

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: **Bill Bahlman**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Bill Bahlman
March 10, 2010**

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so the way we begin is you look at me; and just tell me your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

BILL BAHLMAN: My name is Bill Bahlman. We are on Charles Street where I have lived since 1980, '81. And my age: I was born December 31st, 1951, so that makes me 58 years old.

SS: Okay, and today's date.

BB: Today's date; March 10th, 2010.

SS: Okay, great. Where were you born, Bill?

BB: I was born in Brooklyn, New York.

SS: Oh, you're a New Yorker.

BB: I'm a New Yorker. People say that I don't have the accent of a New Yorker. Which at first I thought was kind of an insult, maybe. "Oh, you don't sound like you're from Brooklyn." But people, after they talk to me for a while, they're like, "there it is, there's that Brooklyn accent." So it's like –

SS: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

BB: I grew up in Sunset Park. Sunset Park was a little bit of a lower-financial-income area, compared to Bay Ridge, but it was right on the border of Bay Ridge, so we liked to say we were from Bay Ridge, not Sunset Park, to some degree. My family is Norwegian and German; German on my father's side, Norwegian on my mother's side. I took, I think, more after my

mother than my father, so I consider myself to be a bit more Norwegian. And my brother took more after my father, so he's the German sibling in the family.

SS: Where were they born, your parents?

BB: They were born – well, my mother was born in New York. My grandmother had come over from Norway. And my father was born in Washington, D.C., I believe.

SS: And so what did they do for a living?

BB: What'd they do for a living? My father was – well, he moved to New York, and that's where he met my mother. And his first job, I think, was working for the National Biscuit Company, Nabisco. So he was making Oreos and Vanilla Wafers and things like that. So he'd be bringing home, after work. In the same factory that's now the Chelsea Market. So you can actually see old pictures of what it looked like on the main floor of the Chelsea Market; what it looked like when they were actually making biscuits there, and cookies. So I don't know if you could see my father there. But there are pictures of that.

And my mother, she worked as a teacher's aide, and did a lot of typing and addressing of envelopes, as a way of making extra money. They were incredibly good parents, in terms of, they had two children, so they wanted to provide for both of us. So they worked two and three jobs. My father worked the night shift, and he'd come home at four in the morning after he left the biscuit company, and started working for the post office.

So they worked really, really hard. And even though we were a poorer family compared to our neighbors and so on, that maybe had a house in the

country, or a way to get away for big vacations, or whatever; they made sure that we had violin lessons, guitar lessons, tap-dancing lessons, acting lessons. And my grandmother had one of the first color TVs in the neighborhood, and watching “Bonanza” on TV, was a big excitement back then.

SS: Now were they union people? Were they political, in any way?

BB: They weren’t political in any way. My mother, who I have to credit for – anything I’ve done within the community and my activism, I have to credit to my mom. Because she worked very hard to help other people in the neighborhood. If there were children that were being abused by their parents, she would intervene, and actually physically stop a parent from beating the crap out of their kid. This is Brooklyn, and it’s fairly common. We would take in children from other families when there was an alcoholism problem going on in their family.

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I had to teach her, as she got older, to care more for herself, and realize that taking care of yourself is a good thing to do. Because she was always taking care of other people.

So I think a lot of my tendencies toward getting involved with the community and trying to change things in the world must have come from her.

SS: Do you remember them having political conversations at home? Let’s see; the ’50s, right? So that’s –

BB: Fifties. And well –

SS: McCarthy –

BB: Born in '51, so about the time I might have been thinking those things – around '61, '62, '63 –

SS: War in Vietnam.

BB: War in Vietnam, Martin Luther King. I lived in a co-op apartment building that was 44 families. And the neighborhood was mostly Swedish and Finnish. Us being Norwegian and German, even though it's northern European, we were a little bit the outsiders, because we weren't, our hair wasn't as white as the other kids. It wasn't just blond; your hair was white when you were a kid. So I learned very early on about prejudice. Because there was this thought that the Swedes were better than Norwegians. There was this thought that Scandinavians were better than other people. And you couldn't get an apartment in a coop apartment building in Brooklyn at the time, in Bay Ridge, in the Sunset Park area, if you were anything other than Scandinavian.

And I saw the problems in my neighborhood. I saw the crazy people, I saw the alcoholism, I saw the abusiveness of husband and wife relationships. I saw people who were just plain mean and nasty, as well as the good people that were there as well. And I was like, what makes Swedish people, or Scandinavian people, any better than anyone else? There was school busing when I was a kid. So my elementary school, which was mixed in terms of ethnic backgrounds – I went to junior high school at Dewey Junior High, which was kind of a tough school that had a lot of Spanish and some black students as well. And I was never afraid to forge very strong friendships with people who were not Scandinavian. So I was bringing people of color into my family's house and into

this cooperative apartment building, which went okay, and I didn't really notice any problems. But I was aware that I was doing something that was semi-taboo.

But my mother had – the way that they would keep “undesirables” out of these co-op apartment buildings was a system called blackballing, where the coop board would have to vote in, or not vote in, a prospective new tenant who wanted to buy an apartment. So if the person was not to their liking in terms of color, they were, quote unquote, blackballed. And my mother fought against that.

And I could see that she was doing stuff like that. She didn't go to rallies, she didn't join unions, she didn't – she was also a teacher's aide for many years, in an elementary school – grades kindergarten through six. And I remember, one time, there was a kid that was putting his head in the lap of a girl in the class. It was just a nice way that they wanted to show their togetherness. It was not anything – not that it's anything wrong with anything sexual, but it was just something, a matter of something that they felt comfortable doing. And it became a huge uproar in the school. And in front of the principal and in front of the teacher and in front of the parents, my mother stood up for these kids, and told them. And it was amazing. Where did this come from, in her mind? How did she – what made her stand up for these kids? But she was like, if you're teaching this kind of thing now, what's going to happen the rest of their lives?

SS: Right.

BB: And it was like –

SS: Well, when did you –

BB: Early '60s, that's pretty radical.

SS: When did you become aware of other gay people in the city?

BB: Well, first I discovered the orgasm. And I had no idea it had anything to do with sex. I had no idea it had anything to do with other people. It's just like something that felt nice. {LAUGHS}

SS: Right.

BB: And then – probably when I was about 11 or 12 – when I was a kid, I was very active in sports. I played stickball bat, I played alley bat, I played slapball, I played football, touch and rough tackle, and everything. Neighborhood sports, not team sports. I wasn't really too much into joining teams, like my brother was. He became quite noted for Little League Baseball, and won championships there. But I liked it more kind of just as we played it amongst our friends and stuff.

I remember wrestling with this guy George Deers who was the grocer's son from across the street. We were wrestling, and all of a sudden, I'm liking this too much. {LAUGHS} And it was just this sensation that there was lust or attractiveness or whatever. I'm only like 12 or 13 years old. I guess that was the first realization that I was gay.

SS: When did you start realizing there were other gay people?

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BB: It's kind of weird, because as I got a little bit older, my brother was older than me, and when I first thought of the term "homosexuality," I looked it up in my brother's sociology or psychiatric textbook that he had for one of his

classes. And I saw the words: if you should feel this, you should seek out counseling immediately. So one of my first efforts to find out about what it means to be gay was to see that. And of course you don't realize that anybody else is gay around you. At the time, we didn't have gay role models. We don't have the Internet, like we have today, or TV shows with gay characters, although I had Liberace and Paul Lynde, and who knows how many people on the TV that we were seeing regularly, and my parents really liked.

My mother loved powerful women, and women who were very strong, from Amelia Earhart to Ella Fitzgerald and Sophie Tucker and people who were – I listen to some of the lyrics to Sophie Tucker songs, and I'm like, whoa. My mother loved this? Cool. {LAUGHS}

I remember I had a song by Dion, on 45. I was collecting music when I was a little kid. And the song was called "The Wanderer." And it was about, I roam from town to town, port to port, and everywhere there's a girl, and so on. And it was like, my parents made me stop listening – they didn't make me stop listening to it. But they took the 7-inch vinyl 45, and crossed out the title, "Wanderer." But still let me listen to it. Which was kind of weird.

One other thing that happened kind of like that, where I felt a bit of censorship as a kid, was I was reading a book by – Dick Gregory. And it was called *The Nigger*." It was a black-and-white cover; soft-bound book. And I was reading it, going back and forth to high school, and whatever, or maybe junior high – I think it was junior high then. And my parents, my mom, I think, said, you can't walk around the street with a book that says "Nigger" on the cover.

And I was like, why not? For those who don't know Dick Gregory, he was a revolutionary –

SS: Yeah, sure.

BB: – stand-up comedian, who was very philosophical, and taught me a lot about life, whenever I'd see him on the Ed Sullivan Show. And it's amazing that people like that were on TV in those days. But he was militant, black activist, poet and writer, and comedian. And I loved him; I loved his writing. And so it was kind of interesting to have a little white-label sticker over the title of a book I was reading.

SS: When did you first find other gay people?

BB: I think it's kind of more, for me, it was like, hit-and-miss kind of – not stumble in the dark so much, but you see somebody on a subway, and follow them an extra stop, to their house. And I met a friend that I saw totally on a sexual level. He was older than me; I was only 16. He was breaking some sort of [LAUGHS} law by being with me. But I really didn't like being treated as a young kid. I didn't care how old the person was that I was going to be with. But I certainly didn't like being desired because I was young. I took great offense to that.

But it was also weird not being allowed into his life because – the reasons now I understand better than I did at the time. But that was the first time I ever had sex with somebody who I didn't know. I was having sex with my friends in junior high school and in high school, from the you show me yours, I'll show you mine kind of thing, to you suck my cock, I'll suck your cock. And – no

no, you didn't suck my cock long enough, I'm not sucking your cock. And playing those sorts of games with friends of mine who ultimately were heterosexual, or their lives – they got married and lived lives without being gay.

One of my best friends that I had in junior high school was in the orchestra classes. I took violin lessons from the third grade, so by the time I got to junior high school, I was first chair in the orchestras throughout junior high school and throughout high school – my senior year, the 12th grade. And the best woodwind player was a friend of mine named James Fariola, who happened to be black, and was my best friends throughout junior high school. And we would go for chocolate sodas at the high school, and then go to his house, and jam for two or three hours; him on any oboe, English horn, saxophone; any woodwind instrument. And I would play violin and guitar. And I still have some of those tapes of our improvising, which was a lot of fun.

We also did fool around – {LAUGHS} – a little bit, like I was saying. But by the time I got to junior high school, I found a friend named Bob Solvig, who was Scandinavian – actually Norwegian, as well. And we did a lot of experimentation with sexuality, leading right through our after-high-school-graduation trip to Europe, where after I was providing oral pleasure to him for two and a half hours in the Grand Hotel in Paris opposite the old Opera House; bed about seven feet off the floor; it seemed as a kid, with brass canopy and all of that; and, you're gay. It was like, no I'm not, no I'm not.

And he was the most popular kid in high school. He had a steady girlfriend. I sort of had a girlfriend, a little bit. And years later, I run into friends

from that high school, who all had the hots for him. So it was kind of cute that we were together. And when it came time for him to get married a couple years after high school, he wanted me as his best man. And his parents wouldn't allow it; that his brother had to be best man.

But it was really nice. I had lots and lots of friends in high school and junior high school. But being gay, I think, was something that we hid. But the camaraderie that we had amongst each other was very strong.

SS: When did you first get into the gay community?

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BB: Within a year after graduating high school, I moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan, on the Upper West Side. And I kind of felt like as soon as I could walk on my own, it was like I wanted to live in the city. So I began to meet people who were gay, and began to date a little bit. And that was kind of – still wasn't really fully feeling my way around, but began to. And the gay scene was beginning to become something of merit and something truly interesting in the early 1970s, like around 1970 or so. So there were gay bars to go to that weren't awful.

SS: Which bars did you like?

BB: I grew to like the Ninth Circle a lot, because it was a mixed bar; it was gay, straight, bisexual. If you were an artist at the time, you went there. And most of my friends that I began to develop as close friends were all artists, or would-be artists; poets, guitarists, singers, actors. And they were my core group of friends that I hung out with. We did all sorts of fun, crazy things together. And it was, the city was ours, in a way. We were just so comfortable

together, and we could spend hours upon hours sitting and smoking pot and listening to music and playing music and being in the studio recording music. It was almost kind of like an artists' collective, where if one person amongst us were to really make it, we all would have made it, kind of thing.

SS: Right.

BB: And nobody actually did, from this group. Although did some really wonderful stuff, and played with some really great jazz musicians. And we had a lot of fun. We were huge fans of David Bowie, and the Stones. In some circles of my friends, there were lots of feather boas everywhere. And lots of mirrors, and makeup. It was a really, really fun time.

It was also about the time that – one of my connections to the gay community – from when I was about 15, I wrote a column for five neighborhood newspapers in Brooklyn and one in Staten Island that were all put out by the same publisher. They were the kind of neighborhood newspapers you'd wrap fish in, as opposed to necessarily read. But I wrote a column called "The World of Rock." So I was reviewing the Beatles' albums when they were coming out; I was reviewing the Stones' albums when I was 15, and getting paid five dollars a column. And one of the things that I did as part of my research, and part of my own passion, was – at 15, 16 years old, I subscribed to *Billboard*, *Cashbox*, *Record World*, and *Variety*. And I read all four of those publications every week. They were mailed to me. And paying \$60 for a subscription to *Billboard* when you're 15 years old, out of your own pocket, was, I guess, something not many other kids in the world were doing.

SS: Right.

BB: But it was a way I found out about the gay community, to some degree. Ron Gold, who I would later meet in the Gay Activists Alliance, was a writer for *Variety*. *Variety* would write reviews of gay porno movies back then. They would write a little bit about what was going on in the gay community. So there was some gay culture that was coming across as gay, or I was able to read into it that it was gay. The *Village Voice* had ads for porno movies, of guys, with full frontal nudity in the ads. So that was my first porn. Also thinking, back then, will I ever get to even see a cock, other than these pictures in the *Village Voice*, when you were a little kid.

So those were my connections to know what was going on. And once I was living in the city for a little while, I realized that there was the Gay Activists Alliance; I didn't necessarily know it by name, but I knew there was a gay movement, activist movement. And I felt, knowing myself, I need to pay my dues. I need to, not pick up an axe – I knew that I had to join, and do something.

Tape I
00:25:00

So I went around searching for what I was looking for was the Gay Activists Alliance, but I didn't know its name, but I was looking to try and find it somewhere.

I went to, I made some, I went to the West Side Men's Discussion Group, hoping that that was GAA, and hoping this was the activist movement there. And it was a group of about 20 gay men, sitting in a circle, talking about knitting. And it was like – failed miserably here. But fortunately, I met John

Endy and a friend of his, and they took me to the bulletin board, and they said, this is the group you're looking for.

SS: What bulletin board?

BB: It was a bulletin board in the church, I guess; the Church of the Holy Apostle, on 28th and 9th Avenue, whatever. They told me they have meetings Thursday night – I think it was Thursday nights. This is the group you are looking for.

And I think that night I went home with John. Just met him, we spent the night up in a loft bed, having a wonderful time all night. And *Godzilla*, I think, was on TV in the morning. And it was a very – cool experience, very fun and very kind of connection, as opposed to the non-connections of the anonymous sex scenes in some of gay life back then.

So I went to a GAA meeting at –

So that week, as soon as they had their next meeting, I was there, at the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse, which is located in Soho, on Wooster Street. And it's an old firehouse. It's three floors and a basement. And walked into the meeting, and they were having a debate about the Saturday night dances. And I was like – okay. And Jim Owles, who was the first president of the Gay Activists Alliance – it was his second term as president of the Gay Activists Alliance; he served two terms. Unlike George Washington, I think, had served only one for this country. And they were discussing the dances. And it was whether they should serve mixed drinks at the dances, as opposed to just draft beer and soda. And Jim got up, in this sort of Marine dress-gray coat that was

down to his ankles kind of thing. And said, I enjoy a martini just as, or a Bloody Mary just as much as the next guy. But I don't think, blah blah blah blah.

And it was like, okay, this isn't the group, either. {LAUGHS}

I'll never forget, Eric Thorndale was there, who I had just met, or I would meet that night. And he was kind of looking around at me. And he kind of go psst, psst, trying to get my attention. And I said, well, I'm in a gay club, or whatever. He's trying to get my attention; he must want me to go home with him, or blah blah blah. He wasn't my type, or I wasn't partic-, I wasn't looking for that there. And so I was trying to ignore him. And it was kind of like Harold and Maude meeting at the church, of a funeral, when Harold and Maude become good friends in that movie. Because he was older; almost as old as Ruth Gordon, or whatever, to me.

And little I know, the reason he was trying to get my attention is, he wanted me to join his committee. So I got to talking with him. And he was from the Agitprop Committee, Agitation-Propaganda Committee. Which was the speaking committee for, the speakers committee, for GAA doing speaking engagements.

And we began talking, and he had two other friends — Stan Magnan and Don Garabrand, and they had like three or four little dogs that were with them at the Firehouse. So they offered me a ride uptown, because they all lived on the Upper West Side, and I lived at 69th and Broadway.

So Eric said, you're welcome to come to my place. And it was like — my apartment is a time-warp. And so, okay, this is interesting. So I went to his

place, and his apartment kind of was a turn-of-the-century time warp, in one of those old brownstone buildings, with nothing, with candlelight and kind of, he hadn't joined the 20th century, kind of thing.

Tape I
00:30:00

But in the course of the entire night — we stayed up all night, talking — he told me the history of the gay activist movement, up until that point.

So by morning, I was almost like a veteran, in terms of my knowledge of what was going on in the community, and who my heroes were: Arthur Evans, who wrote the GAA constitution; Marc Rubin, Pete Fisher; many other people, who — he had people he didn't like, Eric had people he didn't like — mostly the reformers, who wanted to work with politicians. And the people who were the true revolutionaries were his heroes. And they quickly became my heroes, too, because I was more of an anarchist at the time, or possibly a libertarian, than a reformer or a liberal.

So I got very quickly involved. The following week, I was part of a panel at a speaking engagement at Kings County College, speaking before 250 students. And I didn't say a word during the entire two hours we were up there talking about the gay liberation movement. Rich Wandel, who was the incoming, or the new president of the Gay Activists Alliance — Rich is now head of the Gay and Lesbian Museum at the Community Center in New York — Rich came up to me afterwards, gave me a little pinch on the butt, and said — you were kind of quiet. I said, well, actually, I didn't say anything. And he said, well, I have the feeling you're the type that within a couple of weeks, we're not going to be able to shut you up. And he was right. {LAUGHS}

So I began working very much with the Agitprop Committee, going on speaking engagements quite regularly. And that's part of the GAA history that's not very well known. GAA was known for its activism, for its zaps; going into offices and taking them over, to protest the way gays and lesbians were being treated at the time. But we also had a very active speakers committee. I quickly became an organizer of speaking engagements, as well as going on them as well. Our committee had about 35 members, who were very active. And I had a list of over 250 very qualified speakers that I could call upon to go to high schools, even junior high schools and colleges, and Sunday-school groups, to talk about the gay liberation movement. So it was amazing to have such a wealth and diversity of speakers to be able to call upon. Our youngest speaker was 13. And our oldest speakers were probably in their fifties.

I saw a 13-year-old kid, who was actually Jill Johnston's son, Richard Johnston — Jill Johnston was a very famous writer for the Village Voice at the time, most known for writing all of her columns in lower-case text — Richard was like, I think, 13 or 14 at the time, and he did speaking engagements with GAA. He was gay, and he was lovers with one of my best friends, Mick Ortiz, who was 15. I saw him bring down principals in a school, when they'd come in and say, oh, what's going on here? And it's getting upset, and saying, this is not right, or blah blah blah.

But the reason we were able to speak to students — and we spoke to every single week, from 1971 or '72 to 1974 — we spoke to between 2 - 5,000 students per week. We would go to teachers groups, and we would present to the

teachers group, an association of teachers for a particular school or a neighborhood, or a school district, and present what we would present to the students. And they would say, oh, we want you to come to my classes. Oh, we want. So we'd sign up a lot of teachers to bring us in. And the teachers would bring us in for the zero-period class right up through their eighth-period class, at the end of the day. So we would be speaking to students from eight in the morning till three p.m, day after day after day. And we would drive distances to get to these schools.

One of the school systems that we were most popular in was Valley Stream High School District. And they had three or four different high schools in the Valley Stream area. We spoke to every student at least twice during the time they were in high school. And — drawing a blank on his name —

Tape I
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but someone came up with the idea of doing a questionnaire, to send to the students, that they would fill out the night before; to ask them about their views about gay rights. To ask them, If a friend of yours came out and told you that he or she was gay, how would you feel? If your teacher, blah blah blah. And it was beautifully written. Maybe I have one somewhere, but hopefully there is, somewhere in an archive, a copy of this questionnaire. Because what was great about, and what was brilliant about that questionnaire was that it set a tone; it set a framework for us coming into the class the next day.

Schoolkids love any disruption of their daily fare, what they have to deal with with whatever they're studying. So anyone coming in — a fireman, a policeman, or, was going to be more interesting than their usual day. And here

was three or four or five or six gay men and women coming in, and talking about the gay liber-, and going into the New York *Daily News* offices and taking it over, protesting their bigotry in an editorial. This is pretty hot stuff.

And Eric taught me, in terms of speaking engagements, that there's always going to be two or three kids in the class who are gay. And you would see that, at every speaking engagement. You have 30 kids, you've got two or three kids that are gay. And they make themselves known to you, in one way or another: by the way they look to you. The way you take care of a bully in the class that asks a question about, I can't understand what you would do in bed, blah blah blah. Or say something derogatory about gay people, or whatever; that you people don't deserve your rights, or whatever.

That was almost a welcome kind of thing, because it gave us an opportunity to beat down that attack, and to make the gay or lesbian person in the classroom, or the transgendered person, or the person who was questioning themselves – it gave them more of a sense of themselves, where there weren't role models in the rest of society – well, maybe we gave them a little bit of a role model, or a little bit of something to look up for as they would be growing up in their lives.

So it was a tremendously useful thing, and something that you would speak of now – we don't have that sort of thing, except on rare occurrences. And it's almost seen as, it's almost an impossibility; we can't get into schools to talk about the gay movement, or even the AIDS movement. But it was the '70s. And teachers wanted to show how liberal they were. They wanted

to feel good about themselves because it was a revolutionary time, and they kind of wanted to show that they cared.

SS: We need to change tapes.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: Okay, so you mentioned a little bit about zaps and direct action and GAA. Can you take us on the trajectory from that moment to the Lavender Hill Mob?

BB: Well, there was kind of a journey in between there. But –

SS: Okay.

BB: – the – GAA was a lot of very courageous people. The weekly meetings had somewhere between 75 to 125 people, on the main floor of the Firehouse. There were fiery debates, about what we should be doing. It was a very well-respected group. I got the sense that we were respected by the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, and we respected the work that they were doing. I worked on the Speakers Committee. Brenda Howard, who was a member of ACT UP New York, I worked with on the Speakers Committee. And it was one point where we needed to elect a new chairperson of the Agitprop Committee. And it became an election between myself, Brenda Howard, and Joe Kennedy. And Brenda Howard and myself were the two radicals, the more radical candidates, and Joe Kennedy was the conservative. So Brenda Howard and I split the radical vote, and Joe Kennedy wound up being chair of the Agitprop Committee, doing a spectacular job as the more conservative candidate.

One thing that is really amazing is that GAA was a single-issue organization. It fought for gay rights and gay liberation. It worked on getting the laws changed; it worked on getting the sodomy law repealed in New York; it worked on getting the – what am I thinking? – it worked on having the bars not being harassed, and being able to stay open. We had a demonstration at the *New York Daily News*. Because they had an editorial in the *New York Daily News* commenting on the Supreme Court ruling about a person who was gay being a librarian, in a college library. And the *New York Daily News* editorial said, actually said in headlines: Fairies, Nances, Queers, Call ‘Em What You Like, Have the Right to Jobs in Nonsensitive Positions. But –

So we, about twenty-strong, we went to the *Daily News*, and got ourselves into the building, got up to the editorial offices of the *New York Daily News*, on 42nd Street; charged into the office, with the standard, “Give me a G, give me an A, give me a Y; Gay Power!” – shouting it. Which was a kind of dramatic way to enter a room. It was also a way to just cause a little bit of chaos where nobody is willing to stop you, because they can’t figure out what’s going on, and it’s like, there’s this dynamic group coming into the room. And so we could take over an office. And we did that quite often, very very frequently, wherever gay people were being oppressed; wherever we thought we could make a difference. And we often got retractions, and we got policies changed the same day, or the next day. So we were geared toward getting a response.

We sat down with every editor of the *Daily News*, and explained to them why that editorial was just something we were not going to stand for, and

how wrong it was. And it also put a face on who we were. It's much easier to defame someone and to discriminate against someone when they're a faceless nothing. But when you're being faced with somebody who is, who they are, and they are gay and they are lesbian, and they're telling you, they don't want to be, you don't want to be discriminated against, it's much more harder to justify your positions.

I've got some great pictures of that takeover of the office, which have been shown in exhibition a couple of times.

Tape II
00:05:00

But it was really neat to take over an office like that. And the phone rings; we're answering the phones for the *New York Daily News*, and telling them that the *New York Daily News* is not in operation today, due to their bigotry in their editorial the other day. And the police are coming in; the police don't know what to do. They're not sure whether to arrest people. We often, in those days, would outnumber the police that would show up. Four police show up, and you got 20 demonstrators. It's like, you almost have the upper hand a little bit, especially when the police would come in, and we would tell them to arrest the editors of the Daily News because of their bigotry. It took them awhile to figure out what was go-, so it gave us more of an opportunity to stage an event.

And they were not meant to hurt anyone. They were meant to educate, to show a face, and to potentially change the world. And we so often did.

I remember when the American Psychiatric Association was meeting in New York, for their annual meeting. And we decided we wanted to do

a zap of the American Psychiatric Association. This was in 1972. And I was somehow put in charge of putting that zap together. And we got about 10 people, we dressed in suit and ties, we went and got ourselves in to the annual conference meeting at the New York Hilton. And there was a meeting on homosexuality – I forget what it was officially called. And so once the meeting got underway, I stood up and said, How dare you say that I am mentally disordered? And before I finished what I was saying, somebody else jumped up and said the same thing, and then somebody else, somebody else. And we basically took over the meeting.

And the attitude of the psychiatrists who were there was kind of like – you mean you don't like being called disordered? First time they were being confronted by gay activists who were demanding that they change what they have in their codes and their books and their list of disorders and so on; that this was, we felt, was demeaning to us as people. And, how dare you do that?

In the course of a year, Ron Gold followed up in a meeting they had in Hawaii, and actually changed the way they classified homosexuality, and it was no longer seen as a disorder, and has been ever since.

So there were a lot of things we did that really changed the world.

So that's something that became a theme in my life, to some degree, is that a few people banding together can change the world. It is possible. I mean, I think most people — and it varies from culture to culture around the world — but people don't necessarily see that they have an opportunity, or it is possible for them, to work together with a group of friends and change the world. And that was something that, when AIDS hit us, in the '80s, I realized that that

was something that was important, that I had to roll up my sleeves and get back in the fight again. And when I initially joined GAA, it was, okay, I'm going to do this for a year; and I have paid my dues, and whatever. It was two and a half years with GAA.

And when I left GAA, the organization had wound down, it had gone through their heyday. It had accomplished a lot of what it set out to do. But it lost its energy, it lost its direction. Bruce Voeller came in as the new president of the Gay Activists Alliance, and instead of Rich Wandel, who inspired people to flourish within GAA, and take on projects, and oversleep, and not show up for a meeting as president of the group so you had to represent the group; he inspired people to take on responsibility. When Bruce came in, his was more of a top-down approach. He wanted to be in charge of everything. And I felt very stifled to try and get the work done that I wanted to do. Because I'm kind of a leader, in a way. I'm very happy to follow other people, and take direction. But when I'm being told –

SS: Wasn't he a fancy research scientist, or something like that?

BB: Well, I don't know. The chemistry was not right for him and me –

SS: Okay.

Tape II
00:10:00

BB: – and a lot of other people as well. I became chairperson of the Community Relations Committee of GAA, which was very interesting, because the Community Relations Committee had to work with all the other gay

organizations in New York City and New York State. So I got to go to meetings with the presidents of every gay organization in New York, and represent GAA, because Rich Wandel might be sleeping late, so I would be there representing GAA, as the chair of the Community Relations Committee. So it was really neat, getting to know these people in the Bronx and Queens and Brooklyn and sometimes – there were times during disputes with an organization, I would come in and chair that local group for a couple of meetings, to help them elect a new president, or something like that, of their group.

We also, as GAA, like soon-to-be ACT UP 18 years later; we, Gay Activists Alliance chapters formed all over the United States, and all across the country. And as Community Relations Committee chair, and then, there was also a gay movement, national gay movement committee as well, which kind of merged at one point with the Community Relations Committee. So then I became ambassador for GAA to the world, and to all the other gay organizations around the world.

So I was doing lots of correspondence, and beginning to go to meetings around the country to help organize and work with people in various other parts of the U.S., and all throughout the United States, we had – or throughout New York State, we had many meetings of all the leaders of the various gay organizations to discuss strategy, to share, to learn, to grow. And it was really fascinating work. I loved it. But it was a lot of work. At the time, I was working a full-time job. But I was spending equally as much time at the GAA Firehouse, in committee meetings.

And GAA was funded by the Saturday-night dances, which raised a lot of money. They charged two dollars at the door. That included draft beer and soda, included. And if you couldn't afford the two dollars, you could work a half hour, serving soda or beer, and then you could get in for free.

That was seen by some as an elitist policy, to charge. And two of the people who were at times very upset about that were Marsha Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who would hold alternative dances on Wooster Street, on the cobblestone streets, out in front of the Firehouse, with like a portable radio or a turntable or whatever. And that was a lot of fun, too, because you'd be in and out, joining their party, and being inside, and whatever. And the party always spilled out onto the streets, as well.

But I also worked with Sylvia and Marsha on putting together potluck dinners for the community at the Firehouse. Which is a way of helping feed people who couldn't afford to eat. People would come to the GAA Firehouse who were thrown out of their homes, from all over the country, and find a home at the Firehouse. They'd be able to sleep, have coffee, have some donuts and cookies and whatever that were always available on the second floor at the Firehouse.

Vito Russo, who was a very strong member of GAA, then ACT UP, did Sunday-night movies at the Firehouse. And Vito Russo worked at MoMA at the time, in the film division at MoMA. So he had access to films that he could just bring and show at the Firehouse. And he showed some very controversial movies, that stirred up lots of discussion about how we were being

depicted in movies and whatever. Vito did some really great work with that. About the only movie I really remember seeing there was *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, with Jane Fonda. That was quite a moving film to see at a gay firehouse.

The Firehouse was the first community center for the gay community, and maybe anywhere in the world. And it set an example for people, in terms of what we could do.

Tape II
00:15:00

After GAA – I left GAA around 1974. About six months thereafter, there was the big fire, where the Firehouse burnt down. And that kind of put an end to the Gay Activists Alliance. There were people who met on and off, and did various zaps and whatever, right through 1977. But it was kind of not that very, very active period, where we had demonstrations and zaps and speaking engagements going on every single day of the week. There was no lack of things to protest and to work on. And we worked out butts off, pretty much the way ACT UP did in its first six years of existence.

After that, I got more involved in just my own life again. And around 1980, '79-'80, I began getting more interested in music again. I'd kind of lost track of music, because the Stones and the Beatles and Bowie and all them had become corporate rock and rollers, and were not making music of any interest whatsoever. And then the punk era came on, with Patti Smith and Television and Talking Heads and the Ramones. And there was all this political excitement in music again, that meant something. And it was at CBGB's, it was at Max's Kansas City, it was at a number of other small clubs. So I began to get a group of

friends who – we'd go to see Patti Smith every night she played. And she would play three months at a time, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday night, four nights a week, every week for three months, and me and my friends, we'd be there every night for the two shows. And that would be the beginning of our evening in addition to going to –

SS: Where did you go to see her?

BB: Mostly CBGB.

SS: Uh huh.

BB: And at Max's. She did the Rock 'n' Rimbaud at colleges. She played at different places – mostly CB's and Max's. And the bands were a lot of fun. My friends were a lot of fun. It was all just a really, really good time to hang out and do some drugs and drink and get crazy, and sleep with each other, and inspire each other, and listen to music together. It was some people I knew from GAA, and some people I met during my period in GAA. But they were not the real activists. They were more the artists, who would not fit comfortably confined in the structure of committee meetings and things like that.

SS: So was the Lavender Hill Mob formed before AIDS crisis began?

BB: No.

SS: It was –

BB: No, no, no –

SS: It was the first response to the AIDS crisis.

BB: No, from 1980 to '86, I worked as a club DJ, in the New Wave clubs of the time; first starting at Club Hurrah – something I had not pursued in any way, shape or form. I had done a party or two. And Sara Salir, who was the main DJ, with Charlie Brown, at Club Hurrah — which, Hurrah was Studio 54 before Studio; they lost Studio 54; Studio 54 opened, and Hurrah didn't know what to do, because their crowd was gone, so they went punk, and then New Wave. And Sara came up to me one night. She said, I heard you play the other night at that party. Have you ever considered DJing in a club? And I said, well, no. {LAUGHS}

She said, well actually, I really like what you did, and Charlie Brown is leaving. Would you like to come in? I think you'd be great.

I went to my friends, and they said, do it, do it, do it, do it. And they were like – some great band was playing that night, as well. So it was always an event there. And I told her – and she said, okay, Saturday night, one o'clock, you'll spin for an hour, we'll see how you do. Which in a club with 500 people on the dance floor at one o'clock on a Saturday night – it's an audition.

So I was hired on the spot. I was asked as much what I would play as well as what I wouldn't play. And they said, well, would you play The Pretenders if somebody begged you to play them? And I said, no. Why? They were the bullshit band, just in it for the money. There were very serious New Wave bands at the time that were bringing new thoughts and new ideas into the club scene that had never been there before, in such an environment. Gay people were never welcomed in the club scene, I thought, in New York, outside of the

gay clubs. So this was something that was really a revolutionary movement, as much as it was a club scene.

So I wound up doing that, starting a career as a DJ. And then I was asked – one of the clubs, famous clubs in New York, was called the Anvil, on 14th Street and the [Hudson] river. And that was an after-hours gay club, with very, very intense, powerful disco DJs, and an amazing stage for performance drag artists; and a downstairs bar and catacomb of rooms where people went and had sex in the middle of the night, as they were drinking and whatever else they were doing on, seven nights a week, from one o'clock at night till 9:30 in the morning. And Tanya Ransom, who was a drag queen from the East Village, was doing a show there, performing Amanda Lear and Nina Hagen songs. Which were not your typical disco-type drag performance at the time. And I would see this Chelsea clone crowd — not the Chelsea gym clone crowd that we have today, but the flannel shirts and the mustaches –

SS: The original clone.

BB: – what Freddy Mercury looked like back then; that look; the Village People look; these guys who were just kind of dancing politely to the disco, when Nina Hagen music would come on, they were getting excited. And Tanya came up, Tanya and I became friends. And she said, well, have you ever thought about DJing here? And I was like, I'm working three nights a week at Hurrah. That's a very steady gig for a DJ. I'm really loving and enjoying it. I love the people there. I also didn't want to work for the – the crowd that runs an after-hours – the Mafia, at the time, who organized these clubs, and ran some of

these gay clubs. I don't know who they were, but I knew I was stepping into an area that, oh, this is something very different.

So Tanya arranged for me to do one night, a guest appearance on a Tuesday night. And there were lines around the block for that night. And what was really amazing; I brought in East Village performance drag artists, who were not necessarily drag, but they were performance artists in the East Village, to work with the Latin and black drag queens from the West Side who were playing the Anvil, mostly, for performances.

It was a one-night thing, and they told me, well, whenever you want to come back – so I came back and I did another night. And within a month, it was a weekly event: new wave nights at the Anvil, for four and a half years, from that point on, every week. And I didn't necessarily want to do it. Because I was working a lot already. And it also meant I had to work till 9:30 in the morning, producing the shows. But I felt a responsibility. Because there was nowhere else in the gay club world where you could dance to anything other than disco. And I thought there was a bit of a tyranny about that. It's perfectly fine; disco is fine, enjoy it. It's mindless, it's whatever. But you should have an option, you should have a choice.

So I began doing that. And it was quite, it was a scary thing for the disco DJs, because they felt if you, breaking the rules a little bit, the whole world's going to fall apart. Like you allow gay marriages, you're going to have pedophilia; you're going to have sex with animals, and marriage – and it's like, if you allow anything other than disco, the world's going to collapse, and we're

going to be out of work. It was a very strange kind of reaction, from people who know that they're oppressed; to think that it's okay to have only one kind of music.

But people loved it, and it became very, very popular. I had a lot of celebrities. Bronski Beat, Jimmy Somerville, would come often to nights. Billy Idol would come quite a bit to the nights. A lot of people in our community — all the gay people who worked in all the gay-friendly clubs at the time — Danceteria and Mudd Club and Laight Street and all that — they would come to the Anvil when their clubs were closed, at four in the morning, because we stayed open till 9:30 in the morning. And they were really wonderful, adventurous nights, and I was very free to play any kind of music I wanted to, and went from like hard punk to new wave, Human League-type stuff that also had a message to it. But the intertwining of the East Village performance artists with the West Side Latin and black drag queens was also a great opportunity for people to get to know each other, and to understand each other better. So that was really wonderful to me.

Tape II
00:25:00

And I wound up playing at Danceteria. And I remember, when first they wanted me at Danceteria, it was a club called Interferon. And it was kind of interesting, because the first, the last six months of working at Hurrah, opening night, the first song of the evening I played was "Interferon," which was a noise-type piece by Thomas Leer and Robert Rental. And then Interferon was in the process, being opening. And they would, they wanted me to be the house DJ. But I didn't like that they weren't going to have a guest list; they were going

to be charging over \$20 to get in. And I just didn't like it at all. And I said, no thanks. Even though they built the DJ booth to my height specifications, and some good people I liked were there, and they were putting a fine restaurant into the club. And it was like, that's kind of weird, too.

So this guy named Walter — I forget his last name; it begins with a "D" — he wound up being the house DJ there. And he'd come see me at Hurrah afterwards. And he'd say, well, the club was empty again tonight. But at least I had a good meal.

And then, it changed over to become Danceteria, with Jim Fouratt

—

SS: Right.

BB: — and Rudolf being the managers. And I didn't particularly like Jim Fouratt that much from my days in GAA. And I knew of him, and all that. But I figured, well, maybe I could — I'll work, I like going to Danceteria. It's going to be a fun club. And they hired five of the best DJs in New York. And I was one of them. And I figured, oh, I think I can outlive Jim here at the club, which fortunately, I did, which was great. And Rudolf was really good to work with. And it was a lot of fun working there for a number of years, as well, as I continued with the Anvil.

And then, around the time Madonna became famous — she played initially at Danceteria, the first place she ever played live. And I wouldn't play her music. And one night, I played her first single, which, produced by the other DJ at Danceteria — it was myself and Mark Kamins who were the main two DJs

there. Mark produced her first single, "Everybody." And one night, I played it. And Audrey, who worked the elevator, she came running up to the DJ booth: Why are you playing this? Don't you know what she's like?

And I was like, okay. Because I was, certain things you just wouldn't play because they were just too commercial, or they weren't part of the advancement of what we were trying to do in the club scene, which was something that meant a lot. And that's another interview, for another time.

But it was – it kind of ended, around the time that Madonna became very popular. Because what was happening in the club scene is, people did artistic things, and they hired artistic people to work – whether they were bartenders, door people, light people, videographers, DJs; security, whatever. They were all hired because they were artists, because they had a talent for what they did. And they did something new, and they were creative about what they were doing. And around the time Madonna began to become very popular, it went from, okay, let's do something really interesting – and the money just kept rolling in. There was lots, lots of money. I never made any, because I was paid \$125, \$150 a night to DJ. The bartenders were making more than the DJs were. But the money was coming into the clubs. The clubs were making lots and lots of money. And it was almost by mistake, or by, not by design, that they were trying to make some money. So once Madonna and others started coming to the fore in the club scene, it was kind of like, okay; the whole attitude became, let's figure out how to make the most money possible; and if we can do something a little artistic on the side, great.

So that completely changed the club scene, and I wanted no part of it, and went back to the private life a little bit.

But then AIDS hit.

SS: Should we switch –

JW: Ten minutes.

SS: Ten minutes? Okay. Can hand me my jacket? I'm really cold. Careful because you're plugged in.

Tape II
00:30:00

BB: Fortunately, my phone hasn't rung.

{BRIEF PAUSE}

SS: So do you remember the first time you became aware of AIDS?

BB: No. I don't remember the first time I became aware of AIDS. It's kind of hard to say when I first heard about AIDS. I knew what was going on. Friends were getting sick. But I think for me, it first became an issue, to a degree, around 1985, when AIDS was being used as a way to discriminate against the gay community.

SS: Okay, but before that, who was the first person you knew personally who had AIDS?

BB: I didn't have any friends at that point who had AIDS.

SS: Even though you were working at the Anvil.

BB: Even though I was working at the Anvil.

SS: Okay.

BB: The Anvil – well, actually, no. Maybe something that’s not so there in my memory of the time – but I remember, we – the Anvil shut down its backrooms around 1984 or so, when it began to become an issue of, this is something that may be transmitted sexually. And having a backroom is not a good thing to do. And so the Anvil voluntarily shut down its backroom.

So there was a sense that we were doing things to try and stop HIV. I had lost a number of friends through drugs. I had lost a number of friends, one or two friends, who had died from suicide. I had lost a friend or two from cancer and various other things that were not AIDS-related. And I remember, the Anvil closed down when the district attorney or whatever – something came out on the front page of the *New York Post*, saying, “New York AIDS Den Pays No State Taxes.” And they were closed the next day. It was kind of closed not because of AIDS or whatever; because it was something to do with taxes.

First really getting to, I don’t think I had any close friends who had AIDS, that I was aware of. And it was not necessarily spoke of. And that’s, to some degree, why it may not be so present in my memory. And this is going back – 25 years now to try and remember what people were saying or what people were doing.

But I remember the attacks that were coming on the gay community. And AIDS was being used as the excuse. Things were being written in the *New York Post*, and things that were being done – discriminating against people being able to get on airplanes who were HIV-positive. I saw it initially as

a civil rights issue. I didn't see it as a medical issue. I didn't see it as a science issue as much. I don't think we knew very little about research at the time. We knew very little about drugs. Or I knew very little about HIV drugs, and whatever. I was HIV-negative, as far as I knew. I don't think we necessarily had an antibody test at that time.

So GLAAD was a new organization that was being formed. And Vito Russo, who I knew from GAA, was on the board of GLAAD. They held a town meeting at the church that's over on 12th Street and Seventh Avenue, right up from the Gay and Lesbian Community Center. I remember a bunch of people who were forming GLAAD, I guess, out of someone's apartment or something like that. And Vito gave a great speech, as he often did. And he said – and everybody was stirred up, everybody was angry. It was a great time – that you could walk into a room, and people show up in the room, angry and wanting to take action, and wanting to organize and wanting to find a vehicle to express their anger, and to fight back. That's what GAA, captured that energy after Stonewall, and channeled it into aggressive, tough action that made change. GLAAD seemed like this was a resurgence of an organization like GAA.

It wasn't. It wasn't at all. Vito – probably he meant it in his heart, when he said that you are GLAAD; you are the organization; you are going to make it what it is. Unfortunately, GLAAD was a board-of-directors type organization that a number of writers, a number of people who saw themselves as stars, who wanted to have an organization to be head of. And I'm sure they

wanted to fight back; I'm sure they wanted to change the world. But their vision was not my kind of vision.

So I didn't really get involved with them right away. And then a friend of mine, Paul Shetler, who I was kind of dating at the time; he said to me, he was like, well you really should get involved with GLAAD. Marty Robinson is chair of the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee. And I was like, oh, I remember Marty from GAA, he's kind of a little crazy. He was like, whatever. I don't know that I want to be a part of an organization with him. And then I did start going to the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee meetings somehow. Something drew me in; I've got to do something. By that point, Amy Bauer and Bruce-Michael Gelbert were the co-chairs. And it was a group that, 10, 12, to 35 people would show up to meetings. And we would plan demonstrations. We planned really great demonstrations. And then Amy would go to the board, and say, this is what we want to do. And they're like, no, you can't do that; we're an educational organization. You can't take over the streets. You can't go into an office and take it over.

So Amy would come back to us and say, no, they don't want to do it.

SS: And "they" was like Darrell Yates Rist –

BB: Darrell Yates Rist.

SS: Right.

BB: Who I grew to despise, unfortunately. I wish I could be friends with some of these people. But when they're telling you that the

community can't do something that the community wants to do. And I know this is the kind of thing that needs to be done, and we need to strike out, we need to hit hard to make change. And it's like – they're saying, no, you can't do that. And then we'd do it anyway. Amy would figure out some way. I love Amy Bauer. She's terrific. To this day, I see her walking her dog, and I'm always just so happy to see her, because she was able to navigate between the star board and her committee, and manage to get really great work done with the committee, on demonstrations.

I remember, one point – William F. Buckley and the *National Review* – they came out with an article in the *National Review*, written by Joseph Sobran, talking about AIDS. And it was a horrendously awful, disgusting article. Joseph Sobran referred to AIDS as “a ghastly retribution for a repulsive vice.”

Tape II
00:40:00

And this article just really reeked. And Henry Yaeger and I, who became close members of what would become the Lavender Hill Mob – Henry worked on the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee, and I grew to really like him a lot. He was a French comparative literature professor at the time, and quite an amazing person in the art of wheatpasting flyers.

JW: We have to stop.

BB: Okay.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: You're on.

BB: Great. We're talking about GLAAD. And Amy Bauer, as chair of the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee. It was great working with Amy. I loved her a lot. I still love her very much. There was a point where

William F. Buckley came onto our radar screen, for his idea of tattooing people with HIV, with AIDS; tattooing gay people on their butts, and IV drug users on their arms. And this was such an outrageous thing to be saying. And he actually said these things.

There was also an article by Joseph Sobran in his magazine, the *National Review*, his conservative magazine, where Joseph Sobran refers to AIDS as “a ghastly retribution for a repulsive vice.”

We had to do something. We had to take strong action against Bill Buckley. Or at least we needed to show our anger about this. Henry Yaeger, who later would become a member of the Lavender Hill Mob, who I really liked — and we worked on writing flyers together for GLAAD — he came to my apartment, and we combed through this article by Joseph Sobran in the *National Review*, going, okay, we need to isolate comments in there, to write a flyer, to get people excited and angry enough to want to go to the *National Review*, and do a demonstration.

And it was kind of like, it was just repulsive and ugly from beginning to end, but didn't really have the sound bites. So first, we found the “ghastly retribution for a repulsive vice.” And it was like, yeah, it's great. Okay. That'll work, that'll work. And then we were like we need to have at least one other quote. And all of it was awful; the entire article, in its entirety. But you can't get people to read an entire article on a flyer.

Then we found, he used the term for HIV as an avenging angel. That was it. That's the smoking gun, for us. And we were like, great. We're

going to, we gotta put that in the flyer. Because HIV is targeting our community. And that's a good thing, according to Joseph Sobran.

So Amy and the rest of the members of the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee came up with a really fantastic demo, where we had people dressed in concentration camp uniforms. We actually set up a concentration camp on the East Side, in the Thirties, where the *National Review's* headquarter is; and set up a whole staged theater demonstration in front of the *National Review*, and also went in, and took, went into his offices as well. And within about 24 hours, Buckley was on *CBS News Nightwatch* program, with Charlie Rose, answering questions about his position on tattooing. And his exact quote was, to Charlie Rose: I pretty much well retreated from the idea, because I have been persuaded that it's almost irrevocably associated with Hitler. Those were his words. So we got them to retract that, from one demo.

That's the kind of demo I like; where you can put together a really good staged theater demo, where people are taking to the streets, and doing something themselves, and changing people's positions, and letting it be known that this is not acceptable. You can not put people with AIDS in concentration camps; you can not tattoo them. You could not shame them, or quarantine them, in any way, shape, or form.

And that was very important, to be able to do that; and also important that we were able to win, and that we empowered people to fight back. I hate, quote unquote, demonstrations that are essentially rallies, where you have a

bunch of speakers get up and talk and talk and talk and talk, because you're not empowering people. If you give them something to do, that's great.

Tape III
00:05:00

When the Supreme Court *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision came out, in 1986, just a couple days after Gay Pride Day, saying that gay people did not have a right to privacy; those of us who were active in the gay community were exhausted. It was, we'd just finished Gay Pride Day, and the march that we did with GLAAD in Gay Pride Day. It was kind of like, oh, we gotta do another demo again. But I remember putting a flyer together. If you want, I can show it to you, if you want to stop the camera for a sec.

SS: We'll keep the camera going, you can show it.

BB: Leave the camera going?

SS: Yeah.

BB: Ahh. But I was very much into doing flyers for demonstrations. And some flyers were easier to do than others. With this one, it was a matter of going back to that terrible old *Daily News*. Let's see if I have it here.

SS: Right, I remember that demo.

BB: Top Court Okays Gay Sex Ban. And all I had to do was copy that onto a piece of paper, and write in, in my own handwriting, Rally at Sheridan Square Tonight at 7 PM, July 1st.

We got that out within hours. Well, not within hours; we got out that immediately. Buddy Noro and myself, who was a member of GLAAD, and soon to be a member of the Lavender Hill Mob — this is actually kind of the first

action of the Lavender Hill Mob, in a way — we knew that what we put up with, with the coalition – because we tried working within GLAAD, with the Swift and Terrible Retribution Committee; we tried working as, we sort of left GLAAD, went to the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which was Andy Humm and Eleanor Cooper’s group, to form the Actions and Demonstrations Committee there. And so we had done a number of demonstrations with these various umbrella groups – GLAAD and CLGR. And when this happened, the *Hardwick* decision came down, we knew our community was more angry than ever; and that a simple demonstration, polite legal demonstration, was not going to be enough. Buddy and I, Buddy Noro and myself, who had organized a number of demos, met in Julius’s, where he liked to go and drink and hang out on a weekday afternoon. So we sat there and had burgers and talked. And we both came to the agreement that a rally is not enough; we need to have civil disobedience. This is not accept-, we cannot allow ourselves to be told we can’t do things. We have to empower people.

And so we came up with this plan that after the speakers, we would lead people to Seventh Avenue, and sit down, and block traffic. And we did. Buddy announced that we are now going to go out from where we were, in front of the park, to take over Seventh Avenue, and to sit down. There were about a thousand people there or so; maybe a little more. And Buddy was in the front of the group; I was in the back of the group; that was kind of the mo-, we had some other people as marshals, but we were the two people who were, stuck our necks out, and said, okay, we gotta go to civil disobedience. And we felt, as what would

be members of the Mob, that we were taking this responsibility onto ourselves; that mainstream gay organizations aren't, their hearts aren't in it as much as ours are, and it was kind of a feeling of something new is coming to the fore.

We wound up blocking traffic for several hours; not just on Seventh Avenue, but on Sixth Avenue as well. Connections we had — I don't know where they came though police community-relation cops who were there or whatever, but what I heard came from the mayor's office — Ed Koch was the mayor at the time — was, they have every right to be angry. And if they want to block traffic till the morning traffic rush, let them do it.

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SS: That came from Ed Koch?

BB: Yes.

SS: Wow. That's the first nice thing I've ever heard about Koch.

BB: Well, I've got nice things to say a lot about a lot of evil people.

SS: Uh huh.

BB: Because people are not black and white; they're a mixture of things. And while I got some horrible experience with Cardinal O'Connor, there are some good things he's done, as well.

But that demonstration was sort of the birth of the Mob, in a way. What was really interesting was that the people who were there at the demonstration demanded that it not end with this takeover of the streets for the one night, on July 1st. July 4th was going to be the Liberty celebration; 200th

anniversary of, I don't remember what, but this country celebrates a lot about itself.

So they closed down Lower Manhattan to have all these sausage vendors and rides and things like that, and vendors selling knickknacks and whatever, celebrating the 200th anniversary of something. And the people in the crowd said, we want to be there. So we organized a march from Federal Plaza down to the Battery. When we got down to Broadway and Wall – there were about 3500 people, who were automatically a part of this march. We did another flyer for it, and put it out there.

I remember, the day of the *Hardwick* decision, going around in somebody's car with a bullhorn on the street: We're meeting, seven o'clock, in Sheridan Square; seven o'clock. And people came out – now you need Facebook to do that, and Facebook works beautifully for that. But trying to do it with a bullhorn – and it worked! And it worked! Over a thousand people showed up that night, and more people gathered, bec–

It was not just that I had done a flyer, or I had done some bullhorn. People, on their own, said, this is something horrible that's happened. We need to go to Sheridan Square. Like people do in the overall activist community, straight and gay, when something horrible happens, go to Union Square.

So for the second demonstration, which met, I believe at Federal Triangle, and then marched, was going, plan was to march down to the Battery celebration; we were met by riot squad, four deep, where Broadway hits Wall Street. And they were absolutely determined, they are not going to allow us to

mess with their party. And it looked bad; it looked bad. But, I don't know who started it, but we started circulating, one by one, two by two, to disperse. You can stop a crowd, but you can't stop individuals. So we went different ways around, took the subway, took, and regrouped down by one of the war memorials, where the eagle, big huge bronze eagle, is placed. And we regrouped, and we made a huge presence at that as well, and made headlines in all the newspapers.

I remember Andy Humm, who was one of the two co-chairs of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, who was kind of officially the organization that was sponsoring this particular march; climbed up on top of the eagle, and spoke to the thousands of us who were there. And that was, I think, one of Andy Humm's best moments, and I was so proud of him for that. It was really great. It was really great, a great thing.

And then, August 11th, Chief Justice Warren Burger was coming to town to receive an award from the American Bar Association at the New York Hilton. The New York Hilton has a long history of being at the center of our community's activism. I remember GAA actions there. The action that we did against the American Psychiatric Association was at the Hilton. The Inner Circle dinner, where Morty Manford was beaten up by the head of the Uniformed Firefighters Union was at the Hilton. And many other things have occurred at the New York Hilton. And here is Chief Justice Warren Burger coming – about 45 days after the *Hardwick* decision, coming to New York to receive an award. So we put together a demonstration for that. And managed to, though the actions, the demonstrations of GLAAD, gather together 75 organizations cosponsoring it, and

50 prominent individuals. And I put all their names on the flyer. I think I have it here, which I could maybe hold up.

I think it's right here, handy.

This is the flyer.

SS: Right.

BB: And down here was a list of all the organizational sponsors. And we put a helluva lot of work into that. And one of the things that we said was, bring whistles. Mitch Halberstam did the design of this flyer. He worked for a graphics company. I could run to his office, and he would do amazing printing of wonderful flyers like that.

SS: Let me say something. It's interesting: that's the old style. Which was to get the whole coalition list. ACT UP stopped that.

BB: Well yeah, ACT UP didn't – not too often did you put together coalitions like that for demonstrations. Because of not just the importance, but because of the scope of that decision, it cried out for coalition.

SS: But that was the old-left style.

BB: Oh, I don't know, I don't know. It just is something that was felt natural for this particular demonstration.

SS: Sure, um hm.

BB: And I remember getting there at like quarter to four. It was called for four to seven p.m. And actually, I remember even before that. During the day, I found out that Chief Justice Warren Burger was going to be having dinner at Lincoln Center, in the New York State Theater. I remember calling up

Eleanor Cooper, who was one of the co-chairs with CLGR. Eleanor Cooper just recently died, and I really loved and respect her a lot. But one of the things that annoyed me about working under an umbrella organization was, when I told her that he's going to be having dinner at the New York State Theater, her immediate response was, don't tell anybody, because they're going to want to go there.

SS: {LAUGHS}

BB: And I was like – what do you mean? We should go there!

And the concept was, we have a rally, we have speakers, and blah blah blah, and people cheer, and that's the demo. And it was like, that's not me; that's not my view of a demo.

So kind of worked it out with Eleanor, and probably Andy at the time, and others, that when the rally is over, Bill and you, Buddy Noro, will bring people to Lincoln Center, if that's what you want to do. And I remember, during the speeches — and there were some great speeches; Alan Dershowitz spoke, and he gave the, today I am a gay person, I am a Berliner speech that was so powerful, whatever. And we had a group of singers that called themselves the Supremes, and they sang “Stop that kind of love, before you break the law.” And it was some fun things, and some good speeches and whatever. But as it dragged on and on, through 27 speeches; and the crowd, the sound system was so loud, the crowd couldn't even hear themselves chant; I began to sit and cry. And I cried and I cried and I cried. It was like, this is what I worked my butt off to do, was to have people corralled into a pen; not even being able to hear themselves chant.

Fortunately – heh heh – we did, Buddy Noro and myself, we led people to the New York State Theater, to Lincoln Center. And when we – the police escorted us – there were 3500 of us – escorted us. Along the way — negotiating at every street: okay, you’re going to turn down this way — you never know when the police are corralling you, as you’re marching, whether they have secret plans for you, or whether they’re going to lead you into an alley where they’re going to start pulling their clubs out; whether they’re going to start arresting you; lead you to a dead end, where you can’t go anymore, and then order you to disperse, or whatever. But they led us all the way up to Lincoln Center – and then tried to stop us from getting into the plaza.

Tape III
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It was a little bit of chaos, but an organized chaos, of how we made ourselves, remembering the one-by-one, two-by-two thing that we did on July 4th, getting to the Liberty Island celebration, where we outsmarted the cops. And we got into the plaza, we got onto the plaza at Lincoln Center. And we were so loud and noisy, because someone had the concept of putting on the flyer, bring whistles. We all had metal whistles. We were loud; we were really, really loud at that point. And the plaza has a way of echoing your sound.

People from our demonstration managed to get in to the New York State Theater, where people were having their gala dinner for Chief Justice Burger. And we were told that we were so noisy, and effective in our noise, that people had to shout to each other, sitting at the table, to be heard from one person to the next. That’s how loud it was inside.

People actually did get inside and shout things inside. I don't remember at this point what was said, and exactly what was done. But there was a little, minor disruption caused by people who got in. And this went on for a good hour or two, and was a very successful demo, up until the police, as we were getting ready to disperse — and I fault myself to this, as much as anyone else — that we didn't organize the dispersal from the demonstration maybe as well organized as he should. But the police had. And they corralled us into an area where they had their big van-trucks, and had police horses, and they did some beating, and a couple people got hurt. And it was a little bit of chaos for awhile.

But I think the fight was well fought. We were able to speak back to the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and the American Bar Association, to let it be known that this kind of behavior is not acceptable, this kind of ruling. And eventually, we have gained that right to privacy. But it's taken many years to do so.

So this timid sort of nature of the established gay groups kind of let Buddy Noro to say, we've got to form our own group. And I didn't want to do that. This is a lot of work as it is, what we're doing with GLAAD and with CLGR. But he said, we really need to do so. Marty Robinson had gotten involved. And Marty said, we gotta form our own group. Henry was for starting our own group.

So a core of people — of myself, Buddy Noro, Henry Yaeger, and Marty Robinson — began meeting in this apartment. And we began planning actions.

I need a break for a sec.

SS: Okay.

BB: Marty Robinson was an early member of the Gay Activists Alliance. And he quickly became the visionary for me, and maybe a lot of our community, in terms of what we needed to do about HIV/AIDS, and the genocide that was going on in our community. One of his mantras was, if it's not medicine, it's murder. He taught me things like it doesn't matter whether you're Rock Hudson or a person living on the street, homeless: if you don't have effective treatments for HIV, you're going to die. And it's an equalizer. And the most important thing that we need to do as a community is fight to have better research done, and to make sure that there are treatments for people with HIV. That quickly became the focus of the Lavender Hill Mob, and later, to a great extent, ACT UP. The main focus was research.

We began to – I didn't know the difference between the CDC, the FDA, and the NIH. I didn't know that the NIH did the research, the FDA did the approval and regulations of drugs once they were on the market; and the CDC does prevention and epidemiology, and tracking of diseases and viruses and all that, around the world. So to me, they were all just one big mess, responsible for not providing any medicines for people with HIV, and not doing the research that they needed to do.

Tape III
00:25:00

One of the first things we did was try to follow the money – something you learn out of Watergate — that, okay, 12 million dollars was being spent from the AIDS Clinical Trial Network, which was the network of research

being done by the National Institutes of Health under NIAID, the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases. They were giving like 3 million dollars to Mount Sinai, they were giving 4 million dollars to NYU – wait, there were three people enrolled in clinical study here, and there are four people enrolled in clinical study there. Where is that 4 million dollars going to? And why are they only studying AZT?

This led to, I think, one of the first demonstrations I think we did out in front of Sloan-Kettering, with ACT UP New York.

SS: The Silent Picket.

BB: This was the picket that went on for 72 hours. And that led to meeting the head of infectious disease there, who would later be on the Presidential Commission on HIV – drawing a blank on his name at the moment. But anyway, we began demonstrating at hospitals. We began trying to get documents out of the federal government, out of the NIH and the CDC and the FDA, to find out what are they doing? Where is this money going? What are they studying, what's going on? And trying to learn, to educate ourselves.

Also, the Lavender Hill Mob went about going to just about every major conference that we could have any tie-in whatsoever to HIV and AIDS, and what we needed to have said.

If I go through this a little bit, I might see some interesting things here. I think it's in the other book.

Well, one of the things the Lavender Hill Mob did was camp out overnight in front of Gracie Mansion to get Bailey House opened. Because the

city would-, Bailey House was the first housing for people with AIDS in New York, that was dedicated housing for people with AIDS. And the city was sitting on the contract for a year, not moving forward with negotiations and getting things signed and getting things done. We camped out overnight. Michael Petrelis helped organize that demo. We set up a tent in front of Gracie Mansion, and we stayed there overnight, and within a day or two, Bailey House was ready to be opened. So that was one of the cool things that activism and camping out overnight does.

So we went to the American Psychological Association conference. And our flyer there was, “AIDS in America: A Case Study in Dementia” – explaining how various fears and phobias are diseases. So we wanted the American Psychological Association to declare homophobia a disease. And one of the manifestations of that homophobia was the policy on AIDS, and what Reagan was doing on AIDS; that this was an irrational phobia that was causing a non-fighting-back against a virus.

For a full year — or actually close to nine months, 10 months — the Lavender Hill Mob was very active, doing demonstrations quite regularly. We went to Senator Alphonse D’Amato’s office, and took it over, at 2 Penn Plaza, near Madison Square Garden. We got into the office. And we had made arrest warrants that said, Arrest warrant: Senator Alphonse D’Amato. Wanted for mass murder by indifference. I think it was 334,000 people dead, at the time, was the flyer. And we stayed there until – they wouldn’t arrest us. {LAUGHS} And later on that night, Marty Robinson got a call from Senator Moynihan’s office,

who was the Democratic senator. And they were like, why didn't you take over our office? Our senator's no better than he is.

But that also led to the –

SS: Wow.

BB: – fact that Marty liked doing zaps and demonstrations and whatever. And it was like – we thought we'd go in and take over D'Amato's office, and then GMHC could come in and do the lobbying, and do the work. And it was like – well, it didn't turn out that way. We offered them meetings with these people, and they didn't want to follow up on them, the established AIDS and gay organizations. So we began doing the lobbying. We wound up meeting with D'Amato's health people, and Moynihan's health people, and we began doing lobbying on that.

SS: Now I have a question.

BB: Yeah.

SS: As you guys were doing this, were you and Marty having an open conversation about the fact that he had AIDS?

BB: Not so much. Not so much. It was not about him. It was not about me. It was a matter about getting the work done. He was not – I don't know how out he was about his diagnosis. And I personally had a false-negative test, at that point. I assumed I was negative. I didn't find out I was positive until 1989, when I got the news that I was positive, and got the news also I was probably positive in '87, but had a false negative test, because I had all the obvious signs that I had seroconverted back in '87.

And at the same time – but Marty was my leader, in a way. Marty was the one that, we did the flyer in the morning at a conference, and we distributed it to 2500 people, and he's saying, okay, it's 11:45; we need another flyer by the time the next session begins at one o'clock. And Henry and I would be like, we just distributed a flyer this morning. He says, no, we need another one. Here's what it's got to say. I'm going to go down and get sandwiches. I'll be back in an hour. When I come back, have the flyer ready. {LAUGHS}

And that's the way Marty was. It wasn't like, I'm feeling sick, I need some help here. Or you're doing this for me because I have AIDS. That never came into it.

And I was working around the clock. There were many times where I'd go 36, 48 hours without any sleep, doing this stuff. And it didn't seem to matter. I didn't pay my rent for a year. Literally. And my landlord was so stupid at the time, they didn't even notice. They just kept sending me bills: okay, you're now \$5,000 in arrears, whatever.

And there was a time where I didn't have electricity for a month and a half in this apartment. And it didn't seem to matter to me. It just seemed like this work is more important. Having electricity isn't the most important thing in the world.

We did do a tremendous amount of self-sacrifice, but it didn't feel the least bit like we were sacrificing anything. We were doing what came naturally.

So anyway, we did a lot of demonstrations. When Jimmy Swaggart had said some really awful things about gay people, we did a letter-writing campaign, to get people to write letters to WOR-TV in New York that was carrying him. And we met with the people who, representatives of WOR, and we told them we wanted him pulled off the air – particularly for one comment he made, about a lesbian adopting a child, or having the child from a marriage that had broken up, and him saying that it's tantamount to murder, to give the child to the lesbian parent. It's equivalent, tantamount to putting a gun to the little one's head and blowing its brains out. He actually said that on the air, amongst other things he had said. And we had documentation; we had exact quotes of what he said, and we brought them to WOR. And they were like, we had no idea. We knew what he was saying was a bit over the top. But they had to honestly say to us: we had no idea he was going this far. We had several quotes that were like that.

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They put his people on notice, his legal people, that they were going to blip – they were going to be monitoring the broadcasts of his show prior to broadcasting them; and they were going to blip out certain parts. And if it got so bad, they would actually remove him from the air. They had received complaints from other community groups, representing the Hispanic community and Jewish community groups. Gay groups were not – well, the gay groups – Lavender Hill Mob — were not the only ones complaining to WOR. And eventually, he was pulled off the air.

We did a lot of things like that over the period of nine months or so before we finally had company, in ACT UP.

In the weeks leading up to the day ACT UP would find itself, in one room, the Lavender Hill Mob went down to the Centers for Disease Control, for a conference they were holding on what they called the role of HIV antibody testing in the control of HIV. It was kind of a – we called the whole conference a hoax and a lie, to begin with, the Mob. We went down with a press release, we went down with a flyer. And we wanted to stop mandatory t-, one of the issues to be discussed was, big issue that was to be discussed was mandatory testing of people for HIV. This was such an affront to our community and to ourselves – that people should be forced to take an HIV-antibody test, when there are no drugs to treat HIV; and what are you going to offer people, besides testing them and then quarantining them and god knows what you want to do with them? Tattooing them; whatever.

So Lavender Hill Mob went down there. And it was myself, Marty Robinson, Henry Yaeger, Michael Petrelis, and Eric Perez, who was a member of the Mob during the early period of time. And we distributed flyers. And it was like, I think one of them said – Test Drugs, Not People was the head slogan on that. And we referred to the CDC as the Center for Detention Camps. So we made quite a splash at that event, as we did at many of the conferences we went to. And that was one of the days where Marty said, we gotta do another flyer for the afternoon session as well. But the meeting went on for a day and a half or so. And at the end of it –

Well, first of all, at the beginning of it, they did kind of a straw poll with like, how many people here who are attending the meeting — there were like some 1500 people at the meeting — how many people here support the idea of mandatory HIV testing? Only one person raised their hand. So it was obvious that it was not going anywhere. They were not going to come out with a conclusion for mandatory testing. But it was kind of like one of those show things, where we just go through the process, and whatever.

At the end of it all, the gay community leaders held a press conference to pat themself-, they were all dressed in nice suits and ties and great haircuts, and everybody looking so proper, and class picture kind of thing; patting themselves on the back for all the great work that they'd done in stopping mandatory testing. And the Mob knew that they were going to be doing this. And Michael and myself led the challenge, with kind of like a How dare you? Our community is dying. You're patting yourselves on the back. Where is your anger? We began shouting this at them. And there was a huge press entourage for this press conference showing the power of the gay community, that they just defeated mandatory testing, and isn't everything so nice. We were furious. It was also very, very painful, for myself, and I'm sure for Michael and for Marty and Henry, to be shouting at our own community leaders, publicly, in front of all the press. But we felt it needed to be done.

SS: So you started yelling at our community leaders. And let me ask you something. Did you hear from Larry Kramer at this point?

BB: No. Not yet. This was — in fact, I remember the date on this — this would have March 2nd and 3rd. No, actually it was the end of February. I have all the press clippings here from all the various newspapers. Henry Yaeger — one of the great things that he would do is he would buy up all the newspapers from all over the country so that we could clip out how we were covered, and see how we were covered in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, in the *Boston Herald*, in the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, the *New York Times* and the *LA Times*, so that we could kind of track the impact we were having, and seeing, it's like, you'd circle something, and say, okay, this is the exact wording from your flyer, Bill. {LAUGHS} It's great that you're doing these things, but it's also very important that the information and what you're saying gets out beyond that closed room that you're in.

So here I was, in this closed press conference, with all the press and all of our gay leaders standing up there for their school picture, and they're congratulating each other, and — we're angry; we're really, really angry. Our friends are dying. Their friends are dying. They should — we shouldn't be giving them a lecture that you need to be showing your anger. But we've had — this now, we've had two years of experience fighting on AIDS and gay issues now, again with the community, from 1985 to now, in early 1987; where our leaders were holding us back, telling us we can't take to the streets; telling us you can't do civil disobedience. We're an educational organization. That's going to upset our tax status, or whatever. And here they were, seemingly happy, when they've got the world's press attention, and they're saying what a great success the conference

was, where once again, the focus was not trying to save the lives of people with HIV. Where are the treatments?

And so we took over the press conference, in a way. And we got all the attention. And our quotes, about why is only AZT being studied, and people are dying in the streets, and the government is, the Reagan administration is doing nothing to fight AIDS – so we became the headlines. People like Michael Callen, who was the head of the PWA Coalition, whatever; it's like, Bill, it's like, do you know how this is going to be seen, and blah blah blah? And we, we, I understand what you're saying about blah blah blah. And it's like – and Tim Sweeney, from GMHC, is like, they're all so upset with us. And it was like, and we understand; but you gotta play by the, and – all this stuff. And – so –

That night, or that day, I get call from that CNN wants me to come on *Crossfire*, to talk about what happened at the CDC. And I knew *Crossfire*, Robert Novak, and I forget who the liberal was, Robert Novak being the conservative one, who outed Valerie Plame. He's like – so they want me to come on *Crossfire*. I didn't have a suit jacket, so I had to borrow one from somebody down in Atlanta. We're in Atlanta, the home of CNN. And I was like, I'm on the phone with CNN, and it's like, well, I'll come on, but I will not debate a crazy. If you want to have someone to legitimately disagree with my point of view, that's fine. But I don't want to debate a crazy person. I don't want to debate a homophobe or a nutty loon right-wing jerk. And they say, okay, don't worry, we'll, blah blah blah.

So I go down to the studio. And – I think that's going to be annoying. {noise from the radiator}

SS: No, we're fine.

BB: It's okay? Okay. So – I get to the studio. And they send a car to pick me up at the hotel. It's like, Marty always made sure that we stayed at the hotels where the conference was taking place, because you could work till one in the morning, jarring people and talking to people in the bars and whatever, and getting the work done, not just at the meetings, but on the sidebars and all that as long as you're staying at the hotel, you got the opportunity to do more work.

Tape IV
00:05:00

So I get down to the studio in Atlanta. And I'm only the one person there. Robert Novak and the person that they put on to debate me was Congressman William Dannemeyer, from, a crazy from –

SS: Orange County.

BB: – Orange County, California. And I forget who the liberal was, as I said. So they were all in Washington; I was in Atlanta, in a corner of the studio of CNN, with one cameraman back over there. Robert Novak began, and said, there was bedlam today at the Centers for Disease Control. A group calling themselves the Lavender Hill Mob. We're going to speak to Mr. Bahlman about this, and blah blah blah blah blah.

So we debated back and forth. And got some of the things that, a lot of the things that's said– it's on tape, but it's – I asked Dannemeyer whether he used a condom when he had sex with his wife. I raised a lot of really important issues about safer sex, about the Reagan administration not doing

anything to fund AIDS, and going into quite a bit of detail, and getting a lot of stuff on national TV, maybe for the first time. And you got those airwaves for 22 minutes; use them the best you can to get things out there.

I remember – Robert Novak, as he leads into a commercial break, says – and when we get back, we’ll ask Mr. Bahlman about an AIDS activist plot to pollute the water supply with HIV in Texas. We’ll be right back.

And I’m sitting there in the studio. I ask the cameraman: did he just say, it’s like – and then we – finally, I got somebody who was walking by to say: yeah, I think he did say that, yeah. So anyway, I came back, and I said, basically said, well, even if somebody were to do this – it’s impossible to do this, and this is not where mainstream AIDS activism is. And I can’t explain what you heard from one individual, but it doesn’t make sense to me whatsoever.

But for the most part, I was able to – I got Dannemeyer to say that he would fight for more research in HIV, which of course he never did. But I managed to win a couple arguments, and make a couple of points. I remember, when I got back to New York, something that was very important to me: Vito Russo came up to me, and said I did a great job on the show. So that to me meant, since Vito is more media-savvy than just about any of us in the community — he wrote *The Celluloid Closet*, he did lectures on gays in the media — for him to say I did a good job, I was so thrilled to hear that from Vito.

So that was just a few days before ACT UP was to be formed. This is just a couple weeks before. It was something that got out there very far and wide.

The Silence = Death Project had these pink triangles with Silence = Death on them, the famous poster logo that everybody knows, in T-shirts. They were up all over the city. When the Lavender Hill Mob came back to New York from Atlanta, we were greeted to these posters up everywhere. We didn't know where they were from. I don't think anybody knew where they were from, because this was something that was done by five people who started this project, and they did it anonymously. They hired professionals to do the posting in New York. That's how you, that's one way you get posters done in New York, like for a Broadway play or whatever, and they used the same system. And the graphic was important, and it was a mobilizing factor, it woke people up, just seeing that symbol, Silence = Death, all over the city.

We had done what we did in Atlanta. It made press headlines, and been on CNN. Larry Kramer was writing very powerful, several-page articles in the *New York Native*, which was the gay newspaper at the time, screaming, in print, in black and white, how our community was letting us down, just like the way Michael Petrelis and Henry and Eric and I shouted at the gay community leaders in Atlanta, at the CDC conference, that you're not doing anything.

I think one of the things Larry said in his article is, GMHC has 60 paid staffers — I forget what the number was — and not one lobbyist in Washington. We knew what was going on. We knew that prejudice was ruling the government's response to HIV, and they were very happy to watch faggots, junkies and women die, and they weren't going to do anything about it. Actually, they were going to precipitate it, if they could. They were going to make sure we

Tape IV
00:10:00

died. At least that's the way we felt. And everything that they did, and even some of their rhetoric, actually spoke to that.

So Larry was pissed; we were pissed; the Silence = Death Project was pissed. And there was a regular speakers presentation, there was a weekly or a monthly event at the Community Center, and the person who was supposed to speak at the Community Center on West 13th Street had to cancel. So at the last minute, Larry Kramer was asked if he would speak. He was a known writer and screenwriter and had helped form GMHC. Everyone knew Larry's position. So everyone converged on the Community Center that night, including every single member of the Lavender Hill Mob – there were about six or seven core members of us at the time, even though we did much bigger demonstrations with lots of people. And everybody else who was angry was there that night. It was that perfect night for the spark to ignite, and for a new organization to begin.

Larry likes to claim, "I was the founder of ACT UP New York," and that's got him a lot of places, and a lot of that is good, a lot of that is great. Because you have to have a strong ego in this business to survive and to feel strong enough that you can do something that nobody else is doing, and be challenging to the system, and have the confidence in your gut to know you're doing the right thing. You gotta have a strong ego. And Larry's certainly got one; I guess I got one, too. Marty Robinson definitely did, as well.

So he likes to claim he was the founder of ACT UP. And that also helps put you on a plat-, gives you a status that allows you to do things. Which is a good thing, it's a very good thing. But at the same time, I look at it as there

were 75 founding members. Every single person who was there that night contributed to the founding of ACT UP New York. They were all essential, in one way or another. They all brought their skills and their talent and their anger and their ingenuity to fight back to the plate.

Larry was the speaker. Larry was the speaker. Martin Sheen, I think, was in the audience that night, the actor. But they were no more or less important than anybody else in that room. They were all extraordinary. I think Larry would probably say that himself.

SS: I don't know.

BB: At least I would hope so. At least I would hope so. Because I love Larry; I love Larry a lot. And I've worked with him on quite a number of projects. So that night, the next day, I think, I invited Larry to come over to my apartment, because he mentioned in his speech, one of the things he said, and it's in his books, the copy of the speech that's in one of his, *Reports from the Holocaust*, I think it's called. He says, the Lavender Hill Mob can't do it all by themselves. Which was a nice wink to us out there. Because we didn't have too many friends in the community. And we had lots of friends in the community. We would do a booth on Gay Pride Day, and people would come out of the woodwork and say, oh, we love the, thank you for what you're doing, blah blah blah. And we had a lot of support. But amongst the leaders, we had {SNAP} everyone wished we would go away, and hated our guts, or maybe, or whatever. And they wouldn't tell us what's happening. We would have to find out through a third source. Oh, there's a meeting taking place at such and such? We want to

be there. There's no meeting there. It was like – so we – we were really the outsiders, the Lavender Hill Mob.

So to have someone mention us from the stage, it was so nice to hear. It made you feel a little good. It can be a little bit of a lonely business when you're sticking your neck out so far.

Anyway, so, I forget how it happened. Maybe I invited Larry. But he came over to my house the next day. And we went through these binders of copies of flyers and press releases that Marty inspired and Henry Yaeger and myself mostly wrote. And he said, this is exactly what ACT UP should be doing, although ACT UP didn't have a name at the time.

Tape IV
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I think it was maybe about the third or fourth meeting, there was a member of ACT UP, who was a nurse — maybe James, you remember who it was — but he got up. We were trying to come up with a name for ACT UP. And ACT UP had a lot of really good-looking people, and a lot of movers and shakers in ACT UP, who were very obviously the most – they just kind of had an excitement about them, or whatever. And this guy — and I wish I could remember his name — who didn't have the greatest body in the world, didn't have the greatest charisma in the world, or whatever — and he was a nurse. And he got up, and he said, I think maybe I have something here, as we were tossing names back and forth. And it was like – ACT UP: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power.

And nyah. Not, a lot of people didn't like it. We had about five or six different names that we debated, and then we took a vote. And ACT UP got

the most votes, with four or five other names out there, you're getting 20 percent, or 22 percent, you may win. And somehow, I don't know how we whittled it down, but that became the name of our organization. And it was interesting: I may have even voted against it myself, if I remember. But a lot of the people who were the most important people in ACT UP over the first few years of the organization may have actually voted against the name, which I think is a cute little anecdote to our history.

But it was a perfect name. It was a perfect name for our group, because it spoke to what we were doing. It spoke to, there was no question. We weren't the Gay Men's Health Crisis; we weren't GLAAD; we were acting up. And we were unleashing power. We were empowering people. We weren't taking people to a rally and speaking down to them. We were going to empower people to fight back. And in a lot of ways, the tactics came somewhat — I don't want to be too egotistical about it — came somewhat from the Lavender Hill Mob. And the Lavender Hill Mob tactics came from the Gay Activists Alliance, which were the first group to really do that kind of zapping, of going into an office and taking it over, and saying, how dare you say this about me?

Here it was, people with HIV and AIDS and their advocates, saying, how dare you discriminate against me? And it was the same technique — it goes back to the black civil rights movement, where black people would take to the streets, and go into a diner, or demand to be able to sit on a bus.

It's a very different thing when you're an anonymous person, that you're being discriminated against, or if you're showing your face, and you're saying, how dare you? Or, I demand that you accept me.

One of the first things, one of the early demos that achieved success was like an airline that wouldn't fly people with HIV. And we got that reversed the same day. I forget what airline it was – it may have been Delta or American or whatever.

But the Lavender Hill Mob, we had a newsletter. We did four issues of a newsletter. And for announcing in our newsletter that there was this new group, ACT UP, the comments that we wrote in there was, "At Last, Company." One of the things – we were like, okay, should the Lavender Hill Mob continue to exist, because we now have ACT UP, which is a much more representative group? You've got a hundred people coming to a meeting, as opposed to three or four or five of us, or six of us meeting in Bill's apartment. Do we have a need to exist? And basically, one of the things that we wanted to do was to, since we were going to all these conferences, and we were having meetings with heads of the NIH and the CDC and the FDA, and we were pushing for various things to get done, and we had connections with congressional offices to help get legislation through, and funding, and all of that; that we wanted to see ACT UP, this greater group of people, get up to speed on dealing with these issues and so on. That year, one of the last times there was kind of a separation between the Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP – actually, we began, the Lavender Hill Mob, the first couple of flyers that ACT UP put out, some of them were co-

Tape IV
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sponsored by the Lavender Hill Mob and ACT UP. Including the flyer that we did where we did the 72-hour demonstration in front of Sloan-Kettering Memorial Hospital, where we went through a step-by-step process of what the federal government research agenda was doing, and going through it point by point by point, where do you get from here to there to there, why only AZT, and so much money – a system built to study thousands of people, it's only 42 people enrolled – coming to the conclusion that it was genocide; that the government was committing genocide with its AIDS research policies.

That was something that the wider group, ACT UP, had to learn. And they knew it already. They knew it already. But how to turn that into being activists, and to make change on that agenda.

I remember, at the Third International Conference on AIDS, which was that June — ACT UP was formed in mid-March — the Third International Conference on AIDS was held in Washington, D.C. I forget which hotel it was. But it was the same hotel where President Ronald Reagan was shot, by Hinckley, was it, in the arm, under a portico. But that's where the international AIDS, Third International Conference on AIDS was held. And ACT UP was there, in strong and big numbers, outside, demonstrating in front of the White House. Larry Kramer got arrested. There was a great picture in Time magazine with his hands behind his back, with the White House in the background.

Lavender Hill Mob was on the inside. Because we had attended many conferences up to that point. And I remember, the Lavender Hill Mob was dressed up in white lab coats, white pants, lavender crosses on our sleeves and on

our backs, and Silence = Death T-shirts. And the flyer that we gave out that morning to the 4500 people who were in attendance, the researchers from all over the world, was: Reagan Administration Fears Human Sexuality More Than AIDS. That was the headline. And there were about five or six paragraphs that went through it there. And the –

I was sitting there, in the second row, with Marty Robinson and Henry Yaeger. We were the Mob at that moment in time there. And Tony Fauci was sitting right behind me. And I had never met Tony Fauci, but of course I knew who he was. And I said to myself, okay; hadn't distributed the flyer yet. Let me talk to Tony before I distribute the flyer, because he'll never talk to me again. So I said, okay, right.

So I said – introduced myself, blah blah blah blah blah. And he introduced himself. And we talked a little bit. And George H. Bush was the keynote speaker at the opening plenary session of the International AIDS Conference. So I said to Tony, I said, Tony, are we going to like what Bush has to say today? And Tony just shot back to a perfect answer: You will if he sticks to what I wrote for him. And I was like, okay. {LAUGHS}

So we distributed the flyer. I was – I forget if it was Marty or myself – they tried to arrest at least one of us. And we had paid. We didn't get a scholarship or anything. We had paid, we paid for all these conferences we went to, out of our own pockets, even though none of us were rich, we were all poor. As I said, I was behind in my rent. But we paid the \$400 or whatever it was to be there. And Marty said, we are registered for this conference. This is an open

event. This is a matter of free speech, and you cannot stop us. And he talked them down. He was like, when you know what you, sound like you know what you're talking about, heh heh heh, you can go through; the force is with you, and these people are none of your concern.

So we got the flyer out to every single person there, in attendance. And one of the things that it said is, there are only 442 people enrolled in the ACTG, a system that was designed to study HIV research in over 10,000 people with AIDS. Four hundred and forty two people. It's designed to enroll 10,000.

So I sit down, and go back to my seat, to wait for the session to begin. Tony taps me on the shoulder. Says, Bill, I just wanted to tell you, I like your flyer.

Okay.

And he said, but you've got 442 people; it's 475.

And I said, are you sure, Tony? I spoke with your secretary on Friday, and she told me 442.

So he said, no, it's actually 475.

And he said, I'm glad you have the lower figure, and I'm glad you're doing this, because the more you're demonstrating, the more money I'm going to get to work with. Which seemed like a – Tony's –

SS: Well, what was his explanation for the underenrollment?

BB: He didn't have an explanation, and I didn't really have a chance to really talk to him in great detail about it at that particular time. But it's what led Tony toward open discussions with those of us in the activist

community; people like myself and Peter Staley and others who began to meet with Tony fairly regularly. But at that point, I think some, a couple other people in the community had met with him a bit, but not so much from the activist point of view.

And so throughout the five days of the meeting, I kept getting these calls from behind me, and it would be Tony. And it's like, Tony, I want to introduce you to so and so, blah blah blah blah blah. And he'd say, well, he's been trying to get papers from us about trials and stuff. But whatever Bill says he wants, just send it to him. Nice, nice, nice, but it was bull crap. It was like we still had to fight to get papers; we still had – one of the things we did in the Lavender Hill Mob was file Freedom of Information Act inquiries to get copies of research documents, and to track this stuff down, so we knew how many people were enrolled, we knew where their money was going, and stuff like that. And things opened up a bit. But it was still a fight to get those papers from Tony's office, from NIAID and NIH.

One thing that was great: Iris Long, who we met through ACT UP, was a data junkie. And I was getting papers, and we were trying to process them. The Lavender Hill Mob set up our own educational group, which we figured, well, maybe this is a group that we can accept donations for, because it's educational, and we can set up our own little foundation or whatever. We started the Lavender Hill Education Project.

So documents we were getting, as soon as we were getting them, we were packaging them up together – actually, we got Lambda to give us space

to work in, so that we could xerox copies of papers we were getting out of pharmaceutical companies and the NIH, and just sending them with a cover letter to groups all over the country, going – document one is this, document two is this, and just not really having time to analyze, or even telling people what to think of it. It's just like, here's, we got these documents; here, take them, and do with what you wish. Because we didn't feel comfortable just sitting on them. It was kind of immoral to just sit on them. We managed to get these documents. We can't really publish them anywhere. But at least send them out to the other groups, so that they have them.

But when Iris came in, I was doing an okay job. But as I said, the Lavender Hill Mob was a core of myself, Marty, and Henry. There's only so much we could do. And Iris, her main thing was getting documents.

SS: Right.

BB: So she took over that. It was like ch-, here you go!
{LAUGHS} And Iris began getting even more documents, and more successfully, than what I was doing. And of course, we were all still collecting things, and whatever. But Iris became really quite a whiz at that.

Tape IV
00:30:00

So we did a series of flyers at the International AIDS Conference, including an editorial from the *Village Voice*, which said, first they come for the aliens, which was about quarantine and tattooing and all that. Marty came up with this flyer – Are you now or have you ever been a seropositive? McCarthy-era-type blacklisting kind of thing. We even – there was a great editorial in the

New York Times — When to Test for AIDS — about testing and why testing everybody was a stupid thing to do at this point.

SS: Do you know who was behind that?

BB: I don't know who was behind it. And what was really shocking – that the Lavender Hill Mob would publish something from the *New York Times*.

The final flyer we did to everybody was a flyer that was this very simple — and we did color coding for different days, for each flyer, so people would know that this – oh, you're getting an orange flyer; it's different from the green one you got yesterday morning, or whatever. And the Reagan administration says Just Say No to education. No condoms, no sex, no privacy, no freedom; no choice, no reality, and no cure – The Lavender Hill Mob.

And that's a classic Marty Robinson-ism. Because he could sum things up in a matter of a couple words. Or he could write three pages of total nonsense, and then hand it to — but saying some great stuff in there, somewhere — and then Henry and I would have to refine it, and come up with a flyer.

But one of the things we also did was, the last day, when secretary of Health and Human Services [Secretary] Otis Bowen was to make a speech – one of the big mistakes that these international conferences on AIDS were doing was inviting political figures to come in to talk, because it's difficult to counter a researcher and turn him into a villain; but it's much easier to turn a government official into a villain.

SS: Totally.

BB: So we urged people to stand for medicine and science. We wanted people to stand up during his talk. Because the Mob were three of us. Actually, when Bush spoke, we stood up, and we started shouting at him, at the opening plenary. And Bush was like, he said what he thought was off-mike, but it actually was picked up: What is that? Some gay group out there?

So the front page of the Daily News the next day was a picture of George Bush, with a balloon caption “What is that, is that some gay group out there?”

But the flyer was actually – how exactly we came up with the wording – but like, it was rather nicely written: Stand for Medicine and Science. We urge you today to take an action in support of medicine and science. The politics of AIDS as defined by the Reagan administration and the U.S. Congress shows ignorance and contempt for the collective wisdom of the world medical and scientific community.

SS: Right.

BB: We ask you to stand when U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Otis Bowen gives the concluding address, Friday 12:50 p.m., during the final plenary. We urge you to stand for mercy, for understanding, and the future of humanity. This is your opportunity to send a clear message to the world that to end the AIDS pandemic, we need research, not forced testing; education, not legislation; and healthcare, not discrimination.

And because we didn't want to make the Lavender Hill Mob said that, we just put, LHM at the bottom.

And hundreds upon hundreds of people stood. And it was a silent protest. And it was quite powerful and effective. And it stems from that, you want to empower people to take a position themselves; not make them listen to you talk.

SS: What happened when people in the Mob started to get sick?

Tape IV
00:35:00

BB: {SIGH} Well – Marty did pretty well during all the time of the Lavender Hill Mob and the early days of ACT UP. Marty became somewhat reclusive when he got sick. And Michael Petrelis did fairly well. During that period, I was thought to be HIV-negative. And Henry Yaeger was HIV-negative, as far as I know. And so we – so that was, we were fine during that period. So we didn't get sick, which was a good thing.

But I worked very, very closely with many people with AIDS at the time. Griffin Gold, at the PWA Coalition; and many others, were very dear friends, and I knew many people with HIV and AIDS. And Marty having HIV himself, as well as being a visionary so many times for our community. He was one of the visionaries that turned Stonewall into a liberation movement, as opposed to it just being a fight. You have to take events, and turn them into something that can have a lasting impact. Because otherwise, an event, Stonewall is just a riot. A speech by Larry Kramer at the Center is just a speech by Larry Kramer at the Center. A *Hardwick* decision, where 2,000 people gather at Sheridan Square for one night is just one night, unless you know how to organize, unless you know how to empower your community, and work with them. And

that's something that – I think to some extent, there also seems to be a kind of time of the decade when things are possible. Toward the end of a decade, that's when revolution tends to happen, at least within the gay community. It was toward the end of the '60s that the gay community got together after Stonewall. It was toward the end of the '80s that ACT UP happened.

ACT UP and GAA are very rare groups. They're very, very rare groups. Both of them – hundreds of people worked closely together, from different backgrounds, and unified about one issue, and made it happen.

I think one of the things that made ACT UP New York such a great organization is, initially, it was one group with two committees. There was the Issues Committee, which researched what it was, what the issues were, and what was happening and what we wanted to see happen, and what needed to be changed; and there was the Actions Committee, with Alan Klein, and I forget who else led that committee, who were the people, who were the tacticians. Okay, we're going to sneak into the building here, and we're going to do this there, and we're going to time it at seven o'clock, and we're going to time it for the, blah blah blah. So you had two distinct committees, that were working with the same organization. This was extremely successful.

I worked with the Issues Committee, and we – met at Herb Spiers's apartment, most of the evenings. And Herb was a tremendous and great host, as well as chair of the Issues Committee. Were we to arrive there, early evening, I guess, maybe around six o'clock or something like that; and we'd go till 11, 12, or later some nights, in this big artist's loft that he had. I think it was

in the West 20s or something. But it was a great space, and he had a living room built into that loft space. And we sat in sofas, facing each other. And Henry was there at those meetings, and Jim Eigo was a member of the Issues Committee, and a lot of people. And we all argued and debated. But there was a really, really close tie we had with each other, that supported each other's ideas. And like, we wanted to know what each other thought about this and that and whatever, so that our, the collective wisdom could grow, and we could come up and work things out.

I remember, for the Fifth International Conference on AIDS, which was in Montreal, we were working with two groups; one in Montreal, and I think it was AIDS Action Now! in Toronto. And I don't know who came up with it, but we decided to do a proclamation, that would be given out at the opening of the International Conference on AIDS. And my major contribution to that was changing the title. It was initially proposed as the rights of people with AIDS. And I said, no no no. I think it should be the rights and needs of people with AIDS. It isn't just a matter of rights. People with AIDS need things. We need things. It's not a matter of right. It's more than the civil rights issue.

Tape IV
00:40:00

JW: I need to change tapes.

SS: Okay.

Tape V
00:00:00

SS: Okay, you're on. Tell us. What would you like to talk about?

BB: Well, anyway, the Fifth International Conference on AIDS, in 1989; that was where ACT UP New York worked with a Montreal AIDS group

and Toronto AIDS Action Now!, I believe it was. And we developed a document called “The Rights and Needs of People with AIDS.” And it spelled out everything we were fighting for. And we put it in the form of a newspaper, and gave it out to everyone attending.

That was also a meeting that the health commissioner of the City of New York, Stephen Joseph, I believe, made a presentation. As one of ACT UP New York’s not-shining-most moments, because he was shouted down. And we had no flyer explaining why. He was just shouted down. And that’s a bad thing to do. Because if you shout someone down, they don’t know why, it just creates sympathy for the person who’s speaking, which it did. And if I remember, he got an ovation, possibly a standing ovation, at the end of his speech. That was one bad thing we did, in many years of great things that ACT UP New York did, but it’s a lesson to be learned, though.

The time when we were in Montreal was also the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre, in China. And that was one of the more beautiful moments, where ACT UP joined another community, and we marched in solidarity in Chinatown, in Montreal. And it was very, very moving, and very, very important.

There was one time ACT UP went down to the Centers for Disease Control. And we had a series of demonstrations, including women’s issues and HIV, with the CDC, and how they were not counting the women. But one of the off things that we did in our down moment was go to the Martin Luther King museum, which is in Atlanta. And that was very powerful and moving to do that

with 75 fellow activists; to spend a day at that museum. And for me, the most powerful moment was – because back then — I forget what year it was; might have been 1990 or '91 that we went to Atlanta — there wasn't an awful lot of things in the Martin Luther King museum at the time. But one of the things that really struck me was the suit of clothes that he wore, and the shoes that he wore in the marches throughout the South. And that was just so touching. It was one of the most powerful moments in my life, just to stand there, and see, to look at those shoes and the suit of clothes.

If you look back to the '60s, people didn't have a closetful of shoes. They had one pair of dress shoes, they had maybe another pair of shoes. So if those were his shoes, those were his shoes.

SS: I wanted to ask you; you continue to work with the ACTG.

BB: Yes.

SS: So what is that like for you now, after all this time?

BB: Well – it was ACT UP that opened the ACTG to people with HIV and their advocates. Because we went down, we began attending meetings of the ACTG, uninvited; and began having confrontations and discussions and learning things, and Iris getting documents out of them, and a lot of – walking home with copies of protocols, each one this thick. I wound up having seven milk crates of documents in my apartment in a very short period of time.

But we began attending the meetings, and our philosophy was, wherever our lives were being discussed, we need to be present. Wherever

research was being developed to find treatments for people with HIV, we need to be at the table, we need to be there.

So we met with Tony Fauci. The only two people I remember being at that meeting – myself and Peter Staley. There were probably about six or seven others. Probably Iris was at that meeting. And there was another meeting of the ACTG coming up. They meet three times a year. And we said, well, the one that's happening in June or whatever was the next one, in like two or three weeks or something. That meeting has got to be open.

Tape V
00:05:00

And Tony said, no, you have to wait for the one in October.

And Peter said, with the support of all of us in the room — we were not disagreeing with each other, or one bit out of step with each other — said, okay, you'll just have to arrest us, then.

So the next day, Peter Staley got a call from Tony Fauci, and he was like, you're welcome.

And Tony Fauci, who rarely comes to the ACTG meetings, spoke at the opening plenary of this meeting, where we were there. And his speech was basically, They're here, they're queer, get used to it. And he said, We're all scientists here. These people have something to contribute. If they ask you a question, you will answer it. If they have some advice that is useful, we expect you to incorporate it. And if you are unfairly attacked or judged in your work, you have the support of the NIH behind you.

So he set the tone for that. And it's rare, because these researchers, who are high-powered people, from NYU and various other – UCLA and all these

various institutions from around the country — they kind of feel self-righteous themselves, because they're kind of powerful people, who are never graced with Tony's presence.

SS: Right.

BB: And he's coming in here, and telling them this. It's like, while it was good to hear him say that; but the struggle had only begun then. And there were many, many fights with the ACTG, and there are many fights within our own community about how research should be done. The use of placebo controls; the acceptance of CD4 and viral load being used as a surrogate marker. Do you have to count the body bags? Do you have to count the numbers of times that people with HIV are hospitalized with opportunistic infections, to show that a drug works, or drug A is better than drug B; or drug combination A is better than drug combination B?

Once we found that protease inhibitors in combination with two nucleoside analogues could suppress the virus down to undetectable in a high percentage of patients; can you study it against two nucleosides alone, which you know cannot do that?

These were fights that we had with the ACTG, and these are fights that went on between members of ACT UP and members of TAG. TAG wanting to say, well, we need to do clinical endpoint studies. We need to do death as an endpoint. We need to do studies that potentially could put people at great risk.

There's a concept in research called equipoise, where you have to go into a research protocol with the understanding that either arm could be as

good as the other. When you know that either arm can't be good as the other, it's not equipoise, it's not just, it's not ethical. But, if you say that CD4 count and viral load suppression does not correlate with lack of getting sick; does not correlate with death; then you could say, well, we need those as endpoints.

This was a big battle and a big struggle within our community. Not many people said that we needed – one of the things we achieved very early on in ACT UP was getting CD4 recognized as a surrogate marker of progression. You have that in all diseases. You don't have to wait till someone gets dead to prove that a drug may work. But you also have the complication there that HIV medications are taken for very long periods of time, and as far as we know, for now, if you're going to be taking HIV meds, you're taking them for life. Unless you decide that you want to stop taking them, and see what happens. But the thing is, the goal of treatment is to keep the virus undetectable and keep CD4s high. And to do that, one has seen, through our experience, you need to stay on the medications for long periods of time. And these medications are toxic. And they were initially very, very toxic.

SS: Right.

BB: We have over 20 HIV medications approved right now for the treatment of HIV. I was on a drug regimen for seven, eight, nine years, where I had diarrhea every day of my life, and incontinence regularly. When I was attending conferences all over the world, I was changing my bed sheets in the morning before I went to my meetings. This was something that just was taken as a given. And there were people who believe – wait, wait, wait, wait to go on

medications, whatever. I waited for a while. But once I did go on medications, I saw that, for me, as a good thing. I believe that people should have choices to do what they want with their lives, and if they want to take medications, do it, or not. But I took medications, and I have done very well. Other people have not, and they have done well, too. But to me, looking at all the research, I see that being on medications is a very important thing, and they need to be available for those who want to take them.

But the work with the ACTG has – I kind of stopped working with the ACTG, and I put my eggs in the basket of working with the pharmaceutical industry. Because the ACTG was moving very slowly. And the pharmaceutical companies had the drugs. They were making the drugs; they were designing the early clinical studies. They were the ones to go to, if you wanted to get an expanded access protocol – expanded access protocol is to get a medication available to someone who has no other choices prior to its approval, and to give it to that person, and to those individuals who need it, for free.

It was ACT UP who established that policy, of having what's called a parallel track for people with life-threatening disease — AIDS and cancer, it was seen as — defined in congressional legislation that we got passed.

And we would go to the pharmaceutical companies, and say, hey; we need your drug available to a hundred thousand people with HIV who have no choice. They have gone through their other drugs already.

This was before we understood that two protease and a nucleoside would actually effectively keep the virus under control, and get your virus down

to undetectable levels. We were doing two drugs, one drug, and then switching one drug, and changing one drug. And there was not very much known about resistance. So people were cycling through drugs rather quickly. So people needed choices. They needed options.

And we succeeded, with Bristol-Myers, in getting them to do an expanded access protocol. I think it was d4T. Myself and Michael Becker began working with Merck, who had a drug called L661. Both Michael Becker and myself were in a Phase 1 pharmacokinetic study, where we were hooked up to IV for three days in Bethesda, Maryland, for the first study of that drug in Phase 1. And we were already meeting with Merck. And there were 35 individuals enrolled in Bethesda, Maryland, in a intramural trial; and 35 people enrolled in Birmingham, Alabama, at that site. And that was the entire length – 70 people in a Phase 1 study.

I – since you're in bed with somebody else who's also on the drug, what's your phone number, what's your address? – and we managed to put together a patient support group of 35 of the 70 people, with their names and addresses and phone numbers, and we began sharing information back and forth. And myself and Michael Becker were meeting with the pharmaceutical company regularly. So everything we learned, we then sent out to the other people who were in the protocol.

Interesting things we found out, like the placebo — since it was a placebo-controlled study, and it was a nonnucleoside, in monotherapy, which is a very dangerous thing to do — someone figured out if you opened up the capsule,

compare the placebo to the drug, and see the placebo is yellow, and the. So people knew, could unblind themselves in the study, which was one of the things we were fighting for. It's like; placebo control isn't necessarily placebo control if we can unblind ourselves.

So we had a lot to teach these people, about their work.

{LAUGHS}

SS: Right.

BB: But we didn't tell them that we're unblinding ourselves. But we could tell them; in design of future studies, that people are going to figure out a way to unblind themselves, so you better not do a placebo-controlled study. Let's compare it to something that's potentially going to offer benefit to people, as opposed to nothing.

SS: Right.

BB: We did a lot of work with them. And I managed to get to know about 50 people at Merck very well — including their executive director in charge of communications — such that when they did have a drug that went to market, which was the first protease inhibitor, I went to them, and they invited us to one of the regular meetings with community representatives. And Peter Staley would be there; Spencer Cox; Moises Agosto, and others who were a part of the pharmaceutical-meeting circuit of community activists from around the country. And we'd review the protocols and discuss them in quite detail, and get updates from them, and demand certain things from them, and tell them what we wanted

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to do. Succeed some things, lose others, blah blah blah. That's a long discussion in and of itself. I still have audiotapes of many of those meetings.

So when it came to marketing Crixivan, Merck asked us, at a meeting: well, what do you think we should charge for it? And it was like – what do – and I was like, nothing. You should give it away for free. I, so you're asking me – I'm a representative of the community. I'm not going to, uh, you should charge nothing for it. I said, but if you want practical advice on what you might be able to do; I said, you need to put this drug on the market at a price point that shows the world that Merck understands that this is a disease that affects mostly poor and disenfranchised people around the world. And that you need to send that message to the world, to the media, and to the community, that Merck means business about being more compassionate than the other pharmaceutical companies.

All my fellow community people looked at me, as like – there goes Bill again. It's a waste of your breath. Why are you even saying this?

A month or so later – and I pushed that to every single person I knew at Merck, from the biochemists to the statisticians to the marketing people; everybody. Because, I knew a lot of people at the time, because I was on their previous drug, that failed, due to resistance, as any non-nuke would fail as monotherapy.

SS: Right.

BB: And so I knew a lot of people there, by that point. I used to joke with them when they'd take me out to their headquarters in Rahway, New

Jersey. I'd say, okay, the fence over there, there's a hole there. Just tease them about, it's like – but they also knew me as somebody who cared. I'm not just there to yell and scream at them; I'm there to try and make things better. So, which is a good thing. You gotta realize, these are human beings as well as monsters. And working for a monstrous system that really can hurt you badly; and sometimes can do a little bit of good, and do a lot of good, too, in terms of developing a d-, they're the ones who can develop a drug that has kept us alive. So they're bullies and they're mean; they're awful and they're corporate; and they're everything else. But they also are essential to this process, until we completely change our drug-development system in the world, which they're not about to do, and AIDS wasn't going to do it overnight.

So that's why I engaged them. And so – John Durley called me up one morning, at eight a.m., woke me up, and said: Crixivan's going to be \$12 a day. And I said, okay, thank you, John. Blah blah blah. Hung up.

Realized: damn. Saquinavir and Norvir, from Roche and from Abbott respectively; they're \$18 a day. This is significant, this is important. It's not free. But it's one-third lower the price.

So I called John back, and I said, John, thank you; thank you so much. And he said, and we talked for a while, and he said, I'm going to need your help on this. Because our people are saying, we've got the best protease inhibitor – turned out to be not a very good one, with the buffalo hump and other complications that Crixivan wound up causing. But at the time, they were clearly seeing, even by our community, it looked like the best of the three protease

inhibitors. Saquinavir was weak, Norvir had its problems with complications and diarrhea and all of that; and Crixivan looked like the star of the three of them.

And then they said, well, he's telling us, their marketing people said, we've got the best drug, so we should be charging the most for it.

So they told, well, you guys attack us all the time. He said, we wind up getting attacked after we've done this, it's going to say, well, why'd you bother doing this in the first place? And so, well, the reason you did it in the first place is it's the right thing to do. I'll communicate that to my community, but my community is still going to jump on you when they have to. So you did this, this is a good thing, but you gotta keep doing the good things.

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And we sort of gave them a pass for a little while, at the international conferences, when we trashed other people's booths. And we looked at Merck, and we said, We're watching you. {LAUGHS}

So I got out of the ACTG for a while. Because I didn't, they move too slow; they don't get a lot done; they're heavily bureaucratic; they had quarantined the AIDS activist community into a group they called the CCG, which is a group that couldn't seem to focus on getting anything done, and really advocating. So I didn't see them as a good place to put my interests. We got a lot done in terms of expanded access programs, and with the pharmaceutical companies.

We had a lot of huge failures. Abbott was, most of the companies are incredibly piggish, and the prices they're charging are totally outrageous. But they're the ones who were designing the clinical studies, and getting some clinical

studies done. So if we want to have input into the design of the clinical studies, you need to meet with them, you need to talk with them. And getting the expanded access programs; you had to convince them that not only was it the right thing to do, it was also a good marketing strategy. If doctors are using your drug out in the field, and they learn how to use it, in the patients that they need that drug for, you've kind of built in a market for yourselves, for your drug. You've educated the top doctors out in the field who are treating people with HIV about the complications of using that drug: to know what to look for, in terms of side effects, in terms of lab values. These doctors have learned how to use your drug. And you've got a kind of a marketing strategy, in a way, for yourselves, that is beneficial. And people with AIDS who have decided for themselves that they want to risk their lives on taking your drug have access to it.

And it was always a battle in terms of figuring, well, a hundred thousand people need this drug; and we fight like hell, and the pharmaceutical company says, okay, we'll do it for 30,000. But even the point of once you do a plan, members of our community would meet with the pharmaceutical company for hours upon hours upon hours to set up third-party groups that would administer the program, that would set up the 800 number for people to call to enroll in the program. We monitored these programs very carefully. Jules Levin and myself and Don Daugherty from Atlanta and Marty Delaney; we monitored all these expanded access programs to find out, okay, someone calls on a Tuesday, and says that they need this particular drug. We wanted to know how many people call on Tuesday; how many days it took before their doctor received

the drug; how many people were turned down, for one reason or another; what things were put in place to make sure that, to take somebody who was turned down for expanded access to actually wind up being one of the people who actually got the drug.

So if there are thousands of people enrolling, we monitored the length of time it took from that initial call to the ISO of whatever the company, what they're referred to as the intermediary company, that was set up; from the point that the person called to when they actually got the drug, and if they didn't get the drug, why not? And we followed these case by case by c-, and it's a lot of work and a lot of time. But it was needed.

SS: Right.

BB: Because you couldn't trust them to do it on their own. And you couldn't trust the ISO to do the proper work. What questions are you asking? We would go through the questionnaire that people would be asked, and so on.

So, it's not just a matter of being in the streets, demanding that you want something from these institutions. Time and time again, it's been a matter of following things through, to that level of detail, to make sure they actually work.

SS: Right. Two last questions.

BB: Yes.

SS: When and why did you leave ACT UP? That's one question.

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BB: Okay. I left ACT UP – well, I put in quite a number of years. I lasted longer than most. It's very frustrating, it's very difficult to do this kind of work. And some of it is controversial, and people can disagree with you, and people can say, have all different points of view. It was difficult sometimes, after going out to meet with a pharmaceutical company in California, or Delaware, or Toronto, or Chicago; and achieve some level of success; and have 75 people in the room go, that was great, Bill; or, and received well; and have another 20 percent of the people in the room going, he had dinner with those people. It took him till one o'clock in the morning to get the CEO of a pharmaceutical company in La Jolla, California; it took one a.m. and five hours of fighting with the CEO and the people who had told the CEO within the company, who were hired from Bristol-Myers and blah blah blah blah blah, to, to actually get them to agree to an expanded access program of a drug. Come back; and say, you've got an agreement for 30,000 people to gain access to the drug. And have a portion of the room say, you traitor; we need a hundred thousand.

SS: Who called you a traitor?

BB: There were nights I met, I left ACT UP meetings in tears. There – ACT UP was amazing in that, at least for the first several years, it was an organization that people, regardless of their political persuasion, could work together. It's like the little girl stuck down the well. Everybody in the town joins together, whoever they are, to pull on the rope. We were all pulling on the rope together, to achieve things.

It was amazing how people who believed HIV had nothing to do with AIDS could be members of ACT UP; and we'd work it so it wasn't an issue. It wasn't an issue if you had one point of view or another point of view. We all worked together, and we made it happen, and everybody was respected. And that was a great thing.

My goal has always been to try and figure out, what is the best thing to help save lives, and to look at the individual person with AIDS, and make sure that we provide the most options for them. Whether it's their safety; security; housing; healthcare; medications; research. All the various components that a person with AIDS and a person with HIV needs to survive; those, to me, have been the most important things to fight for.

And at times, sometimes you see a group like ACT UP, particularly after seven or eight years, kind of settled in to, okay, we're a radical, left-wing organization. And we're kind of maybe losing sight a little bit about what's happening with the Division of AIDS Services of the City of New York; and losing track on some of the issues. And it's like, but it's also like, when you fight for something that you truly believe in, and you come back, and you have a win, and you come back, and a good part of the room thinks it was no win at all, and what you did was selling us out; that's very painful.

SS: Right.

BB: It's very painful. But at the same time, it's like, I think I had a tremendous amount of respect by many people in ACT UP. And I had a tremendous amount of respect for many others in ACT UP. And, comes also a

time you've gotta pull back from all involvement, to some degree. Because I have always enjoyed so much in life. So much in life gives me joy. Music has always been a main thing of mine. My closest friends have not necessarily been in the movement, although I have many very close friends that have been in the movement all these years.

But I didn't join ACT UP to make friends. I didn't meet with a pharmaceutical company to become a friend of the CEO of the company. I'm not there to become anyone's best friend in ACT UP. I didn't go there for sex, although I found it there occasionally. But I think the work was more important than the friendships and the bonds. And I wanted a certain sort of respect for what I did, and I think for the most part, I got it. And hopefully, I gave it to the people who deserved my respect as well. I certainly fought with some people. And I thought people really did wrong things along the way. And I let them know it. I may have an enemy or two out there. But that's okay. Because it's a hard battle, and sometimes you're not all exactly on the same side.

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But mostly, I think I left ACT UP because I just needed a break from that. And I maintained, I just received an award from the NYU Community Advisory Board –

SS: Oh, congratulations.

BB: – for, I got an award, a new award, that was created for myself and Gus Vianna Biehler, who is a member of ACT UP New York, called the Quarter Century Award. So, for 25 years of service to the NYU Community Advisory Board. And that shows me that I never did drop out. I never did. You

tend to focus your energies a little bit more this way, a little bit more that way. And ACT UP, I hope, is still doing some great work. It's kind of lost its huge support from hundreds and hundreds of people, and being able to do demonstrations with thousands of people, and I hope there will be again.

But a group like ACT UP is very important because when we do have a huge, major crisis, that calls us, that we have to band together; there needs to be a vehicle for the community to act through. And we've seen tremendous action on gay marriage in the last couple of years, and major demonstrations in New York of two thousand, three thousand people. And some of the people who put it together are just like kids who just did it on Facebook, and I spoke to some people who did a marriage rally on Sixth Avenue and then one at City Hall. And two of the four people who organized the demonstration told me that they had never been to a demonstration in their lives. And how did they do it? They did it through Facebook. They met in Starbucks, and talked about what they were going to do, and put it up on Facebook, and thousands of people show up.

But the thing is, if the community at large is excited about an issue — whether it was what happened after Stonewall, or the *Hardwick* decision, or the genocide of the federal government on AIDS issues — it creates a groundswell that can be turned into a movement, if certain things are there to help facilitate it. And ACT UP can be that again, in AIDS. But we get 10, 15 people, I think, showing up for a meeting currently. I wish them well, and actually, I wish sometimes I could go there and share more experiences with them. But I'm working six different things at the same time every day. I'm working now with

the ACTG. Three, four conference calls this morning. And I just came back from a week in San Francisco, of meetings with the ACTG. And things need to be, not everything is good. We had two years of the ACTG waiting for its funding to be settled. There is a recompetition that takes place every few years in the ACTG. The last one, under President George Bush, went on for an extended two years past the point. People were not able to enroll in clinical studies. New clinical trials were not able to be initiated, because sites didn't know if they were going to be funded or not. New people could not be enrolled in studies, because if a site was being defunded, what are you going to do with the person who's enrolled in the protocol? That went on for two years.

Now, the ACTG, from what I'm seeing in the spring of 2010, has a new sense of exploration and a new sense of vigor to try and get work done, and answer some of the new questions, or some of the now current questions, around HIV; HIV aging; about HIV and malaria, TB, tuberculosis. We have international sites at the ACTG. I think there are about eight of them in countries – four or five in Africa, in Zimbabwe, in Zambia. We have sites in Thailand, and sites in India.

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And the community is now set up as the Global CAB and the CSS, the Community Scientific Subcommittee, where I serve on the Antiretroviral Committee of the ACTG.

We have a network of 28 people on the CSS — Community Scientific Subcommittee — who are community people from all over the world. And they are an astounding, amazing group of people. And we are working on trying to move the agenda forward doing the ACTG. We're past that

recompetition period. But we're also facing a federal government, through NIAID, that may say, oh, we want to shake things up and restructure everything. We just spent the last three years restructuring.

The fight goes on. And right now, I'm still there. My term in the ACTG, on the CSS, is good for another year, and then I have one more year that I can run for an extended one-year term. But I'm serving right now as the community rep to the OpART Committee, which is the Optimization of Antiretroviral Therapy Committee. So I'm on conference calls weekly with that committee, and it's an exciting position to be in. And the community just came up with, we spent a year coming up with a community agenda; what we thought were the most important research questions. And we've thrown it in their faces, in a very polite way, in a very stirring way: these are the things that we want studied. And we are seeing those issues — the toxicities of drugs, aging; issue of women; tuberculosis; malaria — all those things that we prioritized as our top 11 points that we want the ACTG to address; they are making their way into the protocols.

SS: Okay.

BB: So –

SS: Okay, you have four minutes. So you have to sound bite.

One-sentence answers. Looking back, what would say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its biggest disappointment?

BB: Its biggest achievement was being able to provide a voice for people with AIDS to fight back against the U.S. government.

SS: Thank you. And what was its biggest disappointment?

BB: Its failure to, no. Its biggest disappointment? I don't know if there is one that I would say. I'd have to get back to you on that.

SS: Okay.

BB: Because there was so much good that ACT UP did achieve. I mean – the biggest disappointment is the dying went on through 1995, in such rapid s-. And I'm not sure what we would have been able to do to change that. But ACT UP was formed in '87, and we didn't have people beginning to go on protease and two-nucleoside therapy in larger numbers until 1995, '96. Everybody before then died in such massive numbers. And I wish we could have done that sooner. Because there were a lot of people that we lost, right at that time period.

SS: Right. Okay, thank you, Bill. Wow, man.

BB: Yeah, I didn't expect to be that long.

SS: Four – what is it – three hours and 45 minutes. Thank you

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