LGBTQ Activist Cleve Jones: 'I'm Well Aware How Fragile Life Is'

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. My guest, longtime LGBTQ activist Cleve Jones, thinks of himself as part of the last generation of gay people who grew up not knowing if there was anyone else on the planet who felt the way they did. He moved to San Francisco in his early 20s and became active in the gay rights movement there. One of his mentors was Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in San Francisco who was assassinated in 1978. Jones was working with the state assembly speaker on gay rights issues and health issues when the AIDS epidemic started. He went on to co-found the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and conceived the AIDS Memorial Quilt. He's had HIV for many years. Few of his old friends survived the epidemic. His new memoir "When We Rise: My Life In The Movement" is his attempt to describe not only his life but what his generation fought for, what they lost and what they won. He will be portrayed by Guy Pearce in an ABC miniseries also titled "When We Rise" which is scheduled for broadcast in February. In the movie, Milk which starred Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, Jones was portrayed by Emile Hirsch.

Cleve Jones, welcome to FRESH AIR. Remind us of what the penalties were for having a consensual sexual relationship with somebody of the same gender when you were a teenager knowing that you were gay - and we're talking about the 1960s.

CLEVE JONES: The penalties for homosexual conduct were - would vary from state to state, but they were - it was a felony in most states punishable with prison terms of varying lengths.

GROSS: So when you realized - when you knew that you were gay, were you afraid that someday you would be arrested?

JONES: Yes. When I began to understand what the words meant that were being tossed my way, I went to my father's library. He was a psychologist and looked it up and, you know, it was pretty horrifying for a 13, 14-year-old kid to learn suddenly that his feelings are not only deemed criminal, but, you know, psychologically an illness. So that was the reality for my generation growing up in a world that - in which we were criminalized and considered to be ill.

GROSS: And were a lot of people imprisoned for gay relationships back then?

JONES: You know, even in my town, even in San Francisco, thousands of gay men were arrested usually using entrapment techniques every single year for sexual behavior between consenting adults. That continued well into the 1970s until it was finally decriminalized in 1976, I believe.

GROSS: So you were afraid to tell your parents that you were gay in part because your father's a psychologist. You were afraid that he'd sign you up against your will for aversion therapy or electroshock therapy. How seriously did you worry about that?

JONES: Well, I was very concerned about it, and I delayed telling my parents until I was 18 so that they would no longer have the legal right to have me committed and be subjected to these procedures that are really, pretty barbaric. And, you know, I think those fears were well-founded because for the first couple of years after I came out, there was very little contact with him. And he really wanted to be cured, and I kept saying there's nothing to cure. Later, we were able to reconcile somewhat, but my fears were certainly grounded in reality.
GROSS: And you write that you were hoarding pills. You - it sounds like you had a suicide plan just in case. What was the just in case?

JONES: Yeah. I felt that my life was over before it really even began because it just seemed then that there was no way to have a decent life and to be gay. So I was terrified that I was going to be caught, and I had already experienced quite a bit of bullying. And, you know, I just thought that only misery lay ahead, and that if I - when I got caught that would be the solution. I wish I could say that was a thing of the past. But, you know, it's not. And even today every year we lose an awful lot of young people, teenagers, who take their own lives because they're - they are gay or transgender.

GROSS: You've described yourself as a queen. So, like, were you considered like too feminine when you were in high school or were you bullied for that?

JONES: Yes. I was bullied pretty badly especially in middle school. High school was not as bad as middle school, but I was not a macho kid at all. And the kids saw me as different from a very, very early age.

GROSS: So you found out that there was like a gay movement through being a Quaker. You and your mother went to Quaker meetings. She went to Quaker meetings because she wanted to be a Quaker, so you'd have a reason to avoid the draft. This was during the Vietnam War, but so how did going to Quaker meetings lead to your discovery of the gay rights movement?

JONES: The Quakers were very welcoming and even back then I think they were performing commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples. But really the big news for me came not at Quaker meeting, but through Life magazine. And it was the Year in Review issue of 1971. They had a big spread called "Homosexuals in Revolt." And I think it was eight or nine pages of text and photographs, and it was just the most astonishing thing for me. Stonewall, the rebellion in New York's Greenwich Village had happened just two years prior, but if you were a teenage kid in Phoenix, Ariz., you didn't know about that.

So this magazine in a matter of minutes revealed to me that there were other people like me, there were a lot of us, that we were organizing, that there was a community and there were places where we could live safely. And one of those places was called San Francisco.

GROSS: So you met Harvey Milk. He became a mentor to you. How would you describe his importance in the gay rights movement?

JONES: Well, he's often described as the first openly gay person to be elected to public office. That's inaccurate, and in my book, I make sure to credit the half dozen or so individuals who came before him in various places in the country. But I think that Harvey's significance really was that he became our first shared martyr. The word of his assassination spread far and wide, and even though gay people had lost many people to violence, to suicide, to drugs and alcohol, here was this symbolic figure that just struck a chord with people. For those of us in San Francisco, it was fascinating to see this guy who was really just kind of, you know, like one of your local neighborhood characters assume this worldwide significance.

GROSS: So in 1977, Anita Bryant led a campaign to overturn a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Fla., and after winning, she vowed to take that campaign nationwide. So after her group kind of won in 1977, there was a big protest in San Francisco. And, you know, Harvey Milk helped channel the anger into a march. So describe him in action during that protest.

JONES: Harvey was very smart and really good at working with crowds of people, and he did not want violence. He understood that there were times in history when violence was inevitable. I would hate to say useful, but he did not want violence. And he didn't want it in our neighborhood. So when people were angry,
when people were frightened, he would bring us all together so we could have that sense of power that comes from being together in the street and taking over the street. And then he would march us, and we created this march route that went for miles and miles up and down some of the steepest hills in San Francisco. And the main reason we did this was first, of course, to show our anger and our determination, but also to make sure that by the end of it, everybody would be too tired to break windows or fight the police.

GROSS: Really? That was part of the strategy?

JONES: It was march them 'til they drop. That was the strategy. And there were so many times when we would go roaring through town at you know 11 o'clock at night - tens of thousands of people screaming bloody murder but without breaking a single window or injuring a single person.

GROSS: Yeah. You say that Harvey Milk's attitude was don't burn down your neighborhood.

JONES: Yeah.

GROSS: So in 1978, California State Senator John Briggs proposed a bill which became known as the Briggs Initiative or Proposition 6 that would ban gay people from working in any capacity in California public schools. What was your role in opposing that?

JONES: At that time, there were only a few local jurisdictions in the entire country that had passed any kind of legal protections for the people we now call LGBT. And the movement to repeal them was gaining speed. We had the loss in Dade County, also defeats in Wichita, in St. Paul, in Eugene.

So initially we looked at Proposition 6, the Briggs Initiative, as an inevitable defeat and a really grave threat because this was a bill that would ban anyone who was LGBT or anyone who supported them from working in any capacity in any public school in the entire state. So it was a real attack against gay people, against workers, against teachers. And Harvey thought it was very important that the young people who were joining gay liberation in droves be organized in an effective way. So my first responsibility in that campaign was to head out and visit all of the campuses and pull together the usually very small gay student organizations that existed at that time and build a coalition. So that was how it began.

GROSS: And what was the outcome?

JONES: Well, contrary to all the predictions, we won that election. And, you know, it would be decades before we won another statewide election like that. And I enjoyed talking about that campaign especially with young people today because we've been through so much recently. But the history has largely been forgotten. And back then, even that early on in the movement, we were able to win.

And I think that we did it by coming out, and that was Harvey's main message to the community was that we had to come out. We had to take the risks. And, yes, there were risks, there were potential repercussions that could be very serious. He never diminished that. But he said that everyone had a responsibility to themselves, to the - to their families, to their community and to the movement to come out of the closet.

So in that campaign against the Briggs Initiative you saw literally tens of thousands of ordinary people knocking on doors and saying, please, I'm your neighbor. I live down the street. I'm gay. If this passes, it will hurt me. It will harm my family. I think that's how we won.

GROSS: You did that kind of work, too, didn't you? Knock on doors.
JONES: Yes, I did.

Dan White assassinated Harvey Milk, who was then a San Francisco supervisor. The Board of Supervisors is kind of like city council in a lot of cities. And Dan White also assassinated George Moscone, then mayor of San Francisco. You had met Dan White before this. What were your impressions of him?

JONES: I think Dan White was a very troubled man in many ways. I think he - I remember him as kind of petulant and way in over his head. He had been on the police department, he'd been in the fire department. He had not done well in either job. He briefly had a shop up in the Fisherman's Wharf area, the tourist section of San Francisco.

But he just seemed really childish to me. That's the word that comes to mind and also someone who was just not comfortable in his own skin. He couldn't handle the day-to-day banter and deal making that goes on in, you know, every city hall. He would lash out and say that people were corrupt when they were really just trying to do their job. And he also, I think, quite deliberately, though he would deny it later, appealed quite directly to homophobic and racist attitudes among the white working-class people of his district who were feeling, I think, probably justifiably ignored by city hall.

GROSS: Did you sense his homophobia when he talked to you?

JONES: Oh, yes (laughter). He was - he was a strange guy to be around. And I avoided him as much as possible.

GROSS: You were working for Harvey Milk when he was assassinated by Dan White. And you knew - you saw police; you knew something was wrong when you came to the office. You had a kind of personal way of getting in there so that the police weren't blocking your way.

And you came upon Harvey Milk's dead body and saw a police officer picking up the body. And you saw the blood, you saw the gunshot wound in his head. I mean, you saw an explicitly horrible death. What lasting impact did that have on you? You can't unsee something like that. You can't erase it from your mind.

JONES: Well, you know, it changed my life forever. And, you know, when I came around the corner and saw him, I saw his feet sticking out in the hallway. Dan White had invited him into his office and shot him there. And his feet were sticking out in the hall, and I recognized his wingtip shoes. He had secondhand shoes that he bought at a thrift store.

And then we couldn't leave. We were stuck there because the police were doing their thing. And we've played the tape that he'd left for us to play because he predicted his assassination. And I used to tease him for it and tell him he wasn't important enough to get shot, so that was pretty eerie and very horrible to be sitting in his office listening to his voice predicting his death while his body's there in the hallway.

I knew by the end of the day that that was the single-most important moment of my life, and it was the single most important thing that had happened to me. Meeting Harvey, seeing his death, it's - it fixed my course.

GROSS: You got a job after Harvey Milk's assassination with the state assembly's speaker, the state assembly of California, to work on gay rights and to monitor the assembly's health committee and serve as the liaison between the committee's Democratic members and the speaker, who was Leo McCarthy. And that's how you first found out about AIDS before that word was known. You had to, as part of your job, read the CDC's weekly Morbidity and Mortality Report.
And back in 1981, you read about something called pneumocystis pneumonia. Did you realize right away that this was something that was going to decimate a lot of the gay community? Like, what was the first - what was the first article about it that you read? What were the clues?

JONES: That was the first week of June, 1981. And I read in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report about these cases of pneumocystis pneumonia and Kaposi's sarcoma among young, previously healthy homosexual men. And I remember being very puzzled by it and alarmed. I cut it out and put it on the bulletin board at my office. About a month later, The New York Times did their first story about it, and I cut that out, too.

And about the same time, I got a call from Dr. Marcus Conant, who was a dermatologist at the University of California, San Francisco. And he wanted to talk with me because he knew that I worked for the Democratic leadership, and he was already, you know, predicting that we were going to need to raise and spend significant sums of money for research and treatment. So he took me to dinner at a place called the Zuni Cafe - it's still there on Market Street - and told me that he thought it was a new virus, sexually transmitted, maybe dormant for many, many years, that it attacked the immune system in some way that he couldn't understand and was fatal.

And there was something about the way he delivered this information that just went right to my heart. And I knew that night, and I - you know, I looked up and I said, well, then we're all dead. And he said, you know, maybe.

He then took me to meet a young man who was dying at the UCSF hospital. His name was Simon (ph). And, you know, he was in an isolation ward. And it was pretty horrifying to see close up what the disease did to him. That was June of 1981. By the fall of 1985, almost everyone I knew was dead or dying or caring for someone who was dying.

GROSS: When were you diagnosed?

JONES: I tested positive for HIV the week the test came out, which I'm thinking was 1985. It's - that time was a bit of a blur. But, yeah, I tested positive. And I had been in a study I had volunteered for, so I knew that they had samples of my blood going back all the way to 1977. So I learned that not only did I have HIV, but I learned that I'd had it since the winter of '78, '79. So I never expected to survive.

GROSS: And you almost didn't.

JONES: I didn't get seriously ill until 1993, and then I got very sick. My immune system collapsed, and I was also allergic to many of the drugs used to treat the opportunistic infections, particularly pneumocystis pneumonia. So I moved out into the woods and got a little cabin out in the redwood forest north of San Francisco and thought that would be as good - as good a place as any to finish up.

And Dr. Conant got me in one of these first studies for what we now call the cocktail. And it was a combination of three drugs. And I responded almost immediately. So that was November of '94 that I started on treatment, and it came just in time to save my life.

GROSS: You said the movement saved your life because you think it was in part because of ACT UP that the trials of these drugs were sped up.

JONES: Well, I mean, that's really what this book is about. The movement saved my life twice. I was planning to kill myself when I was 15 because I thought I was the only queer in the world, and I didn't want
to live that way. And I didn't want to be ashamed and beaten up, and then I read about gay liberation in Life magazine. And I decided not to kill myself, and I flushed the pills down the toilet. And then when I was dying of AIDS and could barely walk, of course, it was ACT UP that saved my life.

It was all of the activism and all the people who participated in that struggle to change the way the drugs were tested, to change the double-blind placebo policies, to make access of it for people that were dying. And it absolutely saved my life. None of that would have happened if it hadn't been for ACT UP, people like Larry Kramer driving people nuts with their anger and rage. But, nonetheless, you know, it was very well-focused, and it had extraordinary results. And anybody who was part of that struggle during that time would say, yes, absolutely. Cleve, you're alive because of activism.

GROSS: How's your health now?

JONES: It's good (laughter). And, you know, when - that fall when the meds started to work, I ran into a friend at the grocery store. It was one of my first trips out by myself able to walk, go shopping, you know, live a semi-normal life. And we're in the produce section, and I see my friend. And he's been in the same study, and he's responding well to the meds. And he said, well, I guess we're not going to die. And I said, no, I guess we're not going to die. And then one of us or the other said, but we'll never be happy again. And I thought, no, that's true. We'll never be happy again. And, you know, I'm 62. I'm healthy. I'm happy and very grateful to be alive today.

GROSS: Was it hard to learn how to be happy when you lost so many of your friends to the epidemic?

JONES: I'm still learning. I think anyone who goes through that kind of experience, with that kind of - the enormity of the loss, you know, it's similar, I think, to being in a war. And I think of my friends every day. There are some days when it is so painful I really can barely function, but I have to. And I do, and I find that I get my strength from my community and my friends. And I am surrounded by people who went through that time with me, and we support each other. And we love each other and are grateful for every bit of laughter and joy that comes our way.

GROSS: So do you think the AIDS epidemic helped people including gay people realize the importance of gay marriage?

JONES: Absolutely. When I was young. Marriage was just, you know, one of many things on a long list of rights and privileges that were denied us because of our sexual orientation and also because so many of us in the early days of the movement had really come out of the feminist movement as well as the civil rights movement the anti-war movement.

But we were particularly influenced by the early feminist movement, which for many of the women who were writing then and speaking then, marriage was was viewed as sort of, you know, a patriarchal institution, you know, going back to the days when women were property. So many of us were skeptical of marriage, didn't view it as terribly important and would dismiss it as just a piece of paper that was not needed to validate our relationships.

Then came AIDS and suddenly that little piece of paper meant, you know, the difference between actual life and death because I can tell you that I knew people who were unable to get medications because their partnership was not recognized, and they were not able to get the insurance. So many people began to understand the legal importance of marriage due to insurance rules, also visitation rights in the hospitals. I can tell you stories about people who cared for their, you know, partner of 20 years and then after he'd passed away, the family swept into town and sold the furniture and threw the partner out in the street because he had no legal rights as a spouse.
So the epidemic gave us really, you know, powerful evidence of how important that institution was and how much that little piece of paper mattered in our ordinary lives. But there was another part of it which was that after what we had been through and after what we had witnessed in all of the people who cared for their partners and shared that, you know, horrendous struggle and any of your listeners who've ever cared for somebody as they get ready to die know this is hard to do. It's hard physically, it's hard emotionally, it's hard spiritually. And after that, I think there was this new attitude within the community. Those of us who had survived which was what do you mean this isn't a marriage? To hell with you.

This is exactly what a marriage looks like. This is exactly what a community looks like. So I think that out of that - out of all that misery and pain and suffering came a new understanding of ourselves, our families, our community and a real deeply rooted demand for full equality under the law.

GROSS: Ronald Reagan was president during the first few years of the AIDS epidemic, and it took him quite awhile to acknowledge its existence. What do you wish that President Reagan had done that you think might have been helpful?

JONES: Reagan did so little, and it's frustrating for me in the following decades to see how he has been elevated to sainthood in some quarters. For me and for my community, his presidency was a disaster. I think when we look back at those early years, it's very clear that the one nation on Earth - ours - the one nation that had the resources and the advance warning and the institutions and the money that could have made a difference failed to do so.

And we failed for really one reason. This was identified as a gay disease, and then when we discovered it wasn't just gay people, we discovered it was black people. So this combination of homophobia and racism just led to this attitude that was expressed quite clearly by almost all of the politicians of that time which was let them die. They weren't interested in funding the research.

If we had jumpstarted the research, if we had been honest with people and graphic in our descriptions of ordinary sexual behavior. But, you know, back then, you had - you couldn't talk about the very behavior that you needed to describe to people so that they could protect themselves. So the science was stalled, the public message was stalled, and it was all wrapped up in a lot of homophobia and racism. It was a disaster.

GROSS: Do you fear that gay rights advances can be reversed, or do you think it's just too late for that, that there's too many people who are gay, too many people who have someone in their family or somebody in their workplace or a friend or a neighbor who's gay? It's just, like, too late to turn back the clock on gay rights.

JONES: I don't think any social movement is ever won. I think that nothing can be taken for granted. I believe in my heart right now that everything we've gained for LGBT people and so many others could well be swept away in the blink of an eye. And history gives us so many examples of situations in the past where, in fact, that has happened.

So I think that the young people today who are responding to the election may well have to spend the rest of their lives grappling with the consequences of this past election. And I think that older people like myself probably will not live long enough to see this undone, so I am very concerned. I am concerned for my own people. I'm concerned for my country. I'm concerned for the planet, and I'm very disheartened. But that is when I go back to the movement. That's when I go back to what I know can bring change and can save us, and that is building the movement, the bigger movement, the broader movement, the movement of all the different ordinary people all around this planet who want to live in peace and want justice and equality and clean air and safe water and houses and jobs. So I think we have a big fight ahead of us.
GROSS: Let's talk about the AIDS quilt. It was your idea to come up with this. And for anyone who's not familiar with the AIDS Memorial Quilt, I want you to describe it.

JONES: The AIDS Memorial Quilt is an enormous quilt made up of panels, each bearing the name of an individual lost to AIDS. And each panel is 3-feet-by-6-feet, the approximate size of a grave, and they're all created by the families and friends, co-workers, children of people who've lost their lives to AIDS. They're sewn into sections that are 12-feet-by-12-feet, which are then linked together to create larger displays. And the last display of the entire quilt was in 1996 when we covered the National Mall from the steps of the Capitol building all the way to the Washington Monument.

GROSS: How did you come up with this idea?

JONES: I had the idea for the quilt on November 27, 1985, at that year's annual candlelight tribute to Harvey Milk and George Moscone. Every year in San Francisco on November 27, we gather at the corner of Castro and Market Street and light our candles to remember Harvey and George.

That year, as we were getting ready for the annual tribute, the death toll in San Francisco rose to 1,000. And there was a headline in the paper about 1,000 San Franciscans dead from AIDS as I was walking around the neighborhood putting up posters reminding people of the candlelight vigil that was coming up. And I was just so struck by that number 1,000.

And I remember standing at the corner of Castro and Market and, you know, its beautiful Victorian homes and buildings with cafes and restaurants and clubs. You hear music and smell food and coffee and hear laughter. You have no idea that you're standing at the epicenter of this really horrendous tragedy that at that time was rapidly spreading. And I just got so frustrated by the lack of evidence, and I thought to myself, you know, if we could knock down these buildings, if this was a meadow with a thousand corpses rotting in the sun, you know, then people would look at it and they'd understand it. And if they were human beings, they would be compelled to respond. But there was no response.

Reagan was president, and he wouldn't even talk about it. And Bush followed and, you know, it just - it was really just overwhelmingly frustrating. And so that night of the march, I had Harvey Milk's old bullhorn, and I got stacks of poster board and sacks of markers. And I asked everybody to write the name of someone they knew who had been killed by the new disease.

And at first people were ashamed to do but finally began writing their first and last names. And we carried these placards with us with our candles to San Francisco City Hall, where we always leave our candles. And then I had everybody go another two blocks down to UN Plaza and the building that housed the Health and Human Services West Coast offices for the federal government for the Reagan administration. And we'd hidden ladders in the shrubbery nearby and climbed up the front greystone facade of this building and taped the names to the wall.

And after I got off my ladder I walked through the crowd. There were thousands of people. It was a gentle rain, no speeches or music, just thousands of people reading these names on this patchwork of placards up on that wall. And I thought to myself it looks like some kind of quilt.

And when I said the word quilt, I thought of my grandma back - and my great-grandma back in Bee Ridge Ind., and the quilts they'd made. And it was such a warm and comforting and middle-American, traditional, family values sort of symbol, and I thought this is - this is the symbol we should take. And everybody told me it was the stupidest thing they'd ever heard of. And it ended up being the world's largest community arts project.
GROSS: I think it's interesting that you came up with the idea in the sense that words are more your thing. You know, like, you're more of the writer than, say, like, the visual artist, the visual thinker.

JONES: I'm - yeah, I'm all about words. The artistry of it was the thing I was least prepared for. I thought to myself I know this could work to help people, to comfort people. I envisioned people sitting on living room floors or church basements and working with scraps of fabric of different textures and colors to create something, and I thought maybe by telling their stories and working with their hands we could combat that sort of paralysis that comes when you're overwhelmed by too much grief, too much loss.

And I - as I've already said, you know, the media part of it, the condemnation of the government, but I did not predict or imagine the beauty of it, the artistic beauty of it. And as some of these individual panels began to come in, you know, it was just really astonishing. These were individual works of art that were being wrapped up in brown paper and sent to a post office box in San Francisco to be unwrapped by strangers and sewn together with other individual works of art.

GROSS: So you were portrayed in the movie "Milk," the movie about Harvey Milk directed by Gus Van Sant in which Sean Penn played Harvey Milk. And you are portrayed by the actor Emile Hirsch. In your memoir, you say that you told him that you're a queen but you didn't want to be portrayed as a cartoon queen or a caricature of a queen. What were you worried about?

JONES: Well, (laughter) I think that just about says it. You know, I don't want to be a cartoon. I'm a real person. And I think that sometimes actors, especially heterosexual actors - and Emile is heterosexual - in portraying gay characters tend to go for the stereotype. So, you know, I just wanted it to be a little more nuanced. And he did a beautiful job. I'm Cleve Jones, and I endorse this portrayal.

GROSS: (Laughter) How closely did you work with him?

JONES: Oh, it was great fun. I - we met up several weeks before filming began. We got to spend a lot of time together. I got to show him my neighborhoods and places I'd lived. We had meals together. We became friends. And I think that sometimes actors, especially heterosexual actors - and Emile is heterosexual - in portraying gay characters tend to go for the stereotype. So, you know, I just wanted it to be a little more nuanced. And he did a beautiful job. I'm Cleve Jones, and I endorse this portrayal.

(LAUGHTER)

JONES: I was so horrified when I realized what I was doing. That's when I took him back and made spaghetti and said, now listen, you know, OK, I'm a big old queen but I'm not a cartoon. I'm not a caricature, and you better get this right. But he did, he did. I loved the movie.

GROSS: So now we'll get to see you portrayed in an ABC miniseries that is scheduled for some time in February. It was written by Dustin Lance Black, who also wrote "Milk." And there's several people who are portrayed, several gay activist portrayed in this movie. And you're portrayed as your younger self. And, like, one, is yourself in your 20s and yourself in your 50s?

JONES: The miniseries, I believe, begins in 1971, and I believe it ends last year.

GROSS: Oh, OK.

JONES: So a young man named Austin P. McKenzie plays young Cleve. And then Guy Pearce plays old me.
GROSS: (Laughter) I don't know the younger actor, but Guy Pearce is great. So did you give them advice on being you?

JONES: Yeah. You know, I'm a consultant to the production. I haven't seen it yet, so I can't really offer any previews for anybody. But I was a consultant, was onset for much of it, especially the scenes involving my character. And I can't wait to see it. You know, it's going to be fascinating. I think it's a milestone that ABC would do this, and I think it's going to have a big impact.

GROSS: Did you have flashbacks watching scenes of your life re-enacted?

JONES: Oh, yeah. There were a few scenes where - and this happened with "Milk" as well when we were filming "Milk" - there were several times when I had to leave the set. It was just too real and still too raw. There's a scene that was shot - I don't know if it's in the show or not. It was about a former partner of mine who passed, and that was pretty unbearable.

GROSS: You've referred to the fact that there have been times when you were, you know, brutally beaten, you know, bullied in school, but also brutally beaten later. And one of those times was - you were walking on the street in San Francisco, and you were beaten and stabbed - stabbed, I think, like cut in the neck, and, you know, bleeding quite badly. And I think your life was pretty much in danger. You were taken away by an ambulance. Were you specifically being targeted as you? I mean, had somebody seen you on TV or known who specifically you were and targeted you for that reason or do you think it was just a kind of more generic gay bashing?

JONES: I have to correct you. It happened in Sacramento.

GROSS: Oh, OK.

JONES: Not San Francisco. I was working in the Capitol, and I was working in Sacramento for the Friends Committee on Legislation, a Quaker-sponsored lobby working primarily on criminal justice issues. And I had been on "60 Minutes" and the local newspaper. The Sacramento Bee did a little tiny story about this gay activist who'd been on "60 Minutes" who was now living in Sacramento and working in the Capitol. And my name and address and phone number were listed with directory assistance, so I started getting death threats almost immediately.

And then one night, I had gotten home late from the Capitol. And it was a very, very hot, humid night. And I turned on the air conditioner and went out to get ice cream while I waited for my apartment to cool off. And there were two skinhead, like young Nazi-type kids, and they beat me up pretty badly and stabbed me in the back above my right shoulder blade, a deep wound, and then tried to cut my throat though the blade actually hit my chin bone and bounced off that. And I almost bled to death, but fortunately the ambulance got there in time.

GROSS: Were you thinking of Harvey Milk when that happened of his assassination?

JONES: Well, of course, and, you know, that is always with me. And I think it's a big part of what keeps me moving forward is I have this - these memories of great struggle and great pain and great loss, but I also in my lifetime have seen extraordinary progress and amazing change. So whenever - I get to these junctures in my life - and we just had one with this last election where it's sort of everything I've been through kind of flashes before my eyes again one more time - and I think, well, here we go. But finding Harvey's body, watching all those people die during AIDS, I'm well aware how fragile life is and how short it can be and how important it is to use it fully.
GROSS: Cleve Jones, thank you so much for talking with us, and I wish you all best and good health.

JONES: Thank you very much, Terry.

GROSS: Cleve Jones' new memoir is called "When We Rise: My Life In The Movement." He's one of the people portrayed in the forthcoming ABC miniseries which is also called "When We Rise." It's based on the lives of several LGBTQ activists.

Tomorrow on FRESH AIR, my guest will be Kenneth Lonergan who wrote and directed the new film "Manchester By The Sea." It's about grief and guilt and stars Casey Affleck as a man who, after the death of his brother, is asked to become his nephew's guardian and just can't. Lonergan also made the films "You Can Count On Me" and "Margaret" and wrote the play "This Is Our Youth." I hope you'll join us. FRESH AIR's executive producer is Danny Miller. Our interviews and reviews are produced and edited by the Amy Salit, Phyllis Myers, Anne Marie Baldonado, Sam Briger, Lauren Krenzel, John Sheehan, Heidi Saman, Therese Madden and Mooj Zadie. I'm Terry Gross.

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