

From a Whisper to a Roar

| Interview Summary | |
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| Name: Vito Ward | Date: 26.07.2019 Age: 76 |
| Key issues: Lesbians in the forces. Pubs and clubs. Lesbian and Gay Centre. Women's groups. Pride. Opening Doors London. Ageism/ Older gay community | |
| Narrative summary Vito talks about feeling different, but not having the language to explore this and following her peers in dating boys. She joined the Navy as soon as she could, partly because women were depicted as taking part in adventurous activities which were not available to her. She began to recognize her feelings towards other women but suppressed them, taking solace in Christianity. However she did meet someone, formed a relationship and became part of an 'inner circle' of lesbians living a very closeted existence within the Navy with much secrecy. She was very successful in her career and had reached the rank of Petty Officer after ten years when an ex girlfriend was caught and a search revealed old letters from Vito. She describes powerfully the process of automatic discharge from the service and its consequences. She describes the pub and club scene of the 60's. The Gateways was more heavily frequented by the army and she favoured the Robin Hood as being a bit more elite. She recalls how they dressed in a fairly strict butch/femme environment. She also talks in detail about the rough pubs around the docks in Southampton where she had a male nickname. She recalls the Lesbian & Gay centre with its Tea Dances, Sunday brunch and plethora of women's groups and how feminism impacted strongly to empower women. There was a great social life and they even organised holidays and lesbian camping trips. She also remembers the changing atmosphere at Pride over the years, and other things that are the same for young Pride-goers today. In latter years Vito has become an advocate for the older LGBT community, challenging ageism. She became an Ambassador for Opening Doors London, supports the Wandsworth LGBT Forum and has been involved with a project looking at the best kind of provision for older LGBT people in need of care. | |
| | Length of interview: 1 hr 17 mins |





Sandra: Okay, so we're starting now. Right, let's do that again. Okay, this is an interview for From A Whisper To A Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London, and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 26th of July 2019, and I am interviewing Vito. So, Vito, could you start by telling me a little about your early life, and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Vito: Well, long-term memory should be good, but it's not necessarily. But I think like most of my peers, we knew we were different, but we didn't have a

name for it. We didn't have any experience, or any role models, we didn't even have television in those days. So there was no, apart from Round The Horne, which was a radio broadcast where there was clearly a very camp man in it called Julian, I loved.

But I like everybody else just got on with our lives, did dating with the boys, because that's what the peers did. But I always knew that my life in the northeast of England was limited up there, and when I first saw women in uniform in a brochure I got from somewhere, as soon as I was old enough I applied to join the Women's Royal Naval Service. And I think in my heart of hearts I must have known, or even if it was secretly in my heart, that those women in uniform would be something like me. At least they purported to be, because the brochure showed women doing things that women didn't do in my village.

Sandra: Right.

Vito: Like riding horses, driving trucks, firing rifles. Not that I was thinking of killing anybody, I wasn't, but doing all the things, adventures, climbing mountains and so on, that weren't available to me in a little village in Northumberland. All that was available for me was my lack of education, because they didn't educate girls in those days unless you happened to be teacher parent or something. So I left school at 15, and my father went and got me a job in a shop. But I just couldn't wait until I was old enough to join the Navy.

And off I went at 17 and a half to get to Burghfield, I'd never really been out of Northumberland. I was a Broad Geordie, and I was with people from all over the world. Or well, all over the country. Different classes, race, and everything. Most of them had had an education, there was one woman from Wales. And I mixed well, fortunately I'm a survivor and being a Geordie, we can talk a lot, so yeah, I soon got on with my life there. I felt a bit homesick at times, and so on, but I was so excited by some of the things that we had to conform to. I loved being in uniform eventually, all the training we got, and we were all women together, and all pulling together. And that was, suddenly it was like an alternative family.

And I think I got my first crush then, on a woman that was, I don't think she had a crush on me, but we became very close, intimate friends, and we would... Although, when I trained in my second year in my category, we used to slide, we shared a cabin. So we would move, I would move into her cabin and sleep on the bottom bunk or something, so we'd be together. And we sort of got caught one morning, because I slept in. I was late. And it was a punishable offense, then, and they couldn't find me of course, and eventually found me, I was somewhere else.

I remember still feeling that sort of shame, even though I'd done nothing. But I think in my own heart I knew there was something that was different about me, and wasn't different about Val.

Sandra: Right.

Vito: I met her many years later, and she'd got about five kids by then, but we were sort of very close women together, because we're going through the same hoops together, and so on. And I suppose when I was stationed in Cornwall shortly after I finished my training, it was a big air station, and I played hockey in those days, and got really friendly with the goalkeeper, who was... I was also, got quite a lot of religion. I don't know, I found some solace in Christianity when I was at home, and I used to go to Sunday school and things like that. I quite liked it in a way, I think I must have liked the vicar or something. But it felt like a nice place to be, and we did lots of interesting things.

And then I went, I got confirmed by the Naval Chaplain, so I did my training, and got confirmed, and so on. So I believed that I was carrying 'a cross to bear'. So although I was fancying women, I never would act on it, because I thought, well, to act on it was wrong. I never discussed this with anybody, never talked to anybody about it. One didn't then. Then, Sandy, who was the goalkeeper, her parents were emigrating to Australia, and she lived in Dorset, and it wasn't far from Portsmouth. By then, I think I was about 20 something, and she invited me to go home for the weekend with her, to say goodbye to her parents, or to see them as often as she could before they went.

And girls always shared a bedroom in those days, people didn't have big houses anyway. Boys used to share bedrooms and beds as well, you know, there wasn't anything unusual about that. But anyway, it happened, and then we thought we were the only ones in the entire place, until many years later we both had to be separated because we were in different camps. You kept moving on, and moving on. But I went away to be godmother to one of my friend's firstborn. She was, by then, married and out, and I'd been to her wedding and so on. And when I got back from the weekend away, I found that Sandy had been taken to a pub by the other internal lesbians, in Southampton. And she described it, and subsequently, I went there.

And they, of course, the inner circle of lesbians knew, and they'd sussed us two out, and we then knew we weren't the only ones. And from then, it opened up, because we're like a club within a club. So wherever you went on draft, as we call it, moving from place to place, all you had to do was mention a name, a place, or something, and also we all wore, most of us wore these little pinkie onyx rings, to give some indication. We could get it wrong, because some people wore them and they weren't, but mostly we got that. So wherever you went, then you'd soon meet somebody who'd introduce you to somebody else, and you'd be in their inner circle again.

Sandra: Networking.

Vito: And so we had a separate, private life, but we were integrated also into the whole general milieu of things. And some people knew who were straight and didn't mind, but we knew we had to keep it low key, you know, couldn't get caught because you hear all these stories about people are getting caught, and various things like that.

Sandra: So Vito can I ask, you say that you would hear stories of people getting caught, so were you aware of the repercussions, you know, what would happen to you if you got caught?

Vito: Yeah, sure. Sure. It was never spelled out, nobody ever said it for definite, but we just... I suppose internally we all knew it was wrong, and we'd been brought up in a society where it was wrong, so we assumed that that would be the case in the Navy, and we weren't short of girlfriends within our circle, anyway, so it didn't bother us particularly. We just, we learned a language, and we learned a way of being that would keep us secret. We could talk to our lovers on the phone if they'd been sent somewhere else, we could write letters and everything, because we learned a certain code.

Sandra: Right, okay.

Vito: A certain way of talking on the phone. I'm trying to think what it was, but we'd never mention names.

Sandra: Sorry to cut you, interrupt you, but so do you feel like even your verbal, you know, correspondence on the phone, that that was being listened to, do you think?

Vito: Well it could have been, yes, it could have been. Well, because in those days you didn't have mobiles, and you didn't have... you went through an exchange to get a phone call.

Sandra: Of course you did.

Vito: Yeah.

Sandra: Yes, of course you did.

Vito: You didn't have your own phone.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Vito: So you have to go, I mean when I was stationed at Dauntless in Reading, I mean my friend was on the switchboard, so you knew, you timed it who was on the switchboard before you made your call, and things like that.

Sandra: Wow.

Vito: So there were so many different ways you could get past it without being found out, because you heard the stories of people who'd been ending their career. And I never thought it would happen to me, because I'd always been discreet, but I had a girlfriend who was much younger than me, who when she was in Portsmouth and that, we had a flat together, and everything we used to use. And so did a couple of my other friends who used to rent these bedsits, as it were, so we could have a little private time.

Anyway, she got sent down to Brawdy, which was in North Wales, and she apparently got caught with somebody. She was my ex, by then.

Sandra: Oh, right. So this isn't Sandy.

Vito: No, no, no, I'd had a few since her.

Sandra: Okay. Okay, so fine, yeah.

Vito: Yeah. We, it was like dating in a way. It was like dating, you'd see somebody until such time as they went away, or something like that. I mean you might have fallen in love for a while, but you know, you knew it had a sell by date and things like that.

Sandra: Right.

Vito: It's kids in a sweetie shop stuff, wasn't it?

Sandra: Okay. [laughing]

Vito: So yeah, when Maggie went to Brawdy, she got caught. I knew nothing about it, and she didn't do what most of us have done. If somebody got found out, they made sure everybody knew in our community, so we'd be really extra vigilant.

Sandra: Right, okay.

Vito: Well the first I knew was the two of them, they were both called Maggie, believe it or not, came up to London, walked into the establishment, they'd already been kicked out. The other Maggie had a girlfriend there, and this Maggie was my ex. So they just walked in, I was then a Petty Officer by then, and they had just been kicked out as ordinary Wrens. And I didn't know what to do, but she told me what had happened, and so I tried to help her out, I got her in a hotel for a couple of nights, and things like that, and then I got somebody to take her on the train. She went back to live with her parents for a while.

And I thought nothing more of it, until a few weeks later I got invited to put my hat on and to go and see the officer in charge. And you know it's serious when you put your hat on. And I was marched in, and then it was read out that I was a lesbian, and did I deny it? No. Because I saw photocopies of letters I had written many times a go, quite a while ago, that Maggie had kept. She didn't tell me that she'd been searched.

Sandra: Oh.

Vito: Because she was, they were both denying it, and when they deny it, they then got permission to try and find evidence, and so they found my letters. And I thought I was always careful, but you know, when you look at something photocopied, and it's upside down, you don't know. And for that split second, would I be a liar or would I be telling the truth? So I didn't deny

it, and then I was told under the Naval Discipline Act, this was against regulations, and end of story, you'll be demobbed.

I was in shock for a while, and fortunately the people who had to administer my demob was a friend of mine, as well, and she was the regulator there. So she looked after me, up to a point, as much as she could, and tried to make it as easy as possible. But I literally had weeks before my career was ended, with no money, no pension, nothing. Everything went. I had to hand in my uniform and everything. I couldn't even tell people in my mess, my POs mess. It was something about feeling ashamed or something, or being caught or something, and of feeling ashamed of not telling people, or something, I don't know what the shame was about. But I know I felt it, and I didn't feel like I wanted to tell my parents. I just told my parents I decided to end my career, and they thought this was really strange. Why give up such a really good career with good salary, and you know, I was rising up the ranks. And...

Sandra: Could I ask, Vito, at this point, how long had you been in the-

Vito: 10 years.

Sandra: Wow.

Vito: Yep. And I was at the top of my rank, I was due to be promoted again to a Chief, and I had just signed a 10 with a 12 year option, and then once the 12 years were up, then I would sign for pension. So in theory, I was still officially in until the 12 years, and I'd had really good reports. I'd just had a review, and it was, I got excellent, and everything else like that. But the witch hunt started, and various people were called in, and so on. And a lot of people denied it, and I'm glad I didn't when I look back, because they were watched all the time, they never got promotion, they didn't do so well. And they still had to live that lie all the time, and I'm glad I didn't.

But it was a horrendous time, and within a few... Well, in the weeks that followed, before I actually came out, we used to use the male Chief's Mess. It was in Kensington, so we're all in the same building, and we had an adjoining door, which only people our rank had keys to, the lower ranks didn't. So we used to drink in the Chief's Mess, because the booze was cheap, we'd play games and all sorts of other things, and I went that night, and I'm sitting at the bar, and I met somebody who'd just come on draft there. And Nicki and I were in bed by that night, and we formed a relationship. And what was really strange was she was high security, she was working in Whitehall on Morse code.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Vito: I was household staff, you know what, and the premise of which you get kicked out was that you could be blackmailed for official secrets and all that crap.

Sandra: Oh, I see.

Vito: Well I had, laundry wasn't an official secret. Or food, or that sort of thing, you know. Anyway, she was my saviour in some respects, because within those weeks she was supporting me as well, although she had to keep a low profile, and she was the same rank as me. So that made it okay that we could be talking, we could be eating together and things like that in the same mess. And then she helped me, so did another friend, to find a little place in Earl's Court, and she used to come around and things like that. But I couldn't go around and see her.

So that helped me a little bit to overcome it. I also had friends that lived in Putney, who were out the services who helped me a lot really, and I got over that for the time being anyway. But it was a tough time, and then eventually I got a job, a living in job in Dolphin Square. But I doctored my papers, because my papers said, your service is no longer required. I think I had enough respect from them to put that on rather than dismissed for homosexuality, for example. Some people had that on their forms, I didn't.

Sandra: That would have made it very difficult for you to get work.

Vito: Yeah, and I mean most people didn't know it was discharge services no longer required section, this section there. And I doctored some of the documents anyway, and photocopied them as you did, you just sent them in. And then you needed a reference. Well I had friend who were officers. Rather than give them the establishment name, I would just give them that name and they gave me a reference. So I got a job in Dolphin Square, and I got a place to live, and then I started, Nicki was still with me for a time, and then I started meeting other friends that were out, and friends that were still in used to come around. They were stationed in Kensington, so we started going down more to the Robin Hood again, and places like that.

Because when I was in the services, when I was stationed in Droxford, we used to come up for the weekend to the smoke and do the club, and stay with friends, or not, or find somebody to sleep with that night. [Laughing] so you're in a bed.

Sandra: So you mentioned the Robin Hood, that a club, or?

Vito: That was one of the first clubs, yeah. It was after the Gateways, but it was during the Gateways time. The Gateways was the first lesbian club.

Sandra: I've heard about that one.

Vito: Yeah, yeah.

Sandra: Yeah.

Vito: And I didn't like that one very much, and I don't think the Wrens did. The Army tended to go to the Gateways. To me it was more of a rough dive, the Robin Hood was a little bit more elite.

Sandra: Okay, okay. A little bit more classy.

Vito: Yeah, a bit more... well, we thought it was, anyway. We also thought the Wrens were more classy than the WRAC.

Sandra: The WRAC?

Vito: Women's Royal Army Corps. WRNS was Women's Royal Naval Services.

Sandra: Yeah.

Vito: Yeah, yeah. So yeah, I mean we'd come to the Robin Hood, obviously not in uniform. We'd come up by train or by car, in the days when you could park in London. And I had a couple of friends in Kensington that I could stay with every now and again, sometimes I was up with my girlfriend, or we'd go out. I mean it was only Saturday night at the club, it wasn't every night at all. And we'd change our clothes, and we'd be, you know, I suppose I was a soft butch in those days. Pink shirt, and a cravat was the-

Sandra: Very nice.

Vito: Wearing men's trousers, and flat shoes sort of black or brown, or something like that. And our girlfriends, we had to be butch or femme at those days, it's the way in which you met your partners.

Sandra: Really, you had to have that role?

Vito: Yeah. Particularly the pub in Southampton. You couldn't have got a rougher dive, but it was one of those lovely places, because it was near the docks. I think it still exists, the Horse and Groom, except it's a nice gourmet pub now. But it was one of those pubs that accepted everybody. In the days when Black people wouldn't have been allowed in a pub, and where other people like us wouldn't have been allowed, so everything went. And we were all really supportive, and everybody was okay with everybody.

But the women that lived down there, they were very much butch and femme, and a lot of their partners were prostitutes, and they were on the game for their partner.

Sandra: Oh, oh, oh.

Vito: That's how they were earning their money, because their partners would be living as men, and they'd have men's names.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Vito: And nobody would know, because it was easier for them to live that way. And so that's how they had to survive, to earn their money. And who were we to judge?

Sandra: No, it just sounds...

Vito: Yeah, I mean they gave me a man's name, which I used when I was down there. My mate was called Paul, and what was I called? Steven or something else like that.

Sandra: Steven.

Vito: Or something silly like that. So it was role play, and many years later I fell in love with a woman who was butch, and I had to pretend to be femme. It didn't suit me. I think I bought a skirt or something, but I felt so damned awkward in it, and thank god the relationship didn't last very long.[laughing]

Sandra: It didn't last. Oh wow.

Vito: But you know, it was silly, really, because one of my best friends, she's still a friend of mine, she's married now and living in Spain. But when she was with a woman, her and I were in different establishments, and her partner was in a different one, so we all converged into Portsmouth, into the service people's club. And Dorothy and I booked into that place, and Jackie was coming later. But she wasn't sharing our room, so we had a shared room. And when Jackie came, I was dressed in trousers and cravat and everything, she said, "You're bloody butch and you're sleeping with my girlfriend." As if it mattered. Dorothy and I were great friends, we'd often sleep together but we didn't fancy each other or anything like that, you know.

Sandra: Right, right, right.

Vito: It's the adage, isn't it, you think because you're a lesbian you fancy every woman.

Sandra: Yes, isn't it irritating?

Vito: It is very irritating.

Sandra: I hate it.

Vito: Yes, so do I, but it's what people assume. It's why you have to be careful sometimes with your friends, and my dear friend who I was godmother to her son, I mean he came to my 70th birthday. He's in his 50s now, he's got four kids of his own, but the privilege she offered me to be a godmother, and we never talked about it, but she knew. She's dead now, bless her, she died at 38.

Sandra: Oh, dear.

Vito: Yeah. I know. Tragic.

Sandra: Very sad.

Vito: Lots of tragedies like that, really, when you think about it. I'm still in touch with some of the people I had friends with. One of them lives in Spain, has done for donkey's years. And my other friend lives in another part of Spain.

One's in Alicante, one's in northern Spain, another one in Cornwall. And my ex-partner who is also a Wren lives in the Isle of Wight now. So I never looked back after that in a way, that I would never be in the closet again. But I had to be to get this job.

Sandra: Yeah.

Vito: In Dolphin Square. And there was a couple of gay men there, so I formed friendships with them, and then I found that there were certain below stairs staff that were okay with that, and again, we had our little secrets. So we'd socialise outside of that, and so on. And I don't suppose people cared, really, one way in another, but I wasn't happy there. I mean I liked the luxury living, because next door to me was Katie Boyle and Fanny Cradock, probably people before your time, but Katie Boyle's still alive, she used to do the European song contest, the very first ones.

Sandra: Okay.

Vito: And she's still around, and Fanny Cradock's long since dead, she did the first recipe program on TV.

Sandra: Her name sounds familiar.

Vito: Yeah.

Sandra: Yeah.

Vito: Yeah.

Sandra: Yeah, yeah.

Vito: Strange character, I think they were both that, you know, drinkers. But they were very famous people and Dolphin Square had a lot of famous people. But they didn't know I was the housekeeper there, because I was living in the other part, and the part I worked in was run like an apartment hotel.

Sandra: Okay, very private.

Vito: So I could, I mean I could have had anything on delivery from Harrods or anywhere, I just had to pick up the phone, and they'd deliver it, because it was such a good address.

Sandra: Wow.

Vito: And when I moved out to Clapham, they wouldn't send anything.

Sandra: Things were all different.

Vito: North Clapham, they wouldn't send anything. Still exists, that snobbery, you know, where you're address If you live in Belgravia, or Pimlico, you can buy anything unless you're on a council estate.

Sandra: Yeah, no, absolutely.

Vito: It's still there, it's all in our class system, isn't it?

Sandra: Yeah, yeah.

Vito: So, what else do you want to ask me?

Sandra: Okay, well that was good. You answered all of my questions in relation to finding yourself, as it were. Did you join any social or political groups? You've mentioned the clubs and pubs that you used to go to, and you obviously were part of a sort of community, but was there any sort of organised social group, or was it all quite casual and organic?

Vito: I think it was more or less organic whilst I was in the services, but it happened because as each club closed another pub would open. And that would last for a few weeks, and then another would... So, you know, where are we all going next Saturday? Is the new place Red's in Camberwell or something? Where's the next one? Oh, it's down in Central London. And until the LGBT set up in Farringdon. And you know that was a lovely Sunday afternoon spent with a tea dance, and people like Jo Purvis, who I think is still alive, had the first tea dance at a club called Stallions.

Sandra: What was that?

Vito: And it was ballroom dancing basically, her and her partner Eileen, I think they're both still alive but they're much older than me, so they might not be. I asked the other day with a group I was in if anybody every knew them, because we were both featured in Clare Summerskill's Gateway to Heaven book. And when the book was launched... and also Jill Gardner's Women at the Gateways. So when the books were launched, we were all participants in that sort of oral history thing, so we all met up then.

But Jo used to then run a tea dance on a Sunday afternoon in the lesbian and gay centre, and it was a lovely place to go. Political it was, because there was fighting between the lesbians and the gay men, because it was attracting a lot of younger gay men who were more interested in cottaging and that sort of thing. The lesbians wanted something more politically, they wanted lesbian parent groups, they wanted groups, they wanted our own bar, but unfortunately, we didn't have the same economic strength, as well, as the men had. And we couldn't get enough volunteers to run our own bar. And I knew the guy that ran the centre at the time, and you probably heard the demise of the centre was that somebody misappropriated all the funds. And so they lost their grant, and it closed.

But Sunday, I used to go there Sunday mornings, we'd have brunch, and we'd read the papers, and we'd just chat to people, and then we'd join the tea dance in the afternoon, then have a drink or something.

Sandra: Sounds lovely.

Vito: And it was really lovely, and there were often, the lesbians would organise different events. It was also where Pace was based in the early days, the LGBT counseling service was based there. And I did some work for them, because I was a trainer, so we developed some workshops for empowering women, and assertiveness training, and aging with that attitude, and all that sort of thing.

Sandra: Wow.

Vito: And I was a counsellor myself, so I worked with them for a while. I get dates mixed up and time frames mixed up, so I can't remember exactly what year that was, and what came first, or whatever, but I guess that was our political forum. Also we had the bookshop that's, well it's not Gay's The Word. We had that, but we also had one in Charing Cross Road. Oh, what was it called? And it was a really good meeting place, because they didn't have a coffee bar or anything, but they had a notice board. It was a feminist bookshop, and they had loads of lesbian books, mostly Naiad Press from America, or whatever, before we had many publishers here. Silver Moon was also up in North London, but the notice boards would tell you where things were, what events were on.

And I guess, as lesbians, we were campaigning differently, so we'd be running our own show. I mean I laugh about it now, because we never... most of the women were on benefit, so everything was concessions, nothing was paid for really. There was a Camden Black women's group that set up and things like that. There was a lot of fighting between us, I remember going to a separatist conference at the women's centre, because we had women's centres as well then, as well as the LGBT centre. So at the same time, women were beginning to get empowered, and there was a lot of fighting between male and female because patriarchy, and Germaine Greer, and all that sort of thing was all amalgamating into political action.

So we're doing demos, and marches for various things. Reclaiming the night, and so on. But we're also organising ourselves into so many different groups. Either through politics, or through... you know, general politics, like Labour party or something. Because the Labour party was unlike the conservatives. We borrowed the Labour party headquarters in Lewisham. Once a month we'd have Reds there, we called it Reds, and it was a lesbian club, and we ran our own bar and everything. We'd put on, the lesbians mothers would meet there, and things like that, and they'd put on poetry reading. It was always strumming guitars and sad poetry, you know, it wasn't exactly dynamic, but...

It was funny when I look back, but we organised holidays together, there would be drumming, we'd go to drum camps. We'd camp and go away camping weekends, and then we'd have lesbian camp. And then somebody, a friend of mine, put on the only conference for older lesbians many years later in Leeds University, during the holiday time. And that was amazing, because it's Alice's partner and a friend of mine that put that conference on.

Sandra: Wow.

Vito: So it's a very rich and wonderful history, and to say that... It was painful at times, and what you saw happened to your friends sometimes, as well as what happened to yourself, was grossly unfair and hard to live with. And it took me a long time to recover from being kicked out, but I had to work. I had to find some way to live, so I kept going, you know. And it toughens you up a bit, but I never really went in the closet after that. I wasn't going to. But we had such great fun, too. Because we would be, like any marginalised group, when you're together you share that commonality, and you share the laughter that goes with the discrimination, or how you challenge it.

Sandra: Yes, yes.

Vito: We had our ways of getting back, which I'm not going to talk about.

Sandra: Okay, that's all right.

Vito: But graffitiing and things like that, and graffitiing posters that sexualised women and things like that. So if it wasn't women's politics, it was lesbian politics, or it was LGBT politics or something. And the only places available in London was often drag queen oriented, like the Black Cap, and the Vauxhall Tavern. Still go to the Vauxhall Tavern.

Sandra: Yeah.

Vito: I had one New Year in there, and the days when there's just one bar, and the dragettes used to dance around the bar. And again, it was all of us together. Once we walked out we had to protect each other, but while we were in there we were having a ball. A big drink culture, I might add. I mean, some people smoked, but very rare. There wasn't the access to drugs as there is now. And I think I had a spliff once, but I didn't like it. But we all smoked and we all drank.

Sandra: Yeah, yeah.

Vito: I don't think I've had a spliff a few time since then, but I don't like smoking, but if it's in a bit of cake, it's a different matter.

Sandra: I will [crosstalk 00:36:43]. Oh, wow. Okay. That's fabulous. Okay, well so I can ask now, were there any major figures or political movements that inspired you?

Vito: Oh, gosh, yes lots. Jackie Forster, the main one really, because Jackie Forster used to stand at Hyde Park corner, and stand on a soapbox, and say, "I'm a lesbian. I sleep with women. I have sex with women. I'm a dyke." I mean, she'd name all the words, the derogatory words, and she would get heckled and everything. She was an actress.

Sandra: When was this? When was this?

Vito: That would be in the 60s, wouldn't it, I think?

Sandra: And it was Jackie...

Vito: Jackie Forster.

Sandra: Forster?

Vito: Forster. Oh, you must look her up, Jackie Forster.

Sandra: I will!

Vito: Because she's a professional actor, and she worked for the BBC, and so her history is well chronicled. She started the first lesbian archive, as well. I mean, god rest her soul, she's been dead a few years now. And there's some film clips of her, and things like that. You must look her up. Wonderful woman, she was really an icon. And there was Claire Rayner, who wasn't gay, but Jackie Forster started Sappho, as well, which was a women's discussion group. Can't even remember where it was. But I remember Claire Rayner being there. Claire Rayner was working for TV or something like that, when she worked on Sexuality, and she came to one of our meetings. And I met many years later at something, don't know if she's still alive now.

But all these people have long since gone, you see. I'm trying to think who else, but there were other people that inspired me. I suppose professional actors, the ones that came out. I'm trying to think of their names, now. But there was always somebody like Boy George or something like that, an entertainer or something like that. So in the early Prides you'd meet these people and you'd follow their group whether you liked their music or not, because they were gay, and you'd share all that music. And we had icons that weren't necessarily gay, but were gay friendly. And if they were on our side, then they were part of our community, if you know what I mean.

And there were a lot of, I mean the first London Pride, I wasn't on the first London Pride, because I was still in the Navy. I think I was still in the Navy, or I must have shortly come out, because it was in the 70s. I think my first London Pride was '74, but I can't remember. But I was with a partner then, a serious partner who took me to the march, but didn't... she was going to meet me later at the park. And it was a little do at Victoria Park, on the south bank. It was about three stalls, or something like that, and the march was from I think Hyde Park at Park Lane, what do you call it, Marble Arch-

Sandra: Marble Arch, yeah.

Vito: Down to... So it wasn't a very long march.

Sandra: Down to Victoria Park?

Vito: Yeah.

Sandra: Right.

Vito: Yeah. On the south bank, anyway, somewhere around the south bank. I think it had one porta-loo or something like that, we weren't allowed to use the Festival Hall or something like that. It was low key, probably had a bar, I should think, or whatever, but it was sunny day and it was just so lovely. But I was terrified on that march, I didn't know who to march with. Because I didn't know the general layout of things, but I knew I wanted to be on the march, and I was an NALGO member then, the union. It's now Unison, but it used to be NALGO.

Sandra: Oh, right, okay.

Vito: It was a social worker's sort of... I'm a social worker as well. So I saw the NALGO banner and just marched with them, even though I didn't know any of them. And then I met my friends at the park. Two of my friends had disabilities, so I met them there, and we had a great time. And then subsequently, I started getting to know more people who were going on Pride, and in those days, the police were there to protect us, but they weren't very friendly towards us. You could tell they were embarrassed, they didn't want to be there, they had to do their duty. They weren't friendly one little bit, they were just doing their duty.

And there probably was a good proportion of them were lesbian or gay, but they couldn't afford to be out in the police.

Sandra: No.

Vito: And the Christians were there in their masses.

Sandra: Really.

Vito: And over the years I watched them deplete... I think there was two people with banners this year, with cards, saying we'd be burned in hell for our sins or something. But the lesbian and gay Christians with their god loves you, Jesus loves you. And I'm on the top of the bus, I can see these other with their little placards, but most people couldn't see them.

Sandra: Yeah, no.

Vito: But the lesbian and gay Christians had a big banner at the front, you know, made sure now. And the police are there enjoying Pride with us, and they're marching with us now.

Sandra: Yes, yes they are.

Vito: So it was very, very different. And some of the Prides were a really long walk. Couldn't do it now. Right to Kennington Park, and then a big party. I remember taking my cousin, who'd formerly been in the RAF, but he was much younger than me, and he'd been married, and he came out later in life. And I took him to his first march when he was still in the RAF, and he was trying to hide every time there was a camera. And that night we went to the pub in Vauxhall, there used to be three lesbian and gay pubs in Vauxhall,

and I can't remember what the other one was called, but there was a TV camera showing the news, and there he was.

Sandra: Oh dear.

Vito: See, it's also sad, because he got offered to fly with the Queen's Flight, but the security is absolutely rigid. They check your history, you couldn't be on that flight if you were adopted, because they couldn't trace your parents in those days. It was a lengthy process to go through that, and he didn't want to go through that, so he resigned and left the RAF. He's not regretted it since, because he's come out and he's... I mean, he took him to first Pride, he disappeared as soon as you got in the park, I never saw him again. Couple of days or something, you know, typical young gorgeous man, they know.

But after that, then we used to contribute to Pride with Kenric, we'd have stalls, we'd have a tea tent with the tennis on, and things like that. And there were great reunions, it was wonderful too, and then Clapham Common, lying on the grass, you know, with your friends and so on. It was all free, until one year they decided they would make Hyde Park a payable event, and I, like many of my peers, thought well, we'll give it a try, and we bought our tickets for 20 quid. It was an absolute disaster, because there wasn't enough people in there, and they'd got all these shows, they lost a tremendous amount of money. Also, the bar, you had to buy tickets. You didn't know how many tickets you wanted, you couldn't buy your friends a drink because you didn't know how much you had.

So you had to go one place and get a ticket, that would then get you a drink. And the queues were lengthy, you weren't allowed to take any drink in, whereas we'd all taken our booze and everything on the march. I mean, I remember one of the buses I organised for the elder lesbian network, which incidentally has been going now for over 40 years. We organised a truck one year, well two years, really. And I had a water pistol, one of these big ones that was full of gin. Gin and tonic. Who wants a drink?

Sandra: [crosstalk 00:45:59].

Vito: I mean we'd start at the morning when it went from Hyde Park, we'd go to Harrods for breakfast. And one of my friends, she was crazy, god bless her soul, she's dead now. But Julia had, she was a real sort of punk. She was a probation officer, and she worked with abusers and so on, but she had piercings. She wore a long dress and DMs on the end, and she had a dog collar that one of my friends was leading. And we still went to Harrods for breakfast. And they didn't want to let us in, but our money was as good as anybody's and we had champagne breakfast in the morning.

Sandra: Excellent.

Vito: And oh, about fifteen of us. I've got a picture down there of some of us in Harrods, and I think five of those people no longer exist, they're all dead. So it's sad, as well, but we had a ball. We really did have a ball. And so we'd be pissed before we got on the march, really, and then we'd... what they're

doing now. The young people are pissed before they get on the march. It's one big piss-up now, isn't it?

Sandra: Well, it is, yeah.

Vito: And I can be the grouchy old lesbian. Oh, god get away from me. Pissing in the street and things like that. We can be really judgmental. When we used to go to the Robin Hood, there was always a party afterwards, and we'd no idea where this party was, we'd just follow the crowd.

Sandra: Crowd.

Vito: You might pick up a cheap bottle, the cheapest bottle of something that you could get, or you might not. You just go because there might be somebody rich And they often were, people with loads of money, big houses, often gay men, other drag queens there, and so on. Sharing a toilet with drag queens, and they would pee, and then you were just finishing, and they were still in the same room. Because they were desperate, and so on. You know, and now I've got all these judgments about these people peeing up against a wall.

So it was crazy, and not something to be admired, but it was all part of the acceptance of everybody. And there was that lovely acceptance now, there wasn't this separatism. But I remember going to a separatist conference, and oh, women were just fighting with each other. They just all wanted space, they wanted recognition. Like the lesbian parents, who'd been through a lot. Some of them had lost their kids, at a time when husbands had the rights more than the wife. So they'd had a hard journey. Black people obviously had a hard journey being lesbian, and different factions, obviously. If you were not British, you spoke a different language or whatever, and everybody was fighting for their own bit, you know.

I'm going to just check that-

Sandra: We can pause this for a moment. Okay...

Vito: Because that might be the hospital for me.

Sandra: How do I pause this?

Sandra: Yes another one. Okay. We're just going to do two questions then we're done. The 67 Sexual Offences Act was specifically directed towards gay men, but did you feel the impact of this and successive legislation? What legal changes have made the most impact on women in the community in your opinion?

Vito: Yeah the 67 Act didn't really touch me because I was still in the Navy. And if there'd been any gay men that was affected by it, they wouldn't have been able to say. So it didn't, it passed me by. Obviously we celebrate it this year,

50 years, or was it last year? 50 years, and we did a lot of different things around celebrating the 50 years of that. And it was only a partial discrimination at that time. It didn't become a full discrimination until much later. There was still regulations around what men could do and what they couldn't do. But it did have an effect on lesbians even if it was only psychological.

Sandra: What effects was that?

Vito: Well, if you discriminate against lesbians and the gay men are there, they feel it as well. As with black people, if we're discriminated against and we've experience of that, then it's going to touch us, mostly. I can't speak for everybody, but it does touch me. I mean what am I? I'm a challenger when it comes to discrimination. I shoot everything that goes on. It would never pass me by on the street. If I see it happening to kids, I see it happening to kids in shops. Some shopkeepers treat these kids really badly or they might be in the front of the queue and somebody like me comes in and they treat me instead of the kids. So there's ageism involved.

I'm an advocate for ageism. Obviously for obvious reasons and particularly with aging of older people, LGBT people. But so that Act I wasn't aware of and it wouldn't have been publicised because we didn't read newspapers and we weren't supposed to be political when we're in the Navy either. You were officially allowed to vote, but none of us ever did. And I guess I might have been a Conservative of some sort because we were conforming to... The queen was our head and all that sort of thing. We'll protecting queen and country for some or other reason.

And so that passed me by, but I think how it impacted on lesbians that just would have reinforced the fear of lesbians if the men could still get a certain amount of freedom. There was still things that were uncertain. There was some partial discrimination (decriminalisation). So it would still have an effect, because you weren't quite sure where you could be and what age you had to be and so on. And I mean some of my peers got put on the sexual offenders register because their boyfriend was young, under a certain age. 17 or something like that or 16 or something. So they still had to hide in the closet.

And there was laws affecting women that affected us. So we're battling against those things. Although in the services we felt we were equal, we weren't quite, but we were equal in so much as many of the jobs we did the men did too. But not now. I mean now we're all part of the Royal Navy and women can do everything. All the duties like man. I got tickets to Wimbledon through my association and I met ex WRAF, that's RAF women's and the WRAC and ex Wrens. And they were saying how they had been in more recent than me and they were saying that when the law changed, they were allowed to opt to serve at sea or not serve at sea. So they could still do their jobs. They weren't in a forced into doing what the men did or whatever. Because you joined up for a different reason.

So we had our own services but we were under the Naval regulations up to a point. But you see one of my ex partners desert it but they couldn't, we didn't have our own police or anything. He couldn't bring them back, because we didn't have that law. Like the RAC did. The RAC could arrest them and bring them back and put them in jail so they could the RAF, but we couldn't. But it made sure that deserters didn't get a reference. That was about all really. Because it happened to a partner of mine and she came out and then she got a job as a store detective. When they asked for a reference... Do you want a biscuit? You're going make a noise aren't you? Should have put them on a plate.

Sandra: It's okay. I packed them out. Thank you.

Vito: But she got sacked as soon as she... they wrote and said they wouldn't give her a reference. They could've just ignored it, but now they write and say, "No, we won't give a reference because..." And really what she did was leave without notice, which also was frowned upon in the employment, because you think about employment at the time, you'd get sacked from your job. Or at the very least you'd be pilloried in some way or other or marginalised or something in your job. Take the demand.

And there was a lot of fear around. If you're a lesbian, you came out lesbian this year and you fancied every woman around and similar to the men. And there'd be all these sort of jokes that went on about lesbians and gay men and things. And it would be the same with black people that ran the same time. I mean, I still remember as a kid, we used to have Rowntrees jam and it had a golliwog inside and used to save them.

Now we used to use the golliwog if we lost our virginity, just stick it on T shirts or whatever we had at the time. But we never thought racism. We were ignorant, innocent, shall we say. We never thought racism, but clearly racism existed tremendously. The black and white minstrels we were brought up with as well. We weren't thinking colour or anything, but we probably were, but we weren't conscious of it. Totally unconscious.

I remember one of my, and I must have been a little small kid, but curious as to why this woman was treated badly. One, she was a divorcee. Two, she had a black boyfriend, because there wasn't any black people in my village. So what do we know about them? What did we know about them?

Sandra: Oh dear.

Vito: They'd been all that study in the previous century about them having smaller brains and also all sorts of crazy things like that. You think about. Indian people just pick tea.

Sandra: Eugenics I think.

Vito: I know and now you can hardly get good Indian meal these days because all the third generation are doctors or lawyers.

Sandra: With their tiny brains.

Vito: It's crazy isn't it? But you think you lived through all that and you can laugh about it now. And it was painful for all of us in different ways. But we can now never ignore sexism, racism, genderism or whatever. Because you notice it. It's in your blood, as it were. It's all there and you can see it every day of your life. And unfortunately it's a bit of a burden to carry sometimes.

I mean, on the tubes and that now I can't stand in this heat for too long and so on. But people sit in the seats for disabled people and elderly people with their earphones and their head down, pretend to be asleep so they don't have to give you a seat. "Excuse me, can I have that seat?" I did it last week and you know what this guy said?

Sandra: What?

Vito: "Sorry, I need it."

Sandra: Why?

Vito: So the guy next door to him said, "You're joking mate. Here love, have my seat." And then he glared at this man and he said, "You could've given her a seat." He said, "Oh, I hurt my back yesterday." He said, "That's nevertheless." He said, "Your back will heal."

Sandra: Exactly. There are some good people out there [crosstalk 00:09:33].

Vito: Yeah, they are there. For every bad you find a few better. I mean the youth today get a terrible reputation.

Sandra: They do.

Vito: Some of them deserve it, we know. But the ones I've met are polite. And I got knocked off my bike with a lorry one day up the top of the road a few years ago and these guys... Somebody came to pick me up and they were picking my bike up and I was cursing, I was cursing like hell and this young man said, "It's not me Mrs." He said, "I'm just helping you." It was the kids from the local school.

I went the next day with a box of chocolates and everything with a card and I saw the headmaster and I said, please give thanks to those boys who helped me up and so on.

Sandra: They're not all bad. They do get a bad rep though.

Vito: Not at all.

Sandra: We'll talk about that later. Okay I think we're nearly finished. Have you had personal experiences of the impact of changing attitudes? How does life now compare to 50 years ago in your day to day dealing with people and organizations?

Vito: Well, it's to say it's wonderful, it is. It's wonderful getting to this time in my life. There's some things that not so good like arthritis and various other things that go with the territory. And I'm one of the fortunate ones. Many of my peers have died before me. A lot of women died with cancer, breast cancer. It seems to be prevalent in lesbians, but nobody's done any particular study on that.

But I think that having been out for so long, I've still got to be careful, because I wouldn't be out in Africa. Certainly not Mugabe's Africa. And some of the many countries I wouldn't go to because of that. I wouldn't go to Kenya. Although they're looking up, they're beginning to mobilize quite a lot. But I keep in touch with the other countries and their progress. I'd love to go to Brazil, but I don't think it would be safe for me, and Columbia and places like that. One's got to be really careful. But I will support those people online or donations or whatever, because collectively we got to change this world.

So there's still a lot to do. But it's a lovely time in my life because I started with the Wansdworth LGBT forum. I started a project, a coffee morning for older LGBT people. And that's my dream. It's not creating ghettos, it's not creating marginalisation or separatism. It's about getting LGBT people into ordinary places where older people are, because it's the older people that discriminate. The staff are trained not to. Yeah, but it's the older people in old people's homes and things like that. And some of their staff need to be trained which is what Opening Doors are doing. To try and train the staff to provide the cultural things that we as older LGBT people need in our old age.

We don't share the same music. We don't share the same reading material. We don't share the same social outlet. Some of them we do, like I played badminton. I'm probably the only lesbian as far as I know at a big club. But I have a great time there and I'm out with everybody. And that isn't a problem as a gay, couple of gay men that go there. So I'm always in the minority and I'm used to that, but I like sometimes to not be in the majority. So I love doing things with my older lesbians and my younger lesbians. I don't want to be separated from younger either. So hence my membership with, and I've been an advocate and an ambassador for Opening Doors more or less since it opened. And prior to that was running my own charity and working with the Metro Centre in Greenwich and the Lesbian and Gay Centre in London. So I go back a long way and I suppose everybody knows me, which can be a disadvantage.

I can't go on a dating site. They just see my name and then later delete it? Just my last girlfriend was in LA.

Sandra: Sorry.

Vito: Yeah. So the good times and fun times and that coffee morning that's been going over two years and we're completely integrated. We're all members of the project. So I do an exercise class and Tai Chi class there, belong to the radio group, the poetry group. And others now are members and they come from Lambeth, Merton, Croydon, even somebody from Southend, a black guy who hasn't got anything in his area. But he'll trade not every week, but

he'll come about once a month from Southend just to be with older LGBT people. Have coffee with this. Very intelligent guy and a lovely guy to be around.

And we just laugh because we sort of share the same sort of humour. And we make so much noise they have to close the door on us, because we're all in conversation about the latest theatre we'd be into, we spread out and how we go to drag bingo about once a month. You must come, it's great fun.

Sandra: I'd love to.

Vito: It's great fun. It's not like bingo. I can tell you it's sort of like bingo. It's a bit rude at times-

Sandra: Ooh it sounds lovely. I'll definitely come.

Vito: They do two for one cocktails. And by the time you've had your two cocktails, you're anybody's anyway. But it's a drag queen who does it and David who's the forum chair does the deejaying, and they fix the music according to the numbers that come out and things like that. It's very clever. And you get three go's, but they're silly prizes like a pot of noodles or something like that. And then there's one big prize at the end, which you pay a couple of quid to get tickets on or something like that. And then they're able to give that money to the winner.

But that's fun. We've had trips to County Hall because my assembly member just lives on the corner, so she invites us. So we've been to City hall. I've been to City Hall many times and Sadiq was my local counsellor-

Sandra: Oh right [crosstalk 00:16:41]. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Vito: ... before he got to be mayor. I've danced with him many times. He's a good dancer, Rosina. And I'm a member of the Labour party and things like that, so we've done International Women's Day. I've spoken at International Women's Day about being an older lesbian when there was a 15 year old lesbian talking about her experience.

Sandra: Oh Wow.

Vito: And although we had different generational experiences, there were a couple of things that we still shared.

Sandra: Of course.

Vito: And I worked with the youth group at the Metro. And it's interesting they talked about coming out. And even though 14, 15 year olds were out to their parents and their parents was okay with it, parents worried about how they would be treated and the kids themselves still found it difficult to tell their parents.

There's still the internalised process, which happens to me every now and again. I just remember walking across the common one day when my partner at the time and she went to kiss me. And just in that instant, I did a check like this. It was fractional, it was minuscule, half a minute or something, or 30 seconds, I did that and then kissed her back. Because it's in here, the damage is there and we're celebrating but I know a lot of people that are not out. As I said, if they're in sheltered housing units or something, they can't be out.

I know a story of a gay man that was in a sheltered housing unit. The warden thought she was doing him a favour by telling all the residents that a gay man was coming to live there and not to discriminate. While the old people didn't discriminate, but they all had grandchildren. And of course word got out in the local community, every time he went out the house, he got abused by the local teenagers.

Sandra: Oh no.

Vito: And so I'm working with Tonic housing association. We've been working together for years, and I'm now beginning to get this idea that we don't want... I think the gay men, older ones want a sheltered housing unit just for themselves. The women don't necessarily want to live with gay men. And they're like me, they don't want to be, um, a ghetto. So I'm beginning to think, I love the idea. I think being a ghetto brings attention to you and you can become so institutionalised in that.

What I want to see is all the old people's homes are providing entertainment and cultural needs of the older LGBT community. And that every day care, every service that's geared towards older people has that perspective on older LGBT people. So that in their old age when they're fragile, ill, none of us can assert ourselves when we're ill or fragile. When vulnerable, we can't fight back as we used to and we're more likely to be living alone. We're more likely to be excommunicated from our families. We're more likely not to have children. So we're going to be more socially isolated as we get older.

Sandra: True.

Vito: So it's my concern and that's why I'm working the way I am now to try and make sure that by the time I'm really old and decrepit, if I live that long, that things will be different. We still a lot to change to make. And I'm relying on people like you and the younger people to start making the difference.

Sandra: Okay.

Vito: We can start with London Pride given precedence to the veterans. London, Manchester, all of them give pride a place at the front of the queue with transport to get people there, transport to get them from the march to somewhere else, so that it's possible for them to participate.

Sandra: Yeah, I think it's a really good idea actually. I think it's a really good idea. I mean the front of pride this year was L with the T, I think.

Vito: Bikers were at the front this year.

Sandra: Oh right.

Vito: The dykes on bikes. While I offered to go on the pillion. My friend, she was going to take me on the pillion but we needed to practice, because I've got a motorcycle license. But I couldn't ride one now. I mean I can't take them off the stand.

Sandra: Quite heavy, aren't they?

Vito: But I've still got a license. So I said, Oh, I'd go on the back, but I know what it's like if you don't have the right passenger on the back of your bike as well. You've got to be able to move with them and so on. I was a bit nervous. I might've compromised her. But we might do it one year. She said, we've got to have a practice. She was going to give me a practice at Lfest, but most of the time she was so pissed with what's going on.

Sandra: Good times. Okay. So I'm going to say, are there any issues that you feel we haven't discussed that you would like to raise now?

Vito: I'd like to give credit to Opening Doors because I think they've done a remarkable job. They put us on the map. They've given us an opportunity to be sociable in our old age and for some people fragile. Opportunity for social engagements and other outlets of interest. And drawn a lot of friendships from that have spanned out. As well as, they're now well respected within certain social services, health service. And I'm hoping that they can influence the social care system, and that's what they want to do. But of course they need to raise a lot of money. And I'm sure Alice's job is not an easy one.

Everybody's fighting for the same pot of money. And Boris Johnson's promised, hasn't he? To review the whole social care system and put money into it. Well, believe the rhetoric, if you like, I'll watch with bated breath to see what happens. I mean again, you see, you can't not be political if you're a lesbian or a gay man of my generation, because you fought for so many campaigns to make changes. There's always another change to make. And there'll always be abusers out there. And we've now got the whole trans feminist issue. And most of my feminist friends are not against trans people at all. They support them all along the line, but they also want to have their own women's space. And why shouldn't they?

Sandra: Yes, yes it's-

Vito: I mean, I was at the swimming pool this morning, very early. Tried to go there last night and it was closed because of a riot. So I went early this morning. There was clearly a woman there who was making a transition, because she'd lost her breasts, I think. And she was beginning to sprout a few hairs and so on. She'd got the very short cut and so on. And I smiled at her, but I know that nearly everybody there looked at her as suspicious to check out what she was. They didn't do anything particularly to her or say

anything, but they did a double take because they thought, well is this a man come to the wrong changing room?

And I can see how difficult it is if you're making a transition to a woman. What do you do? You can't go in the men's cubicles and you can't go in the women's if they're general. If they've got cubicles, that's okay. But if it's just like our general shower with no cubicles, you draw attention to the fact that you still got a penis or you still got breasts or whatever. And people are going to look at you suspiciously. They don't know how... It's the fear stuff again. How do we approach that person? Do we smile at them? Are they going to misinterpret it? Oh God, it just goes on. So we still got a long way to go, haven't we?

Sandra: Yeah. I think you're right. I think you're right there. Okay. So is there any advice you'd give to the young Vito?

Vito: To the young? Campaign!

Sandra: To the young you. The young you.

Vito: The young me? What do mean the young me?

Sandra: Well, it's a thing that people do now. They say, "Oh to my younger self, letter to my younger self."

Vito: Oh right. Oh God. You stopped me there. A letter to myself. I'm very proud of myself, I think. I've got to that stage now where I do feel proud, not arrogant but proud of what we've been through and what I've survived, put it that way. What I've survived. And I think my message to the young people is say, go for it. Don't be afraid because... feel the fear and do it anyway because it would lead to a quality of life. You can't go through life without suffering in some ways. You'd be bloody lucky. There are those people that have gone sailed through life without any hassle whatsoever. They've gone straight down the line society's expectations. They've got the 2.1 children or whatever, in the marriage, the happy marriage, the loving relationship, the house, the garden, their friends, economics or whatever.

There's some people that have gone through that, but I think it's very rare, irrespective of whether you're Boris Johnson or inherited masses of money, or other people that have gone to public school. Whatever class you are, or whatever, you're going to get challenges in life if you live it. If you don't live it, then I think you'd be bored.

Sandra: Wow. Thank you very much Vito. That's been great.

Vito: You're welcome.

Sandra: Thank you.

