



## **Youspeak Radio Episode 5 – You Are Our Legacy – With Roland Palencia**

### **Audio transcript**

Full audio: <https://www.onearchives.org/youspeak-radio-ep-5-you-are-our-legacy-with-roland-palencia/>

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio, a project by ONE Archives Foundation with generous support from the California humanities.

Dean Campbell ([00:15](#)):

My name is Dean Campbell. My pronouns are he/him, they/them, she/her, whatever. This is my interview with Roland Palencia. We talked about so many things, but what, coming out of it, I really grateful to be in this project to talk to a queer elder, because you do not see a lot of that or any kind of queer elder representation.

Roland Palencia ([00:38](#)):

There you are, our legacy and I feel proud of the work that we did. And it is unfinished, it's nuts. Our future is in good hands.

Dean Campbell ([00:46](#)):

So that was just a representation that like, if they can make it through, we can make it through. Just starting off with a brief introduction of who I am, because there'd be a weird interview if you had no idea who I was. So I'm Dean, I'm from Memphis, Tennessee. I just graduated, so I'm upcoming college freshman. And I'm really dedicated to queer activism and queer history. Started several different [inaudible 00:01:23] with like a queer history group with different people that I know and other queer people and have plans in the future to do [crosstalk 00:01:30].

Roland Palencia ([01:30](#)):

That was in Memphis or the-

Dean Campbell ([01:33](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), in Memphis.

Roland Palencia ([01:33](#)):

Yeah.

Dean Campbell ([01:35](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Roland Palencia ([01:36](#)):

Love the food in Memphis and the music, oh my God.

Dean Campbell ([01:38](#)):



Yes, yes. [crosstalk 00:01:40] there's not a lot of us out here, but the main thing is just keeping community and ties to all of that, which I'm dedicated to and want to extend through my life.

Roland Palencia ([01:54](#)):

Great. That's wonderful. Are you in Memphis now?

Dean Campbell ([01:59](#)):

Yes.

Roland Palencia ([02:00](#)):

Wow. So thank you for sharing that word. That's amazing. Thank you.

Dean Campbell ([02:04](#)):

Yeah. It is quite interesting sometimes. Okay. Now that you know a little bit about me, just going to start off with the questions. I know that you have extensive work in both the world of art and activism. And can you speak about the relationship between art and that activism, to your personal experience?

Roland Palencia ([02:25](#)):

First of all, I just want to commend you for doing the kind of work that you're doing. One thing is to do activism in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and here in Chicago, Miami and so forth. But to do it in places where there is not, there's a long history, but there's not a critical support we find in bi-coastal so to speak. So I just want to commend you for doing that. I am not an artist. I can barely draw a stick man if my life depended on it, I cannot play an instrument. I write poetry, maybe I've written a haiku, four lines at the most. But I have always appreciated art and the artists, because I think that art manifestation of basically our subconscious, what's underneath, what is not being talked about or spoken about. And it really is in a language that, people on the other side [inaudible 00:03:23] so that the words are intended for, they can decode them.

That there was a lot of art, previous to having a very openly queer movement, that resonated with people. And whether that was in plays, it was in movies or it was in pictures, images and so forth. So I think that artists are very, very critical because they give us access to a language that simply is forbidden. That is forbidden and is suppressed. Artists know how to go beyond that and give us, like I said, the images, the pictures, the poetry. So that's why it's so incredibly effective in activism. And if you see, let's say art that they created, and it's probably most remembered and in what they said. I mean, the demonstrations that they had. Because it really resonated with people when they saw the plus sign. Like, silence equals death.

And it's like, you can't get any more succinct about what the Bible is all about, especially in the midst of an epidemic. So I think that having powerful words that are in the context of art, really give people something that speaks to something that is deep in them. And to use that as an activist tool is so, so important. For instance, many of us can see male to male or female to male or trans images. And as we started to see those images and pictures validated who we are, and that's what is so, so important.

Dean Campbell ([05:07](#)):



You talked a little bit about the AIDS epidemic and how it related in art. Do you see, post-AIDS, how that movement changed how we see art in the queer world?

Roland Palencia ([05:23](#)):

Yeah. I think that there is so much more diversity now in the art that we see. There were populations, certainly the trans community and the non-binary community, gender identity community, that was not really, was in the picture, but it was not completely acknowledged. And I think that we're having many more images, not just the individuals themselves who are being so much more visible, but also the art that is being created where is very non binary. And for some of us, it might not resonate because we are not non binary people. Individuals who are, part of this speaks to their soul, validation of themselves.

And I think that that's the purpose of art. Not one piece of art or one style is going to speak to everyone. But I think that now we're so much more open the doors to such a diversity of images, of voices, of speaking, of writing that we did not have, let's say even 20 years ago. And also when it comes to HIV and AIDS, it was really... A lot of the art reflected life and death. It was very clear what the two choices were. There's so many more issues and diversity that the art speaks to, there's that spectrum of differences as well as similarities.

Dean Campbell ([06:47](#)):

How has your vision towards art, in art, changed and developed over time and how you seen it?

Roland Palencia ([06:56](#)):

Yeah, for me, it was it reason why I wanted to found VIVA!. And VIVA! was a queer artist collective that was founded in 1987 and I was one of the four founders. The other one was Robert Ochoa and Mike Moreno and Betty Flores. And what we wanted to do is to really rescue the art of mostly the Latino men artists who were decimated in the AIDS pandemic. We wanted to keep their legacy alive. And that's what Viva means. You've probably heard VIVA! this or VIVA! that, it means long live, right? And so we knew that their physical bodies were going to not be with us any longer, but we wanted their artistry and their legacy kept alive. So that's why we founded VIVA!. And in the end, we ended up having over a hundred artists involved during the 13 years of existence of the organizations.

And actually in the midst of that, we had a lot of Latina lesbians who were doing VIVA! and it really became, and even after this point, the largest collective of Latina lesbian artists. Some of them very, very prominent that are being shown in museums now. So how my attitude in terms of how it has evolved is that I used to probably have an eye for something Hispanic and rather than content, the content of it, what's the deeper message? What is it that crosses the threshold of the conscious, and goes into the unconscious and motivates you to act or to take action in a way that maybe, if you read a newspaper, it wouldn't do it. Or, when [inaudible 00:08:42]. So I think that I have really, not transformed my attitude, but really have deeper appreciation for the role of art activism.

And I would say that, especially in places, let's say like Memphis or rural areas or smaller cities. Cities that are really not very hospitable to our movement, that art could be a powerful instrument. Songs, poetry, right? Writing, the painting, the sculpture. I remember how many of the artists would do these amazing sculptures. And because you can be malleable, we can be flexible with the material. They shape forms and sometimes it will be like a deformed body, and it will speak to us because that's how our bodies were being treated. But you're really being quite, [inaudible 00:09:38] logically, but in a very



[inaudible 00:09:39], that really touch your emotions and it acknowledge and reaffirm who you were and why you felt that way.

Dean Campbell ([09:47](#)):

And when you're talking about all that different types of activism, how has your personal relationship to activism shifted over time?

Roland Palencia ([09:58](#)):

I'm going to be 64 in a couple of weeks and so I'm going to be 65 a year from now, in 2022. So my activism is shifting more as being a mentor. And I mentor a lot of younger individuals, a lot of younger people. By mentoring doesn't mean that I necessarily reproach them, just give the space for conversations to happen that they otherwise would not have even among their own generation, because they... People my generation have a certain view of life, not that we don't understand previous generations or the generations that come after us. There's a certain conversation. We went through the tragedy of AIDS, where I lost eight of my 10 best friends and hundreds of other people that I knew. And that trauma is very different. And the experience that someone who's 20, 21, 22 where, God forbid, you get infected with HIV, that there's so many more... There's an arsenal of medications that can really turn that into more of a manageable disease, as opposed to, a death sentence. And that's a very different existential experience.

So we were really put in a very life and death situation, and also the possibility of losing all the gains that we had made up to that point. And everything was on the line. Not only our lives, but also the very existence of the movement. Just because you win your rights it doesn't mean that you have it forever. You have to constantly be vigilant, constantly be fighting for that. And so I think that my activism is just being aware of the fact that we have gained so much more, but it's precarious. We can lose those gains, look at all the anti-transgender laws that are being passed. This is in the middle of the blossoming or the Renaissance of the queer movement, and yet we're having this tragedy going on. So I, in my activism, it is transforming the sense that I have a longer view. I serve as to mentor our younger individuals, as someone who can give them a different perspective that you can change circumstances by being involved and being an advocate.

Dean Campbell ([12:27](#)):

Thank you. And how has not so much in both the intersection of being Latinx and being queer, how was those intersected throughout your activism?

Roland Palencia ([12:39](#)):

Yeah that's a very, very good question. So many of us are walking intersectionality, right? Like we are part of this community, we're also part of that community. The benefit of that is that you get to play in so many different spaces. Obviously what might be a disadvantage is that you're not completely accepted by one, you're not completely accepted by the other. Because the reality is that we were part of an equality movement that is very unequal. It's unequal to the people of color, it's unequal to trans people, it's unequal to non-binary, it's unequal to women. It goes on, it goes on and on. So my consciousness in terms of, how do I merge those identities, is to look at... Looking at, just the richness that comes from being part of those communities in a way that queer people who only belong to one community can't truly understand.



And I think that as we, as our movement has become more merged and more connected, because of the embodiment. Many of us belong to different communities. But also you understand that we have to have many fights, different fronts, and that we have to be united because the oppressor in many ways is a common oppressor. Someone who is homophobic, chances are that that person is also racist and sexist and transphobic and you name it. So just understanding that we also live at the crossroads of these different communities, that we are a resource for people to understand that, hey, we know some of the people that you are fighting against because we have suffered that kind of oppression. And we can be critical members of this liberation movement. So I think that there's a richness, certainly because of the experiences that we're exposed to, so many more experiences. But also there's a marginalization that happens. And we have to be extremely aware of and challenge that within our communities. So our movement is not mirror image of the heteronormative patriarchal movement that opposes just about everything that we're fighting for.

Dean Campbell ([15:05](#)):

Definitely. What would you say to younger queer people when we're fighting for all of these different intersections at this point in time is... I know it's a really broad question, but is there anything that you would offer up as words of advice?

Roland Palencia ([15:20](#)):

I would say, read your history, the ONE Archives, and I'm on the board of the archives. And that's one of the reasons why I'm on the board of the archives. And I said, the different routes, your [inaudible 00:15:32]. But the higher [inaudible 00:15:34]. And understanding the past is so critical because one, it gives an appreciation for what people went through. But it also shows you that there was a lot of heart, there was a lot of bravery that people had in situations where you could lose your dog, your life, your reputation, your family, you name it. Everything. Just by someone saying you are a homosexual or you're queer or whatever the derogatory name might be. And really not taking that for granted. I think that many times we feel, especially those of us who live in cities, our little oasis of liberation.

We think, oh, we're fine now because I can marry whoever I want to marry. I will not get fired from my job because I have protections. These things are not automatic and they're certainly not permanent unless we constantly are vigilant and we fight for that. But definitely learn your her-story or his-story and read those books, watch those movies and learn from that and learn what works and what doesn't work. Learn the fact that people had to create a new language for liberation that really resonated for them in a way that claimed their dignity and decency. So what's the next step, right? So this movement has gone this far, and knowing how far it has come and knowing the history will give you a good indication of what do you need to do next? What's missing? I would say learn your history, yeah.

Dean Campbell ([17:11](#)):

Definitely. And when we look back to that long history of queer rights and all of that, what would you say to your younger self back then. And kind of having to go through and navigate through all of those experiences?

Roland Palencia ([17:25](#)):

That's such an amazing question, because I was just thinking exactly yesterday, how would I tell myself, if I was 20. [inaudible 00:17:35] movement, we have an amazing rich movement. I kind of go in and out,



in and out. Stay in it, stay in it. Take care of yourself, self-care and all that kind of stuff. Don't leave the movement. It's definitely worth fighting for. And learn, and create support system. And also, take it to the next level. You are our legacy, and we only did what we did and what we could do, even in our own limitations. You don't have the limitations that we had.

So just don't take that for granted and create a much bigger space so the generation that comes after you will basically... It's like you're planting the seed that will grow into a tree for other people to, have a shade that they can take some comfort in. Don't stop the level that we stop, take it to the next level and trust the movement. There are going to be disappointments, there are going to be individuals and people who are going to disappoint you. But there is an inner part of you that knows that you're doing the right thing. Trust that and elevate it and nurture it and take action and learn and create wisdom out of that and lessons learned you can share with other people.

Dean Campbell ([18:54](#)):

Definitely. And when you look back to nurturing that activist spirit and nurturing activism and community, is there any particular lessons that you took away from that? And learning along the way, this pathways of creating community change?

Roland Palencia ([19:13](#)):

Yeah, I think that, for me, it was dealing a lot with shame. I had a lot of shame. And I was born in a Catholic family. My dad and my mom were not extremely conservative, and... I mean strongly religious conservative. As a matter of fact, my dad, he was a revolutionary. He fought in the resistance in Guatemala, that's where I'm from. I was born and raised there. And he fought in the resistance and he joined the armed revolution to overthrow the oligarchy government in Guatemala in the 1970s. He ended up getting assassinated. And I came from a rather conservative culture and there was a lot of internalized shame. So I would say one of the things that we don't pay as much attention in our movement is our psyches. Our psyches is just like, how did we get to be the person that we are today? And meaning everything. Your successes, your victories, but also those things that are in the background that still point to shame and point to limitations.

And I would say that, probably the next phase of the movement is, to go more into the psyche of queer people because we have the generational trauma that has not really been addressed. Just because we have all these external civil rights gains, that's just exterior, that's just the skin. You know what I'm saying? Skin is skin deep. And below that, is the heart, is the lungs that [inaudible 00:20:51] liberation that still have some cancerous cells of shame in our bodies. I mean, you name it. And if you're trans, that even magnifies and multiplies. So I really believe that, for me, what I learn is that I deal with that on a daily basis. I deal with that even though I live in a city that is like Nirvana, it's an oasis of liberation and civil rights. We're entrapped in this shame internal weather environment, and we cannot be shaken up just because on the outside looks like we have our rights and we're liberated.

That's really critical. It's really important, in our movement we need to continue doing that work because that work is not finished. There's a lot of internal work that we're going to have to do. And I think that honestly in your generation is going to really get that. I think that you are much more in that aspect of the queer psyche than we are, because we were fighting the enemies right here. Like, [inaudible 00:21:52]. Blah, blah, blah, just external. And now we have to go inside. And I will say that no revolution is going to be successful until we also look what is inside of us, because otherwise we're going to replicate the very same systems and duplicate the very same oppressive systems. And you can see it



in some organizations, that people act out the heteronormative oppression. And so we have to address that. We truly want to have inner and outer liberation.

Dean Campbell ([22:30](#)):

Thank you so much for your time, it has been amazing. I'm really glad that I got to talk to you.

Roland Palencia ([22:35](#)):

No, you guys seem awesome. Y'all, I'd better say you all, y'all. You're fantastic, you're great. And I cannot tell you... My heart is just melting for [inaudible 00:22:51] your appreciation for the work that you do. And Tony Umi and Eric, they're [inaudible 00:22:58] ears. I'm just really grateful. And it really gives me just a sense that, not to like claim anything, but I will. You are our legacy and I feel proud of the work that we did and it is unfinished business. It's unfinished business. But our future is in good hands.

Dean Campbell ([23:18](#)):

Thank you.

Roland Palencia ([23:20](#)):

And then just look at a lot of [inaudible 00:23:22], right? People have all these hopes and... They put these leaders in charge and then they do exactly if not worse than the ones that were there before. And people become really cynical. And I think that we, as a queer community, because we're so... We're from every language, every ethnicity, every social strata. We're like the microcosm of humanity, and if we change, our whole world would change. If we have an internal, inner revolution, it will transform the world. You only need like 2, 3% of the population change in order to have a revolution. In China, there were only 50% of the people involved in that revolution. The point is that it doesn't take that much. And we are, not only in terms of numbers, let's say we're like 3%, that's enough to turn the world around if we're strategically located.

One of the reasons why we're saying, well, the LGBTQ movement has been more successful faster than racial minorities. Well there's why, because just about every family has queers. So at some point you have to confront that. So we're strategically located. And I think that we have such an opportunity with this inner revolution, that it transforms all revolutions ever. I don't know a lot about psychology, I barely know a little bit about Jungian psychology. But I understand how shame has prevented us from being the amazing, magnificent group of people that we can be.

Speaker 1 ([24:57](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio. We are-

Cassidy All ([25:04](#)):

Cassidy All.

Savi Bindass ([25:05](#)):

Savi Bindass.

Dean Campbell ([25:06](#)):



Dean Campbell.

Gabriel DuBransky ([25:07](#)):

Gabriel DuBransky.

Jaileen Vargas-Garcia ([25:09](#)):

Jaileen Vargas-Garcia.

Téa Wagstaff ([25:10](#)):

Téa Wagstaff.

Erik Adamian ([25:12](#)):

Erik Adamian.

Umi Hsu ([25:13](#)):

And Umi Hsu.

Speaker 1 ([25:15](#)):

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