

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

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

Interviewee: **Lei Chou**

Interview Number: **025**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **May 5, 2003**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Lei Chou

May 5, 2003

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

LEI CHOU: My name is Lei Chou. I'm 36. And today is May 5th, 2003, and we're in New York City, in my apartment.

SS: In the lovely East Village.

LC: In the East Village.

SS: Okay. So, where were you born Lei?

LC: I was born in Taiwan.

SS: When did you come to New York?

LC: I came to New York in the winter of 1984.

SS: And what did you come here to do?

LC: For college.

SS: Where did you go to school?

LC: Cooper Union.

SS: Were you already out as a gay man when you came to Cooper?

LC: When I moved to New York, I came out to my family.

SS: So, you were living the life of the gay art student at Cooper Union, and what was that like, in '84?

LC: It was a very interesting experience, actually. It was fun.

SS: What were you studying?

LC: Sculpture.

SS: And were there a lot of openly gay people at school?

LC: No. There were a few that I found out, after we graduated, but there wasn't a very visible gay presence there.

SS: So, the idea of making work that had an overt gay content – was that present at all, on the landscape, when you started?

LC: Well, there's David Wojnarowicz. He was, pretty much, the lead artist of the time that dealt with a lot of gay content.

SS: And how did you become familiar with his work?

LC: Through schoolwork. We had some professors that came in and did a lot of the AIDS related art stuff.

SS: Like who, do you remember?

LC: Douglas Crimp, mostly.

SS: Is that how you met him?

LC: Yes.

SS: Was he supportive of you at the time?

LC: Well, he was teaching this really high brow theory class, but he incorporated a lot of the activism stuff into the theory. So, it was a very fascinating subject for me, personally. I certainly got very much involved with it.

SS: When was the first time you heard about AIDS?

LC: I think in the early '80s, when I was living in Ohio, going to high school.

SS: Do you remember the context?

LC: Probably Rock Hudson was the one that broke it. It's not anything specific. It's mainstream reporting.

SS: So, you would say you heard about it from the television?

LC: Right.

SS: When was the first time that AIDS came close to your life?

LC: I think it was in '85, maybe, when I started going to school and saw these ACT UP posters around, and I was thinking a lot about being gay and coming out and, sort of, that unfairness of gay people having gone through all this persecution and finally found a way out, and all of a sudden we have this disaster on our hands. And, it's such an injustice. It really pushed me to think about why that is going on, and if there is anything that I can do to change it.

Tape I
00:05:00

SS: So, how did you find out about ACT UP?

LC: From the posters, and I'd just sort of been thinking about it and talking about it with my friends. And then, Douglas Crimp came to the school and did a specific presentation on the FDA action – some video work and posters and documentations that came from it. And then he would say, “Well, there's a meeting right across the town, if you want to go to one of the meetings.” It would be interesting, so I just went.

SS: Had you ever been to the Center before?

LC: No.

SS: What did you see, when you walked in the room?

LC: It was really exciting. It was like live theater, and it was compelling that there were so many people there and, at the same time, it was refreshing to see so much intelligence being displayed and work with, right out in the open like that. It was fascinating to see it.

SS: Had you ever had experience with a political group before?

LC: Nope.

SS: And, had you ever been in a room of gay people that wasn't a bar?

LC: No, actually not.

SS: So, how did you get involved? What was the first thing that you did?

LC: I think City Hall was the first big one that I got involved with.

SS: What did you do? Can you explain what that action was, a little bit?

LC: It was Target City Hall. It was 1990? '89. The action itself was trying to call attention to how the city is not really dealing with the crisis on every level of government. I was involved with the Housing Caucus at the time. So, we basically had these moles that were in the system and they could give us documents and we'd pour through them and figure out ways to demand the government to do more about housing issues for people with AIDS. And, that's the plug that I went into the action with. And we had an affinity group and got arrested together, blocking the Brooklyn Bridge.

SS: Of all the group's committees, how come you chose the Housing Committee?

LC: It was an issue that I was sort of studying, also. At that time, the homeless situation was just so atrocious. It just seemed like housing and AIDS were the two issues, the areas that needed the most attention paid. And the situation was just so drastic that I figured I might as well get involved with that, if I already have some background information on both of those issues.

SS: So, who were the other people on the housing committee?

LC: In the beginning, there was G'dali – we used to meet in his apartment. Rod Sorge was there. Who else? Conyers Thompson, Eric Sawyer, Charles King, Natasha Gray. It wasn't a very big crowd; it was maybe eight or 10 very active members.

SS: And what was your plan?

LC: I think, at the time, we were just looking at what needs to be done and then advocating for it. We did a lot of direct action, actually. We went after the Housing Preservation and Development. We went after Human Resources Administration. And, I think those two were the two big targets that we went for.

SS: Could you just tell us a little bit what the situation was, and what the city was doing, and what you wanted them to do?

Tape I
00:10:00

LC: If I can remember. I think at the time, the only kind of AIDS housing in the city was Bailey House, and there wasn't anything else. And, homeless people with AIDS were living in unsanitary conditions in shelters, and on the street. And, we thought that that situation just was not acceptable. One of our goals was to get – the city, at the time, had all these abandoned buildings around town. We thought, why not invest money and get those buildings rehabilitated and turn them into housing units for people with AIDS? This was back in the early '90s, and people were still basically dealing with hospices and dying and we just wanted to make sure that the city take leadership in the issue and start addressing the issue, which, at the time, they weren't really dealing with it at all.

SS: Why not?

LC: There was no political will, I think – primarily. Financially, the city wasn't doing too well, as well.

SS: Who was mayor at the time?

LC: Koch.

SS: So, where did you get information about how homeless people with

AIDS were living? Were there any homeless people in ACT UP? Or, did you have direct contact?

LC: There were people from the Coalition for the Homeless that were involved with ACT UP. Charles King was the main one. So, they would come to us with the information, and we would go and meet with them. And, eventually, there were – we did bring some of their clients into the group.

SS: Do you remember anyone's names?

LC: I can't recall right off the bat.

SS: So, then you started meeting with the city and making your demands?

Is that what happened?

LC: They wouldn't meet with us, so we basically just marched into their offices, a few times.

SS: Who were the people whose offices you marched into?

LC: Gee, I don't remember any of those names. The head of HPD, the head of HRA. We would request meetings with them, but they wouldn't come, so we just started going in and getting arrested for it.

SS: So, what was that like? You just walked into City Hall?

LC: It wasn't City Hall, it was in their offices. I think at the time, they weren't really used to this kind of tactic. So, we would scope out the building and then try to figure out where the elevator was, and how to get past the security. We'd just march in.

SS: And then what would happen?

LC: Then we'd sit in there and they'll get panicky and run out of the room and call the cops on us. And, we're sitting there, waiting for them to come back. Sometimes

there was a lot of shouting. We tried not to get too violently active. We were pretty well trained, in terms of being non-violent. But, when you're at the point, where you have push through the doors, it gets a little hairy at times. Eventually, after a couple of those, we did manage to have a meeting with them in City Hall, with all the heads of the departments together.

SS: You said you were trained. How did you get trained?

LC: The civil disobedience trainings.

SS: Can you describe what those were like, and who ran them?

LC: Every time ACT UP did a big action, they would have training sessions for people that had never done it before. You basically just go to a meeting – I think it's a couple of hours – to go through some history of what civil disobedience means, and then you practice going limp – and to do's and things not to do in a situation.

SS: Do you remember who ran those trainings?

LC: No. It was always lesbians. [LAUGHS]

SS: So, you guys would go in and then you'd get arrested and they'd take you to jail. Did you have trials?

LC: We debated a lot about going to trial. And, there were lawyers in the group, as well. But, I think the purpose of our getting arrested is not to go to trial, per se. If you go to trial for something, you need to sort of use it effectively, as a legal strategy, to address a specific issue, like, with needle exchange – that was tremendously successful. But, for what we were asking for, we weren't really looking to use the legal system as part of the solution. It wasn't really part of the picture. When we'd get arrested, we were usually aiming to get a meeting set up, or deliver a set of demands, or

call media attention to the issue.

SS: So, would you plead guilty?

LC: No – I don't think we ever plead guilty. There was always some sort of negotiations. You'd get a summons or something. But, we did go to court, but somehow, everything resolved itself. It never got too problematic. We probably had to go to court a couple of times.

SS: Okay, so you finally got these meetings. Do you remember who you met with?

LC: It wasn't Koch. I can remember that. But, it was pretty much the top deputies in all the different offices. We were in a meeting for like, three hours. We just went down the list of things that we thought the city should be doing, and they said, well, we can't do this, we can't that. And we'd say, why not? People are dying, you have to do something. So, it was really a slow, painful process to get anything done. The people in the group are not all professional social worker types, and we got students, artists, Broadway showtune queens. And, it was as really nice mix of people, who were just really into the issue. And, to be at that top level meeting at City Hall was kind of a trip, because we just came out of nowhere. We were able to get those meetings, which was kind of interesting.

SS: Did they give you any of your demands? Did they say yes to any of your demands?

LC: No, no. But, there were times when things that we did directly led to changes in policy, or led to more funding being allocated. I think one specific action that we did was at the HRA. The problem was that the Division of AIDS Services – their

offices were too small, and when they open a new office, they don't have any furniture, and it was such a huge mess and people who worked at the agency came to us and complained – can you help us? We said, okay fine. So, we rented a van, went around the city and collected all this furniture off the street. We're aiming for office furniture type things, but we can't always find it and we just grabbed whatever we could. Then, one morning, we just drove up in front of the building, and pulled all the furniture out and chain ourselves to the furniture, and blocked the entrance – to bring press attention to the problem, and that, actually lead to a pretty speedy resolution of the agency allocating more resources for the department.

SS: So, in other words, a city agency would call ACT UP to help them negotiate with the rest of the city bureaucracy?

LC: The individuals within the agencies, not the agencies themselves.

SS: And were these people who came to ACT UP?

LC: There were a lot of city workers that were in ACT UP. That whole group had so much resources – up and down the food chain, it was kind of interesting. And there were people who knew people that worked there, that would give us information as well. A lot of them are not directly involved with ACT UP, but they know of us, and they'd know that they can come to us, when they needed help.

SS: Were you involved with the thing about contracts to the Catholic Church for housing for people with AIDS?

LC: No, that might be later on.

SS: How long did you stay with the Housing Committee?

LC: Two or three years, I think. We did so many actions. It's kind of strange

to say it was lot of fun, because the issues certainly weren't fun, and when you're out getting arrested, it's kind of dangerous on certain levels, but you do get kind of high about feeling good about doing something – rather than just not dealing with the issue. It's rewarding, personally, to have participated in that, and to actually see things change, or see issues being covered by the press, gives you a sense of accomplishment, even though it didn't actually bring about a housing unit for a PWA at the time. But, you know that incrementally, you're making some change.

SS: Now, what was the relationship between the Housing Committee and the floor? Did you just do your actions, or did you have to bring them to the floor to be approved?

LC: We had to plan our actions, and then we would try to pull people off the floor to discuss it, and then we would propose the action on the floor itself. And then, after the deed was done, we'd come back and do a report on what happened.

SS: So, did you ever have conflicts with the floor, about how to proceed?

LC: Not with Housing. I think people were all pretty much behind the issue. I think starting from City Hall was when the whole organization started addressing more hands-on service delivery issues, rather than focusing just on treatment issues. And, I think Housing Caucus was one of the main pushes, in terms of really targeting agencies, and targeting specific policies, or lack thereof. I don't think there was a conflict. Any sort of conflict comes when there's just way too many agendas, and then people are going, why do you go first, why can't I go first? That kind of stuff. I think the Housing Caucus was pretty well received by the whole floor as a whole, because we did a lot of actions. Some of them are kind hilarious. We tried to bring a toilet bowl in front of the

building and could not find a way to chain ourselves to it. There's nothing to chain to. And somebody had the brilliant idea of handcuffing themselves to their office chair with the wheels. [LAUGHS] So, the cops came by and just wheeled him off. Even the cops were laughing; it was such a goofy idea.

SS: What was the largest housing action?

LC: I think the largest one might have been where we brought two busloads of people down to a housing march in DC. There were, like, a hundred people. It was kind of amazing to see so many ACT UPpers in a homeless march. I think that's probably the biggest one that we ever did.

SS: So, that was a coalition with other homeless advocacy groups?

LC: It was a national homeless march on DC. It was everyone under the sun, but we were the only loud-mouthed AIDS contingent people, and we brought – maybe half of them were homeless people with AIDS and the other half were ACT UPpers.

SS: Was there ever an issue about people being gay, in terms of relating to other homeless advocacy groups?

LC: Nope. I don't believe so.

SS: What were some of the groups that you worked with?

LC: The Coalition for the Homeless, because I think Charles King was an attorney there, at the time. There was some political stuff that went on with the Catholic groups – so we didn't really get too much involved with them. There was some sort of embezzling thing going on. We were like, "See you, later." But, I don't think we worked in much larger groups, on the whole. When we did our actions, it was always very specifically AIDS and housing together. So, that's not necessarily such a main agenda

item on the housing groups. The only time that we did work in coalition was on that march.

SS: What other committees did you work on?

LC: I think the Housing Caucus kind of took off by itself, and it turned into Housing Works, basically, and started providing direct service and housing to people with AIDS. And, at that point, I kind of disengaged from that group, just because, all of a sudden, it got very professional – 501(c)3 – and all the by-laws and stuff were just way over my head. I was involved with the Outreach Committee for a bit.

SS: Can you tell me about that? What was that?

LC: The Outreach Committee were, basically, people in ACT UP who are not very up on all the technical issues. Outreach was one of the first committees you joined if you just came to ACT UP and don't really have an issue to work with. We basically just tried to figure out a way to increase membership for ACT UP, and there was our street postering, and we had a Speakers' Bureau that goes out to schools – that kind of stuff.

SS: Who were you working with in Outreach?

LC: I can't remember.

SS: Did you do Speakers' Bureau?

LC: No. I think I was involved with a lot of poster pasting.

SS: Would those be like Gran Fury posters, or that type of thing?

LC: I got involved after Gran Fury. It was more just – every time we have a major demonstration, there would be postering sessions.

SS: So, where would you wheat paste?

LC: Down in the East Village. We went into the West Village once, I think.

SS: Did you ever get caught?

LC: No, we got it all down. We put the wheat paste bucket inside a plastic bag, and if you see a cop car coming, you drop the bag and keep walking. We never had a hairy situation. It was back then in the '90s, and nobody cared. It's not like now, where everything is scrubbed clean every day.

SS: What other groups were you in, in the organization?

LC: I tried to do Needle Exchange for a couple of months. We would do bleach kits over at Rod's house. We'd paint the needles to identify them, so that they knew it was from the exchange program. We did some outreach out into shantytowns, to hand out needles and stuff.

SS: Can you just give us some background – like how Needle Exchange got started in ACT UP and who was doing it?

LC: I'm not really the right person to ask that.

SS: Who do you remember working with there, besides Rod?

LC: It was basically, Rod Sorge. He was my best friend, so I got involved with the group through him. There were a lot of other people involved I wasn't really very well acquainted with.

SS: Was this controversial in the organization?

LC: Needle Exchange? I don't think so. I think the whole issue was so new that it's not like what we have today – with all the documentation or the fact that the program actually works. Back then, it was just people knowing that something needs to be done about it and they basically just try out different things to find out what actually

works the best.

SS: So, you said you would go to a shantytown – where?

LC: There was one at the foot of the Bowery, by the Manhattan bridge.

SS: And what would happen when you arrived?

LC: We would just walk there with our bleach kits and there was a route every Saturday morning that we would do on the Lower East Side. We'd just end up there and there were some Chinese people who lived there. So, we actually had a translated fact sheet in Chinese, to hand out with their bleach kits and clean needles.

SS: Did you do the translation?

LC: Me and my sister did, yes. It was a kind of an interesting process, but I only did that a couple of times. It was really sad that the shantytown burned down, after a while.

SS: How many people were living there?

LC: I'll say maybe 20 or 30. When we went there, they would come out and we'd talk to them.

SS: So, the Chinese people that were there, did you talk to them? Who were they?

LC: We tried to talk to them, but they have a different dialect from what I speak.

SS: What was your route on the Lower East Side?

LC: Essex, and then we would go down East Broadway. There were known locations that we would go and wait for the clients to come. We'd do a couple of stops.

SS: So, were all the dealers still openly out on the street at that time?

LC: I didn't know anything about drug use at that time, so I wouldn't know if a dealer hit me over the head with a bat. But, there was definitely a very visible drug use culture, though.

SS: So, inside ACT UP, were people who were former or current IV drug users – were they open about that, inside the organization?

LC: Not the current ones. I think maybe some of the former ones. Richard Elovich was always very open.

SS: Let's talk about Rod a little bit, because of the things we're trying to with this project, is to talk about people who aren't here, so that their work is remembered. Could you just tell a little bit about what he did in ACT UP and what he was like?

LC: Well, the first time I met him, it was in a Housing Caucus meeting, and he was just one of those really smart people. Every word that came out of his mouth had a very concrete meaning, and it was well thought out and well planned. It was just such a pleasure to know people like that, and that they're doing this work, using everything that they have. I think he left the Housing Caucus, shortly after I joined, and started up the Needle Exchange Committee. I would say that he probably was the driving force behind that whole thing, and keeping it going, for so many years. And they really approached needle exchange every way they can. They went to trial; they got arrested all the time – on top of actually doing the needle exchange every week. I think, at the time, he was running two different programs. I actually went with him up to the Bronx, and he would know where all the crack houses were and he would go in and I would say, "I'll wait outside for you. Just let me know when you come out." It was kind of scary, because it

was obviously a very dangerous neighborhood, but Rod didn't give a hoot, and he met a lot of clients there. And, he went out to New Jersey and got arrested and went to trial for it. But, that didn't do any good, because Governor Whitman wouldn't allow needle exchange at all. It still doesn't have a needle exchange program. They have a pilot program, supposedly up, but I haven't heard anything about it. It's just ridiculous how many people got infected in New Jersey because of that stupid policy – murderous policy.

SS: So, when did Rod realize he was infected?

LC: Seven years ago, I think. He just came down with a really bad case of shingles. I think that he pretty much knew all along that he was infected, but this was right at the time that protease inhibitors came out. A lot of people, at the time, didn't really feel the need to get tested, because there was just no treatment. And, he was one of those people in that camp. If there wasn't anything you could do about it, why find out? But as it turned out, he should have gotten tested. When he found it, it was just way too late for the drugs to do any good.

SS: I don't know this for a fact, but I think he had a kind of belief in wanting to maintain his drug use and not being forced to get off drugs, in order to get AIDS treatment, is that right?

LC: I've wrestled with that thinking for so long now. I've come to an understanding that Rod is one of those people that so firmly believes in justice, so firmly believing in living a life with a principle that he couldn't understand why drug use is illegal, and he couldn't understand why people were persecuted for that. He understands people use drugs for many different reasons, and the least of it is for the fun of it. Most

of it has to do with people struggling with their daily realities and just trying to cope, with self-medication. That's very much his own take on drug use. I don't think that it was either drug use or AIDS treatment. It wasn't ever really a split on that level. He had tried to quit several times as well. When he found out, he was just so sick that he did try the medication. None of it ever worked out.

SS: Wasn't there an issue about people who were actively using drugs, not being given the same treatments, or not being given some access to treatment? I'm vague about this – this is a vague memory of mine.

LC: Well, Rod certainly found out a lot of it, because he had track marks. So, he would get discriminated against on every level of service. Doctors wouldn't take him. Emergency rooms would confiscate his bag or search his bag. He was, basically, being treated as a criminal, rather than a person needing medical care. He got locked up in isolation wards a couple of times, because they had thought that he had TB. The level of discrimination that he faced was ridiculous, and still goes on. You never hear about, that's all.

SS: Can you describe his memorial service a little bit?

LC: I think a couple of hundred people came. We held it at Housing Works. Some people wanted to do it at Judson Memorial Church because they used to do needle exchange bleach kits in the basement. But, Rod was pretty adamant in his will that he didn't want to have any association with religion, even if the church has been decommissioned. We thought Housing Works was an alternative site. It was just – when he passed away, there was such a tremendous hurt being felt by so many people, just because of who he was. I still don't know what memorial services are good for. I don't

know if it helped me deal with it better, but it was nice to be in a roomful of so many people that knew Rod. I guess it was helpful in that sense.

Tape I
00:40:00

SS: That's interesting that you raise that, because going to memorial services was the big part of the ACT UP culture. How do you think it served the community? Or, why do you think people were so committed to making memorial services for each other?

LC: I actually had not gone to a memorial service before. I wasn't part of that. I usually tend to go towards more of a pro-active solution, rather than really face the stark reality. So, I tend to avoid those kinds of things myself.

SS: All right, let's talk about something that's more fun. How about the social life of ACT UP – were you involved in that?

LC: I was also involved with my Majority Action – which was a group of people of color in ACT UP.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: So, what was Majority Actions Committee?

LC: Majority Action was all the people of color in ACT UP that got together. There were a couple of white guys – not just guys – a couple of white people. They tried to call themselves pink people, just to blend in. We're, like, nah, I don't think so. Rich Jackman, he's another – he's in the Housing Committee. I think he moved out to Seattle. But, I can't really remember. It basically functioned as an affinity group. Every time there's a big action, we'll do part of it as the Majority Action, and it serves as a foundation for the social circle that I was in.

SS: So, who was in Majority Action?

LC: Stan Williams. There was Keith Cylar, Michael Wiggins, Sharon Tramutola. That's pretty much it. There were always people drifting in and out all the time. There were some Latinos, before they started the Latino Caucus.

SS: So, there was a Latino Caucus separate from Majority Action?

LC: Majority Action was before Latino Caucus. Latino Caucus kind of blossomed into itself one day. It got huge. And that also served as kind of a social circle for us, in ACT UP, because there were like the A-list people and the B-list people. We were like the D-list people. We'd go out to have a drink and something to eat after the meeting.

SS: Where would you guys go?

LC: One of those diners, I forgot. I don't think it's there anymore.

SS: Was there any interracial socializing? I mean, your group was interracial, but with white people?

LC: I think so, yeah. There was some. I never personally got involved with people in ACT UP, though. Something about it just doesn't sit quite right with me.

SS: You never had any romances in ACT UP?

LC: No.

SS: But, the room was a big cruise scene, right?

LC: Yeah, it was a huge cruise scene.

SS: So, you just decided not to be part of that?

LC: I think I was a little too intimidated. When I first went, I was 19. So it was like all these cute men, walking around. I think I'll focus on the work, and not deal with that part of it.

SS: How was it to be a young person in ACT UP? How were you treated by the older people?

LC: I think people get treated in ACT UP according to the work that they do. I don't think there's any other categories. If you're doing good work, and you are responsible for what you started, and then people will respect you as an individual. I certainly look up to a lot of the older activists in the room, and learn a tremendous amount from them; it was really a great opportunity for learning. There was so much activist history in the room. You certainly don't feel like you don't know what you're doing, because there's always people there that know better than you do, and have done it before, and can tell you how to do it.

SS: Who were some of those older people that really knew?

LC: I think Maxine Wolfe was great. Who else? I can't remember anybody specifically.

SS: So, what were some of the goals of the Majority Action Caucus?

LC: I think the primary goal is just to put the issue of people of color on the agenda, because ACT UP was so overwhelmingly white back then. I think that's when the epidemic itself was shifting from the gay community to more into the black and Latino community. But, certainly those communities were not represented in ACT UP, which was primarily a gay white organization. It had come under criticism for that, somewhat. But, part of the Majority Action was to somehow represent the other side of the epidemic and try to bring up issues on the floor, as it relates to it. We spent a lot of time discussing how to get more people of color involved, but never really quite got there.

SS: Did you ever try? How did it work?

LC: I think there's just such a huge culture divide. I think we tried putting up posters in places, but it's kind of hard. It's not simple to get like a gay ghetto – everybody's here; you just go there and find the people. People of color are everywhere in New York, so it's kind of, like, where do you start, and how do you get them to come to a room full of white, gay people and have them participate? It just doesn't quite jive. We didn't really do too good on that front.

SS: Why do you think that you were able to survive and work constructively in a majority white organization, while a lot of other gay people of color didn't want to?

LC: Interesting question. I don't know. I never thought of it that way. I just thought – I don't really have much of an issue about race, probably because I'm an immigrant, so, I didn't grow up with a lot of that stuff in me. And personally, I can't really say that I faced racial discrimination to a large extent. My personal take on ACT UP as a group is primarily as I relate to it as a gay man, rather than as an Asian man.

SS: Did you ever hear from other gay Asians, why are you going to ACT UP, or anything like that?

LC: No. I was also involved with gay Asian community groups.

SS: Which groups?

LC: GAPIMNY – Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York. It's one of those long acronyms. And, there were very intense discussions about race relationships within the group itself. And there were certainly – there was a big demonstration with *Miss Saigon* and how GLAAD? No, Lambda [Legal Defense] was using it as a

fundraiser – so, we made a big stink over that one. In New York City, there are two gay Asian groups. One is all Asian – no whites allowed. The other one is white and Asian mixed, but it's primarily white guys running it. There's always been that split in the gay community here. And most of them aren't involved in AIDS issues. It wasn't really much of a problem.

SS: Did you try to bring AIDS consciousness to GAPIMNY?

LC: Yes.

SS: What would you do, for example?

LC: Well, eventually, we started an API Caucus in ACT UP. There was a handful of us there.

SS: Who was in it?

LC: Ming Ma, Paul Pfeiffer. He's in town, maybe you should talk to him.

SS: I'd like to.

LC: There was my sister, Kathy. There was Yukari [Yanagino] – what was her last name, I forgot.

SS: So, what did you do to bring AIDS issues to GAPIMNY?

LC: What did we do? Well, we started an API Caucus in ACT UP. At the time, there wasn't even any prevention brochures in Asian languages. I think GMHC had one that was really hokey looking in English with Chinese illustration type things. I was, like, that's not going to work. And, basically, our focus of the group was to bring the AIDS issue to the API community. And, of course, in the gay group, the issue of AIDS awareness is, obviously, very high up on the agenda. So, we did a couple of teach-ins with gay groups, and people got interested in the issue and started coming to our

meetings.

SS: So, people would come, not to ACT UP, but to the ACT UP API caucus. Okay, that's interesting. So, how many people did you have at your height?

LC: API Caucus? Maybe eight. We did a lot of stuff.

SS: Tell me some of the things you did.

LC: We did a fundraiser at a gay Asian bar. We had a condom fashion show. We made these strange, crazy outfits with condoms and dental dams, culminating with a big wedding scene. A bouffant of condoms blowing out. It was a lot of fun, actually, to do that.

SS: What bar was it at?

LC: It was at Club 58, it was called. Now, it's called the Web. It's the only gay Asian bar in town.

SS: Where is it?

LC: It's on 58th Street and Madison. It's kind of shocking. In New York, there's only one gay Asian bar, don't you think? I could never figure that one out. And, we worked up a curriculum and did safer sex education things to any groups that wanted to invite us. There was this one time – we went down to a middle school in Chinatown. I think it was an after school program or something – so we went and brought out the bananas and the condoms and a whole big show and tell, and we had somebody do it in Cantonese, and somebody doing it in English, somebody doing it in Mandarin. And the kids were just sitting there going – they were fifth graders or something. They'd never heard anything like this. We were just going – I think we're going to get these teachers in trouble here. But they invited us, so we just went and did our thing. We went to

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Hunter College. We did one up in Binghamton. They have some kind of Asian student conference there. And then we pulled together with Majority Action and Latino Caucus, we organized a national People of Color AIDS Activist conference.

SS: Where was that?

LC: That was at Hunter.

SS: How many people came to that?

LC: Maybe 100, 150, from all over the country.

SS: And ACT UP paid for it?

LC: It was sponsored by ACT UP, yes.

SS: And what was the result of it?

LC: I think people just got in touch with each other. There was a lot of chest banging about how we need more people of color involved, but that's always the tough one.

SS: So, there was Majority Action, API Caucus and Latino Caucus, all at the same time?

LC: Yes.

SS: That's a lot. So, you were in API Caucus, Housing Caucus, Needle Exchange, Outreach Committee and Majority Action. Was there ever one day of the week that you didn't go to ACT UP?

LC: That was my whole life. [LAUGHS] Every night, there was something going on. Generally, I just do one group at a time.

SS: So, how much of your life was about ACT UP?

LC: It was pretty much school and ACT UP. More ACT UP than school at

some points.

SS: Can you try to convey – because I think it’s something that people have a hard time understanding historically – what it was like to live in ACT UP?

LC: Well, you know everybody in your phone book is somebody in ACT UP. When you go out to eat with friends, everybody at a table is from ACT UP. When you go out to bars, you see the other people from ACT UP, wearing the t-shirts and stuff. It’s a very supportive environment, and can also be kind of volatile at times.

SS: Give an example.

LC: There were camps. There were a certain camp of people you just don’t talk to.

SS: What were the camps? This is important.

LC: I can’t really remember. Certainly, all the Treatment divas are in their own camp. We don’t talk to them.

SS: Why wouldn’t you talk to them?

LC: I guess we just had this kind of perception of them being snobby – not that I know too much about it. I tried to get involved with T&D, but it was just a little over my head at this point. What were the other camps? There was always some kind of in-fighting thing going on, on a minor level. I think it got a lot worse towards the end of its heyday, when that whole organization was splintering.

SS: Can you describe what that was, and what the issues were, so we can understand that?

LC: There was a huge blow-out over a particular study with AZT and black women – 076. And there were different camps of people that were critical of the study

itself. And then, some people felt – the Treatment people did not stand up and proclaim, loud enough, the problem with the trial. There were just basic political differences that came to the surface, I think.

SS: Do you remember what the problem was with the trial?

LC: I think it had something to do with placebos. I don't really remember specifically.

SS: Did we have a position on placebo?

LC: I think so, yeah.

SS: What was it?

LC: That they shouldn't be used. You should do parallel track, instead.

SS: Can you explain what parallel track is?

LC: You would try, for people who were in clinical trials – this is before HAART. It would be unethical to give people a sugar pill, when you could have a different alternative, by using two different regimens – comparing the regimens or different dosages. You can attempt to answer the question of whether a drug is effective by using other means, other than the black and white one of comparing somebody who's on it and somebody's who's not.

SS: So, you recall 076 going against the grain of ACT UP's position on placebo?

LC: I think that whole trial touched on so many hot button issues – feminism, racial inequalities. Everything was just kind of tied up in a knot, with that trial. There was just so many different – people were screaming and yelling and crying, fighting over it. It was so emotional, and I think, for ACT UP, particularly, being a primarily white

organization that race was a very touchy issue – it's always been kind of touchy – when we were out there, screaming for attention about AIDS, all you see are white faces, which gives the impression that we're speaking for everybody, but, at the same time, the fact of the matter is, we don't have that kind of participation from people of color communities. That was always kind of a catch-22 with the group.

SS: What kinds of things do you feel that ACT UP won for people of color? And, where do you think that ACT UP didn't come through for people of color with AIDS?

LC: I never felt ACT UP to not address those issues. And, it has a lot to do with my continuing participation in the group. I felt very comfortable. The organization as a whole are very political conscious, and whatever actions they take were always for the good of every person living with AIDS, and not just the privileged ones. So, I think, politically, ACT UP – this was before political correctness was coined – ACT UP has always been that way. And, occasionally, individuals in that group will make some sort of insensitive remark, and they always get booted down. So, it's kind of, like, when you get that large a group of people together, there's bound to be differences of opinion. If people had other agendas, they weren't voicing it.

SS: You brought up feminism. What was the role of feminism in ACT UP?

LC: I think the whole organization was very feminist. There were certainly very well articulated – particularly from the lesbian communities involved – that are always putting that issue up on the table, and they fought for a lot of – it changed the CDC definition to include pelvic inflammatory disease. And, at the same time, a lot of

the pro-choice things were going on as well. I think the feminists – particularly the lesbians in the group – provided a lot of the driving force for the whole organization, and leadership. And, their experience from their work in feminism definitely helped ACT UP in its maturing process, to follow by all the Robert's Rules of Order – the best way to organize, and what you can do with people once you get them organized. That kind of technical stuff all came from the feminism movement.

SS: So, when did you leave ACT UP?

LC: I think I left ACT UP right about the same time that most people left ACT UP.

SS: When was that?

LC: When was that? I think it was after I graduated from school – the mid-'90s, '95? Right before protease came out, I think. That's when things kind of went downhill. Through the API Caucus, we got involved with others in the Asian community, and started up a non-profit organization – APICHA – Asian Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS. We met for a couple of years and get some Ryan White funding and got the organization off the ground. And, a lot of the people in the API Caucus were the driving force behind that organization coming into existence. And, I think, that at that point, a lot of that translation from ACT UP style street activism went into actually going into service provision and building that infrastructure of HIV care and delivery. I think a lot of ACT UPpers went into that field, and became professional.

SS: You have, right?

LC: Yeah.

SS: Where do you work now?

LC: Right now, I work at the AIDS Treatment and Data Network.

SS: And what are you doing there?

LC: My focus right now is federal AIDS policy.

SS: Now, did that organization also come out of ACT UP?

LC: That came out of T&D.

SS: And do you know who started it, or how it got started it?

LC: I think it was Iris Long. But, Ken Fornataro is the one who's been running it for 10 years or so.

SS: So, you've been part of three service organizations that came out of ACT UP committees. I just want to clarify one thing that we talked about earlier. You said that when the API Caucus started, there was no prevention information in any Asian language. Did you guys actually do translations and create that information? Or, did you go to GMHC and get them to do it?

LC: We went to GMHC – actually, I wrote a piece in *OutWeek*, criticizing their lack of prevention material and got all this hate mail.

SS: What kind of hate mail?

LC: Like, “How dare you – we've been doing this for years!” We do have this, we do have that, and trying to show how this person is – no, that's not going to work. No, we actually did. We looked at several prevention brochures and then drafted our own version of it, and then we went to the gay Asian group and asked for volunteers to translate them. We did one brochure that had six different languages on it, six main ones.

SS: And ACT UP published it?

LC: Yes.

SS: Where did you distribute it?

LC: We tried to go through schools. We tried to get it through the Chinatown health agencies. They weren't really crazy about them. They would just Xerox, with handwritten Asian languages that we tried to make as legible as we could, but it was kind of interesting how we got that done. It was really basic – HIV 101. How to use a condom, how to clean works.

SS: So, you just walk into a Chinatown health agency and say, here, we want you to distribute these – we're ACT UP? And what would they say?

LC: Oh, okay, put it over there.

SS: Who did you meet with at GMHC, when you discussed this with them?

LC: We didn't actually go to them to ask for help because they didn't know what they were doing. At the time, the incidence rate in the API community was pretty low in the city. I think it was a couple of hundred of people. So, we didn't feel like the community itself was that high on their agenda. We just went on and did it on our own.

SS: Were there any Asian people with AIDS in ACT UP?

LC: I don't think so. Some of them later became infected, but not at the time, I don't think. If they were, they weren't open about it. There were Asians with AIDS in the other – the APICHA group.

SS: Do you know what the rate is now, in 2003, for Asians in New York?

LC: I think the latest I heard was, it has the fastest growing rate, but I don't know the exact numbers.

SS: So, you guys were really ahead of the game?

LC: We were part of it. There was another group of people that worked in the social service industry, that had gotten together before we got involved, but they were just sort of sitting around in a board room, talking about stuff, and planning to go to give speeches in Japanese churches and stuff. We were really the ones that pushed the group to apply for funding, and actually start providing services.

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SS: So, you were really in the vanguard of activism and service for the Asian community in New York, regarding AIDS?

LC: There was a group of us that did it, yeah.

SS: Did you get support from the rest of ACT UP?

LC: Well, I think when we'd gone down to the API Caucus, because the group is so focused on one specific population, that the organization, as a whole, wasn't really too concerned what we were up to, but we were certainly doing a lot of work directly.

SS: Did you ever get opposition?

LC: No. Usually, when we got on the agenda, it was at the end of the meeting. We would have most of the room already gone. So, we didn't care. When we had to do something, we'd just go ahead and announce it.

SS: I have one last question, and it's kind of a complicated one, but, basically, you have spent your whole adult life working in AIDS, do you know why?

LC: No – I spent a six-year period just doing for profit stuff – graphic design work. I certainly was burned out at the end of the first period. At a certain point, the politics of it just got to me, and I couldn't deal with it, at the time.

Why? When I was very involved with ACT UP that was very much a lifestyle. It

was a community – especially for a young gay man who’d just moved to the city without much background information to have that community there, and to have things to do that actually helped people, was very fortunate. If I were to move here today and not have that, I don’t know how my life would come out. I feel very lucky to be there at the time that it was going on. I went back to doing full-time AIDS work, partly because there was no other work around, and partly because of Rod. When I first went back – this was almost two years ago – there was a lot of talk of people leaving. Longtime AIDS activists are leaving their work and trying to pursue their own lives. And I was like, well, why don’t I try to go back in and do some more, because I already know all this stuff, anyway, so it just kind of comes natural to me. It’s not like I have to start learning everything from scratch. And, certainly, having some of that background and history helped, in terms of understanding where the epidemic is at right now, and what needs to be done about it.

SS: And you have Rod’s ashes right here in your apartment, and his picture. So, you’re living with that.

LC: Yeah. Well, not for too much longer. He’s going home this summer.

SS: Are you going to scatter his ashes?

LC: No, I’m just going to give it back to his Mom. We’ve tried to figure out ways to – something to do with the ashes. We thought about taking them over to New Jersey and dumping them on Christine Whitman’s lawn, or go to the White House, or go out to Fire Island. I just never really have the heart to do it. I want to let him rest. He’s worked too hard. I don’t think he wants to end up in New Jersey, anyway.

SS: Okay, thank you Lei. That was wonderful – you did so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]