

PHOENIX HOUSE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Peter Kerr

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2014

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Kerr conducted by Cameron Vanderscoff on November 24, 2014. This interview is part of the Phoenix House Foundation Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #: 1

Interviewee: Peter Kerr

Location: Peter Kerr's Office, FTI Consulting,

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

New York City, New York

Date: November 24, 2014

Q: We'll start at the beginning. So today is Monday, November 24th, 2014 and this is Cameron Vanderscoff, here with Peter Kerr for the Phoenix House Oral History Project. A part of what we're doing with this project is trying to figure out the context that people came to Phoenix House from, and so if you wouldn't mind stating your date of birth and a little bit about your childhood?

Kerr: Sure. I was born February 20th, 1956. I was born in Manhattan but I grew up in Queens. My parents were both doctors. In fact, my heritage with medicine and the city hospital system goes back to the 1920s. My grandparents—both my grandmother and grandfather—were doctors. She graduated, I think, in 1923 from Flower Fifth Avenue and they practiced medicine in Corona, Queens, but all worked in the city hospital system at one point or another. And my parents met over a cadaver named Sam at the Bellevue Anatomy Lab, and by the time Sam was gone they were a hot number. And my brother today works at Metropolitan Hospital as a radiologist. So there's a long history of being involved with public health, New York City health.

Anyway, I grew up sort of uneventfully in Flushing and went to Bronx Science and then went to [University of California at] Berkeley. And I decided I was going to be the black sheep of the

family and become a writer and escape from this whole healthcare nonsense. But I wound up going to Columbia Journalism School and then became a copyboy at the *New York Times* and a reporter and in 1986 I was assigned to the drug beat, which is how my path crossed Phoenix House.

Q: Right. And so just to walk through a few of those events briefly, since so much of your reporting has been on the city, on neighborhoods, on how they change, would you mind describing that uneventful Flushing that you grew up in—to use your word?

Kerr: Well, it was not too much different from the way it is today, except for the faces are different. It was a, I'd say, middle middle-class, partly middle lower-class Jewish, Italian and Irish neighborhood. People got along pretty well. There were some projects, black and Hispanic, but there wasn't a lot of tension there. It was very pleasant; the schools were very nice. The public schools were really good. Boring. I thought it was dull as all hell. But it was no different in some ways than Racine, Wisconsin or something. It was not—most people were not really cognizant of being too close to Manhattan. And it was a place where cops and firemen lived.

My parents were elite because they were doctors. And that's sort of it. And I was a bit of a hippie, I had hair down to my—I had *hair*—down to my shoulders. And we did drugs when I was a kid. Actually, it was the early '70s and the drug thing was really wild. And in fact I had done so much of it—not heroin or cocaine, but other stuff—that by the time I got to Berkeley at

seventeen I wanted to have nothing to do with it, because we had sort of burnt through all of that. So we were real hippies and we—it was self-styled. What else can I tell you?

Q: Well, I guess going into that drug culture more, how did you get introduced into that?

Kerr: Oh, just kids. All the kids were doing it. You know, they were all smoking. It was primarily pot, but there was LSD and mescaline. And I didn't do the hallucinogens very much. My brother did. Any rate, it was just everywhere. It was just everywhere, and remarkably, only a few kids that I knew from junior high school and high school got really fouled up by it. Just one kid I knew sort of distantly OD'd on heroin and died, but for the most part, one kid got really trapped in that. She went on to heroin, too. We wouldn't do that, my friends. But it was the time. And also one of the things—this became an abrupt shift for me—was, somehow, smoking pot was associated with being against the war. Smoking pot meant you were against [Richard M.] Nixon. It had a value system associated with it that had nothing to do with the intrinsic value of doing the drug. And I later on the drug beat had to separate out all of that and try to figure out what that was all about.

Q: So would you talk a little bit more about that process of separating the politics from the drug use, I mean—

Kerr: Yes, but that's sort of later in the story. I have a story to tell you, though. It doesn't have to do with Flushing.

Q: Sure, yes, we can return to that. Great.

Kerr: It's how I got on the drug beat, at least as it's told to me. I was on night rewrite, which is the late night beat, which is where you get sent to when you're sort of being trained. And Abe [Abraham M.] Rosenthal, who was the editor of the *Times* and was very emotional, was visited by Jesse [L.] Jackson. And Jesse Jackson was not really, I'm sure, Abe's favorite. Abe was a New Yorker, New Yorker, New Yorker, very Jewish—I mean “very Jewish” in the sense that he was religious, was very proud of who he was. And Jesse had run into trouble by calling New York “Hymietown,” so the fact that they met at all was kind of remarkable. But Abe came out of there with tears in his eyes and said, “This city is being destroyed by drugs.” And he said, “I want a fulltime drug reporter.” And the metro editor, who was not a great journalist, was really sort of uninspired and he says, “We'll give it to Kerr.” And this was just at the outset of crack. Really, the crack epidemic had not been publicized yet. I was going to do that. [laughs] So that's how I got my job.

Q: And so why do you think he said “Kerr” as opposed to any other name, was that just that—?

Kerr: I was just there. I guess I was young and writing a lot. I was coming in at night to do my assigned work, but I was doing a lot of stories besides that, feature stories and so on to try to get off of night rewrites, so they knew I was anxious and energetic. But it was just luck of the draw.

Q: And so what sort of topics had you been reporting on prior to that? What had you been focusing on?

Kerr: Oh, I had been the consumer reporter at the style section. I had, for a brief time, covered the TV industry unsuccessfully. I apparently didn't meander, didn't make my way through the politics of the networks right or something. Anyway, I was not a great TV reporter. And they put me on night rewrite, which is something, you know, a plane crashes at a quarter after ten and there's nobody else around. You have to call the F.A.A. [Federal Aviation Administration]; you have to call the police; you have to call the airline and put together a story in forty-five minutes or so. Or an obit. And the rest of the time you just sat. So that was night rewrite and either you were—the most highly respected people were on night rewrite, the best of them, or young'uns, who are just supposed to be learning the craft, or people who were to be forgotten, and were just sent to night rewrite to sort of head for retirement. So I was in the second category, and I learned a hell of a lot there. But I was ready to go. I'd been on it for twenty months and I was ready to get off and do something. And when they said, "the drug beat," it was sort of with a yawn from

the editors I got. They were not excited at the prospect, but they knew that Abe wanted it so they had to do it.

Q: And so just to sort of ask a little more about your motivations in becoming a writer in the first place—you get into entertainment, it's not your thing. Given that it did make you a little bit of a black sheep in your family, at least relative—at least like vocationally—

Kerr: I think jokingly, but there is an element of seriousness to it, yes.

Q: So where do you chart that divergence coming from? Where does that interest begin?

Kerr: Yes. I was in ninth grade and Mr. Stein, my English teacher, made us write an essay every night. And I found I was writing the best essays in the class and I thought, “This is really cool.” And then I started to read poetry and plays and I at first wanted to be a poet, and then by the time I got to Berkeley I wanted to be a playwright. And one thing morphed into another. I figured I didn't want to really take the riskiness of being a playwright, because you could starve. I became interested in journalism. That was the time of [Robert] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein and it was in the wake of Watergate and so it was very, very attractive. Everybody wanted to be a journalist. And it was considered an honor to get a job at a lousy little paper, much less get one—

it was a dream to get to a big paper. And so I went to work at that. I worked at a local radio station for a while and then I went on and became the editor of the newspaper at Berkeley, *The Daily Californian*. And then I went to the Columbia School of Journalism. So it sort of just evolved. And I'd wanted to work at the *Times* straight throughout all of this stuff.

Q: And so was there a particular area of journalism that you became interested in through your time at the *The Daily Californian* and then following that thread through the J school at Columbia?

Kerr: Not really. I guess the two things that I did well were feature writing and investigative reporting, yes.

Q: Well, how did you come to get the job at the *Times* in the first place, then?

Kerr: Oh, well, there was a program there—I don't know if they still have it—but they hired copyboys and you went and got coffee for the editors or you literally carried paper back and forth between desks. It was something left over from an older day when all the circulation of paper had to be done by boys moving around the newsroom. But we still got coffee and answered phones and things like that. And about one out of twenty people who did that would—

well, you write stories on your own time. So you worked very hard. You worked eight hours at the paper and then worked another eight to sixteen hours on your stories. I mean, very tired people. And it was sort of like medical school or something: you just worked like hell. And if you were lucky and you were talented you got a chance to become a reporter trainee, and if you passed that you were a reporter. So that's what I did.

Q: So you come up from being a copyboy and finally you get this opportunity to go work on the drug beat, as it were.

Kerr: A few years later.

Q: Yes, right. And so would you mind talking about that experience, about getting the drug beat in that way, how that began for you?

Kerr: Well, first of all, people were not aware that the crack epidemic was happening in a big way at that point. So there were a lot of memories of the heroin epidemic that preceded it in the '70s. And there was a very good reporter named Jane Gross who had done this drug beat thing for a little while, and she sat down with me at my apartment and gave me a list of her sources. And one of them was Mitch [Mitchell S.] Rosenthal. Another was the head of D.E.A. [Drug

Enforcement Administration] in New York, Bob [Robert] Stutman. And there were several others, but those were two of the big ones. I added to that list—well, I remember going uptown, at first I remember saying, “Well, should I write about designer drugs?” You know, at the time ecstasy was coming on. I thought maybe that was a story. Nah, it wasn’t that important. It wasn’t that significant.

But I heard that the number two guy at the police department’s P.R. [public relations] office, a captain there, said, “They’re doing interesting work in Washington Heights. There’s some operations going on there, why don’t you go there?” And I got there and spent a night with the cops. And what was remarkable was there were traffic jams in Washington Heights of cars coming in over the George Washington Bridge, buying crack and going back out. And it was like a parking lot. It was just an amazing backup of cars, and the police couldn’t even make a dent in it. So I wrote a story about that that ran on not on the front page, but on the metropolitan page, the front page of the metropolitan section. And immediately there was a response. I could tell something was happening because the mayor and the police commissioner the next day announced the formation of a task force of 200 cops, like that, to crack down on the situation in Washington Heights.

And then I started just honing in on what was going on there and it turned out to be crack. You know, writing about that—and nobody was really writing about it. I was just there at the very beginning, so I did some of the first national stories on that. And I remember going into a crack house once, which led to—

Q: Would you mind describing that, going into a base house that way?

Kerr: I don't remember it real well, but there were some undercover cops who took me in. And it was stinky and dark and kind of disgusting. And I went on some raids with cops. But I had to triangulate what was really happening, because it's a dark world that you can't penetrate very easily. And if you did and you could get to a drug dealer, it doesn't really matter because for the most part you can't corroborate what they say. Besides being dangerous, it's just not that fruitful. So where do you get information on the drug world, this almost impenetrable world, that's decent and quotable? Well, one of them was the Drug Enforcement Administration. I had a really good guy who was running the office there. They had about five hundred agents and the head of the operation was very amenable to the press, or to me, anyway. On the higher level drug dealers, I could get to the drug organizations because they had confidential informants inside. But these were people who the agents controlled, so they could filter what was being said and they could make sure the person was telling me the truth and so on. And they could also talk about trends globally.

Another way was by meeting people who were just coming out of it who were going into drug treatment, because there was a premium on honesty in the therapeutic community, particularly. And of those organizations, the one that was the best organized and the person who was most articulate was Mitch and it was Phoenix House. So I linked up with that.

Now the interesting thing was I needed an intellectual structure for all this information coming in, because why was it happening now? And how does this relate to what had happened in the past? And what were the forces driving it? Why were people doing drugs anyway? And there was a guy named David [F.] Musto, M-U-S-T-O, who was a professor at Yale, who's a fascinating guy. [phone ringing] Bear with me one second. [interruption]

Q: Of course.

Kerr: [takes phone call; interruption] Excuse me.

Q: Not a problem.

Kerr: It was the client. So—

Q: You're talking about finding an intellectual framework for this.

Kerr: Yes. Musto is a psychiatrist and a historian, both. And he was an expert in drug epidemics, here, in China, internationally. And he had a whole theory that was brilliant. It was neither left-wing or right-wing, pro-drug, anti-drug. It was just sort of factual, that there were epidemics and that would happen and society was—there are good and bad effects of drugs. You feel good, sometimes it can do things, and the positive effects cause a wave of people to do more and more. And then the casualties start coming in. But collectively it happens over time. It takes a number of years, and then the society tends to turn very violently against drug use.

And the earlier epidemic, the last epidemic that was really severe before the '60s was—and you have to break these down to which drug, because they came in different orders—but at the turn of the twentieth century, resulting in the laws against cocaine and crack in 1913. And there was an amazing reaction, a really powerful reaction against drugs, particularly cocaine, which was associated with black people—and fears of sexuality, of rape, violence and all sorts of things. It led to the general distribution of .38 revolvers instead of .32s in police forces, a huge thing, huge thing. And [Eugene O'Neill's] *Long Day's Journey into Night*, you remember the mom has a morphine addiction. That's left over from an earlier drug—[knock on door] Come on in.

[interruption]

Q: So Mary Tyrone [the character with a morphine addiction] in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Kerr: Yes. So at any rate, so society reacts and then forgets and relearns by experimenting again. And some of the interesting side effects of this is there was a reaction against pot around 1937, when it was made illegal, and *Reefer Madness* came out then. If you ever saw the movie *Reefer Madness*—and I grew up on, “You see how ridiculous it is? All the propaganda about marijuana?” Actually, the traits that were attributed to marijuana in *Reefer Madness* were true of cocaine in its later stages in the epidemic. You know, psychosis, tremendous sexuality, violence. All these things in the later stages of cocaine addiction are true, but it was attributed to pot because it was a memory from twenty, thirty years earlier of a cocaine epidemic.

So this guy was smart. And he gave me a framework for what was happening about forgetting and relearning about drugs, which seemed to be a continuous cycle. So between Mitch and Bob Stutman at D.E.A. and David Musto—and a number of other people, but they were the ones that really stick in my mind—I was able to construct a narrative about what was happening with crack that was quite interesting. Then there were other things. There was Len—what was his name? He was a basketball star who died of a cocaine reaction.

Q: Oh, in Maryland.

Kerr: Yes. I’m not a real sports aficionado, so—

Q: Bias something?

Kerr: Yes, Len [Leonard K.] Bias. And this thing erupted in '86 into again, like most of what I've talked about, a wild, virulent societal reaction against drugs, against coke particularly, against crack particularly. And a lot of that had to do with the fact that it was minority. I'd say that one of the things is that I felt very strongly anti-drug at this point, because of the way it ravaged poor people's lives. And it was funny, at this point there was a distinction between your liberal experienced drug user, college-educated kid who could say, "Hey, it's no big deal," and then I'd say to him, "Yes, but go look at what poor people have to say about this." Because the devastation of drug abuse just gets more and more dramatic as you go down the socio-economic scale. And crack was something of the inner city, and it was really just destroying families.

One of the things that I reported on was that heroin was like 80% male, 20% female. Crack was 50/50. But in the inner city, because these were matriarchies—there was a society where males had sort of dropped out because of the lack of employment, out of the family structure. So when you took out a male, it wasn't anywhere near as devastating as the mom, who's working at Con Ed, bringing in the only money, taking care of the kids, and she evaporates and things go to hell—really go to hell. So crack was a much more devastating drug. And you had crack babies in the hospitals. The courts backed up with cases of child abuse, child neglect, child abandonment, all sorts of stuff like that. So it was really something that spiraled out of control.

Meanwhile the political reaction became just extreme, and there was a lot of congressional action. I should have spent more time in Washington [D.C.]. That's one thing I regret. But if we're going to skip ahead, I have regrets about my contribution to this. See, the *Times* played—Mitch played a crucial role to me, but the *Times* played a crucial role in this. And more so than today, it set the news agenda of the time. And I think that my crack stories, together with other coverage, really blew out this issue. And one of the reasons was that television depended for their agenda every day on what they read in the *New York Times* and some other papers. We controlled the agenda much more than we do today, than newspapers do today. And so I felt some responsibility for the legislation that came about—not that I did it. But I contributed to the phenomenon and what—

Q: The '87 [sic] legislation?

Kerr: It was '87, yes?

Q: The Anti-Drug Abuse Act [of 1986 and 1988]?

Kerr: Yes. And a lot of that stuff wound up instead of—what I was hoping was that a crackdown would help the poor people. But I'm afraid that it did more damage than good because what

wound up happening was you got three strikes and you're out. You got crack being a much more severe penalty than powdered cocaine, which broke along class lines.

Q: Right, the 100:1 sentencing ratio [from the 1986 Act].

Kerr: And where we are today with just such a high percentage of young black and Hispanic males wrapped up in the criminal justice system has something to do with the legal regime that was created at that time. And I'm not sure that was all such a great idea. But anyway, the consequences of what you're doing never seem completely apparent. In all of this, anyway, I think the important thing was Phoenix House gave me a window into a world that I couldn't have seen clearly without them.

Q: Sure. And so thinking about your intentions with this journalism, what were they? I mean, by reporting specifically on this crack epidemic—and you followed it quite closely. Through '86 and '87 you published a whole series of articles which I've taken note of, starting with this idea of teenagers are using this new powerful drug and then following it through these other demographics, like women, mothers, talking about infants. So following it, following through, what was your hope of covering this issue?

Kerr: I don't think you think in such global terms as you're doing it. You do it story by story, and you see it's a good story. You know, I don't think most reporters are driven by ideology or visions of social change; they're driven by ambition. To be on the front page is where you want to be. And I was young and that's where I wanted to be, and the story was a good story. I thought I was able to bring something to it that other people didn't, partly because I'd studied history at Berkeley and I tried to put it in an historical framework. I tried to delve a little deeper. Later on I got involved with Chinese organized crime coverage and heroin and I just was willing to spend a month or two or three or four on a story, which most people couldn't do. So that turned out well, that turned out well.

But no, I didn't—if I felt anything, I felt that law enforcement was doing the right thing by cracking down; that we needed much more treatment. We needed treatment in place, and sometimes in the place of incarceration. That we needed more attention, and that we needed a change in values about what drugs were about. Much of the ideology that I had lived and breathed at Berkeley and in New York was—it was my father, who was a psychiatrist. He was trained as a psychoanalyst, but he wound up running the men's shelter down on Fourth Street. He wound up working with the homeless in the last part of his career, said that, "Illegal drugs are about as attractive as syphilis." And people would say to me, "How could you write about crack without having done it?"—which I never did. And my response was, "How can you write about venereal disease if you haven't had it?" I mean, it's just not a very attractive thing. The whole thing isn't very attractive. So those are the kinds of things that were going through my mind.

Q: So you mentioned early on in our interview here about this shift that happened in your ideology towards drugs, that you separated the politics from the drugs instead of seeing it as all sort of bundled in. So would you talk a little bit more about your personal transition, in terms of being a teenage drug user in this way and then reporting and coming to this different conclusion as to the damage of drugs, as to the disproportionate damage of drugs?

Kerr: Well, I think I went through a slow transition and—not slow, but over the years. First of all, I was never really a big druggie. I mean, when I was a kid—I was fifteen—I wound up doing this stuff. But I was never in danger, I don't think, of becoming an addict or it was the primary thing in my life. I became disinterested and didn't really like it by the time I was seventeen. From fifteen, fourteen through sixteen I may have done drugs; seventeen I arrived at Berkeley and I wasn't really interested. I was sort of bored by it. I found it distasteful, as I got older. But it wasn't until I started seeing the devastation in poor communities—which, remember, this is something where my parents were very involved and served these poor communities.

My mother was the head of adolescent medicine at Harlem [Hospital]. She had to deal with the crack babies. There were a lot of crack babies. She's a pediatrician. So that moved me. That was really powerful, what it was doing to poor people. And you know, it became evident that there was a lot of silliness about drugs. You know, the Hunter S. Thompson romanticization of—

Q: *Fear and Loathing [in Las Vegas]*, right.

Kerr: Yes. It just didn't make much sense. On the other hand I wasn't enamored of Nancy Reagan with her "Just Say No" campaign, which I know Phoenix House was involved in. Because I don't think it was as simple as, "Just say no." That implies a kind of simplistic response to something that has a lot of powerful forces working behind it. So, anyway.

Q: So just one final question on this story, you mentioned that you'd wished you'd spent more time in Washington [D.C.]. Given that a part of your work with Phoenix House was engaging, I understand, with Washington in some way, I'm curious about what do you think would have happened to your writing, to this story on the crack epidemic, if you had shifted some of the focus away from say Washington Heights towards Washington [D.C.]?

Kerr: I don't know. I think that—I just say that because I figure I uncovered the political process. As a reporter—which I am not now—I think that I never really studied politics enough and didn't understand the mechanics of it and the trade-offs as well as I—it was a mechanism I just never really learned as well as I should have. It's more a personal regret than a public policy regret. I don't know that my coverage would have drawn any different conclusions or been more or less powerful. I just think it was a dimension that I didn't really study as well as I would have liked. Well, I don't know, we'll see.

Q: Sure. And so focusing within all of this to Phoenix House, would you mind speaking more about your engagement with Phoenix House in this time? I notice that in several of your articles, not only do you quote, say, Mitch Rosenthal, but you quote Kevin McEneaney on different issues and residents in the Phoenix House programs as well.

Kerr: Well, that was the thing, is that they would introduce me to residents who had come out of that world so I'd get a sense of what was going on inside of it. You know, there were other therapeutic communities, there were other drug treatment organizations around, but they just weren't as professional. They weren't as accessible. Phoenix House would get me what—I say, “I want to talk to this type of person,” and they would find that person in their large population. And then I could go to Mitch and Mitch would contextualize it. He was very thoughtful and he was very articulate and charismatic, and so he was a great source—and much more so than his competition. I don't remember exactly what my interactions were with Kevin. I quoted him, and he was helpful, too. And then I became friends with Mitch. It was hard not to become friends with Mitch. You sort of became friends with Mitch, as a result of all this.

Q: So all of that happens. And I know in later years—we'll come around to your actually joining Phoenix House as a vice president for communication—but in the interim would you mind

talking a little bit more about the work that you did in the *Times* after this '86-'87 crack epidemic, as a way of guiding us into the transition towards your work in communications?

Kerr: Yes. They wanted to build up the operation in New Jersey so I became the New Jersey bureau chief and did that for about three years. And I wound up getting more involved with healthcare there, strangely. I mean, this is just sort of a tendency of mine, I guess. I wound up spending eighteen months—although part time, it wasn't all I did—but eighteen months doing the investigation of a hospital chain that had one hospital in Jersey but a lot in Florida and Texas, where they were doing a lot of bad stuff to kids. And I wrote that story. And at any rate, I got married. I asked the *Times* for a job back in New York because I wanted to live in the same city as my wife, who worked at *The New Yorker*. And they said the only thing that was available was healthcare and insurance at the financial desk. So there I went.

And that's how I got back involved with healthcare. And I did that for about three years and then I was hired, I went to—I decided I needed more money, basically. I was not making that much money as a reporter and I needed—if I was going to raise a family and get a house or something, it was not working. So I went to work for a strategic P.R. firm that is—one of the partners actually runs this organization I work for now. I wound up bringing in business, some of my sources. One of them was a C.E.O. at Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield. He hired me and I ran the communications department there. Then I went to Phoenix House and I wound up doing that, running communications departments ever since.

And Phoenix House was intriguing. I think that one of the things was they had expanded beyond New York into other states and there was a branding question of how you could transport that. There was also a question of how they would grow next in a changing environment. So it seemed interesting and familiar and on the right side. So I joined.

Q: And could you say a little bit more about that, about the process, about how you heard about this opening? Was this through Mitch or how did you come?

Kerr: I'm trying to remember. Mitch was looking for somebody. He was looking to—Mitch has, unlike a lot of people, has a real belief in communications, and maybe too much of a belief. Because you can only do so much—depending on the organization, there's only so much you can improve through communications. So he asked me to do an assessment of what was going on, and so I did some sort of analysis of the organization's communications function. Frankly, I don't remember what I said. My memory of this is not great. But you know, there was an opening and I think he asked me to look for people for him. And I said, "What about me?" Something like that. And I did that for two years.

And I think that there was—I still feel very warmly about it—I think that there were some problems that came up when I was there that I couldn't really solve. One was that the therapeutic community was no longer new. Well, a few things: the drug tide had ebbed somewhat, so the media wasn't as interested. The therapeutic community had been innovative in the '60s, but now

we're in the '90s, and just like psychoanalysis—there's some roots in the therapeutic community in psychoanalytic theory—just like psychoanalysis, America was getting tired, I think, in some ways of, or at least bored with the therapeutic community model. It wasn't cutting edge in some ways. So it was harder to get attention to the issue. The issue had fallen from the front pages and Mitch and Phoenix House weren't going to become something new. They were really dedicated to what they did and so it was, I felt like I was in a little bit of a box.

I don't think I did the greatest job there. I was maybe uninspiring. And Mitch and I eventually came to an understanding of that and I left. I like doing the strategic stuff but I wasn't really as excited about nurturing a reporter at the *Daily News* and feeding him stuff and finally getting a clip out of it. It just didn't really turn me on the same way as it did some other people.

So I don't know that I was the most terrific executive at Phoenix House. I don't know that I did the best job. I think I was a better reporter than I was a V.P. of communications there. And I learned more and did a better job at other companies when I was working for them as V.P.s of communications. So I don't know what else I can tell you, really.

Q: Well I mean, relative to some of these other places that you've worked—Blue Cross Blue Shield, we're here at FTI Consulting today, Universal American—what were the particular challenges of doing communications work for Phoenix House in this nonprofit context, in this drug treatment context, and specifically in this therapeutic community drug treatment context?

Kerr: Well, I think that there were a few things. One was you had to keep the flame burning, the interest in this issue, because people were suffering. You know, crack use probably was still relatively high then, but it burnt its way out of the—people burned out on crack faster than they did on other drugs. And so that sense of imminent threat and tremendous media interest had passed. And I think that there was a need to continue talking about the issue in part because treatment and the things that helped those people who were being forgotten. And so that was the mission, was to keep the word out, I think. Yes, it was to get more funding for Phoenix House, keep those political connections alive, but I felt that I was sort of on the wrong side of history at that moment.

Q: How so?

Kerr: Because I think interest in the drug issue and the belief in treatment as a really effective way of saving lives, that belief was ebbing. I just didn't feel—the zeitgeist wasn't the same as it had been a few years earlier.

Q: I mean, you've written in one of your articles about the crack epidemic, you've written that there was this sense of desperation in response to the crack epidemic. So what was the sense then at Phoenix House that you're discussing? I mean, what was that shift?

Kerr: There were things going on. Still, crack was a problem. It understated the heroin use in working class white communities. That's something we tried drawing attention to. [pause] Phoenix House was sort of revolutionary when it started, I think, in the '60s. It really captured the moment. I mean, there was Mitch, who had longer hair and was just part of a charismatic generation of people of the [Mayor John V.] Lindsay administration. But by the time I came on board as an executive, we were very much a part of the establishment. It was part of the criminal justice system. The idea of a therapeutic community wasn't new and it just wasn't—it didn't have the same energy that it had had in earlier years, I think. This is from a public relations point of view—I don't know in terms of the number of dollars and number of people being treated. Maybe it may have been growing. I think that Phoenix House was actually growing. So it was thriving as an institution in many ways.

Q: But in terms of your function as V.P., yes.

Kerr: Yes. I was thinking about the zeitgeist. And one of the things I think that makes Phoenix House outstanding is how effective it's been. These organizations that serve poor communities are generally not that well run and don't grow that easily. Growing something that big and effective is hard. It's very hard on public monies with this population has relatively little support

outside of government, little political support. It's a very tough act to pull off. And they did, they did.

Q: And so could you say a little bit more about—you mentioned when you were reporting on the crack epidemic in the '80s that it was distinct from similar organizations like, I don't know, maybe Daytop [Village] or Odyssey House or any of these other places that were existing at the time. I mean, so you've spoken about Mitch Rosenthal and you've spoken about this '60s zeitgeist of the therapeutic community and this charismatic generation of administrators. So in the '90s then, what sort of efforts were there in terms of branding? I mean, was it your sense that you were trying to carry forward that image, that original kind of thing from the '60s? Or was there a shift—I'm curious about what your pitch was, right?

Kerr: Well, I think that— [laughs] I don't know. And you know, I'm not sure, I think that may be my failure in part. The institution was Mitch in a lot of ways. Its strengths and allies were Mitch's strengths and allies. I developed the belief that it wasn't going to really grow—it grew to something like 83 programs, which is remarkable, in seven or eight states—but it wasn't going to become a more important institution unless it changed some of the things it did. And that could have, but those were things that Mitch and management didn't want to do. And that was fine, because what they did was fine. But things like becoming more of an advocacy organization—like a friend of mine ran the Coalition for the Homeless. And he was an advocate. In addition to giving services to the homeless he was a participant in policy discussions in a very powerful

way, taking sides. And Phoenix House never took sides in a partisan way. It wasn't an advocacy—I mean even to this day, Phoenix House could be an advocacy group for the poor. The Pope's interested. [laughs] A lot of people are interested in the poor. They're gathering data every day from that population and they could be speaking out. They're part of the criminal justice system; they could be speaking out.

I don't think that Mitch ever wanted to be pigeonholed as being of the left, of the right, associated with one party or another. It was almost like a psychiatrist feel: he had an illness to cure. And he didn't want to make enemies, either, which was smart. But if we had been an advocacy organization my job would have been easier, because we could have picked up on issues as they came up, issues of the day, and participated in that discussion. I couldn't do that.

What else? They could have—and I think they're trying to do this now, and I don't know much about it—the other thing was to break into the middle class and upper class substance abuse treatment. I don't know if they could have mustered the capital for that or if they even wanted to, because that would be changing the brand in a big way. But when you have middle class people who are affected and upper class people who are affected, suddenly your ability to do P.R. and the power of your message is much, much greater. These people empathize: people with money empathize; people with power empathize. It becomes a much—if it's just about those poor people over there, you're sort of relegated to a special place—you're in your own P.R. ghetto.

But these are little fantasies of mine. I don't know that they were really good ideas. I don't even know if that's what Phoenix House should be doing in any way, but I felt a little bit like I

couldn't—I failed to come up with any brilliant ideas on how to give Phoenix House a more powerful brand. But that may be my failure. It may not reflect on Phoenix House, I don't know. I couldn't think of anything that would make a terribly new and different—it's not bad. It's just, that was it. And maybe I would have not left. And Mitch and I came to an agreement [laughs] it was the best idea for me to leave and I'm glad I did—but without any antipathy or bad feeling. But I don't think that I was giving that much value to the organization because I couldn't come up with any really great ideas.

Q: I have a few more questions about your time there, which I hope can flesh some of this out. I noticed in your biography for your hiring at a later organization, the Markle Foundation, that you, “played a lead role in increasing the organization's [Phoenix House] visibility in Congress, resulting in the introduction of legislation favorable to the organization.” And so I'm curious about that.

Kerr: Yes, what we did was, Senator [Charles Ernest] Grassley—who's still there, Iowa—and to a lesser degree Joe Biden, were really interested—there were some aides to them, some staff members, who were interested in the drug problem. And they wanted to introduce legislation to increase funding for residential communities. So we went down to Washington and we did a classic Phoenix House thing, which is bring in very attractive, articulate former drug users who testified. There was one girl who was just adorable and it brought tears to people's eyes. Biden just went off on one of his Bidenesque things and we got headlines. I don't remember all the

shows we got on, but we got onto a number of them. And there was legislation—if I remember correctly, there was legislation that gave some money to residential communities. It wasn't hundreds of millions of dollars, but it was some. So that was a success. And we did raise visibility in Congress at that point.

Q: And so relative to the climate of the Reagan/Bush era, which is, of course, what you meant in terms of your article for the crack epidemic, what sort of a political climate did you find in your time in Phoenix House, when it came to drug issues?

Kerr: It was much more subdued. So finding an aide to Grassley who was really interested in this issue was an anomaly. It was something that wasn't—it was great, but it wasn't the norm. It wasn't the same. Which in some ways is good, that you know—well, it wasn't good. The problem hadn't disappeared, but the urgency about it and it being on the media agenda disappeared, and the political agenda.

Q: What was that shift? I mean, from that incredible urgency that was there in '86 and '87 and '88?

Kerr: Part of it is the media cycle. You know, we deal with today's crisis as if it's going to end the world. And then we go onto the next crisis. And what was really happening was the crack epidemic was in ascendance during that time that we talked about in '86, '87, '88. And there was a reaction. And the epidemic then plateaued and then went down and the political reaction, political attention and media attention moved on. There still were a significant number of people who were doing very serious drugs and were casualties of that. Hundreds of thousands of people doing heroin, I don't know how many doing crack in New York. It was enormous. And the other effects to production countries, the corruption and the environmental damage and all those things were still going on. But it just didn't have the newness to it, so it was a quieter period. And you couldn't get the—if you were in the business of trying to get media attention it was harder. Yes.

Q: And so if that was the external challenge—which of course would have been something that you had to face in particular—internally, would you mind speaking about Phoenix House in relation to the place that you reported on in '86, '87? At that point, of course, there was a huge demand for beds, the place—I mean, Odyssey House, Daytop, Phoenix House, the demands hugely, hugely exceeded capacity and there was all this concern directed towards crack in particular. So at the time you arrived, then, what was the internal situation you found in terms of the demands and in terms of the drugs, the demographics?

Kerr: My memory of it, which is vague, was that there was always more demand than there were beds. Now what's the ratio between the two was, compare '87 to where was it when I was there,

'99, I just don't remember. The beds were needed. There was more treatment needed. We needed to have more—what is it called? Referrals of people in the criminal justice system were there—there's a verb. They are sent into treatment rather than into prison. We needed more of that. So it was urgent. It was a significant issue. And it was a component of the crime issue. It was a component of a lot of things.

Now that's another thing. When did [Rudolph W.L.] Giuliani come in? I'm just using that as a marker. Crime was getting better, not worse. And I think we can't fool ourselves—the reaction about drugs is more about fear than it is about empathy. Crime scares people. There's a lot of racial issues involved in that. And the upsurge in violence that came with crack was one of the driving forces. That's why there were such severe penalties attached to it. Crime was going down in the '90s, I think. I don't know if I got my timing down yet, but yes, Giuliani was in, and the period—I don't think Giuliani's responsible for all the decline in crime. It was something that was much bigger than him, but I remember it as being that period. So that took some of the wind out of the sails of a P.R. department for a drug organization.

Q: So one other way I'd like to ask about your perspective on Phoenix House—so you have Phoenix House as a source in '86 and '87. In June of '93 you published a piece in *New York Times Magazine*, which details an individual, Bill Giddens, who was in a Phoenix House program, therapeutic community setting in prison. And then, of course, later in the decade you come to Phoenix House as a V.P. for communications. So thinking as a reporter in that continuity, what are your impressions of the therapeutic community, its relationship to these

addicts? Did that shift in any way once you became more intimately involved with Phoenix House in that way? Relative to this external—I'm curious about that switch from his external perspective on the therapeutic communities.

Kerr: To the internal?

Q: To an internal, yes.

Kerr: No, not a lot. Not because I went inside Phoenix House. Phoenix House was pretty transparent. I mean, the Phoenix House I got to know from the outside wasn't that different from the Phoenix House—there were no secrets that I unearthed. There are a lot of complicated issues about treatment that you have to think about. One was that Phoenix House was willing to take on a population that other people just weren't even willing to deal with. And there is a secret, actually, and that is that drugs may not be the real thing you're treating people for when they come in. That's what the law says. But people may be [pause] sick with something much bigger, that comes from poverty, from all the terrible things that happen to poor people who don't have the right families and so on, of being socialized, of just learning how to deal with society and how to organize one's life and all those things. I don't know what you call that pathology, but Phoenix House dealt with that whole range of issues that a thirty-day program couldn't—that methadone couldn't. So that was interesting and good. On the other hand you had to worry

about—I sometimes worry about how tough it was on the residents, and whether that was ever unfair. I think any thinking person would. So.

Q: And are these issues that you think were subject to ongoing internal discussion and debate? Or do you think this was your observation, in that sense?

Kerr: My observation, my observation. I never saw any cruelty or anything like that. I mean it's—I have nothing bad to say about Phoenix House. I just—the method is tough and the residents are tough. And if you're maybe a bleeding heart liberal like I am, was, maybe it's hard to see both sides of it. It's hard to see the damage that these people caused, and it's hard to see the tough means that are used to try to correct their behavior.

You know, my mom went to work for Phoenix House for a while.

Q: Really?

Kerr: Yes, after she retired from Harlem Hospital she did it for about six months. And she's eighty-six now. She's still around. She was troubled by how tough it was for the kids there. But I

don't know any other institutions that were really dealing with these issues with this population. So I don't have any answers, but those were the questions.

Q: Thank you. So I guess moving forward then, the last question I have about that is who were the people who you worked with closely? We're trying to develop like a larger network of names and people and so forth and so—

Kerr: Well, there was a wonderful woman who worked for me that I hired there named Luci de Haan, D-E-H-A-A-N. She was my deputy. She was wonderful. You know Amy Singer, right?

Q: I'm interviewing her in a couple of weeks.

Kerr: Yes, she knows, she goes back a long way. She was great. Who else? Some people have died. Let's see, who else? Mitch, Kevin—but I can't think of the name of the woman who was in development.

Q: These are also things we can fill in later with the transcripts if anything else comes to mind.

Kerr: Yes, a lot of people are blanking on me. I can see the faces but I can't—

Q: Sure, sure. And like I said, when the transcript comes around, that's another time those kinds of annotations can be made.

Kerr: You know who it is that I'm thinking of? Meacham is her last name. She was in charge of development when I was in communications. Very smart lady. Her husband is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist/historian. And I see their faces but I can't remember their first names. But she'd be the person to talk to, smart.

Q: Great. Thank you. So you leave Phoenix House, is this '01, 2001?

Kerr: Yes.

Q: Yes. And so since then, what sort of relevance has engagement with issues around health, around Medicare, around addiction, any sort of those—? I know you've worked on some of those issues but I'm curious if there's any continuity.

Kerr: Well, before this I worked at Universal American, which runs Medicare and Medicaid programs around the country. Well, I actually did some funny stuff. I worked for a company that was very boring after Phoenix House, Pitney Bowes Corporation, because I wanted to be up in Connecticut where I lived. And I just got tired of everything I was doing. I got divorced and I was just sort of finished with that life. So I went and became a teacher for a while at an inner city school and at a high school. I taught history, but just for a year or two, for two years. And then I went to work for Universal American, where I really got an in depth exposure to, again, like I had at Blue Cross Blue Shield, to public policy, involved with healthcare public policy and a little bit of finance and so on. That's what I deal with here.

Q: Similar sort of duties in that way.

Kerr: Yes, I mean I'm a consultant now, management consultant who deals with healthcare organizations and advises them on communications and other things.

Q: Yes. And so have you kept touch with Phoenix House? Or, you mentioned that you were friends with Mitch. I'm curious about the present moment, right.

Kerr: Yes, we had breakfast a few weeks ago. That's really my contact, is I stay in touch with Mitch. We had dinner I think January with two other people. You know, it's a long-term friendship.

Q: And then as a way of closing here—I think this is diverging more into your personal opinion—but I'm curious about what your sense of the current moment is when it comes to conception of addiction, response to addiction, here. I mean, there's been national trends towards the legalization of marijuana, which Phoenix House—Mitch—has opposed. And so when you think about these different modes, your own involvement as a teenager in some of that drug culture, that sort of initial flare of drug culture, as it were, and then your reporting on the crack epidemic, your involvement in Phoenix House, what's—thinking about that whole continuity, where's the moment now relative to all these other periods which you've been so involved in or paid such close attention to?

Kerr: Let me think about that for a second.

Q: Sure.

Kerr: Well, certainly you know the legalization in Colorado and Washington is significant, and we're going in that direction on pot. I think some of the divisiveness about that has faded. And it's a logical thing to happen because the cost—see, I sort of disagree with Mitch in that. I don't think legalizing pot is a good thing, but I think the regime we have right now is terrible, where the amount of money and lives, the number of lives that are ruined by the drug laws in terms of pot may be unnecessarily harsh. And also there's a certain point of no return when something becomes so widely accepted that the way of addressing it is not through arrest anymore. Mitch is right, it ain't no panacea. But I'm just not sure if the alternative is so great either. Or practical.

Now having said that, one of the things that—this is more my opinion than a good analysis of—it's even the approach to the question is, "What do you think about illegal drugs?" And the answer is, "Which drug?" There's no such thing as [pause] an acceptable dose of cocaine to keep somebody's cocaine habit in check. What is it, what's the word I'm looking for? Well, at any rate—

Q: Like a palliative or something? Some sort of—

Kerr: Yes, the idea was with heroin at one time in England they tried giving you your dose of heroin every day, a maintenance dose. There's no such thing as a maintenance dose for cocaine. And there's no such thing as really good use of cocaine. I mean, there are people who integrate it into their lives without taking undue danger—it's really scary dangerous. So you have to handle

cocaine as really one thing, heroin as another thing and pot as another thing. I don't know where things stand now. I really don't look at surveys. I'd be really interested to see where attitudes are right now. I think that there are a number of things going on. One is there's a reaction against the really severe, punitive, lock 'em all up trend of the '80s and '90s, if for no other reason than because of costs. And with the decline in fear of crime—people don't talk about it, but white people are less scared of black people robbing them than they were at that time.

So there's less of a premium on that. And so that's a trend there. There's a libertarian streak in the culture that cuts a number of different ways. So I don't know, it's complicated. I haven't really been thinking about it so I don't want to spout off something that's not well informed.

Q: Sure. And so before we close out then I'm curious if you have any further thoughts about what the role of Phoenix House might be at this point. And I know you're not involved with the organization anymore—

Kerr: I'm not.

Q: And so the answer might be—

Kerr: I don't know. I really don't know. I'm just not part of that world anymore. I wish them well. I think that if you look at the history of Phoenix House, in many ways you're looking at different eras in New York City politics. The birth of the Lindsay years and the idealism of it, the charisma, Mitch on TV as the doctor of *The Today Show* and all of that, it was a time when—in the development of the social programs around drug abuse, it was a time of being much more pro government, of having more faith in government. I think that Mitch, if he were starting now, probably would have been an entrepreneur rather than a doctor. No, I wouldn't say that, not rather than a doctor. He probably would have been a doctor, but he might have been an entrepreneur in the private sector because government doesn't seem as promising to young people as it did when he was a young person. Government was seen as a way of achieving things that people don't believe in anymore. So maybe he would have developed a company that did something in medicine and he would have—I can see him being an entrepreneur in some way or another. I don't want to take away his medical degree, though.

Q: [laughs] So thinking about all these issues—I mean before we close out—is there anything else that you'd like to add, thinking back on your own reporting on these issues or thinking in terms of your own involvement with Phoenix House, if anything?

Kerr: It's a complicated issue. It's a really complicated issue. I don't know what else to say.

Q: That's great. Well, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking time—

Kerr: Oh, sure.

Q: —out of the middle of your day. It's been really edifying for me looking into your articles and all of that.

Kerr: Great. Let me print out that [oral history release] form.

Q: Great, perfect. [interruption; after brief exchange, Kerr decides to add further commentary] So I'll turn the record back on, but if not then I—

Kerr: However you want to do it. There's nothing particularly sensitive to me about this.

Q: So anyway, so the question was—

Kerr: The way I see the city right now is it's glistening; it looks better than it ever has. But to some degree that's a veneer, or at least a level under which there's a tremendous amount of suffering. And the anger that brought de Blasio in about stop and frisk and really about the role that the criminal justice system plays in the lives of poor males, poor young males in the city is devastating. And I think that there's a lot of history to that that goes back to the years that we're talking about, where we constructed a world where things were gentrified and rich and the poor are forced out. But where they live is pretty goddamn tough and the criminal justice system and the way it relates to them is really, really a problem.

And people like me are paying our taxes and enjoying the city and not realizing that we're supporting a system that allows so little opportunity for young poor people to get ahead. And there are very complicated forces at work here: income disparity, the way that wealth goes, the way that education has taken its turn, but the criminal justice system is—there are a lot of things about it that are just wrong right now.

You can see what's happening at Rikers [Island Correctional Facility]. And the one thing I feel—I don't want to get a grandiose sense of what I contributed to this, but where I did enter the public debate about the drug issue, I was all for enforcement, enforcement, enforcement. And I think that there were some repercussions of that that were really unfortunate, that have gotten—I've hurt the people I wanted to help.

Q: And you think that's been appreciable thinking of the Reagan/Bush years to the present?

Kerr: I think there are a lot of people who realize that the “lock ‘em up” approach was very expensive and very damaging and the current form it takes is really hard on certain minority groups. It's very hard on young men. And I think that the comfort that we feel in walking the streets and anyone who walks through Central Park and all of that blinds us to the fact that we're paying for a system that's very hard on these kids.

Q: So thinking back to that, to your own reporting in this and your sense that it perhaps contributed in some way to this “lock ‘em up” kind of attitude, thinking about the city now, thinking about the changes that have been happening, what would be the shift? How would you emphasize things?

Kerr: What do you mean? I don't understand.

Q: Well, so if you were emphasizing the “lock ‘em up” thing too much, what do you think could have been emphasized?

Kerr: To help them. Put more money into treatment, to education. I mean I'm obviously going to sound like a softy, that we put more effort into saving these kids. And locking them up is not a solution for most of them. It doesn't really buy you anything. It buys you somebody who's unemployable. So we could spend years just talking about one part of this, education, drug addiction, the impact of technology and jobs that went overseas. There's a hell of a lot of stuff involved in all this, racism and separating them out, it's really complicated. But the current state of affairs that was brought about by just enlarging the criminal justice system and making the laws very, very tough, taking the power out of judges' hands, there were consequences I'm not comfortable with.

Q: And so focusing briefly on another part of your reporting, say, taking your story on Bill Giddens, right, the sense of—who went through this whole Phoenix House academy, therapeutic community thing—what is your sense then of the effect of that sort of approach? You reported on it and then, of course, you worked at Phoenix House but not directly in that capacity. But thinking about some of these other routes or other responses that can happen to this incarceration, to this, this “lock ‘em up” response.

Kerr: I think that Bill Giddens did OK. And the people like Bill Giddens can do OK coming out of a Phoenix House. It's not—it's like psychoanalysis, it's going to work for a certain number of people on a small scale. I can't imagine there being a million Phoenix Houses, you know, or a million Phoenix House beds. It's very hard to imagine. So I think you have to address some of

these problems in other ways, too. And the mayor's trying with early childhood education as a start. Giving opportunity to people at a younger age. I'm not an expert in this stuff. I don't think about it very much now. I mean, I don't get a chance to study it very much, about what goes into poverty, a lot of the housing issues—this whole mix of things. But it probably starts with jobs.

You know, all of this stuff comes when the black male population no longer had factory jobs to go to, that their parents or they came north for, the marriageable male population became limited because you had to have a job, and to form a family. And so all sorts of things sort of flow out of that. It's very complicated, but it's tragic and you know I just, I wish we were doing more to address it on many different levels.

Q: And I notice that, even within the Giddens piece, that he got a job at a stapler factory with the assistance of Phoenix House.

Kerr: Yes.

Q: [pause] Well, wonderful.

Kerr: OK, great.

Q: All right, great. Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]