in terms of what I inherited, in terms of my abilities. So, when you talk about, you know—all that stuff, essentially, has been passed on to different people, it's just a matter of how it comes out.

I was just looking at a jazz singer, a guy called Joe Lee Wilson. And he always made mention of the fact that he's part Indigenous, three-quarters indigenous. And when I knew him, I had never even considered that. But apparently, nowadays, that's become even more important, in terms of your genetic makeup. So my genetic makeup is rather unique, in terms of what I've accomplished, because it wasn't all about me, it's about what I inherited, in terms of all that information that was gathered up over those thousands of years. And then, I'm just adding to that information. So all my inquiries, in terms of research, basically, it just carries on what they were doing. Just, you gather up the information, pass it on to somebody.

So I gather up information, I post it on Facebook, on Instagram. Most people don't even look at it, but I figure, well, that's very important information and they will look at it and realize what that's really all about. So it's not about whether or not they interested in it today, it's would somebody be interested in it tomorrow, in terms of that would be the link to some other more important information that will be disclosed further on, that would be added to that information that would be beneficial to them. Now they could come up with any ideas, in terms of inventing or changing things because early on, that was always the initiative for people to figure out different things. [01:59:47]

When I was growing up, the people talked about, you know, the Black dude who invented the cotton gin. I think to myself, really? You mean I have access? You mean I could do that, too?

Yes, yes, yes, yes. But the thing is to know that! So when the opportunity comes, you're out there doing something. So photography is not just the only thing that I'm interested in—I'm interested in everything! Especially, as it begins to happen. Like I say, you know, anything's happening, I have to keep track of it. So the only way to keep track of it is, you know, I spend fifteen, twenty minutes going through social networks, mainly Instagram, going back through Google, Google News. I figure, that's the best access because they tapped into everything. As long as I keep track of it all, I can always go back and see how much has materialized since then, after that area was disclosed.

So we deal with the epidemic. It's almost the same thing. The kind of research that I did, the kind of postings that I did around all of that, nobody paid attention to that because it wasn't in their area of interest. But I found it was very important information to disclose. It's why I got into the white papers of those areas there. I'm always going back to the white papers. [laughs]

Dziedzic: I think what you're describing, this trajectory of gathering knowledge and putting knowledge out there, and kind of sharing intelligence, is a really nice sentiment to end on, I think. It doesn't feel like an ending, it just feels like we're at this particular point, but there's a lot of future ahead.

Harsley: Yeah, last night I had to try and figure out what I was going to be able to survive today.

Dziedzic: [laughs] I'm glad you made it.

Harsley: I got thoroughly ill last night, boy! And I woke up this morning and said, well, at least I laid in bed long enough for it to go away and I'm getting control over it. Now, can I talk? If you notice, I can barely get my throat working again. It gets back to the hydrochloric acid. And the effects I'm still feeling from all of that, essentially. So it's been nice talking.

Dziedzic: Yes, thank you so much for all of your time, and I'm excited to know that any time I drop by, I'll be able to see a different assortment of your photos up in the front window, and hopefully have another conversation with you.

Harsley: Thank you.

Dziedzic: Thank you so much. You'll hear from me probably in a month or two.

Harsley: Okay, so where is this showing at?

Dziedzic: What's that?

Harsley: Who's looking at this?

Dziedzic: So this will be in an archive of interviews of other longtime residents of the East Village, Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, West Village.

Harsley: I've become important, in terms of information, huh? [02:03:27]

Dziedzic: Yes, you are absolutely important, in terms of information. But before it's public, I will tell you more information about it, and you'll know when it's out in public.

Harsley: Okay, thank you.

Dziedzic: Thank you so much and have a great day.

Harsley: Thank you again.

Dziedzic: Take care, bye-bye.

END OF RECORDING

Oral History Interview with Alex Harsley, June 10, 2022

Narrator(s)	Alex Harsley
Address	4th Street Photo Gallery
Birthyear	1938
Birthplace	Newport, South Carolina
Narrator Age	84
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	June 10, 2022
Duration of Interview	124 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Harsley_Alex_VillagePreservationOral History_zoomaudio.mp3 [74.4 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	50 [#1 2022]