

LA GUARDIA AND WAGNER ARCHIVES
La Guardia Community College
Oral History Project - Mayor Koch –Larry Kramer/*Normal Heart*

6-21-2011

08.100.0004V0004

(Revised twice by Mayor Koch, may no longer reflect original Audio/Video)

Interview with: Edward I. Koch
Interviewed by: RKL
Subject: Photo Ident/Larry Kramer/*Normal Heart*
Date: 21 June 2011

Q: The first picture I have here -- a few pictures here of a guy that --

KOCH: Jesus! I am thin! This is Jim Capalino. [Phonetic] He was the commissioner of one of the agencies. I don't know what we're doing there. He's probably in charge of cars -- his agency -
- and he's showing me the new cars that the city buys.

Q: He was General Services?

KOCH: General Services, yes. A very good commissioner. He's still around. We're still good friends. He now has his own major firm.

Q: This was Reserve-A-Car, a program called Reserve-a-Car -- 1980. May of 1980.

KOCH: Oh, it's some kind of city program, to hopefully cut down usage. It never does.

Q: And what made him such a great commissioner?

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KOCH: He was on your video, when I said, "If you want to get something done, get Jim Capalino to do it.

Q: Give me an example. Or some --

KOCH: Anything. I cannot give you a particular example where he went out and did it. He's now involved in New York uprising. Again, he gets it done. He gives us accommodations, so we don't have to pay rent. That's his contribution. Just a marvelous guy.

Q: Of the commissioners you've worked with --

KOCH: Well, I'll give you an illustration. He was in my election campaign for mayor, the first time. He bought 2,000 umbrellas, just in case of rain. [Laughs] I don't think anybody's ever done that before.

Q: Here's another picture of the "collection."

KOCH: That's his wife. She's a surgeon -- cancer/breast, in particular, refashioning them after cancer operations. It's a very nice picture of the two of them.

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Q: I think it's the swearing-in.

KOCH: This is back in '77-'78, isn't it?

Q: Yes. This is Photo #080100102. Yes. It's the swearing-in to the Department of General Services.

KOCH: Good.

Q: You said earlier that there were many commissioners, you would bring them in, and they didn't get it done. They couldn't --

KOCH: I don't remember saying that. What I said -- what I think I probably said -- was that I ran a commissioner form of government. I appointed people, and gave them wide authority. I said to them, "I want you to be innovative, and if you're innovative, and you create new programs, some of them will fail. I don't want you to worry about that. If you use common sense in creating the program, I will be standing with you when the press is attacking you because the program has failed, because I don't want you to be afraid." As a result of my doing that, I think I got the best out of people. They didn't worry. They were willing to take chances, responsible chances. I also fired people who didn't make it, but the vast majority of people were very competent.

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An illustration of a firing that was kind of funny was -- we had a guy who was the chairman of HHC. He'd been hired because he had a wonderful reputation for having saved a major voluntary hospital in Brooklyn, financially, so we hired him -- because HHC was sort of like a hemorrhaging bank for the city. The hospitals just went over their budgets. In the private sector, they might just go into bankruptcy, like St. Vincent's did not long ago. Here, they can't go into bankruptcy because the city gives them money, when they run out of money. It was very dangerous for us, so we tried constantly to get somebody who could run the operation. It was, I think, sixteen or seventeen hospitals. No other city in the country, at that time (and I think it's still true today) , had more than one municipal city hospital. We had sixteen or seventeen. They're tremendously costly.

So he didn't perform as well as we thought he should, and I called him and I said, "We're going to give you two helpers. We're going to give you Martin Cherkasky (phonetic), who had been an advisor, and who had been an extraordinary physician and became my advisor on HHC - - not on the payroll, just as an advisor -- and he had run Montefiore Hospital up in the Bronx, and done a terrific job. He couldn't take over HHC because he had a lifelong contract with Montefiore that was very valuable to him, to pay him for the balance of his life, and provide him with a car and a whole host of things, so the only thing he could do was be an advisor.

I remember his being interviewed, after I appointed him as an advisor, and he was interviewed, I think, probably, by the *New York Times*, and I read it Monday morning, when I come to my office. And there it says, "Martin Cherkasky announces that he's going to close half of the city's hospitals." [Laughs] So I called him up, and I said, "Martin, how could you be so

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fucking dumb? How could you announce that you were going to close half of the hospitals?"

"Well, that's what I hope that I can do. We have too many beds." I said, "Even if you could -- which you wouldn't be able to, I'm telling you -- you don't announce it!" He said, subsequently, to other people, that no one had ever talked to him that way -- because he was a very autocratic guy. Very. And here's the mayor saying, "How could you be so fucking dumb?!" [Laughs] But he enjoyed it.

Q: Who was the second advisor? You said you had two advisors.

KOCH: The other one was Felix Rohatyn, for finance. He said, "I'll have to think about it," meaning, "I don't know if I can work under these circumstances." Because he would have to check with each of them, and get their sign-off in their respective areas. He would no longer be his own boss, so to speak.

So he asked to come in and see me, he came in to see me, and he said, "I've thought about it, and I can't do it." I said okay. He said, "And here's my resignation." He takes it out of his pocket, I read it, and it's got a typographical error. He says in it that he's resigning, and the resignation date is like effective today -- which is impossible. He's got to close the operation down in some way. So I said to him, "You put in the wrong date." So he said, "I'll take it back." I said, "No, no, no. Just change it, and initial it." [Laughs] I didn't want to have a later question as to whether or not he was resigning, and get into a big sturm und drang with him. "Change it."

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Q: So what happens to the hospitals?

KOCH: Which one?

Q: Well, you said they were in trouble. They were bleeding.

KOCH: Oh. Well, ultimately, they were brought under control.

Q: Who does that? How does that happen?

KOCH: Stan Brezenoff, Victor Botnick, Bobby Wagner. Those were the three that I ultimately put in charge. It took a long time. I don't say that we completed it. I think it took people after us to do it, too. But, ultimately, I think today it's no longer a problem.

Q: They lived within their budgets. Do you remember a moment when -- ? [Interruption] I'm curious about the fact that you inherited this mess, and one advisor was saying, "Shut down half the hospitals," and at the end of your administration it's better.

KOCH: Yes.

Q: What did you do? What were some of the things you did?

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KOCH: Well, it's all a question of having good management, and people dedicated to the city. My comment, which became rather well-known, was that hospitals are not there to provide employment; they are there to treat people who are sick -- which is very meaningful, because they were used as employment operations. They did employ thousands of people, but that's not their prime purpose.

Q: So you shut down hospitals?

KOCH: I only shut down one, actually, which was Sydenham [phonetic] (I think I've told you this story), which I ultimately regretted. Even though I was right to do it, I regretted it, because it wasn't worth it in terms of the pain that the black community went through, and that I went through as a result of their pain. Oh! It saved \$9 million a year -- which is a trifling, when you think of all the money that was spent there.

Q: Were a lot of people let go in these other hospitals? Was there a lot of firing? Was there a lot of trimming?

KOCH: Well, I can't really give you the details. Did you ever interview Brezenoff?

Q: We will.

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KOCH: Brezenoff is *the* genius. The second genius would be Nat Leventhal. Those were the two operating deputy mayors. I didn't change the title of Nat Leventhal -- which pissed him off, terribly. He wanted to be first deputy mayor. I said, "No, I am my own deputy mayor." But I did appoint Brezenoff first deputy mayor, and I should have appointed Nat Leventhal. He was a remarkable guy, and he still works pro bono for Bloomberg, getting him replacements for commissioners who leave.

Q: Just staying with health for a minute -- I know you recently reviewed the AIDS documents.

What did you learn, and what do you now know?

KOCH: Well, it's interesting.

Q: I'd like to get you on camera about your early days with AIDS.

KOCH: The fact is, I'm going to be reported by a Times reporter. I decided, initially, that I wouldn't be, because you can't win those fights. But I think he's an honest reporter, so I relented, and I will be interviewed by him.

This is the issue. Larry Kramer, an activist -- brilliant -- was very distressed with me, and he created a play called *The Normal Heart*, where he set forth that distress, in addition to a whole host of other things concerning his involvement with addressing the issue of HIV-AIDS. The

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Times reporter asked me to read the play. First he said to me, "Would you go to the play with me?" and I said, "No, for two reasons. One, I don't go to my own hanging," which is what the play does, in part, "and two, I would become the subject and center of attraction. People wouldn't be looking at the stage, they would be looking at me, to determine whether I was unhappy, etc." He said he understood that, so he didn't press on that.

Okay. I sent him a letter, which I think is a very good letter. I worked on it very extensively, because, after reading the play (he asked me to read the play, and I read the play, at his request), I now understand what motivates Larry Kramer. I was mistaken before. I thought, always, his attack on me -- it's clear that he thought that I did not involve myself with addressing the problems of AIDS and HIV, because that would, in some way or other, cause people to think I was homosexual, and, therefore, I avoided any involvement.

This is the furthest thing from the truth. In terms of involvement, nobody has been more supportive of the gay/lesbian community than me. My support goes back to several years before 1962 (and I'll tell you why I mention 1962), because I testified several times before the City Council Committee before 1962. -- I wasn't even a public official of any kind, but I was politically active. I went down to the City Council, and I testified in support of the legislation, which was locked up, not given a vote, by the majority leader. They wouldn't let it out.

Q: Cuite

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KOCH: Tom Cuite, City Council Majority Leader, primarily, and probably even before. But Tom Cuite, primarily, was responsible for not permitting a vote on the bill. Then in 1962 I ran for the Assembly, and I ran on three issues: to eliminate the sodomy laws (New York State had sodomy laws, which said that if you engaged in oral or anal sex, you could go to jail, and it applied to male and female). I said they should be eliminated. Abortion was illegal in New York. This was before the Supreme Court decision. I said we should change that, and make it legal. And I said that the divorce law should be changed, so you could get a divorce on grounds other than adultery. People were engaging in fraud when they wanted a divorce, to allege, even where the parties were friendly, that one had engaged in adultery, because that was the only basis for getting a divorce. It was ridiculous. My friends at the Village Independent Democrats [interruption] --

Tom Cuite was preventing legislation (ultimately passed in 1986) which prohibited discrimination in employment, housing and education, by the government against its employees, or people who wanted to be employees. There were only nineteen (19) states in the whole union that had such legislation. We are the twentieth. We got it because of me. We did it before the state did it. I believe NY State did it later under Governor Pataki.

Anyway, getting back to Larry Kramer --

Q: Where we left off is it was labeled the campaign I ran for Assembly in 1962 – the SAD Committee, a reference to the 3 issues of sodomy, abortion and divorce. I was urging change in the law, requesting all three.

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KOCH: That's in 1962. Then, a whole list of things I'd been doing -- the first thing I did when I became mayor, in the months of January, 1978, the first thirty days, was to issue an executive order that prohibited discrimination by the government against city employees. I didn't have the authority to prevent the private sector from discriminating, and that's the legislation that was passed in 1986, prohibiting the private sector from discriminating. So there are only twenty states that have that legislation, and it in New York came about as a result of me.

So in my judgment, while I support same-sex marriage, it's more important (and I don't understand why the gay community hasn't given it emphasis), because it affects millions of people, whereas the opportunity to get married affects tens of thousands, at best of same-sex marriages, while discrimination against individuals because of sexual orientation affects millions.

But in any event -- in fact, at one point my staff member who served the gay community's concerns put together a list of things that I had done, beginning with my entry as mayor. It's enormous.

Q: Who's the staff member?

KOCH: Lee Hudson, who is a lesbian.

In any event, my understanding -- I had not read the play but I'd heard about the play. I'd not read it before, recently, at the request of the *Times* reporter -- my understanding all through

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these years, going back now, thirty years -- that's a long time. I've been out of office twenty-one years -- and he never stops attacking me, year after year, when I was mayor and after I left.

Q: You live in the same building?

KOCH: He lives in the same building that I live in. [Laughs]

So I always thought it was unfair, because his attack, as it appeared in the press, his statements were that I didn't want to be associated with the gay community in any way, and, therefore, stayed away from AIDS. It's just not credible -- all the things that I have done, not only on AIDS but on a whole host of issues affecting the gay community.

So I protested but it didn't help. It bothered me very much when David Sencer [phonetic], who was an extraordinary public health expert, died, and the *Times* quotes Kramer as saying, "He didn't want to know anything about AIDS because the mayor didn't want to know anything about AIDS," just a smear, not only of me, but of this extraordinary physician.

Q: In his grave.

KOCH: So I was very upset with that. Then I thought to myself, you know, I have a choice. I can refuse to have a meeting with this reporter, because he'll say, "What did you do in '81?" Who remembers what I did in '81? It happens that I went back through the archives, got all the public records of the commissioners of health, and the first commissioner of health -- who was there in

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1981 and -- doesn't mention AIDS or HIV on a single occasion. Sensor does in 1982 when he takes over. And everything that Sensor would ask me to do, I did; everything that his successor -- also a great public medicine doctor, Steve Josephs -- whatever they asked of me, I did.

Now I read the play, and I suddenly realize it's not because of what I did or didn't do; it's because, in the very beginning, Kramer and a woman physician, who plays an important role, have a conversation. What they say is, "Homosexuals have to stop having sex." [Laughs] When you think about it, it's true. You can't get HIV except with the exchange of fluids, body fluids; so, if you want to end the transmission, you don't have sex -- that's true, but that's not real life. Are you going to say to a whole group of people, millions, "You can't have sex for your whole adult life?" That's ridiculous.

Then there's a second discussion -- which becomes even clearer, as to why Kramer is angry with me (and I'm not mentioned in that section) -- what he says, in effect, is that he told his lovers and his friends who died, "Stop having promiscuous sex." Now he's right. But they, nevertheless, didn't listen, and he has them saying, in effect, that they wouldn't listen.

So what he's saying is that if *I* had told them, they wouldn't have had sex -- that's what I think is his complaint; that somehow or other "Mayor Koch could have made my lovers and my friends aware of how dangerous promiscuous sex was, and they would have stopped." That's meshugeh! [Laughs] (That means crazy.)

So now I know what really motivates him, and in a way it's complimentary. What do I mean by that? My personality was so strong as mayor -- I used to say that if a sparrow has a heart attack in Central Park, they think it's my fault! I should have done an MRI!

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So that's the story. When the reporter comes in, I'm going to tell him what I told you, and see what he has to say. But it's not a battle you can win.

Q: And in reviewing the documents, particularly before '82, did it reflect -- ?

KOCH: No! I mean -- I am not saying that I was a leader, a national leader. Fauci was the national leader, and he says, in his play, I think, that Diane Feinstein, in San Francisco -- maybe she was. I doubt it, but maybe she was. Because he has a line in there that San Francisco gave millions, and New York City -- Koch -- I think he says \$75,000. That's ridiculous. We spent millions of dollars -- in care.

But, once again, I give him, Kramer, credit for having done so much in terms of raising consciousness. I also believe he owes an enormous apology to the Catholics of this city, and the memory of John Cardinal O'Connor. Cardinal O'Connor called me up one morning, and he said, "I've been told that next Sunday there's going to be an invasion of the cathedral -- St. Patrick's -- by ACTUP," which is a creation (very effective) of Larry Kramer, an activist group that believed in physical acts that would violate the law, to bring attention. It wasn't simply non-violence (depending on how you describe violence), but physical acts. They were going to invade St. Patrick's. [Interruption]

Q: Cardinal O'Connor calls you up.

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KOCH: He calls me up, and I say, "Your eminence, I will be there on Sunday and so will Stan Brezenoff," and the two of us were there.

Now during the mass, when the priests give the wafer -- and the wafer, for Catholics, is the body of Christ -- not figuratively, literally. That's the body of Christ, and what members of ACTUP did was to rush up to the priest, take the wafers, and throw them on the ground. That's terrible! That would be [like] if some group walked into a synagogue and took the torahs and threw them to the ground; but worse for Catholics, because you're assaulting Christ. His body is being thrown on the ground. It's like, for them, crucifixion, again, whereas torahs are just scrolls, even though we revere them. We had cops there, and they were arrested.

Now my recollection is (and I haven't checked it) that nobody was punished. Because the courts, you could say, were sympathetic to the violators and their cause. But it's violence, it's not non-violence. And the verbal attacks on the cardinal -- not physical attacks, but attacks by gay activists -- were outrageous. He and the church do not believe that homosexual behavior is acceptable, but their position is hate the sin, love the sinner.

Now I happen to think it *is* acceptable, and the public has come a long way. There's no question about that. Probably, same-sex marriage will be voted on in New York. But that will still only make six states in a union of fifty states; so it's not exactly a majority position. Are these people in opposition necessarily evil? I don't think so. You want to persuade them -- and I've made videos in support of same-sex marriage -- but I don't think of the opponents as evil. They're to be persuaded.

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Okay. So courts probably, as I say, think, "Eh, why should we punish --?" Now I'm not talking about jail time; I'm talking about how about a \$250 penalty? That's what civil disobedience is all about. You're supposed to pay a penalty to shock the conscience of society; you don't say, "Oh, don't put me in jail! Don't fine me!" [Laughs]

So I think that Kramer should apologize to Catholics (although Catholics probably don't even remember what happened at this point). But I remember how shocked O'Connor was.

Q: Do you have memory, going back -- I know it's thirty years ago -- of a moment where it really hit you that this was a big problem?

KOCH: AIDS? Oh, I don't have any special memory, but there's no question it was a big problem -- and I give all credit to the activists for getting the drug companies, AZT in particular, to become cheap enough to be distributed (they were charging ridiculous prices for those drugs). What I say in my letter to the *Times* reporter is -- there are many more people who suffer from breast cancer, and die of breast cancer, on the part of females, and many more men who die from prostate cancer. I say those two groups ought to figure out how the gays did it, to get the research money -- which far exceeded what was given, on a per capita basis, to breast cancer -- to prostate cancer, and resulted in turning HIV-AIDS from a terminal disease to a chronic disease. People don't die anymore (in the United States, I'm not talking about elsewhere), if they take the drugs that are available. It's no longer terminal, it's chronic -- meaning treatable. There's no cure, but it's treatable. Maintainable.

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Q: Do you think that part of Kramer's annoyance, also, in addition, to what you said about you being mayor, was his assumption was that you were gay, and a gay man should have said more about AIDs -- not just your powers as mayor, but --

KOCH: In my letter to the *Times* reporter, what I say to him is [that] I had one overwhelming priority: saving the city of New York from bankruptcy! I appointed people with other priorities and I supported their efforts. Public health is not my speciality. Never was. Obviously, I'm concerned. I've had a stroke; I've had a heart attack; I've had quadruple bypass; I've had an enlarged prostate, and an operation for that. So I know what it means to be sick. Oh -- and spinal stenosis.

But public health is not my priority or expertise. I've never gone out and talked about research for any of those areas -- and I believe in research for those things, particularly when I was mayor; my priority as I have emphasized was saving the city from bankruptcy. Others in and out of my administration had different priorities. And I had one other priority, because it was something I knew about, and that was housing. Because I was on the housing committee -- banking and currency -- in the Congress, I knew something about housing, and I created the largest city program for housing. But, again, it wasn't that I was delinquent. I supported -- whatever the experts in my government asked me to support. Was I the leader? No. That was not my expertise. However, if you examine my record as Mayor, you will find I did speak out and testified on AIDS before the Congress as a representative of the nation's mayors.

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Q: In Soffer's book he adds that the city didn't have money, and one of your concerns at that point was also, "Where are we going to get the money for any of these programs?" He says that it's a combination of the fact that *nobody* knew what was going on, in the whole country --

KOCH: Correct!

Q: -- but also that New York, at that time, had no money.

KOCH: Well, what were we going to do with money? Turn New York into a basic research operation? That's done by the National Institutes of Health. That's Fauci. Then I did some things that I thought were quite unusual: I closed the bath houses. Now that was very controversial. Larry Kramer was for closing the bath houses, but a lot of gays were against closing them including the GMHC . But I was convinced, based on what my experts said -- the doctors -- that safer sex (never *safe* sex, under these conditions, using condoms, but it would be safer), safer sex was not being practiced. People were engaging in behavior, sexual behavior, that was transmitting HIV in those bath houses.

So we sent in inspectors, and we went to court, and it wasn't easy. We closed them. Did I get credit? I don't think so. I don't remember Larry Kramer saying, "Here's the mayor doing something really good." [Laughs] Or, they weren't going to let a kid into public school because he had HIV. We went to court, and the corporation counsel -- I think it was Fritz Schwartz

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corporation counsel who actually argued the case -- and we won it. I remember Mother Theresa announced that she was going to open a facility for babies with HIV. I called her up and said, "Good. But what we need is a facility for adults with HIV-AIDS, because we can't find enough. People don't want them. Our hospitals are able to take care of the babies. I'm not stopping you on that, but could you please find a place for adult men?" And she went ahead, and she did! She opened a house with fourteen beds. I remember she called the cardinal and me to come on the day of the opening -- I think it was 5:00 -- and he was to bless the facility. We were both there, and he blesses the facility. I'm there, at a press conference, and I remember her telling me that what the patients wanted, when she came to their bedsides, was to take her hands -- as she told me -- and put them on the running sores of their faces.

Understandable. They wanted physical contact. People were avoiding them, right? Fear. And she said, "I would do it. And then what they wanted from me was a ticket to heaven, and I gave them a ticket to heaven." It was very sweet. The cardinal had one of the Catholic hospitals (I think it was called St. Clare's. It's no longer with us) devote most of its beds to AIDS patients. He would go there (I was told by his people. I believe it) and bathe the patients.

Q: The cardinal.

KOCH: Yes. And he was constantly attacked. For him -- he loved the patients. What they had done was a sin, but we're all sinners! [Laughs]

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Q: Before we stop -- I have a request. A lot of my students, faculty, and staff will see this play, and I would like to put up, on our YouTube site, something from you saying, "Okay. You just saw the play. This is what I'd like from you," looking at the camera. "This is what I'd like you to think about."

KOCH: Okay. You can't put this out I have the --

Q: I won't put it out, but I really --

KOCH: I mean, you can put it out later, but you can't do it until the *Times* reporter's article is published by the Times.

Q: I won't. But it would be fabulous for us to have on our YouTube site, for our students, faculty, and staff. You've seen the play --

KOCH: I'd be happy to -- and then they should see this.

Q: But I'd like you to, at this point, say to the camera what you'd like them to be thinking about, now that they've seen the play.

KOCH: Okay.

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"You've seen the play, and I have no doubt that you had an enormous emotional experience; and that you have, as I have, enormous respect for the efforts of Larry Kramer, who's a brilliant playwright and activist, and who has a list of accomplishments in support of the gay community.

"I don't detract from that at all. As you know, in the play, I'm attacked. I think the attacks are unfair. I'd like you to make that decision, after you've viewed my comments that I made some time ago, in which I point out my side of the story.

"Thank you."

Okay?

Q: Great.

KOCH: Did you like what I said?

Q: Yes.

KOCH: Is it convincing?

Q: Yes. Susan, do you have any questions -- ?

Susan: It's great.

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Q: It's great.

[End of Interview]