

ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Richard Burns  
September 11, 2012

# ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Interviewee: **Richard Burns**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**SARAH SCHULMAN: So you start with your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

RICHARD BURNS: Okay. My name is Richard Burns. Today is September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012. We are at my home where I live with my boyfriend, Bobby Berg, on 19<sup>th</sup> Street in New York.

**SS: And how old are you?**

RB: I left that out. I'm fifty-seven years old.

**SS: Okay, great. Where were you born, Richard?**

RB: I was born a couple blocks from here in Stuyvesant Town here in New York.

**SS: You know, I never knew that.**

RB: Yeah.

**SS: Were your parents real New Yorkers? Like, were they born here also?**

RB: My dad was from Bay Ridge in Brooklyn. My mom was from Minnesota. But Stuyvesant Town had been built for returning World War II vets, during a housing shortage, by Met Life, and so that's where they moved in and where we — I had three — four boys, three brothers, and that's where we were born.

**SS: And your father's parents, were they Irish or were they from —**

RB: My dad's parents were primarily Irish extraction, I mean, been — really, I think my grandmother grew up on a farm in Connecticut outside of Stamford.

**SS: So they'd been here a while. Where did you go to high school?**

RB: Well, I went to high school out on Long Island in Huntington, a place called Harbor Fields.

**SS: Oh, so you escaped.**

RB: We escaped, yeah. When I was six years old, we left and went to Ardsley in Westchester, and then for high school we — or junior high — moved to Huntington. Yeah, followed my dad's jobs around, you know.

**SS: What did he do?**

RB: He was a lawyer for the New York State Medical Society, general counsel there.

**SS: So we're the same age, so we grew up in the same era, and that's where it's the sixties and everything is exploding and there's the war and everything's on television. I mean, when you were watching that, what kind of conversations were you having with your family and with your friends about what was going on?**

RB: Well, as a kid, I was not particularly politicized. My dad was a Republican and engaged in a moderate way in local Republican politics, primarily as a volunteer lawyer. I think where we first starting having clashes, was around Vietnam when I was in high school, but we didn't really engage that much.

**SS: How political were you? Like, were you opposed to the war from a peace point of view or from an anti-imperialist point of view?**

RB: Well, as a kid, I think it was a peace point of view, but it was not — in high school, I don't think my politics were highly evolved. They were more gut and influenced by my peers, I think. It wasn't really until I went to college that I became more conscious, I think.

**SS: Now, were you gay in high school?**

RB: Well, I knew I was gay, but I came out my sophomore year in college. But, sure, my earliest memories in life are of attraction to men.

**SS: And when did you first become aware that there was a Gay Movement or a gay community or some kind of entity?**

RB: Well, certainly in my senior year in high school I knew about Greenwich Village, but I'd never come in on my own, only with other people, so I wasn't in contact with that. Really it was, again, it was in college my sophomore year where I became a gay activist.

**SS: So where did you go to school?**

RB: A place called Hamilton College, upstate New York.

**SS: Sure, upstate New York. And was it an all-male school, wasn't it?**

RB: Well, it was historically, but when I was there, there was a coordinate college that was a women's school called Kirkland College, and they had campuses across the street and shared classes and dining halls and dorms ultimately. So it was a coed school when I went there, but women got Kirkland degrees, men got Hamilton degrees, and that changed the year after I graduated. In '78, Kirkland, facing financial difficulties, was swallowed into Hamilton.

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**SS: So what kind of gay life was there in Hamilton?**

RB: Not a lot. One day in the dining room on the Kirkland campus — this is my sophomore year — a sign went up. It was just 8-1/2-by-11, and all it said was “Sappho, 7 p.m., Kerner Hall,” or something like that. And I knew enough to think, oh, Sappho, lesbian poet, maybe — you know, I didn’t know if it was a literary group or a gay activist group. But I went, and that was my first encounter with other gay-identified people, and it was mostly women, a couple of guys, one of whom was a friend of mine a year ahead of me and a guy who now works at the Whitney, actually, Stephen Soba. And that really opened my world. Hamilton was a very conservative college, and so that is really how I became an activist, as someone who had to organize with other people around the school administration, the school newspaper, things like that.

**SS: Because we’re talking, like, 1973, right, or ’72?**

RB: I entered in ’73, so this would have been ’74.

**SS: So what did gay activists do in 1974? Like, what was on the agenda?**

RB: Well, part of it was simply identity formation, having — it wasn’t called a support group, but that’s in effect what it did. We were part of organizing a demonstration in Utica one day that obviously pulled in other people, people from Syracuse University, which is a ways away, local folks in Utica, and we organized a demo. And, of course, it rained on a Saturday, and the most exciting thing for us then was that the *Village Voice* sent a reporter up to cover it.

And, of course, none of us knew how to organize a demonstration, so she ended up marshaling us. It was very, very funny in retrospect, but at the time it was exciting to — in a place where there was a great silence around gay people. And what I think had prompted the demonstration was there had been a fire at a gay bar in Utica, and I think people suspected it was arson and didn't know if it was anti-gay, but that was an organizing point.

**SS: So what was the relationship between gay politics and left-wing politics at the time? I mean, how did you experience it?**

RB: Unconnected, really. You know, my friends who were activists against the war or around apartheid, it really at that time was unconnected to — then we really talked about Gay Liberation as opposed to a Gay Equality Movement. The language was different and the orientation was a little different.

**SS: What was Gay Liberation? What did that mean?**

RB: Well, it meant being able to come out, and, of course, it was tied to sexual liberation and freedom. I think that the early movement, even then we were aware that the Gay Liberation Movement was made possible by the Anti-War Movement, the Women's Movement, the Black Civil Rights Movement, that these movements created the space for a Gay Liberation Movement. And I think the reason it was obvious even then was so many people, gay organizers, were coming out of those movements. Now, at a conservative college in upstate New York, that was less the case, but that was certainly — sort of as we woke up, I became more aware of that.

**SS: So then what was your next step? You went to Boston, right?**

00:10:00 RB: I did. I did. While I was at Hamilton, I had heard about a newspaper, from a friend, called the *Gay Community News*, and it was a weekly, it was lesbian and gay, it was run by a collective, and I thought, “Well, I’m going to go there and I’m going to join that collective.” And I got the college library to subscribe to the newspaper, and that was part of our organizing and making them do that. So I had a friend who was from high school who was going to the Harvard Divinity School, and she would be in her second year. So I figured, well, I’d go there and we’ll be roommates, and found an apartment in Somerville on Washington Street, just on the Cambridge-Somerville line, and got a job as a waiter in Harvard Square and went to *GCN*.

I moved up there Labor Day ’77 and just showed up and began to just volunteer and kept volunteering until there was a job opening, and at that point they knew me and they hired me. In those days, you were interviewed by the whole collective, which you’d be — you know, in this walkup downtown, you’d be interviewed by thirty or forty people, and then you’d leave the room and they’d vote. So they’d have a series of interviews with different people, and then somebody was selected.

**SS: So hired was like \$50 a week or something then?**

RB: When I joined, it was everybody made \$70 a week with no benefits, so after taxes that was 62 bucks with change. In the late seventies, there were ten full-time staffers, which at that moment, that was a larger staff than the National Gay Task Force. It was one of the largest staffs in the country at that moment, and there was, as I said, a staff of ten, but then we were all part of a larger collective of volunteers that met every Tuesday night for anywhere from two to four hours. And somebody always yelled.

**SS: Now, tragically, *GCN* is not digitized, but this is where you began your collaboration with a very incredible group of people, many of whom are still your closest friends now.**

RB: Sure.

**SS: So can you just say who some of these people were that you met at *GCN*?**

RB: Well, sure. When I came in the fall of '77, I met Eric Rofes, who was a school teacher, public school teacher at that time in Boston, and schoolteachers really couldn't be out in Boston at that time. He wrote under the name of Eric Rogers for a couple of years and then came out when he left public school teaching and went to teach in a school called Fayerweather private school. He became one of my best friends at that point.

Then about a year later, Amy Hoffman came in, and she is a writer, published two or three books, and is the editor now of the *Women's Review of Books*, a monthly out of Wellesley College, the Center for Women at Wellesley. And Amy was hired as the features editor following Eric. Eric had been the features editor for a while.

And some of the people who were there when I arrived were Neil Miller, who has written a bunch of books on gay nonfiction; and Harry Sang, who lived in a collective called the Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom. A bunch of guys had bought four houses in about '76, '75. They formed a corporation called Stonewall Nation, and these were houses that had been seized by the city for tax arrearage, and they were not occupied. So this collective of gay men called the Fort Hill Faggots lived there, and they,

many of them, were involved with *Gay Community News* and many of them were involved with a periodical called *Fag Rag*, which was published out of the back office of *GCN*, and another magazine called the *Boston Gay Review*. I actually have a couple of copies framed, hanging on the wall of *Fag Rag* and the *Boston Gay Review*.

Then as time went on, at about 1980 I went to law school but stayed involved with *GCN*, and Urvashi Vaid, I met on the first day of law school at Northeastern University Law School, and she became involved in the paper. And then Kevin Cathcart, who's now the ED of Lambda, was a year ahead of me in law school, and he had been active in Gay Pride organizing in Boston, and he became involved with *GCN*.

Cindy Rizzo, who's now at the Arcus Foundation, was in law school at Suffolk and was a writer, and she originally, when she was in law school, wrote under a pseudonym as well, because there was a fear that you couldn't be admitted to the bar as a known homosexual, although she then also came out and wrote under her own name after a while, maybe after she graduated.

00:15:00 But all of these people were in the collective. Sue Hyde joined in maybe '81. Sue Hyde came after the fire. *GCN* was burned out by arsonists. We were at 22 Bromfield Street, and our offices were set on fire and devastated, obviously. Oddly enough, that office is still empty now. That fire was in '82, so '92, thirty years later that office — the first floor, I think is a sneakers store, but upstairs it's still empty, which is so odd. It's in the downtown crossing in Boston in what used to be the camera district in those days in the seventies.

**SS: There was Cindy Patton.**

RB: Cindy Patton came on later. Sure. She came before the fire, came in as features editor, I guess, after Amy Hoffman, and then managing editor after Amy Hoffman. When I went to law school in '80, Amy Hoffman moved from features editor to managing editor, and then Cindy followed that track. This is before she had written any books.

At some point, she and Amy became lovers. I guess Amy had been lovers with Betsy Smith, who was part of the SocFems, the Socialist Feminist group with Marla Erlien and Margaret Cerullo, and they were all part of the Radical America Collective, but the SocFems were overlapping with *GCN* but separate. And, you know, even though we were considered a lefty paper, they thought we were too centrist.

**SS: Those were the good old days.**

RB: Yeah, exactly. But Amy was lovers with Betsy, and then with Urvashi, I guess, and then with Cindy Patton.

**SS: And Michael Bronski was at *GCN*.**

RB: Michael Bronski, yes, was a writer in the seventies and lived in Cambridgeport with his lover who's now dead, Walta Borawski, who was a poet. Michael was very prolific and would do a lot of cultural and political commentary for *GCN*, and he could just knock it out, an amazingly fast writer. Now he's actually teaching at Dartmouth or Harvard or something, in some place I never expected him to land, as he was a real, real sex radical and wrote for another publication called *The Guide*, which is still around, I think, in Boston, a monthly sort of bar travel guide.

**SS: So it's a really important group of people in terms of gay history and —**

RB: A great group of people. I'll tell you, in the seventies it felt like the center of the world, because at that time, before the web and email, there were very, very few regular gay newspapers, and that point, *GCN* was the only weekly in the United States, and the *Gay News* in London was the weekly in Europe. An important publication in Canada, in Toronto, was the *Body Politic*, which was monthly. The *Blade* in Washington was published every two weeks. The *Sentinel* in San Francisco was every two weeks. The *Advocate* was a monthly at that time.

So if you wanted something weekly, it was *Gay Community News*, and it was also very, very rare for something to be coed at that time, because prior to AIDS, the Lesbian Movement and the Gay Male Movement were largely separate. But somehow *GCN* was always coed from the beginning, which meant that reproductive rights, or then what was called abortion rights, were always a part of it in those pages. And racial justice issues were in the pages, again, driven really by lesbians who were writers.

And most of the writers were volunteers, and so people would write — the way it got to be a national paper was if you were in Cleveland and you were a subscriber and something was happening, you'd write about it and you'd send it in. You'd mail it in or you'd dictate it over the phone. So we used to say, our readers are our writers. And there was lots of political diversity in the pages, lots of fierce fighting and anger about everything, whether gender issues, just everything, intergenerational —

**SS: Well, you had one of the first gay prison projects, if I recall.**

RB: Sure, sure. Mike Riegle really took off with the prison project. He's now died of AIDS. He didn't found it, but he really sustained it. In the late seventies, '76, '77, *GCN* had a policy that anyone in prison could have a subscription for free, and that was a collective-decided decision, and the National Gay Task Force had a similar policy for their newsletter. And so we would send these to gay prisoners who wrote to us and said, "Please send me a subscription," and we did.

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At one point, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons declared *GCN* to be obscene, which was so ironic, because it was the farthest thing possible from obscene. We were so politically pure, we couldn't be erotic. So Lambda Legal, which was then not a national organization, it was a New York-based organization, took on our case, and it was *NGTF GCN versus Carlson*. Norman Carlson was the director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons in '77, '78. So we were a plaintiff, and so I had to go to Washington and be deposed, and it was an eye-opening experience for me.

There was then something in Washington called the Women's Law Collective, which was Nan Hunter —

**SS: Nancy. Nancy Polikoff.**

RB: — Nancy Polikoff, and they were the pro bono attorneys with Margo Carl, who's now dead. Margo Carl was a New York lawyer in private practice, taught at Brooklyn Law School. She was the president of the board of Lambda Legal at that time, and so Margo and Nan Hunter were the lawyers on this case.

And so, I would go to D.C. and be deposed or whatever, and they would guide me, and it's part of what inspired me to go to law school. And then, actually,

Margo was the one who wrote — was one of the ones who wrote my law school recommendations and advised me on all that. But that's how I got to know Lambda Legal.

Then in 1980, Roz Richter was the executive director of Lambda Legal. She's now a state Supreme Court judge here in New York. But she and Margo recruited me to the board of Lambda, when in the fall of Lambda they had made a decision to go from being a local organization to a national one. So they recruited people from each region, and I, having represented *GCN* as a plaintiff, they brought me in as the New England rep for that board. And so I served on that board for three years, from '80 through '83, the whole time I was in law school. And that was eye-opening and sort of exposed me to the New York activist community because Lambda was based here.

**SS: And, of course, those were the crucial beginning of the AIDS crisis years, '80 to '83.**

RB: Sure. Yes.

**SS: So you're living in Boston still at that time, and when did you first start to become aware of AIDS?**

RB: I entered law school in the fall of '80, and, as I said, met Urvashi, and we — in law school after your first year of classes, you do three months of an internship, what they call co-op, and then three months of classes. So by the end of your three years, you've had really a full year of work experience. And in the fall of '81, I did a co-op. I clerked in San Francisco for something called the Lesbian Rights Project, which today is called the National Center for Lesbian Rights, which Kate Kendall runs. Well, then the

director was Donna Hitchins, who is now a judge in San Francisco, actually just retired. But she ran that, and we were under the auspices of something called the Equal Rights Advocates, which was a feminist gender discrimination impact litigation nonprofit.

So the LRP was there, we were in the Mission, and I was living in the Haight with friends for those three months, and I remember reading about GRID, sometime around there. I can't remember exactly if that was the word we used, but I remember being at a dinner in the Castro with some friends hearing about people getting sick. So, let's see. I lived there the fall of '81, but then I was back a lot in '82 visiting, and so it was at one of those dinners that I remember these conversations about men getting sick and dying. At the time, what people were saying is, if you've had over a thousand sex partners, your immune system would collapse. I mean, they were really — people were grasping at straws of what was going on.

**SS: Had you had over a thousand sex partners at the time?**

RB: At that time, no, but I was very active, sure, and in Boston and in San Francisco that was gay bars. You know, my social life was political activism and gay bars.

I mean, at *GCN*, we would lay out the paper every Thursday night, and some days that would go till two, three in the morning. But on days where it would get finished — this was before typesetting was electronic. You used to — it came out on film paper, and you would have big sheets of cardboard, and you would lay the columns down with wax, hot wax. And that's why your headlines would be crooked and —

00:25:00

**SS: What were those called again? Make-ups or those —**

RB: Mockups.

**SS: Mockups.**

RB: Yeah.

**SS: That's right. That's right.**

RB: So on Thursday nights if we finished it before two, then the whole group, volunteers and staff, would go out to a bar together, go to Sporters or something in Beacon Hill, and so that was the center of social life.

**SS: When did you start to think that you might have to think differently about your sexual life, or be concerned?**

RB: Well, that took years actually. I mean, the concept of safe sex wasn't immediately there. There was a lot of paranoia, but the concept of safe sex took a while to come around. And I remember I was still in law school when I had to first go buy condoms, and I'd never bought condoms. I remember I was clerking at a criminal rights defendant project, and I was in an attic office with these straight guys, and I would ask them. I asked them, where do you get them? What do you do? And they were so sweet, laughing at me, but explained.

**SS: So when did AIDS first reach your life? Like, when did you first find out that people you knew were infected?**

RB: Well, I think it hit Boston a little later than New York and San Francisco, but certainly I was in law school still. So it was '83-ish where we began to have friends and people we knew get sick and die.

The AIDS Action Committee in Boston started as a project of Fenway, the Fenway Community Health Center, which is a big, big health center today, but it was — that's where I got my healthcare in the seventies. At *GCN* we didn't have any health insurance or any benefits, but we had an advertising exchange with the Gay Health Collective, which was part of Fenway Community Health Center. And the ad exchange was they got advertising in the paper, we got healthcare. So we would go to the Gay Health Collective at Fenway, and I remember it was run by Ron Vashon, who is now dead, but who later worked for the Health Department, ran the Office of Gay Health when Koch was mayor in New York.

So the Gay Health Collective, and Cindy Patton, actually, was on the board of Fenway when they were starting the AIDS Action Committee, and I remember when they — Larry Kessler was their first executive director, but I remember when they were looking to hire someone, and Cindy was on that search committee, because I remember Kevin Cathcart was thinking about looking at that job. This was before he became — he left the practice of law and became the ED of GLAD in Boston, the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, which we had founded in the fall of '78 in response to Suffolk County District Attorney Garrett Burn went on this anti-gay reelection campaign where he was accusing gay men of there, he created the concept of this sex ring preying on boys, the Revere sex ring scandal.

At the time, the *Boston Herald American* was owned by the Hearsts, and it was a real rag, and so every day there'd be these front-page covers attacking the gay community as predatory. And there was something — '78, '79 — forum called the

Boston-Boise Committee, which was a group of activists operating out of the *GCN* office, but organizing to defend the gay community against this attack. And, oh, god — John Ward, who was one of the few openly gay attorneys at that time in Boston, was an organizer in Boston-Boise. John Mitzel, lots of folks who — and there were demonstrations at that time and a press voice.

It was very important to have a voice in the *Boston Globe* to counteract these attacks on our community. Someone in the legislature wanted to open a hotline where anybody could call anonymously to the city or the state and accuse you of being part of this sex ring.

Elaine Nobel, who had been the first open lesbian legislator in Massachusetts —

**SS: Or gay. She was the first, that's right.**

00:30:00 RB: Yeah — endorsed it, and so there were big, big schisms there. Elaine had lost her seat in a redistricting gerrymander. She was in an adjacent district to Barney Frank, who was in the legislature, not yet out. And *GCN*, we were in Barney's district. And so she had lost her seat when redistricting had pitted her against Barney. But she was still a prominent activist in town the late seventies, ran for the U.S. Senate, actually, at one point, '78 or '79, I can't remember what year.

So Boston-Boise happened in response to this. There was a benefit for Boston-Boise at the Arlington Street Church off the Boston Garden, and that had been the center of anti-war organizing. Gore Vidal came in as the headliner to speak, and it cost \$5 to go. It was a big deal that Gore was coming to — because, you know, he's a hero in

some ways to gay men of a certain literate orientation, even though he was not part of the Gay Movement and disdained it. But he was coming to put his weight behind the Boston-Boise Committee.

And the reason this became a big deal was the head, the chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court, which was the high court in Massachusetts — and I'm sure I'm messing it up — Robert Bonin, B-o-n-i-n, bought tickets to go to this. And his wife, he and his wife, Angela Bonin, were going to go. But these Boston-Boise cases were going to end up wending their ways up before the court, and so he was attacked for having bought these \$5 tickets. And this was front-page news day after day in the *Globe* and the *Health American* and ultimately hit the *Times*. He lost. He had to leave his seat.

**SS: Oh, he was smeared, yeah.**

RB: Forced out. And part of it was there was a belief that it was anti-Semitic, you know, that he was the Chief Justice, and that was not really done in Boston. But he was forced out.

So this at that time, what was changing was gay people who were so below the radar, our movement was so below the radar in Boston, not worthy of coverage in the papers, suddenly was peeking out because of attacks during Garrett Burns' reelection campaign, because of Boston-Boise Committee, the fact that the chief justice got pulled into this.

And then when that all died down, that's what led in the fall of '78 to the founding of GLAD, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders. John Ward put a call out in an item in *GCN* for an organizing meeting that we needed a formal legal

organization to defend our rights, because at that time, remember, Lambda was local. Gay Rights Advocates on the West Coast was local in California. Texas had a legal organization. There was really not a national movement at that time.

The National and Gay Task Force was founded in Bruce Voeller's kitchen. It was a New York organization, was not national. There was nothing national. So when GLAD was formed, there were five of us in a church basement, Old West Church on Beacon Hill. John Ward was the leader, Cindy Rizzo, me, Roberta Stone — we incorporated, and I became the president of the board, John became the volunteer executive director. And, today it's this wonderful, wonderful, equality machine that I'm so proud still exists. But at that time, it was radical. And, again, that's what helped propel me to law school, I mean, again, Margo Carl and John Ward, the two folks who did my law school recommendations.

But, again, blame the context for prior to AIDS the lack of a national movement. I mean, here you are at *GCN* on Beacon Hill. Harvey Milk could be calling up on the phone, screaming at the news editor because he didn't like a story. Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde would be writing letters to the editor about why'd you do this. And you sort of knew you were — you know, I was twenty-two, twenty-three years old, but I knew we were in the middle of something.

Then in February of '79, there was a meeting in Philadelphia at the Friends Meeting House in Philadelphia that was a convention to plan the first march on Washington, and there were delegates. There had been prior conversations about a march, but in February of '79 — I remember it was snowing — there was this

convention. And Eric Rofes and Dee Michel and Amy Hoffman and I rented a car and drove to Philadelphia as the Boston — self-anointed Boston reps. And we went down and we were sleeping — Eric and I slept on the floor in — the guy who owned Giovanni's Room.

**SS: Ed? Ed Hermantz?**

RB: Ed Hermantz?

**SS: Yeah.**

RB: Yeah. We slept on his floor. And Amy was assigned a roommate in someone else's house with Eleanor Cooper from New York, who was the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

00:35:00

We went to the Friends Meeting House for this two-day meeting, and I was terrified because everybody screamed at each other for two days. I mean, you had the Salsa Soul Sisters from New York and the Gay Democrats from Chicago, and, really, Steve Ault from New York yelling at the top of his lungs. And I didn't know these people at that time, and I remember, whoa, this is crazy. And Eric loved it, immediately got immersed in the ongoing national organizing for the '79 march.

So we went back and reported on it in *GCN*, and part of the New England organizing came out of the paper, and we did buses. And I remember we published a special edition that was a guide to the march. And rented a Ryder truck, and Amy and I drove it down to D.C., and I'd never driven a truck before. I didn't know how to drive a standard. And drove it down, and we would go from bar to bar before the march,

handing out these newspapers, and then *GCN* volunteers would hand them out at the paper — I mean at the march itself.

And I digress.

**SS: That's okay. I just want to digress for a second, because I used to write for *GCN*. One of my favorite moments was one of the April Fool's issues, and the title was "Human Community News," because that's when this whole "human" euphemism was starting to come into play. I think that was when Human Rights Campaign was founded or something like that.**

RB: Right, right, right.

**SS: So '83, you're still up in Boston. And then when did you move to New York?**

RB: Let's see. When I got out of law school, I went back to work at the newspaper again. I didn't have it out of my system.

**SS: So let's talk about AIDS coverage at *GCN*.**

RB: Not good. Not good.

**SS: Why? Can you explain that?**

RB: There was at that point, the early days of the epidemic, such division within the collective of — it was no longer, you know, a queer family or community. I don't like the word "family" in that context. But it was not a supportive environment anymore, really factionalized. And there were a couple of key writers who thought too much attention was being paid. Nobody knew the hurricane that was landing, but there were battles about the coverage.

**SS: But these battles were national. People did not understand how important it was going to be. But what was interesting in *GCN* is that you had women in *GCN*, like Cindy Patton, who were in leadership in AIDS. You had a key death in the collective, Mike Riegle, right, that affected a lot of people.**

RB: That's all later.

**SS: Oh, that's later.**

RB: All later.

**SS: Oh, okay. So this was before that.**

RB: Mike died in the later eighties, and at that point, I think *GCN* fully embraced decent coverage. I think Cindy might have been managing editor at that point, '82, '83, and, you know something, I think she caught on fairly quickly because of her involvement at Fenway.

But there were battles, and at that time, I guess it was the *New York Native* was around, and so some of the writers at the *New York Native* also wrote for *GCN* as volunteers.

**SS: Right. It was called the *GCN* New York bureau, actually.**

RB: Huh.

**SS: Because I wrote — yeah. It was Peg Byron, me, David France, Sally Chew. It was a whole bunch.**

RB: Vito Russo wrote, I remember — maybe that was earlier — for Amy Hoffman. Yeah. And so I'd have to go back and look at old *GCNs*, which I haven't done, to track the AIDS coverage. But I remember having, like, these all-day retreats in

Dave Peterson's living room in Cambridgeport where we were fighting it out over the coverage or lack thereof.

**SS: And you think that the issue was that people didn't understand what was coming.**

RB: Yes. I think some of it might have been personality-based. Some of it people didn't understand what was coming. Some of it was, I think, some men feeling like it was too male-focused. In hindsight, crazy stuff, but that's what it was.

**SS: So what year did you move here?**

00:40:00 RB: I was recruited down in '86. I had gotten out of law school '83, gone back to the paper for a year. Spent a year in a law firm — just to, like, I have to do this — a law firm called Lill and Hare in Cambridge. Then I was a lawyer for the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. A friend of mine, Donna, recruited me over there, and that was great.

Then I got recruited to come down to the Center. I had — through contacts on the Lambda board that I had made, when the Center was looking for an executive director, Bill Hibsher at Lambda, who's on the Lambda board, told them to call me. So Chris Collins, who was on the board at that time, a lawyer in New York, called me cold. And the first time he called I said, no, I wasn't interested in leaving Boston. I was still at a law firm then. And they called again about six months later when I was working for Cambridge, and I said, oh, well, maybe I would, and so I went down and interviewed with them.

I remember Tim Sweeney was then the deputy director at Gay Men's Health Crisis. Richard Dunn was the executive director. And Tim I'd gotten to know well because he was in Boston in the late seventies. He had been the treasurer fighting the Briggs Initiative in California. He was the statewide treasurer for that. Then his boyfriend, Jay, moved, was going to business school at Harvard, and they moved to Boston. So Tim showed up at the *GCN* collective, and so he and I — you know. He got a job at Fair Share, and we would go to demonstrations together. We just became friends.

And then when Roz Richter left Lambda as ED, Tim applied, and we hired him to be the next ED. So then when I came down interviewing with the Center, he at that point was long gone from Lambda but was working at GMHC, and he sort of coached me on how to work with the Center board interview process. And I remember hanging out in his office in Chelsea on 18<sup>th</sup> Street at GMHC.

So I went through a number of interviews and then accepted the job and came down here December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1986. My lover at the time was an architect in Boston, Tom Huth, and so we commuted back and forth on weekends, actually for about almost nine years, which gave me lots of time to work at the Center during the week, which I did.

**SS: So you come into the Center and you come in before ACT UP. So you're coming in.**

RB: Mm-hmm.

**SS: And before ACT UP came there, how was the Center responding to AIDS? What was happening at the Center?**

RB: Well, the Community Health Project was really — and GMHC were the two big community responses. In earlier, might have been '85, maybe even sooner, the St. Mark's Health Collective and the Gay Men's STD Clinic, two different collectives, merged, formed Community Health Project as it moved in to the Center.

**SS: Right. The St. Mark's collective was a lesbian collective, right? So it was a men and women's collective that merged? Joan Wakowitz.**

RB: You know what? I wasn't here, so I don't know.

**JIM HUBBARD: You're right. There were two. It was a merger of two organizations.**

RB: But that was all told to me as history. The Center founded as a concept in '83 and began, in effect, almost squatting in the building, which was owned by the city, and Ed Koch was mayor and wanted to sell it to raise revenue. And at the same time, Koch was fighting to get rid of the nonprofit real estate tax exemption, and that led to a couple of things, led to the formation of the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee in New York, which is still around, which successfully fought that battle and pushed it back, but where it impacted the Center was when the Center organizers, leaders from the gay synagogue, SAGE, MCC, the Lambda Democrats in Brooklyn, Ginny Apuzzo, these folks came together to form the Center founding board, they lined up support of the borough presidents.

And at the time, New York City real estate under the city charter was controlled by the Board of Estimate, which no longer exists. The Board of Estimate was each borough president had one vote, so that's five borough presidents. The mayor had two votes. The city controller had two votes. And the city council president had two votes. Something like that. So you could outmaneuver the mayor around real estate, and that's what these activists did. They lined up the votes to outvote the mayor to say, "We want to sell this building to the gay community."

00:45:00 And the way Koch agreed to the deal was, "Well, you have to agree that you're not going to be tax-exempt. You're going to pay real estate taxes."

So this deal went through the Board of Estimate in '83, and the closing on the building happened, like, the day before New Year's Eve in '84. And under the original deal, no mortgage payments were due for the first year, so that would have been 1985, and the mortgage rate was 12 percent, I think. And so no mortgage payments meant negative amortization, right? You start with the principal and then all that interest accruing gets added on to the principal. So instead of paying it down, you're paying it up.

So when I arrived in December of '86, maybe that was two years, there had been no plan to pay the mortgage, and so by the spring of '87, we got a foreclosure notice from the city that for nonpayment they were going to take it. So that sort of galvanized the board and began the organizing around serious fundraising.

But I'm sorry, I digressed about AIDS at the Center. So Community Health Project was a primary health clinic, and the doctors were mostly volunteers. They

had a deal with the city hospital over here where they could place doctors and supervisors — what's the name of the city hospital? I'm blanking on it.

**SS: St. Vincent's?**

RB: No, no, no, no.

**SS: Beth Israel?**

RB: The public hospital where they take you if you're shot.

**SS: Bellevue?**

RB: Bellevue. It was Bellevue's license that enabled CHP to be a primary healthcare provider. And so lots of doctors today — lots of gay doctors today in their fifties, who are in private practice, were volunteer doctors at CHP in the mid-eighties and late eighties.

**SS: So the AIDS practice must have been absolutely enormous. I mean, did it overwhelm the Center?**

RB: Well, no, it didn't overwhelm it, but I think it overwhelmed CHP, and at that time, GMHC was in Chelsea, and I think doctors in general were overwhelmed. So, sure, it was the dominant thing. There were — think about the context. In '86, you had the New York City Gay Rights Bill finally pass. You had *Bowers vs Hardwick*, which was the U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the sodomy law in Georgia, so you had the success in New York of gay activism on the one hand, and then you had this big national loss, which was galvanizing the Gay Movement at the same time that AIDS was devastating gay people.

All of these, perhaps, privileged guys who felt like they didn't need to be a part of the Gay Movement, when *Bowers* came down, they were publicly told, "You are less than. You are illegal." So you had an uptick, a dramatic uptick, in engagement and in dollars going into gay organizations like Lambda Legal, like the National Gay Task Force.

So at the same moment that AIDS was happening, the context was this big defeat and this pushback and greater engagement in anger. So that's the context of the moment. You think Rock Hudson happened in '85. You think back further to where did gay people start getting really publicly angry post-Stonewall? Well, it was after Harvey Milk was killed in '78, the Dan White verdict came down in '79, and you had riots with police cars on fire in '79 in San Francisco, the Dan White Night riots. And there were demonstrations around the country then.

So, you know, not quite a decade earlier before ACT UP, you suddenly have this violence erupt and then shut down again. And I think, in a way, it was a precursor of some of the activism spawned by these attacks. Our community felt attacked by the Dan White verdict, and so there was an uptick in activism. *Bowers vs Hardwick*, we were all attacked. There was an uptick in activism.

GMHC at that time, being in Chelsea on 18<sup>th</sup> Street, was very involved in the Center. The folks running the Center didn't know how to fundraise. So the first garden party was produced by folks from GMHC, who had been doing large-scale fundraising for GMHC. Now, that predated me, but that's how the garden parties started.

00:50:00 Volunteers from GMHC who'd run the Madison Square Circus benefit, things like that, came in and jumpstarted it.

**SS: I'm thinking back to that time, and I remember just meeting so many friends in front of the Center because they were coming out of CHP. I think it was the first time that the Center was in my life on a regular daily basis, because the whole nature of what people needed had changed so dramatically.**

**Now, were you guys sitting there saying, "What is our responsibility? What are we going to do?" Were you having those kinds of discussions? Was your role to lead, or were you there to be there for when other people were taking initiative?**

RB: Well, it's a combination, and that, I think, was the wonderful model of the Center. If you think that on the one hand, the Center was there to create a space and a home for indigenous community organizing, and the idea was is that anyone — you could call us up and say, "I want to organize a march on Albany," and Robert Woodworth would say, "How's next Tuesday at seven?" And you'd have a room. And at that time in '86, it was a dollar a person was the rent. And the first thing I did when I got there was, "It's now \$2," and raised the rent.

So we published some monthly calendars, *Center Happenings*, *Center Voice*, and so if you were organizing lesbians against the war, we would put that in the *Center Happenings*, which would be mailed out free to thousands and thousands of households. So if you had an idea and you were the only person that you knew with that idea to organize something and you put it out there in *Center Happenings*, you would

come on your appointed night on Tuesday at seven, all these other people would arrive in that room, who didn't know you, but they liked your idea. And everyone would pay two bucks, you'd pass the hat, and you could start your organization or your community action.

That's how in that period of time in the late eighties, mid-eighties, the number of gay organizations in New York multiplied dramatically under that system, because someone with no background in community organizing, no network, no access to money, could make something happen. This was all pre-Internet. So you could, just by using that system and getting it out in the newsletter — and then also things like the *Native* might put you in the calendar. So there were different platforms even then for organizing. This was the days of phone chains, which certainly played a role in the early days of ACT UP.

**SS: Phone trees.**

RB: Phone trees. What did I call them? Chains. Phone trees.

**SS: Let me ask you something. Was anybody excluded?**

RB: Well, sure. The controversy in the eighties was around NAMBLA. The North American Man/Boy Love Association had been founded in Boston, I believe in the late seventies at a conference at the Community Church of Boston, I think Tom Reeves, Michael Thompson, Charlie Shively, and then it spread to chapters around the country and certainly New York. I can't remember the name of the guy, David —

**SS: Thorstad.**

RB: Yeah, David Thorstad. And so they organized and they wanted to meet at the Center. And I think the first time the Center banned NAMBLA was prior to my arrival, so that was prior to December 1, '86. But they were organizers, and they kept applying to come back. The first time I had been told that it was the Gay Youth of New York, GLYNY, the Gay/Lesbian Youth of New York, that objected.

And then probably around '87, they applied again to come back. And the board of directors went through a process, and we bought a year's worth of NAMBLA newsletters and Xeroxed them, and everyone on the board got them in advance and had to look at them. And then Paula Ettlbrick was at Lambda Legal at that time, and we brought her into a board meeting to talk about what was required under the New York City human rights law, like what were our options.

And the board was eighteen people at that time — that was the size of the Center board for most of the eighties and nineties — went through a very, very thoughtful discussion about it, and ultimately voted no, 11 to 7, and it wasn't — you would think it would have divided on gender, and it didn't. There were men and women on both sides. And it was very much in the context — remember, this was a Sexual Liberation Movement, and so there were people coming out of that who also were First Amendment fanatics in a good way and felt like this isn't about an act; this is about thought. And this is about community organizing, and we as gay people were banned from organizing and were persecuted even in the Mafia-owned gay bars, and, what, now we've created this space. I mean, it was a thoughtful discussion.

00:55:00

**SS: How did you vote?**

RB: Well, I didn't have a vote. But I weighed in against NAMBLA. And it was a struggle, because I knew some of the organizers in Boston who I felt were good people. But, you know, ultimately just we thought we have queer youth groups meeting here, we — just it came down no, but that was not the end of it. I mean, that controversy went on for years. I remember they got Allen Ginsberg involved, and Allen Ginsberg had spoken at the Center a bunch, and he agreed to do a benefit for NAMBLA one time, I guess in the late eighties, early nineties. And so they wanted to book it at the Center, and we wouldn't let them, and so they went to town with the press on that, that Allen Ginsberg banned from the Center. That was hard stuff, but that was —

**SS: And you also banned the New Alliance Party.**

RB: Yes, thank you. The New Alliance Party was also banned ultimately, and that was less — that was not controversial at all, because I think at that point — and I might have my timing wrong — Political Research Associates in Cambridge was investigating the New Alliance Party as this Lyndon LaRouche cult that ultimately was anti-gay and was preying on vulnerable gay people, whatever. I probably have the story wrong. But we said that they could only — if they were having specifically gay- or AIDS-related meetings, they could hold them at the Center, but not their general meetings.

**SS: So then ACT UP starts coming to the Center.**

RB: Well, that's — I mean, that's a whole different story. One of the first programs of the Center was a cultural program called Second Tuesdays and run by volunteers on the board. And on the second Tuesday of every month, there was a speaker

brought in, and people would pay two bucks to come hear them, and it was the idea of creating like sort of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in the Village for gay people.

So at that time, Audre Lorde had come to speak, and John Sayles, Fran Lebowitz, lots of cultural figures in New York. And in March of 2007 [1987], Nora Ephron was invited to speak, and the board member at the time, Diana Leo, was the person running Second Tuesdays. She was a writer for the radio station of *The New York Times* at that time. Diana had booked Nora Ephron. And Nora, a couple days in advance, maybe even the day before, got sick and said, “I can’t come.” And so Diana hustled and booked Larry Kramer as the speaker, but we had to get the word out. And that’s why I talk about a phone tree, is our phone tree kicked in.

And then at the same time, Vivian Shapiro, who was a community organizer, she was in advertising, direct marketing, and had been the co-chair of the board of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, tremendous fundraiser. And she had what was either a radio show or a cable TV show, I can’t remember. But the day before the Second Tuesday, she went on it. She hosted her show and said, “You’ve got to come hear Larry. You’ve got to come.” So that was one of the platforms that the word was put out on short notice, because you mail out a monthly calendar, you have phone trees and flyers, but this was before social media.

So Larry came and spoke and the rest is queer history. I mean, that was the speech. And I remember I was in and out several times that night, because I was always in and out at Second Tuesdays, what’s going on. And I have it in my head — I could be totally wrong — that Larry brought Martin Sheen with him.

**SS: Yeah, that's right.**

RB: Is that possible?

**SS: Yes.**

RB: Because I remember that, and, you know, it was very, very exciting.

Then so that was a Tuesday night, and people said, "Well, let's come back next week." And Chris Collins, who was on the Center board at the time, ran upstairs to Robert and said, "We want to come back next Tuesday night. Can we do it?"

And Robert said, "Well, no, next Tuesday is booked. How about Monday?" And so that's how it started Monday nights at seven in the first-floor auditorium at the Center.

And I remember the first several meetings. Tim Sweeney was deputy director still at GMHC, and he was asked to be the facilitator for — I think it was three meetings. Is that possible? I can't recall, but I just remember being there and him sitting at a table, and even then there was cacophony going on and on.

01:00:00

**SS: So what did it mean for the Center to have ACT UP there? How did it change things?**

RB: Well we thought it — it was normal. That's what the Center was there for because in your earlier question about was the Center there leading or was the Center there as sort of a receptacle, it played multiple roles. It was creating this system of room, low-cost room availability, with publicity attached. Okay, so that was one part. But then it ran its own programs, so, for example, prior to the start of ACT UP, in

December or in early '87, I guess, or sometime in '87, we started our alcohol and drug abuse intervention and prevention program, Project Connect.

So that was our first state grant, probably late '87, because Mario Cuomo came a month after ACT UP was founded. He came in April of '87 in his first public address to the gay community, and it was around insurance, what the state was going to require insurance companies to do for people and AIDS. So that was April, one month after ACT UP. And so as a result of him coming there, Ginny Apuzzo, who worked for the governor at that point, was able to help us get our first state grant.

And at that time, there was a pressing, pressing need around alcoholism, because we had spawned so many gay AA groups, and people already knew and it had already been documented that alcoholism was double in our community what it was in the population at large. So that was our first formal social services program, and then as we developed those, we had them around youth, around — the alcohol program immediately began working around HIV and AIDS because it became a poly-substance abuse program, which was so tightly intertwined with the spread of HIV. So our first counselors, in effect, ended up being alcohol/HIV counselors, and we would work with the Community Health Project and GMHC, sort of coordinating programs.

**SS: Now, how did the crisis affect the staff at the Center? Did you have key people who got sick and died?**

RB: Sure, sure. Our founding president, Irving Cooperberg, who had been the president of the synagogue, the gay synagogue, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, CBST — Irving, you know, was an early person with HIV. And when the Center was

founded, they had a very, very short amount of time to raise the down payment. They had to raise 150,000 bucks, and one of the places they went was to the synagogue congregation, and these were originally all thousand-dollar loans, and raised that down payment in a couple of weeks. So Irving was critical in that first board.

Peter Vogel, who was the president of Independent Democrats in Brooklyn, worked for the state, worked for the governor. Peter died in '86. I'd met him in Boston when Eric Rofes and some of us were doing some political organizing in Boston, and Peter came up to talk about the model they were doing in New York with Ginny Apuzzo. Ginny and Peter were both on the founding board of the Center.

Then Irving got sick in '87 and stepped down as president, and David Nimmons became president, but Ken Dawson had been on the founding board of the Center and was the executive director of SAGE. He got sick, and didn't die right away. I mean, Irving lived into the nineties. But Charlie Barney, who was probably our first staffer who died of AIDS, ran the front desk, African American gay man, older guy.

But the Center was home to lots and lots of funerals, and so we would, in effect, be event production for funerals. And people would bring in opera singers to sing, and they were very beautiful. But a lot of people didn't want them in churches or didn't feel welcome in churches, and so the third-floor auditorium was really where the memorials were held all the time.

01:05:00

And then we all went to lots and lots of funerals all over, and many board members died. Gregory Kolovakos; Marc Krasnow; Steven Powsner, who was president after Dave Nimmons and helped to get our capital campaign going; Frank Guerrero;

Norman White; all board members. Paul Rappaport, who had been a founder of GMHC and a founder of the Center, died of AIDS in July of '87. I remember being out of town and coming in for the funeral on a Sunday on the train with Jed Mattes to go to that funeral home on the Upper West Side for Paul's funeral.

**SS: This may be going nowhere, but at that time and now, gay men are not allowed to give blood. Wasn't there something about a blood drive at the Center, alternative blood drive?**

RB: I vaguely remember this. Yeah, I do. I vaguely remember this. That was a moment when having gay people participate in something, each one was breaking a barrier. It was at that same time that GOAL, the Gay Officers Action League, was trying to recruit gay people for the police department. And so we'd have signs in the building at the Center hanging up that said "Come Tuesday night and be coached by GOAL on this." And then other people would set their signs on fire while they were on the wall. So, but when you mentioned the blood drive, each thing was a barrier being broken at that moment in the late eighties.

**SS: Do you consider yourself to have been a member of ACT UP as well as the host of ACT UP?**

RB: Well, I was sure at a lot of meetings, but I don't know if I — I don't know what the qualifications for membership were. I was arrested once.

**SS: Where were you arrested?**

RB: I was arrested on World's AIDS Day, December 1<sup>st</sup>, in Washington, D.C. We were blockading the White House, and the group I was with was all executive

directors from around the country, and so it was Tom Stoddard at Lambda and Kevin Cathcart was then at GLAD in Boston, Urvashi Vaid was at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. And so we were across from Lafayette Park. We were at the gates of the White House, and we all sat down and we were there.

Jean Maguire, I think, was the head of — it wasn't the AIDS Action Council then. Maybe it was NORA [National Organizations Responding to AIDS], one of those early coalition national groups. I remember her speaking, Urv speaking, and then we were all — the yellow handcuffs and put into buses and taken to the D.C. jail.

**SS: Did you ever disagree with something that ACT UP did?**

RB: The thing I disagreed with is when they moved out and went to Cooper Union. You know, again, I was so — the Center was my life, it was my life's work, and I viewed it as a progressive, feminist, queer organizing liberation space, and I felt betrayed by it. I didn't act out about it, but I felt like this is your roots.

And I remember we were all — the Center was always struggling financially, and all we ever charged ACT UP was the two bucks a head, and they moved to Cooper Union where they were paying a fortune in rent. And I felt like they're losing their roots.

**SS: Why did they move?**

RB: Well, I think it was explained to me that it was just too tight, the space was too tight. I felt like they were getting fancy. And even though Cooper Union is a great space, it's wonderful, I —

**SS: Who negotiated this with you? Who was the person, the point person?**

RB: I actually don't know. I don't remember who I had the conversation with. But it was presented as a fait accompli.

**SS: So you didn't realize that this whole conversation was going on on the floor of ACT UP for a long time and they just —**

01:10:00 RB: I think I heard inklings about it, but not — I guess maybe I was in denial. I didn't think it would happen, because I viewed it as the Center was ACT UP's home and we were — when ACT UP at the last minute would need something, a room to do posters, a room to do training, anything, the Center would, of course, automatically bend over backwards to make it happen, because we felt like we were the same. We're in the same family on the same side.

And I was very proud, personally, that ACT UP had been founded there, that — I mean, a lot of things. Before I came to New York and the Center, GLAD, the Gay/Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, had been founded at the Center. The *Post*, the *New York Post*, had been attacking the gay community, and there were two big demonstrations organized against the *Post*, and they were organized at the Center. And those organizers, out of that came GLAD, and that was Gregory Kolovakos and —

**SS: Peg Byron, Jewelle Gomez, Vito Russo.**

RB: Yes, the whole —

**SS: The opposite of what GLAD became.**

RB: Yes, exactly. So that was something that we were proud of. Gay Men of African Descent had been founded at the Center, again before my time, and so then it was normal. ACT UP was founded there, then Queer Nation, Lesbian Avengers, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, IGLHRC, all started as an idea, somebody's meeting there. So we felt like, well, these groups, you know, this is a community, and this messy queer Center is where they belong.

**SS: So how does it happen that now people who are working against the occupation are not allowed to go into the Center?**

RB: Well, I was very, very lucky. I got to take my vision and synthesize the vision of many, many other people to make the Center for twenty-two years, from '86 until I left in February of '99, and I knew when I left — and I was really ready to go — but I knew that it was going to be someone else's vision.

**SS: Okay, but I'm just asking you, how does that happen?**

RB: Someone else's vision.

**SS: I mean, but technically how does it happen?**

RB: Oh, technically, it would be a decision of the board of directors.

**SS: No, no, no, but, I mean, how does it move from an organization that's there to facilitate what's happening in the community to an organization that's there to keep the community out?**

RB: I think that organizations, like you mentioned GLAD earlier, organizations evolve based on who is at the table at that time, on the board, and on the staff, and I think that some of that shift might be generational.

**SS: But technically it's a shift from people like yourself, who come from the grassroots of the community, to people who come from corporate, right? That's who's running the Center, that's who's running GLAD, that's who's running a lot of these organizations. Where is the key moment where all of a sudden it's not about the community, and suddenly it's about the corporation? Like, where do you see that? Where is the hinge moment where that happened?**

RB: Well, something that you see in our movement organizations as they've grown, as budgets have increased, as capital campaigns became necessary, is you build a different kind of board of directors and you recruit people for their fundraising capacity, their giving capacity, their connection in other worlds. And I think that what you want to do is you want to craft a set of trustees that are diverse enough to represent different perspectives in different parts of our community, because that's what a board of directors is. They're a set of trustees holding an organization in trust for the public. And so the board of the Center or the Task Force or GLAD holds this organization in trust for our community, and those boards evolve and —

**SS: So when you were putting people on the board, on your board, did you ever imagine that this was where the community was going?**

RB: No. No, but I was naïve. I thought that we could achieve a balance of people, and certainly my experience for twenty-two years was that was the case, you know, the Center did the, its first capital campaign kicked off in the mid-nineties. We moved out to West 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Labor Day of '98 and we raised over 13 million bucks

01:15:00 or \$12 million, and the board led that process and did a fantastic job while maintaining that vision. So I knew it was possible, but it's all politics.

**SS: So let's just talk about AIDS for —**

**JIM HUBBARD: Wait. Before you go on, there's a problem with your math, because you said you were there for twenty-two years.**

RB: Yes.

**JH: And you said '86 to '99. Did you mean 2009?**

RB: Yes. I'm sorry. Oh, gosh. Gosh, yes, 2009.

**SS: So when you left the Center, you left the board that had a lot of corporate presence behind you, even if it was naively, as you said.**

RB: It was mixed. There were definitely academics, people who organized in the transgender community, Ana Olivera, so definitely there were still community organizers there.

**SS: So here's my final question on this, and then I'll drop it. Do you regret that you had so much corporate presence that you left behind on the board?**

RB: No. It was necessary. I think where the job of any leader is to inspire people to follow you towards a particular vision, and you're always synthesizing new ideas into that vision, but whenever you make change, you've got to sit down with people who disagree with you and bring them along. That's your goal. If we only sit in a circle and talk with people who agree with us, no change happens. The whole way change happens is we've got to bring people along, whether seduce them along, educate them along, excite and inspire them along towards a vision. And for a long time I felt like I

and the team I worked with was able to do that in a way. We had had Republicans on the board, but they were signed on to the mission of the Center, and that's why we wanted it to be a place where the Log Cabin Republicans were comfortable meeting. We wanted it to be their Center, and we hoped some of the Queer Nation would rub off on them. And so I think that we were successful a long time in bringing people along to that vision.

**SS: Right. Ultimately you learn the Obama lesson, which is —**

RB: You know, I don't know that I've learned the lesson. I keep trying.

**SS: Well, I wish you still ran the Center, Richard, but, anyway.**

RB: Thank you.

**SS: So now the last few years you've been going through progressive and queer foundations, and since the focus of this is AIDS, you know, here we're in a very strange place now, because there's — we interviewed Kevin Frost the other day, and he was saying that there's 1.2 million people with HIV in this country but only 30 percent are undetectable, and that 70 percent of people with HIV are not getting the treatment that is available. Then Marjorie Hill says that 1,600 people died of AIDS in New York City last year, and half of them were diagnosed in the ER. But there's this perception that AIDS is fine in the U.S. —**

RB: Right.

**SS: — and everything's in Africa. So, like, how informed are foundations? Are they up to date? Do they understand about the prevention crisis?**

RB: I don't know how informed people are. You figure roughly, rough numbers, about \$400 million a year from foundations goes into HIV and AIDS in this

country, and about \$100 million might go into queer equality. So, you know, and when you think back to this movement, at one time they were the same movement. AIDS and gay were the same movement in the eighties, and they diverged a long time ago, and there's still overlap. A lot of the players came out of one or the other and know each other, but they diverged a long time ago. And that's true on the funding side as well.

So you had — well, the philanthropic funding of AIDS had, took off much more robustly than foundation funding for gay equality right from the beginning of the epidemic, and I think probably HIV and AIDS funding actually helped push some gay funding along. But now the foundations, the smaller foundations that make those grants are separate. Certainly something like the Ford Foundation is a major player in both areas, and the gay program officer, the program officer in charge of LGBT and the program officer in charge of HIV report up to the same person. But most foundations that do HIV might have more of a health focus, and those that do gay and lesbian, bi and trans, may have more of a social justice focus.

So the foundation community is more atomized than I understood when I was at the Center and on the side just seeking funds. I didn't understand, and I think most executive directors don't understand, how focused foundations are around a subject area. And just because they fund HIV, it doesn't mean they're going to fund gay.

**SS: But amfAR told us that the number-one group of people getting infected are white gay men, the second group is black men who have sex with men, and the third is black women, and the fourth is Latino gay men. So it actually is still the same epidemic.**

RB: Right. I think that those statistics are not widely known or internalized within philanthropy. I think that —

**SS: Is it because they don't see people of color as gay?**

RB: No. I think that foundations now see certain opportunities around equality issues and not just marriage equality, but organizing within religious denominations is a focus, to a degree around racial equity, looking at the intersection between racial equity and LGBT. There's a focus, there's an understanding in some quarters that LGBT equality will never be fully achieved without an alliance with racial justice advocates.

So presently I'm serving as the interim CEO of a philanthropic affinity group called Funders for LGBTQ Issues. Funders has been around for thirty years. It's national and it serves foundations and it advocates with foundations around LGBT funding. It's one of about sixty different philanthropic affinity groups, Grantmakers in Health, Hispanics in Philanthropy, Immigrants and Refugees.

And we just published a report in August on foundations working at the intersection of LGBT and racial justice, and it was a focus on the experience of five different foundations around the country, small and big. And the reason this report was commissioned was because this is still a relatively new area, and the report is distributed to program officers and decision makers at foundations around the country to encourage them to look at this and to look at — you know, to take the jump and the risks.

I think that HIV — because it's AIDS fatigue. I mean, it's not on the front burner of everyone. You probably are — I mean, you get an interesting perspective here

if you talked to the folks at Funders Concerned about AIDS, which used to be in New York but is now in D.C., because they're another affinity, philanthropic affinity group that works closely with funders for LGBTQ issues, but —

**SS: Well, there's a link here because the corporatization of the Center, the corporatization of GLAD, the separation of gay from AIDS, all of this is moving in a direction where the more rights certain kinds of gay people get, the more they disassociate from social justice. Not all, but significant groups of people, and we're seeing it globally.**

**We're seeing that in the Netherlands where gay people have complete rights. There's a lot of participation in racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim groups. We're seeing that in Germany. We're seeing in England that there are racist groups that are recruiting gay people and that have LGBT, and in the U.S. we're seeing it too. We're seeing a real separation from the original kind of agenda that you talked about, this freedom vision, to an act of rejection of that.**

01:25:00 **RB:** But in a way that's always been true in our movement. In the early days of queer organizing, the people doing the organizing were often people who couldn't pass. They were already outsiders. So whether it's folks at the *Gay Community News* in the seventies or Stonewall riots, whatever, it's people who — I don't want to say had less to lose, but they were already on the outside. And, as I said, many of the early organizers came out of the Feminist Movement, out of the Anti-War Movement, and so that already, that informed what those organizers were.

And I remember going to gay bars in Boston in the seventies, and guys being disdainful that we were gay activists or worked at the *Gay Community News*, that people didn't feel like they were part of a movement. They didn't feel like they didn't need a movement. They were doing just fine. And I remember and we were sort of considered the great unwashed, hippies or something.

And so I think that the phenomenon you're describing has always been with us, and I laugh today that when I say the gay agenda in the late seventies was dismantle the military and dismantle the nuclear family, and now it's we want to serve and we want to get married. And I support the right to get married, obviously, and I support the right to serve in the military, of course. We want full equality. But that wasn't the agenda that I thought we were going to end up focusing on.

And, and I think the fact that we have focused on it is because we have been an actually democratic movement. The moves towards those issues came up from the grassroots. They were not decided in the offices of a national gay organization. National gay organizations did not want to take on marriage. They thought it was a loser. It was queer couples around the country who kept insisting on suing, or trying to go to a clerk's office. It really — and certainly there were people like Evan Wolfson at Lambda, who tapped into that right away, particularly around the Hawaii case, but it was a democratic phenomenon that that came up.

**SS: But there's a difference between a movement for relationship recognition and a pervasive ideology that marriage is a centerpiece of being accepted in our society.**

RB: Of course. Of course.

**SS: These are two separate issues.**

RB: Well, I guess my point, certainly, if you talk to Terry Boggis at the Ettelbrick Project at Stonewall about LGBT family recognition issues, that's what this is all about. But the search for marriage came up from the grassroots and that that moderating influence on our movement, in a way, reflects the democracy of this movement.

**SS: Yes, but I'm disagreeing with you because, while I understand what you're saying, that the wish was a grassroots wish. It makes us more acceptable to straight people the more we resemble them.**

RB: Oh, sure.

**SS: That's not coming from us; that's coming from them. So that the spotlight on marriage and the emphasis on marriage as grounds for tolerance does not come from us. That's the only grounds we could get.**

RB: Right, right, right. We're not having ENDA, so, yeah.

**SS: Well, anyway, we've covered a lot and I've been talking to you for a long time. Is there anything in your notes that we have not covered that you want to talk about?**

RB: Well, I think, if anything, I want to talk about what it was like to live every day in the context of constant dying and how when I talk and work with folks in their twenties and thirties today, they don't know anything about that. And I remember at the moment we were living in it, it felt like a Holocaust. It felt like opera come to life,

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that the large emotions were every day right next to the mundane things about getting a sandwich for lunch. And the context of, “Okay, we’ve got to raise a dollar to pay the mortgage,” I have to swing by the hospital to visit or to sneak somebody’s dog into St. Vincent’s against the rules, or to deal with Paul Kaplan’s parents, Stanley and Rita, as he’s lying at NYU, that to be asked — because of my role at the Center, to be asked to be a speaker at funerals constantly. I would go to the hospital and, Harvey Lerner would sit there in St. Vincent’s and say, “Would you speak at my funeral, please, at my memorial service?” Or Tim Grant, you know. These folks would plan and say — and this was just all the time.

And you had colleagues, friends who were sick and you wanted to keep them on the payroll because you wanted them to have health insurance and be able to pay their rent, or folks who had brothers and sisters and lovers who were sick. It suffused and it influenced everything.

And so now when I think, I’m in my late fifties, I have lots of friends in their sixties and seventies, so now people are getting cancer and who are dying of other things, and you think, whoa, wait, we did this already. Let’s not do it again. But when I talk to twenty-five-year-olds or thirty-year-olds on staff and they just — they don’t know.

And, now there’s an organizing effort in New York to create an AIDS Memorial Park in Greenwich Village at the triangle at Seventh Avenue south of the O’Toole Building. And last summer I was approached by these two guys, Paul Kelterborn and Christopher Tepper, who are both urban planners, one at the Municipal Arts Society, the other at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, who didn’t live through the AIDS

epidemic. And one of them read *And The Band Played On* and was shocked, shocked, and said, “We’ve got to do something.” And they’re urban planners.

And they met Bill Hibsher, a lawyer here in New York, and he sent them to me and Janet Weinberg and Marjorie Hill and dragged us all in to an organizing committee. And so, it’s gone through the ULURP [Uniform Land Use Review Procedure] process, the real estate review process, and they’re raising money for this park.

But it’s so funny that I think Paul might be thirty-two and Christopher might be twenty-nine, and they didn’t live through it. They feel like — oh, my god, I’m so proud of them for wanting to organize something about it to keep it — keep that memory alive, that lesson alive, and put it in people’s faces. And it’s actually been — the resistance from some people in the Village to having an AIDS park on Seventh Avenue shocked me. I thought, oh, this isn’t over. There are people who don’t want busloads of people with AIDS and gays.

**SS: Well, there aren’t — it’s not going to be busloads of people with AIDS, right? It’s going to be the Holocaust Museum, the AIDS Park, the Highline.**

RB: Maybe, maybe, maybe.

**SS: What’s different between us and them, the younger people who didn’t go through this?**

RB: Well, in some ways they’re lucky. I think as I get older, I’m more and more conscious of my relationships with younger people, both in a formal mentoring role around professional stuff, but also around things like this, what we lived through,

and how can you tell those stories without being the old guy in a rocking chair or hectoring people? How can you live today but share that in a kind, appropriate way?

**SS: Right. Is there anything else that you want to —**

RB: No. No, I was just thinking about the impact of ACT UP, and I was actually thinking about the gays in the military in '92 and how some of the organizing that came out of that wouldn't have happened without ACT UP having happened.

**SS: How do you understand that relationship?**

RB: Well, again, gays in the military isn't something that I would have expected, but the militants of ACT UP informed the militants of gay people involved in the 1988 Democratic Convention, and a lot of ACT UP people were early Clinton people; Marty Rouse, I remember. And so Clinton and the campaign, under the radar, said, "I'll get rid of the ban on gays serving in the military." And then who was the Republican  
01:35:00 who ran against Clinton for his second term, had been a U.S. senator?

**JH: Bob Dole.**

RB: Bob Dole shrewdly said, "I can use this," and Bob Dole is the one who put Clinton on the spot, what, in February or March of '89? Is that right? No, no, I'm sorry, '93. And so I guess to answer your question, I think that the militants of the gay activists pushing things along were made possible and inspired by ACT UP.

**SS: Really? I see it as backlash to that, because we're being made part of the apparatus, and our goal was to change the apparatus. So after ACT UP, it's all backlash.**

RB: I think what's not backlash is learning to demand, learning to be entitled to equality. One of the impacts of ACT UP was that we demand to be paid attention to, and that —

**SS: But to do what, though?**

RB: To do anything. I mean, the fact that —

**SS: But it's not to do anything.**

RB: Well, but perhaps it was not a purposeful impact of ACT UP, but once you let the cat out of the bag, it's out. I mean, it's out there. If you say to gay people, "You must be equal," well, then there are people that are going to run with that in every direction, even the directions you don't pick.

**SS: Okay. Well, I have one last question. Do you have anything else?**

RB: I think we got it.

**SS: So we've asked everybody this, and the question is, looking back at ACT UP, because that's the focus for us, what do you consider to be ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think of as its biggest disappointment?**

RB: Well, the greatest achievement was this galvanizing impact on a generation of queer people and straight people about demanding equality. And our enemy was not just Reagan and Bush and the government. The enemy was media. The enemy was corporations that were not treating us with equality or compassion or justice. And that organizing in such a smart, media-attractive way was huge and, I think, influenced other kinds of activism. So I think that. And, obviously also then there was the actual results, the changes at the FDA, the changes in housing policy, all of that. And

I think that some ACT UP alums have gone on to continue to be activists and some have not, but I think everybody was changed by it.

The biggest disappointment for me, setting aside them leaving the Center, is really that that level of activism has not continued, you know. Why have subsequent generations not consistently — you have something like Occupy, the Occupy Movement happening in a moment, but it's not been consistent. I think that in our own community, every time we're attacked, you have an uptick in queer engagement and activism. When you think back to '77, '78, Anita Bryant nationally touring, attacking us, that resulted in gay organizing around the country. You've got *Bowers vs. Hardwick* in '86. You had HIV and AIDS. You had the Boy Scout case resulted in more activism.

Matthew Shepard's murder in '98 completely galvanized for a brief period that generation. I remember we had just moved to the Center from 208 West 13<sup>th</sup> Street to do the renovation over to No. 1 Little West 12<sup>th</sup> Street in the meatpacking district and people — its two blocks over, but no mass transit. People couldn't find it, can't find it. Well, Matthew Shepard was killed — we moved Labor Day. I think he was killed in October. The following two weeks, the building exploded. Everybody found it. We had to hold meetings in gay bars because all of the rooms were full, and that organizing happened. Now, again, uptick, at that point we were tracking online volunteer applications, 30 percent increase. Increase. So the layperson who wants to volunteer in any capacity, answering the phone, putting on a dance, everything went up in response to that attack. So certainly it's all in a context of when does our community galvanize itself,

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but I wish it were more consistent, and I think ACT UP was such a beautiful model. I just wish it was still happening.

**SS: Thank you, Richard.**

RB: Thank you, it's been swell.

**SS: I learned a lot.**