



“I Want People to Understand How Grateful I Am”

Upon his retirement, Tom Viola, executive director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, shares his insights on the fight against HIV.

August 23, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

Anyone familiar with the HIV and AIDS services community—or, for that matter, with professional theater—is likely familiar as well 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 raised more than \$300 million since its 1992 inception for hundreds of HIV and AIDS and adjacent service organizations throughout the United States.

Since 1996, BC/EFA has been led by Tom Viola, 70, who came to New York City as an aspiring actor in the 1970s and found himself swept up in efforts to provide aid to theater community folks hit by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. During his tenure, he has grown BC/EFA from 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 to a sleek machine employing dozens of people whose revenues, 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 AIDS and other illnesses.

The organization’s next big event is its longtime [Broadway Flea Market and Grand Auction](#) on September 22.

In July, Viola [announced](#) that he would retire on December 31, turning over leadership of BC/EFA to Danny Whitman, the group’s longtime development director. Viola talked to POZ about the wild ride he’s been on the past three-plus decades, what BC/EFA’s work has meant to its recipients—and to himself—and what comes next for him.

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 St. 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 come into 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-twenties, 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 St. 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 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 [effective treatment with] protease inhibitors had hit.

When did you first connect 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 that said BC/EFA. And then we officially merged in 1992.

Tell us some stories from the early days.

There was the night that [choreographer] Jerry Mitchell and seven of his pals from Miss Saigon all

danced on the bar at [the now defunct 1990s-'00s Chelsea gay megabar] Splash, which became the annual Broadway Bares.

But another story is how the Flea Market started. It began with the company of A Chorus Line, at the tail end of the original run around 1986, putting a couple of card tables outside their stage door on Shubert Alley to sell stuff off their dressing room tables, for what was then called the National AIDS Network. I think it raised about \$30,000. It was such a popular afternoon that, the following year, they invited other shows to join them.

Last year's version raised \$1.2 million over 50 tables of goods. Many of our events have geneses like that. Of course, the organization had to scale up from that, but I was fortunate to grow and learn with the organization about what needed to be done.

The cast of "& Juliet" raises money for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS
Courtesy of Broadway Cares-Equity Fights AIDS/Angela of York

A longtime Broadway institution is the Red Bucket Follies, when production casts make a pitch for BC/EFA from the stage right after the curtain call when the energy is high, then collect donations in bright red buckets from audiences as they exit. How did it come to be?

Completely by accident. In the late 1980s, we would do Equity Fights AIDS Week and would send info to all the Broadway, off-Broadway and even national shows encouraging them to raise money with which we could take care of the folks in our industry through the AIDS Initiative of the Actors Fund.

So, in 1989, *Steel Magnolias* was a big off-Broadway hit, and Rosemary Prinz, who played M'Lynn, decided to make an appeal from the stage at the end of the show and then they held out some kind of basket or bucket. They raised something like \$11,000 over the course of that week.

And then I think in 1990 or 1991, Keith Carradine, who was starring in *The Will Rogers Follies* on Broadway and spent much of the show talking directly to the audience, continued to do that after the curtain call and asked for money for us. And then other shows wanted to do the same thing, so we had to get official permission from the theater owners and unions. We figured it out as we did it.

Describe the flow and the traffic of all those crumpled bills.

Frankly, before people stopped dying in such large numbers after protease, there was such an emotional energy behind those appeals. The actors, still in their costumes, would rush to the lobby to hold the buckets and the stage managers were involved in the uncrumpling and counting of the bills.

Eventually we delivered safes to the theater to hold the cash. Today, the management of all that is huge. We're providing 80 to 100 volunteers a week at 20 shows. We do it in two yearly six-week campaigns, and this last spring's campaign raised \$4.7 million across 54 shows nationwide.

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 actor [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 for help with senior services, artist 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 grant to have some HIV and AIDS component in their mission even if that isn't the sole focus.

And many of these organizations are far from New York City.

They're all across the country, varying from the largest HIV and AIDS groups in metropolitan areas to very grassroots. And all of them now for the most part serve underserved communities, of

which HIV and AIDS is only one component of all the health issues. We fund about 40 harm reduction organizations [such as needle-exchange programs]. We were the first to step up and do that when it was controversial.

Just in New York City alone, an example of our reach is that we give about \$50,000 a year to God's Love We Deliver, which now delivers meals not just to homebound people with HIV and AIDS but with any debilitating illness. We also give about \$10,000 a year to the food bank at St. Clement's Church in Times Square, which serves people in the area experiencing homelessness. HIV may or may not be an issue for them, but it doesn't determine our support.

As people tend to carry less cash with them, have the Red Bucket campaigns suffered?

One of the reasons we're still around as an organization is because we're responsive and flexible. We use QR codes now and other ways that make it possible for people to donate right there in the lobby if they don't have cash, or want to give more than their cash on hand. The volunteers can feel like an octopus, like you need to have about five arms to handle everything as the people are filing out.

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 truly gave purpose and meaning to my life. 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. The empathy I saw in Colleen Dewhurst has always driven how I wanted to respond to whatever is in front of me.

2024 Broadway Bares Courtesy of Broadway Cares-Equity Fights AIDS/Michael Hull

What have been the most challenging times?

Right after 9/11 and the 2008 recession were challenging. But certainly, the biggest challenge was the COVID shutdown.

In one day, everything we did, all of which involved in-person engagement, was undoable. And the entire industry was out of work, with many people really struggling to make ends meet. So, we created the COVID Emergency Assistance Fund with all kinds of online events and major donor outreach. We awarded more money that year to the Entertainment Community Fund than ever before, working feverishly to raise money with Zoom events.

And we had some very good luck, like an older gentleman who'd said in his will that he wanted to leave money to organizations "like BC/EFA." It was that vague. But we sold his lawyer on the idea that, if all the man's money was awarded to BC/EFA, then we could disburse it to a variety of organizations nationwide and he wouldn't have to vet a single one. It turned out to be a \$7 million gift in the middle of the pandemic. And this lawyer was so happy that we'd made it so easy for him that he gave us half his fee.

That's a great story. What is a typical day like for you?

If I'm in my apartment in the theater district and not at my place upstate, I'll wake around 7 a.m. and take out my dog, Gracie, and pick up a bagel. Then I'll answer emails and putter around the

house, feed the cats, then get to the BC/EFA office a few blocks away at 10 a.m. Then the day begins. Today I'd be dealing with the Broadway Flea on September 22. Our development department is currently working with 1,500 major donors around all sorts of things. We're already making plans for Giving Tuesday and an end-of-year campaign.

I usually head home around 7 p.m., but if it's during our Red Bucket campaigns, the whole staff holds buckets after the shows at night. I'd very likely go home, eat, nap, then at 9:30 p.m. walk to some theater lobby to hold a bucket.

Do you see a lot of theater?

Oh, yeah. I'm very fortunate that I'm on the second-night press list for Broadway shows, which allows me to see a lot of things I'd otherwise not be able to afford myself.

What are your top priorities before you leave?

I want to ensure a really smooth and sustainable transition from myself to Danny. We have a board meeting in October, and I want to make sure Danny really understands the work I do to get us ready for that meeting.

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. I'm not looking to do some big benefit or squeeze one last donation out of people to acknowledge my leaving.

What do you want to do next?

All I really want to do initially is to make some 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. My sister and I said to each other, "What is he going to do now—just sit in the house?" And what he ended up doing over the next 20 years was reinventing himself. He and a buddy became the handymen of the tristate area. He volunteered at a women's shelter and also brought leftover restaurant food to food banks. He was as busy as ever and happy just giving back without having to be the boss. That didn't escape my notice. And I also noticed that, when he passed away, a lot of the people celebrating his life were the ones he'd engaged with in the 20 years since his retirement.

A final question: What would you say today to those eight friends you were at brunch with so long ago?

I'd say, "I did this for you."