

Interviewee: Ken/Karen Cusson

Interviewer: Christina Matthews

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Location: Zoom

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Q: Okay, recording.

Cusson: If I'm not speaking loud enough, just let me know.

Q: Okay. Can you hear me clearly as well?

Cusson: Absolutely.

Q: Okay. All right, well [exhales audibly]. Today is Saturday, April 11 uh 2020. It is about 12:50 p.m. Pacific [Daylight] Time. Uh, this interview is for the Monterey County Theater Alliance Oral Histories project. And I'm Christina Matthews, and I'm talking today with—

Cusson: Uh Ken, Karen Cusson.

Q: Hello Karen. [excited/uncomfortable laugh] Um, so first I'd like to start off, can you tell me about your name and where that came from.

Cusson: Where my name came from?

Q: Just tell me a little about your name, yeah.

Cusson: Uh, well, uh I don't know where my mother got my names from. Um the uh first name I have no idea. Bruce [middle name] was a was a very popular name in the early fifties, when I was born. Um, one of the more popular names so she liked it so she added it in, but I don't think it was named after anybody. My last name is, um, is uh French Canadian. And in French, it's pronounced Cùs-sôn.

Q: [Repeats] Cùs-sôn.

Cusson: And the only one that ever pronounced it that way was my father. Occasionally. And only when he got angry. He spoke French only when he got angry. Uh, so we never wanted to hear him speak French. And um, it's a very popular name on the East Coast. Um, almost as popular as um, um Rodriguez is here. It's a very popular name. In fact my younger brother lives in uh North Carolina. And he was saying—he told me that uh they don't pronounce it as Cusson. Or Cùs-sôn, as my father did it. They pronounce it as Cùs-SÔN. Cùs-SÔN. Emphasis on the—on the second syllable. Which I thought was really weird, 'cause my dad never said it that way, but, he says that's the way they're saying it over there, so—

Q: Wow.

Cusson: Just shows, same name, different whole class of people. Different whole group of people, and they say it in their own way.

Q: Right, right. Um and 'Karen'? Um and what about Karen?

Cusson: Well, Karen is because um it sounds so much like 'Ken' uh but I am a transgender female. Um, I've known that since I was eight years old, and it—I just decided in 2019 that I would transition now. I'm 69 and uh felt it was time. It was—I had, uh, lived uh 68 years, uh 60—almost 69 years as um Ken, Kenneth. And decided that now it's time for me to be authentic and real and to stop being fake. Just to be myself. So, that's why I made that decision last year. It's not an easy decision to make. A lot is changing in my life, but um, it's something I felt I needed to do. Was time. So, Karen is what I prefer now.

00:03:23 Q: Great. Um well Karen, can you tell me a little bit about your earliest memory.

Cusson: Hm, my earliest memory. Well, I—we lived in, um, I think it was, it was Lakewood. And um, it was a very rural area at the time; not so much urban. Um, and I have very early memories—this is really strange that I had the memory this far back, but of actually reaching through the crib slats to uh, reach out to something that I was trying to grab, and I can't—I don't know what it was, but I can remember reaching through the crib slats and my mom walking in and talking to me. And that's the end of that memory.

But then, uh then a few years later, when I was walking, I can remember a memory in the same location, when my father who liked raising animals—he was, he was, I think he was a, a country person at heart. And uh, we had chickens and ducks out in the backyard, and he was uh—my Mom had sent him out to—oh and a goose—and to uh, um, to get the goose, because they wanted to have it for dinner that night. So I still remember him um, putting the goose's head down and chopping the head off. And the goose running around the room—running around the yard with no head. I still remember that. And uh, was not a happy camper because blood was going everywhere and it got on me, and I was not a happy camper at all. And remember yelling and screaming about it but um. And uh my dad just laughing his head off.

But um, that's my earliest memories, and then it goes on to—moves on to when we lived in Compton, when I was about uh, 10 I think. Um eight—no, eight. And um, um and I remember in the back, my dad—again, my dad had quite a few animals. Um, had chickens and a duck, and he had a big cage that he had set up on the back with Iguanas, uh lizards. And we had rabbits. Um a lot of fruit trees in the backyard. It was a good sized backyard. And um I still remember showing off the iguanas to my friends. And uh I lifted up the cage lid and picked up one of the iguanas, like an idiot, by the tail. I didn't know any better. And sure enough, the thing snapped off in my hand, and the iguana landed down in the cage. And I'm standing with this, this tail whipping back and forth in my hand. It remin-reminded me so much of the goose, that I literally screamed and dropped it and thought I was a—I was dead. I thought I might have—I was gonna be killed my father. I thought I'd killed his iguana. I had no idea it snapped off like that, to protect itself. So when he came home, I'm sitting there, "Dad, Dad, Dad, I, I think I've killed your iguana!" Um and I mean, he just was laughing his head off, thought it was hilarious that I thought I'd killed it.

And he explained to me that, "don't worry about it. It'll grow back." And course I was amazed that anything could do something like that, but uh. So those are probably my earliest memories. Uh having a summer, uh, with my family in uh Sequoia National Park, about the same time. Um, and uh, we spent about uh, about a month there and uh, it was a lot of fun. Went, you know, outside. Um, in a cabin where they have a number of cabins set up together.

00:07:16 Cusson: And uh, there was a running brook in the back and I used to like to go out, walk through the running brook, and my dad would go fishing. And um, I remember spending a few days trying to catch a rabbit. And uh, it was a—I set up a trap, a trap, you know with a box and a stick and a string. And waiting for the rabbit. And I put a carrot down in the, in the box. I thought for sure carrots must eat rabbits, right? Uh I mean uh, uh rabbits must eat carrots. I mean, after all, Bugs Bunny did. Um so I put a carrot in there and would wait and sure enough came along. Went in, pulled the string, caught it. I went in there to grab it. I grabbed it by its hind legs and pulled it out of the box, and the blasted thing screamed. I admit, I didn't know that rabbits screamed. And it screamed this, this high pitch scream. Scared the tar out of me, and I let it go. Um, and my dad was behind me someplace sitting down, watching it. And I remember him, again, roaring with laughter over [laughs]—I'm spending all that time to catch the rabbit and I caught it, and then let it go. And I tried to explain, "Well it screamed! I didn't know they did that!" And he muttered something in French, and that was it. But that, that's—those are my earliest memories.

Q: Well. Wow.

Cusson: Then they switch to, uh, not so good memories. When I was 10 and uh, um, I was uh, when I was 10 our house caught fire on uh, Easter Sunday evening. Tomorrow night would be the anniversary of that. And uh, uh it burned to the ground. I was caught in it. My father was killed trying to rescue my mother and I. Uh, my mother was pulled out through a window by my older brother and younger brother. And I walked out into the middle of fire, and uh remember um, fire—I remember waking up in a corner of the dining room with these firemen coming at me, and they were, you know, in those old asbestos suits that you've seen in the movies, you know, the white asbestos suits. Yeah. And they were reaching out for me and they grabbed me, and I screamed, 'cause the pain, and I screamed and passed out. Next thing I remember waking up out on a picnic table in the backyard and um, they were trying to resuscitate me and screamed and passed out again. Then I wake—I remember waking up. They brought me and my mother to a, uh, a clinic, that was at a convalescent home, 'bout um, maybe a mile and half from my house. Which is what saved my life because if they hadn't found somebody that—someplace that close, I wouldn't, I wouldn't have survived. But they uh brought me there. And I remember them—they were trying to debris me. You know, to remove the—what was left of my pajamas and so on. And just screaming and passing out again. And then waking up in the hospital. Um, must have been a day or so later. Um, it was the uh, Los Angeles County Hospital, which I think now is um, uh it's either USC or UCLA Medical Center. Um, and I spent three months in that hospital and I have some very, very real, uh, vivid memories of that time.

Um, they didn't know how to handle uh burns very well in those days, and um wrapped my hand in the wrong way so that it healed improperly. Um, but they didn't know any better. And uh, had to change the bandages every day and they would—that was not a fun time. Because the

bandages would stick. They didn't have nonstick bandages in those days. This is uh, nineteen fifty, fifty-nine, nineteen sixty, somewhere around there. And uh, the uh—they would have to—I was bandaged from head to toe. So they'd have to change the bandages every day, and some of the nurses were nice and they would let me soak the bandages off, 'cause I'd have to get into a whirlpool bath afterwards. Uh, others didn't have the time, and they would just rip the bandages off. And uh—I—my mother was in a room that wasn't far from where the room that they were treating me in, and she could hear me screaming every time I was doing that. Every time they did that. She, she told me she never forgot that. But um, it's just the way they were. And it was a county hospital, and they, they—the concern was to get the job done. Not so much for the person.

Um, a lot of things were different in those days. For instance, IV's were a minor surgery. They had to, you know, cut you open and insert the needle, and sew it back up. Um and I have spots all around me where they put those in. Um, that was not fun. And then uh um injections, I was getting shots every day, you know two or three times during the day. To the point now still I'm a little bit, I'm nervous around needles. I don't like them. And uh, in fact one time they, they had to start giving me shots in the front of my calf, my leg, because uh I was developing bed sores from all of the injections I was getting, so the—I remember, I still remember this, they hit me with a shot, and injection, and and the needle was too long and it hit my bone and broke off in my leg. So they had to literally cut me open there to get the needle out and um, that hurt. A lot.

00:13:27 Cusson: I can also remember I had to have a lot of skin grafts on my hands, my backs—my back, and they took the skin off my legs. Um so um I wear uh um compression

stockings. I've had to wear them for years. Uh and actually, I like to because my legs look better with them than without. Um but um there was one time they put um the uh um patches of skin on my back—skin grafts—and then I had to be in a cast from my neck to my knees. Um and that was for two weeks, three weeks, and it didn't take. So they had to do it again. And this time I wasn't allowed to lie down on my back. I had to stay sitting up all the time. Because that's what they said happened. I lied on my back and it didn't allow the um the grafts to heal properly. So I had to sit up the whole time. You know like this um leaning over a table in order to sleep. Um and um so anyway, those are the memories I had as a child. I can still remember the first day that I saw myself for the first time. Um—

Q: Tell me about that.

Cusson: We were um, we were going to—they were taking all the children from the burn ward and from the other wards uh to see the ice [unclear] I think at the sports arena. This is down in uh the LA area and uh they um—somehow I managed to be the first one to get in the bus. And I don't know how I did that, but I did. And I got on the bus and went back and sat down, about halfway back, and I was waiting for everybody else come in. And I looked up and I saw the mirror that the um the driver has so he can see the people behind him. And I looked in there and I said, 'Oh, somebody else's in the bus,' and it was a kid. And I remember saying to myself, 'Boy, that kid—that is the ugliest kid I've ever seen.' And then I said something to the effect of, 'Oh, wow,' and I saw it was me. And I was in shock, the whole rest of the time. I don't remember the show that I saw. I don't remember anything about, don't remember coming back and I don't

remember anything about it after that. Um, because that changed my whole outlook on myself. Pretty bad.

Since I was eight, I knew that I was tr—I was transgender. Didn't know what it was in those days. But I, I knew there was something wrong. Um, tried telling it to my, my mother and she just said, "you'll grow out of it. Don't worry about it, you'll grow out of it." Uh my dad, uhh just kind of slapped me across the face and said, "Don't ever bring that up again." So I never did. But I knew that was wrong. I knew there was something wrong. Um I, I never—I didn't want to do the things that boys did. I was much preferring—I much preferred to, to have fun with the girls and, and play with the dolls that they had, because I couldn't have dolls. Um anything like that. I much preferred to, to uh uh do that.

And I would wear my mother's slip around the house and spin around in it, and wear her shoes. Not my dad's shoes but my mother's shoes. Um and I always got in trouble for it, but I still did it. Um, so from there um I had probably about uh 10 to 12 surgeries. Um, one of them was not, was not good. I, I—they, they had—they—in those days they gave you uh, uh—oh, uh, I forget what it's called. It was laughing gas—I can't think of what it's called—nitrous oxide. Uh put you to sleep. And they had other forms, but the cheapest way was nitrous oxide. And so they would give me that all the time. And every time I got it, when I wake up later, I would be sick as a dog. Vomiting. And just terrible. Um and I told my mom about it, and she raised um bloody hell and told them—the nurses and so on—them not to give me nitrous oxide again. And they agreed they wouldn't, the doctors agreed they wouldn't, so I ended up—I had a surgery coming up—so I went for the surgery, and they started to give me nitrous oxide—no, they started to give me a spinal,

and to this day, I don't remember any pain associated with the spinal at all. And yet um, it took so long the doctors got impatient, so they decided they didn't want to wait any longer.

So they pulled me over, held me down, and gave me nitrous oxide while I was screaming to stop. Went to sleep, when I woke up I was violently sick again. Only this time the nurse told me I had to stop throwing up. If they didn't—if I didn't uh they were going to uh—and they knew of my feeling, my f—how I felt about shots, and they said, "and we're gonna give you a big shot with a big needle and a little shot with a little needle, and you won't like it." Um so I [pause] swallowed it from there on. Didn't throw up and didn't call the nurse whenever I had a problem. Um, they didn't want my mom to know, who was in the hos—still in the hospital. So, but she found out 'cause I told her. And uh there was a huge squawk over that, I remember that, but uh that was the last surgery I had while I was in the hospital. I'd had plastic surgeries after that, on an outpatient basis—coming in and having it, staying for a while and going out, but uh.

00:19:41 Cusson: Then um from there, it was um memories in school. Um, um I think the earliest memories after school will be the fifth grade, I think. Fourth or fifth grade. Um, wasn't easy because uh I didn't make friends easily. Because I was, I was always aware of how they saw me. And, see the thing that was really bad about that was I knew how ugly I was, and I knew the girls should be pretty. So I also figured that there's no way that I could ever be a woman, ever be a girl. I was just ugly. There was nothing that I felt right in. Nowhere. No way. Nowhere, nothing felt right for me. Um the way I was, the way I could be, or anything. There was just—nothing was right. And I didn't think I could ever change. So, what it resulted in is my pretty much isolating myself. And uh not uh—I had very few friends growing up.

Um, I learned—I read a lot. I enjoyed reading, so I did a lot of reading. Spent a lot of time in the library. Um and um and I had, I had a girlfriend, I do remember that. In like the fifth grade, I think, and um—don't remember what we talked about, don't remember the—just the fact that she was um a girl and she was a friend. Not my girlfriend but a girl and a friend. And that's the only one to remember. Um then we moved to uh Florida, um when I was in the sixth grade. Fifth grade. So that must've been in the fourth grade—fifth grade we moved to Florida. And I remember going to school there and um they required you to dress out for P.E. And I remember that being extremely uncomfortable time for me. Um, it was not fun. Was not fun. Um because I knew well—you know, I was covered with scars, and uh every time I had to undress, I knew that they were—people were staring, and I hated it. So um that was not a pleasant time for me.

Um, then for the sixth grade we came back to uh California. Um and um went through school mostly in the Lawndale area, down in Southern California. Went to uh junior high there—I can't remember—middle school—I can't remember what the name of it was, but uh then went to Lawndale High School and uh, made more friends there. I was getting a little bit past the way I look. Um, not as much as I should—you know, in a in a way you know that somebody should but junior high was a very difficult time for me. Uh rough time. Because then when you're, when you're at that age, everything's going crazy, you know your, your hormones are going crazy. Your body is developing in ways that um—in my mind, it was wrong. I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do about it. And it was uh it was, it was, again, difficult. I guess if I was going to put one word on my whole childhood and adolescence, it'd be 'difficult.'

Um but uh it wasn't until high school—understand, right now, I as a transgender woman, I see myself as a straight woman. Um that's my orientation and it's my attraction and so on. Um so is in high school is where I discovered I was, I was attracted to boys and that did—that was something that was a real difficult thing to realize. Although I knew that inside I was a, I was a girl, but at the same time that was wrong. That was just wrong. And it was a very hard time—thing to—so I was going through so many 'wrongs' as I was growing up, the—there never seemed to be any 'rights.' Um so it, it um, it was a rough time through high school. Um I even tried to uh, tried to ask girls out to—for dates, but I can—I never had any luck, any success in that. Just never worked.

00:24:54 Cusson: Uh again, I wasn't exactly the best looking guy in the world, and um there were all—plenty of other better looking guys than me around. Uh I did get involved in music though, and that's what helped me. I discovered I had a real knack for music. Uh um, took up the trumpet. And uh the band director there um tested every music—every person, every freshman that came into high school for their music ability, and mine was quite high. So, he invited me to come be a part of the beginning band. So I took up trumpet, loved it. And within a year I was in advanced band.

So um so my high school years from then on, basically, everything that was good was centered around music for me. Um, performing was easier in music because I didn't have to—I was with the group, you know, part of the band. And, and so it wasn't a difficult thing. But it got hard a couple of times, because I had to—band director kept pushing me to compete in this competition they had for all the schools in the area. Uh, something California School Band and Orchestra

Association—SCSBOA—where they would—you compete as soloists, duets, trios, as a band etcetera and get educated—adjudicated—um, so I did. I did a solo a few times. Scared to death because of the way I looked. And I knew everybody would stare at me, but they didn't. They were listening to my music. Um.

Q: Can you tell me about the first time you performed or maybe a particularly memorable time that you performed?

Cusson: Well, the first time I did uh, I performed as a solo uh I-I--it was a--can't think of the name of the piece. Uh, I think it was "Concerto for Trumpet" uh, by Vivaldi. And um, I did a condensed version of it, and I got a um 'superior,' which is the highest grade you can get. Um and I remember that inside my trumpet case, at, at the end--in my senior year I had all these metals that I had won as doing that, and they were in my trumpet case. Um and they were all blue, which is 'superior,' except for one which was red, which is 'excellent,' but uh—

Q: Wow.

Cusson: Um, and I did a couple of duets. Um scored high on those as well. But um—so music was my salvation in high school. It was a thing that was really big for me. The other thing was, again, reading. I enjoyed reading and I developed a good relationship with the school librarian, and she was always recommending books for me. Um, a type I thought—she thought I would like. One of the things I got really interested in when I was in high school—this is really weird—is um insectivorous plants or carnivorous plants.

Q: Hnh.

Cusson: And uh I, I had seen a National Geographic magazine that was like 1965 or '64. Uh and it had an article about carnivorous plants that grew on the east coast of the United States. I was fascinated by that. I now have a copy of that magazine, which I found online and I purchased it. Um but uh—and the librarian thought that was, that was fun that I was really into that. So she ordered a book that was *Carnivorous Plants* by Lloyd, and it's one of the—it was *the* book on carnivorous plants at the time. The only one before that was written by Charles Darwin—on carnivorous plants, and uh that one wasn't in the library, but she ordered this book, specifically for me. I checked it out in the last part of my freshman year, and I just kept re-checking it out all through my rest of the years in high s—in high school. Nobody had a chance to read that book but me.

00:28:52 Cusson: And it was written in extremely scientific terms. I did not understand half of what I read, but I would look these terms up so that I could try to figure out what they were saying. So I was learning, um, all these scientific terms that I still know to this day, uh many of them. But um, took um Biology, which was required in high school and didn't care so much for the animal side, but I sure loved the uh, the botany side. Um uh, and in fact, um, when I was a freshman and sophomore at my—my goal was to be a botanist—that's, I really thought what I—I thought that's what I wanted to do.

But as I got better and better music, I decided I was going to be a music teacher. That's where I was gonna go. Because music—I can just get past everything. People just listen to the music. They didn't look at me, they look at—listen to the music. But the same time, when I was a sophomore, I rediscovered something I know—I had found when I was 10 years old. And that was magic. When I was 10 I was given a magic kit for Christmas—nine I think. I was given a magic kit for Christmas, and I loved doing it and told my teacher about it. And she said, "Well, you're gonna come to do a show for, for the class. So I said, "really?" "Yeah." So, I did—course that's before the fire. So I did and um, um I had a ball. I had a fu—I, I had so much fun with that. Never forgot that. Um—oh I didn't mention that when I was in the fourth gr—third, fourth grade—whatever that was when I was ten. Fourth grade, fifth grade—well, I guess it was fourth grade. Um, learning the cello. And um, it was my mom's idea, but eh something—they sent something home suggesting that the kids want to learn musical instrument, they could, so I learned the cello. I remember carrying that thing back and forth from school every day.

Awkward.

Q: Yeah.

Cusson: But um, couldn't pick that up after the fire because my hand was badly disfigured, and this is the hand you would use to work on the frets, so I couldn't do it. Um but back to what I was saying about high school—back in my sophomore year—I think it was my sophomore year—began to develop an interest in magic again. And, met a magician at a magic shop in Inglewood, California. And I would go up there—I took the bus up here, like once a month on a Saturday and just sit there watching him demonstrate magic to different people coming in in the shop—

fascinated—and he would actually show me how some of these things were being done. So I was, you know, uh really getting the opportunity to learn some of these things. Hold on just a minute.

Narrator's Roommate: All right. [Asks indistinct question to narrator]

[Narrator mutes audio]

00:33:08 Cusson: Okay, I'm back. Sorry about that. Pizza man came, I had to let [gesturing toward the front door]—[unclear] my [gesture implying reference to roommate]

Q: [Laughs]

Cusson: So where was I? Okay um, learning magic.

Q: Mhm.

Cusson: Um, so [audible exhale] uh what I discovered in doing magic—first doing it for my family at home, then doing some magic shows in my backyard or the neighborhood—and what I discovered is: nobody noticed the scars. They just d—they were amazed at the magic, so I really fell in love with that. And uh started—I, I remember doing some magic shows for my uh, band, and we always had a party every year at uh Halloween time. And so for two years—my junior year, my senior year—I did magic shows for the party and had a great time with that.

Still remember one time in the magic show I, I did this effect—it was called the "zombie ball," which is a ball that—silver ball that you put under this, this cloth and it begins to float all around the room, under the cloth. And um, I remember doing that we had uh the, the assistant band director was also one of the science teachers. And after I performed it, he would not let me go during the whole rest of the party. He had so many theories and how that was working, you know, from magnets to steam to—he was going out of his MIND trying to figure out how I did it! And none of 'em were right. I mean, none of them were even close! So—and I couldn't tell him, because that's, you know, y—you agree—you promise not to tell. So, he was driving me crazy all through that party.

But, you know, it just proved me that magic was a good thing for me, uh, and I loved performing. From then I really discovered that performing in front of an audience was good for me because they didn't notice my scars. They just saw: Ken. And the—whatever I was performing. And I, I learned that being a magician was just an actor playing the role of a magician. And so that's where I really fell in love with that. So, um, that's my school years. I graduated, went to junior college; thought I was going to be a music major. Um, and, um decided no that wasn't what I was going to do because I discovered I couldn't play the piano, and I had to play the piano to be a music major. So I couldn't play the piano, so that went out the window. So I had a lot of things that I wanted to do that just didn't work out.

Um and that's when I um, not long after that is when I received my calling to go into uh, full time ministry. Um, and uh before that I was doing a lot of magic. I was doing magic shows for, pff,

for everything under the sun. It was a, good side income uh with that, doing children's entertaining or blue and gold dinners for Boy Scouts. Um, um uh bachelor parties, bachelorette parties. Um uh college parties. I remember doing a party in July. A Christmas party in July—I thought that was the wildest thing I'd never heard of. But I went to it, got there and um, uh uh the, the people that were hosting the party were excited to see me and they showed me where to set up, and I was to set up and I was sitting right next to the Christmas tree. And the Christmas tree was a full grown marijuana plant.

Q: [Surprised laugh]

00:36:49 Cusson: And I looked at that, and knew what it was the minute I saw it, but you gotta realize: it was VERY illegal in those days. So I was VERY nervous at that point. Now, that had to be the fastest magic show I've ever performed in my life.

Q: [Laughs]

Cusson: I put almost an hour worth of magic into 35 minutes. I wanted out of there so bad, just get—I thought for sure the place was gonna be raided. At any moment. [Baffled stuttering] that, just, too freaky for me. I still remember that. But uh, they got their money's worth; it was a great show, but still. I got out of there fast. Um, and didn't even pack up well. I just threw everything into the suitcases that I could and just got it out to the car and drove off as fast as I could get out of there. Still remember that. Um, and that was in Hermosa Beach which was an area of, lot of, at

that time uh, uh hippies. Um, so, I should've known better. I should've realized it was gonna be like that. But I didn't.

Q: [Laughs] No one let you know that the Christmas tree was going to be a pot plant. [Laughs]

Cusson: Nobody told me that, I know. I never even thought about it. So when I got there and saw that, I just stood there staring at it. The guys says, "What's wrong?" I say "Uhh, nothing. Uhh, that's a pot plant, isn't it?" "Oh, yeah, isn't that cool?" And I, "Ah yeah, yeah. That's cool. Real cool. So where am I performing at?" [Internal dialogue] "And how quickly can I do this?" Y'know? [Laughs] That's what it was.

Um, but um. So I did a lot of magic. Um also did a lot of performing of the trumpet. Uh I did a lot of weddings. Um playing um--a lot of brides apparently like to have the trumpet played, um, as they're coming down the aisle. You know, da dun DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN ["The Prince of Denmark's March"]. That thing. So I, I learned to play that, pretty much. Um, which is interesting because later, years later when I got married, yes, and my wife decided she wanted—my wife-to-be decided—she wanted it played at her wedding. Saame thing. [Interviewer laughs] Um, I still remember trying to talk her out of it. "You sure there isn't something else you'd like to have played that—uh, anything?" "No, no, no. That's what I've always dreamed of."

Q: [Laughs]

Cusson: "Oh, well, all right!" Um, so anyway. [Pauses]

Q: Can I ask—

Cusson: I don't know how much more you want me to tell about all this.

Q: No, this is great. I have a ton of questions and I know I'm not going to get to all of them; you've covered a lot of them, but also, um, maybe I—we can go in a different direction.

Cusson: Sure!

Q: I have a question about—

Cusson: Go ahead!

Q: —spirituality and um—

Cusson: You have to realize, I'm a talker. If I get talking, you need to stop me. Okay?

Q: Awesome. Okay. Um well okay so—

00:39:29 Cusson: I'm an actor. An actor likes to talk. A monologue is a big thing for an actor, okay?

Q: [Laughs] Yeah. Um, so, you told me that you had a calling. Um, how old were you at that point? For service—for, for ministry?

Cusson: Well, I was umm... 23? 24? Somewhere around there but realized that I had, I had known about that calling when I was, uh, as far back as I can remember, all the way back to at least eight years old. Um, we were Catholics. And as far as I knew, as far as I knew I was going to be a priest. I mean, I couldn't be a nun. So, I was going to be a priest. Besides a priest gets to wear--did get to wear a dress occasionally. Um, so you know the, the frock that they wore in those days. So, okay, so that's what I wanted to be, and nothing else. And my dad didn't like the idea and insisted my mom take me to go talk to the priest and have the priest talk me out of it, in the local parish. He didn't; it just made me want it even more. Um, and that didn't go well with my dad. But uh, my mom loved it.

Um, but then when the fire came about, and the day that I saw myself in that mirror, was the day that I began blaming God. How could you possibly let that happen to me? I was going to give my life to you. I mean, I--you were all, everything, and you let this happen to me? No. No. No, not gonna happen. So, it wasn't until I was in my mid-20s, that I realized that I was seeing it wrong. It wasn't God's will that I get burned. It was God's permissive will, in the sense that he allows us to do the things that we choose to do. We have a free will, he doesn't step into the way of that. And my father chose to get drunk. And chose to smoke while he was drinking. And chose to lie

down on the couch and fell asleep, and that's what started the fire. So it was, not my fault. It wasn't God's fault. It happened. So it--wasn't anything I could do about it.

So, um, but when I got into my 20s, that's when I realized 'that's not true.' Um, there was, there was more to it than what I thought. And when I realized that, my original love for God and decisions--and, and the decision to, to go into the ministry, uh, rekindled even stronger. And this time uh, I was, I was associated with the Lutheran Church. And wanted to go in there. But, discovered how expensive is going to be, so I decided, 'no, that wasn't going to work.' And a friend of mine invited me to come and play in a band at the Salvation Army and my reaction to that was, "oh, I don't think so. I, I think I have better things to do than go play in a band with a bunch of winos. I mean, come on. There's gotta be better things to do than that."

I had no idea what he was talking about. I had no idea what the Salvation Army really was. But he convinced me to try it, so I showed up for a rehearsal and long story short, I fell in love. It was—the music was incredible, the fellowship, the friendships, the everything was just fantastic. Nobody cared about my scars. It was: home. It was just coming home. And of course, uh I decided I wanted to be an officer in the Salvation Army.

00:43:19 Cusson: And uh, um, decided uh I-I was gonna go in—into what they call training school. And uh training school is a two year period; two years in house and then three years on the field. That's what it usually is for the training. And uh so I was ready to do that. But, in the meantime, I found a girl that I thought was going to be able to s—uh I spend—I would spend my life with. Because I had to. I had to fit into everybody's expectations, so I had no choice. I, you

know, couldn't be what I thought I was, what I knew I was uh—because that wasn't an acceptable—I had to be what everybody expected me, so I had to continue going on being fake and not real. Just what everybody wanted. And finding a girl that would accept me uh and that I could accept was important. Um so I found a woman that I thought um loved me. And I thought I loved her. I asked her to marry me. She agreed.

Um in the Salvation Army is required that um both husband and wife go in together if they're going to go in—one, one can't be called and the other not called; they both have to be called. So before I ever asked her to marry me, I said, "are you—do you feel called to go into ministry?" And she went, "Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely, yes." So I said, "Okay. This could work." And then um, it was in um—it was in October of um 1978 I guess of um the—it was announced that the Commissioner decided to leave the session open six more months to try to bring in more people into the session because it was very small and that was the National—National anniversary of the Salvation Army—100th anniversary—and they were going to have a combined uh commissioning of officers and in Kansas City of all (unclear) trainings around the country. So—and ours is the smallest in our church, and he wanted a bigger one, so he was leaving it open. And that sounded very attractive to me and three others that were—and a few others from the church uh because that meant you-you wouldn't have to pay for half of your schooling.

Q: Wow.

Cusson: So that meant a quite a bit of savings. So, they got us together to talk about it, and I thought was a great idea. Uh the others that were there thought was great idea, except for the girl that was there with me, who I was engaged to; she didn't like the idea. She said "we're supposed to get married. We're supposed to get married next Christmas." And I said, "Well, we could do that after we get commissioned. We'll be together in the same school; we'll see each other every day. And um, that didn't fly with her. Finally she broke down and—really broke down—and it came out that she never really planned to go to training school.

She was convinced that if she married me, uh, I wouldn't be able to go so that would be it. Uh, I wouldn't be able to go and that would be it. Um [Narrator's dog barks] needless to say I decided that was too dishonest, and it threw everything out. So I told the marriage is off and um decided to go into training school. Um so I did. In my second year in training school I met Ruth, the woman that I finally did 36 fantastic years with. Um uh I fell in love and in—I really did fall in love in training school.

00:47:12 Cusson: Um, um she fell in love with me. I asked her to marry me at Disneyland in front of the wishing well, uh, very romantic. Had some friends of mine that uh, uh they had little earphones in their ears and a suit on, so that they look like they were Disney security and they stood on either pathway to the well to make sure nobody would go down there while I was there with Ruth. And had the chance to ask her—asked her to marry me and she said yes. Um and then we were married as soon as she was commissioned. I was commissioned in 1980; she was commissioned the next year. So um we were married after that. We had um three girls over that period of time. Um Kristen, Kathy, and Korina.

Q: Ah.

Cusson: Korina was born with Down syndrome. She was our last one. She was born with Down syndrome, and we lost her when she was seven years old to um—to leukemia. She came down with a um, a um temperature that was really high. Took her to the doctor. He didn't seem to think much of it. Gave us some antibiotics. Came home. Didn't go down after two days; took her to emergency, and they found out that she didn't have a single white blood cell in her body. And so they admitted her immediately to ICU—Peds ICU [Pediatric intensive care unit]. And from there it was a three month battle. Um at one point, she—they told us that [audible exhale] um that the leukemia was strong, but she also um had developed double pneumonia. So they had a choice. They could either treat the double pneumonia or treat the leukemia. It was our choice. Either way, she was going to die.

Um so it was our choice which way she was going to die. So we chose, uh: treat the leukemia. And they intubated her and um, um—we had a meeting with the doctors and the nurses and they all told us that this is the way it was going to be. We kept saying, "Okay, well, if that's the way it's going to be, then we want—" They put her into in-induced coma, and we wanted her to wake her up—wanted them to wake her up so that we could um, um say goodbye if that's what was going to be. Um but we kept a positive attitude—we stayed positive. We believe—we believed and I—certain of that that if God wanted to take her home, he would. If he wanted her to stay with us, he would. It wasn't up to the doctors, and it wasn't up to us. It was up to God and her.

So that's the way it was going to be, so wake her up. Let's see what happens. They didn't want to do that—they didn't feel that we were thinking logically, so they didn't think that was a good idea. But fi—after—right after that, a doctor and a nurse came up and asked if we would go with them to another room and talk. So we went—Ruth and I went to the room and talked to them. And it turned out the doctor was an Israelite and the nurse was a Christian.

00:50:25 Cusson: And they both said, "We are impressed by your faith. We feel that if you want us to wake her up, we'll do that. But you're sure you understand what can happen?" "Yes, we do." And they said, "Okay, we can talk to the doctors into going along with it; we'll wake her up. But it'll take about two days. We'll wake her up slowly." She was in, in an induced coma. Said, "Okay." So the day they started to wake her up, I was in my office, which is not far from hospital. Um and I got this phone call say—telling me, "You need to come down to the hospital, quickly."

So, I dropped the phone—put it on the thing, and I ran—and I literally was—it was only a half a mile from my-my office, and I ran that half mile to the hospital. Got there, got up into the Peds ICU, went into her room and looked at her bed, and she wasn't there. There was this giant Barney the Dinosaur which the—it was huge—which the nurses and doctors had all gotten her because we had Barney the Dinosaur playing on a video player there the whole time she was in there. Constantly. 24 hours. So the nurses and the doctors are getting to the point—they knew the song; they knew the dialogue; they were knowing everything that was going on with dial—with Barney. And they knew that she loved it. So, they got to this giant Barney the Dinosaur to be, be with her in the bed. She didn't see it until after—till later.

But anyway, that, that Barney the Dinosaur was there, and her intubation was in that thing. And I'm looking at this, and I was totally, you know, just looking at somebody, "This isn't making any sense. What am I seeing here?" And I hear from over to the side—said "Dah-ee! Dah-ee!" [Raspy-voiced daughter saying 'Daddy.'] And I turn around and there's Kori sitting in the lap of the nurse, just reaching out to me. And I literally fell to my knees crying.

Um, they said later that um—they had said she wouldn't survive because her lung had become a solid organ—her left lung had become a solid organ and it would never be used as a lung again, so she only had one lung, and that one was damaged by the pneumonia. So, waking her up they thought would be very difficult for her. But they were doing that, but when they opened her—when they woke her up, that lung opened up and she began breathing with that lung, like a normal lung.

And the radiologist, who was the one who was coming up taking the x-rays all the time, couldn't believe what he was seeing. He told us, "this is not possible. It's just not possible. I have—I have x-rays all on one wall that're showing that lung as being a solid organ. There was no way it was a lung. But she's breathing with that lung. There is no way." And the same time, the leukemia went into remission. So the—pneumonia was healed, and the leukemia was healed at that point. Um, so it was a miracle.

Q: Miracle.

Cusson: Even the doctors were calling that. And the radiologist—she [Korina] was there for another couple weeks—kept coming up to the bed every morning when he came in just to stand at the foot of the bed looking at her, just to look at her. He said, I've never seen a miracle before. And so every day, he was there.

Um but then um, we finally left the hospital. She relapsed the following Christmas. Um and went back to the hospital again, but it went remission right away. And that was when we lost our Christmas that year [laughs] because we wanted to hold it for her when she came out of, out of uh, out of the hospital. So we didn't do anything (unclear) Christmas. My daughters and-and us decided we'd just hold all the presents until she came back. Um so but by the time we realized we were going to do that, we didn't buy anything for Christmas dinner. So, we lived—I don't know if you've seen the movie "A Christmas Story"—

Q: I have.

Cusson: —But when the dogs got their Christmas dinner, they didn't have anything so they went out to a Chinese restaurant, right?

Q: Yeah.

Cusson: That was all that was open. Well, all that was open for us was a little diner on one side of Los--of Long Beach, and went there. And the only thing they had on the menu that was available was pork chops.

Q: [Laughs]

00:54:38 Cusson: So we--all four of us had pork chops for dinner. And they were the worst pork chops I'd ever had in my life. But that was our Christmas dinner that year. Um and then uh a few days later Kori came home and we had Christmas at home with her. Um she did relapse later—uh and this time they got her through it again, but the doctors told us that this wasn't going to go away. And this was, it was just um her system just couldn't handle that again.

She did relapse again um and we took her—and the—with Make A Wish Foundation paid for her to go to Disney World, because she had—her wish was to meet Bernie—Barney the Dinosaur, of course, and Aladdin and Goofy. Well the only place in the world where you can find all three of those characters was in Florida, because Aladdin and Goofy were in Disney World, and Barney had a show at Universal Studios. So they arrange for us to go down there, and she had a chance to see them all. And we took her to [Disney World] first and she went—she met Aladdin and the things they shoed everybody away just so she could have time with Aladdin. And then same thing with Goofy and Goofy's son. They did this dance that they did in this "Goofy Movie." She fell—she fell in love with Goofy—she was in love with Goofy, and she knew the dance and she giggled and laughed and crazy—like as they did the dance for her. They spent about—almost a half an hour with her.

Um a couple days later, we took her to Universal Studios. And saw the Bernie—Barney show. They told us, "Wait a little while; Barney wants to meet Kori." So after a little while, Barney

came out and he's—his whole head went over her head. And her head disappeared into his mouth, and they were jabbering away at each other. I mean, I don't know how he understood a word she was saying, but they did. Then he stood up and gave—came over and gave Ruth and I both big hugs, and he was crying; you could hear him cry.

Um um two days later, we were coming back and we stopped in Chicago—was there—there was a layover in Chicago and she began deter-deteriorate really, really badly—quickly. We brought—we brought the steward over and we told her, “She's—our daughter's not doing well. We need to get an ambulance.” So they brought an ambulance, rushed her to a hospital, and long story short, she passed away uh from uh um—oh—uh I forget what it was now, but uh, she passed away in the hospital. And uh we stayed overnight there. The airlines flew us all back—my grandparent—or Ruth's parents had come with us—flew us all back to uh, to Salinas or to-to uh San Francisco via first class. They moved us up—us up to first class the next day.

Q: Um-hm.

00:57:27 Cusson: Um and then um, and then Kori's body was flown back a-a couple weeks later and we had the funeral for her here in Salinas. Um so that's Kori's story. Um, very big story for me, for my family. We learned a lot from that. Um I learned a lot about who God was and how God works and um just how amazing He is. And um I'll never forget that. But, so, questions.

Q: I actually did have a question about um how you have come to know and understand who or what God is. Um so that kind of led perfectly into it—what it—how has your relationship and understanding evolved over the years?

Cusson: Well, um, Ruth and I got very close. Um um and I—it was amazing to me that I can have such a close relationship with uh—with a woman. Um she was amazing. It took me 17 years into our marriage before I could tell her about ‘me’—before I had the courage. I thought I was going to lose her, and I didn't. Um she accepted it. Um it was just me, she said, and she fell in love with me. It didn't matter; just didn't matter. Um and I [laughs] just couldn't believe that. Uh it was true, but it's just unbelievable. Um and my relationship with her over the years um, just showed me—Kiani—or Kori and um her (Ruth) and so many other things.

Uh we-we left the Salvation Army—we-we had some tax problems—at least that was part of the reason. The real reason was that they didn't—uh Kori—it was Kori—Kori was going in and out of the hospital at the time and it was costing the Salvation Army—because I was self-insured—well over a million dollars in medical bills. So they wanted us to step out. So we stepped out um and I didn't know what I was going to do. I found a position very quickly, something I love doing: computer work at the time, and um, and later um was asked by the pastor at First Baptist Church in Salinas—which was the church that we started going to—if I wanted to come work for them. And at first I didn't want to. But my family said, “You've got to.” So I did. And they were—it was great. Eight years with him. Um but I—I'd seen so many things going on. God was real. There was no, NO question in my eye—my mind that He wasn't real.

And of course, all this time I kept questioning *me* or 'why?' Why did I have to be who I was? Why couldn't I be real? Why couldn't I be who I really was? But I couldn't. Nobody would accept that. I just knew it—nobody. At one point, my wife told me—she—Ruth said, "Why don't you transition?" Now, we didn't call it that at the time—it was, "Why don't you just change? Why don't you just begin being a woman?" And I said, "I can't do that to you or the girls. I won't do it. I won't put you through that. That's just not fair. So [audible exhale] um I didn't, but she kept—she was encouraging me all the time.

Q: Wow.

01:00:54 Cusson: Um and uh, um, through the, you know, eight years at-at First Baptist Church, and two years at uh All Saints Episcopal Church in Carmel on staff there, and then um a year with um um the uh the Butterfly Church in Pacific Grove as a director of uh performing arts. Um and at First Baptist Church, I had—I'd come there to devel—to create an after school program for kids that were at risk of being—of dropping out of school. Um the, the pastor there had heard about some of the programs I was developing when I was in Long Beach before I left the Salvation Army—and it—this is basically what we were trying to do is develop programs for that.

I was a youth officer there and I—we were going to open a brand—big, new youth center. And so I was developing programs that we would put in the center to support kids at school. And he heard about that. And he wanted to know more about it, and that's why he offered me a position at the church to develop an after school program to support kids who are at risk of dropping out

of school. Um, so I did. Called it the L.I.F.E. Center. L-i-f-e: life is for everyone. Um and ultimately, I had uh four L.I.F.E. centers around the, around the city. Each L.I.F.E. center was a church partnered with a school. Everybody kept telling me they couldn't do that. But I said, you can do that. So we did.

Um the churches would approach the school they wanted to partner with and explain to them that they were doing this—not as church growth, but as an opportunity to help children get through life. So once that was explained uh the schools were very much in favor of working with the—uh varying levels—with each of the churches. But um uh the center that I created at First Baptist Church was with Washington Mutual—Washing—Washington Middle School, and uh I had a really good relationship with the, with the principal there. I had a daughter in school there at the time. And um had a good relationship with the counselors. When they had a-a kid who was at risk of dropping out, they would suggest my center to the parents. And the parents could come and contact us and see if they wanted their child to come into our program. At one point, we had about—I guess about 10 kids in the program. We'd have volunteers in the church come in and help. We would never talk about spiritual things unless the—unless the kid brought it up. They brought it up, I'd answer the questions but move on right away. And if after the program was finished, you'd stay—if they wanted to ask more we could talk more about it, but not during the program itself. I was very faithful with that, and the volunteers knew that. So the school was very appreciative of that—the parents and—they'd come and visit and they'd see that's exactly what we did.

We work primarily—one of the biggest things we did is helping kids learn to read. We found that that was the biggest problem they had in school, at that point—they didn't read well, so they couldn't keep up with the class and that put them behind. So we practiced reading every day in class—in the, in the group. And we did in a fun way. I would get stories that were like mysteries that would end at the end of the—of the chapter with a hanging thing—you know, had to wait—couldn't wait, and I'd make them all read the paragraph in a circle—each read a paragraph—and then when we get to the end of chapter, "Well, that's it for the day. We'll do the rest tomorrow. We're do—" And, "No, no, no, we wanna read more!" "No. No. All done for today." So they couldn't wait to get back into the book. And they knew they had to read a paragraph, so—in mind. Eventually, it got to the point where they read a little bit better.

And I think they did better because—except for one kid for the three years that we had the uh—that L.I.F.E. center uh only one kid didn't make it through high school. This was a junior high school uh L.I.F.E. center, and they all made it through high school, except for one. Um and another one could have graduated; he just stepped out--he just quit on his own. Um and I've kept a relationship with him down through the years. I still know him—we still talk quite often. But, and almost—him it in the back when he told me that he dropped out—'cause I didn't know until he told me he dropped out of school—I said, "Man, you could have made it. What's wrong with you?" But anyway. Um so that was what I did there. But all of that just convinced me that God was real. Just, so real. There's just so many coincidences that can happen in your life.

01:05:36 Cusson: After the L.I.F.E. Centers closed—because the State of California decided to put money into after school centers of their own—so the school had its own after school center,

so they didn't spend them to us, so we wouldn't—weren't getting any students (unclear), so we just closed our program down. One of the cl—of the groups stayed open uh and stayed open for a few years after that, but um.

So I took the time from there—my daughter decided that she wanted to be in a play, but she wouldn't audition for it. And I said, "You gotta audition for it." Because I thought she was pretty talented person—you know, prejudiced father. But I thought she was pretty talented, so I said, "You gotta audition for it." And she said, "No, I won't." I said, "Come on, you gotta do this. Really. Give it a try. You'll be sorry if you don't." And she said, "Okay, I will if you do." I said, "Whoa, that's just for kids." She said, "No, no, no. On the wharf; they're doing a play on the wharf, and you could audition for that." At the Wharf Theatre. And I said, "Uhh that wasn't part of the agreement. That's not what we talked about." "Well, if you won't do it, I won't do it." "Okay, I will." So she did—went to her audition—she did. And she got into the play.

Well, she then said, "Okay, Dad, you got to audition for yours." So I did. First time I had auditioned for anything in my life, and I was terrified—now I had done a few plays in the Salvation Army and things—and had been a magician. Uh performing in front of an audience wasn't the hard part; auditioning was the hard part. Somebody going to do this and then be critical about what you did. That was terrifying. Um and all by yourself. Um so I did, and it was for the, the uh operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan's Pirates of Penzance—no, H. M. S. Pinafore. Never done an operetta before, but, said "Okay." Um so I auditioned. They wowed—I wowed them.

They thought I—they—some of the actors later told me they thought I had come from Broadway. That's a—the, the—because I had sang. I sang in church. I sang solos all the time. Uh um I just sang all the time. And so, singing wasn't a problem—I could do a song. Was not a problem. And then I was acting out the song as I was singing it. So they were impressed. They thought I had come from Broadway or something. And they were, "Oh man, this is the best actor we've ever seen." I'm sittin' there, "You gotta be kidding." But the director asked me to be in the show, and so I played the part of Sir Joseph. Um and it was a crazy part and a great one. A lot of fun with that.

Um next season I did um, um Pirates of Penzance, and I played um uh the Major-General. That's the one: (sings) "I am the very model of a modern major-general. I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral. I know the kings of England and I quote the fights historical, from Marathon to Waterloo in order categorical." Anyway. On and on—there's four verses of that song. [Interviewee laughs] Um but I—and I had a great a lot—a great deal of fun with that. It was a lot of fun to do that. And so I did a number of shows at the Wharf Theatre. Um went on to do Oklahoma, um and the Mikado—another Gilbert and Sullivan—I played the Mikado.

Q: Oh, uh-huh.

Cusson: Which was a lot of fun, and that one I incorporated a bunch of magic. The Mikado turned out to be kind of a, a um mystical conjuror, and uh I did a number of magic—uh talked about it—in my songs talks about a guy that had stolen, so now he was going to have his arm

chopped off. So I used the arm chopper and chopped his arm off. But then they said, "No, he's-he's-he's innocent." "Oh." [Laughs] I had to make his arm come back, so it was fine. Another one I had to twist their head around in circles. Um and I twisted it around one way. And then they said, "but he's innocent!" And I had to twist it back the other way. And it was, you know, we had a lot of fun with it; it was a great deal of fun.

But um, that was the beginning of my doing shows—uh doing uh acting. And then auditioned for Western Stage. Got picked for um doing the show uh How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying. Um and played this really—I always wound up playing the blustery um, um stuffy, you know um, uh, person. You know, the [grumbling, blubbery sound] type of person who was just, you know, you know—I always got to do those kind of roles. And I always wanted to play the evil person. I never got to play a evil character. I auditioned for one—I did audition for the judge in Sweeney Todd—never got it. But I guess they didn't think I was evil enough. [Interviewer laughs] Was in the show, but not as the judge. Um but anyway, so I've always played different blustery characters. Like Cogsworth in Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Um you know, he's always ticked off. He's always wound up just a little bit too tight. Um, well he is, he's a clock! Um so, anyway, those kind of shows I did all the time. But anyway, that's how I got into that.

01:10:53 Q: Um, what has kept you performing and motivated to perform?

Cusson: The audience. Um, the audience. There's, there's no bigger thrill than getting that applause at the end of a show. I mean, it is—nothing beats it. And I've seen many a young person

do the show for the first time and they get bit by the acting bug. It's the audience. They get that, that applause at the end and there's, there's no high that meets—that, that equals it. Um all these people appreciating it—with me—with my self attitude and my lack of self-confidence to be able to stand up there and perform, and nobody noticed it—nobody noticed the scars. 'Course I had makeup on my face, and you're so busy—no—who would ever know—I—very rarely did an audience member who'd come and see me after the show mention—they would say, "Oh, wow, never noticed your hand. I never noticed it." Um, they didn't have to, because I was acting. I was playing a role.

So um everything I could put into it, I put into it. I would research the roles. Um and, you know, make sure that what I was doing was what needed to be done for that role. Um so it was um—that's what kept me going. And I guess there's a little bit of a ham and most of us. And uh I, I—it just came out. And being a magician, like I said, realizing early on that a magician is only an actor performing the part of a magician. Um I've always—I've always been acting. On the other hand, I'd always been acting. I've always been acting. I mean, I had to play a role that society accepted. So I, I had no choice. So pretending to be something I wasn't was easy for me. Been doing it for—now I've been doing it for um 68 years. This last year, I haven't done as much. I have done it in public. I have—I've been playing that role in public, but in private and as much as I—as often as I could in public, I've stopped acting and started being me.

Um, so that's the reason for Karen, but uh um acting was just a natural thing for me. There was nothing difficult about being an actor for me—just walking on the stage and, and I—yeah, I would get—you, you get stage fright, sure. I mean, there's bouts of stage fright, particularly

when you go on stage in the—in a particular role for the first time in front of a paying audience. That will—that can be a little bit frightening.

But I just learned—I learned it when I was doing magic—you learn to take the energy that you're wasting on being scared and put it into performing, so that when you get on stage, you're just performing. You just—whatever you put together for the last six to eight weeks, you just do—just become—just make it happen. So it's um, um you do it that—to me was just easy. It was just, you know, because I had already have—spent all my life doing it anyway. So it was just a matter of doing it on stage with a different role. It was, it was a lot of fun.

Um I've played a lot of different roles. And, with the exception of one—and I won't say which one it is—but, with the exception of one, I probably enjoyed all the roles that I did. Uh, I, I did. I enjoyed everything I was doing. And the experience of researching the role, discovering what it was all about, who it was all about, um where they were, and why they were, and what they were, and putting it all together uh to make that character come to life on stage um, is a, is a thrill and a half. It's just fun.

01:15:14 Cusson: Um, and I've also discovered when you—when you're acting—I've told younger actresses this—if you can't find something new in every single performance for that particular role you're playing, you're really letting the audience down. Because that role needs to be constantly growing and becoming. You should be able to find something different within that character at every performance. If not in every performance, at least every weekend. Um, if you're not, then you're letting the audience d—and you're letting yourself down.

And even though you can't change the character once you start performing—once the show actually opens—because the director is expecting you, and the stage manager, all expecting you to do what you did at rehearsals. You can still expand on what you've got and the way you understand the character. The way you—the, the ability to present the character more to the audience, because now you understand more about that character, whatever it is, um that has to happen. Otherwise you're letting the audience down; you're gonna let yourself down because you're gonna get bored. You just can't do it. You need to continually be growing in your character. So that's—when I learned that, that's really what, you know, made me convinced that acting was a great thing to do. And I've never been disappointed. Uhh, maybe one show I didn't care for too much, but um, I did it. I did—

Q: Will you tell me about it? Even if you don't tell me names or, you know, giving any way--
[laughs] giving any clues. Was it—

Cusson: Uh, yeah, it was uh—the, the show was a, was a uh very well known musical. Um and I was playing a role that I didn't think I was really suited for. It was um—to me, it should've been suited by—for a young—younger character. Uh this character had to uh run and leap across stage. And I wasn't comfortable with that. Um the director felt I was doing a great job. Uh, the audience I guess liked it. But, it was—to me, it wasn't—I took it because I was told by someone close to me that it would be a very fun role play, and it was a funny role—and I like doing comedy—um, but I didn't find it that funny. And I didn't--definitely wasn't that much fun. But I

committed myself to it, so I did it. Um but let's just say: takes place in a forest. I won't say any more about that.

Q: Fair. [Laughs] We can move on to your experience with the Monterey County Theater Alliance. You were on the board. Um, what was your role?

01:18:15 Cusson: I was—well, I was, I, I joined the board; just as a board member, but then quickly was voted in as, as president because nobody else wanted to do it. So um I said, "Okay!" And so I was president of the board for—about, maybe 4 years—3 1/2 years—something like that. Um you're only supposed to do it twice, but nobody else wanted to do it, so they kept voting me back in again.

And that was, that was a very interesting experience. Uh uh I got to know all of the, the artistic directors for all the theater companies in Monterey County. Uh they all knew who I was, and—which, didn't necessarily get me any roles, but it did give me an opportunity to understand where each theater was going and to come up with ideas that we could put together uh—that would support the theaters.

Um the thing—the one thing that I'm most, most um proud of is that—I remember my second year as president, I saw something in a, in a newspaper, and it was about a, um, athlete who was getting this big scholarship—and a big article about it, and a picture of the kid with people getting the scholarship—teachers and principals and so on. And I'm saying, "How come we never see anything like that for theatre?" So I went back to the board. I said, you know, "There's

something wrong here. We need to establish a scholarship program, so that we can get--we don't have to give big ones—but just a scholarship program to a selected student or two every year."

And one of the board members uh who went on to become president the board uh really picked up on the idea, and she'd been—she took the ball and ran with it in. Um really developed (unclear) the program to something that's, that's, I think, MCTA can be proud of right now. They do give out regular scholarships to students who show promise in the theater arts. Not big ones; they're \$500 scholarships, but they raise money every year to—in order to finance that, and um I'm just proud of the fact that it was my idea. I didn't actually make it happen, but I did bring it to the board. I did suggest it—they—convinced them—they, they were a little bit skeptical. But convinced them that this was something we really needed to do, and this board member—um, um just praise her—she, she, she went, she took it off and built it up to something, and now, really is—and I think still involved with it.

Um, so—but it was an interesting experience in my life to do. Um, like I said, it didn't help me in acting and, and it didn't help me get any roles or anything like that. But it did, it did uh give me an awfully good opportunity to meet different people in the theater community and uh get to know all of the, the uh big theaters' and all of the major theaters', artistic directors. Um and that was a very enriching experience for me. I don't know if I did much for them. But um, I don't know.

Um I know one—we did—one, at one point the uh Forest Theater Guild was having a very difficult time, and I—we all thought they were just going to fold. And um, we stood by them.

And I convinced the board—they were going to pull out because they couldn't afford the dues. And I convinced the board to let them stay without paying dues. As long as they needed it. So that they could build a, you know, get back on the—on their feet again. And um I actually did a show with—for them. Um the—Treasure Island. And I played the Squire Trelawney. Trelawney. And that was a—that was a fun role. I was—that was the first time I ever get to fight—sword fight with somebody. That was, that was a great deal of fun.

01:22:22 Cusson: And the actor who was playing uh Long John Silver was amazing. This guy—I, I wish I could remember his name, but uh—it's terrible that I can't—but um really, really good actor. Fine actor. Um, and he was a expert on, uh, on Robert Louis Stevenson. He was a living authority on Robert Louis Stevenson. And we kind of connected because of the role I was playing—he and I did a lot of scenes together in the, in the play, but because he was really into Robert Louis Stevenson.

And when I was with the Salvation Army, I was stationed in Hawaii for almost three years and on the Big Island—or, excuse me, on the island of Oahu is where the divisional headquarters for Hawaii is for Salvation Army. And they own a lot of property there, and on that property—I think it's still there—they have a restaurant that they own and operate and they're—next to that restaurant is a grass hut, which is Robert Louis Stevenson hut that he lived in when he was there in Hawaii. Um so we got to talking about that, and I was—being, being an officer, I could go in there when others couldn't—I could go in there and look around, and I got do it a couple of times. And he was all questions. And we talked about it quite a bit.

And I really quizzed him on things. I—fascinating what all he knew about Robert Louis Stevenson, was just amazing. Um particularly in response—in respect to the book we were doing, you know, Treasure Island. It was his book, and it was good to hear what he knew about the author's opinions of the characters and so on. So it was really—it was a great experience. Um but I did that. And I usually—and, at that point, I was using getting paid for performances that I did. I would ask for something to help with the cost of getting back and forth to the theater, because I live in Salinas, and they all were a long ways away. One exception was when I did something at Western Stage because—right around the corner from my house. But uh, until I found out that other actors who had lived here in Salinas were also getting paid, for them, and I said, 'That's it, I need to ask.' But, anyway, that's another story.

But I didn't ask for anything for that show just so I could help them out. And it did help them get back on their feet—because it was a very successful play. Then I directed a play for them a year or two later—I can't remember when it was—it was for, it was uh Peter & The Wolf. Which was an interesting play to direct, because um it was actually two halves. We—the artistic director for the company—Forest Theatre Guild—came to me with this play. Was a children's play, and it was short. I mean, it was very short—it was a children's play—wasn't big enough to be a production, you know, for a major production. So she said we needed to come up with something else; we needed to add to it, and we needed it to uh—add a second half to this.

So what we did was we uh, we split the story in the middle, and we added a couple scenes to it—but we split in the middle, so there was a first act, a second act, and an epilogue. And the first act was the story that was in the play; second act was the story that was in the music, and it was all

dance; then the epilogue went back to the story to finish it off, to tie it all together. So it was kind of unique. I don't know if anybody had ever done it before or done it since, but uh it was fun to direct. But it was—you had to have basically two directors. Um I mean I was in charge of the full production. I didn't get into the choreography side because I wasn't a choreographer, and so I let the choreographers handle the dance side—they just showed me what they're doing and and I'd say, "Yeah, that was great," or, "Could we do this instead of that?" And it—we always worked it out together, because I knew them very—I had worked with them before—they're great people. And uh, so it was a very interesting production.

01:26:28 Cusson: Um, the dancers—some of them were professional dancers—and they were fantastic. The costumers we had did a fantastic job at costuming, so that the characters in the straight play, had their costumes—but the characters that were doing the dance, their costumes had something to do with the characters that were in straight play, so that you could connect them together. It was, it was great. And then it was narrated uh just like in the, in the, in the uh—we did the whole thing—that uh the musical part of—the whole thing. Um so it was uh, it was a great thing, and so all together, it was about the length of a regular theatrical performance. Didn't have great set—audiences, because we had a really stormy time that year. I mean we had a lot of storms. So there were a few weekends that we lost one or two shows the whole weekend.

So, I don't know how well it worked for them financially, but uh I know they didn't have to pay for much for the, for the play, because it uh it was public domain. But they had to pay the—all of the uh back staff, you know, the production staff, and a couple of the actors were paid. Same actor that did Long John Silver uh also portrayed one of the major roles in there, so I had a

chance to work with him again; that was a lot of fun. But anyway, so that was fun. Um, what else should I talk about?

Q: [Laughs] Um, let's see. Well, I was actually curious because you said that you hadn't—not that you knew of—no one had ever done, sort of a production in that way—in that format. How did you come up with that idea? Just came out in the creative process?

Cusson: It was, it was—the artistic director that had the, the original concept—and they had gotten together before they brought me into the picture—into the, into the staff. Um, and they had all been working on this, this idea. So they brought it to me, and—because, when I looked at the script, first thing I said when I got together: It's too short. It's way too short. This is not gonna work. I mean, this is, this is gonna be 45 minutes max. Uh long enough for kids show but not long enough for a full scale production. You-you know, you've gotta have at least have 90 minutes, or else people are gonna think they're gettin' gyped.

Most theater productions, they'll go, you know, 45 minutes to an hour for the first act, and then 30 to 45 minutes for the second act. Um, longer—eh, you're sitin' a long time, particularly the Forest Theatre on those wooden benches, but you gotta get something for your money. So uh they say, "Well, we have an idea." And that's when they, they shared that idea with me. And costumers had already come up with some idea what they were gonna do. And, that's when I suggest to them, make sure that you put something—because there were two different costumers—one for these great actors and one for the dancers. And I said, "You guys got to get together to make sure that both costumes have some connection so that we can see when they're

dancing who they are in the straight part”—because that's what it was all about, okay, because Peter—when he dreamt, he was dreaming of people he knew, and he put them in his dream, so that whole sequence of music was all a dream.

So, that's how we had to get that—it had to work out, so we talked all this throughout, so it was a lot of fun. So, I don't know whether anybody's ever done it before or since; I haven't heard. But we had a very good time putting it together, except for those stupid storms that kept wiping out our performances, but—had a good cast. They understood. Um and great cast of dancers. Production staff was fantastic. So it was, it was a very good production, but I don't think anybody's ever done that way.

Q: Interesting.

01:30:30 Cusson: But the interesting thing about that is that the artistic director and I—she is a very strange person—and, about halfway through the production—and I won't tell you who this was—but halfway through the production, the kid that had been cast as Peter, um—I was informed that he had the possibility of getting on a TV show in Southern California during the production, and that he would leave the production. That was a good possibility, according to his parent. So I said—so I went to the artistic director, "Hey, we could potentially lose the show halfway through it. We need to double cast it." And she said, "You're—yeah, it's a good idea. We do." So I opened up casting again for another kid to play the part of Peter. Well, the original kid got wind of it—mother threw a typical mother—you know, backstage mother—and the kid, KID, called me up and said, um, "I'm sorry, Mr. Cusson, but I can't do the role. I, I really don't

feel comfortable having another actor play my role, so I'm just not going to do it." And I'm sitting there, "You're kidding." "No." "You agreed to do it." "Well, I don't want to do it with another actor playing the role too." I said, "Okay. I see." So, where I was only going to hire—bring in one of those kids, I now brought two of those kids in. Threw this kid out, and brought in these two kids. It's, it's unfortunate because that first kid was very talented, and he would have been a great Peter, but these other two kids did a great job too.

So, uh—but after I discussed it with the artistic director, um, she felt it was a good idea, but when the kid decided he didn't want to do it, she immediately backtracked and started jumping at me. "We can't do this. We need him." I said, "No, we don't need him. I mean, that—that's a kid. I don't care how good he is; we have two kids that are good actors, they can do it. And they come from good families who are also in the, in the, in the industry so they, they can do it." So she begrudgingly agreed, but she wasn't happy about it. And she kept throwing that at me.

So that really caused a rift between her and I. I expected her to support me in this, not backstab me, um, in favor of the mother. Because, the mother was on the board for that uh theater company, um, so she felt threatened. So that's why she did that. I said, "Look, you can't cast for that reason. You have to think of the—protecting the production. And that's the only reason why I'm doing this. If she had not—if the mother had not told me that child had the opportunity to be cast in a show in TV, that they auditioned for and there was a very good possibility, I wouldn't have even suggested this. But they did." So, I said, "I have to go by what I want to hear. And I think of the show."

So, um, we didn't get along from that point on. And she actually stabbed me in the back, um, about three quarters of the way of the, of the produc—of the performances. She, she uh took all of the production numbers that—she had all posters and everything else—and took my name off as director. So even the programs didn't have my name as director—the second printing. Um, I hit the ceiling. But, there wasn't anything I do about it—now online, there's no record of my being a director for that. Um complained and, and she and I got into a shouting match.

Um, one evening—there was a storm that night—but, you know, we were—I was constantly listening to the weather forecast, and I talked to my actors, and I talked to the dancers, and I talked to the choreographers; they all felt we could do the show even though the stage was a little bit wet, we could get out there with brooms and clean off the water, and it wasn't raining, so we could do the show. It looked like it wouldn't hold off for the, you know, uh hour and a half that the show lasted, so we felt we could do it. I told the actors we were going to go ahead with the show; they were all in costume. The dancers, who always came in later than the actors did—because they didn't have to be there until the second act—were getting—just getting into costume, and I talked to them. They felt they could do it.

All of a sudden, I hear the artistic director out front, telling the audience that they're canceling the show. And I'm sitting there, "Uh, what?" And the—the actor's are coming saying, "You better hear this." I walk over there, "What?" And she's out apologizing to the audience—she had the dancers around her. She never even once went and talked to the actors. And they didn't know anything about this. Neither did I. So, as soon as she said it, um, she came backstage, and I hit

her with both barrels: "How dare you cancel that show when you knew I was here, and you knew that I was involved in what was going on. You knew I was talking—I told you I would tell you what the rest of the people—the other people thought." "Well, I didn't hear from you, so I just made my decision." "You did hear for me. I sent an actor to tell you. He told me he told you. But I was busy talking to the choreographer." And she just said, "Well, I'm sorry. I had to make a decision on this, and that's the way it is."

So that was it. And that's—I wouldn't have anything to do with her from that point on. It was—I loved the show, I loved the actors, the dancers were fantastic. All of the production staff. Everybody was fantastic. So well talented. She was the only—I won't say it—the only negative person involved with the show. Since then, they got rid of her and they brought in another artistic director. And uh the current artistic director is uh a much better person. And very good at what she does. She's, she's, she's in charge.

01:36:35 Cusson: They're having a rough time right now. So I decided—so Walt deFaria—who is my favorite director—I've done so many shows with him—um and love him to bits—um, he called me up and said, "Ken, we're doing a show—I'm doing a show." He was retired, and he's coming back to a show. He's in his 80s, he's directing a show. And he said that um, "But I wanted you—I wanted to find out if you'd recreate the role that you did for this show a few years back." And I said, "Okay, which show?" And he said, "Annie." "Okay, you're talking about FDR." And he said, "Yes. Would you play the part of FDR?" "Hm. Okay. All right. Well, we've got to talk about this."

Now, I knew I was transitioning at that point. But I didn't want to talk to him about it over the phone. So I said, "We have to talk. So I'll get together with you in a couple weeks, okay?" He said, "All right. All right." So I finally called him back couple weeks later, said "I need to talk. Can we talk?" And we were gonna meet at a coffee place to have coffee, which we've done many times in doing the shows we—that I had done over there. And finally, he called me back, said "I've hurt—I had an accident." And, "Would you mind coming to my house?" I said, "No!" So, went over to his house. We sat down, talked for almost two and a half hours.

And I told him that I was transitioning. I said, "If you wanna drop me from the cast, I understand. But, I'm an actor—I'll portray any role you ask for. And I promise you I'll do it convincingly." Um, "I've done this role before. You know I've done the role before." And I was convincing as FDR, because I spent two hours in makeup before every performance making myself look like FDR. Now, I was a bigger guy than FDR was, but I was in a wheelchair the whole time. So, you know, uh I had the accent down. I had pictures all over the dressing room, and I was watching as I was getting into makeup—in fact, I had actors coming in to watch me getting into makeup, saying, "Wow, it's amazing. You're transforming into FDR." And I did.

Um, and I said, "I'll get my haircut to fit that at the time. Um, it's up to you." And he said, "Ken, it's no problem. Not a problem." He said, "Half of Hollywood is gay. The—and, and more than half of Broadway is gay. So, if you're not, you have a hard time getting into any of the shows." [Interviewer laughs] "So, don't worry about it." He said, "I'm sure nobody's gonna have a problem."

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]