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Interviewee: **César Carrasco**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of César Carrasco
March 9, 2014

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so you just look at me.

CÉSAR CARRASCO: Sure.

SS: And the way we start is you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

CC: Okay. So I'm César Carrasco. And I'm 59. And today is March – 12th?

JAMES WENTZY: Nine.

CC: Ninth, 2014.

SS: Okay. And we're in your beautiful new apartment –

CC: And we are in my new 1929 old apartment.

SS: Right. In – where are we? — Fair-

CC: Fleetwood.

SS: Fleetwood.

CC: Yeah.

SS: Okay, so where were you born, Cesar?

CC: Chile.

SS: All right. And when you were growing up, what kinds of values did your parents exhibit to you about ideas of community, or standing up for other people?

CC: Um – probably the most significant values inculcating that sense were, came from my mother. She grew up being a Seventh Day Adventist. So there were similar values to the ones that relatives who were Catholics, which

is the predominant religion in Latin America had. I think that there were maybe more of a sense of helping the needy; visiting the poor; trying to help those in need – not just going to church and studying the Bible, which we did a lot.

SS: Okay.

CC: Yeah. So, the issue of – the characteristics of class distinction that are very prevalent in Latin America were always kind of like, you know, somewhat passed on. I knew that I was – I came from a working class, trying to be middle class. So that gave us a sense of who the people in politics, you know, could work with our group. So that was a sense of community in the sense of political terms: who are the people that you should rally behind, because they were the ones who presented your interests, you know, for education or jobs or things like that. So that was a little bit of that, even though my family was not very politically active; not when I was growing up.

SS: How old were you when the fascists came to power?

CC: I was 18. I was 18. By then, things weren't, were getting a little more radical in my house. It was more evident that at least my father was very, very opposed to the leftist government. My mother just kept silent. And everybody was getting very scared of what was happening with all these propaganda that was created from the outside, that kept everybody terrified of the government that was not that terrifying, but that was the way it was. And when I was 18, the coup, the military coup, you know, happened.

SS: So before the coup, so during the Allende period; were you active at all? Were you active as a gay man? Were you active in any kind of political –

CC: Not actively politically. Partly because, I guess, I was a little bit of a chicken. I was young. I mean, when Allende was elected, which was kind of like, it was a significant event — I mean, people were kind of like very polarized — I was 15. But that was the year, when I was 18, the year that the coup happened, is when I came out to my family. So I was – you know, I was pretty open about my sexuality, for Chile, Chilean standards, for any standards. I really felt that I needed to come out, and I came out to my family at 18.

SS: Now, I don't know how much you were in the community at the time. But what was the difference for gay people between Allende and the military governments?

00:05:00 CC: That's a fascinating topic, because the Pinochet dictatorship, which was bloody; it was horrendous, it was kind of like concentration camps, we saw people being arrested and taken to detention camps back then, they were, at the beginning, there were no concentration camps, there were detention camps, and some of them were exiled. Friends that we played, in the neighborhood – by then, they were college-educated, and they'd been involved in some form of leftist or – leftist activity, and so it was a tremendous change, because you saw your life being kind of like really turned upside down. You know, like people that you

played with or whatever, all of a sudden, they are missing. Or we know that they are exiled in some kind of embassy, and trying to get out, in one way or another.

And so – on the other hand, Pinochet and his goons; you know, the government was not particularly insidious toward gay men. And there were very important thinkers and political strategists that we all knew that were homosexuals.

I would say that Chile in the '70s was probably like, not like New York. But maybe it was like Washington, D.C. – Santiago. There were a couple of bars. The police wouldn't, couldn't care less. They may stop, be very friendly, in some kind of like gay place, or mixed place – there were not necessarily gay places. There were kind of like bohemian places in downtown Santiago. And some of my friends would go there. And they would just come and check if there were minors. But they were never harassing. They would take jokes from gay customers. Nobody felt threatened. There were a couple of clubs, or things.

I would say that probably like the way, I don't know, like – Atlanta or D.C. must have been in the '70s. Certainly not like New York. And after that, it got more repressive for all of us. Because there were these kind of like curfew. It started very early, and then it moved, you know, like to eight or nine or 10 or 11 p.m. But when you have a curfew, it – afraid that you could be arrested or killed by 11 if you are not in some place. It's like, by seven p.m. or eight p.m., the city is probably getting empty. So in that sense, there were not that much of a night life.

But curiously, like, I remember that there was this little gay joint, kind of like a couple of blocks away from the headquarters of Pinochet and the military people, and – you could not hold hands; you couldn't do any kind of demonstration of affection – kissing or holding hands or anything. But it was a gay club, it was a gay little thing.

There were no places to dance. You could just go there and have drinks, and cruise around, and stuff like that.

SS: So there was no political movement, really. It was like a social scene.

CC: There was no political gay community, neither before or after. During the Allende period, there was some people in government that were really thinking and maybe doing some kind of projects, or something like that, about entertaining the idea of eliminating the anti-sodomy law, or something like that. So something was kind of like going in the right direction. With Pinochet, was nothing, nothing. But there was nothing political at all. I mean –

SS: Right.

CC: It was a very repressive – there were no movies, books, nothing. It was like a culturally dead country.

SS: Did you know that there was a politicized gay movement out there in the world?

CC: Yes. When I was 15 or 16, I remember that I got in my hands – a copy of *Life* magazine. There was a Spanish version. So you would find it in

00:10:00 any kind of like newsstand back then. Then it disappeared. But by then, I remember that I got this issue of *Life* magazine, with pictures of the 1967, or one of, or maybe the 1969, whatever – one of the first gay parades. And from that moment, New York became kind of like this magical place to aspire to go. And I think that someone found it among my things, and made it disappear.

SS: Someone in your family.

CC: Yeah. An aunt or someone, or my mother or someone. Because they all suspected, but then they all have an idea that I was gay. When I came out at 18, it was not surprise; they were just shocked because of the confirmation.

But anyway; I knew that there was a lot of gay life in New York. I have friends who have gone to Europe, and they spoke wonders of Berlin and Hamburg and Amsterdam. But they talk mostly about how fun it was; the bathhouses and the clubs, and how free, how free, the amount of freedom that you could have. And I had some sense that there was more than just social or party organization, that there was a lot about more of like, you know, you would hear about gay power. I saw a clip of the last Kennedy to die — what was his name, I forget —

SS: Robert Kennedy?

CC: Not Robert.

SS: Oh, Teddy Kennedy?

CC: Ted Kennedy, when he was running for the presidential office. This must have been, I don't know, like – I don't know when it was. Way before I came here. And it was a clip in the news, saying that he had openly said that he supported the rights of gay people. So I understood that this was not about people who were dancing and do drugs, or go to whatever – shopping; that there was like a political group, or someone that was recognized, at least in New York and California. You had this idea that San Francisco, New York, are the places where gay people lived very openly.

SS: So how did you get out of Chile, and when did you come?

CC: I came here at 27; nine years into the dictatorship.

SS: Oh.

CC: I was in a relationship with a man who was a naturalized citizen. He was actually Argentinian. And he was much older than I am. He was a professional, he was a chemist. I was ending college, finishing college. And he was very politically active. I remember that he would just finance, or help, or do certain things to help some groups that were against Pinochet. And I was smart enough not to ask any more, because we all knew that the less you knew, the better it was in case that something happen.

He was a college professor, with a much more rich social life than I could have. I mean, it's like I – but I was finishing college, I had some friends, I didn't have any money, so it's not that I could do much.

And so after all these years, we really felt, both of us, that we were going to get old in a country like this, in a completely dead, dead, dead society. For some reason, the mental model of every Chilean was that the Pinochet dictatorship was a copy of Franco's dictatorship in Spain.

I don't know where that came from, but it was so ironclad-structured. It was Pinochet and the rest of the *junta militar*, you know, with the head of the armed forces, you know, including the police – the four branches. This was like Hitler-like type of structure. It was not Noriega or, or Fidel, or some banana republic type of crazy stuff. It was not like Argentina, either, that would go from, you know, from coup d'état to another one, whatever. But it was basically just, you know, trying to get money, and take advantage of the rich country, and the things, how much they could just get out of that, similar to what's been happening in Russia now. You know, like these governments that basically are just so corrupt that the people are suffering.

00:15:00

So with Pinochet, it was – it was very, very, very deeply entrenched, you know, the level of infiltration and control. And we all knew – if Franco lasted 40 years, we doubt that this is not going to last less than that. So we decide that it's like – this is not going to go away. And we're going to become, like, bitter, old gay men here. By then, I was definitely opposed to the government. Not that I could do much, and I never risked to get involved with a specific type of opposition, because I was not going to get killed.

SS: Right.

CC: Being gay also placed things in a different perspective.

Because, why am I going to really be so supportive of this, when the moment that my sexual orientation is known — and that has been one of the profiles of kind of like especially the more Russian, more Communist Party, you know — women, homosexuals — it's like very, very restrictive, in that sense. So it was kind of like, oh, I don't know if I really want to really put myself on the line for these things. But I was definitely against Pinochet — my lover or my partner was.

And his parents lived in the U.S. He spoke English since he was born. He was Anglo-Argentinian. And he had been able to get his papers — green card. He used to come to the U.S. regularly for some post-doc thing, at San Francisco or the University of Pennsylvan-, so he knew people. So we thought that probably the most likely place to just leave Chile was the United States.

For me, it was more important to use the opportunity that I had. For me, more important than where I would go, it was just to get out of Chile.

SS: Okay, okay.

CC: Whether it was the U.S., France, or Holland or Italy or whatever — or even maybe, I don't know, Venezuela back then. There were a lot of Chileans there. So I would go wherever it was most, in practical terms, more possible to just get the hell out of Chile.

SS: And so where did you go?

CC: Well, I got, I got, finally, finally, after a lot of tries, a visa, a student visa. Because you couldn't get — being young, 27, not having much

money, not having assets or much of an income, or property, or anything like that; you could never get a visa to come to the U.S. But I got a student visa to come and study English as a second language in St. Louis University. And I went to St. Louis University.

SS: With your partner?

CC: No no. He came later. He came later. He stayed there, kind of like dismantling the apartment, and putting some things in a ship, and selling the rest. Like that trunk over there came by boat, with things that belonged to us.

SS: And what year is that?

CC: '82.

SS: Okay, wow.

CC: '82.

SS: So you arrive in St. Louis. Now, were you prepared for the racism of America?

CC: I was prepared in the sense that I grew up in a society where discrimination, oppression and distinctions of who is above and who is below and who exploits who and who abuses who, was very clear. Here, it was, more than class, it was like race.

I was appalled at the dramatic difference between black and white people in St. Louis. That was very, very, very evident. I didn't know that it was like that. I thought that it was like on TV, with this *Shaft*, or the figures of the Blaxpotation movies – that there were people that, kind of were okay, and

whatever – maybe not terribly integrated, but not that level of poverty that I saw in St. Louis. Especially because St. Louis University actually is in the part that is the most dilapidated part of downtown St. Louis.

SS: Huh, okay.

00:20:00 CC: So it was kind of like, what the hell happened here? I mean, it was this beautiful 19-whatever, prewar skyscrapers empty, totally empty. Beautiful houses, completely empty. Well, some of them were shooting galleries, or who knows what. And then St. Louis University had taken over some of them, or whatever. So it was kind of – the dormitory was in a – back then, luxury hotel. And now it was just a dinky dormitory.

And surrounded this area was kind of like – oh like a black neighborhood you would see poor people. Poor people.

SS: So did you get involved with the gay community at that time?

CC: Yes. There weren't that much of a political gay community in St. Louis back then. But I started getting involved with whatever I found. I started attending some gay congregations. And actually, there was kind of like a mixed congregation, close by. I didn't have a car; it was kind of like 20 below zero; it was horrible, the winter that I was not used to. So nearby, I remember that there was this gay church, and I was so absolutely marvel by the idea that in this country, you could just go to a church being gay, and hold hands with a partner. Even though I'm not religious.

SS: Right.

CC: But I thought that it was wonderful.

And I kept my eye in New York, New York, New York, for the spring break in March. I remember that I grabbed whatever money that I had, and I took a Trail bus – Trailways bus, from St. Louis to New York. And I spent a week here, and it was kind of like, oh my god; I arrived in heaven. It was a wonderful trip. And it was kind of like, I have to live in this city. I don't know how, but I have to really make it to this city.

SS: When did you come here?

CC: At the end of that year, I left St. Louis in May; I went to Buffalo to stay with a friend, because I had no place to go; and then we tried to reunite with my partner, but the relationship was not doing well. I mean, he was trying to get a job, I was trying to get my papers. So we would occasional contact, and et cetera.

And then finally, we got together here for Halloween – between Halloween and Thanksgiving, in October, or something like that, of 1982. He had gotten a job at Stony Brook. He was living nearby. And then I came to live with him. We both rented space in the house of a professor that was away, and had this big house nearby, in Setauket, close to Port Jefferson, where Stony Brook is.

And then is when I got involved for the first time with some kind of like political group, which was the gay and lesbian office, or coalition, or group from Stony Brook.

SS: Okay, in '82.

CC: In '82.

SS: So AIDS was identified in '81. So do you remember when it first started to appear in your life, or on your radar?

CC: Yeah, that was actually in Chile. Because my ex — he's still alive, by the way — my ex, in his different trips to the U.S., he had met a doctor — he's still a dermatologist in Manhattan — Virgil, that's his name. He was finishing med school in San Francisco. They were good friends, and sometimes he would send us gifts, and I know that Bruce, my ex, would be in contact with Virgil. And I remember that once, returning from one of these trips to the U.S. — I mean, Bruce would come here for a couple of weeks, or sometimes a couple of months, to do some kind of like inter-college project — and he told me that Virgil had mentioned these strange skin disorders and respiratory disorder that were becoming more and more prevalent among gay men.

And by the time that I came here, I already kind of like – we were kind of like already getting the idea that this was getting serious – by 1981, 1982.

SS: So when was the first time someone you knew was HIV-positive?

00:25:00 CC: When I came to live in New York, there was — I met this guy from Chile. You know, like when you go to a place, they introduce you. If you go to France, they're going to introduce you to some Americans that live in Paris, quickly, you know. So that was – there were a lot of men from Chile living in

New York. And one of them was this hair stylist. He had his own shop on Greenwich Avenue. And then he got — that's the first time that I met someone that is officially diagnosed with HIV, or AIDS, or whatever they called it then. This must have been 1982.

SS: So were you involved in any kind of AIDS work before you came to ACT UP?

CC: Yes. Yes. Very shortly, at some point — I was in San Francisco. And I translated a flyer or a brochure, some educational thing, on AIDS for some kind of organization that was there. They had this little tiny office on Castro Street. And I think that I saw an ad in the newspaper, and they were looking for someone that would translate this. And I remember that — I had a good handle of the language — immune suppression, and all this; T-cells, whatever — so I could put it a language that anyone that spoke Spanish could understand.

Then later on, here, in 1984, when we were all freaking out about AIDS, I became one of those buddies at GMHC. I did the training. And that's how I started doing work that was directly connected with HIV.

SS: Now did they assign you to a Spanish-speaking person to be a buddy? No.

CC: No, but they — because I was living in Brooklyn, and the teams in the boroughs were not necessarily — even though the teams in the boroughs were composed of gay men and lesbians — mostly gay men, but a

couple of women, and there were lesbians — we were assigned clients who were straight people, drug users, or the wife of a drug user.

So very quickly, instead of going to visit some gay man in Chelsea or the Village or the Upper East Side, I would visit – I don't know if they called them clients, but you had a number of people that you would visit regularly, once a week. They were like in East New York, or somewhere. And they were drug addicts, mostly injectors, who had contracted AIDS.

So that was my first kind of like sense of how the epidemic is spreading into different groups, groups that are not even recognized so far, I remember that.

SS: So when you first started looking around to see who was serving the Latino population, or what was happening there, what did you find?

CC: Not much. That comes years later. For some reason, during my four years, from 1984 to 1988, I was in GMHC. I didn't have any Hispanic client. But when I started in ACT UP, and kind of like changed careers, actually – that's when I became involved professionally in AIDS also.

SS: What did you change from and to?

CC: I was in kind of like commercial art – advertising, illustrations, things like that. That's what I used to do back then. And from 1988 to 1990, I used to go to ACT UP alone. I kind of like participated in the Media Committee, with Jay Blotcher and other people. But it was kind of like, I didn't

have anyone. I would go to the demonstrations, the marches alone. I'm not necessarily a very sociable person in the sense of striking conversations and getting to know people and becoming friends – it's not necessarily my forte. And it was not until 1990, when all these Latinos in ACT UP decided to form the Latino Caucus, that I really get involved now, kind of like deeply involved in ACT UP. But I was involved before.

SS: Right.

00:30:00 CC: I mean, I would go to the demonstrations, I would go on Mondays. But I would be kind of like an invisible figure in the background. And so when I started — and that happens to many, many other members of the Latino Caucus — we all shift professions, you know, from filming and media at New School, or the other one was a whatever, stuff like that; you know, we started doing AIDS-related work in the community. And I started working at the Lower East Side Family Union, which is a foster-care prevention, you know, services for families where children are at risk. And I started working with women, Hispanic women, who – where the children were at risk of being placed in foster care, or having the system involved, not because the mother was neglecting them or abusing drugs or doing crazy things, but because the mother was dying.

And that's when I met, the first time that I met mostly women, Hispanic and African American women, who were infected. So that's when I began to get the sense of how terrible it was; the silence, the not telling anyone, not wanting to go to the doctor if it's in your neighborhood; being terribly afraid

that people find out. And I met wonderful women. I mean, women who knew a lot about what was going on, what could be done, and they had to figure out how to go to some clinic — Metropolitan Hospital — so if someone saw them going in and out, they wouldn't care, because it wouldn't be someone from the neighborhood. And they were already getting kind of like medications, or at least kind of like getting the type of primary care that you would get in 1990.

And I had no idea that there were specific services for Hispanic people. I really had no idea. It was not up until I got involved with the Latino Caucus that I learned that there was something like the Hispanic AIDS Forum, or the Upper Manhattan AIDS Task Force on 125th Street. I really felt that GMHC was it.

SS: Right.

CC: Period. During the time that I was in GMHC, we were kind of like the super-case-manager. I remember having to learn how to get your Medicaid approved, and how you would combine getting your SSI and all your SSD and your things and the approval, and all these things that, as a social worker, which I am today; those are the things that a social worker would do. And GMHC trained us to, you know, be this kind of like – person that does these things that later on HASA would do for people with AIDS.

SS: So you were like civilians who were filling in for what the government wasn't doing.

CC: Exactly. Absolutely.

SS: Yeah.

CC: That was absolutely clear. That was absolute, especially during the – both the years at GMHC and the years in ACT UP. It was clear that what I was doing was to really contribute and to put my grain of salt in something that the government was not participating or resolving or helping.

SS: Now what made you go to ACT UP in the first place?

CC: I became very disenchanted with the GMHC work. I felt that this was getting more and more serious; this was getting more and more sinister and horrible and dramatic, and that GMHC – the whole purpose of the GMHC thing was, go and help people to die gracefully; and that that didn't cut it for me anymore. I really felt that now, I needed to get involved at a more activist level; that this trying to be the pleasant, nice, Christian, generous, giving homosexual, was, like, no. My personal process with my own – now, I was infected.

00:35:00 Well, I thought I got infected in 1984. If I trace the days that I used to have unprotected sex, it would be probably between 1982 and 1984, the first two years in the U.S. But I got tested in 1988. So now, it was kind of like – no, this shit is not working for me. So ACT UP became a wonderful kind of like way of channeling all this frustration, all this anger, and also all this energy, in a way that I felt that it was productive and effective.

SS: Now did you rely on ACT UP for treatment guidance?

Because in '88, okay, there was a lot of pressure to take AZT. And I'm wondering –

CC: Not necessarily. I did my homework, in terms of reading, and kind of like trying to understand what these drugs are. My ex, who remains a friend, would be someone that I would consult: what is this? I have two brothers; one is also a chemist and the other one is a physiologist. And so I would talk to them, or whatever. What is this kind of like, you know, through their transcript. How does it work, what kind of whatever? So I would get my own personal education on what is it that we were being offered. Working now officially with women and people with AIDS at the Lower East Side Family Union, I was a direct observer of what taking AZT at those massive dosages was doing to people.

SS: Right.

CC: When they were taking it like every four hours.

SS: And what was it doing? Can you just tell us, for people who don't know?

CC: Well, disrupting the way you sleep, first of all, and creating all sort of side effects; from lipodystrophy to – I don't remember exactly what was the precise effects of taking AZT at those dosages. Personally, I was not at the stage where I had to take them — my T-cells were pretty high back then — so I could say no. I was afraid. I knew that it was kind of like a form of oral chemo; really altering the metabolism of the cells.

And second, is kind of like, you know, like when you are 35 or 32 or 33, and they tell you, okay, you know, you're not going to die at 37, you're going to die at 39; for me, it's like, it doesn't make any difference. So I didn't see

the practical benefit of taking something that would extend my life a couple of years. I thought that it was better – that's when I got into the ACT UP agenda; that we need different compounds, better compounds, approved fast.

So even though I ended up doing a lot of community work with the Latino Caucus, at the same time, I'd remain a firm ACT UPper in the sense that I was there to make sure that the approval of new compounds would be expedited. Because otherwise, there was going to be no salvation.

SS: So basically by being cynical, you saved your own life.

CC: Probably.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

CC: But among other things. My mother's prayers, others'.

SS: Okay.

CC: So it's a mixed bag of things.

SS: So now, the Latino Caucus started in 1990, right? So there was like a critical mass; there were more and more Latinos coming to ACT UP, everyone feeling alienated –

CC: Uh huh.

SS: – and then – and so what was the impetus for it beginning? Like, who called the first meeting, or –

CC: I went to the second one. I don't think that we were – you know, this may have a different interpretation. I don't know if we were feeling alienated inside ACT UP; we were feeling alienated in general. I was feeling

alienated with regards to what the government was doing, and the state of affairs, of how AIDS was being dealt in the U.S. – you know, from local government to the Department of Health, to Washington, to everywhere.

In ACT UP, I guess that we all felt not kind of like a hundred percent integrated. And all of a sudden, when there was this critical mass of Latino gay men, it was kind of like a wonderful discovery. There was – who was the name – I have the list of the members. Robert Garcia and another Hispanic, that was very ill by then, and he never came to the Latino Caucus ever again, because he was very ill. And they call one day, they say, you know, we're going to do, let's meet in my house this Sunday. I went to the weekly meeting the week after. And that was in someone else's place; a guy that worked at the Hispanic AIDS Forum. He died. His name was Joe Franco.

SS: Oh sure, I remember him.

00:40:00

CC: Crazy guy. Very crazy. And I know that actually, in the first meeting, there must have been like seven people; now there was something like 20, in this apartment in Brooklyn. And that is when we voted to become a caucus, instead of being a committee. And that's when we kind of like really started doing the work.

SS: Let's try to say as many names as we can remember, of who was in the Latino Caucus.¹

CC: Hm. Well, it was – I think that the host was Joe Franco; there was Cándido Negrón, who lives in Orlando now. They were kind of like boyfriends back then. Mario Quiñones; Héctor Seda; Nelson Galarza– Pedro Galarza. And there were –

SS: Luis Salazar.

CC: Luis Salazar, there was, from San Francisco, a Chicano from San Francisco, wonderful, wonderful soul. Elías Guerrero, I think, I'm talking about the Chicanos. Elías Guerrero, Vic Hernández. And then we have, from Puerto Rico, we have Moisés Agosto, we had Gilbert Martinez, we have – wow – Juan Méndez; we have Jose Santini; we have Héctor Seda and Pedro. Lots of Puerto Ricans, obviously. From Argentina, we had Sam Larson and Alfredo González. From Peru, we have Hernando Mariscal; myself from Chile. And we have Jairo

¹ In an email dated August 7, 2014, César Carrasco provided a more complete list of members of the Latino Caucus:

Gonzalo Aburto	Héctor González	Jairito Pedraza
Moises Agosto	Elías Guerrero	Mario Quiñones
Jesus Aguais	Vic Hernández	José Santini
Cathy Chang	Danette Lebron	Héctor Seda
Carlos Cordero	Carlos Maldonado	Luis Salazar
Steven Córdova	Fernando Mariscal	Luis Santiago
Rita Córdova	Gilbert Martínez	Amador Vega
Mario de la Torriente	Juan Méndez	Andrew Velez
Joe Franco	Patricia Navarro	Luis Vera
Pedro Galarza	Cándido Negrón	Walt Wilder
Alfredo González	Víctor Parra	

Pedraza from Colombia; Luis Vera from Venezuela, Jesús Aguais from AID FOR AIDS, from Venezuela. Mexico, we had –

SS: Gonzalo?

CC: Gonzalo Aburto and this beautiful guy — what was his name? — well, I went blank. Really nice, very shy; very shy, very one of those people — and very silent or whatever, but very smart, and a wonderful guy. He was friends with – and almost kind of like protected, by Gonzalo. Much younger than Gonzalo. You know, Gonzalo is my age, and this other guy was – oh, I forgot his name. He was in a relationship with a guy from Czechoslovakia. They work in, doing, you know, advertising, or things like that.

Yeah – there was Mario de la Torriente, which I think was Cuban.

So it was like a really wonderful, wonderful group of people, from different countries and –

We were all college-educated. That was definitely the case.

SS: But then you had the women who came from Bedford Hills prison, into the Latino Caucus, right?

CC: We had women that came from that. We had women that were in Music Against Drugs. We had Lydia Awadalla, with her own group of women. We have Rita Córdova that had El Centro in Harlem. And the women that participated actively with us probably would never come to an ACT UP meeting on Mondays. They would go to meetings that we had.

I guess that they didn't have the time; they didn't feel the need to do that, whatever, maybe they felt a bit out of place there, or whatever. But the women that participated in the Latino Caucus – and also, they had their own, their other groups and activities that they needed to take care of. Like we had these priests from an Episcopalian church in the Bronx that never went to –

SS: St. Ann's.

CC: St. Ann's, you know, Padre – I don't remember, but he was a wonderful guy. Very active. Things like that.

SS: And Marina Alvarez.

CC: Marina Alvarez.

SS: And Carmen – I forget her last name.

JIM HUBBARD: Royster.

SS: Royster.

CC: Royster. I'm going blank with her. But they were there the other day, at the public library. It was the woman that founded NINA – on First Street – that kind of like little HIV clinic. Oh, god. Yeah.

SS: So what were some of the projects of the Latino Caucus?

CC: You mean the specific Latino Caucus, on demonstration and actions?

SS: What were your demands and your campaigns? I know – okay.

00:45:00 CC: Okay. I always emphasize the fact that we were ACT UP; we were not a sidekick, like an adjunct group; we were ACT UP.

SS: Right.

CC: And we were heavily involved in basically every single action. And we were always kind of like going from one committee to another, et cetera, et cetera. And one of us, or several of us, were in Chicago, in Atlanta, in Washington, on Wall Street, and everywhere, all the time. And parallel to that, we very quickly, somewhat kind of like – disorganized way, because, you know, none of us were kind of like, kind of like activist, and kind of like seasoned politicians. We were kind of really – at least for myself – I was trying to really learn the ropes of how do you do this. And we felt that we needed to really target specific people everywhere at the governmental level, simply because of the silence.

So the first action is in Albany, in one of these political, kind of like business type of Chamber of Commerce things – conference, or party, in Albany. And we went to the floor, and we went to the Coordinating Committee on Sunday, and we got money for a van and a hotel or whatever, and we just went to Albany, and we crashed this wonderful party of all these Latinos, politicians and business people, having a wonderful time. And we just wreaked havoc in the middle of this, and they were kind of —

Because they thought whoever knew about what ACT UP was doing, they thought, oh, god, that's in another universe. That will never reach us.

And all of a sudden, have these people screaming in Spanish, and throwing, you know, like leaflets, and screaming, and denouncing the silence, the invisibility. That things cannot get worse than in any other community but the Latino community. Not that you could compete. I mean, like, in the Haitian community, et cetera, et cetera, the gay community – those were the groups that were really suffering in great numbers.

So at least in the Latino communities, it was kind of like nothing was kind of like in shades of gray anymore. This was very, very serious, serious. And not only in New York – communities like, Hispanics, poor Latino communities in Connecticut; Hartford.

SS: Hartford, yeah.

CC: Or in New Jersey. So that's the first thing that we do. And then, people begin to really bring these ideas, of who's doing and who's not doing what. Then we had an action in front of the office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, on Park Avenue and 21st Street. And people would come to those actions that we had never seen. And that's where we would meet these women of other people, you know, that, that would work with us directly, very well connected, or tangentially, but very effectively. We kind of like knew who they were, and we would do work together. They would call us if they had some kind of like, you know, fair, health fair, in Hispanic Harlem, to just go there and talk.

I remember going to Connecticut, going to the Bronx, to talk about clinical trials, for instance. Who got my name; where; whatever; but we would do these things, you know.

SS: Did you get into a clinical trial?

CC: No, never.

SS: Okay.

CC: Never. But I knew a lot about clinical trials. I knew the jargon, the thing, what they are, you know, and I was somewhat a promoter of being well-informed about an option that if you want to use is there; if you don't want to use it, it's not. Like Lydia Awadalla that would take his children, or his child, to Washington, because they would pay for the airfare and the hotel, and he would get ddi or ddC or whatever she could get for him. That was her choice, and she knew how to do it, and she knew how to help other women that were desperate to have their children on some kind of like, you know, cocktail or bi-therapy, or something.

00:50:00 So that's that. Because of the number of Puerto Ricans in the Latino Caucus, it became more and more evident that the situation in Puerto Rico was also very dire, because of the air bridge, or, you know, *puente aéreo*. You know, you begin to really know of the number of people that are coming here because they cannot get treatment there, and what's really happening there with the Department of Health, or whatever, health care authorities and government, that are not doing anything.

So that one – then it became the Hispanic AIDS Forum, because we had people that work there, that we knew. They're like, who are they, who do they serve, what are they doing?

So those were kind of like the main targets at the beginning – the situation in Puerto Rico –

SS: Were you involved with the founding of ACT UP Puerto Rico, with Moisés?

CC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SS: Did you go there?

CC: Yeah, I went there, in June, 1990, I think, was the action.

SS: Can you describe it a little bit, what it was like? Were people angry that outsiders were coming in, or was that not an issue?

CC: I think that there were always mixed reactions, as with everything. I am a very practical individual. If I get things to move, in one inch or one mile, in the direction that I feel that it has to go, I really don't care about the price that has to be paid. I really don't care. I'll dismiss you if it's not what I really agree, or it's not necessarily something that I really care to really deliberate, because I already know where I want things to go.

When it comes to Puerto Rico, I think that we opened a lot of doors, and some of them, we were not welcome; in others, we were very welcome – people were very happy that this was really kind of out in the open. I'm sure that a manifestation at the church, at the cathedral – that Jose Santini was the one

that kind of like was leading the pack, created a lot of kind of like – you know – bad blood. But that's the way you move things in the right direction when you are an activist. Otherwise, you are not an activist; otherwise, you are, I don't know, like a lobbyist?

I think that the result, that there was the creation of ACT UP Puerto Rico; that there was a gay march that starting that year also kind of like started happening; and the gay thing, and the HIV thing became very open, and began to really be addressed, or denounced – that's the same when we went to the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

SS: What happened there? In New York, or in – okay.

CC: In New York, yeah. Prior to, I think it was prior to the action in Puerto Rico, or around that time. And we didn't get – a couple of gay groups, lesbian, Latina, lesbians group, and gay-men groups – they were not happy. They thought that were really being disrespectful; that we were basically just white men, with Latino genes, but acting like white men, and all that kind of BS: that we were going to offend the community, and da-da-da-da-da. And we went to talk to them, seeking their support; but then we acted like activism. It's like, well, you know, I hear what you're saying; you don't want to support. But we didn't come here to get your approval, just your support. We're going to do what we're going to do. And – I think that we distributed, that day – I don't know, like, 2 million flyers.

SS: I think I marched in the parade with ACT UP, and I think we were the last contingent. Is that right? Were you at the end?

CC: I don't know where they – but there were still a lot of people – and I remember that many of the actions, when we'd get these fact sheets and things – sometimes you have to push them to people. And they take them, and you know, like they throw them away. But here, people kind of like, you would see the hands of people who wanted to get the — it was a fact sheet, and it was also kind of like other stuff that, whatever. I remember that there were flyers, and we took, thank god, we took kind of like, I don't know, 2 million flyers of things, or whatever. And the reception from the people along Fifth Avenue was fantastic. I think that one guy threw kind of like a kind of soda on someone's head. But most of the people were really fantastic.

SS: But also, one of the biggest successes in ACT UP was changing the CDC definition so that women could get benefits. And that profoundly served Latino women in New York.

CC: Absolutely.

00:55:00

SS: And I think the Latino Caucus was very involved in that campaign.

CC: We were very involved. Juan Méndez, in particular.

SS: Juan Méndez.

CC: So Heidi –

SS: Dorow.

CC: – Dorow, Tracy Morgan, and the rest of the women were very involved with this, and they were the ones that were getting inside offices, or forcing themselves into offices to be negotiate, to talk, and — they had all the data and all the information. And we were there behind them. So this was not necessarily a Latino Caucus project. But we were there with them.

SS: And was Juan at *El Diario* at the time?

CC: Yeah.

SS: Okay. So you had an in with the press.

CC: The press, yeah. And so – they were doing fantastic work, and we were as supportive as possible, and we were there in every possible action that had to do with changing the definition. But I, from my perspective, most of the credit should go to the women’s community, and other women because I’m sure that it was not just the women in ACT UP; there must have been other women that were also working very hard so that stupid definition would be changed.

SS: Now, the women who came to ACT UP from Bedford Hills prison; so they were from a different class than most of the men who were in the Latino Caucus, and they had different concerns. What was that relationship like, inside the caucus?

CC: To tell you the truth; I don’t remember exactly what is it that we did with them. I remember work that we did with Stand Up Harlem.

SS: Uh huh.

CC: And we were very supportive. I don't know if we were directly, or they were doing the work, and we were behind them, helping them in everything that we could, with the lack of access to medications in prisons, and they would just, you know, keep you at Rikers Island or whatever, or Fishkill, whatever, without giving you anything – you know, letting you die.

I remember working with Hispanic prisoners, men that needed things translated into Spanish, in order to bring them back to the prisons so they could really educate the inmates. Other groups. I don't really exactly how much work at least I got involved with the women in prison – maybe Rita or someone else could know more about that.

SS: Now I think I remember you being on a translation committee.

CC: Yeah.

SS: Now that was a big battle, to get things translated into Spanish in ACT UP, right? There was resistance to that. What were some of the issues around that?

CC: In all fairness: one, not wanting to do it; second, not feeling that we need to be bothered about this; but third, and very important, is that, what do you want me to do? I don't speak Spanish, I cannot translate this, whatever. Maybe, maybe, maybe. The Spanish Translation Committee, which was the first Latino community in ACT UP —

SS: Oh.

CC: — that was the first one.

SS: Okay.

CC: And then it changed the name to Spanish Communications. Because we really were torn about the fact that we are going to take upon the task of translating. But we really don't like this idea, of being the translators. You know.

SS: Because you don't want to be the secretaries.

CC: Exactly.

SS: Yeah.

CC: But I think that we did a very good job, in the sense that whenever we could get something to be translated, or press, government, like Department of Health, to really produce certain things in Spanish, we did them, and then material began to really come out in Spanish. And that was one of the things that we would really do, would be the cultural sense that they were in language, et cetera, et cetera. But I think that we just were humble enough to know that, you know, if by next Tuesday, we're going to have to get certain things translated, we're going to have to do it. So we're going to do fucking secretarial work, I guess that we're going to have to do it.

Later on, it was changed to Spanish Communications, because we were really doing for instance, going somewhere — because I really don't remember this — we would get these invitations. Hey, whatever, you know, someone wants to whatever, you know, they'd call us, whatever, you know, and

01:00:00 okay, who can, you know. I'll free, I'll be free on Tuesday, I'll go with you, whatever, you know, to really talk about clinical trials, for instance, in Spanish. You know.

So it was not just about translating; it was about kind of like really bringing, you know, a complex material and stuff, you know, like – or talk about, you know, side effects, talk about medications that are good for prophylactic treatment. You know, why you should take, you know, Bactrim, or –

SS: Right.

CC: – other things, you know, and to explain. We were doing kind of like – I would call it teach-ins. You know. So we were doing that – at least I was doing it, you know. We were, Gilbert was doing it too, but some of us were very involved in that. So there was a lot of cross-membership.

SS: Right.

CC: There was also ACT UP Americas; I started working with what's going on in Peru and Argentina –

SS: So you were the liaison from ACT UP New York to ACT UP Americas?

CC: No, no, no.

SS: Oh, oh.

CC: No. No, Alfredo, Alfredo González and Jairo Pedraza; I think that, you know, Alfredo probably – I'm sorry if I'm leaving someone out – but there was Sam Larson and other people, you know, like Gustavo Viana – the other

ones that really got involved, you know, very heavily in the creation of ACT UP Americas. You know. I was mostly Latino Caucus and Spanish Communications.

SS: Okay. Okay, so I want to move into another area now.

CC: Sure.

SS: So a lot of people died in ACT UP, and we all had to deal with that. And I think that the Latino Caucus was especially hard-hit: Robert Garcia, Luis Salazar – he didn't die of AIDS, but still, he died very young — Juan, who had drug problems. How does the community – what was that experience like for you, to be in the epicenter of people dying? Plus at work you had it also.

CC: I was pretty devastated. You know. I – I work in mental health, you know, I work in psychiatry. I'm a clinician now. And uh, and I think that, you know, it can really dig a hole in the psyche of people, you know, like this kind of like post-plague type of thing. I think it was similar to what some people describe as endurance trauma. Not necessarily the classical PTSD. But the sense of danger in seeing in your life at risk of being annihilated; the in and the out, and feeling that there is, there is little you can do to change that level of threat, or that level of danger. You know.

Month after month after month. And I saw a few people dying befo-, when I was at GMHC. And it was kind of like, horrible, you know, it was very disturbing, that first Chilean guy that I met had died. And I had another

friend, from Ecuador, who had died, and it was kind of like – psst. You know, it, it got very hairy.

Going into ACT UP, and enjoying at least a year and a half of – most of us remaining perfectly healthy, in the Latino Caucus; I think that gave us a great reprieve, at least to me. You know, now, now in hindsight, I, I look at it like that.

You know, we were basically just doing everything, and being there at the workspace every day after work, and doing this and participating on this, and planning that – whatever. Almost like there's going to be no end to this, and we are going to have, you know, all the time and all the life and all the energy in the world to do it. But it was not, and, and it was kind of like, um – I wasn't in a lot of denial, but the – healthy denial, but denial. You know. The way I led my life, the way I went back to college, the way I change jobs, kind of like – you know, it's like, you don't see this guy getting ready to die. But – and I feel we acted like that.

The death of Luis Salazar hit us very hard emotionally, but it was, it's not the ugly death. It's a normative death. It's a death on death terms. It's not the plague. It's not this horror. People die of leukemia; maybe we would have — we should have an ACT UP leukemia thing, you know. We didn't, you know. So it, it, I guess that that help us to deflect the blow. You know. It, it, it went from, like a human loss, instead of this apocalyptic loss.

01:05:00 But then, 19-, the end of 1991, 1992, was a hard year, when people started really getting very sick, or dying. So many of them were not coming to the meetings; they were in no condition to really get out of their homes. I mean, you remember. I mean, you know, people with AIDS at 27 or 35 don't die in two days.

SS: Right.

CC: They just linger and linger and linger. You don't know how they make it. But that is when some of the members, or the lover of the member, like – like my dear friend Gilbert Martinez. His lover, Bill; he was just so sick that they basically stopped coming to ACT UP altogether, and he had a 24-hour job taking care of his partner.

And it was very devastating for me. I used to go to the Manhattan Center for Living, down in Tribeca or below Houston, for support. And I remember that once we were doing kind of like some kind of exercise. I can remember that I drew this kind of like old wheel, with spokes, and feeling that the spokes were all breaking and breaking and breaking, and the more spokes broke, the wheel is going to be unsustainable. I can remember that image vividly, because I really felt that this –

My social world was the Latino Caucus. A little side note. When I went from GMHC to ACT UP, either I ejected many of my friends of my life, or they ejected me from their lives. They were really outraged at the way I spoke against the government. And I should go back to Chile if I didn't like it. Uh huh;

and I understand, I understand the feeling. Believe me, I understand. But then again, it was like, well, but you know, I need to move from point A to point B. And if, at this point, you and I need to part, we are going to part. Because I'm going to make it to point B. I've always been like that.

So the Latino Caucus became kind of like, oh my god! These wonderful guys, we are all politically, come from — you know, are committed, and doing the work, and in the larger ACT UP, we were all ACT UPpers, and we're getting arrested, and going places

I think that ACT UP was a wonderful organization. For me, ACT UP was like — ACT UP saved my life; the Latino Caucus saved my life.

SS: But there also was this kind of mental anguish that we observed in each other. Like I'm remembering when Robert Garcia had so much anxiety, and was so out of it, and so — doing too much drugs. And it's like that would happen right in front of you also. It wasn't just a medical disintegration; it was an emotional-psychological —

CC: Absolutely.

SS: — disintegration.

CC: Yeah. Do you remember Rod Sawyer?

SS: Rod Sorge.

CC: Rod Sorge.

SS: Yes.

CC: You know, he was dating Amador Vega —

SS: Hm.

CC: – from San Antonio. And Rod was in recovery; so was Amaro. And Rod was absolutely the loveliest human being. And when he saw that this shit was coming back to get him, and he was not really bouncing back, then he went back to doing drugs; and it was really kind of like, you see the person disappearing into a different hell, prior to dying. So that was very disturbing, that was very disturbing.

SS: There's a lot of ACT UPpers who died of drugs. Juan Mendez; Keith Cylar. I mean, there's a whole bunch of people.

CC: Yeah. The guy that they named that health center – what is his name.

SS: Oh, Spencer [Cox].

CC: Yeah.

SS: Particularly crystal.

CC: The post-ACT UP epidemic – is something that we don't want to talk about it, we are beginning to talk about it. But I've always been highly disturbed by that. I was working at Housing Works during that time. I worked at Housing Works from 2002–2005, and then I went to work at St. Vincent's from 2005 to 2009. And you would see people dying once a month of OD or this or that. It was kind of like –

Now, I know what it is. I mean, it's the post-epidemic thing. An epidemic that doesn't just end. And then we go back to the commercial, of

toothpaste, and European cars. That doesn't happen. And for me, the crystal meth epidemic, or all this stuff that it happens – one of my doctors got involved in drugs, and his career and life was ruined. It's like that. There was no way to transition from total crisis and abnormal way of living into something that can be integrated with a daunting loss.

SS: Well, let me ask you this, as a clinician: there's this kind of rhetoric or ideology in American culture about moving on. You should move on, move on. But something that's so huge, like this; you can't move on.

So if the only option you're being offered is to move on, and that option is impossible, what happens to people?

CC: People basically stay in crisis, but in a different form of crisis. In this case, it was the emotional crisis; in this case, it's the post-endurance trauma crisis – not necessarily the soldier that comes from Iraq type of PTSD classical things.

Now – we don't know these things. I don't know if when the Black Plague ended in the Middle Ages, people really learned that they needed to do something about the aftermath. I'm sure that they started going to church, and tried to rebuild their lives, and going back to normal. And it was not after awhile that they realized that some of them are not making it, that they are all messed up in their heads.

We didn't know this. I mean, I don't place blame. I hope that we look at this, and begin to at least try to understand it, by posing the questions like

the ones that you are posing. Because it was certainly, we were looking in a different direction.

SS: Because now that we have viral load suppression; our generation, of people who have suffered the deaths of everyone around them; who've had their own personal health crises endlessly; who've gone through all the terrible drugs; that's like a lost generation. Because the younger people who are coming up, they get infected, and they go on the meds. And they don't have any of those experiences. And it's becoming an even more unknown, rarefied, and isolated experience.

CC: It is. It is. I don't know if you've heard of Judith Rabkin.

SS: No.

CC: At the Psychiatric Institute. She's documented some of these. But she also kind of like looks at it from the effect of like not PTSD, but kind of like endurance trauma type of psychological post-danger effect. And she's making, she's doing this study on, what is the difference in how you have metabolized, or processed, this experience, post-epidemic – from '96 to today? And if there is a difference between those who were involved heavily in activism like that, or people who were not involved in activism.

My theory, or my sense, is that the people that got involved in activism, like me, are much more aware what was happened. The ones that were not involved in activism; they don't know why their lives just do not make any

sense. And their relationships don't make sense, and they are becoming more and more kind of like – alienated.

I see some of that in the patients, the HIV, middle-aged patients that we treat in the clinic where I work. It seems that they remain alive; not to be able to connect the dots forever. Like there is something there that remains disconnected.

SS: Now, what kind of social acknowledgment would have to take place, so that those people have a context?

CC: I don't know. I don't know. Some kind of acknowledgment that a post-epidemic generation doesn't remain intact simply because they have survived.

SS: Right.

CC: At least that would be the lens. Once you put on a specific type of filter or lens, then you begin to see the kind of things that you need to take care of. But if you don't have a lens that allows you to see certain things, like those things that you see – you know, soldiers put to see in the night, in the dark – then you don't see anything. It's been there in front of us.

01:15:00 I mean, Spencer Cox gave a presentation at the Harm Reduction Coalition. I remember, I attended that. And they were asking about crystal meth. And they were asking what – mostly heterosexual people; mostly heterosexual care providers. And there was kind of like a little bit of like this. What the heck? I mean, you people, you know, waged this incredible war. You survived it. Some

of you were heavily involved in making these incredible changes that we never thought that they were going to happen at the level of kind of like approval of new drugs, and treatments, and stuff like that. And all of a sudden, that was a success – at least in the way we see the successes of 1996, with the advent of the cocktail. Because it's not just the protease inhibitors; it's the cocktail. Saving the lives, AIDS becoming a chronic, manageable disease, whatever, stuff like that. A little bit of BS, but – it certainly, it changes the geography of the epidemic.

And now you are killing yourselves! You know, you're doing these drugs!

Society is much more open; we are on the way — this was several years ago — we are on the way of maybe having kind of like marriage. Improvement is like wha – what's up with you people? It was like that, you know.

And I remember the Spencer talk about, and he said, it's loneliness. It's just sheer loneliness.

When you are left with a whole bunch of people, but neither you or your friend has a narrative; then you don't want to talk neither to you, to yourself, or to your friend. You just stay isolated.

SS: Right.

CC: So developing a narrative for what happened afterwards, I think that would be very, very useful. That's what I like about this research that she's doing – Judith Rabkin –

To tell you the truth, if I were a sociologist, I would be running behind that. I would try to get grants to do this. Because when are we going to have an other epidemic to document how this behaves?

SS: Huh, that's interesting.

CC: From the purely kind of like sociological, anthropological perspective, it's kind of like, it's a fantastic experience.

SS: Right.

CC: What you are doing.

SS: Documenting all the suffering.

CC: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

CC: Documenting the experience.

SS: Yeah.

CC: How people can – the narrative. That's what I'm giving you, my narrative.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

CC: Ninety-three, the end of '93. When the Latino Caucus – just dissolved. And it dissolved officially.

SS: Why did it fall apart?

CC: Because – we felt that we didn't have the critical mass to now carry on with our agenda; that it was somewhat sui generis; somewhat peculiar to what the larger ACT UP wanted. I mean, there was always a little bit of a rift

there. We felt that we didn't have the numbers nor the energy. And also, at least from my perspective, I realized that trying to battle — and I can say this, because I'm a minority — if you're a minority person, and you want to battle the BS within your minority, you are not going to win that battle. They're just way too powerful.

SS: And this was after ACT UP's split, right? So ACT UP was already fractured, and this was –

CC: It was fracturing.

SS: Okay.

CC: Yeah, it was fracturing.

SS: And what –

CC: There certainly – Treatment and Data were exiting.

SS: Were leaving.

CC: They were leaving.

SS: And how do you understand The Split?

CC: That particular split – I think that should have been dealt better by all of us. If we all kind of like, you know, kind of like – lower the volume a little bit on the rhetoric; if we all tried to get more practical, more pragmatic, about what is it that we want to do, and whether we can continue doing it, having very dramatically different, or diametrically different ideologies or perspectives, or angles, whatever you want to call it. But nevertheless, we see the practical. It's like – I'm sure that a lot of people in Treatment and Data never

really understood the agenda of the Latino Caucus. To what extent they supported us, or not; some of them did, some of them don't, whatever. But you know, when they were negotiating inside the CDC, with someone there, and we were screaming outside; or when they entered the Wall Street chamber, and we were making kind of like a scary mess outside; we could see, you know, like in a few days, I don't remember how much, kind of like Burroughs Wellcome lowered their price of AZT. That's all what I care. I don't need to marry you, I don't need to really know that actually, you know, it's like what you are doing doesn't cover the whole spectrum of what I believe the political activism should cover. But if what you're doing is somewhat effective, and you're doing good work; if you are doing good work; I'll do my part. Is there a place for us?

But I think that ACT UP reached a little bit of what happened between the House and the White House and the Congress today; the stupidity has trumped the common sense.

What else was happened? Those were dark years. Ninety-three, '94, '95, is one of those times, not a single one of the compounds that sounds promising is really giving a result. I remember that I was pretty desperate. I remember that during those years, and working in HIV — I was working at Montefiore Hospital, at the substance-abuse program, I was the HIV coordinator slash HIV health educator, working with these drug addicts in the South Bronx, et cetera, et cetera. I remember that probably those were the years after — between '93 and '96, when I really got the sense, this horrible feeling for a moment, that

would invade me kind of like, Cesar, you're not going to make it. You're not going to make it, Cesar, you're not going to make it.

I could not really – I would try to really – get some source of denial – that would help me to say, you know, denial in the form of hope; stupid hope, false hope, whatever, whatever, it doesn't matter. As long as it lets me live tomorrow without being overly preoccupied. You know, we all were preoccupied. You would think about HIV from the moment that you opened your eyes until the moment that you went to sleep. But you were not tormented. But now, it was kind of like, I'm not making it, I'm not making it, I'm not making it.

SS: Well it's interesting, because we've interviewed 168 people, right? And I've asked many people about The Split. And there's really two different schools of thought. Because some people say what you're saying; that it was a product of trauma. But other people think it's a product of supremacy ideology. And it's hard to understand which is more dominant.

CC: The supremacy of the ideology, it was always there. Why couldn't we really deal with it, in a more effective way? Because it was always there.

SS: Okay.

CC: ACT UP was split from the very beginning. At the class level, at the gender level, at the racial level, at the –

SS: You're right, actually.

CC: I think that at that point, simply forces became entrenched; the resources could flow in one direction and not the other. And some people felt that, you know – okay, maybe I have acquired enough knowledge, and I've built up enough contacts to where I can go solo now.

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

CC: Not really. I was not prepared exactly for what was going to be the scope of questions, but I feel we have covered –

JW: I had a quick question.

SS: Oh, sure.

JW: GMHC – did they stop the Buddy program when you were still working there?

CC: No. No, they continued.

JW: Okay, at some point they stopped.

CC: I don't know when they stopped it. I couldn't care less. I basically became kind of like an anti-GMHC person –

SS: Yeah, right.

CC: – and I thought that was not, that is not my model of how do you fight an epidemic; pretending to get any good results. I really don't think that they have done much in the last 20 years, anyway.

SS: Right.

JH: I had a couple questions. One is, what was the relationship between the Latino Caucus and Majority Action?

01:25:00 CC: We had – we had a, kind of like a friendly connection. I mean, I – you know – we would go to them, and present kind of like certain – projects. But I remember that by the time that the Latino Caucus was very much active, the Majority Action was no longer making key decisions about, for instance, what action we were going to do. Each committee became more and more autonomous. Like, they were – I don't know; correct me if I'm wrong. But I think that at some point, the Majority Action became an obsolete group. So the Women's Committee would present their own things, and they wouldn't go through the Majority Action, or the Asian-Pacific Islands, or ours; we'd just go directly to the floor.

And then you fought politically, through debate and this and this and that, for convincing or forcing to convince. Like for instance, getting money for the action in Puerto Rico took a lot of kind of like – you know – being very forceful about certain things. I'm sure that people, just voted kind of like, whatever, and a lot of people just opposed it. I would go regularly to the Coordinating Committee, on Sundays. They would meet at the workspace. I would get the sense that they didn't know exactly why they were approving money for actions of the Latino Caucus. But at least the Coordinating Committee was in general very much kind of like – okay, I mean, we trust that you guys are

going to make good use of this money. Sometimes maybe they didn't, I don't know.

But that's probably the best answer that I can give you.

JH: And there was a lot of tension between the Latino Caucus and Hispanic AIDS Forum. Wasn't there a big demonstration –

CC: Yes.

JH: Could you talk about that?

CC: Yeah, that was a big blow for the Latino Caucus. Because we didn't get the support that we expected and wanted from the organization at large. Very few people – not enough. And we needed that; it really – to really have a demonstration that would create an impact; something that would really make the Hispanic Forum, AIDS Forum, move from this incredible place of comfort and negligence. And we just couldn't. At the same time, they were able to really call the police, and barricade themselves behind police protection, and this action that was supposed to be fantastic ended up being kind of like miserable, pathetic action.

And after that, we couldn't touch them anymore.

SS: But you know, actually there was always conflict in ACT UP about protesting other AIDS groups.

CC: Yes. Including GMHC.

SS: Including GMHC. People were very hesitant to do that. So there's that element also.

Anything else?

JH: Oh yeah. I wanted to ask –

CC: I'm sorry.

SS: Oh.

CC: But that is one of the worst aspects of ACT UP.

SS: Okay, why?

CC: Because – my sense is that a reason why not to go after GMHC, for instance, was about personal particular interests.

SS: Because people were employed there.

CC: Were employed, they were part of the board, knew someone, connections or whatever. That was –

SS: Okay.

CC: – total crap. Because if there is an agency that should have been put up to the noose, it's GMHC back then. They were getting incredible amount of money; and they were the emblematic agency of AIDS services, and they were not doing the job. And we knew, back then, that ACT UP couldn't do it all. We were the detonating factors, but we were not there to do the job for someone else that was already getting paid for it!

SS: But part of the issue with the Hispanic AIDS Forum was that Joey Franco was not considered really reliable by people.

CC: True. It's true.

SS: Yeah.

CC: That is also true. So it, it is true here, and it's true there. I, I, I really want to make sure that we don't begin to really do the, the, the, the musical chairs. Because this is true, then this is not valid. No. Everything is valid. And Joe Franco was a crazy person, and we didn't know how to reign him in. Yes.

SS: Okay. Okay.

JH: So then, the last question.

SS: Yes.

CC: Yes, please, let's not be that comment.

JH: Were there differences within the Latino Caucus between people who spoke Spanish and people who didn't speak Spanish?

CC: I guess that would be dependent on the individual. For instance, Luis Salazar didn't speak Spanish, but he loved the idea of being able to get immersed in everything that he felt was the part of his culture that he couldn't really fully embrace growing up.

01:30:00 He loved kind of like Mexican music; and when he invited us up to his place, or we would – because the weekly meetings of the Latino Caucus was always in somebody's house – of course, food.

SS: Right.

CC: Lots of food. Cooking stuff. The Mexicans did their Mexican things; the other, whatever. And he loved to be able to learn, and he was so eager to really, you know, like really – it was like visiting this country that is his, but he was never able to really visit before.

Other people, I guess that, you know, they felt, you know, that the language barrier was also – a barrier in mentality and culture. So I guess – the best reason that I can give, or the best argument that I can give you, or explanation, is that – that is as varied as how do people who were born here assimilate. The fact that people like me, who are, is a foreigner, claims to be more Hispanic – you know, because I have full command of the language and the culture, and thing.

We have people like, in the Latino Caucus, like – what was his name? He's in ACT UP right now. Forgot, this guy. His father is Puerto Rican, or his mother is Puerto Rican, and his father is Jewish. He goes to ACT UP right now. And he was part of there, he went to Puerto Rico – oh, I went blank with his name.

SS: I don't know who you mean.

CC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He lives in the Village. He's still goes to — and he was, you know – there's Sam Larson, that is actually, was born in South Africa, from kind of like Swedish, you know – ministers. But he was raised in Argentina. So I guess that is a – you would have to talk to them, really, about that.

SS: Right. Okay, so the last question is, just looking back, what do you feel was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its greatest disappointment?

CC: Well, the greatest achievement was really the fact that it sped up the approval of new compounds. I think that that was a fantastic achievement. ACT UP – you know, not just Treatment & Data, ACT UP. That's why I'm alive.

SS: Right.

CC: Is it the fantastic achievement, but a very imperfect one; and I'm really that ACT UP is now working, it is. Because we realized that we could just kind of go on for another 20 years with this very imperfect kind of like solution, that is not taking the epidemic to a real end.

So, but that, that, that was, that was one.

The inclusion of different groups in having the definition of AIDS approved. I mean, that was shameful. That was shameful. Because you have the excuse that you don't have the time or the money, the resources, to get a new compound turning into a pill that can be put out, out in the market. But excluding people simply because, I don't want to acknowledge that women with AIDS suffer from a specific opportunistic infection at a different rate than a normal woman is just pure crap. Uh, but it was a, it was a hard battle. Um –

The – the, the, the denouncing of the lack of services and the marginalization of specific population with AIDS, like drug addicts and injection-drug users – kind of like I think that was a great achievement. And the needle exchange. You know, all the people that work in that. And I was there; I would go to the tables on Saturday, to Delancey, or whatever. But you know – there were other people that were much more involved with that. I mean, that was

fantastic, you know, the fact that they took all this all the way to court, and the judge was able to, you know, approve that what they were doing, you know, had, couldn't be penalized; uh, because they were doing a, a necessary Christian work – I don't remember what was the words –

JW: Necessity defense.

SS: Necessity defense, yeah.

CC: I mean, those are, those are, those are fantastic achievements, among the many, you know.

SS: And what about the greatest disappointment?

01:35:00 CC: Regardless of who is responsible for this; the fact that we didn't get enough support to go against the Hispanic AIDS Forum. By far, the biggest disappointment of my own very particular personal reasons for going to ACT UP; and not only just attending the meetings, but getting organized, you know, in a structured way.

SS: So what was the consequence of failing there? What did they do, the Hispanic AIDS Forum?

CC: I'm sorry?

SS: Since ACT UP failed in stopping them; what did they continue to do? What was the consequence?

CC: Well, they didn't do anything.

SS: They continued to spend money on nothing.

CC: They have continued to spend money. They learn how to become more visible. They snatched the visibility, the presence of HIV something in the Puerto Rican Day Parade. Actually, they made sure, I think on the second year or the third year, to make sure that they would get their float in front, and you know, and do all these things, with the sponsor from American Airlines, and all the crap, or whatever. It consolidate further the idea that AIDS Inc. is what really, you know, survives. That is the way to go.

And AIDS Inc. – I don't think it has done that much work, you know, in terms of saving people's lives. I mean, I still work with, you know – African American women who have AIDS, and children of people with AIDS, up there, where I work, in Washington Heights, and the silence, the sense of alienation, and the – the concerns, the secrecy, is still there. Not knowing who can help me. Yeah.

SS: Okay. Thank you.

CC: Thank you.

SS: Thank you, that was amazing.

CC: Thank you for coming.

SS: Sure.