

A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T

A PROGRAM OF
**MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Aner Candelario**

Interview Number: **179**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **March 31, 2015**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Aner Candelario
March 31, 2015

SARAH SCHULMAN: So you look at me. The way we start is you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

ANER CANDELARIO: Okay. My name is Aner Candelario. I'm fifty-five years old. We're in my apartment in Peter Cooper Village on 23rd and First.

SS: Today's date is?

AC: Today's date is March 31st, 2015.

SS: And you're a native New Yorker.

AC: Almost. I came here, landed in the Bronx in 1963, and grew up in the tri-state area, I mean in the Bronx and in Queens, and eventually moved to 38th and Third, which was right above an Uncle Charlie's West at the time. So when I came out, I went to Bronx Science and graduated in '77, and when I came out, I decided I wasn't going to head to college, I was going to come out and move out with my first boyfriend, Cliff Bossert, Jr. And we got a \$300-a-month tiny one-bedroom, which had the tiniest kitchen, where we managed to feed thirteen members of our gay youth group, and we'd make eggplant parmesan. It was right above Uncle Charlie's, and I thought I was Mr. New York in 1978. I was Mr. New York. Yeah.

SS: That's right. Because you were born in Puerto Rico.

AC: I was born in Puerto Rico, yeah.

SS: And you went to Science. I went to Hunter, so same.

AC: Wonderful. They're like sister, brother.

SS: Right, right. Exactly. So were you gay in high school?

AC: I was not out, but at age sixteen, which was my junior year, I had a revelation on the 6 Train, and I reckon J-Lo was in the next car riding down. I was riding from Westchester Square, and on the 6 Train I realized I was not bisexual, I was gay. And it was like the movies, the sun came in, started shining, I could hear the music, you know, that moment of self-realization. And I was like, “Oh, I’m gay. I’m not bisexual. I’m gay,” just to myself.

And so being a practical person, I looked in the Yellow Pages and looked under, found under “gay,” I found the Gay Switchboard, and I called up the Gay Switchboard. I said, “Do you have any group for kids, teenagers?”

And they said, “Yeah, it’s at the Church of the Beloved Discipline on 14th near Ninth Avenue,” which was sort of a condo building that converted into a church, and now it’s back to being a condo.

And I went to my first meeting, and there as an old guy outside smoking a cigarette, the archbishop, and I was really nervous to go in. He goes, “Are you looking for the youth group?”

And I was like, “Yes, I am.”

“Well, we’re going to start in a second.”

So I went up with him, and there was like three or four other kids, and we were kind of shy. And we, you know, had a meeting for about two hours, and then we just disbanded. And I thought, “Well, it wasn’t my erotic fantasy, but this is important. This is important.” So I kept coming week after week after week, and eventually we got rid of the old guy, the archbishop, because he was a bit of a misogynist and he chain-smoked and we didn’t need him. It was a youth group.

And so at age sixteen, I ran the youth group for five years, and we went from a core group of about ten to 160 kids at a meeting where we had to split up in two groups of eighty, and they ended up at the LGBT Center. We were under MCC Church. We were at the Triangle Building under MCC on the third floor for years. I made many posters and flyers, and we would go before the gay synagogue and speak before them. We were with the gay teachers, and we spoke with NAMBLA [North American Man/Boy Love Association], and we did as much outreach and we grew. I made the banner every year.

I was secretary of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee. That's what it was called back then. First, because I was working at 5 World Trade Center for the Bank of Tokyo, they decided I could be the secretary, and finally I was the treasurer, and that's '78 and '79. That was the year Marcia P. Mason—

SS: Johnson.

00:05:00

AC: Johnson, I'm sorry. I'm nervous. Marcia P. Johnson, who was a hero, was my hero, started coming to the meetings and attending the meetings. When they would come to point of the order of the march, she would speak up for the drag queens being in the front of the march because they started Stonewall, and she spoke very eloquently. Of course, there was a lot of cross-discussion about the dykes traditionally being in the front with the Dykes on Bikes. And she just kept coming every week and speaking on behalf of the drag queens, and that year the drag queens were at the head of the march. Yeah, things like that. I still get chills from that.

Yeah, at a very early age, I was a gay activist. I was with the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The Gay Activist Alliance was there. David Thorstad was

there, Betty Santoro, Eleanor Cooper. A lot of these people went on to other things, Hetrick Martin projects.

SS: You bring up something very interesting, because I remember Gay Youth and NAMBLA used to work together.

AC: Yes.

SS: Can you just explain that? Because I don't think people realize that.

AC: Absolutely. Absolutely. We were a very above-average group of intelligent young people, I must say, and we heard about NAMBLA and we heard a lot of rumors and things, and so we brought it up as a topic. Every week you would go around and you would say your name and your age, and we had a topic, and you could choose to pass or speak.

So one week NAMBLA was the topic, and then we found out that several of the people in the group were in NAMBLA. So they said they're having a party, we're invited. So we went en masse to a NAMBLA meeting, and we found out that it was a bunch of nice gentlemen, varying ages from, like, thirty on up, who were very kind of suburban. And we saw our fellow friends, who had lovers, and we talked about why, the benefits of having an older lover. They have an apartment. They have money. They can feed you.

And we realized that the power was with the youth. We heard a lot about youth being exploited, but in all the situations, we found out it was the youth that had the power, because the youth, if anything happened, they could say, "Oh, he molested me." So there was always the threat of being turned in and the illegality of it. Not that any of

my friends ever had any problems. They always spoke highly of their partners who were twice their age. And we had the gay teachers talk. We spoke with everyone, and we held our own with all these groups, and we never felt exploited, and we stood up.

I was the youth representative when they had the first March on Washington. They took us to—was it to Dallas or to Austin, Texas? Dallas, Texas? Yeah, in Texas. We were in Texas. It smelled different. The fertilizer is just a weird—you're in an exotic land. You know you're not in Kansas anymore when you're in Texas. And we spoke very eloquently. We didn't make any demands at that time about age of consent, which we talked about a lot, lowering age of consent. We knew that they weren't ready for that. We just wanted to be represented, knowing that people would know that we were present. And we made quite a speech and quite an impact, and we got a standing ovation.

I always tried to go to every meeting as much as possible to represent gay youth. When I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, I was always there, always there, always there for gay youth, representing gay youth, and I'm very proud of my young self for being almost like a parent and a mentor to kids my age. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no roadmap. I made many mistakes, and I just was kind of fearless.

I grew up in such a sort of state of oppression, and anything about sex and sexuality was never discussed. My mother always said to neighbors and those who would listen, "Oh, my kids can come and talk." No, we couldn't. We could not come and talk to her. We could not confide in her. She found my Christopher Street

magazines in my drawer, and they would be gone. And I would get up the courage to say, “Did you take my magazines?”

“Oh, those don’t deserve to be in the house with your sisters.”

I’d tell my mom, “My sisters wouldn’t go in my drawers, but you would.”

The second time she did that, I decided I was moving out. She threatened to change the locks and we’d never hear from them again, it was like they were dead. So I said, “Okay.” Two months later, I said, “I’m moving out today.”

She said, “Do you need anything? You need towels?”

00:10:00

I just was fearless. When I realized that I was gay, it was such a self-empowering act to own my sexuality. And I was not a dumb kid. I was in Bronx Science. I didn’t come out in Science, but there was sort of a clique of us who later all turned out to be gay.

I met some of the greatest gay activists of our time, and with GAA [Gay Activists Alliance], and I learned about the history of the Firehouse, and I was just a sponge for all of that. I would go – after work, I would go to four meetings a week. I’d go to Gay Youth meeting on Saturday and a demonstration on Sunday, and we would go to Queens and we would protest against representatives in the City Council who wouldn’t let the gay rights bill be out into the General Assembly. And we protested in the winter, in the snow, in front of their house in Queens, and we were fearless. We protested in the West Village to a gasoline station who wouldn’t take gay money. We were fearless.

SS: I want to ask you about East 38th Street, because I don’t think people realize that, first of all, there were hustlers on the East Side at the time.

AC: Yes, yes, yes. There was Cowboys and Cowgirls and Rounds, and I was aware of that, and I did outreach there too. I took my little Gay Youth flyers to those places and to those blocks and handed out flyers to people there, young people there.

SS: Because people don't believe that now, that the East Side of Manhattan—

AC: Yeah. Thirty-third and Third, it was the traditional—or 53rd and Third. And I lived on for a while, years later I ended up living on 53rd and Third, and I saw a street hustler for years living on the street and slowly saw him decline. And I would give him socks and underwear and clothing. Everything I grew out of, he could still wear because he was just frail. And I remember seeing him on the coldest night, going out for something, and see him like in a box, like skeletal, and then the next days after, he was gone. So it was brutal. It was brutal.

I hung out at Cowboys and Cowgirls, waiting to give flyers out, and I got approached, and maybe I did go with some of these guys to see what it was about, maybe about four or five times, and I saw that it was kind of a lonely existence for the men, and it was too heartbreaking for me. But I kept going and leaving flyers for the kids.

SS: How did the bars feel about activists?

AC: I was low-key. I was low-key. I had little cards printed out, handwritten, and I had flyers that I'd fold up, and I'd just give it to them. And I was fearless. I was doing outreach. We had, like I said, a core group of about ten kids, and rapidly we grew to sixty and eighty. And, yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm very proud of that, yeah.

SS: So when did you first become aware of AIDS?

AC: Very early on in 1980, I would say. Our friend Donald Fariello, he was an attorney. He was always stocky. We would go to Paradise Garage with him. He loved to dance. He was always very buoyant. And he suddenly just got sick, and we're hearing about this gay cancer, and he got sick. And so – they said, "He's in the hospital."

So I went to the hospital, and he was skeletal. Like in a matter of a month, he was skeletal. And I said, "Donald, how are you doing?"

He said, "I can't eat anything."

I go, "Is there anything I can get you?"

He says, "I really want McDonald's."

And I was like, "That's really not going to help you."

He says, "Oh, I want McDonald's." So I ran out and got McDonald's, and he took like a bite and a sip and that was it. He had to walk with an intravenous into the bathroom, and I could see he was skeletal, and I knew he was – had a — he was a full, chubby guy. And that was devastating to me, and that was early, early on, 1980.

SS: So when did you first get involved with AIDS, with working against AIDS?

AC: Well, I, by then I was pretty much—well, we talked about it in the group. We told kids how to use condoms.

SS: I mean, how long did it take before—I mean, because it took a while before people got into using condoms.

AC: Yes, yes, yes. I was lucky in that I started—I did ten years of accounting. I was at Condé Nast for eight years. I was a *Vogue* cost analyst. My life was very structured. I walked from 38th Street to 45th Street and Madison, where Condé

Nast was at the time. I had a tie and Brooks Brothers tassel loafers, and I was an adult. I was an adult, and I was very aware, and I was always a sponge for information. And since Donald died, I was very conscious of safe sex, before they had a term for it. I also was a very sexual person. Like, I resisted not being sexual. Does that make sense?

SS: Yeah.

AC: And I thought that my sexuality was my empowerment, but at the same time, my friend was dying, and so I was very conscious of condoms, and never had a problem with condoms and thought condoms was kind of like a fetishy kind of straight young guy thing. So I always had condoms in my pocket, in my wallet.

Then as soon as I heard about ACT UP, I just went, and it took several meetings for me to sort of catch on and realize, okay, I don't have any information. I was used to being sort of a leader and mentoring, and I had no information, I had no idea of the scope, and so I just listened. It took me years. I don't know if I ever raised my hand. I think I just was a sponge. And I learned the word "efficacy" in trials and chemical names and prophylaxis. I mean, I was just soaking it all in because I had friends that were, looked fine, and back then, we were very careful not to stigmatize anyone with HIV. Like, if you were to find out someone had HIV, you immediately embraced them, you gave them a hug. It didn't stop you from having sex with them. You had your condoms. You were prepared. And we were very careful not to stigmatize anyone with HIV.

Now I see people say "HIV-negative only," and that breaks my heart. It breaks my heart. All our friends who were positive—not all of them – a lot of them – looked the same. They acted the same. They walked the same. We didn't fear drinking

out of the same Coke can. They were our friends, and we were right, but we were there for them. Yeah.

SS: Now, when you came to ACT UP, did you know these people, or were these people that you had not worked with before?

AC: Pretty much most I had not worked with before.

SS: Because most people were not like you. They had not been gay activists, right? For many people, it was their first time in politics.

AC: Yes.

SS: So how was ACT UP different than the previous groups you had been in?

AC: The focus. The focus. And back with the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, we had a lot of struggles trying to be more inclusive, and there were a lot of left-wing groups and radical groups and feminist groups, and we had to walk a fine line between focusing on gay rights and not leaving out the rest of the left.

With ACT UP, it was very, very focused. We wanted a cure. They were looking for a cure. What was going to help? What was working? Wheat-grass juice. What holistic benefits we could attain from flaxseed oil, what have you, spirulina. I went to HEAL [Health Education AIDS Liaison]. I did not trust the medical establishment. I was part of the hepatitis-B vaccine, and I wouldn't be surprised if—that happened in '79, '80, right before people started getting sick, and I would not be surprised if I got a placebo or something and my friends got the virus. I would not be surprised. I'm not accusing anybody, but it's very funny how you get a shot and then people get sick. It's very cause-and-effect.

I remember being home and I got a high fever, a high fever. And I hated hospitals, I hated doctors, and I always took care of myself very well, was conscious about my diet and my well-being, and I worked out and everything. And I got such a fever. I, luckily, had two roommates at the time, and I was resisting them. They were like, “You’ve got to go to the doctor. You’ve got to go to the doctor.”

I said, “I’m not going to a doctor for a fever.” Suddenly it just spiked, and I was like, “Okay, I’m going to go to the doctor.”

So I went to the doctor and they held me overnight. There was nothing to find.

00:20:00

I remember, I remember we were on one of those futons that opened up into a sofa, futons opened into a bed. I was laying on that with—one of my roommates was painting her nails, and she painted my big toe red. And I said, “Oh, very funny, very funny. Get that off my toe.”

And then my fever spiked, and I end up going to the hospital, and the doctor tells me to take my socks off, and there’s that goddamn red toenail, and I was so embarrassed. Here I’m thinking, “Okay, they’re going to find out I’m gay and I’m this and I’m that, and I have a red toenail.” But, yes, yes, to this day I keep that toenail red. Just kidding, just kidding. Okay, so, yeah.

SS: So did you join any committees in ACT UP?

AC: I don’t think I was smart enough to join a committee. I know I was in action groups. One was called CHER, and we were involved in doing, like, civil disobedience. I was more in a group function, because—yeah.

SS: Like an affinity group?

AC: Yes, yes. And I remember when we were in City Hall, I thought, well, strength in numbers, and we had to do our thing, which was to block a certain road. And we said, “Okay, we’re going to do it,” and my heart is thumping. I’d never been so scared in my life. I said, “Before we do it, make sure we have cameras on us in case anything happens,” because everybody else was ready to go. I was the most chicken. I was—oh, my god, I was ready to call and cry home for Mom.

And they just grabbed me. I was just – the group just took me into the street, and I was like, “Okay, we’re doing it.” And my heart is thumping. And we’re sitting down on the ground and we’re blocking traffic. There were noisemakers, and everything is very loud and immediate and impactful. And they just came to—they said, “Don’t resist when they take you. Just go with them. Go with them. We’re going to get arrested. We’re going to get arrested.”

So I’m thinking, “Oh, my god, Mom, what am I doing? I’m getting arrested.” But I believed in it so much. I’m a painter; I have paint on me. So we just got arrested, and I remember a great feeling of solidarity. We were in a holding pen, and there was about fifty of us in a holding pen, and some people were doing graffiti on the walls, talking about how Sergeant so-and-so was dreamy. Somebody had to stay and take all that off. That wasn’t me. And it was so empowering. I was more as a body. I was not a brain, I was not an orator, I was not giving out information. I was just a body. I felt strength in numbers.

I remember marching in a sea of seven hundred, eight hundred, nine hundred black-clothed fellow ACT UP members at the Gay Pride March and going past St. Patrick’s and yelling, “Shame!” I didn’t know that my mom was standing right there

with her girlfriend, who was telling her to accept me as I am if she wanted to have a relationship with me. I just felt like I needed to be a body in this mass.

SS: Okay. Did you go to the FDA action?

AC: Yes, yes.

SS: What did you do there?

AC: National Institute of Health, those, several of those, we did a couple of those. I remember, like, colored blue smoke, and there was a lot of theater going on. I was not an organizer or anything, a planner. I was no brain in that situation. I was another body, representing for my friends who couldn't be there physically and had died. Again, very empowering to be a participant, so whenever I could show up as a body, I did.

SS: Who were your friends in ACT UP? Who did you hang with?

AC: Well, there was a young segment of twenty-somethings, and I think they called them the Swim Team.

SS: Were you on the Swim Team?

AC: I was not there that night, because I had a date that night, and I didn't go to that great party afterwards, so I wasn't part of that. But those were my friends, George Whitman and Adam Smith and—oh, my gosh. To me, it was more about the people that were already dead, who already passed, who were already sick, not the glamorous boy thing, toy boy thing. It was for my friend Donald and for the next kid that was coming into Gay Youth who they needed a cure, they needed something, they needed information. So, yeah.

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SS: What did you do when kids came into Gay Youth positive?

AC: They weren't testing in that era. Testing was in mid-eighties. I was out in '81.

SS: So did ACT UP take up a big piece of your life?

AC: It's not that it was taken; it was offered. I remember being in the Center and my friend George Whitman did a mural, *No More Martyrs*, and it was electric. When Gay Power was focused in the early—people don't realize in the late seventies, New York was going to hell in a handbasket. We were bankrupt. There was strikes, there was garbage strikes, there was teacher strikes. The subways were filled with graffiti. The subway cars, interior, exterior, every square inch of a subway was covered in graffiti. There was no money. The governor told us to go to hell. New York City was a grimy, dirty place. There was a West Side Highway, there were trucks, there were rotting piers.

And amidst all this decay were gay people revitalizing the West Village. We revitalized New York City. We had Calvin Klein, and people would look at the Calvin Klein ad to see who was the model, because that was Calvin's boyfriend of the month. We created industrial design, industrial carpeting and high-tech design, and The Saint was the temple of high tech. Everything, the theater and the Tony Awards and food and dining and museums and culture, everything, everything, everything was focused. And it's like the gays and the lesbians had taken up the mantle of life in New York. Where people were running away on the weekends, we were there on the weekends. Yeah, that was a lot.

SS: Now, did ACT UP ever do anything that you didn't agree with?

AC: That's a tough question. I don't think I could ever appreciate the full scope of their influence. All I saw was the good. And I sort of acquiesced to others who I knew knew a lot more than me. So, I—

SS: What about Stop the Church?

AC: Oh, very good. I didn't participate in that. That was controversial, but it brought attention. We were the elephant in the room again, and we were dying. Before, it was just our right to live and be and hang out in our bars. Now it was like life or death. So I totally supported their doing something very pointed against the church, because the church is hypocritical. Most of these clergymen are closeted homosexuals the pope has been harboring. The past pope who abdicated, or whatever you do, resigned, if he steps one foot out of the Vatican, he's going to be prosecuted for hiding pedophile priests for decades. So I have no sympathy for the church. I think there's a lot of good Catholic people who are not anti-gay. I don't make all Catholics wrong. I think if you have a faith or a belief, good for you if that makes you a better person. It's not an excuse or a ticket to hate.

I applauded them bravely going into the church and risking everything that could possibly happen. They could have been shot at. Who knows? Our cardinal at the time said, "I don't like the sin of homosexuality, but I love the sinner." And every time we would go in our march, he would turn his back, go to the steps of St. Patrick's and turn his back, and I don't know how that represents loving us. So I have no sympathy and no love for the Catholic Church. I love Catholic people, I'm not anti-Catholic, but the whole—Christ came here to destroy hierarchies, but then the hierarchy was the rabbinical, rabbis, priests, and they were telling people mostly that they were unclean and

that they had to do this whole ritual bathing to go into temple, and then you had to change your money for the temple Monopoly money, and it was a whole scam. And Christ came to destroy hierarchies, and Pontius Pilate, who was Roman, ordered his crucifixion, and it's very ironic that the seat of the Catholic Christian faith is in Rome.

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So, to me, everything that the Church stands for is anti-Christ. So the pope, to me, is the anti-Christ, the opposite. Christ was supposedly confronted by the devil in the desert after he caused a riot in the temple for the moneychangers, and so the Roman authorities went after him. He had to hide in the desert, and the devil supposed came and said, "I'll give you a kingdom."

And Christ said, "I don't want to be king. I don't want a kingdom," and he rejected.

And Pontius Pilate said, "Admit that you are the messiah. I'll let you go."

He said, "I'm not the messiah." Because he knew if he said he was the messiah, the hierarchy would be formed again; he would be at the top. So he did the ultimate act of humility by sacrificing himself in this life, and it's about humility.

The Catholic Church sits on a vault of treasures, and one book in the Vatican library can wipe out poverty in South America, one book, and they have vaults of books. And they were – the whole institution of the Catholic Church was to assimilate—was to assemble—that's a better word—knowledge, all the knowledge, and to keep it from the people. The real knowledge, to keep it, assemble it, and anybody who would give it out to the people was excommunicated. And they wanted to excommunicate Galileo. So they wanted to keep the knowledge for themselves, and they withheld it from the self, which, to me, is the opposite of Christianity, in my opinion.

Okay. That was a lot too.

SS: That's okay. Were you involved with the forming of ACT UP Puerto Rico? Did you have anything to do with that?

AC: No. No, no, no, no.

SS: Did you ever go to the Latino Caucus?

AC: There were Latino caucuses at the time, and Gay Youth invited them to meet with us, and they came en masse. I think they came with sixty members, and it was very impressive.

But I didn't do outreach into the Latin community. My Spanish is not that good. But in the eighties, I started working in clubs, and in the clubs they were handing out condom packs, and I always had condom packs. I had them in my backpack. I was a dancer. After doing accounting, I decided I was going to be a go-go dancer, and I—

SS: Where did you work?

AC: I worked—I danced in every club, every—I started because Dean Johnson, Rock 'n' Roll Fag Bar, he said, "I'll give you seventy-five bucks if you dance around on stage in your underwear for two and a half hours, three hours."

I said, "What?" That was like a day and a half's pay or two days' pay for me. So I said, "Okay." So I did that.

After ten years of accounting, I said, "Okay. I'm now head of my own department. What else? What's next?" I said, "Enough of this." I went out on unemployment. My boss gave me a bad review. I quit. I went on unemployment. My rent was like \$370 a month. My unemployment covered that. I started working as an Egyptian promoting *Aida*, which never came to fruition. It was supposed to be held at

Jersey Stadium. And I was making like \$300 off the books—you didn't hear that—a week, and just lived—like, my whole life, I became a personality. I was no longer in a cubicle. I was a person. I was a gay activist. I fought with ACT UP. And I was a dancer. I did the doorman at clubs. I was sort of just a cult personality.

And then Steven Meisel did the Red Hot + Blue campaign, and so he had a bunch of us dancers come up, since we were used to being pretty much comfortable with our bodies. They picked my friend Steven Ashmore [phonetic] and I. His birthday was yesterday, he was here yesterday, and I made lunch for him.

He said, "Just do something." So I would just recline and I held him and he took that shot, and that became the poster for the first Red Hot + Blue campaign. So we became the poster boys for Red Hot + Blue, and we would just travel with condoms and give out condoms. We went to Chicago and Boston as the safe-sex guys. It was pretty freakin' magical. I was, like, myself 100% of the time. It was the most incredible time. I danced for a living. What I loved to do for free, I was getting paid for and tipped. Then I was being very political. I was very aware. People see me as sort of an icon from that time, and I was like, "Whoa, that was a long time ago, and you still remember me from that?" Since then I'm very kind of like a private sort of citizen. You know, I'm
00:35:00 fifty-five, I don't go out, I don't go to bars, I don't drink. I paint. I paint in solitude.

But that was such a tremendous time culturally, and us gaining a voice when Reagan would not say the word "AIDS" for six years, we had a – we were yelling it out. We were being confrontational. We weren't being wimpy and submissive. We were being confrontational. So the church thing, I say, yeah, that's what we had to do. I

make no apologies for it. I wasn't there, but I was definitely there in spirit, and I supported it. Yeah.

That was a lot.

SS: That's okay. So one of the things we've talked to people about is being gay at that time was intense because you're surrounded by illness and death.

AC: Yes.

SS: But being in ACT UP, it was really intense, right, because there were so many sick people.

AC: Yes.

SS: And so many dying people all the time.

AC: Yes.

SS: Is there any particular person that you recall especially who was in ACT UP who passed away?

AC: Tassos. And I'm trying to remember Tassos' name. He was so incredible. He made beautiful dolls out of fabric, which were all different shaped and sort of voodooish, but at the same time whimsical. And I remember going into his house, and he loved fabrics and working with the fabrics to make the dolls. He was just so beautiful, like the light shown out of his face.

And I remember drinking out of a can that he—we would share a can of Coke that we were drinking. He was the first person that I, within the group that I identified with that I was there for, and we just, like, hovered around him as if our bodies could shield him from everything. And when he passed, that was such a void that it still haunts me today, such a void like he's gone.

During that time, I lost a lot of other people from drug overdoses and suicide and leukemia, brain tumors, you have it. So death was a very familiar part of my life, and a lot of my poetry was about loss and losing people. To be, as a child, you learn how to absorb. I think I was a child pretty much through my twenties. I just was a sponge for all of it. And now in my fifties, I do the opposite. I let go. I surrender. I release. I forgive. I've accumulated a lot of experience, a lot of things, and I find myself constantly deaccessionizing—wow, I did that—of things, just getting get rid of things and forgiving people and letting go of things. That's what it means for me to be an adult, to let go.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

AC: I don't know if there was an official date of leaving. I just knew things were changing within the group. We made so many strides and with Mathilde Krim. I felt that there came a point where there were so many things in place, like by the mid-nineties, there were actual cocktails that were saving my friends' life that didn't include AZT. Okay. I tested in 1991 with my then-boyfriend. I was totally smitten by him, but he was a lot of work, and probably so was I. I was thinking, "I'm probably positive." I was assuming that I was positive because I'd been a very sexually active person, and I just assumed I was positive, and so I had been using condoms. I became vegetarian. I was watching my diet very strictly.

My friends, I had lots of friends who were positive, who were healthy, who were working out, who were muscular, who were smoking pot, who were happy. They were fine. They were positive. And I just happened to be—all of us were very out. The ones who tested, they were – we immediately told each other. So I had six years of

hearing people saying they were positive and they were fine. And I had six years of people saying they were positive and having lesions and going through stunts, stunts in their—stents or stunts—in their chest and things, coming out, protruding, and blind, and coming back from that, and people dying in two months. And I saw the whole spectrum, but I saw enough that were healthy that I knew that if I tested positive, I would still be all right.

00:40:00 And I went through a very spiritual reawakening, and I focused on my values. I went through a very, like, New Age period, and I was part of that whole New Age harmonic convergence thing. I remember that was 1987, and I remember the beginning of the year I said, “Something new is coming. Something’s coming, something positive, something wonderful.” And then I hear about this New Age Movement, and I started going to meetings in some Community Center. I went week after week, and I got up at five. They were going to have meditation in Central Park on the Upper West Side in a children’s sand circle pit that had cobblestones all around, and they were going to meditate there at five in the morning.

So I remember going to the Boy Bar and bringing my sheets and having to speak in front of people to talk about the harmonic convergence. And I was like – I was very nervous and self-conscious and thinking people are going to think I’m crazy. So the emcee took the thing and read it out for me, and I was just—and I remember I went with my sister, her boyfriend, and my best girlfriend. We stayed overnight. We slept in the park overnight, meditating, freezing on a sheet that we just happened to bring. We were huddled. It was the coldest night, August 16th and 17th, which is Madonna’s and Sean Penn’s birthday, which is just an aside.

So we came out of a deep meditation on the second day at noon, and people just came out of this meditation and they started just whooping and yelling and cheering. And someone said, “The catastrophe has been avoided!” And we thought we were making a difference.

And at that time, I could not have a low-level conversation with anybody. I was so focused on what my purpose was and fighting the good fight and fighting against racism and fighting against homophobia, fighting against sexism, fighting against ageism. I was an activist. That’s who I was. And I was a spiritual being, and I just emanated that for quite a bit. Yeah, that was, like, the pinnacle of my education in the late eighties, yeah.

SS: I only have one more question. Do you want to ask anything?

JIM HUBBARD: No.

AC: That was a lot.

SS: That’s okay. So here’s my final question.

AC: I didn’t realize I could talk. Oh, shit. Don’t film that.

SS: Final question. Looking back, what do you think was ACT UP’s greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

AC: Wow, that’s a tough—the biggest achievement is that I’m still here and that I had enough information and I saw what worked and how my friends died from AZT and they just went great – a lot of them, I begged them, “Please stop taking it. Stop taking it.” And I talked nutrition for them, and I went food shopping for a lot of them. They had tons of food stamps. I said, “Why are you eating—why are you having hamburgers and McDonald’s?” I would go food shopping for a lot of them.

You know, if there was no ACT UP, I would not be. I would not have the information. I wouldn't have the calm within myself. I would not have waited to—I just recently went on meds for the first time, in this year. I went on Stribild. It's miraculous. I feel energetic. I have no viral load. I kept watch on my viral load since 1991, and I kept it pretty much under 5,000. I was using HEAL and their philosophy to keep myself well.

But without ACT UP there would not be—there are some times where positive thinking and good intentions and prayers work, and there's times when you need an antibiotic. There's times when you need something very specific and complex. And I waited and waited and waited, keeping tabs on myself, like, meticulous tabs on my viral load, on my T-cells, and saw them slowly going down and down and down and down and down. And I waited and I waited and I waited. It's because I had got a new, incredible doctor who she was just a presence, and she looked at me and she talked to him and she said, "It's time, Aner. Your T-cells are down to 170. It's time. You're fifty-five. It's time"

And I just looked at her and said, "Let's do it."

00:45:00

There would be no Stribild for me right now if there had been no ACT UP, and so I owe them everything, everything that I was able to experience in my twenties. And my friends who are still here, they owe everything to them. So I would be the last person to in any way criticize or devalue anything they did, because they did it without a roadmap, and they did it for their friends, and they did it from the heart. I saw very little ego and very little profit for our—you know, other than our lives being saved. It was not

a capitalistic venture. It was the most altruistic thing that's happened on the planet, as far as I've ever experienced in my life.

Wow. That was cathartic. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

So now I'm on Stribild. I finally went on meds. And ACT UP made it possible for those meds to be funded and the clinical trials to be funded and for it to evolve and grow into something that was so specific that it's doing—at fifty-five years old, I feel like a thirty-five-year-old. I have incredible energy. All my supplements work. Everything works. It's like a second lease on life. I'm living by the grace of the early people that they just amassed. They just showed up. One day they just showed up in a room and said, "We're fighting back, and we're not going to be silent." So I'm so blessed to have been any part of that.

SS: Thank you. Thanks, Aner.

AC: That was cathartic. Okay. All right. Is this the x-rated part now?

JH: Yes, definitely.