

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

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Interviewee: **Neil Broome**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Neil Broome

April 25, 2004

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

NEIL BROOME: Neil Broome, 45, Sunday, April 25th, and we're in Hadley, Massachusetts, in my home.

SS: In your beautiful, 18-whatever home – what year?

NB: 1840 farmhouse.

SS: Very nice. Neil, are you a New Yorker by birth?

NB: Yes.

SS: Where did you grow up?

NB: I grew up in Forest Hills.

SS: Did you go to Forest Hills High?

NB: Yes, and I graduated from Forest Hills High School in 1976.

SS: Were your parents involved in any kind of community activities?

NB: No – community activities – well, my father volunteers for tort committees for – and sometimes –

SS: When you were a kid, though?

NB: When I was a kid – yeah, for the Queens County Bar Association and the New York Bar Association. He's done lots of volunteer things like that.

SS: So, you didn't grow up in a household that was politically active?

NB: No – like, politically active – like, community activist oriented things? Not particularly, no.

SS: And, were they involved in any kind of Jewish communities?

NB: Yes, I went to Hebrew school for six years and my brother did, as well. We both had a Jewish education for six or seven years. My cousins were trying to get us – they did aliyah in Israel and so we had some Jewish cultural education. And, there's definitely identification. We celebrated all the holidays and we went to High Holy holidays and celebrated Passover and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

SS: So, in that, was there any kind of ethic about oppression, justice?

NB: Yes.

SS: How was that articulated?

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NB: Well, that was articulated because my uncle is a Holocaust survivor – that's my father's sister's husband, and he grew up in Poland. And, that sort of happened later in his life, where he became involved with being a speaker for the Anti-Defamation League. We always heard the stories that my father told, about what it was like to grow up in New York in the thirties and forties and the type of anti-Semitism and discrimination that they encountered.

Even when I was a kid, we weren't allowed to live in a certain part of Forest Hills that we had wanted to live in, because it was restricted until the mid-1970s – and, that was Forest Hills Gardens. So, we couldn't live there. We had to live in the other area that had single-family homes, which is called Cord Meyer. And Cord Meyer was a part of Forest Hills that was developed by two – I think they were German Jewish immigrants, but I'm not sure.

That was an area where people who were Jewish were allowed to live. You always had that kind of thing, and my father used to tell us a lot of stories about the type of atmosphere that existed. In the neighborhood that he grew up in – in Brooklyn – there

was always fighting, and people were always trying to single – other groups were always singling and targeting Jewish kids.

We sort of had a little bit of that, when I used to go to Hebrew school. Kids from the Catholic school would throw rocks at us. So, you had a sense. My parents were – we were very cognizant that you had to be careful, and you had to be careful of where you were going, and you had to know who was who and what's what and not go to the wrong place because you were Jewish – even in New York, which is pretty amazing – but, that neighborhood that I grew up in – one part of Forest Hills was not Jewish, and the other part was.

And people really didn't feel welcome going into Forest Hills Gardens. As a matter of fact, my sister – she was a ball girl at the Forest Hills Tennis Club, and that, supposedly – and she's almost 40 – and that was the first time they had a ball girl and somebody who was Jewish at the Forest Hills Tennis Club. So, there you go. So, that's fairly recent – not recent, recent history – but, it's recent enough for me to remember what it's like to have kids screaming at you, coming out of Hebrew school, as a 12-year-old kid, growing up in New York. It's fresh. You don't forget certain things.

You don't forget kids throwing rocks and screaming Christ killer, just because you're going to Hebrew school. And, I guess the thing that really surprises me is, I think that if you're not from New York, and let's say – oh, people can say, oh, well, that's the boroughs or whatever. But, I think the heart and soul of New York in a lot of places is the boroughs – people who live in Brooklyn and the Bronx and Queens – it's a whole different experience than, let's say, in Manhattan. But, I think people are very much a part of New York, as they would be if they were in Manhattan. But, for some reason,

even growing up in Forest Hills, which was three expressway stops – people always refer to Manhattan as the city, which is a very funny, odd kind of thing, consider that all five boroughs are part of the city.

There's definitely this in/out exclusion thing. And, I also pick it up from people who aren't from New York – they immediately gravitate towards this, are you from Manhattan? This password thing. So, in other words, if you're not from Manhattan, you're not from New York. It's crazy – it's sort of an exclusivity thing, I suppose. I don't know.

SS: Were you gay in high school?

NB: Yes.

SS: What was that like?

NB: Horrible. It was awful, terrible. When I went to Forest Hills High School – first of all, the only gay thing in the mid-1970's – there was gay and lesbian youth, and that was in Manhattan and it was very isolating. There was a lot of name calling, ostracizing. It was terrible. There was a 25th reunion at my high school, and they send you all this crap – all this bullshit in e-mails and all that.

There was actually a bulletin board from my high school, and I wrote several paragraphs, and I said, I am not going to participate – I said, I don't have good feelings about going to a school where there was such an anti-gay atmosphere. I said, I don't feel welcome.

SS: What kinds of things did you experience?

NB: Being called a faggot all the time – always. In junior high school, a lot; high school, the first year, and then the next two years, just being ignored – completely

ignored. And, people making jokes. There were a few – myself and two other people – and we were all friends, and they were all gay.

And then I decided – it was so uncomfortable – the last year of high school I just said, I can't hide this anymore, I can't take it. But, there was no support. There was nothing to stop name-calling or address name-calling. It was just normal. It was normalized behavior, on the part of the other students – was to vacillate between ostracizing or taunting. And it was terrible. And it was exhausting, and I used to come home and go to sleep.

SS: Did you family know this was happening?

NB: Yes, they did.

SS: How did they respond?

NB: I told them that kids would make fun of me. My mother was not the most empathetic person. Then, I felt ashamed of even talking about it. I would say, you know, they'd harass me, but I was too embarrassed to even say what they were harassing me about was. But, it was terrible, it was awful.

When I responded to this bulletin board, I started getting responses, and some of them were really nice. And, other kids at the school said, they had other things happen. People didn't talk about this. I don't know where I was at a point in a generation – I think now, that's open, there's discourse about it. There wasn't.

It was accepted. It occurred all the time. Kids were always singled out, and nobody talked about the majority of the times that kids were being singled out was because there was a perception that they were gay. There were references to name

calling without specifying and indicating what that name-calling was. And it stunk. It was awful. I hated it. I was miserable. And I didn't like it.

So, I have been able to respond over the years. I went to my undergraduate school. They had lots of homophobia. I went to this school in Florida that was part of Florida State in the early eighties, and a lot of the teachers were in the closet, or they were gay and I would see them at bars. And they did nothing to address it. Same thing, in college. I went to New York City Tech for hotel and restaurant management – right in the classroom, homophobia.

I had a friend – she used to work at the Hilton – Leslie – a really nice person. And, even in a classroom one day, a guy said to me, shut the hell up, you faggot – in a college classroom. I never had a good feeling, and I'm really glad that I left New York, because I felt, growing up in New York, it was the most homophobic place you could ever imagine. People would be right out there with their sexist stuff and homophobia stuff.

I mean – I remember, all the construction sites – people would say horrible things to women. They were always insulting women. A friend of mine who lives in California said that's the thing that I hated the most about New York. You'd never see behavior like that anywhere else. You wouldn't. You simply wouldn't.

SS: You graduated high school, you got out of New York? You went to college in Florida?

NB: No, first I went two years and I got an associate degree, and then I went to Florida, which was another oppressive, awful place – I was living in Miami, and Miami in the early '80s was a city that was still a dying, dead city, and it was a very socially

conservative place. This was before it became a hot spot on the map, in the mid-eighties. It was awful. It was a decaying, awful, dead city, and it had a lot of very conservative people. They used to raid the gay bars. It was crazy. It was a crazy place.

SS: Then you went back to New York?

NB: Then I went back to New York, after I got my bachelors degree, and I waited until '83 and then I started applying for graduate school, realizing that, if I wanted to do things that involved working with people and social services, I would need to do more things.

I started volunteering, and became very involved, for about five years, in different types of things. I worked at the New York City Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project for two and a half years, as a project counselor. And they put you through a three or four day training. And, I really liked that. I found that I was finding something that I liked. I didn't like working in hotels. I thought I would like that, but I didn't like that.

Tape I
00:15:00

SS: I just want to go back to when you came back to New York in '83. So, you're coming back to New York and now you're an adult and it's the beginning of the AIDS crisis. Was AIDS on your radar at that point?

NB: I was reading about it in the *Native* – they called it GRID. I was reading about it, and then I just – I was nervous, but the issue around transmission wasn't entirely clear. People were – I was reading these things and then saying, how is this transmitted? And then, on a personal level, I don't even think it was in peoples' consciousness – utilizing a barrier and protection, until the late eighties.

As I recall, in the media, there was a lot of hysteria from the *New York Post* and all these newspapers. So, it was very hard to get a handle on what's real and what's not.

You know, people were thinking you could get it from tears – crazy things. And, certainly, the media wasn't helpful in clarifying information in people's minds. They weren't entirely clear.

SS: So, at that time, were you involved in any politics or gay community activity?

NB: In the mid eighties, the Anti-Violence Project and I liked that a lot.

SS: Before ACT-UP.

NB: Before ACT-UP, I was in AVP when David Wertheimer was there, and he actually wrote one of the letters, so that I could get into grad school. Then, I had worked for the Clinton Visiting Neighbors. For two years or so, I was a volunteer there, and I did all types of things – administrative things, bookkeeping things, home visiting, and I really found that I liked working with people and trying to help people improve the quality of their life in some way, and just give my time.

My father always taught us that – it was really important to give back, whenever you can. He really thought that it's very important for people to contribute in a cause or something that they're interested in. That's something that was sort of a like a value – that was part of growing up that my father shared with us.

SS: And, he was able to extend that to gay people?

NB: Well, now he's much better with it. But, yes, he was. He was much more accepting, when I came out in high school. I told my parents when I was 17 that I was gay. He was much better than my mother was with it. And, he's always been very supportive of me. He's a good guy. He's really a good guy.

He's had to, I think – there's been quite a learning curve, for a lot of people. But, I try to share information with people in my family – give them things by Richard Isay – Dr. Richard Isay – who wrote *On Being Homosexual* [*Being Homosexual: Gay Men and their Development*] – but, less clinical things and more palatable things that would sort of bridge the education gap.

My mother had a much harder time, and she had a lot of anger towards me and towards my being gay and I think it was harder for her to assimilate information or there was a reticence to read information that was neutral or not biased about gay people. I mean, I don't think her response was – you know, she had very negative things to say about gay people, but she also had negative things to say about a lot of people. So, her attitudes were reflective of who she was as a person, so they were consistent with that. So, that was a little hard. And then, my sister was not too much better because it seems that the last three people she had dated, all wound up being gay, and I think she had a certain level of not feeling good about that. So, who knows? I don't know what the answer is.

Over the years, my father has been much more amenable to getting information, whereas, when I would send information – written information, that talked about sexuality and the reasons – like, from National Institute [of] Health studies and things like that – my father was much more receptive than my mother was.

SS: So, you were an AVP and then did you do anything else before you went to ACT-UP?

NB: Yeah, I did AVP. I worked for the Lighthouse for the Blind in the early eighties. I wanted to get my feet wet with volunteer things.

SS: And you were at Hunter at this point?

NB: The chronology was, was Hunter came in 1989, but then I also wanted to see what these different things were about, because I wanted to try something different than working in a hotel, which I really didn't find very interesting. I worked at the Sheraton for three years and I worked at the Intercontinental. Then, I waited tables, when I was in graduate school. I did a lot of things.

Tape I
00:20:00

So, the AVP was prior – it was the last volunteer situation, prior to – I got accepted after I submitted an application. I had an interview to the School of Social Work at Hunter. It's a good school. They were great there. It's a wonderful program, and I'm really glad that I got to go, and I did make two good friends, and one of them passed away in the early nineties. And, I've been a social worker in a whole range of settings and contexts for the last 15 years.

SS: So, when did you first come to ACT-UP?

NB: I came to the first meeting that Larry Kramer had called for. I recall it was like a community meeting. Can I go back a second? When you were asking about other things – I did get involved for about a year, a year and a half with CISPES – Committee and Solidarity for the People of El Salvador – and they were a nice group of people, and I really believed strongly in what they were trying to do, which was to advocate against – to protest US intervention in El Salvador and government policies. And I really found that was a good group of people. That was prior to ACT-UP.

SS: And they accepted gay people?

NB: They were accepting. I didn't get into too many conversations. I didn't engage with people too much. But, they seemed somewhat accepting. I think a lot of

groups that are “left identified” they’ve had varying degrees of success with the gay issue.

A lot of times, people have found that those are safe places, as long as they didn’t openly talk about the issue too much, because that created – I can’t generalize – that’s not really accurate or fair, but I think that if one were to generalize, I think there’s a history of gay people being drawn to some groups that are identified with specific issues, but at the same time, their sexuality not being talked about too much – I think that’s been the history, in my opinion. And, the left hasn’t been very good about gay issues, at various points, historically. Some they have, some they haven’t.

SS: Just out of curiosity, since we’re on this – later on, when you were so heavily involved in ACT-UP, did you ever see any of the straight people from CISPES at any AIDS events?

NB: Occasionally, I would. There were one or two people, but I think a lot of them had varying levels of comfort. I think it was out of their comfort zone. That’s a clinical social worky term. Not entirely – but, I think they were trying, and someone who’s engaging can help them.

SS: Since you’re a social worker, let me just ask you this question – what do you think the impact is on a person to always be the person who can’t expect the reciprocity – to always be the person who’s in question. You’re describing family being, at best, ambivalent on certain points and some places, hostile; school, punishing; working with CISPES. What is the long-term consequence on a human being, to always be that person who somehow isn’t as deserving as everybody else?

NB: Right. You feel drained. You start questioning. I think it impacts on your self-esteem. I think the message that you get is, everyone else is more important than you are important. It depends on how good you're navigating that and what your egocentric strengths are and how much therapy you've had.

It depends on how evolved the person is. It depends on what their ability is to place thing in a perspective and a context. For me, I think I have certain strengths that are helpful and allow me to do certain things. But, also, after awhile, you start feeling burnt out and undervalued, and then, you just want to withdraw from that. And, I think, as a response, somebody might want to – preservation sets in and you turn inward. You don't want to help, and you focus on yourself. That's kind of reflective of where we're at as a society at large. There aren't too many rewards for helping people. They're ambivalent toward – people helping other people – what does that mean? It has many connotations and I think, generally, they're not positive connotations. Why do you want to do that? Why do you want to bother with that? Why don't you just make money? I think that's the message. You get a lot of messages, and they're not always supportive of that. That's my general feeling.

Tape I
00:25:00

SS: How did you find out about Larry's first meeting?

NB: I think it was announced in the New York Native – or, there was an announcement that was made. And it really interested me. Larry Kramer has a lot of energy and is able to – he has moments of – he's a motivator to me. He motivated and he made a lot of statements and comments and things that all seemed to gel and talked about how there's a situation and this has been going on for awhile, and we really need to

address this as a community and because where the response that we're getting from outside our community is negligible. It really resonated.

What he said, I believe, really resonated and it touched on a lot of issues. It touched on societal homophobia and society's negative attitudes and just, similarly how people in the gay and lesbian community internalize those negative attitudes either by withdrawing or substance use or – you know, you have some very serious consequences as a result of people having very negative attitudes, ideas. They impact us institutionally. People's negative attitudes about who gays and lesbians are has always had – for a variety of reasons – people being fearful of retribution and consequences – we've been defined by other people's voices. And, as a result of being defined that plays itself out in the body politic. It plays itself out in legislation, in policy, and in ways that most people who don't get connections, which, I'd say, are many people in our culture. They don't understand the implications of allowing other people to identify who we are.

So, this was probably an opportunity – I think this meeting – to really try to call attention to something, and create something to respond, on more of a level than just hospice and home-care and GMHC. I believe that was the intent.

SS: So, at this point, did you suspect that you, yourself might be positive?

NB: I did, because I was having unprotected sex. This is hard to acknowledge. I think, often, I needed to be high in order to have sex, because I felt ashamed.

SS: So, when you got there, you thought, this could be me?

NB: Oh yeah. Sure, I was thinking that. Yeah, I was.

SS: But you hadn't tested yet or anything?

NB: I did, in 1987, and I was positive. And I was in a tailspin, initially, but then I bounce back really quickly. I'm a survivor.

SS: What was it like being a positive person inside ACT-UP?

NB: It was a very supportive place to be HIV-positive and it was a place that, contrary to what the media would have people believe, because, at that point, you had limited drug options. And, the only option, basically, was AZT, and the mortality rate was fairly high. It was like a disaster, a train wreck – hearing all these things. And to counter all those negatives of death – those messages and images of death, death, death – you know, how do you come out of that and create something that's positive and say, wow. But, then, you start finding out that all these other things started emerging, like Body Positive, and support groups and – there was a group that used to meet quite often – it was a holistic group – HEAL [Health Education AIDS Liaison].

There were so many good things. There was Louise Hay who, in retrospect – I'm not even getting into that – but she was helpful, too, to a lot of people. Overall, she was somewhat helpful. But, when you examine some of the things that were being said, there was more than a little element of homophobia there, and she became more controversial and people started analyzing – seeing and acknowledging what she was doing.

So, I think that was great. There was a community that began to emerge of supportiveness, and a community that began to challenge the perceptions that someone with HIV is this – because, you see, HIV became representative, I think – or, the person who had HIV became representative of, really, everything that was bad and wrong with gay people. I really do. It was sort of like – not an analogy – it was so loaded to be HIV-positive. HIV itself – the word – was loaded.

SS: What was it like inside ACT-UP? Did you just tell everybody in ACT-UP that you were positive?

NB: I think maybe some people, I acknowledge. I think, for me, that was also a process. Let me just go back to the loaded part. So, I think the word was so loaded, because people hadn't dispelled any misconceptions. There were just misconceptions upon misconceptions and articles to confuse people in the papers that people would read. I mean, accuracy and reality had very little to do, I think, in most people's minds. And this affected how people were treated in hospital situations and a whole range of situations. It was frightening. And then, the homophobia that resulted from it. You know, you had this article that came out in the *Times*, because then you had an increase of violence against people who were perceived to be gay, and the two became linked and terrible things happened. You had awful things – You had a dramatic increase in assaults. You had all these terrible things, and that all occurred in an environment in which the media was reprehensible. They did a reprehensible job of presenting information in an accurate, clear way. They created all types of – especially all these things like the *Post* and the *Daily News* – it was insane.

In that kind of atmosphere, how could the result not be a negative impact on people who were perceived to be gay? What's surprising is that more violence didn't occur. But, I definitely find that there's a direct linkage, as opposed to indirect, between the garbage that was being put out about transmission or the lack of accurate information, and the subsequent, dramatic – there were a whole series of marches in New York, I remember, that occurred – that the Anti-Violence Project organized.

You had a real spiking and a dramatic increase of assaults in a one or two year period – 400%, 500% – and a lot of it was not related through reporting. I had worked there for several years, and what you were seeing was really staggering. And you were seeing – people would get into an argument on the street and people would say – just crazy things – inhuman. And, the response that a lot of people had was just reprehensible.

I think eventually, people's attitudes changed, and I think ACT-UP – even though people may not have liked the in-your-face stuff – but I think that was good – to counter those images of gay people being weak. Not everyone was gay in the group, either. I think that was the other thing – the group tried to be different things to different people. But, I think it was good to counter a lot of myths and make people wake up and think – you know, most people, in general, would like to be in a conscious fog and not know about anything, and just keep making delusional statements and comments and having crazy ideas about what American society is. There's so many layers of it, and people just like to reduce everything to a sound bite, and the reality is, is there's a lot of complexities. I think I'm getting tangential here.

I think what I liked about the group was that there were specific goals and targets and objectives – the trials, fast track, creating more access, moving the trials up so that people would not be dying the way they were. And, I think that ACT-UP accomplished its goals and had some brilliant strategies. There were brilliant pieces of theater.

There were some remarkably bright and talented people in the group. And, there was definitely no shortage of egos. Everyone has an ego, and they were often quite present. But, also, there was a dynamism, there was an electricity, there was an energy,

there was a feeling that things can occur – that people would listen. The group was very mesmerizing, on a lot of different levels in, almost, like a cultish way. And, I think that was good, because there were so few things to provide hope, I think, in general, at that time, because of the high mortality rate, and it was so invigorating and alive. And, it was the most positive use of people's use of energy. And, you had people from – people who are very savvy. They were media savvy. These were people who had reached upper levels of management in corporations. Other people were artists.

There was a group – Avram Finkelstein did the whole thing. There were so many brilliant things. Barbara Kruger – there were things that I loved. And, it was a very – not only appealing – but you really felt that you were helping to change the course of something that – people just wouldn't even respond to. The silence was deafening – because, basically, the main issue was who was being affected. People just don't give a shit. And, I don't think that's changed that much. I think it's changed somewhat. I think American society – attitudes are changing, but essentially, we're an extremely socially conservative country, and you have a lot of polarization, when you have a lot of educational and informational gaps. And, I believe that lots of people continue to remain ignorant both about HIV and about gay people, and they choose that.

They choose that in order to justify why they want to treat other people differently – because it certainly isn't for lack of information. But, most people are too lazy to access accurate information, so they need to hold onto their beliefs, whether they're reality based or truth-based or not. Reality and truth, I think – and everybody has a different idea of truth – are often the first casualties, when you're dealing with deep

prejudices and stigmas – that’s the first truth – that’s the first casualty – objective, accurate information.

It becomes – discourse just turns into emotionalism, and it becomes ridiculous. So, when you have social policy emanate from deep prejudices – like, now we’re seeing there’s a new issue – the marriage issue. It’s hard to have reasoned discourse and conversation when misinformation, presented as accurate information, becomes the guiding force. This is very detrimental, in terms of social policy. When one group of people hold sway over another group of people and they use to support their arguments like deep prejudices. It’s problematic.

SS: Let’s try to talk about some of the specifics of your experiences in ACT-UP. You did so much in ACT-UP. You were involved in so many things. What were some of the projects you were working on?

NB: The freedom ride.

SS: Could you tell us about that? We haven’t heard about that.

NB: The idea of the freedom ride was to increase people’s awareness about HIV by taking a tour of cities in the south, and sort of retracing the same cities that were on the Freedom Ride – the Civil Rights Freedom Ride, from the sixties.

And, I think one of the things that sort of became the impetus for that – well, first of all, Jay Blotcher was the public relations person, and he was brilliant. He is brilliant. And, he was very helpful in facilitating and organizing everything. He’s a media maven. He’s totally media savvy and he has a great sense of humor. He has all the ingredients and he made it work. And it was myself, Frank Smithson, Heidi Dorow and Gerri Wells. And, it was a really good group of people. I was lucky to be able to spend a few months.

And, what we did is, we took part of the quilt from Bailey House and we had pre-arranged stops, and we went to different places. And, the impetus initially was the burning of the house in Florida of the Ray family.

Tape I
00:40:00

There were three brothers who had received blood transfusions and they lived in Arcadia, Florida, which is an agricultural community. It was 60 miles from Ocala – something like that – between Tampa and Fort – I can't recall. It was two hours inland, in Florida. And that was the impetus, and that was going to be one of the last stops. And, other stops were Montgomery, Mobile, Columbia, South Carolina.

And the idea was, was to show the quilt, show how real people have been impacted and the quilt was a representation of people who had passed away, and people had tried to remember them. And that was from Bailey House. And, we drew a lot of media attention, and Jay had coordinated and done things. I was a little less sedate than I am now. I'm not going to characterize it, but I think I may have been needing some calming medication. But, that was good, because that was reflective of the energy level. There was a lot of energy, but we had some insane situations. We had the police and the FBI come to meet us in Arcadia, and it was very frightening. We had to leave.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: Okay, so we're just trying to explain what all this was like, for people who didn't experience it. So, you arrive in Florida, and you said the FBI was waiting for you. How were you traveling? Were you, literally, in a bus?

NB: We were in a car, and we were in touch with Jay, and he would organize media to come to each place that we were at. And so, we'd have the news stations come, like, when we in Colombia, or in Montgomery, and all these places. You know, this is funny, because this happened in the late eighties, and there were hardly any people in

these places that we went to. Apparently, it was just an extremely rare situation, that people would be openly out and gay. So, this was, like, a big thing. So, we'd get there and – boom – we were there. And we had –

SS: What were you doing?

NB: They would ask us what the quilt was. They were very nice – all the newspaper people. You know, we'd talk. They'd ask us to, I guess, articulate what the function of the quilt was, and why we were there and then, basically, we would talk about, to increase people's awareness about HIV and transmission and that the lack of responsiveness is not helpful, etc.

I can't recall the specifics, but that was the gist of it. The gist was, why were we there? What's this about? What's the relationship of the quilt to HIV? And, we would talk about some of those things, and everyone had a little different take on it. But, the scariest thing was this town – Arcadia – it's a Floridian town, with a wooden courthouse and people came in their pick-ups. They were demented. I don't even know how to characterize it. They were angry, drunk, crazy, pick-up trucks, rifles – it was frightening. I was, oh my God, what is this? And, actually, people started threatening us just for being there, and the sheriff of the town got on TV and said this is wrong, when you have people like this on your grass and lawn.

It was crazy. It was surreal. They had about two hundred people assembled, coming there in their trucks, surrounding us. And they were saying, wait until the cameras go off, we're going to kill you. They were crazy.

SS: Because you were gay?

NB: I don't know. You had the juncture of two issues – gay and HIV, and it's a real trigger for a lot of people – especially when you combine HIV, AIDS and a lot of misinformation, you get a lot of anger. You get a lot of anger, especially if you add alcohol to the mix, in the middle of the day – you're going to have a lot of problems. And we did.

Gerri is usually a pretty – was, like, I'm scared. And, I was, like, I'm scared. And they told us – we called the FBI just before we got there, because we had heard that there were death threats, and they came. We had to leave the town in an entourage of 15 cars and they made us lie down in the well. It was scary, frightening. People said somebody had a gun. It was crazy. There was all this stuff swirling around, and then people were just screaming and cursing.

SS: Because they didn't want people with AIDS in their town?

NB: They didn't want people with HIV, and they started talking about the bible. And, there were all these people that came with tube tops and bad perms. It was just, sort of, like – tube tops, bad perms, pasty skin. All these images were swirling. This is like the worst of Jerry Springer. They were overtly hostile. But, I suppose it's because of the juncture of all of those issues that it was, like, how dare we? How dare we be a presence? How dare we make ourselves visible? People were incensed and outraged to the point where they were verbalizing physical threats.

SS: Now, what about gay people in places in Montgomery and Mobile?

Did they make any contact?

NB: Yeah, some did. And they were very nice.

SS: How did you find them? How did that happen?

NB: They were nervous that we were there, because there had been articles about ACT-UP, and who are these people, and why are they doing this? You know – can't we do something a different way? The different way is, they never do anything – that's the different way.

SS: How would you find the gay people? Would you go to a local bar?

NB: No, there were organizations that we would contact beforehand. Every city that we went to – Montgomery, Columbia. They always had several gay groups. They were either a political gay group – like, in Atlanta, we had a demonstration and we worked with the police. We participated in a demonstration, in addition, at the state capitol. We did a few things at state capitols, and that really got people's dander up – just the fact that we were coming and we were asking to make a visible presence that would also – but, people were a little more tactful, and their hostility was a little more under control. But, nonetheless, they didn't like the fact that we were questioning – But, they saw people – four different people – and they saw that we were relatively articulate and weren't monsters. They were okay. By and large, they were all right. They were no less homophobic than people I went to high school with – put it that way. At least, you could have a conversation with them.

So, we contacted people. Either, there used to be a magazine in the south and I forget the name of it.

SS: *Southern Voice*.

NB: *Southern Voice* and we also contacted people through Southern Voice, Rex Wockner. They would have listings of the places, and people were really quite welcoming. They were very welcoming and very hospitable, and it was nice. We got to

stay at some people's houses, and some people were very glad. I think we went to Birmingham. People were very welcoming, actually, in some of the places.

SS: Did people with AIDS ask you questions about medication and what to do – and that kind of thing?

NB: Not that I recall. We had some information about – at that point, there was only one treatment option, and that was AZT. And, I think most people were aware of it. I can't recall specifically. But, some people would identify themselves as being HIV-positive. They thought it was really great that we were doing that and this is so loaded here, we can't even talk about that. I think it inspired a lot of people.

SS: Were you taking AZT?

NB: Yes, I was.

SS: And did you talk to other people in ACT-UP, when you made that decision? How did you make that decision?

NB: How did I make that decision? Well, it was a treatment option, and there weren't any. And, even though I had heard all these things from HEAL, I just said, I'm going to try both. It did make very nauseous – all those side effects. But, I thought, well, that's the only thing available, and then I can also try and change my diet and try to incorporate two things – western and eastern.

SS: What was the attitude about AZT inside ACT-UP? What were the discussions about?

NB: As I recall, I think a lot of people thought it was a poison. It was toxic and not good, and that it was just being given to people just to placate them. The attitude that I remember was that it was a failed cancer drug. It was a failed cancer drug, and we

needed to find other options, because it had such adverse side effects. And, I think there a range of positions on AZT. Some people being supportive and accepting – in lieu of the fact that there was nothing else. And then, other people saying, no, this is harmful. There was definitely a lot of articulation for the fact that it was harmful and this is all they can do and this is not okay.

SS: So, when you decided to take it – your friends inside of ACT-UP, were they also taking AZT? Were people supportive of you? How did that play out?

NB: I didn't really – I would talk to people – I was in this affinity group.

SS: Which one?

NB: Gregg Bordowitz was in that affinity group. I forgot the name of the affinity group. Charles might know – Charles Stimson – that was a good affinity group. There were quite a number of people in it. But, the question was what?

SS: When you decided to take AZT – that there was so much negative feeling about it inside ACT-UP.

NB: Some negative feeling.

SS: Were other friends of yours in ACT-UP also taking it? Did you talk about it with each other?

NB: A little bit, yeah. Some people were taking it – like, one or two of the affinity group members were taking it. And, people – I don't know, I can't remember.

SS: What was the culture around treatment inside ACT-UP? Did people talk to each other about what they were doing?

NB: Yes, some people were going to HEAL meetings, and also, there was another place – Body Positive – there was another group – People with – People with

AIDS Coalition was another group – PWAC – Michael Callen started that group. That was a good group. And then, out of that, came the Community Research Initiative, which I still – they have a branch in Springfield, and I go to them, and the feeling was, in the group – I’m sorry I’m being distracted. What was the question?

SS: What I’m trying to preserve for history, or whatever, is what the culture inside ACT-UP was around treatment. How did people make decisions? Did people talk to each other, about what they were trying?

NB: I think some people talked about it, openly, at the group. They talked about that. And then, other people sought out other groups that were emerging, to support their positions – whether it be PWAC – many people were strongly in favor of holistic and not putting AZT into their body. And then, that sort of went along with meditation and other things that people sought as alternatives to this. And, there was definitely a lot of conversation and discussion about the pros and cons. And, I think, my approach was just to try to do both. To try and do things to lessen anxiety and reduce anxiety.

Some of things were kind of, like, magically and all that, but, then, they also had good things. They had good qualities and aspects. You know, you don’t have to take everything, in order to derive benefit from it. And, a lot of people were participating from ACT-UP. Some would also be in those other groups. They’d go to these healing circles. They go to the meditation things. They’d read Louise Hay. She was quite popular for four or five years. So, I think people will use a combination approach – like a multi-strategy approach, which I did. But, people in HEAL and in those other groups were adamantly opposed to AZT, and they would search out things like blue-green algae,

as I remember and different types of fungus. Every month it would be a new thing. Or, every few months, they were trying to investigate and try to develop study findings around those things.

I don't think there was much validity, ultimately, in some of the interventions that some of the groups – because people would start swearing by some of these things, and you'd have individual testimonies, but that doesn't make up a study – people's individual experience. You need more than that, for validity.

SS: Did you ever try Compound Q?

NB: I did.

SS: Can you tell the whole story about Compound Q and Larry bringing it to the –

NB: I forgot. I can't remember the whole story. But I did try it. I think what happens is, is when people feel frightened and desperate – the other piece of what happens, is that some things may have value and merit, but lots of things go by not being scrutinized and properly looked into. And, I'm not saying that a thing as to be dragged out in phase one, two and three, but – you know, people also become prey – when people are vulnerable, they also become prey to people who prey on their hope. Then, you start getting into other grey areas, and I think that, sometimes, is what happens. People start going to specialists and clinics and start flying all over the place – with varying degrees of success.

SS: What was your experience with Compound Q? How did you get it? What was it like?

Tape II
00:15:00

NB: I can't remember. But, I remember taking it. Now, I can't remember. I have taken – I've been through the first generation of protease inhibitors, which – and, I don't remember if it was that – there's so many. Now, there's a whole chart, when you go to a doctor's office, of NNRTIs, protease inhibitors, and I've gone through all of them, and I haven't always been able to be compliant with them, because I've always had to work at jobs, because I was not disabled from HIV.

Initially – this is now moving away from the drug intervention and going to social security, because I know all about that, from being a social worker. But, a positive diagnosis, initially, automatically was adequate to be granted an award from SSI, initially, in the late eighties. Automatically, you'd get an SSI award. But, that changed with the advent of the protease inhibitors, and they saw people were living longer. And then, Social Security got it, that a lot of people were positive, but, on a continuum, that does not mean that you're not functioning and that you're permanently disabled, being positive.

It took many years for people to push the Social Security process along, which I think people in ACT-UP, were instrumental – just like they were in the development of the fast track, and parallel track. Similarly, on the GMHC – and people from ACT-UP were involved in helping people to gain access and secure Social Security benefits, in the earlier stages, because people were being denied and delayed. So, then, finally, after lot of advocacy from specific groups – I think GMHC was a big part. GMHC was a significant player in that – speaking to Health and Human Services – they moved it along. And then, what happened is, is it took about four or five years for people to realize that a diagnosis wasn't automatically a death sentence, and then, they changed that again. So,

what happened is that when I started taking all these medicines, I couldn't take some of them during the day, because I worked at a job and I would have a lot of nausea and irritable bowel and all that. I often had to work in the field, and so that created a whole other set of problems.

So, now I'm in a situation where, because I wasn't compliant with a series of drugs, when I've done a genotype test, I'm completely resistant. I had one treatment option left. And so, now I'm on a holiday, until we see how things go. And so, that's a scary thing, but that sort of doesn't necessarily address your question about Compound Q, which I can't recall too much about.

SS: What is your treatment option now?

NB: The treatment option is Tenofovir, Fuzeon. That's the back-up, emergency – my primary care doctor said that she doesn't feel that that's good for most people, because it starts having negative impact on the skin. And now, my everything is dramatically rising, and that's what's been happening. My T-cell count is going down. The viral load is going up, naturally. And, we did talk about that, and I said, well, I did, on several occasions tell you that I can't be compliant with the medicine during the day, since I don't have a bathroom in my car, and I work in the field – seeing clients at their houses.

So, that's a whole other issue. So, now I'm down to that option and one other option. And, it's not one of the protease – it's two NNRTIs, and she said, we're going to try to only explore that option. So, this is kind of new thing for me – that there's only one option. That's not true. In the '80s –

SS: Haven't you been down this road a million times before?

NB: Yes, and what's happening is that at the end of the year, they're having a combination Tenavir and another medication. And she said, you're not going to be able to take that, because you're resistant to it. But, she said, next year, hopefully, there's going to be another option, so we don't utilize all the options.

But, I don't know if people – eventually, when people have been taking so much medicine, whether they're compliant or not. They become resistant. Even just missing one or two dosages, which has happened to me, can ultimately create resistance and then create a problem. But, I have been down that road, and from 1988 to 1994 all there was, was AZT. So, here I am. And, they didn't even have a genotype test, which is a very helpful tool. So, that's a little worrisome that there's only one option left and there won't be one for another year. But, I have to live my life, so what can I do?

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: Did you ever do the Jon Greenberg route? Remember? He ran the alternatives committee. Did you ever go there?

NB: No. I never did only purely alternative. Didn't he die?

SS: Yeah.

NB: Nope, I never did do that, but I did do some alternative things, and I tried some of those things. Compound Q – I remember it, and I remember taking it, but that's all I remember.

SS: So basically, from the beginning, you've been making choices all along, and you've always been at the cutting edge of the research.

NB: I've been right at the cutting edge. I think I've just been lucky. It's been almost 20 years. Now, I asked my doctor – well, aren't I survivor? She said, well, no, you didn't have disease progression. I said, uhhh.

SS: Anyway – back to ACT-UP. What were some of the big things that you worked on, that you liked?

NB: I got a lot of media attention. It was an opportunity to reach out to different communities, and some of the other things – at the first demonstration on Wall Street. I went to the first meeting that Larry called and it was very inspiring. And, he's a dynamic speaker, and he's very passionate, and a lot of what he says resonates, and he's able to bring and pull issues together, in a way that makes people see connections between different types of isms. So, he's very good at doing that. So, I jumped in, and I was very excited, and I knew Michael Petrelis, and I participated in the Wall Street action – the very first one – where everyone chained themselves, and that was really quite dramatic.

SS: And so, what was that like? Can you explain it to me?

NB: What was it like? It was exciting. The energy was – it was an adrenalin rush – wow, this is really powerful. And, it felt very important, and it felt like something is going to happen. So much attention is being drawn, that maybe some of the things – goals and objectives that Larry had initially cited – the possibility is there for those things to happen. People can do that, and people can change the course of something, and change things around, just a small group of people. And, even individuals can impact on those things. So, it's a very powerful feeling.

SS: Did you get arrested?

NB: Yes.

SS: That first time?

NB: Yes.

SS: And, had you ever been arrested before?

NB: Yes, at CISPES.

SS: So, you already had experience with civil disobedience?

NB: Yes, I did. And, I knew about the history of civil disobedience, before I was even – there's a long history of civil disobedience and various contacts around various issues, from Gandhi to King. There's lots. But, I was fairly aware of them.

SS: Did you work on any committees in ACT-UP?

NB: The freedom ride committee and I was part of the affinity group – the Marys. And, I think, at various times, I worked – I can't recall.

SS: Weren't you a facilitator?

NB: I was a facilitator a number of times.

SS: Tell us about that – what was that like?

NB: I'm a little more comfortable, speaking in public. That was interesting. I may have facilitated twice, I think. And then, also, giving presentations. But, that room was a high-energy room, and you had some very articulate people. Sometimes, I'm good in a small group, but in a large group, I just kind of get swallowed up, sometimes, and I think I needed to hone and improve – strengthen my public speaking skills, which are not – they're much better now, now that I've done lots of presentations and stuff. But, there was an energy in that room. That room – it took on, almost, a cultish 12-stepish feeling.

SS: Explain that.

NB: Well, first of all, it was where everything was happening. There was a lot of energy going on – a lot of sexual energy, I think, but I don't know – that was just my sense. I sensed that there was a co-mingling of lots of different energies. But, there was

Tape II
00:25:00

definitely electricity and dynamism in that room. People had wonderful ideas, and people were embracing of those ideas, and people were very, very passionate. There was a specific energy level that was happening.

ACT-UP occurred at a time when there had been a long period of silence – an absence of responsiveness that was appropriate to people that were not doing well. And, so, I think that hit a chord with a lot of people, and also, as an opportunity for a lot of people to respond and feel that they could contribute to something, and change the course of something – affect policies. As I said, you had a lot of savvy people there. I believe you had Peter Staley, who worked on Wall Street – a lot of people who were very adept at negotiating, and were skillful negotiators, and knew the intricacies and how to navigate various bureaucracies. And, if they didn't, they learned rather quickly. And, ultimately, they became players, and I'm sure – as history has shown, some people were embraced by the very institutions that they were either trying to either scorn, shame, or call attention to, for their lack of responsiveness.

Ultimately, some were offered various consulting positions, of one sort or another, or were involved in, and being brought into the table, so that their voice was heard. And that happened several years down the road. I think Mark – oh God, what is his name? – Harrington – people did some really important work, too – research work. There was the research committee. There were all these committees. People had so many skills that they could bring and wanted to contribute, and they did. And they did effect policy change.

SS: Where did you fit in, exactly?

NB: I didn't.

SS: You didn't fit in?

NB: I'm my own person.

SS: I remember you being very involved, were you working on projects?

What were some of them?

NB: There was another project that Gerri and I worked on that we got people in ACT-UP – St. Vincent's Hospital.

SS: Tell us about this.

NB: That was hideous. Another thing that happened – I'm sorry I forgot. I need some more pre-Alzheimer's medication. St. Vincent's Hospital – there was a writer in the *Village Voice* who had written a series of two or three articles about security guards, security personnel, at St. Vincent's physically attacking and accosting people – women – I forgot her name, she was a long time ago.

SS: Joy – a big dyke, right?

NB: Yes. It was her. They attacked her. Her girlfriend was attacked in an anti-gay assault, and they had some serious problems there. They had security guards becoming hostile to people coming into the hospital for treatment. Either they were injured or they were beaten up in an assault or several people who were HIV came in with partners and the security guards would tell them that they weren't allowed to lean on another man. It was crazy – it was out of control there. This is what happens when you have – never mind.

So, the bottom line is – after two or three incidents, I just said, this is nuts. And Gerri and I – we wanted to respond to it, and we did. And I said – I forgot the chronology, exactly, but we organized a series of demonstrations at the emergency room

of the hospital, and it was brilliant. It was in the *Voice* and the *Daily News*. We had three hundred people. It was fabulous. It was not only fabulous – I had never – well, maybe because I was younger and I wasn't as calm. Maybe there was a shrillness that people didn't want to respond to. But, the bottom line is, I have never encountered so many arrogant idiots in my life.

The hospital administration initially was not interested in meeting with us, until they saw three hundred people there, and until they had news cameras there. And then, of course, it was damage control. But, they just are simply people who don't give a shit. And Gerri, who was – she's quite a bit calmer than I am – she was able to be negotiator.

I sat in on one negotiation. They had several. The Human Rights Commission – Elizabeth Zarella was the representative, and Elizabeth Zarella now lives in Quincy [Massachusetts]. She was the representative from the Human Rights Commission, and she was supposed to be a neutral party to arbitrate a resolution to their – we wanted the policy changed. We wanted training for the security personnel, and we wanted a commitment that this was not going to continue to happen – where security guards would come up to people and say, you can't lean on somebody, and then hit them. This is crazy, but again, only in New York, because that wouldn't happen anywhere else. People wouldn't do that somewhere else. It just wouldn't be accepted. I don't believe it would. That's another issue.

But, anyway, people have a much higher tolerance for physical contact, I suppose. So, what I was going to say was, we brought the CEO of St. Vincent's Hospital. He was enraged that he even had to be there. He was angry. He was condescending, arrogant and he was overtly anti-gay. He had no clue. Here it was, a hospital in the village and

there's this gay doctor – no clue – none of the administrators – they're in their own bubble.

SS: It's a Catholic hospital.

NB: They've not interacted with gay people. This is a disgrace. But, the bottom line, and the long and short of it was that – we were going to do a third demonstration. I think there was a negotiation, and they promised that they would institute, I think – they promised, when we had a series of talks, because Gerri walked out on a number of talks, and then I sat in. I was outraged. That was the first one. They didn't even have Gay 101 education. They just were clueless and they were angry and they, themselves, did not understand why they were even having to talk to us. They were outrageous. They were revolting. I don't even know how else to characterize it. And it's also sad, because for a place to be in the village – how ridiculous is that? That's like having – I don't know what it's like having.

SS: And it's across the street from the ACT UP meeting.

NB: And, it was across the street from the Gay and Lesbian Center, and their behavior was just unconscionable. And, I am so glad that Gerri, who did the bulk of the negotiating, is a smart person, and she doesn't take shit from people.

SS: Her brother died of AIDS, right?

NB: No, I had never met him because he had died. He used to own this shop called Eastern Hairlines. He was really important to Gerri. And, in a way, I was very close to Gerri for a while. And so, I think she found me and her brother very similar because of our sense of humor and everything else.

But, Gerri doesn't take shit from people. She is a tough person. She grew up in Queens, where I grew up. And, it's a different neighborhood. I think she grew up in The Rockaways or Howard Beach – towards the beach. I can't remember. And, eventually, they – you know, I don't think we were asking for something that was unreasonable.

But, again, this was the time – and it really shocked me – but, again, New York also touts itself as this progressive place, and it was very progressive for certain things – the homophobia was always out there – even since I was a teenager, and that's really what I hated. So, again, that's the homophobia piece that emerged and surfaced in their reticence and intransigence initially. They didn't even want to meet. They were just outraged by the whole thing. Mind you – not outraged by the behavior of the security guards. That didn't even enter into the realm of conversation, and that's sad.

Another thing that I was involved in was the Pink Panthers. Gerri, again, was involved in that. The thing was, was, there was an increase in assaults – at that time – against people all over the city – huge increase. And we decided to – it was both of our idea, but she was mostly involved in it – to set up patrols in the village, using whistles and trainings. And, it was great. It really took off for a year and a half. We had a march. We had a few marches, and people were screaming again – right in the village – you faggots! All this horrible stuff. You can't even believe that it was not 1950 and people were still acting like that. It was nutty. But, anyway, the bottom line is, the patrol really took off. The police got involved in it. It went for a good year and a half.

SS: How many people in the Pink Panthers?

NB: Gerri could tell you. Thirty or forty. I went on a lot of the patrols. So – the Pink Panthers, the freedom bus ride, the St. Vincent's thing. We also use to go to the

Bailey House. She was Santa Claus and I was Mrs. Santa Claus – just little things like that. We just did, like, little individual – I think it was more individual projects and stuff like that.

So, there were a lot of good things. And then, a lot of the demonstrations I participated – we did the thing at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, which I loved.

SS: Were you inside?

NB: Yes.

SS: Can you tell us the whole story?

NB: That gives me goose bumps. That gives you a total rush. But, again, Cardinal – I don’t even want to mention his name – Cardinal forget it – he was horrible. He was crazy – another demented, delusional freak in New York – another power hungry, hateful person, who all these fools worship. It’s sick. But, again, he was – I think what happened was – he was very outspoken about no condoms, no sex education – all these issues. He was just absent. His role was abysmal with the HIV thing. He made a whole series of statements that I think sparked people on. He was always against abortion, always against this. He was a very staunch, right wing Catholic, almost. And, the bottom line is, is, I have it in that book – should I pull that out? It was a protest against all his policies, which are leading to death. And, I wrote one of the things for that.

SS: Let’s hear it.

NB: Here it is. I also organized a kiss-in. Oh, God, here I go. Let’s first get to – where are we now, the Cardinal? There are a number of things. I participated in a radio show – all these things. These are me, from the Etcetera magazine – South

Carolina legislative grabs PWAs from ACT-UP and Bailey House – a Manhattan hospice. That's the quote, but I want to get the church thing.

I organized – in 1988 – it was a little before ACT-UP, I organized a kiss-in with Bill Bahlman. Actually, it was me that did – because I'm quoted here – in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, because he was always making these sick, crazy statements.

SS: This was before ACT-UP.

NB: Slightly before.

SS: Is this when they kicked out Dignity?

NB: Yes, right around that time. Because I knew Robert Pusillo. So, I organized this kiss-in, because, again, they came out with this statement, not an encyclical, that homosexuality is evil and all this. And then I said, now, we're going to do this. And, Bill and this other guy who was involved – they liked Marty Robinson. And they loved my idea.

So, then we sat in at the Health Commissioner's office – Stephen Putz, I mean Joseph. Wait, I've got to get this. One of the things that I also did – and I did get up on the floor a lot about this – was the bias bill that took so many years in New York City. Now, that ties in with what I was doing at the Anti-Violence Project – going to court with people, and doing all these things. We organized demonstrations against the Republican out in Long Island. What was his name? Oh God help me. It's right here. I can't remember.

SS: That was AVP or ACT-UP?

NB: That was me and some other people from the Lavender Hill Mob. Cathedral Protests – this is –

SS: So, you were in Lavender Hill Mob before ACT-UP. Is that how you knew Petrelis.

NB: That's when I knew Petrelis, and I don't know why I forgot that.

SS: Did you go with them when they went with their concentration camp uniforms to the CDC? Before Larry's meeting?

NB: No. I went to Jesse Helms' office with Michael Petrelis, right around the time that happened, and we did a kiss-in in his office, and Michael threw some things off his – actually, it was good. That freaked people out, in his office.

SS: Jesse Helms?

NB: Yes, that actually flipped people out.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: Go ahead, talk.

NB: Anyway, this is the text that I wrote up for the Stop the Church demonstration, which was the seven deadly sins of Cardinal O'Connor, and they used this. Stop Church interference in our lives. No clean needles, no safe sex education, bias, assault of lesbians and gays. And this is one of the things I worked on. And I did that. And that was that.

And then, when we were talking before, these are some of the – here's a picture of Rollerena. Do you have that?

SS: That's Rollerena and that guy whose name we don't remember.

NB: Yeah, he was a little unbalanced. I think he was Mr. Unbalanced. So, that was that. And then, when you asking all the different things – that I worked on a lot, and that was great. And, I used to also go out and do all the wheat pasting. All the time, we would do that – affinity group actions.

SS: Tell us about the actual action at the church.

NB: I'll never forget that. That was electric, beyond belief. First of all, you had different affinity groups organizing different actions, and the police knew that something was up. They had dogs in there. It was nuts, but Cardinal O'Connor was determined to just continue with the service that day. And, I want to tell you – Gerri and I were together, because we used to like doing things together. And, what I remember was, we started getting up and people punched us. They're crazy. They just started punching.

SS: You stood up in the middle of the mass?

NB: We stood up and different people started getting up. Some people got up on pews. Some people laid down on the floor. When people started saying stuff and chanting –

SS: What did they say?

NB: Either silence equals death or the Cardinal is a – all types of things – the Cardinal started singing and insisted that people drown people out. He's a fascist. He's a sick man. He needed to be medicated, if he was lucky. I was shocked. It was like out of a movie. He just wanted it drowned out. But, the thing was, he couldn't. And then, people started punching people who were in the church. Someone swung at me, but they didn't hit me. They were like baboons. They were animals. I was shocked – these phony, hypocritical, self-righteous, uncaring shit-heads who were there. That's all I thought. And I thought, what else is new? The Catholic Church has a long history of not giving a shit, and screwing people over. So, I guess that's consistent.

But, it was really – the noise level – but people were still rising above the singing, and it was insane. There were so many police. It was frightening. It was frightening, adrenaline rushing, and a lot of people – parishioners – were in absolute shock. And, with the police dogs there with the whole thing, it didn't even feel like it. It just felt like a police state.

SS: How did ACT-UP make the decision to go into a mass and disrupt a mass?

NB: It wasn't difficult, because Cardinal O'Connor was such a prick. He was such an uncaring shit-head, who was constantly opening his mouth up and just stepping beyond the boundaries and always blurring that church state line. And he was really vocal for years. And it's just sort of like – that's that juxtaposition – people have this idea of New York as being liberal and progressive, but there's a lot of strong conservative elements in the city, and a lot of power players who are not progressive and liberal, as evidenced by a lot of the things that happen there, on a lot of different levels.

And, look how long it took for a gay rights bill to pass – seventeen years. You have a number of small factions and groups who joined together in a coalition to prevent the passage of that bill for year after year after year. And, similarly, you had in New York State – you had a bill for years that was struck down, that would include sexual orientation to enhance crimes for bias, committed on the basis of people's perceived sexual orientation. You have the Republican part of the New York State Senate, locking that bill in committee, for almost 20 years – denying evidence, denying testimony – it was frightening – Birmingham.

You had all these crazy people. You'd have three or four senators that were really bad, and one of them was out on the island. And, [Senator Alphonse] D'Amato was another. So, we had to – before ACT-UP, I was involved with the Lavender Hill Mob, and a bunch of other people, and we would organize a series of demonstrations at all of these politicians' offices and houses. And I did. What they did was unconscionable. They dragged a bill out and just – even the Empire Coalition [Empire State Pride Agenda] – they could not make a dent. They would leave that bill stuck in committee year after year. You had D'Amato. You had another senator from out in the island who was a real – [State Senate Majority Leader Joseph] Bruno, was upstate.

But, these people just – for almost a whole generation, made a bill not go anywhere. All it was supposed to do was enhance criminal penalties for crimes that were categorized as bias related crimes. And so, I was very, very involved with that, just prior to ACT-UP, and putting out the paperwork.

You know, we only had a core group of people. And then, I got involved in that and so, how much impact can seven or eight people have? But, we still did get articles in the paper. This was by Phil Zwickler, who passed away – Gay and Lesbian Freedom Ride Hits the Road. This was at Jesse Helms' office – the kiss-in, that I did with Michael. And that truly shocked people in that office. I don't think they were feeling well immediately upon our departure. I think they were physically sick.

This was – when you were talking about CISPES before – I think I might have been quoted in this, or I just cut the CISPES article out, but I was involved in this demonstration for CISPES in 1987 or 1988 – whenever that was – New York's ACT-UP Freedom Ride Jeered in Florida.

Let's just see – the crowd grew increasingly hostile. “We could hear people saying things like, let's get that one, and once those TV cameras are off, you're in trouble,” Broome said. “We knew we had to cut things short. And, police told group members that they could not be assured protection from the crowd, if they did not leave Arcadia within three minutes,” Broome said. The group left town in a six-car caravan lead by and followed by police cars. The demonstration was the final leg. And that really was the finale. And this is a picture of me. I had this kind of Veronica Lake – it's not the greatest picture. I had, like, a little dip.

So, I think those were a number of groups that I was – they were more focused actions, as opposed to committees, that I was interested in – more initiative – like, changing the policy. And we did change the policy. We did organize that demonstration at St. Vincent's Hospital, and we did change that policy within three months. We changed the policy and instituted mandatory sensitivity trainings that Elizabeth Zarella facilitated.

SS: I seem to remember – correct me if I'm wrong – that you guys actually brought the ACT-UP meeting across the street to St. Vincent's.

NB: Really?

SS: Coming in and saying, after the meeting, let's all go to the emergency room?

NB: Right, right after the meeting, we went. That was on the second demonstration, because I got up in front of the room and started explaining what was going on, as far as I can recall. And, another thing – there was a woman who used to

work at the Lawyer's Guild, and she was a woman with dreds – what was her name? I loved her.

SS: Joan Gibbs.

NB: Her and myself, we did the thing for the Webster decision, and I organized that. I got really involved in that. That was a separate thing and then we went up in front of ACT-UP about that and got a lot of people. That was wonderful.

SS: I want to ask you a weird question. So, you're going from being this guy in high school who's being totally harassed, and then you're in ACT-UP, and you're this person who people respect and you say, let's all go across the street, and everybody does what you suggest, and you're a leader.

NB: Right, how do you go from that?

SS: Yeah, what does that do.

NB: Therapy. You have to go to a lot of therapy. You evolve. A person evolves, and instead of being fearful – I got tired of being fearful. You start looking at them and saying, why am afraid? Of what? So, I'll have a fight, so somebody will hit me. You get to a point where you just say, I can't allow this for my dignity. It's a matter of, sort of, preservation. For some people, that's acceptable. I decided, I'm not accepting this any longer – at a certain point. And, I don't know when that point was, but it was – I said, when I left high school – when I finished that college, and then there was still more homophobia, I said, I am not putting up with this shit ever again. And then, I was in my early twenties, and I didn't. And, I saw all these people that were in this school – this program that I was in for hotel and restaurant management. So, when I was finishing my

bachelors degree – and they were all in the closet, and they would see me at a bar and they'd say, don't tell anybody.

Then, what happened was, towards the end of the year, I said, you know what? I'm going to tell whoever I feel like, and you don't ask me to keep your secret – that's your problem. If you're in a public place – and then, I just started saying, I'm sick of this, I'm sick of this hypocrisy. I'm sick of people hiding and asking other people to lie for them. Things starting clicking and I'm saying, this is sick – why do we have things like this? Why is there all this fear and shame? This is not right. This is making people be more afraid. It just feeds on itself.

Some of those experiences had something to do with them – no, I am not going to just, you know, do the bidding of people like that, and stay quiet. No, I'm going to just say, I'm going to use less social filters. And I think the pinnacle of my lack of social filtering might have been in ACT-UP.

SS: One thing it reveals to me is how homophobia trashes people and trashes their abilities. Here's this person who's this incredible leader, and they're being treated like shit –

NB: All the time.

SS: and not being able to participate or have their merit seen. You talked before about how there were so many talented people in ACT-UP, and I wonder how any of those people were treated by straight people before they got there?

NB: Everybody has a different way of dealing with it – but, not probably well. Imagine all the name-calling and all of that stuff that happens. I mean, I walk down the

street – even when I lived on West 40th – people would just say whatever came out of their mouth. They'd say, oh hi faggot. This is crazy, nutty.

I don't want to internalize and blame, but I also wasn't a conforming person. I didn't blend in. I didn't even blend. That was the problem. The thing is, is, a lot of things have changed in this country. I never feel like I live in a small – mind you, it's in between two college towns – but I find that the last few years, that's not become an issue.

SS: I want to change gears for a second. I want to talk a little bit more about the experience inside ACT-UP – you mentioned a lot about the mortality rate, and how many people were just dying, dying, in ACT-UP. And, you were a young person, and you were positive. Can you sort of explain what that experience was like?

NB: It was scary. Apart from ACT-UP, I also was very involved in going out to clubs all the time.

SS: Which clubs did you go to?

NB: My favorite clubs – Danceteria, Ninth Circle, Hurrah – all of them. Club 57 I used to like a lot. I had a friend – he died, his name was Duncan Smith, but he was friends with Ray Johnson, and they just had a movie at the Museum of Fine Arts, and Ray Johnson and I went to see it last week. It was called *How to Draw a Bunny*. It was very interesting, because he committed suicide in Sag Harbor. But anyway, what was the question? I'm sorry I just went off on my own track.

SS: What it was like being in ACT-UP, and being surrounded by so many dying and so many people being –

NB: It was scary. But, also, I was younger. What happened is, it affected both – you see it in ACT-UP, but also the club scene – like a lot of people at Area would not even talk about it – and in the Mike Todd Room all the time, at the Palladium. But, people – dead silence – outside of ACT-UP.

Tape III
00:15:00

But, all those places were slightly before ACT-UP and there was just dead silence. People were too nervous to talk about it. I remember one time, I was having dinner with Klaus Nomi, who died in 1983, '84 – oh, and the Boy Bar – that was the other place – that, I would go to a lot. That was a good place, but people were very uncomfortable talking.

SS: But he had KS. I mean, he couldn't hide it.

NB: He had KS, right. And then, Klaus used to be friends with my friend, Duncan's friend – this German woman – I can't remember her name – Anya – that was her name. It was kind of taboo. Because people didn't want to – And then, also, people stopped going out. People would go out, but there was just terrible fear – just dreadful fear, in the mid-eighties. It affected the club scene.

SS: When Klaus – he had serious KS – I mean, there was no treatment at that time – did he still not discuss it?

NB: It was very uncomfortable. I had a group of friends and people were panicked. People stopped having sex, literally. They stopped having sex – there was so much fear.

SS: But, what would happen when somebody like John Sex would die?

NB: People were numb – shock, fear – not having sex. A lot of times – before that, I think clubs were conducive to meet people and be crazy and this and that. And

then, fear took over just fearfulness and people being frightened and immobilized and paralyzed and then you read articles in papers, but nobody talks about it and it's weird.

SS: Now, inside ACT-UP, did people talk about it?

NB: Yes.

SS: Do you remember conversations with people who were dying?

NB: There was a guy – he had a Greek name – Mark Fotopoulos – he was pretty open about talking about it. He got up in front of the room and made some very moving speeches and things. And other people would talk about HIV. There were a few other people. Some people would get up. People would get up – more than periodically, as I remember – and they would talk about it, and people would be very supportive of them – very – and that was very helpful.

SS: When did you leave ACT-UP?

NB: When I was in graduate school.

SS: What year was that?

NB: The Fall of '89, '90. And, I was just doing graduate schoolwork. I was at Hunter. I was working. I spent a year making a video called *Perfect Targets*.

SS: What was that?

NB: It was shown at Catherine Saalfield [Gund]'s thing, and then they showed it on Manhattan Cable. *Perfect Targets: Violence Against Gays and Lesbians in America* – and I spent a year – Vito Russo was in that. He spoke a lot in that and not Joan Gibbs but another attorney spoke in that, and Joan Nestle spoke a lot.

Basically, I asked people three questions. What's bias-related violence? How is the gay and lesbian community affected by that? And, I spoke to lots of different people,

like Andy Humm and people from Hetrick-Martin, etc. And, I wanted three questions presented to people in a talking head format and then responded to, and that was – what’s bias-related violence? How is the gay and lesbian community affected? Why is that? What are some of the institutions that support violence against gays and lesbians in society? Like social institutions and other institutions. And Gregg [Bordowitz] lent me the camera to make that.

SS: I just have one last question, unless you think there’s something that we haven’t gotten into? Is there anything really pressing?

NB: No.

SS: Looking back – because you were in ACT-UP in the heyday – what do you see as ACT-UP’s greatest achievement?

NB: Well, there were a few things that occurred – increasing people’s awareness about HIV and how homophobia and who was affected affect social policy. I think people did – some people got that message, at large. And, that the gay community can – a community affected by HIV can respond and can make government responsive, and can make people accountable. That accountability can be compelled and people also can change the outcome of policy and legislation and drug trials and treatment and people don’t have to be helpless and people have the power. People have a lot of power – more than they’d like to think. They just need to open their eyes and recognize that.

SS: Thank you, Neil.

NB: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]