

A C T U P
ORAL HISTORY
P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: **Ken Bing**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Ken Bing
May 30, 2007

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

KEN BING: Okay.

JAMES WENTZY : I'm sorry, there's a complication. –

SS: Take two.

KB: Okay. My name is Kenneth Bing. I'm 52. And we're at my apartment, in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. And it's May 30th, 19–, nineteen? 2007.

SS: Two thousand seven. Where were you born, Ken?

KB: I was born in New York.

SS: Oh, really?

KB: Yeah.

SS: Oh, okay. What high school did you go to?

KB: Stuyvesant.

SS: Oh, you're kidding!

KB: No, no.

SS: Okay, so you were a smart boy.

KB: Well – I was a genius in junior high, but by the time I got to Stuyvesant, I was just in the middle.

SS: So what neighborhood did you grow up in?

KB: Lower East Side.

SS: Oh really.

KB: Yeah.

SS: Oh, okay.

KB: Yeah.

SS: So what was — I went to Hunter, by the way, and we're about the same age.

KB: Oh.

SS: So your school was the boys' school, and, right.

KB: Um hm.

SS: So it was still all boys, when you went to Stuyvesant?

KB: No, actually, the first year I got there was the first year they admitted females.

SS: Oh, okay,.

KB: Yeah.

SS: And what was it like, going to Stuyvesant at that time; early '70s?

KB: It was actually pretty exciting. I wouldn't have thought that it would be particularly political, or even too much social kind of place, but it was still kind of turbulent; still had Vietnam protests going on. It still had issues with racism and sexism that would translate into the schools, because that was the first year they admitted women; and also because there was always an issue of getting enough minority students into the school. So every few months there was some kind of demonstration going on. So it was very crazy. And I got involved in, they had a club for African-American students, and —

SS: What was it called, back in the day?

KB: I don't even remember the name. But it was mostly political, but also it was cultural also. Because they put on performances and they put on shows for the rest

of the school population. Cultural events, with some dancing, some drama; those kinds of things.

SS: Because there weren't a lot of black kids at Stuyvesant.

KB: No. No. I was probably, when I was there, probably I would say, maybe – 50.

SS: Out of?

KB: The class was probably 350.

SS: All right. So was that a big difference from your junior high?

KB: It was a big difference, in terms of what I was getting myself involved in, in terms of extracurricular activities. Junior high, I was just totally into doing my classes, trying to be a genius; stuff like that. And I didn't have that many friends in junior high, anyway. But it was the first school that I actually had to take a test to get into. And it had this reputation, and it was exciting for me. And then, once I got in there, to be exposed to a lot of stuff; more different kinds of people, because you had kids coming from all over the city to the school; not just kids in my immediate neighborhood, who I knew from junior high. It was more political, politically charged atmosphere there. So there were strikes and walkouts and protests and all that kind of stuff going on.

SS: So what did your family think, to see you get into this fancy school and then go on strike?

KB: Well, I didn't tell them most of the time. {LAUGHS} They – I would tell them something exciting or crazy was going down there, but they, all they knew was I was in a good school; all I needed to do was get good grades and go to college. And I got pretty good grades, so I kept that end of the bargain, so.

SS: So were they politically involved at all?

KB: Not really. No.

SS: Not in any kind of union, tenants association, church.

KB: No. No.

SS: No. Okay. And were you raised with any kind of community awareness? Because obviously, ACT UP is the ultimate expression of community awareness. Was that something that you came to from your family in any way?

KB: They weren't really involved in community organizations. My mother was part of a loosely formed tenants association, which kind of got started as the neighborhood started getting kind of bad, and lots of robberies and muggings started happening around the neighborhood. So she kind of got involved with that, with the tenants association. And my father, he was busy working, two to three jobs, so he didn't get involved in that. And the rest of my siblings, they, I would say, to my knowledge, they weren't really involved in any kind of community-based stuff going on.

SS: So were you gay in high school?

KB: No.

SS: Did you think about it?

KB: Um – sure. I had crushes on a couple of my teachers. But it didn't – that was something I felt, well, I can't really examine that too closely right now. I just wanted to get through school, and – and maybe, if I moved away from home, I could explore that part. But definitely, while I was still home, I was going to keep that under wraps.

SS: So where did you go to college?

KB: NYU.

SS: Okay. And did you live at home the whole time?

KB: I lived at home the first year. And again, it was a little bit of a culture shock also. Stuyvesant was one kind of atmosphere, but NYU was, a whole total, another experience.

SS: In what way?

KB: It was the least structured I've ever seen any kind of academic experience. I wasn't used to having so much autonomy to choose my classes, and choose what I was going to take to classes, and what classes to take. And also, again, culturally, even though I lived a few blocks away from Greenwich Village, I never really hung out there. So that was a whole, another atmosphere I wasn't quite used to. And I saw a whole lot more out gay people there, also. Which was also a little bit distracting, but {LAUGHS} – I ended up flunking out. Well actually, I ended up dropping out of NYU after two years, before I got flunked out. But it was – again, it was very exciting to me, to be in that environment. And again, besides, people from all over the city, there were people from all over the country, all over the world, who were going to NYU. So that kind of expanded my circle of acquaintances and what kind of backgrounds they came from.

SS: So how long did it take you before you really came out?

KB: I'd say it took another good year and a half.

SS: So you were around 22, or –

KB: Yeah. I was 20.

SS: So where did you come out into? Which places did you go, and where did you meet guys?

KB: Well, I kind of hung around the Greenwich Village area. I went to Uncle Charlie's and I went to The Monster, although I loath to admit it now, but. And just other students I knew had parties at their place. I kind of hung out with them; they traveled, in packs, going to different parties, and like that.

SS: Now at that time, was the Monster for younger guys? Because I only know of it as a place for older guys.

KB: Well, it was always, kind of all ages, but mostly older, guys. But because it was so close to NYU, a lot of students came. And a lot of times, I wasn't able to actually drink alcohol there, but I kind of hung out there, though.

SS: So as you were living your life, did you start to get involved in any kind of political activities, before AIDS?

KB: I gravitated to the group Black and White Men Together. So I was there for a few years. Because at that point in time, my main attraction to dating men was Caucasian men. So I saw the group, Black and White Men Together. I said, okay, that might be a group that I could relate to and see what's up with that. And besides the social part of the group, they also did a lot of political stuff, too. Around the time I got there, they had a lot of issues around different clubs that carded, or would just outright not let black people in.

SS: Do you remember which clubs those were?

KB: No. There was one on 57th Street. Because there was actually, we did a little kind of outside protest there. And that was one of my little baby steps towards

being a little bit more activist. But they also had a lot of consciousness raising sessions there. And for the most part, they all got political, because you're talking about who you're attracted to and how'd you get to where you got to; you couldn't avoid talking about politics and race and stuff like that. So again, that kind of also broadened my horizons on how to think about stuff in a more global setting.

SS: But also there were key activists in that organization, if I recall. I remember Mitchell Karp.

KB: Uh huh.

SS: And then there was that guy who, I can't remember his name now, but he was a big leader in Black and White Men Together, and he was very outrageous. Was it Mitchell's boyfriend, even?

KB: Yeah, Lidell.

SS: Lidell!

KB: Lidell Jackson, yeah.

SS: Lidell Jackson, right.

KB: Yeah.

SS: And wasn't Assotto Saint in there, also?

KB: Assotto Saint was there. And that's where I knew him from. There were a lot of pretty great people there.

SS: Yeah. So do you remember when you first became aware of AIDS?

KB: When I moved to Brooklyn, I had two roommates. And one of them — his name was Wellington — I really didn't know him before I had moved in.

Basically, the guy I was dating said, I know this guy who's looking for roommates. And this was in Prospect Heights — On Eastern Parkway. So I got into the situation. It was these two guys, Don Reed and Wellington. Don I knew a little bit, because he hung out with my boyfriend at the time. But Wellington, I didn't know; I didn't know him that well. And we didn't see each other that often, but we kind of struck up at least a tentative friendship.

Tape I
00:15:00

He started getting sick – around '83, '84. And he was the first person I knew who had this thing that, I actually, people had started talking about it in the gyms, and also, papers like the *Native* came out, and Larry, and all of that. But Wellington was the first person I knew personally that had HIV.

So I saw him getting sicker and sicker. And I came home one day, and Don had told me that he had moved back home. Which I thought was all of a sudden. So he had actually gone back home, to be with his family, before he died. So that was kind of when it first hit me, that it was a real situation; that people were getting sick from this. And also, just being, working out in the gyms, with a lot of gay men; the buzz was going around. And I'd see people, who I would see regularly in the gym, and soon I stopped seeing them as regularly.

And it started getting a little bit, very unnerving to me. Living in New York at that time was crazy, because people are getting sick every day; three, four, five, six people that you hear about, being sick. And also, I'd seen people in the street that you knew were sick, because they were very emaciated, and they had lesions on their faces; they could barely walk. And that was scary for me, because I would think, well, this could be me in another few months; in another couple of years.

So I had this amorphous anxiety about AIDS. And I had actually, vaguely had heard of ACT UP from one of the early demos, on Wall Street. But that whole thing sounded kind of rough, to me. Blocking traffic, and getting arrested. So I hadn't – so that was, I didn't even go to an ACT UP meeting for the first year and a half that it was around.

SS: How was Black and White Men Together dealing with AIDS?

KB: They actually didn't deal with it too much. They would talk about, if they had friends and lovers, whatnot, getting sick. But as something to do something about, they really didn't, it didn't have an outlet to put that kind of frustration to actually doing something. It was more like support, in terms of emotional support. If one of our members got sick, or somebody you knew got sick, kind of more for emotional support, rather than actually doing something more creative to work against what was going on.

SS: So what made you make the leap?

KB: I was hanging around The Center on a Monday; and there was a lot of noise coming from Room 101. So I thought I would – and I knew it was an ACT UP meeting, because they had it listed. Because I saw so many people there, I knew, something really big was going on in there. Because I could feel the energy, and the arguments and everything else that was going on in there. I heard that, and I thought, okay, I'll come in here for a few minutes, just to see what's going on. And that's how that started.

SS: So what was it like to walk in there the first time?

KB: It was overwhelming. One, because just the number of people there. I had never seen that many people in one meeting space. Black and White Men Together,

at most we had maybe 50 people at one gathering. So there seemed to be at least six times as many people there. And there were people shouting, and people clapping, and people laughing and people making jokes. It just seemed like it was this crazy kind of thing that was going on, but I could feel that people really felt strongly about what was going on in there. And they were actually talking about doing something to kind of – work towards ending AIDS, as opposed to just being sad that it's with us.

Again, because it was a little bit intimidating, I didn't really, I definitely didn't raise my hand, or say anything to speak. I kind of stayed in the back, because there was no room in the front anyway, so I kind of went to the back. And they had the literature table, so I picked up some stuff. So I figured I'd take this home, and kind of let it digest. And I kind of decided, well, maybe I'll start coming to the meetings more regularly. And I started, every other week. Then I started going every week, to the meeting.

SS: When you first got involved, were there people there that you already knew?

KB: There were people that I've seen around. But there was no buddies that I saw over there. There were people that I've seen from either the clubs, or I'd seen from the gym, or people that I'd just seen around the neighborhood. So it wasn't totally intimidating in that there were all these strangers there. There were a lot of people that I actually have seen around. And I actually started talking to a couple of them, to find out what's going on with them, how they got involved in it; that kind of stuff.

SS: So where did you first plug in, when you decided to really stop just standing in the back?

KB: Well, this was the time they were actually, they were starting to plan the Stop the Church demos. Because I just basically did nothing but sit at the meetings. And then when they were, because I knew Stop the Church was going to be huge, and they needed a whole lot of people to really have it go off well. So then they started to do the CD trainings, and started making affinity groups. Just something within me clicked, and said, well, you know what? This wouldn't have been, actually, my first choice of a demo, against the Catholic Church. But I just got, I got caught up in the excitement of doing it.

SS: Are you Catholic?

KB: No.

SS: Okay.

KB: No. I was raised Presbyterian. But I knew the Catholic Church was huge. I knew St. Patrick's was huge. So I knew it was going to be a big thing. And I just felt, okay, let's try this. And the people who wound up in my affinity group, they were all great. So that made me feel better about

SS: Well, you were in a notorious affinity group, right?

KB: Yep.

SS: Called –

KB: Well, at that time, it was called the Anti-Marys; later to be shortened to just the Marys. And there were a lot of great people in that.

SS: Who was in the group?

KB: Tim Bailey; Jim Baggett; Joy Episalla; There were, five other people. A couple of women who were just there, who were just going to be in the city for a little

while, but they decided while they were there, they might as well join in on a demo.

There was this young kid — and I forget her name — but she was — not Kate [Barnhart] — she was, maybe 16. So everybody was nervous for her, about doing it. But we decided we're the affinity group, we're going to hang tight.

SS: So what did you guys do for the action?

KB: So for the action, what we did was we were doing a, just sitting down in front of the church, because there were the real crazy people going inside the church. And there was a demo going on outside. And for the most part, they made people go across the street. So what we did was — and we weren't the only group that was doing it; we were one of maybe six or seven groups doing it — we decided to sit down in the street, chanting and screaming and carrying on, until we got picked up.

SS: Was that your first time being arrested?

KB: Yeah.

SS: What was that like?

KB: I was terrified. Because even though I knew that ACT UP people got arrested before, I never saw anything — I never saw it on the news. I may have seen a couple of pictures in the paper, but I never saw the actual thing going on. So I was very scared. But I remember what they taught us in the CD training. So I tried not to antagonize the police, more than necessary. And once I got up into the wagon, it was, that was actually pretty okay, because all of my affinity group were in there with me, and we were trying to have a good time with it, being all handcuffed and uncomfortable and going Lord knows where, in the dark wagon.

What kind of unnerved me more was what was going to happen once I actually got into the jail, because that was totally unknown to me. And I think, we were kind of kept in there for a few hours. I don't think it was overnight, though, but it was for quite a few hours though. And everybody in the slammer, we kind of kept our spirits up, telling jokes and making up songs, and stuff like that. It was actually not bad. Of course I was kind of petrified that I'd have a record now, and I wouldn't be able to get a job, or that my family would disown me; besides from being gay, from being a gay guy who gets arrested.

But it was okay. I think I got through that whole thing very well. And again, I have to thank my affinity group and other people who were also arrested, because they put a lot of people in those cells, so I think we all supported each other.

SS: And did you ever go to court? Did you have a trial?

KB: We did go to, we were brought before the judge, and we were all offered ACD's [Acquittal in Contemplation of Dismissal]; which, I grabbed mine. And so it was, so that was intimidating, to have gone before a judge, because that was a totally new experience for me also. But again, I had a lot of support, because they also had people waiting outside, as soon as you got out of the system there; that was good to see, also. And I think that's one of the things that ACT UP kind of perfected the whole getting arrested, pre, post, and after. It was good. It made a horrifying situation very manageable, and I wasn't traumatized at all.

SS: So how did the Marys decide to continue the relationship?

KB: Well, we were all getting along well. And I think as more demos started coming up, we decided, okay, well, we can still do stuff. We know each other;

we've been busted together; we can probably do it again; since we're going to probably get arrested again later on down the line anyway, we might as well try to do it as a group. And we would lose a couple of people here and gain a couple more people; usually significant others of other people in the group who decided to do stuff.

SS: So how often would the Marys meet?

KB: We'd probably just meet when there was an action coming down the pike that we felt that we might want to do something at. Calls would go around, and we'd say, well, what do you think? You think we want to do something for this? And if you said yes, just started meeting up again; going to people's apartments, and thinking about different stuff to do.

SS: Do you remember any other Marys actions?

KB: Well, one of the other big ones that we did was for Day of Desperation. And for that one, our group kind of picked one of the studios to infiltrate, with the purpose of getting on camera. And I wasn't one of the camera, getting in front of the anchor people, but I was in the scouting-out group, and I think Michael Cunningham and his partner at the time, they were recruited for this particular action. So we had gone to the studio and after we –

SS: What network did you guys –

KB: We went to PBS.

SS: Okay.

KB: MacNeil/Lehrer Report, which turned out to be one of the easier gigs of all three of them. Only because people weren't as crazed about us being there as the other, NBC and CBS. So I was part of the crew that if people got wind of what was

going on, I would try to hold them off, and explain what was going on, so they wouldn't get freaked out too much. And that was really exciting, too. because –

SS: What was the action, actually?

KB: The action was to have a group of the Marys get into the actual studio where, I think it was Lehrer — Jim Lehrer — was actually sitting at the desk. And get in, get on camera, and start shouting, Stop AIDS, not Iraq. Money for AIDS, not for the war; that kind of stuff. And to chain ourselves to whatever we could chain ourselves to; and just stay there, make noise, until, the police came to drag us out.

So I think maybe five, five of the Marys actually got in there; chained themselves to some equipment there, in the studio. Unfortunately, it wasn't actually on camera. But you can see Jim Lehrer, he was very kind of amused at the whole thing. And he said, on camera, that there's a group of people from ACT UP in there, chained themselves. And, back to you.

So they were actually there awhile. And since it was an evening broadcast; it would potentially be a late-night, from, and I didn't know if they would put us through the system, put them through the system or not. So after the thing went down, I was part of the support for trying to keep tabs on what was happening with them, and wait until they got out, until everyone got out. And I don't think that anyone was actually put through the system, but it did take a few hours for them to get out.

SS: Okay. Now what happened as members of the Marys started to get ill?

KB: It was rough, because – Tim Bailey, who was one of, kind of the spark plugs in the Marys; he was definitely getting sicker. So we – so we tried to involve

him as much as we could, in just planning stuff, but it was obvious he wouldn't be able to help actually physically do stuff.

And he actually – he actually died in his apartment. He was in the hospital, but he didn't want to die in the hospital. So a couple of other of the members — Joy and a couple of other people — actually brought him back to his apartment. He lived in Greenwich Village.

And so I actually got a phone call saying that Tim just died. If you want to come in and say goodbye to him before they send somebody to pick up his body, then you should come down.

So all of the Marys, or at least all of them who were available; we went to Tim's apartment. And he was laid out on his bed. So everybody, they had their turn, saying what they needed to say, while being next to him. Then we started talking about Tim, and reminiscing about how crazy he was, and all of that.

And probably three hours into our unofficial wake for him, we started talking about, well, what Tim wanted us to do with his body, as part of his funeral. And personally, I couldn't think about that too much at that time. I was still processing Tim's body being in the next room. But we knew that Tim wanted his funeral to be a political funeral. And he wanted it to be taken to D.C. And wanted to be placed in front of the White House.

And there were three or four people who were working very hard to kind of do logistics for how this was going to go off. And we also announced it to the general membership, because we wanted a lot of people there. And a couple of members of his family reluctantly got involved. Because they knew that they weren't down with the

whole demo thing, and they, it wasn't like any kind of funeral that they would have been used to. But because they knew Tim really wanted this, they reluctantly got onboard with it.

And it just snowballed into this big political action. And cars of people started going down to D.C. And it was pretty wrenching when the police and the authorities wouldn't allow us to go more than two feet.

SS: Well, how did you get the body?

KB: Well, that's when the fa-, I think it was Tim's brother. That's when he was very helpful. Because they wouldn't allow the body to be released to us, naturally. But because it was being released to a family member, we were able to actually take it from the nursing, the funeral home, and be able to transport. And we knew we were going to run into resistance when we got there, anyway. But we, we were expecting to at least be able to go a few blocks, chanting, and then maybe stop. I don't think a whole lot of us thought it would actually get to the White House. But at least we wanted to be public, and let people know we had a person who was living with AIDS die because of government neglect. So we wanted that kind of picture to be out there.

I said, we didn't even get two feet, and it was getting crazy. At one point

—

JW: We need to change tape.

KB: Okay.

Tape I
00:40:00

Tape II
00:00:00

KB: Okay. So at one point it got very intense, and there was a whole lot of scuffling going on between the police and the people who wanted to transport the coffin. And the coffin was going back and forth, and people were scared that it was going to fall entirely. But it didn't. But we didn't get to do that. We had to keep him in the van. And so what we did was we had a little impromptu memorial service for him, right there, in the parking lot.

And so that was pretty emotional for everybody there. And ACT UP had a few political funerals since then. There was another one from somebody from the Marys, Mark Fisher. That one, we actually walked from, I think, Judson Memorial Church; we walked up Sixth Avenue. And we wanted to, he wanted us to take his body to the office of the Republican National Committee. So we actually got to do that. I think they had people, behind us seemed to have gotten permits, because otherwise, I really don't think we could have done that. And I remember, because it was pouring that whole afternoon. But we went up Sixth Avenue, chanting our lungs out, because we wanted the people on the street to know what was going on. And then when we got to the headquarters, again there was some more speechifying. Which I think it went off well. Deep inside, I was wishing, that I don't have to go to too many more of these, because even though they're kind of energizing in terms of really channeling your immediate anger and sadness, it's emotionally draining also, so I wouldn't have to go through that too many times.

So there were a couple of others. But I think after awhile — probably after Mark's funeral — the Marys stopping coming. This was also around the early '90s, when people in general stopped coming to ACT UP. But we see each other every so

often. I ran into a couple of people that I haven't seen in ages, at this last demo, for healthcare, the 20th anniversary. So I see people every so often. But people have moved away, and stuff like that, so.

SS: What was it like for you personally to be surrounded by so many sick people and dying people for so long?

KB: Well, I had a feeling of helplessness about it. These were people I knew; some people that I had dated; people who were close to me; and they were very sick, and they got very sick and they got very sick quickly. And it was rough. And even being in ACT UP, there are people there I saw at ACT UP meetings who I kind of felt that I knew even though I didn't know them personally, but just from hearing them week after week, or seeing them at demos. And seeing them get sick and die; almost every meeting, for a long time, you used to do, have an obituary section, just to announce who passed away. That was really sad for me. But also, because people were in ACT UP, and they were actually channeling their sadness into, okay, well, what are we going to do now to make sure that nobody else dies? What are we going to do to make sure that the government does what it's supposed to be doing? And people were coming up with ideas, concrete ideas. And I think that's also what I really loved about being in ACT UP, was people had very creative ideas on how to get their point across. And it just felt like, I have to be here, because otherwise I'm just being upset and sad and angry for no reason. If I'm not doing this, in ACT UP, then I'm either going to totally go into denial, or be in a puddle someplace. So in a good way, ACT UP was very therapeutic in that sense also.

SS: What was the relationship inside ACT UP between people who were positive and people who were negative?

Tape II
00:05:00

KB: I think, because at meetings there were people who were positive, and they weren't ashamed to admit it; and they would put themselves out on the line, saying that they were positive; I personally, I admire them a lot, because it takes a lot. Because besides dealing with their medical condition, they have to deal with people's attitudes. I think within ACT UP, I didn't see any kind of barrier between people who were positive and not. Most people who I worked with in working groups and stuff like that, there were a certain percentage who are positive. And that didn't matter, because we had work to get done. And in a way, having someone who was positive there actually gave us more impetus, because you feel you're doing it for them, too, because we want them to stay healthy. So that's even more of a reason to do it, because you have your reason right in front of you. You have your reason sitting in a circle next to you.

SS: Did people in ACT UP have safe sex?

KB: Um – well, I didn't observe everyone, but {LAUGHS}.

SS: You observed some people.

KB: I've been to clubs, and I've been to the backrooms, and I've seen that. I think for the most part, I think that early part, where, "Men wear a condom or beat it," kind of thing, and safe sex was being really heavily, heavily promoted; I think for the most part, yes. if someone was having unsafe sex, they weren't really bragging about it; they wouldn't really, at least to me. But they weren't bragging about it. And I think within ACT UP, because we were all about safe sex and trying to help prevent people from getting infected in the first place, I think the party line was safe sex all the time. But if you weren't having it, you wouldn't be shouting it on the rooftops.

SS: Was there a lot of sex going on inside ACT UP?

KB: Oh yeah.

SS: Yeah?

KB: Yeah. there was very much a cruising scene there. There were a lot of attractive and charismatic people there, and – I had crushes on a few people there. And when we'd have affinity groups and people get busted; that's always another, yet another bonding experience, for it to develop into a sexual relationship; that happened a lot, I saw it a lot.

And in a way, I felt that was good also, because people were invested in each other, and that's one way of showing that you're invested in somebody. But again, another thing I was impressed with was that even though there was this incestuous thing going on, there wasn't a whole lot of drama about that; about who slept with who. It was more, we kept our eyes on the prize, so to speak. I'm sure there was some drama. Although I guess, when we'd have road trips, there was always stuff going on. Not with me, mind you, but.

SS: What road trips did you go on?

KB: Well, the one I remember most was when we went to Kennebunkport.

SS: Can you explain that, because no one's talked to us about that yet.

KB: Okay. What we wanted to do was to hit George Bush where he lived, literally, at least during the summer. So the idea was to go to invade Kennebunkport, Maine, with busloads of AIDS activists; and bring George Bush a document saying this was what he has to do to help stop AIDS. And we wanted to deliver it to his home in Kennebunkport. That was logistical craziness. Everyone was really psyched to do this, because it was end of summer. There's a sticker right over there from it. In Spanish.

But it was crazy. I think a lot of the things that, we got busloads of people there. The Marys actually, we were part of the advance crew to take one of the first, we took a couple of cars down. So we took everybody there, to scout out places where we could actually do demos, and scout out the route of the march.

So the idea was to march, start marching all through town; stop every so often, make a couple of statements about different facets of the AIDS crisis; and then march to his, the Bush home. And that took a lot of work. All the affinity groups had to do their own fund-raising. So the Marys had to do some fund-raising. We were selling our T-shirts, custom-made T-shirts.

And as we were driving down, we'd stop at these bars, out-of-the-way bars and try to get people interested in what we were doing; maybe we can get some people to go down with us. And a nice disco song would come on, everybody go up and dance, and twirling around. And there were people giving us New York people looks. And it was fine. It was very exciting to do, because I don't think that's been done before, or even since, to the magnitude that we did this.

And it wasn't supposed to be an arrest scenario, because nobody wanted to get busted in Maine. So we wanted to keep things nice and tight. It was heavily marshaled, so no one would get out of hand, on either side. And we talked to a lot of the townsfolk. We handed out fact sheets, tried to explain why you had all these masses of queers going down there. And I think it was a successful action in that I think we proved to ourself we can do something on this scale, and also that, I don't think Kennebunkport was the same afterward. And Bush couldn't help but get the message, even though we didn't make it to his home. I think it was one of the best things ACT UP has done.

SS: What made you leave ACT UP?

KB: Oh, I haven't left ACT UP.

SS: Oh, you're still in ACT UP?

KB: I am still in ACT UP.

SS: Oh, that's interesting.

KB: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: Oh, we have to talk about that.

KB: Yeah, I don't go to the meetings with as much frequency as I used to. But I believe that ACT UP still needs to be here, especially since early '90s, post-protease inhibitors and cocktails and whatnot; I've seen that the membership in ACT UP has dropped precipitously and now, on a good meeting, you might get 20 people. That's on a good meeting. But yeah, I have not left.

I think there was one year that ACT UP actually did not march in the gay pride parade. But I really didn't want people to think that ACT UP was gone, or disappeared from the scene. So I made up flyers that said ACT UP is not marching this year because – we haven't gotten that support. But we still need your support, because this reason, that reason, the other reason. And even then, it was almost a one-person operation, because a lot of people that year really didn't even want to bother.

So I did a flyer myself, ran it by a couple of people to get their feedback. I guerilla Xeroxed it myself. I boxed it up myself, put it in a shopping cart. And the day of the parade I wore my ACT UP T-shirt, and I went down the parade route, handing out flyers. And it was just me for quite a few blocks, and I ran into a couple of people who wanted to help me out with that. Or took pity on me; one way or the other.

And I felt good that I was still trying' to keep ACT UP's name out there. But it's been rough the past few years. And it's a little bit frustrating for me, because I've seen a lot of stuff that was going on in the '80s, a lot of that stuff is repeating –

SS: Like what?

KB: –History is repeating itself. In terms of prevention; there's no AIDS curriculum in high schools, or in any schools right now. And there's been stalling on new drugs, new treatments; there's nothing really exciting coming down the pipeline. It's all just recombining drugs that already exist. And people still think that – AIDS is something to stay away from and to not get involved with.

One of the things that ACT UP had done in recent years, about three years ago – wanted to actually go into Harlem, and start an ACT UP Harlem. Because we knew a lot of people in the community were affected by AIDS. And we wanted to stir up whatever kind of activism around it that we could. And also because traditionally, ACT UP wasn't perceived as reaching out to people-of-color communities. Even though there were always people of color in ACT UP. There was always that perception. And I was one of maybe eight people who said to have another meeting night, in Harlem. A lot of people who helped us out were Columbia University social work students — God bless them! They did a lot of grunt work, in terms of getting flyers done and wheat-pasting stuff.

That wasn't as successful as I would have liked it to have been. Except for maybe two or three meetings, we wouldn't get more than probably three, three people from the community.

SS: What was the difference between ACT UP Harlem and Stand Up Harlem, and other uptown organizations? Why did you need an ACT UP?

Tape II
00:20:00

KB: Because we wanted that – ACT UP, in-your-face-ness to translate. And we knew that it was possible. Because there had been demonstrations up in Harlem for years and years and years; regarding racism and police brutality and that kind of stuff. But at least we didn't see there was that same kind of energy and commitment to fighting AIDS on the street level. And so that was kind of our attempt to try to give the community some of our experience with that. Even though there were arguments within ACT UP; we're coming in, telling people what they should be doing. Or we're presenting ourselves as the experts, kind of thing.

And so I think that's one reason why ACT UP, as a whole, wasn't totally with that program. But there were people there who felt that it's just giving some people a reason to get angry about AIDS specifically. And tell them they can do something to express their anger about AIDS; to not be victimized.

I think ACT UP was one of the first groups that had people who were, who had the disease actually really super-advocate for themselves, and really bust down doors for themselves. So we just wanted that to get translated to the people-of-color community, specifically in Harlem.

But there are other groups that work on AIDS advocacy, that we weren't planning on replacing. We just wanted them to add some CD flavor to what these groups said already.

SS: So you said that there have always been people of color in ACT UP. Can we just name some of the people of color who have been in leadership in ACT UP over the years?

KB: Well, when I first got there, actually, there was a working group called the Majority Action Committee. And that was totally composed of people of color; and not just African Americans, but other people of color.

SS: Who were some of the leaders? Do you remember?

KB: Oh my gosh, you ask me to remember names. Well, I do remember Ron Medley, who was part of it. And also, he was one of the facilitators, I think. One of the cool things at one point; both Ron and I were co-facilitators at a meeting. So you had two black men facilitating an ACT UP meeting. So that was really cool.

And Keith Cylar. Who was a strong influence upon me also personally, because he was just so, such a strong personality. And very focused. Who else?

I'll have to get back to you on those.

SS: Okay.

KB: {LAUGHS}

SS: Robert Vasquez.

KB: Oh! Yeah, Robert Vasquez, yeah. He, as also people, also there are these other working groups that develop. There's a women's committee in ACT UP, and there was also a Latino committee.

There's Robert Vasquez, there was another Vasquez, too. I forget his first name.

SS: Why do you think – given, for example, if you look at a group like Other Countries, where almost everybody died; or given how many men of color had AIDS, leaders; why do you think so few people came to ACT UP?

KB: I think – for – for some reason, they felt their particular needs weren't being addressed by ACT UP. Because it was a predominantly gay white male group. Maybe they felt like their concerns really wouldn't be addressed appropriately because it would have to be watered down, because you have all these other concerns that they wouldn't necessarily be a part of. We held the meetings at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center. Which a lot of gay black men didn't go to.

SS: Really?

KB: Yeah, besides specific group things, they didn't go to hang out there.

SS: Oh, okay.

KB: And they didn't go there to do anything particularly political, I think. That's my perception. There were social groups there. Groups like Black Women Together, that met at the Center. But in terms of, I think that they did, a lot of them didn't want to be perceived as just being exclusively gay focused. They didn't want to lose their identity of being black men also. And culturally, politically, they didn't want that to be watered down in everybody else's issues.

SS: It's interesting what you say about the Center being white-dominated. Because if you go there today, it's mostly young kids of color. That's who's there.

KB: Yeah.

SS: So it's really changed. Why do you think it's changed?

KB: I think that – actually, I don't, and I don't even think it's changed for a particularly good reason. I think it's changed because a lot of the, especially the kids of color; they're being pushed or intimidated against hanging out in other places.

SS: Oh, like the pier.

KB: Like the piers. So they know the Center's there. So they know, worse comes to worse, they can always hang out there. And because there aren't all that many places for queer kids to hang out without being chased away, or have to look over their back, or feel like they can really be themselves, as flamboyant or whatever, as they are. It's still kind of segregated. That there are a few places where you can be your flaming self, and not be bothered too much. And there are other places you can do that and get beat up. So I think that's probably why, that's my perception of why there are probably more young queer kids there.

SS: Okay. That makes sense. So what are you doing in ACT UP now?

KB: Well, for the 20th anniversary, which we had in March, the focus of ACT UP — or one of the main focuses has been towards getting a single-payer healthcare system in the United States. Feeling that we have AIDS treatments available. But yet it's not available to everyone. We wanted to have, it's the next step. The first step is to have some drugs, or have some treatments. And then a lot of people are getting them. But not everyone is getting them, or not everyone is even getting an appropriate amount of care in the first place, medical care, in the first place.

So single-payer healthcare is going to be a hot-button issue for the next presidential election. And it's being talked about a lot these days. So in a way, we're

jumping on that wagon. But in a way, we also see how it benefits us as people with AIDS and people who care about people with AIDS; that if everyone's getting acceptable levels of healthcare that will extend people's lives. And if everyone has access to care that will extend people's lives, and to drugs and other treatments.

So that's one of our big campaigns, and I think that's what we're probably doing for gay pride. And also, in the past few years, we've also been interested in other issues; access to treatments around the globe.

Right now, we're focusing a little bit on Thailand, because one of the big pharmaceutical companies — Glaxo — they are withholding some of their drugs from Thailand, because Thailand wants to make their own version of HIV drugs. So we're trying to put a little bit of pressure on them.

I participated in the zap of Magic Johnson a few weeks ago. Because he is sort of the main spokesman right now.

SS: For what?

KB: Ah —

JW: Abbott.

KB: I'm sorry, it's Abbott, not Glaxo.

SS: Abbott Pharmaceutical?

KB: Yeah. And —

SS: Oh, Magic Johnson is Abbott Pharmaceutical's main spokesman?

KB: Yeah.

SS: And how much are they paying him to do that?

KB: Oh, who knows. Beaucoup bucks, though.

SS: Why would he do that?

KB: I can only imagine for the money. because he's been on their medication from – and so he's on this campaign to end black AIDS. So, which is commendable, I'm all for that. But he's just going around and just saying how great these Abbott drugs are. And that people should get tested, which I agree. And they should get on these Abbott drugs right away, because they made a big difference in his life, and you'll love them.

SS: Is this the first celebrity AIDS drug endorsement?

KB: Probably.

SS: Oh my god.

KB: Yeah.

SS: So what did you do at your zap?

KB: So what we did was we went in; we had signs under our clothing, or in our bags; that said, Magic, Abbott is killing PWAs in Thailand. Or, Magic, speak to Abbott. Because we want him to use his celebrity to actually talk to his employers and say, you should lighten up on Thailand. So –

SS: Where did you do this?

KB: He was speaking at Medgar Evers College, in Brooklyn. So it was a pretty packed auditorium. And I was a little bit nervous, because – well, I'm nervous every time I do a zap or an action, still. And I was the leadoff guy, so I was the first person to stand up and hold up my sign.

So actually, Magic was telling the crowd to be cool, let them say what they want to say. But he tried to switch it that he's going to speak to his people in

Abbott. But I want to talk about what's going on in Brooklyn. And the crowd, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. {CLAPPING}

But we found out later on, because a couple, after the, we got escorted out – a couple of people stayed behind, because they weren't being disruptive. So after the event, they actually had some of the fact sheets, because we were handing out fact sheets also. They actually gave it to some of the Abbott representatives, and said, did you know this was going on? What do you have to say about this? And they totally ignored them. And they tried to give a fact sheet to Magic himself. And Magic said, give it to, give it to my people over there. And some guard took it, and just put it back down.

So one of the things we were going to do also, maybe, was to put more public pressure on Magic to get him to speak up. Because Abbott is paying him beaucoup bucks, and he's got to know what they're doing. If nothing else, he needs to know what they're doing.

So we're working on that. I've missed the last couple of meetings, but I think that my – one thing I was doing that I kind of stopped doing, because the other people who were on the Prison Issues Committee dropped out – but to work on prison issues, because in the New York City prison system there's no standardized healthcare for prisoners, especially regarding HIV; and there's no condom distribution; and there's no good followup for when people get discharged from the system –

To make sure that they have all the information they need to either get treatment or to stay uninfected and to keep the communities they're going to uninfected.

So that working group had been doing – going to different upstate prisons and trying to deliver condoms and stuff like that. And Mel Stevens, who was a big part

of doing that; he's not doing that too much anymore. He's reached his ACT UP frustration level, as so many people have. So he's not doing that. He's doing some stuff on his own, but he's not doing it as part of ACT UP. And since we have a new administration, New York State, and a new health commissioner, it would have been a good thing to get on that, to get the new commissioner started to work on that issue.

And there's something I may still do, maybe after Pride, I'll probably work on that a little bit more.

SS: So I only have one question left. Is there anything we haven't covered that you think is important?

JIM HUBBARD: Following up on the prison – did you work with any of the women who came out of Bedford prison –

KB: They were, not directly. There were meetings that were set to work on prison issues. There were people working on it who weren't part of ACT UP's working group. There was kind of a larger group. We met at New York AIDS Housing Network. We started having meetings there. And there's even a larger group that's – there are representatives from different community groups who are working on prison issues. So Mel was more in contact with that larger group. But besides that, it was Tim, me, Tim Lunceford, Mel's partner; Mel, myself, and a couple of other people. And we did our own thing.

SS: But back in the day; do you remember Katrina Haslip and these women who were in ACT UP in the early '90s who had come from Bedford Hills?

KB: I do remember Katrina. I didn't – I wasn't fully aware that they had come from Bedford, or what issues they were working on then.

SS: Okay.

KB: I knew there was always a lot of different things going on in ACT UP, and a lot of different groups, which was also one of the things I loved about it; that whatever you wanted to plug yourself into, there was usually someplace to plug it into.

SS: Okay, so I only have one last question. Unless you think there's something that we've missed?

KB: Not for me.

SS: Okay.

KB: I think that a lot of people who – I see a lot of ex–ACT UPpers around. And I don't really want to get on their case about why they're not in ACT UP anymore. Everyone has their own reasons. And I've seen people leave because of being frustrated, or – because it is frustrating when there are a lot of people, a lot of things to do, but not too many people to do it. People get burnt out very easily. I take my little ACT UP vacations, too. There'll be two or three weeks where I don't go to a meeting. But I think there's still work that really needs to be done, and I wish that people would get a second wind and start working on them some more. Because AIDS hasn't gone anywhere yet. It's actually gotten larger. And people are forgetting that this is something that we could work towards a cure for, and we can work towards people getting treatment and extending people's lives for. And I just hope that I know there's still AIDS advocates out there. I just hope there's some more AIDS activism.

It was very encouraging to see, at the 20th anniversary, a lot of people, and some old-timers came down. But part of me thinks a lot of that was for nostalgia value, and that, yeah, we're going down to Wall Street again, blah blah. But it's really time for

people to remember how powerful ACT UP was. And if you say, ACT UP, and if I put down that I have been in ACT UP, people always kind of look. So ACT UP still has some power in people's minds and memories. So I just think that hopefully – have you interviewed everybody else, maybe people talking about it will get them thinking, well, maybe I should go back to that. Because the work still needs to be done.

SS: So my last question is, just looking back, as far as you're concerned, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its greatest disappointment?

Tape II
00:40:00

KB: I think its greatest achievement was – getting people to talk about AIDS as something that affects people in a very personal level, and not a kind of esoteric that's happening to somebody, level. It really put it out that there are actual people who are angry that they're being denied medication, or being denied care, or being discriminated against or something, and that these are real problems. And we had to put the problems out there.

I think one of its – in a way, ACT UP was a victim of its success, in the sense that a lot of people who were in ACT UP kind of started doing other things, because of their activism. Housing Works and needle exchange and all of that. And it dispersed the energy of it. But I think there was no way to avoid it, because you can't try to contain that. If people feel they've learned so much from being in ACT UP, and they want to apply that to help PWAs in this area, they should go do it.

But I think, actually, we haven't really made a very good job of getting their replacements in; of getting new people involved; in giving newer people, or younger people, reasons to think that they should join ACT UP.

And I think, as we go down the line, I hope that that's one of the things that we really work on, as a group; to find out how to get younger people, how to get new energy to do it, because it takes a lot of energy. And a lot of people have been burned out. So energy get –

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