



Expressing Gratitude

The executive director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS says farewell.

November 11, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

Anyone familiar with the HIV and AIDS services community—or, for that matter, with professional theater—is also likely familiar with [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS](#) (BC/EFA).

That's the New York City-based nonprofit whose lavish, beloved annual events, including the strip-a-thon Broadway Bares and the Easter Bonnet Competition, have, since its 1992 inception, raised more than \$300 million for hundreds of HIV and AIDS and adjacent service organizations throughout the United States.

Tom Viola has led BC/EFA since 1996. Viola, 70, came to New York City as an aspiring actor in the 1970s and later found himself swept up in efforts to provide aid to theater community folks hit by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

When he began his tenure, BC/EFA was a small, scrappy outfit raising thousands of dollars here and there through a variety of “Hey kids, let’s put on a show!” one-off events. Viola grew it into a sleek machine that employs dozens of people and raises revenues that, via grant processes, have funded food delivery, prevention, care and advocacy services for agencies large and small across the country serving people living with HIV and other illnesses.

Viola announced he is retiring from BC/EFA on December 31 and turning over leadership to Danny Whitman, the group’s longtime development director. Viola talks with POZ about the wild ride he’s been on the past three-plus decades, what BC/EFA’s work has meant to its beneficiaries—and to him—and what comes next.

Where were you born?

I grew up in a suburb of Pittsburgh, then went to a music conservatory in Cincinnati as a musical theater major, then moved to New York City in 1976 to be an actor. The city was such a wreck

then—the parks and the subways—but for me, it was all about the theater district and the Upper West Side, where I lived with friends. I came here to be an actor but mainly to be gay—I wanted to explore all that. I got a job as a waiter at The Grand Finale, a club on 70th Street where people like Bernadette Peters and Chita Rivera performed. That was a fabulous entry into the city.

I took theater classes downtown at Uta Hagen's studio. Those were crazy days, being here at the tail end of what I would call "the party." I didn't go dancing so much as I went to the baths, which were like a social club, and gay bars on the Upper West Side, like The Wild Bar, Nickel Bar and Cahoots.

When did AIDS enter the picture?

I remember being at a diner on the Upper West Side in 1981 reading the first New York Times story on the mysterious cancer, Kaposi sarcoma, that was being seen in some gay men. And about five years later, I went to brunch with about eight friends, all of us in our mid-20s, everyone aspiring to be part of the Broadway scene in some way. We were talking about AIDS and pushing it away from ourselves, saying, "Oh, this only affects guys who party harder than we do—older guys." Well, 10 years later, of those eight guys, four were dead, and two were HIV positive, including myself.

What about your own diagnosis?

I found out I was HIV positive in 1993 at a clinic on 125th Street. I'd tested negative many times before that and had gotten sober in 1988, but I seriously fell off the wagon and ended up in rehab around the same time I got my diagnosis, so it was a double whammy. Broadway Cares (BC) and Equity Fights AIDS (EFA), two groups doing basically the same kind of work, had just merged. Rodger McFarlane, who I worked for and was the executive director at the time, told me I was going to rehab or I'd be fired, so I did. If he hadn't made me do that, I'm not sure what would've happened to me.

I didn't need to start HIV meds until 1998, by which time, of course, protease inhibitors [effective antiretroviral treatment for HIV] had hit.

When did you first get connected with BC/EFA?

I first got involved with EFA in 1988. I was the assistant to [legendary actor] Colleen Dewhurst, who was president of Actors' Equity just around when their council had created the Equity Fights

AIDS committee. She said to me, "You can handle this." All my chaotic energy got focused there, and I jumped in like it was going to save my life, and, frankly, it did.

And then when Rodger became head of Broadway Cares, he took me to lunch and suggested that, instead of competing, BC and EFA work together. He said, "There's too much possibility here for us to be pissed off at what the other group is doing at any one show." So we began to work as if it were the same organization. I even mocked up stationery on the Xerox [machine] that said BC/EFA. And then we officially merged in 1992.

You've been leading BC/EFA for 28 years. How would you break down that long tenure into chapters?

A big change was in 1996, when we expanded support at the Actors' Fund to the Phyllis Newman Women's Health Initiative [which was run by Broadway actress Phyllis Newman, a cancer survivor who died in 2019]. We did that because of all the women in the theater community who'd helped BC/EFA take root the past decade, helping to care for primarily gay men.

So we felt it was imperative to support a program to help women. And that began the expansion of our mission and outreach beyond AIDS to what is now called the Entertainment Community Fund, which we've provided with \$7 million to help with senior services, artists health insurance, addiction recovery services. That expansion was pivotal because it allowed us to keep the entire community engaged in our fundraising once the advent of protease inhibitors gave many people the impression that the AIDS epidemic was over.

Also, our National Grants Program just grew and grew. We've awarded more than 450 organizations nationwide a total of \$160 million and a total of \$150 million to the Entertainment Community Fund. All the organizations we give grants to have some HIV and AIDS component in their mission even if that isn't the sole focus.

You went from being an aspiring actor to heading a very large nonprofit. What skills did you pick up along the way?

Thankfully, I'd been doing a lot of freelance writing to make a living before BC/EFA, so all the writing involved in running an organization was a skill I already had. But BC/EFA gave me purpose and meaning. It made me learn how important it was to say "Thank you," to make sure that people really feel appreciated and to really listen to what they need in order to help us. And in terms of working with a staff that's now up to 46 from the initial 10, I learned to share the credit and also take the blame. My staff needs to feel like I have their backs.

What are your priorities before leaving?

I want my leaving to be about expressing gratitude in everything I do, all the opportunities I have to talk to people. I want people to understand how grateful I am.

What do you want to do next?

Initially, I want to make room for something else to happen. To have the time to volunteer or get engaged somewhere. Who knows what that might be? Maybe a political campaign. I'm not looking for another job. I might foster dogs.

I watched my father when he retired at 62. Over the next 20 years he was reinventing himself. He was as busy as ever and happy just giving back without having to be the boss. That didn't escape my notice.

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