

A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: Gonzalo Aburto

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Gonzalo Aburto
August 26, 2008

SARAH SCHULMAN: You just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

GONZALO ABURTO: My name is Gonzalo Aburto. I'm fifty-three years old. Today is August 26, 19 — no, 2008. I'm sorry. Shall I repeat it?

SS: No, that's fine.

GA: And what else?

SS: Where are we?

GA: We are at my apartment. It's 100 Thayer Street in Inwood, Manhattan..

SS: We're in your beautiful apartment, actually.

GA: Thank you. Thank you.

SS: So where were you born, Gonzalo?

GA: I was born in Mexico City in 1954. Actually, I'm fifty-four. I just remember.

SS: In which neighborhood?

GA: It's called the colonia, which is the name of the neighborhood. Victoria de las Democracias at the time when I was born, was outside of the city. It was mostly a neighborhood that was built by invaders. People went down there and say, "Okay, let's have this land," and they built their homes. I was born in a very humble neighborhood in what we call a *vecindad* which is like a project, is the equivalent here like a project. A *vecindad* in Mexico is a big place, big house with a lot of rooms and a lot of people live in there.

SS: What did your parents do?

AR: My father was a factory worker. My mother was a farmer. She was a woman for the *campo*, for the countryside. Her family was all farmers. She moved to the city to work as a maid, and then was when she met my father and they got married.

SS: So what kind of values did they instill in you about politics and activism and these sorts of ideas?

AR: Well, you know, I guess my mother was the main force behind everything, because even if we never have problems as other families, that they have like food or cleaning, clothes and everything, she was always on top and she did everything to have food ready every day and to have us, all of us—we were six—with clean clothes, and she sent us to school.

She was the only one who understood me, I guess. We never spoke about my sexuality or whatever, but I know. I'm very sure that she knew in her heart, because her worry was always that I was going to hell and she was responsible for that because she was a very, very Catholic woman. But I guess that was the thing. I look back now and I know that if there was no future in there for me because some of my brothers and my sister, the only thing that they did was to grow up and marry at eighteen or nineteen, because [that] was the way to get out of there and start their own family. But for me, I say, "No, I don't want to do that."

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After elementary school, they say, "Okay, you have to go to study some technical career, three years account or finances or something like that," and that's what they did, all of them.

And when I say, “No, I want to go to high school,” they say, “You’re crazy.”

And she was the only one. She was the one who took me to high school, that was a private high school, and she took me to apply for a scholarship, and I have it. And that’s the way that was possible for me to know more things behind the world that I was living in, who was very nice, because when you are a child, you don’t have worries, and the only worry is food and I had food.

SS: Did your parents talk politics with you?

GA: Not really. No, no. My mother, she was very Catholic. My father was strange. I guess now he was bipolar, because in one moment he was giving you hugs and all that, and in the other he was yelling at you and insulting you and all that stuff. I guess now I can call him that, now with the time and the things we learn, because at that time I didn’t know what happened. But we were not near for that, and with my mother was the only one.

After elementary school, I went to this high school who was private and was from seven a.m. to seven p.m., and the only thing that we did was the students was asleep at home. But from Monday to Friday I went down there, and I had to wake up at five in the morning and walk one hour to get there. And then I discovered there another world, because I saw people who were with their parents and they were take to the school by car, by chauffeurs, all that stuff, and I didn’t have that.

But at the same time it was the worst time in my life, and at the same time was beautiful because is the time when I discover many things and I start questioning, because it was a school run by priests. It was the *Salesianos*, this San Juan Bosco patron

from Italy who went all over the world to fund schools for poor children and other stuff. That's the order they call *Salesianos*.

Then all of them were priests or students. They were in the seminary and all that other stuff, and was okay for that, but at the same time was also – how do you call? Bully. I was picked on by for a lot of kids because I was poor and because I didn't have the things that they have, and also because they knew that I was gay.

SS: So what did you do after high school? Did you finish?

GA: I finished high school. When I started discovering that I was gay, well, I didn't discover; I just was gay, I guess. And no one talked to me about sexuality. No one told me what was going on, but in the neighborhood that I was living, we were playing all the time. That was life. The school and play. School and play until high school, and I have very good friends and I didn't like to play. All my brothers, because they are four of them, they play soccer and sometimes they play on the same team. And they were waiting for me when I was eleven or twelve when I was going to join them on the team, and I say, "No." And I prefer volleyball, and I started playing volleyball and I say, "Well, you know, I'm going to be the best." Like, when I was twelve, I say to myself, "I'm going to be the best because if I am the best, no one is going to talk to me about anything." And that was my goal, play, and study, play and study, play and study, play.

Tape I
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But my sexuality, I discovered it with my friends. I didn't know that was sexuality. I didn't know that was homosexuality. I just played with them. There was never penetration, was just touching and caressing, but never, never penetration. Some

day, I can remember I was eleven or twelve, and one of them told me, “Don’t tell to no one that we do this.”

And I say, “Why?”

And he told me, “Because this is bad.” And that’s the first time that I realized that what we were doing was bad.

SS: So what happened when you left high school?

GA: When I left high school, I tried to study in the university, but because of the student movement in Mexico in 1968, during that year, the year was lost for the students, the whole year, and then they had to start – and then the calendar was not at the same time. When you finish high school, you have the summer for vacations, and then you join the *preparatoria*. That is called college, no? At that time, for that reason there was eight months that you have for yourself because the classes at the university were in a different calendar. Then I took off that time and I just did nothing. I just played and that was it.

SS: Did you ever go back?

GA: I go back to the school and I started studying first English, and then that was like I lost, like, two years. Then when I was going to start going, I become ill. I have a condition that is called Syndrome Guillain-Barré. It’s like a polio, but the difference with poliomyelitis is that the virus that cause polio destroyed the *neuronas* and the nerves, and you have no possibility of recovery. What happened to me was that I have the same thing. I cannot move anything. I just move my head. I can talk and I can close my eyes and I have sensation, but anything else I can’t move.

SS: Wow.

Tape I
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GA: That happened from one day to another. That was a shock because at that time, I just was playing because my thing was that some day I was going to be able to join the national team of the volleyball, no? I trained six or seven hours a day, and that was my life, play volleyball and do exercise. I didn't smoke, I didn't do drugs, and I did not drink, nothing. My life was training from Monday to Friday, and Saturday and Sunday, play two or three games. And suddenly, from one day to another, I cannot walk, and that because that is a viral condition. Then nobody knew what happened because I remember that after my lesson, I came back home and I just sat, and I never can stand up again.

SS: How long did you have that?

GA: Three years.

SS: Oh, my god.

GA: Three years, and it was terrible because at the beginning, no one knew what happened. Then when I listened to the doctors that explained to my mother and to my brothers and the family what happened, I say, "No, I want to die," because they say, "There is no guarantee that he will be able to move. We don't know nothing, because as the virus goes through the system, disappears white cell and then who knows? Maybe he will move one finger. Maybe he will move something, but we need to wait."

Then I say, "No, I don't want to live," because I say – but the other thing is that I cannot take anything. I cannot walk. Then my reaction was to stop eating, but they put things through the vein. But it was something very, very – because I didn't have any movement. And they were waiting the three days, seventy-two hours, because they say that maybe I will have a heart attack or – no heart attack, but if the virus goes to the

nerves that regulate the heart, that was a possibility that I will die, or the lungs, the respiration system. But, you know, thanks again to my mother and another brother, I'm here because –

SS: So when you recovered and you had this new life and you knew you were not going to be an athlete, what did you decide to do with your life?

GA: I didn't know nothing, but when I recovered, I tried to get back to the sports, but I never recovered 100 percent. Still there are movements that I cannot do and things that I cannot do. I don't have the strength in my hands and in my knees and in my *rodillas* [knees]. How do you call these?

SS: Knees? Thighs? Knees.

GA: The knees and the ankles. I cannot be on *¿cómo se llama? De puntillas*, on my –

SS: Tiptoe.

GA: Yes. But after one time, I say, “Okay, no problem. I will do anything, even if I have to walk with the harness,” and all that stuff that they put it, all my life. I say, “I don't care. I will do it.”

But the doctors were very amazed that I have the possibility to walk. I walk again after almost two years, because as you started doing physical therapy and water therapy. You go to the swimming pool and you do there a lot of exercise and you have electric shocks and a lot of thing. It's funny because I didn't have electric shocks because I was gay; it was to make the nerves to respond. With the electricity, they made the muscles to respond.

Tape I
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When I start again walking and doing my things, I say, “I’m going back to school.” Then there was this new school at a college level in Mexico, that the university opened up, and they were in different places in the city. The way of teaching was so different because this came out as a project for the students that were not in jail, who were part of the ’68 movement. And then there was a lot of energy and there was a new thinking, because when you went to the university in Mexico, I guess in the sixties, you went and you say, “Okay, I’m going to be a lawyer.” Okay, you go and apply for the school.

They say, “Okay, you are in,” and you go to the university. Then from seven to three you were in class, and the way the teachers did was they came to the classroom and they start talking the whole hour. Never interact with you. Never ask you something, never. When the class finished, they went, and one after another and one after another. That was the way they teach. Then suddenly they say, “Okay, let’s have an exam,” and they did an exam. Then at the end and they saw the results of those exams, they will tell you, “Okay, you are exempt for the final exam,” or if no, “You have to do the exam.” But the whole career was like that.

SS: Wow.

GA: Even in careers like engineering, the discussion was minimal.

SS: When you were a young man in Mexico, what was the gay consciousness or what was the gay underground world like?

GA: I didn’t know until I mentioned to you before that this guy told me, “This is bad.”

But when I went to the high school with the priests, I started reading and – because I was the guy who didn't play sports, and if I go to play volleyball, they say, "Oh, you are *maricon*," and this and that. I was always reading, no? But it was okay because that opened up a whole world for me. Then I started reading, reading and reading and reading. And I remember at that time came out this book that *Everything You Need to Know about Sex* and was translated to Spanish. For some reason, I got it because at that time and my age that supposedly you will not read that. It was not a lecture for you, but that was one part. And then I started open up with some of the priests, especially the young ones, but the answer was, "Okay, you can change."

SS: So no priest was gay?

GA: Well, I have the feeling that some of them were gay, but the things were so crazy that I say, "No, that cannot be possible." Then I took religion as a way to try to avoid any conflict, to say, "Oh, I'm pure and if I offer my life to God," and that's the way that they told me. But before I went, I started going with the Jehovah's Witnesses, and they caught me, and that I was so passionate, because I say, "Okay, this is the way that I—." But basically I guess was because the way they treat me, I mean in the sense that for them I was one of them. You never talk about gay issues, but they knew, or just because I hear them sometimes. But they say – well, the point was anyway, "He can be gay, but if he doesn't do anything, that's okay."

And then I say, "Okay, this is it because I can be as they are and everything." But that was impossible, especially I was eighteen, nineteen, and all that stuff, and you are horny all the time anyway. And I was in love with one of the guys who give me the Bible studies and I just went for that because I was in love, stupid in love.

Tape I
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But regarding the way that I look at homosexuality, at that time in my neighborhood there were gay people. There was gay people, but they were the ones who get mugged and the ones who were insulted all the time and were the ones who were gay, but they did not say anything or they did not look gay. But I knew that they were gay because they approached me. And the other ones who were very flamboyant and they use sometimes makeup. It was very funny because I was terrified, because I say, "No, I don't want to be like them." But I didn't understand nothing. I guess was because the way that the other guys treat them.

Even I have a friend of mine who is dead because of AIDS, and he wrote a beautiful short story about that, about a guy like that, that say, "We are the ones that you insult during the day, but at night you are in our beds," and that was true.

We were in a very, very working-class neighborhood, very popular neighborhood, and then the way that we spent time was playing, because right in the corner of my house was the *deportivo*, that we call a place with football, soccer.

SS: Like a playing field?

GA: Playing field, and then basketball and volleyball and games for children and all that stuff, and a gymnasium to play basket[ball], and also volley[ball] and gymnastic. We went down there every day, every, every, every day.

And the other way that we have a good time was during the weekends, mostly Sundays after dark, people close up the streets and then they put a big sound system and they start playing music. It was amazing that the gay people, they have a line of guys who want to dance with them because they dance beautiful, but beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, that people went to see them. And the guys were with their

girlfriends or with their wives, and they make line. That was from six to ten, and at ten there was no alcohol yet, there was no drugs yet. I mean, if someone did some marijuana, they did it in other place. But was nice and that was the part that I liked. But the other part, when I saw them in the street walking, oh, my god, I was so terrified.

SS: So by the time you were twenty-five years old or something like that, were you still in that mentality, or did you go into the gay community yet?

GA: No, after I came out from my illness, I went back to the school, and I went back to this school that I mentioned to you that is called the Colegio de Ciencia y Humanidades, and was so different. That was a new world for me because the guys were young, the teachers, and when you start the semester, they said, “Okay, this is the program. These are the books that you have to read. You have to form teams and you have to give the—.” Every time there was a different team. Then we pick between us and they made the class, they made the lesson. Then the other teams were participating, and the professor was just trying to correct the things that were really wrong and was like a moderator. But his or her participation was almost nothing.

Then that was the first time in my life that I have the possibility to speak out and they didn’t laugh at me, and that changed my world completely, completely, completely, because I started talking and I become very outspoken. I start participating in the student movement, and that was my first thing, and then I started learning because that was a very active school. We have conferences and people from the student movement came to speak out, what happened, and people from different ways of life. We had theater. We have a lot of things, no?

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All of the courses were like that, even writing or reading, and chemistry and biology, and all of them were interactive. You studied something in literature had to do with something in biology and in chemistry, and that was very nice. And that was the first time that I start participating and understanding that the things were not like they were because was the will of God, and poor people was poor because it's like that. And it was very interesting because a lot of things happens there.

Of course, there was other part of the establishment in the university that didn't like what all these people were doing with the students, and then they have groups, organized groups, we called them *porros*, were groups that they just were there in the schools doing nothing, but they were paid for the authorities to terrorize the students.

Then we start organizing ourselves, because one of the things, they kill one student and they kill one professor. The student was in chemistry laboratory, and suddenly came out, someone entered the room and shot him in the head, and the professor also. And then we start organizing. That was crazy because we were fighting with people who had guns, but we say, "Enough is enough."

The things that really changed everything was when they killed the student inside the school and when they killed the teacher, because the teacher was after the student. They were in a motorcycle, very, very *¿cómo se llama?* – anyway, they wait that he went from one classroom to another and he was walking through, and they shot him over there.

And then that was the time when we said, "Enough." And then everyone organized, and then we started collecting steel bars and a lot of things, and we put a system because the school was in the middle of nowhere, and they can come out from

every part of the area. Then we start organizing. We put an alarm system that if someone see something odd, they push the alarm. The ring came and everyone start to organize and confront them, until we expel them.

That was my first big participation. And at the same time, we having the school Trotskyists and people for the Communist Party and all that stuff. I really like the Trotskyists because they were the first that spoke to me about sexuality, and especially about homosexuality because they want to co-opt me, the *comunistas*, the *Maoistas*. The *Maoistas* were sick because they say, "Let's kill the *putos*. Let's kill the faggots," and all that stuff. The communists, people from the Communist Party also, even though *ellos* [they] have the *Juventud Socialista*, *Juventud Comunista* [Socialist Youth, Communist Youth]. But they have always a very rhetorical point of view about sexuality in general. And homosexuality, forget it. Was part of the corruption of the *burguesía*

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SS: But I think the Fourth International, the Trotskyists in the U.S., also, were the first ultra-left group to support gay people.

GA: I mean, after that I started reading more and learning more, and I knew that for example, the Trotskyists were the first one, even before here, but in Europe, to start supporting the women's rights and sexuality and gay rights, no? And, yes, and Mexico happened the same, and Mexico was the same.

SS: Did you join?

GA: They call us *simpatizantes* [sympathizers], and after that, yes, I become a member.

SS: And what was it called? Here it was Socialist Workers Party and the Spartacists.

GA: Over there it was *Partido Revolucionario de las Trabajadores* [PRT]. That was a formation, several groups, because Trotskyists always are fighting and they always have *tendencias*, no? And they have groups and everything. But then in 1976, the four biggest groups in Mexico, they join together and they form the party, PRT. And this was the first time that people from the left speak out about – it's a wonderful story that some day someone in Mexico should do it, because there are things that were very important in the sense that, yes, a lot of guys from the PRT, we were in the gay movement.

SS: Because they were willing to recruit gay people and nobody else would.

GA: Yes, and I'm telling you the truth. I didn't join them because I was *Trotskyista*. I mean, I knew the facts and the basic things, what happened with Trotsky, what happened with Stalin, all this and that, but I really enjoyed them because they treated me like a human being and they give me support.

After I finished the school, I went to study theater and economics, economics in the morning and theater in the evening. A lot of people in the theater school also they were from the PRT and we form a theater company. We were together for several years, and they are continuing doing beautiful things in Mexico.

SS: So when did you come to New York?

GA: In 1986.

SS: Do you mind telling us why you decided to come?

GA: Oh, my god. Well, I came to New York in 1969 with the Jehovah's Witnesses to Yankee Stadium. *Ay, no me recuerdo cómo se llama*. I don't remember

how they called, but it was this big meeting, worldwide meeting from the Jehovah Witnesses, and then I came – *loca*. I was just finishing high school and I say, “Okay, I’m going.” I convinced my father and my mother, I don’t know how, to let me come. And it was good. But I came and we were here eight days, and from those days, every day we have to be in Yankee Stadium doing all this stuff and everything. But we went there and say, “Okay, bye,” and we took the subway and we came here. Was amazing, no? I remember there was in the movie theaters, a movie that is called *Fahrenheit* –

SS: *Fahrenheit* –

GA: A number. *Fahrenheit 430* something [*Fahrenheit 451*]. I remember that much, and I went to Times Square. We went to the museums and everything, and I was walking through the streets and I say, “One day I’m going to be here in New York. I’m going to live here and that’s it.”

I come back to Mexico and after some time I left the Jehovah Witnesses because, before, they were saying, “The Armageddon is coming. The Armageddon is coming.”

And, “When it’s going to happen?”

They say, “In ’68.”

And I say, “In ’68? Oh, come on. There are going to be the Olympics in Mexico. That cannot happen.” {LAUGHTER}

They say, “Yes, yes, yes.”

JW: We have to stop and change the tape. Hold your thought.

SS: So what made you come in 1986?

GA: In Mexico happened the earthquake in 1985 and was something very

tragic and very terrible in Mexico City, but also was something very important, because after that, nothing was the same, because after the earthquake, the government said, “Nothing happened. We are okay.” And when you went to the streets, you see all the destruction and no one was helping them, and people start rescue and moving the bricks and everything. When the government said again, “You need to go back to your homes,” people say no, because the Mexican government put out the army, and the army didn’t help, was just trying to get people to their home. It was something terrible.

But at the same time, I was tired. At the same time that I was in theater and in the movement, become very involved in politics, came out the first organization public to work for gay and lesbian rights in Mexico.

SS: What was the name of the organization?

GA: The name of the organization was – were two organizations. One of them was *Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria* and the other one was *el Grupo Lambda de Liberación Homosexual*, and in those two organizations I have friends who were from the PRT. With my friends, I went to the first demonstration in ’78, in June, but I went as support, not as part of the organization. Then they say, “Okay, you have to come to a meeting,” and I went to a meeting and I stayed.

From there, I didn’t move from the other political activists or militants to the gay militants. For me was the same. For me was no different. For us, because we were not just men, gay men, but there were lesbians, and we have a lot of support with the women, the feminists from the PRT. Oh, my god, that was wonderful, wonderful. I started working with the gay organization, and we were several of us and we were the best. In Lambda we have a horizontal, as in ACT UP, we have an horizontal – We were

not asking for membership. The only thing that you have to do is go and attend a meeting and participate, and if you want to be in a committee, you can.

After that, we started going to college and universities and we started doing demonstrations against police brutality. We started doing a lot of things. I was there from that time until 1984, '85.

SS: Was there AIDS consciousness in that period?

Tape II
00:05:00

GA: No. Well, not really, because when I hear about AIDS was here in New York. Because of that, we have in Lambda a lot of contact with international organizations. We have contact here with Lavender Left and the original organization from after Stonewall. Also we have contact with groups in San Francisco and also in Europe and we have a lot of information. Initially all the information was in English. Then we have also our team that translate or to share the books and everything.

The point is that we have contact with some guys here that were called *Comité Homosexual Latinoamericano* [COHLA], who were made from Latin American guys who were living here in New York, and they came to visit us. We have always people from different parts of the world. We have people from New York, from Chicago, from San Francisco, from Sweden, from Holland, from Germany, who were living there with us and help us out.

SS: We were on the periphery of Lavender Left, Jim [Hubbard] and I, when we were young. Who were your contacts in Lavender Left?

GA: Was a guy who – I don't remember his name, but my friend Frankie, who live – he can remember because he was the one that we have contact, I mean that I have contact the most. But is Steve Forgione?

SS: What was it?

GA: Steve Forgione?

SS: Don't know.

GA: No? He was a guy who used to live in 23rd Street, between 8 and 9. He was also in ACT UP, but he died.

SS: He died?

GA: Yes, yes. Steve Forgione, yes. But the other people, I don't remember the names.

Then I hear about AIDS here. I came to visit my friend Frankie, because he was for the organization, COHLA, and then when we met was in 1981 because we came here. I came with my boyfriend and another friend, and we finish in his apartment, 96th and Broadway, where the lesbian used to live. Do you remember those lesbians who used to live in 96th and Broadway, who were very radicals, and then the FBI come? They were Laura White.

SS: Oh, sure, sure, sure. She went to prison, yes.

GA: Well, he lived at that time in the next-door apartment. We didn't know that about the lesbians, but anyway. And then we have a dinner there and came from Nicaragua, a friend of his, and he say, "I hear about a gay concert."

And we say, "Where?" This was April, '81, and I say, "Where?"

He say, "In the gym."

And we say, "Oh? Did you hear anything else?"

"No." I'm alive, I guess, because, you know, I came to New York at that time with my boyfriend, because I will finish in the bath house and everything. Nothing

wrong with that, but at that time I was so in love that I was not able to leave my boyfriend just for a minute. We stayed one month in Frankie's apartment and then I return. During that time, we didn't hear about AIDS until after the first article in the *New York Times*, and the first reaction for us in Mexico was, "No, that's not going to happen. This is something for the right, something that they are doing to scare us, to take us our rights." I remember doing an interview in Mexico because I became very public, very open in my job. After I left theater, I went to work in the Mexican government, the Secretario de Comunicaciones y Transportes with a friend of mine who was also from Lambda, and he was the director of agency about information. Then he invited there like a half of Lambda and half of PRT guys and was called the *Cage aux Folles* because we were gay all the way.

Then we became very public. At that time, there was no usual that you go to the television and say, "Yes, we are gay," and all that stuff, but we did it. Also, we work a lot with the left, inside the left to participate, because our approach was we are not fighting just for gay rights. As the condition in Mexico were, we were fighting for the rights of everyone, and we have to make those people who call themselves the leaders, the vanguard and all that stuff, meaning the left organizations, to understand that this is something that we are doing for everyone.

Tape II
00:10:00

We were in every organization that was important at that time and we joined every front and we participate in all demonstrations from political prisoners to *democracias sindical* to *colonos* to neighborhoods, everything. We were everywhere. Even we were at the *Basilica de Guadalupe*, when was the assassination of Monsignor [Óscar] Romero. That was 1981, and there was a big demonstration and was the first

time that a contingent of gay and lesbian, open lesbian and gay people came out inside the Basilica, visible.

Then we were in there, and when we hear about AIDS, we say, “No, that cannot be possible. That’s something that should be the CIA.” That was the first reaction. And I don’t regret it because we don’t have information. We didn’t have anything. If you, here in New York, didn’t know what was going on, can you imagine in Mexico was something terrible, was so devastating?

SS: So when you came to New York and you started to realize that AIDS was real, how did that confront you? How did AIDS affect you when you lived here?

GA: You know that the first time that I met someone who was HIV-positive was a guy who used to live with us. Joe was his name. He was from Chicago. Then when I move here, like two or three months, my friends told me, “Joe have AIDS.” And I said, “Oh, my god.” He came to New York and he stayed with us because I was living with this friend that I told you, Frank Dominguez, who was from COHLA, and he was also in ACT UP and he was also in the Latino [Caucus] of ACT UP.

SS: Is Frank Dominguez still alive?

GA: Yes, yes. Then one of the things – well, let me tell you, when I move here, Frank was listening to BAI¹, and then, for me was something, “Wow,” I say, “Oh,

¹ WBAI is the Pacifica radio station in New York City. It is usually referred to simply as BAI, pronounced B-A-I.

my god.” And I hear of the programming and I hear a program that they have that was called *Alternativa Latina*, and I say, “Oh, my god. That’s interesting.”

But one of the things that was so amaze for me was that you didn’t hear about AIDS in the Latino community. And when I move here, the first thing that I did was go into the gay community center, look for information in Spanish or in English about Latinos and AIDS. Nothing. And I went to the organizations and I joined them. Nothing. And it was so frustrating because they say, “No, that’s not an issue for us.”

And I say, “Excuse me? That’s not an issue for us?” Anyway, that was the point.

When I arrived, BAI had the fundraising, and in this program they say, “Come over. Do you speak Spanish? Come and help us to answer the phones.”

I went down there, and the program was Saturdays. I started working as a volunteer. In two or three months, I was producing my first segment. I say, “My first segment is going to be about gay issues.”

Tape II
00:15:00

And they say, “Beautiful.”

I call it *Rompiendo el Silencio* [Breaking the Silence]. I started doing that and also started doing AIDS reporting, trying to get people to talk about AIDS in the Latino community and in Spanish, and was my focus, especially because when I move here – in Mexico, I didn’t sense what was happening with my friends. But the thing that happened is that after I move, like six months, I started receiving calls from my friends and they told me, “So-and-so is sick in the hospital.”

And I say, “What happened?”

“Ah, well, you know what.”

Then after one week, they call me to say that he was dead. At that time, I decided that I – I didn't decide that I was going to stay, but that happened. I didn't have the money to go back and forth and to attend – but I have beautiful friends that made the world better and they are not here, and they are a whole generation. There are, like, four or six people who survived. I don't know why I am one of them, and all of them are dead. During that period of, I guess, one year, almost, when I hear the telephone ring at night, I was so afraid because, yeah, that was some news that someone was sick or someone was dead.

SS: So how did you decide to go to ACT UP?

GA: I went to the demonstration on April '87, the national demonstration, the first national demonstration. Everything was so intense and so emotional. I was here almost one year, but the first gay parade that I saw in the Village, I was so overwhelmed because we, in Mexico, worked so hard to make that happen, because since '78 we started doing the gay parade in Mexico, no? But at the beginning, as here, was very political, very, very political. We had a theme and also mostly has to do with the political and police brutality, because we were subject to a lot of things with the police in Mexico City. But not in Mexico City, was all over the country, no?

For the second gay parade in Mexico in '78, we came out like two thousand people. Oh, my god, and we were so happy because from the year before that we were less than two hundred to two thousand, and we took the main street from Mexico City and we marched. Oh, my god. I remember we did banners and flags with the Lambda sign. And the banners on the flags were so beautiful because there were *de esta tela que es brillante*, like a bright fabric, and we painted with a stencil and we did

Lambda signs. We did five hundred flags. We worked so hard and we say, “Oh, my god, tomorrow what are we going to do? Who is going to carry these things? Oh, my god.” And when we saw that they were and it was beautiful.

When I moved here and I saw that parade, I say, “Oh, my god,” but that has nothing to do with the feeling that I had when we went to Washington in April ‘87. I mean, was so overwhelming. I just remember I was with my friend Frankie, with Sergio, that he lives in Jalapa, and myself, another friend, and we didn’t move. We saw the whole, whole, whole parade of groups, and when I saw New York, oh, my god. I saw Barney Frank. It was amazing. We saw the beginning of the march and we saw Whoopi Goldberg and all these people who were in the beginning. And we say, “We can do something.” “Something is going to happen.”

Also, that was, the thing. And after that, because I was working, I didn’t go to the ACT UP foundation, when they call because I was working. I was cleaning apartments and all that stuff, but my friend Victor went. He say, “*Loca. Vamos.*” He told me, “Let’s go. This is good. And beside,” he told me, “all the men are so beautiful and they are gorgeous.”

“Okay, let’s go.” And we started going, you know.

At the same time, I was working at BAI as a volunteer, and I had my show and we have a lot of things, and that’s the way that we enjoy ACT UP. My friend Victor Parra, who was also from Lambda, he move one year before here to New York. He was one of the founders of the Latino Caucus of ACT UP and he was the founder of the Translation Committee, who was before the Latino Caucus.

SS: Victor Parra.

GA: He died from AIDS.

SS: He died.

GA: Yes, he died from AIDS here in New York.

SS: So what committee did you first join when you came to ACT UP?

GA: The Translation Committee.

SS: So can you explain how that got started and who was in it and what you did?

GA: They formed the committee, Moisés Agosto, Victor Parra and other people that I don't remember at this moment. But the ones that I can remember is Moisés Agosto, so he's still alive. He was the poster boy from ACT UP at one time. For me, was being thirsty because one of the things was we don't have information. We don't have information. And one of the amazing things that ACT UP did was that, to have information. And we say, "Yes, but now a lot of our people doesn't speak English. Let's do something." And that was the thing. That was a necessity, and we start translating. We said, "We have to do the medical and treatment information," because that was the most relevant part and that was the main purpose of the Translation Committee.

SS: What were the treatment issues at the time that you were translating? Do you remember?

GA: I guess the basics. Mostly the side effects of AZT and the clinical trials that were going on and how to enroll in some of them. I guess those are the things that I remember when we started doing that.

SS: So you would go to the Monday night meeting, get the information in English, and then do the translation?

GA: Yes, but I remember, I guess, that was a Treatment Committee in ACT UP. Then Moisés was part of that committee, and then other people from the Latino Caucus also was in that committee. Then they came to the Translation Committee and they presented what they were doing, and they say, "Let's do this." And that was the way that we worked.

SS: So the treatment activists who were on both committees, they knew what was the priority information, right?

GA: Yes, yes.

SS: And once you did the translation, how did you get it to the community?

GA: We put it in the table in the Monday meetings. In that sense, people will notice that there was information in Spanish. We put it in the gay community center and a lot of us working organization communities. For example, Moisés was working in El Bronx, in the Bronx, with a group of students. And we took it to schools, to different parts, churches and community organizations, mostly.

Tape I
00:25:00

SS: So how many Latinos would you say were in ACT UP?

GA: I don't remember, because not all the Latinos were in the Latino Caucus. But I guess when ACT UP was in its peak, we were maybe 150.

SS: The Latino Caucus, did that exist already when you joined ACT UP or did you help create it?

GA: No, they existed, because after one meeting from the Translation Committee, they decide that they have to do something like a caucus to see what we can do inside ACT UP.

SS: So you also joined the Latino Caucus?

GA: Yes.

SS: Can you explain to us who was in the Latino Caucus, what the priorities were?

GA: The Latino Caucus were people with HIV, drug addicts, women, and activists, and what we did was to try to educate the community about HIV because even HIV, at that moment, was something very critical and was affecting a lot of our neighborhoods, like the Lower East Side, South Bronx, and all that stuff. There were no programs. There was no information, and we tried to reach out to the community and the community respond. The guys who were drug addicts and who were in treatment and who were HIV-positive started working, doing outreach to their communities, and also the women. And that was the way that we have the possibility of give out the things that we did in ACT UP.

SS: One of the things that's really interesting about the Latino Caucus is that more women with AIDS were in the Latino Caucus than in any other group in ACT UP, and most of those women have died, but not all.

GA: Yes.

SS: Just for the record, can you remember some of them and tell us about them, their names, and what you remember?

GA: Yes. Lydia Awadala was a woman from Brooklyn. They have two organizations that they work, one in Brooklyn, Women for Life, and one in the Bronx. Lydia started the program. The girl that started the program in the Bronx was Rita Cordova, who was someone who was very involved in the community. And they start a

group in St. Ann's Church in the South Bronx that's called Woman Alive or something like that. But you know who have the records? Chica?, that organization, which is in 34th Street, and they do a lot of things for AIDS. They funded both groups. The group up in the Bronx and the group in Brooklyn. Now, mostly all of the women in those groups came to the Latino Caucus.

Lydia Awadala was a woman, beautiful. She has two sons, one with HIV and the other was almost a teenager. She was wonderful. I mean, she was very committed and she did wonderful things for the community, but also she died.

There is another woman that I remember is called Marina Alvarez.

SS: She's still alive.

GA: Yes, and her story's so amazing, because she was in jail, and she caught HIV and that changed her life. I just see her now and just see how wonderful she is, no?

SS: What about Iris de la Cruz]?

GA: Iris de la Cruz, for example. She was supporter, but she never joined really the Latino Caucus, but she was always very committed to what we were doing. We knew her poetry.

SS: Because she was organizing sex workers, yes?

GA: Yes. Yes, but she never came to work with us, the other women.

SS: Latino Caucus and ACT UP had problems with other Latino organizations, sometimes had good coalitions and relationships and sometimes had conflicts. Now, of course, there was the famous incident with Joey Franco.

GA: And the Hispanic AIDS Forum.

SS: Yes. Can you explain what that was about?

GA: Well, the point is that also we were activists and we need to call out of the organizations that say they were doing something with the community because, I mean, we didn't have the resources that they had, and that was not our job. I can tell you now, with the time, that we did more things than they did now or in their history, and also we say no. When we look at the Hispanic AIDS Forum and we knew because we have people who were inside and who tell us —not just Joe Franco, but Candido Negron, who was there and were in the Hispanic AIDS Forum, and the things that they were doing. We say, "Oh, come on."

SS: Be specific.

GA: First, we say, "Why do you have your office in SoHo," when the community's not in SoHo?" I mean, "Let's have it in the Bronx or the Lower East Side or in the *barrio*." But anyway, how many people can come from the Bronx to SoHo? Anyway, that was one of the point.

But the outreach, there was no outreach to the community. You cannot say that you are doing outreach just because you have pamphlets or flyers on your table in your office. You need to give out, you need to go to the neighborhoods. They were sitting in their office waiting that the people will come.

SS: In your analysis, why is it that the Hispanic AIDS Forum did not do any activism?

GA: Because that was not their point. They were sitting there just having their pockets full. And was a good move for them, especially in the Latino community. When they say, "Oh, we work on AIDS," oh, my god. And for that reason, also, one of

the points that we said is, “You have to reflect in the constitution of your board of directors the people who are affected by the epidemic. Where are any HIV people in your board of directors?” None, because they were just there because their curriculum looked good.

SS: So what happened?

GA: What happened? We called them and we say, “We want to meet with you.” There were many things involved because we have just one meeting with them who finished very bad because, yes, we were very passionate. And we say, “No, you need to do something, and we demand.” We didn’t go polite and say, “Okay, come on.”

Of course, these people was, “I’m the executive director. You are talking to me like that?” All the board, who were all these big names, the president of, at that time, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund was in the board, and then people like that. “Come on. You are coming here to my place to tell me what should I do? Are you stupid, no?” That was their response, and they closed it and they didn’t want to do anything with us.

And we say, “Okay.” And then the Day of Desperation –

SS: The Day of Desperation.

GA: — in January, 1991. We organized our thing by ourselves. We went to downtown to have the demonstration, and after that we took a bus, and our first stop was the Borough President, the Bronx.

SS: Who was Ferrer?

GA: Fernando Ferrer, and Marina Alvarez is giving him this tape and everything, videotape, giving him the diploma to the, *a la negligencia*. She confront him

Tape II
00:35:00

and she say, “I live in the Bronx. What you are doing? You don’t have anything. You don’t have services. You don’t have this. You don’t have that.” Oh, my god, that was powerful and amazing. If we put out that tape, now that Fernando Ferrer is going to run again for mayor.

SS: Do you have that tape?

James Wentzy: We’ll do it. Yes, we do.

SS: You have it?

JW: Sure, we have it.

SS: Great. How did ACT UP respond to this? So ACT UP’s Latino Caucus is telling ACT UP, “We’re having this conflict with this mainstream AIDS organization. We’re going after this big-shot politician.” Did you get support from ACT UP or what happened?

GA: They were very paternalistic. They never came to our actions. But it’s not just ACT UP, but ACT UP is an example. Not you, but American people doesn’t want to learn anything about nothing. We are – I mean in the sense that we went to every, every, every, every demonstration that was called for ACT UP. Every demonstration. You can look at the tapes and you’ll see Luis Salazar got arrested in the NIH. And Kennebunkport, the house of Bush in the –

SS: Kennebunkport.

GA: I mean, they were the Latinos. They were in Washington. They were in every, every part of the demonstration. And when you call a demonstration to the Hispanic AIDS Forum because we are going to the man that this organization were, “Oh, no, we cannot do that because they are – oh, no, no, no.” I mean, come on. We call a

demonstration in front of the Argentinian consulate because they were criminalizing people with HIV and all that stuff. We announced it in the floor, and who went? Just the same guys that always went.

SS: Did you get any support from ACT UP, financial support?

GA: Yes, we have financial support, at least that. Yes, in that sense, it's the last thing that they will say no. Please, because the Latino Caucus of ACT UP was the first one who demonstrate in Puerto Rico about AIDS, and that was funded by ACT UP. Of course, at that time, okay, *las locas y blancas*, the white guys, they say, "Okay, I'll go to Puerto Rico," and they went, okay. But at least they work. They spent there one month preparing and was amazing. The demonstration that they did in front of the *capitolio*, in front of the cathedral and all that stuff was amazing. That's the first time that the Puerto Rican people saw a demonstration about AIDS, because what's happening at national conference on the CDC and NIH on AIDS in Puerto Rico? Nothing happened. And for that reason, the Latino Caucus went and they founded ACT UP/Puerto Rico.

SS: So that was the beginning of ACT UP/Puerto Rico.

GA: That was the beginning of ACT UP/Puerto Rico.

SS: What about when the Women's Caucus started the campaign to change the definition of AIDS so that women with AIDS could get benefits? You remember this, the CDC definition. The Latino Caucus was part of this, so there was coalition between the Women's Caucus and the Latino Caucus.

GA: Always.

SS: Always?

GA: Always.

SS: There was coalition between the Latino Caucus and the Majority Action, but the problem was—

GA: We did not understand the Majority Action Committee.

SS: Well, tell me.

GA: But we say it's okay. If they want to form it, form it. We form in a caucus because we have specific issues to address inside the things that were happening in the epidemic. And we saw that was the only way to at least have some of those issues here. But the other thing – but, yes, we have a lot of things in common with the Majority Committee, who were the Asian people and black people, and they always work with us.

SS: So in a way, there's two ACT UPs. You're describing the ACT UP of people of color and women, and then this white male ACT UP that's sometimes supporting and sometimes not. Is that accurate?

GA: Well, I think they did not support – looking back, I say they have their own – because we have to understand now is that they were fighting for their lives, also, and then we were just a reflection of the whole society, the American society. We are here, the Latinos and people of color, or whatever they call us, but we are not, you know. And it's the same. If you look at the majority of this country is white Saxon Anglo—

SS: White – WASPs, you mean.

GA: Exactly.

SS: But they're not majority. But, yes. They have the power.

GA: Like a [unclear] doll.

SS: But what's interesting and what I'm trying to get at is that –

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: We're just on the topic of the relationships between Latinos in ACT UP who did not speak Spanish and ones who did, and you were saying Joe Franco didn't speak Spanish.

GA: Joe Franco didn't speak Spanish. Luis Lazar didn't speak Spanish. And the other guy, the doctor, did you remember him?

SS: Yes, Guerrero

GA: Guerrero, Elias Guerrero.

SS: What's his first name?

GA: Elias.

SS: Yes, Elias Guerrero.

Jim Hubbard: And Robert Garcia

GA: And Robert Garcia. Basically, Robert Garcia was one of the first guys that I interview in BAI, for the first day of World AIDS Day, the first time that was that thing organized. I don't remember the year, but I guess it was '90 or '91. But, yes, we have a special show and we have a two-hour show in BAI.

SS: I want to ask you, since you're an experienced political activist, ACT UP has – there's a contradiction and I wonder what your analysis is of it. On one hand, there's racism inside the organization. The Latino Caucus is doing actions that the whites are not supporting and this sort of thing. It can't be denied. It's a fact. However, in the long big historical picture, ACT UP was able to win things like needle exchange, like changing the CDC definition, like housing works that affected Latinos and poor people who had AIDS. So how do you explain this, this contradiction?

GA: Well, I guess it is not a contradiction. We need to say that we were part of that. We were part of that, and we did that, also, because in the demonstrations as the Day of Desperation and other big demonstration that we have, besides working with the establishment to change the definition and everything, but they should be ashamed of those things because people were outside, people were in jail, people were putting their lives at risk because they believe that things should be changed, and we were part of that.

SS: But what's interesting is that somehow—and this is what I want to see if you could help me articulate—women, Latinos, immigrants inside ACT UP who did not control the organization, but who knew what the agenda was, somehow were able to mobilize the entire organization to make these changes. How did that happen?

GA: Because I guess in the long run, people in ACT UP were people who believe that things should be different. There is no way, in my mind, that in the recent history of this country, and even in the recent history of the world, there has been a movement as the AIDS movement, and especially ACT UP, who inspire so many changes, not just political, but socially, and the way of life. For that reason I'm telling you when I look back, I say we were part of it.

Now I want to thank you guys, because this is the opportunity at least that we have the Latinos and Latinas to be in the record because the other thing is that, that we have been part of the movements but never been in the record. That happened with the Stonewall, besides Sylvia Rivera, the transgender who died recently, who were at the beginning of the movement. But the significance of the guys who started Stonewall, not just the night or the three or four nights of the riots, but after that, organizing, organizing,

organizing, giving the civility to something that was not visible, was nonexistent, that happened with AIDS. That happened with the ACT UP.

Tape III
00:05:00

I never, never, never felt, since I moved here so empowered, when I went to those meetings and I saw all these people, not just in the gay community center, but we moved to Cooper Union and NYU, the auditoriums, full of energy and full of willingness to change the world. And I say, yeah, those blanquitos, those blanquitos were also willing to put their lives in risk. Because what I tried to explain to some Latinos who don't understand is in this country is not just oh, I'm going to be arrested because, it's nice to be arrested, no? That is going to be in your record and you can ask Candido that he moved to Orlando and he was trying to be a teacher, in his record was all the times that he went to jail because of ACT UP. And he has to explain to the board of the school that he was arrested because he was in a demonstration for AIDS.

SS: Now I have a lot of little questions to ask you. Yolanda Serrano.

GA: Yolanda Serrano, she was part of the Board of Directors of Hispanic AIDS Forum. She was a woman who did a lot of good things, but at the end, I guess, when the controversy with the Hispanic AIDS Forum, she was afraid to lose her position because she was one of the most powerful Latinas, in the Latino world here in New York, no? She was very well known and all that stuff, but in her heart I knew, I knew, I knew that she knew we were right, but she cannot accept it.

SS: There was a whole contingent of Argentinians.

GA: Oh, yes. Alfredo Gonzalez, you need to talk with him.

SS: He's still alive?

GA: He's still alive. He's a doctor now in anthropology at [the University

of Illinois] Urbana. He has been doing a lot of work on AIDS here and in Rio de Janeiro. Yes, he's still alive.

SS: Who were some of the others, the Argentinian group?

GA: The Argentinian. Well, most visible was his, was Alfredo, but there was a Colombian also, who's still alive, who is Jairo Pedraza.

SS: How do you spell that?

GA: Jairo is J-a-i-r-o. Pedraza is P-e-d-r-a-z-a. And there is this guy, Candido Negron, he's in Orlando. He was also very, very part of the Latino Caucus. And also Jesus Aguais, who is the Aid for AIDS. He's a celebrity now.

SS: How do you spell this last name?

GA: Jesus Aguais is A-g-u-a-i-s.

SS: Now let's talk about Juan Medina.

GA: Juan Mendez.

SS: Juan Mendez. Sorry. Juan Mendez. He was really like a leader in ACT UP, not just in Latino Caucus. He was a main figure in ACT UP and also kind of a mainstream person in some ways. So can you tell us a little bit about what he did in ACT UP? Let's start with that.

GA: Well, he was a leader and he was a beautiful guy, and he work a lot and he want to be – that's one of the good things about ACT UP that you can become a star and a celebrity, but because of your work, because in ACT UP, you cannot be a celebrity just because you were nice or handsome or, you know. No. If you work, we give you the – that was one of the things that we have with other people in the Latino Caucus because we work as equals. But sometimes some people wants to be in the

spotlight, and we say, “Yeah, go ahead, but you respond to us.” And Juan always did. We knew that he wants to be a celebrity and we say, “Okay, go ahead, mama. Go ahead, mama,” and he was until the end, you know. After ACT UP, he move and he started working in media, and he was also in BAI. But he did a good job in the Latino Commission on AIDS, and then he moved to *El Diario/La Prensa*, and then he moved to *Latina* magazine, and then he moved to Univision, and then he moved back to Miami. Then he moved back here and then he die.

SS: A lot of people have had serious crystal meth problems after ACT UP. It's very common that people who survived the AIDS crisis have crystal meth problems. In fact, Peter Staley has been very public and open about his addiction issues and all this kind of stuff. Juan died of crystal, right?

GA: And then the other guy Gabriel Torres. What can I tell you, mana? What can I say? I'm an alcoholic. I'm twenty-one years in recuperation. Since I move here, I never touch any alcohol. In my country, in my environment, in the militant and political movement, alcohol was okay, but not here. Then when I moved, things were different in the sense that I don't have the support of my friends, because even I can be very drunk. They always treat me well and they – I don't know. The point is that in Mexico I never stop going to work because alcohol, not even here. But I stay here at the end? No, I don't want to be here like that. I don't want to die in the subway, in the tracks, or wherever. I stopped drinking, and thank God I don't have any other issue. I smoke for a while. I don't smoke now.

Maybe it's the age, but the crystal meth and all the other drugs gave me – I'm afraid of that maybe because I am, as they say, an alcoholic, and I know what's going

on. Maybe I never touched them because I'm afraid of that, that if I touch them, I will be dead. But it's very sad. I don't why. I don't know what happened. But, yes, more and more people that I know, that I've been very friend, I mean that they were part of my life in some time and very important because it's different. When you have a family, you have a family and you love your family because it's your family. But your friends, you choose them and you met them. My thing is that I'm blessed for that because the people that I know through all my life those are my treasures. Without them, Sarah.

I didn't know that I was going to have this apartment never, never imagined. When I moved to New York, I started working as a kitchen aide and I did all the jobs that an Indian does. I don't move here because I need money or I want to be rich. I moved here because I was crazy or whatever. But what I'm trying to tell you is that I never imagined that I was going to work in *El Diario/La Prensa*, that I was going to witness all the wonderful things that I told you, and that I was going to be able to have my place. I never, never – I slept in the subway station sometimes. I have to decide if I will eat a slice of pizza or take the subway, things like that.

And I'm blessed, but I'm blessed because of my friends, because the people that I met through these years, and it's so terrible for me to see that some of them are – and the other thing is that I don't know how to reach them. Because when Juan Mendez moved back here, I knew that he had problems, but he never opened up. And then in this thing that you don't know if you have to respect that – I mean, with all the things that you live with them, and if you met them and they say, "Oh, hello. How are you? Okay, I'm good," and three months later he's dead. Please, no. That's one thing that I have with me and then hearing other people who are in the same situation. I don't

know what to think about it because honestly, honestly.

I guess my thing now is that some day I have to finish all the things that I have to finish putting together a *Homovisiones* archives, my things in the papers, my things in the radio and all that stuff, and doing more things. But I guess also what keep me alive is to see that the things that I do, even for life, I mean my work, I see that is making a difference. I'm the editor of the community section in *El Diario/La Prensa*, is one of the most reading sections of the paper, and I have my radio show now for twenty years in BAI. You hear it, and if you hear the people who listen the show, I just say, "Oh, my god," and then with that I'm okay.

SS: I just have a couple more just historic questions for the record that I want to ask you. What was the Latino Caucus' relationship with AIDS in Cuba?

GA: Not a lot. We try. We try and try, but at that time was not possible.

SS: So in other words, you were subject to the American situation, in terms of –

GA: We have information besides the information that you can read in the paper, see on all of the other stuff, because we have people over there, and we knew that the things that they were doing at the beginning of the epidemic on Cuba, like to try to put people on a special sanatorium and that sort of stuff. We also addressed that and we say, no, that's wrong. That should not be because it's the same situation that we are fighting here in the U.S. We are not going to take it and we denounce and we demand, and we say that's wrong, especially for Cuba.

SS: This is kind of a philosophical question, but would you say that

the Latino Caucus used a Latin American left-wing style to do political organizing, or do you think that people adjusted to the American protest style?

GA: I guess we used both in the sense that we were very passionate, because for us, in Mexico and in Latin America, we don't call it *activismo*. We call it *militancia*, which is different. Militant is someone who is more committed, I guess, and who thinks that that's part of her or his way of life and everything. Of course, some of those, those who had experience in the left, like Alfredo Gonzalez, José Santini because our generation was marked for the things that happened in Latin America, with the military dictatorships and all the repression and all that stuff. But we adopt also, because we say, yeah, the way that we should fight here is taking the way that the civil disobedience and all that stuff because it's a form of pressure and it's a valid and effective way of fighting.

SS: How did immigration issues come up in ACT UP?

GA: Oh, my god.

SS: Were there any actions that you can remember?

GA: Yes, because that's another part very important because at that time a lot of the guys who were working in ACT UP in the Latino Caucus started working in GMHC, and they were the first one who started working in immigration issues and then both in ACT UP and in GMHC. In fact, they – I mean, we don't force, but because of that work GMHC opened up an office and a program for immigrant in their offices, because, at that time a lot of people who was here before and discovered that they have HIV they went to try to get treatment or medical attention and they were facing a lot of things. Then we see that that was also part of our issue because we are that, we are

immigrants.

Then one of the things is that that we changed everything. I mean, the things that GMHC did with that program were amazing. People are still alive for that, because of that.

SS: Were there any ACT UP actions around immigration that you remember?

GA: I guess, yes. I guess one also that I mentioned in the – we did an action also in the Venezuelan Embassy, something like that, for immigration. Jesús. Did you talk to Jesús?

SS: No.

GA: He will tell you. He will tell you because he – you see the result of what is now the AIDS industry is because the work that ACT UP did. This guy, Jesús Aguais, he is the executive director of Aid for AIDS. It's an organization who works with people in Latin America, and he'll recycle the drugs and he send drugs to Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Colombia because over there still the one priority is access to drugs.

SS: So when did you leave ACT UP?

GA: When did I leave ACT UP? Let me see. I guess it was 1994.

SS: Nineteen –

GA: Fifty-four.

SS: No. Ninety-four?

GA: Ninety-four, ninety-four. Ninety-four, yes, because people who were in ACT UP, we started working in *Homovisiones* and then we create *Homovisiones* in '94.

SS: Can you explain what that is?

GA: *Homovisiones* was a television show who was on air in the community access cable from 1994 to 2002 or 2004. Ten years. We celebrate ten years in 2004.

SS: So, basically, a whole group of people left ACT UP to start *Homovisiones*.

GA: People start *Homovisiones*, for example. Other people went to work in different things. Alfredo start his master's degree and his doctorate, and Jairo started working for UNAIDS, and Jesús started founding Aid for AIDS. Those were the most visible. Of course, Moisés Agosto was working in the drug industry. And those are the guys. The women mostly all of them are dead, but Marina Alvarez now is a celebrity in the AIDS war, no? Yes.

SS: I only have one more question. Is there anything that you think we didn't cover?

GA: I guess one of the things that I want to mention is that also the Latino Caucus was the first organization who participate in the national Puerto Rican Day Parade with a gay – not with a gay just contingent, with an AIDS contingent. And that was something, wow, because when we took the streets on Fifth Avenue, we have signs about El Huracán AIDS, Hurricane AIDS in Puerto Rico, and was overwhelming, the response, because even people who talk about that, the media said, “The most important issues in this parade were the situation of the Puerto Rican, its commonwealth or independence and the drug addiction and AIDS.” Yes, and we did it for two years in a row.

Of course, after that, they came, these people who always work for them, and they didn't let us participate. And this woman is called Lila Pimentel and she was AIDS activist, but she say, "No, you cannot participate." And she called the police, and the police came, and we have to leave the third year.

SS: That's interesting, because I remember the first time there was a gay contingent in the Puerto Rican Day Parade because I actually marched in it.

GA: Seventy-eight.

SS: It was the last contingent in the parade. They made everybody wait.

GA: Yes, you were with them. You were with Frankie and all these people because, and you were in the *¿Cómo dice Frankie? El le llamaban el contingente del pueblo*, the people's contingent. And then they put there gay people and independent people, and yes, I remember that.

SS: And behind us were the garbage trucks.

GA: Right.

SS: So my final question is, looking back, what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you feel was its biggest disappointment?

GA: When I see people who supposedly should be dead because at that time when we started working in ACT UP, AIDS was a death sentence, and when I see them, that's, for me, the biggest accomplishment of ACT UP. And not just one, but I guess so, so many people are alive because of that, because ACT UP showed them that there was a way to fight, that there was possible to change things and to make things better.

When I see all the things that came out from ACT UP even things that we don't agree or disagree, but many, many, many, many things that are over there, that still is necessary to do more things, yes, because there is nothing that is finished with AIDS. I know people that is sick and I know people that have been very sick, and I know other friends that are dead recently. The most tragic thing is that now people think that it's not a problem that this is a chronic disease and that people can live getting HIV or getting AIDS or whatever, which is not true. But anyway, I guess that.

And when I see, also, I see that in other social movements we are part of the history and also is the way it is. They say, "This is a science," and if you see the gay movement, in '69, when Stonewall and all that stuff came all this revolution about everything, and people who participate in that did so many great things. And that's another thing. Recently, a friend of mine, who is eighteen, from Mexico, gay, who is living here in New York and working in a kitchen in downtown Manhattan, asked me, "Are you going to the gay parade?"

And I say, "No."

And he say, "Why?"

And I say, "No, I guess I'm not going to be here." And I ask him, "Do you know why there is a gay parade in New York?"

And he say, "No. Why?"

And I say, "I just guess to have fun." But that made me so sad, because at the same time I say our responsibility as people who were participating, maybe, is that, that more and more people, more and more young generations are losing the sense of history, the sense of where they come from. People who think that AIDS is just a chronic

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disease, they don't know nothing about what we went through, and I'm not talking about the terrible things that you have to suffer at that time, seeing your friends dying without attention, without any compassion, no, but the things that happened. How was that?

And I hope that some day you are going to write the beautiful novel, and I hope that someone some day is going to do a beautiful movie, because this is something that we have to do as a movie the time of ACT UP. That will be great. You know, it's like all the social movements. After some times they are co-opted by the system and they serve just an escape, *válvula de escape*, to let out the pressure in the system and everything. And the question is now, what is going to be the next big, big, big movement.

SS: Right. Thank you. Fantastic.

GA: Thanks to you.