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P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: **Jay Blotcher**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Jay Blotcher

April 24, 2004

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

JAY BLOTCHER: Jay Blotcher. I'm 43, and it is the 24th of April 2004, and we're in High Falls, New York, in my palatial cabin. It used to be a hunting cabin.

SS: And you live here with your husband – you just got married.

JB: Yes, we got hitched, and all the world knows it, thanks to CNN. It was really fantastic. The fact is when we moved up here, we didn't think that sexuality or activism would even be on the table. We essentially came up here – not to retire, but to switch gears, and the movement sort of followed us here, which was good.

Brook [Garrett] and I mentor to gay teams up here, and to them, being gay is not a major issue, it's really so refreshing. They're very inspiring – these kids. They don't know anything about ACT UP; they don't know anything about Queer Nation, because being gay is just what they are. We help them, by filling in the holes in their history, but they are just so functional and so cool and so vibrant that it's nice, because weren't we fighting for their right to not have it be a big deal? To have it just be an aspect of their personality, rather than be the dominating aspect of their personality.

SS: Let's go back to you, in the other days. I don't even know where are you from. Are you a New Yorker?

JB: No, I'm from Randolph, Massachusetts, originally. Randolph is a small town, south of Boston. I was born in 1960. I lived in Randolph until 1978 – though, one aspect of Randolph life that helped fuel my sexuality was that we had a gay bar/club at the edge of town – a very unlikely thing – but it was a Jewish country club that had been bought by a gay entrepreneur and turned into a gay bar and club. However, the cabanas

and the shuffleboard, and the Polynesian poolside bar were all kept in tact. So, it was a real scene – a real, surreal scene. By senior year of high school, I was going into this bar and hanging out. My sexuality had pretty much been cemented.

SS: What was the name of this place?

JB: The Randolph Country Club.

SS: So, what was the scene like?

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JB: Hairdressers. Mostly, not working class thugs, not blue collar people. It was more what you would expect for a stereotypic age of hairdressers and somewhat fey men who went there, because they were the only people with enough guts to be out. The women there were very, sort of, suburban dykes with Farrah Fawcett hair, hip-hugger pants, and the ever-present comb in the back of their pants, so they could give the hair a quick comb-over. They still look like that – 25 years later – that’s how they look.

SS: And, what kind of town is Randolph? Where is it?

JB: Randolph is 20 miles south of Boston. It was one of those towns that grew up around the shoe industry, next to Braintree and Brockton and all that. The Sacco and Vanzetti situation happened the next town over, in Braintree. Small, mostly Irish Catholic town – a working class town. Jews were almost neck and neck with the Irish Catholic, in terms of population.

SS: What did you parents do?

JB: My parents were very active in temple, so I did have a strong, religious background. Judaism was not only relegated to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – we weren’t High Holiday Jews. We celebrated every holiday. I would stay out of school. My parents were President of the Brotherhood and Sisterhood of our temple, and those

were the men's and women's groups. So, there was a real pride associated with being involved with temple, and having our social life being focused on the working – interacting at temple.

SS: Was it conservative?

JB: Yes, conservative – veering towards orthodox – and not in terms of prejudice or in terms of conservatism, but more in terms of ritual. We all wore yarmulkes at temple. There was no cutting around the corners that you would see in the reform temple area. So, we call it conservative, veering towards orthodox. But, it wasn't as if women and men were separated in the schul.

But, what you did have was – my mother was President of sisterhood, but she was not allowed up on the bema – the platform – to read from the Torah. It was only the next year, in 1974, that they finally changed the rules, and a woman was able to go up and read. So, they weren't cutting edge, but it was a nice environment, and I learned. And I went to Hebrew school from kindergarten through 10th grade of high school. So, it was a substantial amount of Hebrew school. That, of course, was always in conflict with my homosexuality. Here I am – you know, the temple providing some sort of cultural and religious haven for me, and yet, at the same time, I knew if I came out, I'd be a pariah or expelled or whatever. As I became more aware of my sexuality – my sexual orientation – temple played less and less of a role in my life. It was really banished to the sidelines, just because I knew that I couldn't be myself and still be a relevant member or a capable member of temple.

SS: So, were you out in high school – you were going to this club?

JB: No, I wasn't. You know, you play this very elaborate – one plays a very elaborate game of cloak and dagger in high school, when you're trying to hide your sexuality, and yet, also make the first steps towards investigating it. Another bizarre aspect of life in suburbia is that passions are always tamped down so much that they all spring forth in this big geyser, and the fact is that my little town of Randolph, Massachusetts, population 16,000, had an honest to goodness gay male sex ring scandal that happened.

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These two guys who were brothers – Jewish men, brothers – twin brothers, 42 years old, both involved in temple, both of them married, apparently were closeted – well, they were looking to make assignments with high school guys. And, it was one of those open secrets, that everybody knew about, but nobody – you know, they giggled about. And, it was just friends of mine and I – we figured it would be just a matter of time until they got around to us. And, sure enough, one of them got around to us – got around to me, and his brother came on to my friend. And, I guess we had enough of a sense of ourselves at the time, that we went for it.

We thought, sure, why not? You know, it's not about a predatory dynamic. If anything, we felt sorry for these guys. And they weren't pushing us into anything we didn't want to do. We were seventeen, at the time. So, one could argue that we certainly had our wits about us. I'm always pissed off now, when I hear about inter-generational relationships always being cast as a predatory situation. It's just a simplistic reading of a complicated issue.

But, we loved it. It was fun. It was a lark for us. Hey, I'm making it with an older man! And then, what happens is that this one guy in our school, who had been

advanced upon by one of the brothers, didn't welcome it, told the cops, and suddenly what had been a very quiet, sort of giggly secret, amongst friends, was in the newspapers.

SS: Your name was in the paper?

JB: No. It was odd. It was our senior year. It was the last two months of our senior year, and here we are, getting ready for the prom, trying to find out what colleges are going to take us, and we're worrying that we're going to be subpoenaed for a gay sex scandal. It was all very surreal, and my friend and I were best friends – we were talking about it and he said, a car came down the street yesterday, while I was sitting in the living room with my mother and father, and I looked out the picture window, and there was a squad car, and I almost couldn't breathe, and they kept driving really slowly, as if they were looking for me, and I didn't know what I was going to do.

I didn't have that happen to me, but the cops were delivering subpoenas to people, and it got very hairy. The resolution to all this – I think it was, like, one of these odd cases of suburban justice. The two brothers were acquitted with the understanding that they would both leave the town forever. I don't quite understand how they brokered a deal like that, but that's what happened.

SS: You didn't get exposed?

JB: No.

SS: Not to your family?

JB: No. In fact, my mother asked me once, what's going on here? And, by then, I had gained a sense of understanding of myself, and about what gay people faced. I was angry that gay people were being abused or persecuted. Anyway, I said something to her that wasn't committal enough, but enough to suggest that I thought it was awful

that these guys were being harassed. Or, that people were taking such a joy in making this town scandal fodder. And, I had responded to her a year earlier, when Anita Bryant won that Dade County initiative against gay people – I remember walking into the living room, and Anita Bryant was on the 11:00 o'clock news, and she was saying something to the effect – I was about 16 then – and she was saying something to the effect of, I'm so glad we won this initiative, because we can keep the world safe for normal people. And, I heard that, and I let out a horselaugh, and my mother said, why did you say that? And I said, she makes me sick. Listen to her. And, it must have put some doubts in my mother's mind, at the time, as to why I would be taking such a stand about this. But, Jewish mothers, they'd rather not know.

But, I didn't come out in high school – however, I had been having sexual relations with kids my own age, since I was 12. At the same time, I was trying valiantly to do everything that one does to assimilate into a high school environment. I went to every prom possible. I had as many girlfriends as I could, and the way that I reasoned with myself about this seeming disconnect is that I'm an adolescent, you do adolescent things, having sex with boys is a fun, little adolescent thing, and I'll outgrow it and girls will be – I'll assimilate, I'll do what one needs to do.

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I tried to keep that bargain with myself for years, but it became obviously, after awhile, that I was not sexually compatible with girls or women, and so it wasn't until my freshman year of college, that I really came out with a vengeance.

SS: How were you able to conceptualize being gay in some kind of political context?

JB: Well, I suppose it goes back to Anita Bryant – to see somebody who had actually helped push through a law that would limit the civil rights of a person, simply because of their sexuality. Now, had I not been gay, would I have been as empathetic? I don't know. The fact is, that I knew right then and there what I was all about, and to see what she was doing, and to know that I would one day, might be a target of that bigotry, of that sanctioned, institutionalized bigotry, sort of made me determined.

Another part of me, I think, has always been a troublemaker – has always wanted to work people's nerves. And I thought, well, if being open and being gay is going to bother people, I'll do it some more. And, I'll do it some more, again. That, for me – I don't know if you'd call it civil disobedience, or just plain brattiness, but that was something that I remember being attracted to, early. If priggish people were going to be upset by the fact that I was gay, then I was going to make a point of mentioning as often as I could.

SS: How did you deal with your parents' disappointment about your homosexuality in a Judaic sense?

JB: I was able to maintain the charade with my parents as long as I could. I went off to college. Nary a thing was said. I had done the expected number of dates and expected number of proms, and I had gone through everything that one expects of a good Jewish son. The first disappointment that I visited upon my mother and father was not dating Jewish girls. I did not like the dynamic of Jewish girls. The Jewish girls that I happened to know were very materialistic and very picky and, I don't know, the stereotype of the suburban Jewish girl, in my town – that prevailed.

So, that was the first disappointment – where my mother said, why don't you date any Jewish girls? And, I tried to explain to her that their whole scene was something that I didn't like. So, she accepted that. I didn't think that she was ready for me to venture into, I don't feel like dating any girls anymore. So, I kept that mum. I went to college. I had two years in college and a summer after college, where I stayed at Syracuse University. I spent the whole summer up there. I bloomed – big fag – just so excited, so enlivened by the whole scenario of living up there. I went off to – the beginning of junior year – then, I went to London, for my second semester. Finally, I came home after all this, after this utter awakening, and I could no longer hide who I was, even though I was trying to. I had to come home for that summer to work, because I had to recoup money, after having been in London. And, it was then, that my mother realized that I was a different person. And, through a couple of things that happened, she probably figured it out. So, she was the one who asked me, finally. It was the summer of 1981, and she asked me, what's going on here? And, she danced around it a little bit, and finally, sort of came out with something. And, I responded by muttering that I was sort of bisexual, or was still figuring things out. God bless Jewish mothers. They know what's going on, they take eons to process, and finally broach the subject. Then, when you tell them, they shut up again. They don't want to really discuss it. They've opened Pandora's box, don't like what they see, and pretend – and I'm not saying that only Jewish mothers and Italian mothers – it's a crowning cultural touch. It's omnipresent.

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So, I didn't have time to feel that sense of disappointment from her, because she no longer wanted to discuss it. So, I just went back to school and lived my life and eventually went to New York, right after senior year, and was able to become a

professional homosexual, meaning that my orientation not only dictated my social life, but also dictated my work.

From the very beginning, I worked at *Christopher Street* magazine and the *New York Native*, and that was in the summer of 1982. I did that through Fall/Winter, and then, in 1983, I worked on a television show with Vito Russo called *Our Time*, and it was a Manhattan cable/WNYC-TV, 13-week series.

At this point, I didn't tell my Mom what I was doing, because I knew she would not be pleased. However, one day, she happened to have called the office, when no one was there, heard the answering machine, with Vito Russo's voice saying, Hi there, you've reached *Our Time*, the new gay and lesbian TV show.

Well, that was it. My mother made some snide comment to me, about what I was doing and what transpired was a month or two month silence. And this is a very tight-knit family. From the time that I went off to college, my Mom and I would speak every week on the phone. We just had that sort of relationship. And this, suddenly, put a chill on it. She never really accepted it, even when my aspirations or my political beliefs transmuted into ACT UP work. She never was comfortable with it. She loved me; she told me she loved me. She said, I love you despite everything, but I wanted her to love me *for* everything.

She sent me – after I – I had to come out to her again, because you need to come out to your parents over and over again, otherwise, they pretend it never happened. But, I came out to her, just before going off to New York, to live my life, and I knew I would be a major, major fag. And, she sent me a card – it was my first birthday in New York City – summer of '82. She said, remember, we love you dearly, despite your peculiarities.

And, I wanted to be loved for them, not despite them. So, we never made our peace, and even on her deathbed – I was actually working on an ACT UP event called the freedom ride, which was a tour of the Southern US states, reminiscent of the freedom ride of the sixties, but this was a freedom ride to raise AIDS awareness.

And, I was the publicist, at the time, and it was people like Neil Broome and Gerri Wells and several other people – Frank Smithson – who were involved. And, on my home machine, I had an outgoing message that said, you've reached Jay Blotcher, if you're calling about the gay and lesbian freedom ride, and you're a member of the media, please leave a message.

And, my mother, on her deathbed – I'd gone down to see her – she said, you know, you might want to change that outgoing message, my friends don't need to know your business. Apparently, a friend of hers called my answering machine and was so shocked by that message that the person didn't even leave a message. But, you know, at one point, you've got to live your life. And, I'm sorry that she was always uncomfortable with it, and she tried her best, but there was a part of her that always felt more comfortable with going with the status quo. How does it look to other people? Don't scare the horses. Behave yourself, because whatever the status quo is should be what you follow. And, the fact is, is that it took a lot from me to disengage myself from that mentality, and being a member of ACT UP really helped that, because everything that my parents had taught me or infused me with – these pretty lies over the years about how the government is your friend, and the policemen are your friend, and only bad people are arrested, and if you're good and just, then you'll be taken care of – all that stuff, clearly, was fabrication with the advent of the AIDS crisis.

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And, it took me awhile. There wasn't any one moment of an awakening, but you know, it became clear that everything that they had said for years – my parents had said for years – just didn't fly and by undoing it, and by distancing myself from those homilies which were, in a way, handcuffs, I was able to become my own person – to become even more political than I had been, in my early days, when my gay life didn't have that filter or conduit of AIDS activism to really have it become something important.

SS: Let's talk about the *Native* – an interesting place to be in 1981.

Actually, I was working there, too – did we know each other?

JB: I don't think we did.

SS: Okay, so, in 1981, what were you doing?

JB: It was '82. I graduated college in May of 1982, and by the summer, I was working for the *Native*, because – the way this happened, is that, while I was in college, another one of my baby steps outside of the closet was in my magazine/journalism class at Syracuse. We had all been asked, as part of our final term paper in sophomore year, to select a magazine that we wanted to do a full term paper on, or a final paper on. And, I picked *Christopher Street* magazine – just to be difficult, just to be different, whatever.

That required going down to New York, on the train for a day, and hanging out in the offices and getting the vibe, and talking to the editors and talking to that madman, Chuck Ortleb, the publisher, and Tom Steele, and really being infused by it, because, here again, was another manifestation that my sexuality did not have to begin and end in my groin that there was a way to articulate it and a way that could help other people, help myself, and be entertaining, and maybe make some money.

So, after I finished my paper, and I sent a copy to them, I remember Tom Steele being entirely enchanted and writing back saying, thank you so much, what a wonderful paper. We've learned things about ourselves that we didn't even know. When you come to New York, you definitely have a job. That for me, was a really big deal, you know? So, I started writing for the *New York Native* in the summer of 1982. I was living with some friends on the Upper West Side, and I'd make the trip down to Tribeca, where *Christopher Street* and the *New York Native* started out. They were in an animal hospital. Before that, they were on 57th Street. They moved to what's now an animal hospital on West Broadway, and then they moved to another thing across the street. I don't even know where they are now. I guess they're defunct.

SS: What kind of writing did you do for them?

JB: News pieces, just news pieces – real basic stuff. I was making no money. They were paying nothing. And, that's another thing that I learned to be wary of – people who wouldn't pay you and say to you, it's for the movement, it's for the cause. And, meanwhile, it was a capitalistic venture, and somebody was being taken care of, and if they weren't being taken care of, it means that they were just sloppy businessmen, and so all of us were suffering. I don't think it was until somebody like Sean Strub taught us that we could combine capitalism and politics and maintain a queer conscious.

SS: The *Native* had some shady things going on. There was that guy Thomas Jackson –

JB: That was later – that was in the mid to late eighties. There was a queer, conservative vein running through it. Wasn't that Jackson guy some ultra rich gay man – like Leonard Goldstein?

SS: That's who it was.

JB: I wasn't involved by then, and infighting was never my cup of tea.

SS: So, there was Dee Sushi was Tom Steele.

JB: That was sort of frivolous. He wasn't imparting any scurrilous information. I thought it was just sort of a silly little column.

SS: Darrell Yates Rist.

JB: Oh yeah.

SS: Marsha Pally.

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JB: Who I also was working with, on the *Our Time* TV show – the occasional lesbian, Marsha Pally. Ugh.

SS: So, there you were with these very interesting folks, and all of sudden, there's the AIDS crisis.

JB: Well, before this – it was a finishing school for me. It was so exquisite, because I didn't think of myself as particularly bright then, or politically astute. The only thing I had for me, back then, is that I was sort of darkly attractive and slim. Not that I was looking for a mentor, but I had a lot of men, over at the *Native*, willing to guide me through. And, I just wanted to be their pals. Or, I wanted to sit at their knee and learn about the good old days, which were the seventies – about the days of GAA [Gay Activist Alliance] and GLF [Gay Liberation Front] and all that stuff. I learned fast. And, I think, being at the *New York Native* and *Christopher Street*, helped provide me with a foundation, so that I could join ACT UP and feel that I had something to say or something to contribute.

Once again, I didn't get involved in the shady dealings there. I didn't get involved with the infighting. One, I didn't have the capacity for it, because I was still finding my legs, insofar as navigating through the political thicket of the gay community. But, at the same time, I just had no interest in it.

SS: Okay, let's talk about the *Native's* AIDS coverage. When did you start being aware of the AIDS crisis?

JB: I remember in the fall of 1982, I wrote an article about Henry Geldzahler, because he had become the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs. He wasn't even able to sit with me, so I actually talked to his assistant – this marvelous man named Gregory Millard, who lived in the Chelsea Hotel. And, Gregory had told me, well, you know, Henry does a lot of work for this – he didn't even say epidemic – he said, for victims of Kaposi's sarcoma. And, that was really the first thing.

No, it wasn't the first thing. Okay, let's go back. Spring, of 1983, I was working at the St. Marks Baths. Vito Russo had suggested I go there because I was making ruinous fees as an essentially glorified intern at this TV show, *Our Time*. I said to Vito, I love you to death. I love working here. I can't afford it. I'm not making any money. I was making \$45 dollars, every two weeks, and I think that was merely covering subway and lunch – \$45 dollars every two weeks. It was just absurd.

And, Vito said, listen, why don't you do what I did, when I was trying to make ends meet, while finishing off writing *The Celluloid Closet*. Well, what did you do, Vito? I worked at the St. Marks Baths. Okay. I had never been inside a bathhouse – talk about the naïve among the fauves. It was just a marvelous bit of lunacy. Here I am,

applying for a job at this place, and really being wide-eyed, because I guess I was wide-eyed, and they liked that, and they hired me.

And, while I was working there – it was the Spring of 1983 – and I guess it was a group, the AIDS Resource Center – AIDS Resource Center held the first candlelight march for AIDS, in the Spring of 1983. And we marched from Sheridan Square to the Jacob Javits building [26 Federal Plaza], which was down near the Brooklyn Bridge – one of those Federal buildings near the municipal building. And I remember wanting to do it. I just felt I had to do it. I had heard a little bit about AIDS, and, in fact, that month, two men had appeared on the cover of Newsweek, arm in arm, and it was all about AIDS. And I just felt I needed to do something.

So, I marched, and I had a couple of friends with me, and we marched, and we felt really good about ourselves, because we were being aware and caring and compassionate. And, I remember how thrilling it was to hear Susan Sarandon address the crowd, and I just remember what cut through it all was this sort of exasperated quote from her. She said, I'm sick of my friends dying. We have to do something. And that's about as plainspoken as you can get. So, that was the first time that I was aware of what was going on. I didn't know anybody who was sick. However, that fall – oh – so I came back from – oh – the candlelight march ended that evening. I turned around and said, sort of absentmindedly, hey, does anybody know what time it is? I have to go to my job at the baths. People turned around and they looked at me with baleful glares. The bathhouse. Don't you know that the bathhouse is the vector of AIDS, and this is bad? And I thought, no, I didn't, frankly. And, I started to feel a little guilty. I had a very naïve notion of what was good and bad back then, but I thought, I should leave the

bathroom, because it's bad, and people are dying of AIDS in the bathroom. It wasn't even called AIDS then. I'm being anachronistic – we didn't call it AIDS back then – I don't believe. So, I left the bathroom. And, a few months later, my boss from the bathroom, I was told, died. And they said, it was hepatitis – it just came on really fast. Years later, it dawned on me what had happened. But, that was my first awareness.

SS: Didn't Vito's boyfriend at the time have AIDS?

JB: Jeffrey Sevcik didn't have HIV until a little bit later. And, after the show ended, Vito and I weren't social friends – that we would hang out. It wasn't until ACT UP that we would get together again. So, that was between 1983 and 1987.

SS: I'm a little confused, because you're working at the *Native*, which is the only place that's doing AIDS coverage. And, you're working at the baths, and you're not drawing any connection between AIDS, AIDS coverage and the baths. Where did you think –?

JB: Why didn't I know that the baths were under fire? Hmmm. I don't know. Was I oblivious? The AIDS coverage in the *New York Native* was really being written by people who were – like, Dr. James D'Eramo – people who had medical backgrounds. So, I don't think I was writing too much about AIDS. I was writing about the gay rights bill. That's it. I was put on that beat. So, that's what I was doing. It wasn't that I was oblivious to it, but I wasn't following every bit of minutiae.

SS: Did you have any concerns for yourself, about your own health?

JB: I remember a letter that I had written to a friend, and he had given it back to me, years later. It was a letter I wrote in the spring of 1983, and it said something – I was trying to be somewhat flippant about it – but I said, you know, the latest fashion on

Christopher Street is look, but don't touch. No lips below the hips. We're trying to stay healthy, and this disease has everybody running scared. So, there was an awareness. I did have an awareness, and working on the TV show with Vito – the fourth show of that 13-week series, focused on AIDS and GMHC, and we had Larry Kramer come in and speak, and we had Michael Callen come in and speak.

And we had this spirited debate between Michael Callen – who said we have to pull back on our sexual practices – and a guy named Charles Jurrist, who was with the *Native*, at the time, and who was a writer, who said, I don't want people to tell me how to conduct my sexuality. So, I was aware of that.

I guess I didn't feel empowered enough, at the time, that I had to take an active role in it. I was just looking out for myself. Or, in terms of my own health, I was being very hyper aware of the parameters of safe sex, and I was trying to follow them.

But for me, at the time, aside from marching in a parade with a candle, I hadn't found a conduit or something that – a political way to express myself or to jump into the fray.

Tape II
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JB: Darrell Yates Rist aka Darrell Limp Wrist – it would only be years later, that he would become public enemy number one, amongst AIDS activists and safe sex people, because he became a turncoat. Some would say he became a turncoat. He was either recruited or offered himself up to Channel 4 – WNBC-TV, in New York – and he agreed to take his video cam in his knapsack, into a backroom, take it out and videotape men, purportedly having unsafe sex.

It was so fuzzy. It was so ridiculous. You couldn't even tell, but that was the teaser at the top of the hour – gay men may still be having unsafe sex. Find out! It was a

little sensationalistic, even for mainstream TV, at the time. And, I know a lot of people were irked with him. But, at the same time, this is the man who said that the fight for AIDS awareness was overshadowing other, more crucial aspects of our lives and of the social ills of our community. He started cataloging alcoholism and drug abuse and this and that and he said, these claim many more people – why are we giving the lion share of information to AIDS? And, I'm trying to remember whether he actually spoke at ACT UP about this, but I know that he wrote about this somewhere, and people were really peeved with him for a while. I don't know if he incurred the wrath of ACT UP specifically – whether we postered against him, but I know that he was on everybody's shit list there, for a while.

SS: And then he died. So, how long did you stay at the *Native*?

JB: I wrote for the *Native* probably from 1982 to 1986.

SS: Okay, so can we just talk a little bit about the *Native*'s AIDS coverage and the direction –?

JB: It was loony.

SS: But, it didn't start that way. It started with Larry Mass.

JB: Yes, Larry and James D'Eramo, were very thoughtful about the situation because they not only accessed the pathogenesis, but they also were mindful of the social construct of gay men and their sexual constructs, so that they were not just saying, you're laboratory animals, and this is what you need to do, in order to obviate the situation. They really dealt with all of the ramifications of the epidemic. And so, that was nice, and they were good guys.

Somewhere along the way, Mr. Charles Ortleb had some brain malfunction and suddenly the *New York Native* became the showcase for disease conspiracy of the week. And, it was swine flu, and it was chronic fatigue syndrome, and it was dolphins, and there were all these purported case scenarios that might have created AIDS and there was simian virus – I can't even remember them. I'm probably mussing up most of these things. But, I do remember swine flu, and I do remember something to do with dolphins.

But, it became a joke, a self-parody – the *New York Native* – because every week, there was something else. And, I suppose, in retrospect, they deserve partial credit, for attempting to go beyond the boundaries, at the time, of what was considered – or what were the conventional ways of thinking that they were – but, they raised a lot of confusion. They raised a lot of alarm. And, I don't think anything ever came of it. And, at that point, Mr. Charles Ortleb was – his sanity was growing suspect among people.

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: They were the only people covering the AIDS crisis. This was before the *New York Times* was covering it. They had that initial article – so, this was the only place where varied theories could be presented. Now, since you were in the newsroom, can you remember what kind of sessions were going on? Why Ortleb was having –

JB: I really wasn't in the newsroom. I was mostly working at home.

SS: Do you remember, at any point, him feeling that AIDS was airborne?

JB: That Charles did? Once again, I was not privy to those conversations.

SS: What about the advent of [John] Lauritsen and the anti-HIV people?

JB: I remember Lauritsen, a very crusty, difficult character. He's almost like a grown-up Poindexter. There was something very absent minded about him, but at the

same time he had a real edge to him. I only remember him, sort of, coming to ACT UP a couple of times, and dispensing his theories and, I think, maybe haranguing ACT UP for being on the wrong track, or something like that. But, once again, I was not party to the bull sessions that happened in the office, and I'm sure they were fascinating.

SS: Do you have insight into it? Just since you were around those people? What their motives were? Why they were conceptualizing AIDS that way?

JB: I'd be presuming.

SS: So, from when you left the bathhouse in 1983 to 1986 when you left the *Native* – by that point, you must have had more people in your life who had AIDS.

JB: Not really. People say, how did you ever make it to ACT UP, if you didn't know anybody with HIV and AIDS? And, maybe that's the way I made it to ACT UP, because I felt so blessed, so relieved that I had been spared, that in deference, I wanted to do something. I was working – the extent to which I was doing anything was, once a year – like, '85, '86, '87, I worked with GMHC on their AIDS walk. And, I didn't work the first couple of years, but the third year, I volunteered full time for it.

What was I doing at the time? I was trying to make a living as a freelance journalist, writing for magazines that talked about New York nightlife, talked about jewelry. I worked for a magazine for the jewelry industry. I worked for a magazine for the eye care industry. I was doing anything to make ends meet, and I had not given myself over fully to activism. I was very pragmatic, at that time. I would, eventually, lose that pragmatism, but then, I was trying to really hang in there and hold it down, with the whole 9 to 5 scenario. So, I was somewhat oblivious of the fires that were raging, but

my one concession was to walk for the AIDS walk. Other than that, I guess I was somewhat self-absorbed.

SS: How did you feel when the baths were closed down, do you remember?

JB: I remember, yeah. It was '85, and I remember – if memory serves – I was very surprised that the *New York Times* actually ran an editorial saying that the bathhouse should stay open, that it should not be closed, because we would be cutting off a way of monitoring or keeping track of people who are in the bathhouse, that it would all go underground and that there would be no reaching out with safer sex information – no reaching out to remind people that they could be tested or that there were care options. So, I remember that. Did I feel a sense of loss? Did I feel that civil rights were being abrogated? No. Once again, that political awakening had not happened yet. It really does begin with ACT UP. Up until then, I was on the sidelines, just taking everything in, but not reacting, not responding, and not agitating in any way. I don't remember demonstrating to keep the bathhouse open.

SS: So, how did you get to ACT UP?

JB: I was working at GMHC's AIDS Walk New York. I was a full time volunteer. At this time, I had just sort of given up –not given up – but I realized that my freelance career wasn't really happening. And, here was this thing that was going to take up all of my time. I guess it didn't matter that I wasn't making any money, because I really wanted to help out. And, I don't remember what my motivation was, but I know that suddenly, I got involved, and I was there every night on the phones, calling people,

raising money, working with these people, who were putting together the AIDS walk. And, just becoming the right hand man of one of the chief organizers of the event.

And, I remember – it was my dear, departed friend, Carl Valentino – we were manning the phones, and he said, hey, you know there's going to be a demonstration tomorrow. And, I said, where? And he said, down on Wall Street. There's this new group that just started. What's their name? Oh, they don't have a name. Well, what do they do? Well, they're fighting. They're angry that the price of AZT is so high. I said, oh, I can get behind that, sure. And so, I found myself at ACT UP's first demonstration. I had missed the landmark Larry Kramer speech at the Center, but I had made it for the first demonstration, and I went down there that day, just because here was something that I could do. I had known friends who had been at GMHC as caregivers, and I just knew that wasn't something that I could do – whether I didn't have the stomach for it, or didn't have the constitution for it, or didn't have the compassion for it – I don't know. But, I knew that, that wasn't what I wanted to do. But, here, I could sort of channel that free-floating anger that I had – channel it into activism. The extent of my activism up until then had been marching in the gay pride parade, which, arguably, in the early '80s, was activism, because not everybody was doing it.

I went down to Wall Street that morning – the next morning – at 7AM, and Vito was there, which I thought was a good sign, because Vito was my mentor and Vito was my idol, and whatever Vito did was cool. And, all these people I had never met before were there, and there was yelling and there was chanting and there was marching and there were arrests. And I drew the line at arrests, just because I hadn't been prepared for it. I did not know the civil disobedience scenario.

So, I watched Vito and a few others get arrested. I'm going to say there were 12 people who were arrested that day. But, it was exciting. I had found an outlet. I had found an articulation of that anger, of that sense of injustice, how to express my feelings. And so, I ended up going to a couple of more demonstrations along the way – one, particularly being the summer of 1987 – a series of demonstrations at the clinical trials, over at Sloan-Kettering, and that was a non-stop, four-day marathon thing, and I went two or three times. I remember seeing Rollerena there, and I remember Rollerena from earlier days, and it was a thrill to talk to Rollerena who had said, oh, honey, you've got to join, we need you. You have to be here.

And so, it wasn't until the fall of 1987, with the march on Washington, when ACT UP was there in full force that I was won over. I'd been to a few things here and there, but, no, seeing these people in full force and full fury and full beauty – the male pulchritude was just overwhelming. Yeah, I want to be part of this. I liked the anger, the excitement, the eloquence of what they were doing. It got me. And I finally went to my first meeting. Up until then, I had only been going to demonstrations here and there. And so, I went in, and I think in my first meeting, I had this neophyte energy and they said, we're having a demonstration coming up – Cardinal O'Connor is going to be coming to St. Veronica's on *Christopher Street* for some sort of dedication or re-dedication of the church. We want him to know that we don't want him on our turf, because he may wash the feet of people with AIDS, and he may empty their bedpans, but the church's practices have only resulted in more AIDS cases and more sero-conversion, because the church has actively lobbied against proper AIDS education in schools and condom distribution, etc., etc. So, I could wrap that around my neophyte, activist head –

my brain. And so, I sat down with Bill Bahlman, one evening, and made up my first fact sheet. I had never done a fact sheet before. So, he sat with me, and he was very patient, and I knocked out a fact sheet. And, we had this demonstration on this bitterly cold evening in October in 1987 – and that was the first time I worked with Alan Klein, as well. I met Alan there.

And, the only thing I have to liken it up until then was the satisfaction that one gets from working on a high school play, because that was the only frame of reference I had. You create a production, and you execute it, and then, afterwards, you decide how effective it was. I do remember one thing, that evening – we had been outside marching, and the church had been tipped off to what was going on, and they created this whole barricade around the street. They blocked off both sides of the street, and people could only go in through this narrow passageway created by police wooden horses. So, we were marching on the parameter of that, in the bitter cold. I don't know why it was so cold on an October night, in Manhattan. And, we had just finished doing a moving picket – and, I'm going to say, Channel Four – Channel Four rushes up – hey guys, what's going on? Did you just finish your picket? Did you finish your protest? No, we're just taking a break. Listen, we need to get some footage – could we just march around a little bit now. And, we started to and it was, like – wait a minute, no. We're not going to do that. So, we had the demonstration and it certainly worked the nerves of the archdiocese.

SS: That's interesting that you raised that, because later ACT UP did time demonstrations for live feed, right?

JB: I don't feel that we really played into their hands so much as we created scenarios that would – not have been convenient to them – but, no – I don't remember

creating a scenario or putting together a demonstration, just because it would happen at a certain time. Certainly, we were mindful of – no, no, because we would have things at 7AM, or we would have things at 3PM. No, we felt that the key was, if you get a press release out, via fax, and you state your case, then they're going to show up. Because, I've had demonstrations where we felt everything was hunky-dory, and something would happen at the last minute, that we didn't foresee. So, I don't think we micromanaged it to such a point that we timed things so that –

SS: So, where did you start plugging into ACT UP, after that first demonstration?

JB: I just started going to meetings after that. I was quite puffed up that I was able to do something. And, I felt like I belonged. I felt that I had something to offer. My role was honed more, when I joined the ACT UP Media Committee.

SS: Can you tell us about that? Who was on it? And, what were they doing when you first came in?

JB: I believe that David Corkery and Drew Hopkins were the head of the ACT UP Media Committee, at the time. And, Drew was a journalist for *Spin*, amongst others, and David was a career publicist. Who else was on it at the time? I really don't remember. When I was at the helm, I remember my people.

SS: Try to help us understand the evolution of the Media Committee, and how their tactics evolved? When you came in, how did it work? And then, how did it change?

JB: I think it was really the beginning of the Media Committee. I think, at that time, Michelangelo Signorile was on the committee, as well. I had told Michelangelo

about ACT UP, and Michelangelo, being Michelangelo was, like, pooh pooh, c'mon, there are other ways to make our case and this and that. But, then, he ran into Adam Smith on the street, and Adam Smith talked about how marvelous ACT UP was, and suddenly, Michelangelo was interested. Something had made sense to him.

SS: Can you explain what was special about Adam Smith?

JB: Adam Smith was part of a golden inner circle of ACT UP, who will forever be known in ACT UP lore as the Swim Team. The Swim Team was composed of a bunch of very good looking, sexually dynamic young men who were politically aware and politically astute as were all of us, but they had this certain bon vivant energy – certain kinetic, sexual joy that, really got a lot of people into ACT UP. When people think about the ACT UPper, they think of a guy in a bomber jacket and tight jeans, cuffed at the shoe and Doc Martens – and that was the Swim Team – these well-built guys.

SS: Who was on the Swim Team?

JB: The Swim Team was Adam Smith and Matt Ebert, and Jeff Freitag, and a guy named Buck – George Whitman was his real name, but Buck was his name – he was an illustrator. Who else? Gosh, I don't know.

SS: Good, let's go back to the Media Committee.

JB: As I recall, I think I came in on the ground floor with the Media Committee, and it was a bunch of us – we may have met at Vito's home, on West 24th Street. And the first thing I remember – it must have been on the ground floor, because somebody handed around a lined tablet – a paper tablet – and said, any of you who know fellow journalists, write down all their names, so that we have a group of people we need to contact, so that we can finally get somebody to write about this epidemic properly.

Because, up until then, as Larry Kramer's book, *Reports from the Holocaust*, will explain to you, there was a virtual media blackout, except for gay publications and gay media. No one else was covering this, because it was just too distasteful and, of course, the victims of it were just – had been exiled to the outskirts of society already, and they were expendable.

So, yeah, we sat down, and we wrote down the list of who we knew, because the ACT UP Media Committee was composed of journalists and publicists – people for whom – they made a living of promoting certain clients, and people who made a living as journalists, themselves. And we felt that in addition to writing about AIDS on your own, it would be more effective if you could reach out to your colleagues in the journalism field and get them to write about it.

I don't know if there was any issue back then about journalistic ethics about, how can I write about AIDS, if I am a member of ACT UP? I don't think we even went there at the time, but we wanted to get other people out there. And so, these people who had professional backgrounds in journalism and public relations, had banded together to become the ACT UP Media Committee. And, I remember after Drew Hopkins stepped down, I think it was David Corkery and Bob Rafsky sort of helmed it. And then, after them, it was Michelangelo Signorile, and Mike passed it on to me. Actually, Mike foisted it on me, and there was a reason why he did that.

My mother had contracted pancreatic cancer in the Spring/Summer of 1988, and she passed away in October of '88, and I immediately went into deep mourning. I expected to have someone with HIV die, and devastate my life, so it was sort of unexpected that it was my mother who had died. In fact, when I was in the hospital room

with her, in Florida, in the last few days of her life, I remember looking up – it was either Donahue or Oprah, and there was Mark Fotopoulos talking on the show, and I thought, okay, this is interesting. Here I am with my mother dying, and I'm watching a fellow AIDS activist on TV. It was very surreal.

Anyway, my Mom died. I was moping, I was in deep mourning. And Signorile said, you know what? I'm not going to let you do this. I'm stepping down from helming the Media Committee, you're taking over. I can't, I can't. No, you are. End of discussion. So, I did. And, I learned, by being at meetings before and helping out with various events. We can go back to the FDA in October of 1988.

We were at the FDA. Michelangelo was the publicist at the time, and he had joined forces with a man named Chip Duckett. Chip Duckett is best known as a club promoter in New York City. Chip Duckett was working with Mike to publicize this amazing event that day – this daylong siege of the Food and Drug Administration in Rockville, Maryland. Chip came from a background of sensationalism – of clubs and parties and this and that. And, I remember, at one point, while I was helping out, Chip had a microphone and some sort of boom box, and he was giving hourly reports. And, at one point he yells, media, great photo op on the other side of the building. Activists being dragged away in handcuffs and strangled. Great photo op. And then, I realized, just how surreal the whole thing was. But, Chip knew – give them what they want.

Signorile was a little bit more sober on that facet. He was more nuts and bolts – although, Signorile came from a background of showbiz publicity. He repped several clients in show biz. But, that dovetailed, perfectly, with ACT UP's exalted sense of showmanship. So, it just made sense.

SS: I just want to get back to this issue of contact journalists – so, you guys knew – you said, journalists who you know – now, were most of these people gay? How did you approach journalists? Who was helpful, and who refused to help you? We’re just trying to make an historic record here.

JB: Well, I just remember, when I was at the helm of really contacting certain journalists, we kept it within – we were sort of elementary back then. It wasn’t like we would contact a journalist who only wrote about entertainment, and tried to shoehorn AIDS activism into entertainment. The only thing that we had to sell was ACT UP. Other organizations could sell or promote to journalists their involvement. We were promoting the only resources that we had and that was our demonstrations, as well as the people with HIV and AIDS, who were part of our group, who had been identified as effective spokespeople.

In that time, the only thing that was going to get attention was celebrity involvement. Elizabeth Taylor had already commanded a lot of attention with her organization – with the precursor to AmFAR – I forget what that was called – the American Medical Foundation? Or, the AIDS Medical Foundation, which eventually became AmFAR. But, it was a hard sell. The demonstrations were what got people out there – bells and whistles, dog and pony – whatever you want to call it – we tried to maintain a certain respect, a certain sobriety to what we did, but at the same time, we knew that we had to pull out all the stops to get people to the demonstrations.

Insofar as who responded – you know, we had – it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. It was the people who had written about medical issues, because it was still a medical issue. Not enough people were writing about it as a housing issue. Not enough

people were writing about it as a bureaucratic issue. They were still very one dimensional, insofar as the way that they were looking at the epidemic. We weren't that sophisticated, up until then, about the way we were spinning ACT UP or promoting ACT UP.

So, the people who, coming forth, were people like Bruce Lambert at the *New York Times*, Joe Nicholson at the *Daily News* and Kathryn so and so of *Newsday* – who at the *New York Post*? Was it Joe Nicholson at the *New York Post* and someone else at the *Daily News*? I have to do research on this, sorry. You know, it was an interesting dynamic, because some people you knew were just by the book, and they didn't have any vested interest. And, occasionally, a reporter would let down their practiced mask of objectivity and let you know, in some way, that this really meant a little bit more to them. That they were writing about this – they weren't only doing their job, because, in those days, people were summarily ignoring it. So, it wasn't just doing your job, it actually appeared that you were going a little bit further by not only writing about it, but giving it a fair and compassionate treatment.

And, it seems absurd now to think that people wouldn't be writing about AIDS with compassion and objectivity, but, I'm sorry, that was the reality of it. Either they ignored it, or when they wrote about it, they wrote in the most desultory of terms and described the AIDS activists as troublemakers and the people with AIDS as outside the general population and other words that were even – you know – Kathryn Woodward of *Newsday*.

For me, it was a revelation. I don't think I was that naïve, but it was, like, oh, journalism isn't objective, because if it were objective, than people would be covering

this immense public health hazard with a greater interest. So, it became clear to me that the media pick and choose what they deem important – that it is political, that it isn't just what is important, because then, there wouldn't be all these cover-ups, and there wouldn't be all these grievous omissions of important stories, which continue today.

SS: Let me ask you something. This is sort of a conceptual question, but, you talked before about your mother being unable to overcome her prejudices, and now you're talking about journalists refusing a huge and major story. Emotionally, was there a connection between that for you?

JB: The anger that I had for my mother –

SS: I'm not saying anger, I'm saying, in understanding what was motivating these people? You look at it objectively you think, oh, a person would love their child or a journalist would go for a big story. But, for some reason, both these people were not able to do that. Do you understand why?

JB: That's conceptual. I guess I didn't look so much at motivation as, just, trying to break it down. I suppose in order to break it down, you need to find out its origins or its underpinnings. But, the thing with me, as being the head of the Media Committee – it was an interesting dichotomy because ACT UP – the public face of ACT UP was loud, angry and sexy, and as the media coordinator for my time there, it was a good cop, bad cop dynamic.

Here's a demonstration. All these people in tee-shirts or bomber jackets or whatever, lying there, in the middle of the street, or sitting there in the street, yelling, pumping their fists up in the air screaming. I come on the scene, and I always wear a suit and tie. And, you know – that was a really contrived, but focused way of trying to insert

a little legitimacy in there, or at least to – I don't know – I wanted to show them that we could play their game, too, and that we could not be easily dismissed. And here I was, in suit and tie, showing them that I'm dressing the part of a responsible authority. And, essentially, I would go up to the journalists and say, hi, you may want to know why these people are yelling and screaming. I'm the person to tell you, because I can speak in very calm, clear, collected, complete sentences – which I would. And, they would be soothed by the fact that a person with a seemingly sane face was disseminating the information, while all these people over here, which was good for B role, but wasn't good for sound bytes. So, I played the role. I had to because otherwise, we would be dismissed, as a lot of media outlets were dismissing us. I wanted to undercut that in any way that I could.

So, rather than trying to figure out what their blockage was, what their resistance was, I just tried to put on the most professional face that I could, to tell them the story. And, did I ever try to figure out why? Did I ever sit down with somebody and say, why aren't you covering this? No, because Larry had done that job, effectively, earlier, and he had come up with the reason that it was bigotry and it was prejudice and it was fear that was keeping journalists – good, respectable journalists – away from this issue, when they should have been running to it in droves.

But, no, I never had one of those heart to hearts with journalists and said, come on, people are dying out there, why aren't you covering this? I do remember one time, a saucy journalist came up to me – it was like the sixth or seventh time I had seen him at an ACT UP demonstration. He had dutifully dragged his camera crew there. And, he took me aside and he said, okay, we're here again. But, what if the day comes that we don't come to your demonstrations anymore? And I turned to him and I said, our

demonstrations are only a way to get you out here. If you don't want to cover our demonstration, that's fine. But, at least cover the issue that brought us out here today. Cover the issue that puts us out there in the streets and makes us so angry. Cover the issue or that aspect of the issue that is the latest outrage that has moved us. Fine, you don't want to cover our particular circus show today? Cover the story behind it.

And, I think that was the only time I really had a chance to articulate that to a journalist. I mean, for most other people, it was just business as usual. They would come to an ACT UP demonstration, either they'd give it a good spin or not. And, after awhile, you became aware of people who were going to give a snide spin or people like Ralph Penza of WNBC who continues to show his sneering derision for gay people.

After awhile, you recognize people who would do something for us, who would actually give a little bit more. And, the thing is that, in order not to scare them, or to make them feel vulnerable, I would never acknowledge that. If they were good to us, I would certainly be nice to them, but I would never say something like, hey, thanks for that extra bit, because we all had to maintain that illusion of objectivity, and I didn't want them to think that I knew they were helping out a little bit more. I didn't want them to feel that they were pawns of ACT UP. I wanted them to only know that they were doing the job and they were doing it well, but I never wanted to give them an extra pat on the back, because that would have upset that dynamic that we had as publicist/journalists. You don't want a journalist to feel that they're in your pocket or visa versa.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: I want to talk about the whole process of cracking the *New York Times*. It was a huge issue in ACT UP that the *New York Times* would not cover AIDS. And, if you could tell us, a little bit, how that change was forced?

JB: During my tenure, or during my time as director of the Media Committee, I remember that we began to have a little bit – I don't know, making in-roads at the *New York Times* is always difficult – especially for ACT UP, because the *New York Times*, traditionally, steered away from covering publicity events, or public – what's the word – staged events. The fact is, there could be a 100 demonstrations in a given week in New York City, and the *New York Times* could be counted on to not cover any of them. To that extent – we were in a disadvantageous position, because what we had to offer for the most part were demonstrations.

SS: But, weren't the demonstrations designed to bring attention to a certain issue?

JB: Yes. So, the *New York Times* would more often — when they did cover something – cover the issue, but steer clear of the demonstration, because they didn't feel – because they'd feel like pawns. I forget when this was explained to me. They didn't want to feel like pawns in our publicity game. Others wanted to. The *New York Times* has always lived on another planet, and has always had more stringent restrictions than anybody else, as to what they consider news.

So, yes, they were getting a little bit better, in terms of covering AIDS issues. They were going in from the social angle or from the angle of the poor or the homeless, but we were still running up against them, insofar as our demonstrations. And, the fact is, that we just focused on other media, because we knew we would get more of a response, or better coverage.

I know that people like Ann Northrop and others, have sat down with the *New York Times* to ask them, what was going on? And to try to get them to cover things. But,

I know for myself, aside from sending Gina Kolata the latest medical information that our Treatment and Data Committee had come up with, or talking to Bruce Lambert, who was really – for the record – who is still at the *Times* was a conscientious, thoughtful and innovative AIDS reporter, who always showed a level of compassion that informed his stories.

SS: Is he gay?

JB: No.

SS: So, what was the relationship with Gina Kolata, because there were demonstrations about her?

JB: Because she wrote mostly about medical issues, it was the Treatment and Data Committee people – Mark Harrington and Spencer Cox and people like that – who dealt with her. The issue was that she was getting a lot of information wrong. And, when you're dealing with a life and death situation such as AIDS, you can't afford to get a few things wrong. These people were saying that she was sloppy.

Then we have people like Dr. Lawrence Altman, who wasn't so much – I don't think the issue was that he was sloppy, but that he was taking on good faith too much about what the pharmaceutical companies were saying and doing. And, essentially, we accused him of sort of re-writing their press releases, and just putting them in his stories, without challenging their various charges, because these were companies who were consistently price gouging the public, cheating the government. They were creating drugs facilitated by government money, and yet they were charging ruinous prices to people.

One person who turned out to be a marvelous asset was Milt Freudenheim, who was a *New York Times* reporter who covered the pharmaceutical industries. And when the issue of AZT's inflated prices became a real ongoing ACT UP campaign, and we kept having demonstrations against them, and we were arguing with Burroughs-Wellcome, which then became Glaxo-Wellcome, which then became, what? Glaxo-Wellcome Smith Kline? We had to shame them into lowering the price, and Milt Freudenheim was extremely instrumental in that, because he really did the research, and he passed on to readers, what we had always been saying – that Burroughs Welcome took AZT, which had been researched and created by the National Cancer Institutes, and took it for themselves – took the patent – and then, because it was the only drug on the market, felt justified in these ruinous prices.

And, finally, in the Fall of 1989, he wrote this humdinger of an article about everything that we've been saying for so long – for, like, over two years – and then the *Times* followed up with an editorial – something about the inhuman greed – I don't have the specific – about AZT and greed. And that's when we finally nailed it. We finally got Burroughs Welcome to lower the price of AZT, I think, by 20 percent.

So, in that sense, the *New York Times* was effective. In retrospect, I understood why they did not cover demonstrations, because they didn't cover demonstrations across the board. However, there were other aspects of the epidemic that they needed to cover, that they were willfully ignoring. But, things started to change in the late eighties.

Did we ever get the *New York Times* to cover a demonstration of ours? I don't remember that. One of the biggest breakthroughs, however, came after the December 1989 Stop the Church demonstration, which put us in the public eye, internationally.

It happened the night before the demonstration. I got a call from a guy – a timid voice on the other phone – Mr. Blotcher, my name is Jason DeParle, I'm supposed to write about you. And, I immediately started spitting bullets at him – I've never heard your name. They're sending somebody who doesn't know ACT UP at all. He actually said, ACT UP, what does that stand for? I was livid. Here we were, poised on the eve of our most important demonstration, and they sent a rookie to cover us, which was insult upon injury, because I had to – the guy didn't know anything. So, I sat with the guy, and I told him everything. I had to get to the pre-demonstration meeting, but it was just another bit of evidence of the *New York Times's* disdain of ACT UP.

He came to the demonstration the next day. He did this, he did that. He wrote about it. And then, like the 2nd of January of 1990, when everybody in the world was against ACT UP for our outrageous demonstration at the church, Jason DeParle came out with the article that he had been researching for about a month, which was this amazingly clear-eyed praise of ACT UP. It was called, something like, Rude and Rash, ACT UP, Nonetheless Has Great Tactics, or has been very effective. And, it was a virtual love letter to us that appeared on the front page of the Metro section, and there was a jump page, which was just as amazing as anything. And the fact that it was in the *New York Times*, made it all the more amazing. And the fact that it happened right after the Stop the Church demonstration, when even people without our own community were warring against us for what we did, that made it doubly valuable.

From then on, the relationship between ACT UP and the *New York Times* did improve. Lawrence Altman, in his galloping arrogance, never felt that he had to answer to ACT UP for anything that he did, or for any articles he wrote. Gina Kolata and ACT

UP continued an antagonistic relationship. And, she's still writing about AIDS and writing about medical issues.

It was with the – a man named Jeffrey Schmalz became the AIDS reporter in 1992, and even that is an odd story. This is a man who was closeted and gay and the way that he came out as gay is that he passed out one day in the newsroom because he had contracted HIV. And, suddenly, he became a big AIDS reporter for them. And, this was a man for whom AIDS was a life and death issue – it was his life – and so, he started writing about ACT UP, and he was receptive. And, he actually came to one of ACT UP's public political funerals, which happened in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1992. It was the funeral of Tim Bailey. He not only covered this, but he was there because *20/20*, the TV show, was covering him, and he thought this would be a marvelous backdrop for his story. So, when you talk about journalistic objectivity, once again, the issue gets very muddy. Some people might say, hey, this is a man with HIV, should he be writing about AIDS?

So, you know, the *New York Times* – I don't know – they play by their own rules, deciding when something's objective, when something isn't.

SS: What was our relationship like with gay people at the *Times* like Adam Moss or Stephen Holden or Dudley Clendinen – any of those people?

JB: I didn't have any relationship with any of these people. I didn't know them socially. I didn't know them professionally. I was only interacting with people I needed to interact with at the *Times*. I would dutifully send out press releases for all demonstrations. I would call reporters when I could. A lot of the times – in a lot of instances, the only time I talked to a reporter was when they were on the scene at a

demonstration, or if they called me on the phone to ask me a question, because they were writing a story about a latest development that had happened.

SS: Let's go to the Stop the Church coverage – would you say that that coverage was accurate?

JB: Okay – Stop the Church – we knew from the beginning was going to be a political hot potato. The fact is, you were taking on the Roman Catholic archdiocese. Being a Jew, I did not have the baggage that so many people had. And, we need to know this for posterity – that no matter how fiery ACT UP people were, when we started talking about Stop the Church, these people started to regress into little altar boys and, you know, the big, bad church still cast a long shadow, even amongst these fiery activists. And, during the meetings for the demonstration – leading up to it – people demurred and people stammered, and people thought, maybe we shouldn't do this. It was like they were standing up against their father or their mother. It was frightening to see how potent the church still held these ACT UP people in their grasp. It was like they suddenly flashed back to their first communion. And, there was a lot of – not infighting – but a lot of different views.

Tape III
00:15:00

So, we knew how explosive it potentially could be. And that's why, conscientiously, for a month before the demonstration, I sent out weekly letters to the media, via fax and by snail mail, explaining to them why we were doing what we were doing – realizing that I really had to frame this in such a way, because I knew what the potential hysteria could be. And, you know what? It didn't help, because they wanted to turn it into a circus. They wanted to go with the fact that these godless gay activists – even though members of WHAM were there, as well – even though there were many

recovering Catholics who were there, demonstrating, too – the fact that we were going against such a graven image as the church, was one thing. The fact that people were inside yelling and demonstrating was another. The fact that Tom Keane took the host and crumbled it – Tom Keane, who was a former altar boy, and when he crumbled it, he said, not teaching safe sex is murder. All that was focused on, not why we went in, but the fact that we had gone in and had blasphemed and had visited sacrilege upon the church.

Well, using those words are words borrowed from the Catholic Church. Those aren't words that journalists should be using. A journalist should be saying in a clear, objective way, they went into the church and yelled and screamed, or they protested. Not blasphemed, not sacrilege. The fact is, the Catholic church is still a powerful, political entity, and they were able to spin the resulting media coverage to make them look like the – to make it seem as if they were the victims of a hate crime.

And, David Dinkins and Ed Koch and all these other people weighed in. So, we knew it was going to be explosive. The resulting coverage was high-pitched and erroneous and against us. It made the front of every paper, that's for sure. But, you know, the result – and the radio coverage – everything was AIDS activists storm the church. AIDS activists cause havoc, wreck havoc in the church. AIDS activists stand up to the Cardinal. And, it was amazing – it wasn't amazing in the way we had hoped it was amazing – but, the fact is, that the story had legs, and it went on for days and days. It happened on a Sunday. All the negative publicity came on Monday. Gay organizations and AIDS organization leapt into the fray, to denounce us, to distance themselves from us.

SS: Like who? Which groups?

JB: Oh, God. I really don't remember.

SS: What was the consequence on ACT UP?

JB: Well, the fact is, we had a press conference that following Wednesday. The phones would not stop ringing. I was giving interviews from everybody from the *New York Times*, to BBC Belfast. It was really quite amazing – BBC Belfast radio. And, I talked to Signorile, because I needed a reality check, here. He said, the story is still steamrolling through. You need to do something else. You need to grab onto that velocity, and use it to our advantage. So, we held a press conference the following Wednesday at an art gallery downtown. And, I'm sorry I forget – because they were allies of us. They gave us their art gallery to have a press conference.

SS: Was it The Drawing Center?

JB: Was it? No, it wasn't that far down. It was medium lower Broadway – not all the way down in SoHo. Was it Wessel-O'Connor, their first gallery? I don't know. So, we finally had a chance to talk about all the issues that I had already framed in fax after fax, about enumerating the church's overtly political stand in staunching AIDS education in schools, in staunching condom distribution, in lobbying energetically against homosexuals – etc., etc. All the stuff we're already known. And, we got a chance to say it again, because they weren't listening the first time, or they'd rather cover the drama and color of the demonstration. Did we get our point across? Well, we had so many reporters at this press conference. They got it a little more right? You know, but in the meantime, you know, city officials were still speaking out against us. What broke this, partially, was one, the *New York Times* article which said, they may be rude, but they get things done.

And the second thing was the *Phil Donahue Show*. He called Ann Northrop, and she had – it was Ann and two or three other people, who came on Phil Donahue and talked about why they did what they did. And, you couldn't get any better back then, then Phil Donahue, who was a talk show host with some smarts – who had a sober voice in so far, it was pre-Jerry Springer mania.

So, did we ever get out everything we wanted to say? No. But, that demonstration really made ACT UP a force to be reckoned with. So, you have to go back to that old maxim of any publicity is good publicity, because even though we were public enemy number one at the time, after this demonstration, people were more willing, conversely, or ironically, to listen to us. We had gotten their attention with what people deemed sacrilege, and yet, finally they realized that we were serious.

Gabriel Rotello tells a story – his mother is one of those elegant Westchester housewives, and she was sitting around the bridge table with her friends, after the church demonstration, and she said – one of them said I didn't realize those gay people were so angry. I just thought they were fey and weak – but wow! We got a message across.

SS: Were you in charge for media for the needle exchange trial?

JB: No, I was not.

SS: And did you work on the CDC – the campaign to change the CDC definition of AIDS? Were you involved in that?

JB: No, that happened in the Spring of 1992, and I do remember, in the summer of 1992, where ACT UP went to Amsterdam for the AIDS conference and James

Young¹ [Curran] was there, and we had a demonstration against him, when he got up and spoke. And, after he got up and spoke, a bunch of people from ACT UP sort of surrounded him and said, we want to talk to you. And, they took him to the ACT UP workspace, which was shared by ACT UP New York and ACT UP Netherlands. And, at that point, I remember Terry McGovern sitting with him and saying, do you understand why we need to expand this definition? And it was there that they reached some sort of consensus. The dawn broke. And he finally realized why, and it finally happened. So, I was very proud to be there, at that moment, when these people really broke through to him. But, no, I wasn't part of that. The demonstrations that I worked on, specifically, were the demonstration against the *New York Times* in July of 1998, and then the various —

SS: What was that one?

Tape III
00:25:00

JB: In late June – not 1998, 1989 – in late June of 1989, the *New York Times* brought out an editorial that said, “why make AIDS worse than it is?” And, it began with this very absurdist logic saying, will people stop painting such dark, gloomy forecasts for AIDS? Because, think about it, folks, all the people who get infected now are going to die, and when they die, all the epidemic will die out. I don't know how they got that in there, but it was so outrageous, so disgusting, so insulting, that we decided we're going to have a demonstration against the *New York Times*. It had been a cumulative thing with the Gina Kolata insults and the Lawrence Altman insults, and everyone else who had ignored AIDS, or who had gotten it wrong.

¹ Dr. James Curran was Director of the Division of HIV/AIDS at the CDC. Frank Young was Commissioner of the FDA

We had this two-part demonstration. We started it first by wheat-pasting all over the neighborhood of Arthur Sulzberger, Sr. – Punch Sulzberger – the publisher of the *New York Times*, who lived up at 81st and Fifth Avenue. We went around on the previous Sunday night and put this all up, and it ranged from, the *New York Times* is killing us, to some very juvenile things. It had a picture of Charlie Brown, and it said, good grief, Punch, you fucked up. It had a picture of Arthur Sulzberger, Sr., with a toilet plunger on his head. I mean, we were just nutty that night, but it was effective. We put all these things up there.

And then, a few days later, we went back for the demonstration. We were going to demonstrate in front of his home. Well, coincidentally, the sidewalk in front of Arthur Sulzberger's palatial Fifth Avenue home was all dug up. And, there were police barricades around it. Hmmm. Okay – so, when we got there, to the demonstration site, the *New York Times* already knew about it. Why? Well, the press releases had gone out, but I had already received a call from Abe Rosenthal, a few days earlier. He had found one of the press releases and had called me. He had called my home, and I picked up the message, and he engaged me in this conversation, this debate, right there on the phone – why are you doing this? We have never been bad to people with AIDS. And I said, get real, your coverage has been spotty from the beginning, erroneous, and do I need to tell you the ramifications of erroneous information being disseminated by the newspaper of record, when it comes to the worst public health hazard of the century. And, this is a man who also had a vendetta against gay people, back in the early sixties, when he came back from his outpost in Russia. He had been out in Russia, and he came back to New York City, and had looked in amazement at the homosexual people who were walking down

the streets of Manhattan blatantly just being themselves. And he went into the offices and said, we got to write an article about this. These people have no shame, and they're out there, and this is disgraceful.

And, an article actually came out on the front page of the *New York Times* in the mid-sixties, saying something like, City Concerned with the Rise of Overt Homosexuals – or something like that. So, this was a man who, from the very beginning, had an axe to grind with gay people. And, one could argue that this led to the *New York Times* unwillingness – rampant unwillingness – to cover the AIDS epidemic in an accurate, proper and even-handed way.

Okay – so they knew we were going to have a demonstration. So, not only was this area ripped up – coincidence or whatever – but there were also almost 200 cops or 100 policemen surrounding the area. They had police wagons, and there were cop cars, and there was this – and there were undercover cops. Definitely, overkill. Clearly, somebody from the *New York Times* had called in a favor or said something. I mean, all these cops to protect this guy's home, when ACT UP was not into property damage. We demonstrated. We did not throw bricks through windows. We were, and remain, a non-violent organization. So, it became unsettlingly clear how powerful the *New York Times* was. So, here we were stymied up on upper Fifth Avenue. So, the call went out, and we said, you know what? We're going to march to the *New York Times* downtown, and we did. We started at 80th and Fifth, and we walked – we marched – about 200 people – we marched all the way down to *Times* Square.

We arrived at about 5:30 in the evening. It's rush hour, and the cops are following us down there, of course. So, in a sense, it sort of worked, because they started

out up there, to stop us from protesting at his home, and they ended up escorting us downtown, because they had to keep the streets clear and keep it going. So, rather than stop us, they escorted us. It was quite absurd. And then, when we got to 43rd Street, we were going to turn West onto 43rd Street, so we could get right in the middle – right there, in front of the *New York Times*, in the middle of 43rd – and the cop said, nothing doing, nothing doing, you can't do that. Oh really? It's a public street. We can't do this? Okay, we're going to sit down right here, in the middle of *Times* Square, at rush hour. Okay, we'll let you in. Because they had barricaded 43rd Street, and then it became clear that this was no coincidence. The police muscle that was being shown that day was because somebody from the *New York Times* had called and said, listen, we're being harassed by ACT UP, could you make sure that they can't do anything? So, we had the demonstration there and somebody burned a copy of the *New York Times* – a little bit of street theater.

You know, we got our point across a little bit. Did we really get our point across? No. Nobody else covered that demonstration. Of course, the *New York Times* wouldn't cover it, but no other daily newspaper covered that demonstration. The only one who covered it was the *Village Voice*.

Doug Ireland, in the *Village Voice*, wrote a piece about a week later saying, how odd, that at a time when police forces are being tapped to their utmost by other problems – and they're looking at budgetary constraints – that the police would suddenly be able to marshal over a hundred officers to take care of a mere 200 peaceful demonstrators.

So – I don't know – I think this has ramifications for what happened recently, and that was my dismissal from the *New York Times* for having been with ACT UP. I was a

New York Times freelancer for about two years, and when I moved up here to High Falls, New York in Ulster County, I was a writer for them about very basic, local issues. And, on January 12th, 2004, I was called by my editor and informed that I could no longer work for the *New York Times*, because it was decided by the higher-ups that because I had been with ACT UP, I could not be counted on objectivity, and that people would know that I had been with ACT UP, and therefore, anything that I wrote would be suspect, because I couldn't be objective writing about farmers or local crime, because I had been with ACT UP, and I, obviously, had an AIDS agenda. So, I thought of that immediately. I thought that my dismissal was retribution for having been a very visible spokesperson for ACT UP, during the time when ACT UP was very vocal against the *New York Times*. That was a very interesting demonstration, just because it showed the might of the *New York Times*.

Other demonstrations where I was the publicist was when Woody Myers, the Commissioner of Health for New York City was brought in by – It was Dinkins because it happened in January, 1990. Woody Myers – a man who was head of the Department of Health in the state of Indiana, I believe – who had been on record as saying that he believed in quarantine and other strident measures regarding people with HIV was named – was on the short-list – for being named as the Commissioner of Health in New York City.

And, up until now, ACT UP had had a very colorful history with various commissioners of health, who had rulings and policies that really did not take into consideration the basic humanity of people with HIV and AIDS. And, here was another person who had been on record as supporting quarantine and other issues, and we held a

series of demonstrations, over a period of several days, to fight this. And that was another event that I'd been involved with.

Another one, which also garnered us international attention, was ACT UP's takeover of the international AIDS conference in Montreal in June 1989. And, that was pretty intense. The fact is that we had been outsiders at this conference, and it had been, more or less, a carnival for pharmaceutical companies, and it had been just for the doctors, but people with HIV and AIDS were being systematically excluded from having a role in this. And so, finally, we just burst in and we took over the conference that day.

SS: How was that covered?

JB: I'm glad you asked that. That was a very intense day. It was June 6th of 1989. On that day, in the history of the world, there had been a massive crash of trains in Russia and 400 people had died. The Ayatollah Khomeini had died that day. The massacre at Tiananmen Square had happened that day. So, we were fourth on the roster of stories that day. But, the evening news covered us. The world was coming apart that day. It was just an amazing, intense, frightening, exciting time. And, the fact is, we were able to break through any of that in this impenetrable series of news stories that day to even have our victory documented was quite something.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

JB: Did I ever leave ACT UP? I stepped down from the Media Committee, after the Woody Myers situation. So, by February of 1990, I was no longer director of the Media Committee. But, in subsequent years, I was asked back on various events – whether it be ACT UP's presence in Yokohama, Japan, in 1994 at the AIDS conference, or whether it was the 1998 demonstration for needle exchange at AIDS Czar Sandra

Thurman's office -- just along the way, because, unfortunately, ACT UP's Media Committee started to deteriorate, and I have no reason for that. I don't really know.

So, I was called back to do things. For instance, I spearheaded the media for ACT UP's tenth anniversary demonstration on Wall Street. So, that even though I was doing other things for other AIDS organizations at the time, I was called back for certain things. And, I'm glad I was, because it sort of kept me honest -- to have that energy and to be able to be linked with a group that didn't have any boundaries -- that still had an undistilled anger and still had a purpose, was a nice antidote to working with organizations like AmFAR -- the American Foundation for AIDS Research -- that was a little too careful and bureaucratic. To be able to, sort of, leap into the void again with ACT UP every now and then was very nice.

Tape III
00:40:00

But, since then -- since stepping down from ACT UP, I had organizations come to me and say, what you did for ACT UP, wow, man -- what do you get paid for that? You're kidding, right? This was volunteer work. You did that for nothing? We'd pay you to give us that publicity.

So, I started a PR firm, with my friend and colleague, Alan Klein, called Public Impact, incorporating the same principles, the same ingenuity and the same tactics that we used, employed in ACT UP, and used that for other organizations like SAGE -- Senior Action in a Gay Environment; the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force; The Community Center; Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation -- GLAAD; the Gay Games -- on and on.

We were trying to empower other organizations to say, you know what, you can be as fiery and marvelous as you want, but you can't forget the fact that in this media

saturated world, that a little bit of planning and a methodical media plan and media strategy is really going to put you over the top.

Tape IV
00:00:00

SS: Can you give me your analysis of the split in ACT UP? How you characterize that?

JB: Are you talking about the Treatment and Data Committee and all that?

SS: Yes.

JB: The fact is, is that the Treatment and Data Committee – in addition to being composed of brilliant people, were people with a certain amount of arrogance. One of them is our dear Macarthur genius grant – Mark Harrington. God bless, Mark, it must be a lonely life to be the genius that he is, because you're dealing with people who are just not as bright as you.

And, the fact is, that these guys really did hold the key to some amazing information. And, I guess, genius without humility – that's a liability. They didn't have that. Peter Staley and the others – they are brilliant and props to them, but the way that they interacted with the rest of ACT UP – they didn't play so well with others.

And, often they were very autonomous. They wouldn't tell us what they were doing or the fact that they were sitting with – that they were having meetings with major pharmaceutical companies. And, I can understand that we grew at odds, in terms of our objectives, because ACT UP, as a whole, was out to shame and pillory and otherwise denigrate the pharmaceutical companies for all of their previous crimes.

Mark and Peter and the T&D Committee were about making nice with these people, so that we could move on and they could lower their prices. They could improve their clinical trials. They could be more accurate in their advertising. Back then, it was

before they were advertising directly to the consumer. But, they were advertising to doctors. So, I could understand in retrospect – with cool retrospective and an older head – what was going on. At the time, we felt that they just weren't being diplomatic enough with us and that they were being too diplomatic with them. And the fact is that the pharmaceutical industry continues to be this grotesque money-bloated entity that feels that if you throw money at anything, you can get whatever you want. And you know what? They usually do.

They give so much money – or, they give perks to doctors, so that the doctors constantly use or prescribe their drugs. And, there were perks that they were giving these guys, too. These guys were going for cocktail parties and this and that. And, it sort of seemed at odds with our unspoken vow of grassroots living – that these guys – it was getting a little cloudy – not as to what side they were on – that would be a simplistic analysis, but whether they were sort of being bought, slowly, in a way.

Tape IV
00:05:00

So, what happened then was Treatment Action Group – TAG didn't know whether they wanted to be Treatment Action Group, or Treatment Activist Group. They settled on Treatment Action Group. So, it was, like, the first split.

I don't know? Did they take the best people with them? Were there any people left? I don't know. The fact is that ACT UP's strength was really dealing with a lot of the social issues, in addition to the medical issues. And, I think, maybe, we became an organization dedicated more to – like, the social issues were what we protested, but the medical issues were what we allowed our people to go and work on, without the band of activists behind them. We were empowering our treatment to people – after TAG left – to go to meetings, to sit on commissions.

It was growing pains. These things happen. It didn't help, like I said, that a lot of these people were brilliant and arrogant – the Mark Harringtons and this and that. But, that's what happened. Conversely, something like Housing Works broke off from ACT UP – not because of censure or bad vibes, bad feelings, but because they felt that they could be more effective as a standalone group. So, the ACT UP Housing Committee became Housing Works, and we still worked with them.

So, not every group that spun off created some sort of friction. We recognized that the group was getting very large and that it helped that groups were spinning off and starting their own, because as we revved up and became more powerful, ACT UP found itself with a mounting number of agendas on our plate, and it really became overwhelming. And, nobody else was doing it the way that we were in that direct action, rude, uncompromising way, which I consider all those to be virtues.

Other people were towing the line. In fact, they were using us as bad guys, in order to gain leverage. I mean, I don't have any tangible proof of this, but I can say with great certainty that if an issue came up, and ACT UP was in the streets fighting about a certain issue, a mainstream AIDS organization would go to the government and say, see those people fighting there – they're rude and they're crude, and they're not compromising. We, however – we, mainstream AIDS group – we compromise, so why don't we come to the table and you can talk with us, and we'll be a lot easier. So, I think we played the bad guys, so that these other organizations were empowered to get in more and to sit down with the heads of the government and the heads of the pharmaceutical companies. So, that's the sacrificial role that the bad boys played.

SS: Jay, I only have one more question, so if you feel that there's something that we haven't covered, you should let me know. Just looking back, how would you assess – from your point of view – what ACT UP's greatest achievement was, and, at the same time, where you think the biggest disappointment was – in terms of what did or didn't happen?

JB: The greatest achievement was empowering – not only people with AIDS, but anybody who ever had a disease, to realize that both the government and the medical industry are not the be-all and end-all, and that self-empowerment is crucial to peace of mind, to health, to well-being. ACT UP's self-empowerment program inspired many other people and many other people with diseases to change the model of their interaction with the government and the medical industry. We even had an organization for women with breast cancer called CAN ACT, which I felt was a marvelous tribute to ACT UP – an homage – that they called themselves that. That, I think, is the greatest thing.

The thing that I also want to say about – that was the greatest thing about ACT UP, is that all this was done – all of this anger, all of this genius, all of this uncompromising action was done with a sense of humor. The fact is that ACT UP's humor and its sense of camp and its sense of theater was one of most marvelous aspects of it. And, it all goes back to Emma Goldman saying, if I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution.

ACT UP did dance, and we were crazy about it. And, we could be as serious as a judge one moment, and then being camping queen the next, and still get the job done. And, that is the sign of a people that know what they're doing – that it's not all serious, serious, that they can inject a little bit of levity into it, because if any issue was right for a

bit of black comedy, it was the AIDS pandemic, because there was so much going wrong, because human ignorance or human folly or human greed that you had to laugh at it, at the same time that you kicked its ass.

One seminal moment that really expresses the spirit of ACT UP's camp was at the 1988 FDA daylong siege. It had been going on for hours and hours, and the police had been picking people off and putting them on a bus that was – instead of a squad car or a wagon – it was a bus. And, they were waiting until the bus filled up entirely to take people to jail, somewhere in Rockville, Maryland. And so, that bus sat there for hours, and these people are sitting there in handcuffs for hours.

Finally, they got the last person on the bus that they could, and the bus started to gun its motor. The people who had been sitting there for hours, watching their comrades out there fighting and just being stuck there, realized that they were going. And, someone started singing the Carol Burnett closing theme song, which she did on her show every week which was, "I'm so glad we had this time together, just to have a laugh and sing a song, seems we just get started and before you know it, comes the time we have to say so long."

Well, at that point on her show, Carol Burnett would pull up and tug her ear, which was a special goodbye to a relative of hers. Well, when everybody got to the end of that number, they all tried to reach up with handcuffs to pull at their ear. And, that's genius, that's brilliance, that is camp at its most humane and its most wise and its most wonderful. And I thought, God, I am so proud to be a member of such a magical group of people. That's important – the camp is so important.

And the other thing is the sexual energy in ACT UP, and I've referred to it before a little flippantly, but the fact that sexuality was part of our esprit de corps was really important, because it was at a time where sexuality of all stripes – especially gay – was being denigrated, was being pilloried, was being spoken of in the most denigrating, most negative ways – as, well, gay sex = AIDS. And, we showed that there was a joy to sex. The fact is that ACT UP people – in our mad rush to topple every sacred cow around – we're also toppling that sacred cow of Puritanism and that priggish sexuality that unfortunately had arisen from the epidemic. The fact is, it wasn't that sex of all stripes was killing us; it was the fact that unsafe sex was killing us.

And, we wanted to show that we weren't going to stand for people just badmouthing sex all the way down the line. And, we were showing it. We were having a great time. It was a like a free love scenario, but we were doing it with people who were our comrades and colleagues, and we were sleeping with our friends. These people were our friends, and we were sleeping together, and it would mean something because the next day, we'd be at a demonstration – you'd look down the line, and there's the guy you slept with the night before, and you'd give him a little wink, and it just energized you. And, you know, everybody was getting that level of sexuality, and they were getting that level of intimacy with one another, and it was quite wonderful. It was really an energizing thing, and it meant a lot, because we were fighting against a sex-negative mentality at the time.

Another thing to think of is that not all ACT UP people were schooled in political studies, and not all of them were died-in-the-wool red diaper babies. The nature of the epidemic was that it hit a lot of people who, up until then, had been playing by the rules

and had been getting lots of money and felt that if they kept their nose clean, they could be good Americans. You know, Eric Sawyer was a big investment broker – I don't know what people with money do – but he was making a lot of money for people, with a lot of money. And, suddenly he sero-converted, and suddenly he realized, oh, the capitalist world doesn't care whether I live or die. The same with Peter Staley. He was a Wall Street person. He had this awakening. Oh my gosh, they don't really like me.

Now, I made all this money, and I race to the head of Bear Stearns to be a great hard-core Wall Street person, and now, all I am is a fag with AIDS. So, there were a lot of awakenings that way, and the fact is, that in a lot of ways, ACT UP did re-invent the wheel. We knew we had a tangential awareness of the Civil Rights movement, and we had a tangential awareness of Henry David Thoreau and civil disobedience, and Martin Luther King.

But, the fact is, that there was a childish energy and a sense of purpose that infused us. So, we were re-inventing the wheel a lot of times, and sometimes we did not have an awareness of history. But, you know what? That worked. That naiveté worked, because it pushed us forth, and we weren't afraid of our predecessors. We weren't afraid of not doing justice to them, because we didn't keep that in mind. We were just making it up as we went along.

There were some people in ACT UP who were poli-sci majors or who had some political awareness, but for the most part, we were sort of making it up as we went along, and the fact that we made up the same things that a lot of our predecessors made up, shows that there is a linear approach, or a shared experience of all activists – that there is

a universality to our mission, to our battle, because we do come up with the same techniques and the same strategies and the same tactics.

So, that really fascinated me as well, because, like I said before, I come from a somewhat limited background, insofar as political activism. So, that was enlightening. Let me see if I have anything else. I actually wrote down a couple of notes. That's about it.

SS: Thank you, Jay.

JB: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]