

A Toast!: RKO Army Raises \$4,100 for RI Pride Food Drive

“The Rocky Horror Stay-at-Home Show” was an online event on May 8 that raised more than \$4,100 for the RI Pride Emergency Supply Drive, a COVID-19 relief program that provides boxes containing a one-week supply of food and hygiene supplies to those in need.

After *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* film was released in 1975 to box office disappointment, within a few years it was running at midnight every Friday night to Saturday morning in Greenwich Village in New York City, and audiences evolved the practices of shouting “callbacks” at the screen, then “shadowcasting” by dressing in character and acting out scenes in front of the screen, and eventually throwing objects such as toast and toilet paper at appropriate moments.

The fan phenomenon spread to other large cities and college towns, and by 1981 the ancestor of the RKO Army was performing in RI at venues in Providence and Newport, according to current cast director Roy Rossi who has been involved since the beginning and maintains a history page on the web. In recent years, the RKO Army has become known as a major shadowcast with an international reputation, hosting the worldwide Rocky Horror conventions in Providence in 2013, 2016 and 2019, as well as having announced plans for 2022.

The pandemic show was possible, despite rules under an emergency executive order in RI limiting gatherings to no more than five people, because seven members of the RKO Army theater troupe live in the same house. Reminiscent of Oakley Court, the 118-bedroom British castle used as the set for the original film, the house in Providence is a 5,700 square-foot Victorian-style mansion with three floors plus basement, seven bedrooms, three bathrooms and two living rooms, enclosed by a white picket fence mounted on stonework.



RKO Army cast for RI Pride fundraiser: (standing L-R) Lukas H, Cassia, Diz, Gregory Lane; (kneeling) Ray Zombie, (on floor L-R) Zephyr Goza, Harley Bean

Cassia, who organized the show, explained that her household is an “intentional community,” a broad term to describe living arrangements as varied as a Benedictine Monastery or an Israeli kibbutz. “Our household has grown from an idea to a bunch of people living in a crappy apartment to a bunch of people living in a less crappy place to here. The long story short is that Zephyr and I had actually gone to a summer camp ... and that was where I got introduced to a lot of new ideas. It was for people who were homeschooled and unschooled. Basically, that’s how I met Zephyr. But that was the place where I got introduced to the idea of, hey, you actually can, you know, live in a house with a whole bunch of your close friends. And then I went to another session of the same camp and they actually took us to an intentional community ... it was very different. It was a bunch of different little individual houses on a bigger property that had a main building and everything, but it was still the idea that you could choose to live with people who you actually really want to live with and not just random housemates or family or whoever you happen to live with. We are growing our household, a little bit bigger and bigger.”

Cassia said that she and Zephyr were the first housemates in 2009, joined by Greg in 2010 and Ray in 2012, both of whom she met through Rocky Horror, then Diz from college, then Lukas through a friend, and then most recently Harley again through Rocky Horror. “It has become this family. Everybody, almost everybody, ends up being either somebody we met through Rocky Horror or somebody who gets dragged into Rocky Horror: They fall in with us and they go ‘Hey, that looks kind of cool, you know?’

That's how this all developed into this perfect environment for being stuck in your house during the pandemic and doing Rocky Horror on the internet."

The concept was motivated by other Rocky Horror casts arranging virtual shows, either individual performers recording parts separately so they could be consolidated or participating simultaneously by a video conferencing system such as Zoom. "I took a whole night, basically, and came up with a spreadsheet for how would this even work? Like what exactly would I be asking them to do? Because you really need eight actors to do Rocky Horror: You need somebody for Frank, Brad, Janet, Riff, Magenta, Columbia. Eddie and Dr. Scott can be [played by] one person. And then you need Rocky. And that's eight. So there's seven of us," Cassia said. It was a lot more complicated than a normal show, she said. The Criminologist character, who never interacts with the other characters in the film version, was rotated among the cast. The Usherette who sings the overture "Science Fiction Double Feature," commonly known in the US as "Trixie" and in the UK as "Miss Strawberry Time," was played by Cassia.

Because they were short one essential cast member, the household employed its cats to fill in occasional roles, putting them in different bedrooms until they were needed "on stage." Cassia said, "It had kind of been jokingly suggested a whole bunch before. I mean, I think a lot of people who own cats and do Rocky Horror, think of, if your cat is going to be a part, what would they play? Everybody - not everybody, but a lot of people who have cats - want to insert them into Rocky Horror... and then it was scenes like Dinner Scene where you have eight people who are actively on screen at the same time, which was just not possible no matter how we switch characters, and I was 'Okay, we can either completely ignore that this character exists, which is difficult because in Dinner Scene, every single one of them does something... And then we have cats who could actually get to do some of these things and carry them around, and they're cute, and some of them are kind of like their counterparts. So that was how that happened out of necessity." She was concerned the cats-as-performers might not go over well. "I was really worried that everybody was going to hate it and be like, 'Oh my God, you couldn't do Rocky Horror by yourselves. You needed to add cats. This isn't a real show. You're just substituting cats in.' So I was really stressed out about that. And then everybody loved the cats. I was like, oh, thank God. I should never have doubted the power of cats."

The house happens to be located only a few buildings away from a church, which was used as a location for the Wedding Scene that opens the movie. "I wish I could have captured the look on Lukas's face when I was talking about 'Do you want to actually draw on the church door? Do you want to actually do wedding scene in front of a church?' It was just like Christmas. Everybody was really excited about being able to use these really site-specific things," Cassia said. (In the film, Brad draws with chalk a heart for Janet, and immediately afterward the sexton rubs it off with a rag.) Driving Scene was performed using a real car parked in the street at the curb.

Although the performance was pre-recorded because of concerns with technical issues including internet connectivity, most of it was shot as a continuous take to give the feeling of a live stage experience. Cassia said furniture and decorations were rearranged in the house "to transform it as much as we could into this complete feeling of being a Rocky Horror set. We didn't want it to be, there was one room that you ran through and it truly felt like you were pulled out of it. We want it to be one complete thing you really could feel... Never feel like, 'Oh, I'm removed from the show. This is just somebody's house. This isn't a whole show anymore.' But it was a really good mix of being a show and being somebody's house, which I think was really cool." For Dinner Scene, Harley "decked out the room with a whole bunch of merch from other casts and the cape that they made for the punk show that's all the T-shirts put together," Cassia said. "We had a fake electric chair that... was from another Rocky

household... We just had it in our yard and somebody had the idea of 'What if the electric chair was the throne?'"

The fundraising aspect emerged in stages, according to Cassia. The RKO Army has a long and cordial history with RI Pride, entering a tractor-trailer sized float every June in Pride's Illuminated Night Parade that had to be indefinitely postponed because of the pandemic. Originally RKO had a regular performance scheduled on May 8, but that had to be canceled due to the pandemic. Then the plan was to perform a virtual show online, once it was realized the household had enough people living there to pull it off. "We already had the show pretty lined up for me to pitch the show to [cast director] Roy and talk to the rest of the cast about it. There was an event page for it, you had this plan. That was gonna be a regular show. And then I was on Facebook, and I'm friends with Alijah [Dickenson] on Facebook, and she's been posting about how the food supply drive had just completely run dry. At this point, they had nothing left. And she was really trying to get donations for the supply drive because she didn't really know how they were going to continue otherwise." Cassia was donating to and sharing other benefit shows, "And then I just had this moment of prepping for the show and thinking about this and I just went, 'Oh, there's all these other places that have been doing this as a benefit like we could do this event.' So I pitched it to the housemates and said, 'Hey, are you interested in taking it in this direction?' and they were super excited. So then I went to Roy, and Roy was super excited. And then I went to Alijah, and she cried and was super excited. So it turned into this thing that was even cooler than the really cool show we were already doing. It just took something that was awesome and just made it incredible."

The original goal, Cassia said, was \$1,000 with what she called a "stretch goal" of \$1,500. How did she feel when the total passed \$4,100 shortly after the show? "I really did not even fully process it until later on that night when I was getting ready for bed, and then I just really thought about it and just started sobbing. It's just incredible. I can't wrap my head around it. I cannot wrap my head around the fact that this just came out of a silly idea... It's so far beyond what I had hoped for, and I am so happy, and just reading everybody's comments during the show, too, people's responses to it were so much more positive than I had imagined. There were people commenting saying, 'This important person in my life just died, and this is the first time that I've smiled in a while.' It just was so overwhelmingly positively received, and the audience was so excited about raising all of this money for Pride, and they were really in it, and it was just incredible to have this level of engagement with an audience at a time when we're all so removed from each other, and have this group of people who was really excited about raising money and sharing this with their friends and matching donations. And it was incredible. It was incredible. I cried a lot. There were a lot of happy tears. I'm not gonna lie."

The web cast side of the show was donated by Chris Trainor using the site he created for the RKO Army conventions, rkolive.tv. (*Disclosure: Trainor is the former business partner and colleague of the author, going back to the internet pioneering era in the 1980s.*) With a professional technical infrastructure subcontracted to commercial providers including Teradek Core Cloud, Wowza Streaming Cloud, and Akamai Content Delivery Network, Trainor provided a high-quality 2TB feed to about 1,000 simultaneous viewers, approximately 90% from the US but also from the UK, Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Austria, Ukraine, Italy, Macedonia, Mexico, Poland, Sweden and Thailand.

Cassia said, "One of the people who is involved with our cast recently, Dana, she lives in Germany and she went back to Germany very recently. She messaged me earlier on in the day saying that she was about to take a long nap so she could wake up and watch it in the middle of the night! And it was just incredible. Chris was sending me the statistics for where people were watching and I was like, I have no

idea who in the world is watching from there. Who are all these people? But it was just insane. Ken [Barber] told me we had donations from 17 different states and Canada and London. So there was really support from all over the world and I don't know where all of it came from, but I'm really glad it did."

"RI Pride has been able to feed individuals at a rate of \$6 per week due to nonprofit bulk pricing," Vice President of Operations Ken Barber said in a statement. The organization describes itself as "the largest and most comprehensive LGBTQIA+ community non-profit serving Rhode Island and its surrounding neighbors," but the Emergency Supply Drive is open to everyone without discrimination, and there are links on the PrideRI.org website to request assistance, volunteer or donate. (The donation link is tinyurl.com/PrideSupplyDrive which forwards to Kindful, a payment processor for non-profits). The \$4,100 raised by the Rocky Horror event works out to be enough to feed just over 683 people for a week.

Alijah Dickenson, the program manager of the Emergency Supply Drive, was the principal point of contact working with Cassia to make the fundraiser happen. She said it is all-volunteer, so every bit of money that comes in from donation goes out to beneficiaries, with the work handled by a core team of 10 aided by 168 volunteers who do everything from packing to delivering boxes. "We're going on our ninth week right now of operation. No one in Rhode Island Pride has ever done anything like this before. Our 'Mr. Gay Rhode Island 2019' Bret Jacob had this idea in the middle of the night, he's like, 'We have to do something, we have to be able to support not only the LGBTQI-plus community but also support the entire Rhode Island community in general during this time,' and the way that he thought we could do it is start a food drive. So it started with a couple cans in the Pride office."

Gotham Greens donates the actual boxes, Dickenson said, and in each box "we try and have a cereal, eggs, milk, butter, fresh produce that we have normally: apples, oranges, onions, potatoes and then lettuce provided by Gotham Greens, they also donate lettuce to us. And then we get mac and cheese pasta, pasta sauce, ramen, canned vegetables, soup, rice, beans, anything we can really get our hands on to make sure that there there can be about a week's worth of food to sustain a family."

Prior to the Rocky Horror fundraiser, total donations were \$44,276 from individuals and \$38,850 from organizational grants, so the \$4,100 from the Rocky Horror event is substantial. Most of the individual donations, she said, were in connection with virtual events, including three drag queen shows and a drag king show. "A lot of the credit goes to the artists in the community who have said, 'I want to do a virtual show, let's do a virtual show and try and raise money.'" As of the time of the show when we spoke with Dickenson, the program had served 10,452 individual and 2,834 family recipients. "The data tracker for us was saying that he couldn't keep up with the amount of donations coming in and I have a feeling it's because not everyone has a lot to give, but everyone had a little to give. And so I think that was part of the the lag on the tracking end is that there were just so many people willing to give a couple dollars here and there."

Demand has been so great for the program getting food out to recipients that they ran out of cash on Thursday, April 30. "Our grants ran out and we hadn't really gotten any donations, and we basically hit zero. There was a day we were at zero dollars, our shopper came back and there was nothing left. And we were kind of at the point where we said, 'Well, we have a fundraiser, and we'll see where we're at after that.' And we got into the office on Tuesday and said, 'All right, what can we do?' And we said, 'All right, this is the modifications we're going to make, to be able to stretch ourselves a little further and be able to still continue helping people.' So through people's amazing generosity and donations over the weekend, we were able to pick it back up, but at the beginning of it all it seemed day-to-day. Right now

we're very much feeling week-to-week, but after [the Rocky Horror fundraiser] tonight, we know we've secured a little bit more time than just worrying about week-to-week."

Dickenson said, "We're getting to June, we're getting to Pride Month, and with Pride being postponed in Rhode Island we're still looking at what we can do in June to celebrate Pride Month. So while we're all in office doing food supply drive stuff, the president, Ray Sirico, and the vice president, Ken Barber, are actively looking at what we can do during Pride Month to be able to celebrate the time, and so they're looking at a few different ways to help engage into the virtual Pride that is happening worldwide, as well as what we can do in Rhode Island to help keep the spirit of Pride alive."

Dickenson continued, "What I think the biggest thing that we've been trying to push is our mission statement of we started this off, not only wanting to bring food into the homes of people in Rhode Island, but also trying to give people hope and bring that to them. So the more we go, the more I feel like we're delivering that promise to people that there are going to be days ahead aren't going to be like this, that we are all together in this. Tonight, being able to really see people rally - and I would note that people who donated tonight, I think this is the first time in our use of fundraising that it really came from all over the country - people were donating to Rhode Island Pride saying that this is something that they believed in and they wish that their community also had, so I'm hoping in the future that other people see what we're doing and take their own leap of faith and start doing something like this themselves."

What has this meant for Dickenson personally? "I went in the first week, I think they were three days in or something like that, and I went in to be a delivery driver I signed up to go in, got a couple of boxes and dropped them off at people's houses. Within the first 24 hours, I was promoted to managing inventory and the warehouse and everything that is involved in terms of what what they were getting in. Then from there, I just kept on doing and being there and given more responsibility to now that I'm the manager of everything. I went into this scared of the future and my mental health wasn't in the right place. I was sad. I was depressed, I was just trying to get to a place where I didn't feel so lonely, didn't feel so afraid. Being here and being able to see the impact that we've had, and the support that we've had, I've been so incredibly happy and grateful and honored and supported and seen. I'm so happy that Pride is being able to be seen for more than just a parade and more than just a party, but a valuable part of the Rhode Island community, the Providence community. So it's had a impact on my life that I will tell everyone about who I meet, this will be a defining moment in my life. I'm only 24 years old. So to be able to do all this, it makes me speechless to say that I am in charge of being able to deliver food during a pandemic to people who are in need. Personally, it's done a lot."

UPDATE: As of May 11, the amount collected has increased to \$4,265.

UPDATE: RKO Army has announced an encore performance on Saturday, May 23, at 10pm, with entirely new live introduction and follow-up question-and-answer sessions before and after.

(Disclosure: The author has been affiliated with RKO Army since the 1990s and personally contributed to the fundraiser.)