

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

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Interviewee: **Rebecca Cole**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so we usually start, if you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

REBECCA COLE: Oh my god, my age?

SS: We're all the same age.

RC: No, I know, but we're ly-, I've been lying for at least 12 years.

I work in television now, so I'm not going to say my age.

SS: No, come on, Rebecca.

RC: All right. I'm 50.

SS: Okay, me too.

RC: Rebecca Cole, 50.

SS: Me too.

RC: {LAUGHS} That just ended my television career.

SS: Well –

RC: That and the cheekbones, the lack of cheekbones.

SS: And what's today's date and where are we?

RC: We are, let's see, today's date is June 30th, -ish, 2008; and we are in my apartment in, the, it's one of those no-name places; I hear they're calling it Hellsea, which is between Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea.

SS: In your beautiful apartment, that you own –

RC: Yeah –

SS: On West 34th Street.

RC: – right, I finally own an apartment, in Hellsea.

SS: So let's just start with your background, which is what we do. Okay, the tapes are 40 minutes, each one is 40 minutes long, so we'll change them. And we usually start with the person's background and who they were before they came to ACT UP.

RC: Oh, my god. Okay.

SS: We've done that with everybody.

RC: Okay.

SS: So where did you grow up?

RC: I was born in Lakewood, Ohio. And then I moved to Cincinnati, and lived on a little cul-de-sac, and moved, when I was five years old, to, outside of Pittsburgh, which is where I kind of remember. So I grew up in a kind of rural, working-class town, about 40 minutes outside of Pittsburgh.

SS: What's it called?

RC: It's called Wexford, Pennsylvania.

SS: So do you come from a long line of Midwestern stock?

RC: You know, I'm more of a Yankee stock, even though we moved, like as, kind of, Ohio was where my parents lived, but we grew up, they grew up in New Hampshire. So it's sort of New England–Midwest. A combination of the two.

SS: And what brought them to Wexford?

RC: My father's work, I think, brought us there. My father, he was a traveling salesman, so we lived in a number of places until I was about six, and

then I remember, there was a big family meeting one day when I was about, I think 10, where we were going to move again. And the big decision was made that we weren't going to move, we liked where we lived, and now he was going to figure out what work he could do. Which was a bit of a struggle, I think, for our, from 10 to my going away to college.

SS: What did your mother do?

RC: My mother stayed home and took care of us. And was – we lived in an area where people didn't have very much money. And my father was the only one who traveled to the city to work. And that was really far away then, because the highways hadn't kind of come in yet to the rural area. Now it's five minutes away or something. Not five minutes, but it's 20 minutes, and it used to be an hour and a half.

So my friends were all either farm kids or coal, their parents worked in the coal mines or in the steel industry. And my father had a kind of a middle-class job in the city, but was traveling a lot.

SS: So what kind of life did your parents prepare you for?

RC: Well, I have all brothers. The biggest part of my childhood that I really remembered influencing me the most was the fact that I have three brothers, and they were very athletic. And they did, they were big hockey players. They all went to colleges on hockey scholarships and stuff. And hockey wasn't even the biggest sport in my town, but we lived right next to a big state park, and there was an ice-skating rink, and so it was all about the athletics of –

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and not so much organized ones. There was a pond behind our house, and it was getting up on Saturday mornings and going and getting together a hockey game, or kick the can or whatever. So it was a real idyllic kind of rural – we spent all of our time outside, childhood. Except that it was also – I didn't even realize until a lot later; it was also in the '60s – and we were really far away from real, the immediate impact of the Vietnam War, except that my mother – it was, I was a child, I didn't pay attention to what my mother was doing. But one of the things she was doing was writing the, what do you call that thing, where you – you're trying to get out of the Vietnam War? When you're writing the – what's the term?

SS: Petition?

JIM HUBBARD: Conscientious objector.

RC: Yeah, conscientious objector.

SS: Oh.

RC: Okay. So my mother became this, my mother was this person that everyone knew and everyone loved. She drove me crazy, but everyone else just adored my mother. And it was always someone in trouble, someone in – some radical, someone selling drugs, someone arrested for something. And, or, a really good kid who wanted to be what I didn't know what it meant; a conscientious objector, the war. And they have a priest; and – maybe a politician, or someone – and my mother would write the three letters that were required.

And so she sort of taught me about how there's obligations in the world, but then – there's times when your heart tells you you have to do something else.

So that, I'm only saying that, really, in response to sort of what, where we're kind of leading. It wasn't a big conscious part of my childhood, except that I knew that my mother did not think that anyone was weird or odd or strange; and where I grew up in a really conservative, Republican family, where everyone else did. {LAUGHS} So I think that really influenced me. But more than anything, it was the fact that I grew up with all brothers. And I was really comfortable around guys, and whatever the things were that they were doing, and the sports, the competition. And back in those days, it was before we had any kind of athletics we were allowed to go do. So if I was going to join a team, I was going to be the statistician for the hockey team. I think that was a really important part of my childhood.

And then I, because there weren't really sports for girls, I joined the “the-ah-tah” — of the nearby, the theaters – thing. And that was a really influential part of my life, and that's really what I then went about trying to do.

SS: So in high school, you were in the theater kids?

RC: I was, well, not just in high school. I was probably nine or ten when I went and auditioned for some sort of semipro thing, far, far away. But my brothers' hockey was far, far away, because everything was far, far. It was so rural where we were. You'd have to drive an hour to get to anything, so I think in

some ways, probably to get my parents to drive me somewhere, I went and joined the theater and then did plays.

SS: So was that your motive for escape, was to go be in the theater?

RC: It was totally – escaping was a big part of how I grew up. I mean, I had, in some ways, the picture was idyllic; and then the reality was lonely sometimes, and we were the interlopers in this town, where people had been for, five generations, kind of coal mining, steel mill, town. Really close friendships, cousins knowing cousins knowing cousins. And then we arrived. And getting to know friends and stuff was sometimes difficult.

It also was not the most academic place or school. Yet that was a really big priority in my family. And it was hard to find an outlet for that.

SS: Did your mother go to college?

RC: My mother went to college. My grandmother went to college.

SS: Oh, wow.

RC: My grandfather went to college. My grandmother got her master's at, I think, Vassar in 1917 or '18. So education was a big, big part of my family. But we lived in a place where, I remember saying I was considering going to Northwestern. And the guidance counselor, who was also the football coach, who was also the English teacher, said, well, why don't you pick a school we've heard of?

SS: Oh.

RC: Which would have been, like Slippery Rock or someplace close by, or some community college. So it was an interesting place to grow up.

I think it's really great – my brother has, interestingly, later, only sent his kids to private school. It was, I thought it was really great to learn what the world was like. I mean, I learned what a rural community was like. And struggled, and didn't know that it was a struggle. Until I went to college, when I didn't, hadn't ever really read a whole book yet, or knew how to write a paper. And I went to a really good school. So –

SS: So where did you go to school?

RC: – I was lost. I went to Northwestern.

SS: Oh, okay. So then you went to Chicago, the big city.

RC: Yeah, and that was really, I think that my whole life has been about the difference between how I grew up and where I went as an adult. Because I grew up rural, and I lived only in cities — Chicago and New York — my adult life. And I think my whole business, everything I've done, has been combining those two worlds. My profession is now garden and interior designer, and it's all very organic, and it really comes from the country. But it's got this kind of sophistication that's about the city; and, merging those two worlds. And also, just – I don't really know where I got my politics. My father says I came out of the womb screaming “it's unfair!” And I think it's more about, mowing the lawn versus doing the dishes. The girl did the dishes, the boys mowed the lawn, and I wanted to be outside. So, it was really kind of raw, how it got formed. But

something in my mother, though, something about her. She understood that life was unfair for some people, and that they needed some breaks, and – so she probably helped form it, too. But –

SS: So you did theater at Northwestern.

RC: Yup.

SS: And is that when you first got exposed to gay men?

RC: {SIGH} Let's see; gay men. I'd say the first time, when we grew up, there was no word, gay, any-why, we didn't know anything about gay. But I went to Carnegie Mellon as a summer intern in the theater program. And I remember, there was a boy that was like a girl, and would dress like a girl, and he played the girl parts. And I was 16, and I'd never seen anything like that before.

Turns out all my really close friends — not all of them, but a lot of my really close friends from when I was nine to 15, 16, doing theater — ended up telling me they were gay. I don't think they even knew. I mean they knew, but they didn't tell me. And those were my dear, close friends that still, to this day, are my friends. They're directing plays on Broadway; they all became really successful and did amazing things. So that was the first exposure. But not in any kind of conscious way.

I didn't know – it wasn't really till I was in college that I'd heard the word, that there was – that just sounds so naive, now that I think about it. But I really don't think we knew that there were gay men or women, or – We knew, but it just wasn't a conscious thing. We didn't speak about it, and – and there

wasn't even, there was, my friend down the road, that we used to sing Christmas carols with at my little rural school was a ventriloquist when he was younger. And then became a lovely singer, and his mother was a piano teacher, and she used to teach me the piano, and how to sing. And she had this only child, and he was a ventriloquist. Well, he became a – quite an out, fabulous guy later, but we didn't know what, that it was anything odd.

SS: So when you – okay, so you finished your B.A. in theater.

RC: Uh huh.

SS: And then did you move to New York after that?

RC: Yeah. Well I went to Northwestern and was in theater. And really, a very important part of that thing is that when I was at Northwestern, I also was a fish out of water. I grew up so rural, we just didn't know very, wasn't very sophisticated. I grew up with parents who knew how to be sophisticated, but we just, we were out of practice 20 years. I was never in practice, but they were out of practice.

So they thought it was very normal for me to go there, but I really didn't know what I was – it was an odd place. But I was an actress, I could kind of fake it.

But I did a show with – it was Jacques Brel. And it was with, and I, I loved the politics of it, and the – it was a real coming of age time for me. I was the youngest one in the cast. It was a very successful show, and later we did it again. And there was, and I became really close to the four, there were four of

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us; the three other people that we did it with. And then I left – well, I left school, and went into the theater, and did it in Chicago, and did it with all these people who are now really doing great.

So I graduated in 1980. And in 1981, one of the cast members died of a – a – shockingly; 22 years old. The healthiest, most robust, amazing guy that I had, had really become my family. Because –

SS: What was his name?

RC: Uh – yeah, don't show this part.

SS: We show the whole thing. It's normal. Okay.

RC: David Garrett. David Garrett.

SS: He died in Chicago?

RC: No. He died in L.A. He went to L.A. He was a couple years, two years older than me. And – three years older, maybe. So he was graduating when we did this show. And I was the little baby that they all kind of, embraced and showed me the world.

And – he went to L.A. to pursue the the-ah-tah. And I didn't keep in touch with him. We didn't – we kept in touch by everyone telling everyone what was going on. But, we didn't have cell phones, we didn't have e-mail; it was harder to keep in touch.

So I knew he was doing well, and auditioning and getting little things. And then – one day – I didn't hear he was sick. I heard he died. And I assumed it was an accident or something. And they said, no, it was some, he, he

got the flu, or something. It's like, David Garrett got the flu? I mean, he – he was this gorgeous, black, magnificent, muscle-bound, healthy as an ox – fighter, competitive as, he won every part. There was no way this man could, unless a truck hit him – it still, that was 1981. And – it was probably three years later before I heard of anything else that I traced it back, could that have been what happened?

SS: Right.

RC: Anyway, so that whole time, I was living in Chicago.

SS: And when did you move to New York?

RC: 1984 I moved to New York.

SS: To be an actress.

RC: To be an actress.

SS: I remember when I met you that you were an actress.

RC: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. That's right. Okay, so you came in 1984. And what was your life like?

RC: Oh, my gosh, I had the weirdest life in New York. I had, I – eh. Hopefully people who still move to New York now can still have these, I can't believe what happened to me the first four years, or the first two or three years. I was doing a show in Chicago, at the Goodman. And I was, I had a little teeny tiny role, but with a lot of people who were very famous and successful.

And someone hooked me up with a friend of theirs who had a bar. And I became a bartender while I was in, pursuing acting.

I came here to do a show, and the show, we rehearsed the show, it never opened. And then I kept trying to do the shows. And I did some, but it wasn't to, wasn't all that successful at it. But –

I lived in Tribeca. I don't even know if it was called that then. We didn't call it that. Downtown, we lived downtown. And worked at this bar that was this really eclectic, crazy bar.

SS: What was it called?

RC: It was called the Raccoon Lodge. And the biggest claim to fame, my friends really don't care about ACT UP. They actually care more about this story.

My birthday, it was my first year in New York. And, I always looked like I was 12 years old when I was 20. I really did then. And I was corn-fed, and – so no one took me very seriously. And I was working in this kind of rough motorcycle bar. And one Saturday – I always had the bad shift. And one Saturday, on my birthday, which is December 22nd — or maybe it was the day before my birthday; a couple days before — Tribeca then, which wasn't called Tribeca, it was called downtown, was a ghost town on a Saturday afternoon. And it was just a bunch of bikers and a couple of Wall Streeters still left over from the night before. They had too much coke. And we, there were all these sirens and all

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this craziness outside. And – we're looking out. And we don't see any real activity, we just see all the police.

And the police came, and said, you need to close the bar. And this is not a bar where you can kick people out very easily. They live there, so – we locked the doors, and stayed in. Didn't know what was going on.

An hour or so later, someone knocks on the door. It's a regular. He comes in, and he tells us that there's a shooting in the subway. And in those days, that wasn't all that odd. You really couldn't go into the subway without seeing something really bad happen. I just, that was just a part of New York. So you didn't think it was that odd, but that why is it so extreme?

It was a big shooting; four pe-, no, I think they'd said at that point, like 10 people were killed, and they can't find the shooter, or, I don't know. There was like all kinds of rumors going around.

It turned out it was Bernie Goetz. And Bernie Goetz worked in the store next to me, the electric, there was an electrician store right next to the Raccoon Lodge. And he was this quiet little nerdy guy; didn't really speak to anyone. But he was with all these kind of macho guys that ran the electric store. And they would come and drink at this biker bar, which is my bar. And Bernie Goetz really liked me; because I was just sweet to him. And he was the only person, it was the only reason we had Kahlua, because he drank Kahlua and cream in a shot-and-beer kind of place.

And I don't know if this is really true, but rumor has it that he was coming to give me a little birthday present.

Now, we don't know anything about this at the time. We just know that that night, right after my shift, I got into my car to drive home to Pittsburgh for Christmas. And driving home, and I hear, I'm listening to the news, because, this is the closest I've ever been to news before. And I'm listening to this story that these four kids were shot in the back, and I don't even remember how they told it, but I remember the story just kept changing, about who was shooting whom, and –

But by the time I got back to home, I look on the news, and they say that a white guy shot four black kids, and that there was some, maybe I think they said that the kids had guns, and that turned out to not be true. But the first day of the story. So I'm just fascinated by it, and don't know that I know anyone involved in it.

The next day, there's a sketch of the guy. And I called the bar, who are my friends. They're the people who ran the bar. And I say, that's Bernie Goetz!

And they're, like, honey, you've been in New York for, you're too naive. It's not Bernie. How could Bernie Goetz –

So, that's Bernie Goetz, that's, that drawing is Bernie Goetz!

And he's lost some-, they were trying to find him.

And three or four, and I said, I think I should call the police. I really think that's Bernie G-

And they say, no, you're crazy, and that can't be. He would never, he can't even talk to people, let alone carry a gun.

And it was four days later that he was found in New Hampshire, and arrested. And – and there was this real interesting kind of thing that happened, because the bar was really mixed bar. It was racially mixed, it was definitely economically mixed, because it was like biker bar, pool bar, and Wall Streeters who were, that first time around, making money. So depending on the time you were there. And because of the pool table, it became a really interesting mix. So I really kind of learned New York in a weird way.

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And Bernie Goetz became this, I think that, in some ways, was my coming of age. Because he, the guys brought him there, to the bar, to kind of discuss raising money for his defense. And half the bar wanted to shoot him; and the other half of the bar wanted to buy him a drink; and I'm the only little girl bartender in this, kind of, they never would do this now; but it was one bartender, no barback, just me, and a hundred people, with a big amount of ideas as to what to with this one little guy. And eventually, I remember saying, you need to get out of here; you can't come back; because I can't control this, the sentiment here. And I understood all sides of it.

Actually didn't even understand his side of it so much. I understood the side of – it was a dangerous place, New York. But – {SIGH}.

Four black kids being shot in the back – was a reaction that – galvanized what racism was about in the city, and – I'd always read it in the paper before. Now I was a part of the world that –

SS: Right. You became a New Yorker.

RC: Yeah, I became a New Yorker, and that was seven months into being in New York.

SS: So when did you first come up against AIDS while you were here?

RC: Uh – let's see – see, now you're going to make me remember everyone's name. Okay. Probably I was here two years, maybe? Eighty-four, '85, '86. Yeah. And a friend of mine who I'd had another show with — so it's all kind of through the theater — well, we started learning about GRID, I think, on TV. I feel like that term had come up. And then I feel like my friends had started talking to me about David and that possibility, that that explained that issue. And I'd never known anyone who died before, so that was – so I was more aware of it, probably, than usual, when it would come up, because not very many people knew anyone who had it, unless you were kind of totally in the world of it. Even that, though; it was still pretty rare. Just these odd deaths of very healthy people. Very young, beautiful, healthy people, would –

So, but a friend of mine came to me, and said that he had – we had done a show together, we'd done *The Importance of Being Earnest*. {LAUGHS}. And he was one of the Earnests. And he said that he was going to, he decided he

needed to do something more than just audition and do some plays from time to time, and he wanted to do something more important; and that he was going after the CDC's national AIDS hotline RFP. Which I didn't even know what that was. Like, what is it called, RFP?

JH: Request for Proposal.

RC: Yeah, Request for Proposal for the CDC. Because the CDC was getting, now, calls about – I think it was a, at this point, maybe it was called AIDS, I can't even remember. But it was kind of on the bridge of that moment, of GRID to AIDS. And they were getting calls, directly to the CDC; can I get it from swimming in a pool? Do I get it from mosquitoes? All these kind of like – fear questions. Can I ever go to a restaurant again? And then also, people who had it. It; we didn't even know what it was. I don't even know if HIV was defined yet. Maybe it was. I, I don't actually think so, though.

So, and he said he was going to go after this. And I said, well, what do you know? You're in the theater. And he said, well, it is this, there's a health program that wants to do it, but they want to put it in New York, because it's got to be 24 hours, it's got to be all volunteers. And they figure if they put it in New York, there's enough people here that care about this that will become volunteers. And I want you to do it with me.

So, I'd never done anything like that. But I thought, okay, well, we'll do it. So we started the National AIDS Hotline.

SS: Where was the office, the first office?

RC: The office was, I can't remember the number. But it was at Park Avenue and 19th Street. And it was this; it was on about the 12th floor or something. And – it was a horrible office, with horrible carpet and whatever. And we had regular phones; not any kind of computer system or anything. Just a regular hand-held phone. And it would ring. And, hello, National AIDS Hotline.

SS: So people called you from all around the country.

RC: All around the country, and Puerto Rico. Remember, that was, we were very excited that we had Puerto Rico, too. But all around the country and Puerto Rico and one phone, the first day. Maybe three. I think we had three, but only one worked, the very first day we answered the phones. And there were three or four, or maybe five of us.

SS: So this was the first place that human beings could call to get information about AIDS.

RC: Well, the very first place they called was the CDC. And they'd get the, the, or whatever, the first line of –

SS: Receptionist and all.

RC: Receptionist. And then, you know, where do you put them? There was no AIDS department or something. So they realized they needed a hotline. And – this is going to be bad of me to say, but my memory is, we were not trained. I think we got a booklet of what you could, the most likely questions and the most likely answers. And that first day that I did it, most of it was things like, mosquitoes, and a lot of people who really hated people who might have it,

and a lot of nasty stuff. But one or two people who thought they might have it. And they described their illness, and how bad it was, and where do they go? And we had a – at the time, we just had printed paper of clinics, or something. Clinics – for what? Just, it's like, the hospital name. No one had any, there was no – no one knew what to do yet. But you could, people who, hospitals who said they'd accept people who claimed they had some illness that might be related to GRID or AIDS. That's really is, that's as –

So they'd be from Arkansas; and the closest place was in Mississippi. And – they'd, it was – it was very emoti-, it was so different, compared to, first, one call would be some, some redneck, basically, who wanted to shoot people. Next one was, my kids go to the local swimming pool, and there's someone there that looks like a girl, and I think that could be the problem. I just got bit by a mosquito, and they're terrified; what am I going to do? And, I've been sick for about six weeks now. And I used to weigh a hundred and eighty pounds, and I now weigh a hundred and ten. And, I've got these big black marks all over me; and where should I go?

SS: So where were the first places in New York City that accepted people? What were the New York City referrals?

RC: {SIGH} We didn't really get that many New York City calls. It was really very national, because I think in New York City, people knew people who knew people who knew people who had doctors. It was very individual in New York. Because I'll tell you most of the people – I had to recruit the

volunteers. And that was basically – you go through, I was a bartender. And, in the Village or Chelsea, you ask people to come and be on the phone, and any gay man would go and do it.

That's basically – and it was from – I remember we also had assignments of – what do you call it? When you, you're arrested for DWI or for something, and you have to go do – community service. We had some community service people, and that was a fascinating mix; of people wanting to come and help, and people forced to come and help, and the sort of –

We really were on, to say the front lines, and everyone calls something the front line: we were on the naive front line. We heard what people really thought. Because this is all anonymous.

And it was relentless, call after call after call, of the diversity of questions, and not one answer that we could give anyone. We didn't really even know if you could get it from a swimming pool! We wanted to say, well, you're crazy, you should send your kids to swim. But we didn't know! You, you didn't know, you didn't know how it was transmitted yet. And – the, HIV was just even becoming the term, but it wasn't even yet there. So –

SS: How hesitant were people to tell you the truth, even though it was anonymous over the phone, about having gay sex?

RC: Well, that's, we, we then got, about six weeks into doing this, we went to school. They – they realized how complex the questions were, and how there needs to be a – some sort of standard of who you tell to wear a condom,

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and what – and how to draw out, what are you actually doing, and, where’s – really very specific sexual things. And none of us – and there were a couple people who were very comfortable talking about it. But most people weren’t; particularly on the phone, with a stranger. And definitely the people who called weren’t comfortable.

And there was – I remember there was a big debate going on as to whether you should, that it would be much cooler if we became very specific with our questions, as opposed to, but we don’t really know how you get it; so why don’t we just say that – everyone has AIDS; everyone could possibly have it. So every single thing you do could possibly make it happen.

And then there was this other kind of debate going on, of, so should we start saying having sex is bad unless you know it’s monogamous? And we were all New Yorkers. Well, no one has monogamous sex. Or, even if you do, you only know you are. You don’t know if the other person is. I always love that when a doctor asks: you’re in a monogamous relationship? Well, I think I am, but I don’t really know! You’d have to ask him or her!

So it was a fantastic place to be for that reason, because the conversations were amazing, after every phone call. But we had to be really specific. We were supposed to be really specific, until we all realized everyone’s doing something that’s probably risky, because we don’t really know what the risk is.

The other thing that started happening was, so much more press was on the men who were getting it. And I think because of being there, I realized how many women were calling, and possibly getting it. I didn't know. Having sex means you could. But there were a few people that called that were, it was pretty darn specific, their symptoms, and I realized that there's way more women than anyone's talking about. And it was really through the hotline that I learned that. And it even got to the point where women specifically said, I got diagnosed with some opportunistic infection – is what we, did we call that that, still?

SS: Yeah.

RC: Okay. And – I went to – I'm trying to figure out what to do. And no one wants to see, no one believes it, or they, there's no treatment. What am I supposed to do? Could I breast-feed my kids? Whatever, questions. And every question was like, oh my god, that's not in the manual. I don't know.

And then we'd call the CDC, and they'd say, call the National AIDS Hotline. {LAUGHS}

Okay; but we're calling from there!

SS: Were there people working there who had AIDS?

RC: So do you hear all kinds of different parts of the whole story?

SS: Everybody has a different st-. Ready? Okay, ready? So did anyone at the hotline get sick?

RC: {SIGH} Did anyone at the hotline get sick? There were people who tested positive at the hotline. But not, no one developed full-blown AIDS that, I mean they did eventually. But during the year — I guess I was there a year, I can't remember — that wasn't the place where I found the people, where I knew people who got AIDS.

SS: Did you advise people to get tested?

RC: No, I did not advise people to get tested. This was an interesting, it was a radical — looking back on it, I think it was kind of radical to say, don't get tested. And it's sort of like, my mother died of breast cancer, and now there's a, I can go and find out if I have the gene. Do I want — there's at least a little bit more possibilities of things I could do. But there was nothing you could do.

I mean, we were doing — we were raising money and giving people blenders to make egg lecithin that turned out to be nothing. We were just grasping at straws. So what would be the point to find out? Because here's what would happen: if everyone found, a few people found out, and then everyone else assumed they didn't have it; then no one would be safe. So there was this kind of like, eh, I didn't really know — I had really strong ideas and thoughts, and I liked thinking things out, kind of politically, really for the first time. I remember being against the war when I was a kid, but that's about as far as I went. And — you know, Larry Kramer was a big influence on all of us. And the idea that we all have AIDS, as a sentiment, was a good one. And as a matter of fact — and this is

a little – {SIGH} I don't know if you could even find this; I don't even know if I'd want you to — but my cousin, my mother's cousin, actually, so I don't know what she is; first removed, or something? — was Betty Furness, who worked for NBC. She worked for, she was the consumer correspondent. She used to work for the, I think — some cab- Johnson's cabinet, or something, as consumer affairs, or something.

Anyway, she called me, and said, there's a way now that you can get tested at home, and we want to talk about it, and we want, and will you come on and talk about that you think this is a good idea? And I said, I think it's a really bad idea. Finding out you had AIDS, or even HIV, which was about five minutes away from AIDS back then; was, seemed like a death sentence. And what, you're going to be alone in your house, and you're going to find out, and then what do you do? You go get treatments? No, there weren't any. There were some, but, it turned out a lot of those were really wrong.

So we, yes; the CDC and the hotline told people to get tested. I thought that wasn't a great idea. I thought it was a much better idea to assume that if you're out there having sex with someone, or sharing needles — it was mostly sex calls that we got — that you could definitely get it, and you should definitely protect yourself, and assume that everyone has it, and don't think anything bad about them if they do. You know, that's — that, I thought, was a much better message. But it wasn't the CDC's message. That was, get tested; stay in a monogamous relationship, and carry condoms at all times.

SS: So who was working with you there, at the –

RC: It was a real mix of people, from – a lot of my theater friends. We recruited our friends. People with HIV or who had a lover who was sick, or something. They would come, and this was sort of their way to volunteer. Mothers who had sons who were sick. Daughters who had fathers who were sick. And then the, and then my very favorite group of people were the ones who were forced to work there as community service, because they were the ones that if you were doing a, the TV movie of the week, it would be on them, and their transformation, because we didn't have to transform them. We didn't have to tell them anything. They just had to pick up that phone enough times to then know what it was like.

But it was a conflict. That's sort of how I got to ACT UP, is the conflict between what we were saying as the party line or the government line. And there wasn't anything bad. We – everyone was our enemy in ACT UP. But that wasn't really true. People just – corporations or government offices – either were blatantly bad; or usually just didn't look, they didn't think it out right. And I'd say the CDC was one of those, trying to be do-gooders, but not really so much, and have the party line and don't get sued, and the usual kind of government response. I'd say that was more likely what they were – they wanted to stop spreading it. But – now, I'm starting to know more and more people who have it. So spreading it wasn't the number-one issue anymore, when people are

dying. Then you have to sort of say, well, what about curing it? And that was the move from the CD-, the hotline to ACT UP.

And it was one day you'd say, how did you ever hear about that? The very first Larry Kramer meeting — the sort of spontaneous start — I wasn't there for. But my friends, a couple people that worked at the hotline, did go; didn't go for that. He was speaking on something; I can't remember even — I can't re-, I don't remember what it was about, but I didn't go. And this group formed. And the two or three people that had been at the hotline that went said, there's something happening, and it's totally the opposite of what the party line we're hearing here, and sort of the way it's being approached, that's sort of like, well, let's wait and be sure, and let's be really safe, even about what we're saying. This is going to be much more radical. You should come.

So I think it was the second time that group of people met, I went, and stood in the back, and —

SS: Who did you go with? Who were your friends? Do you remember?

RC: I went by myself. I didn't really — this wasn't my world yet. It just was the work I did. And I was one of the few paid people at the hotline. I think there might have been three of us, at the most — could have been two — and everyone else was volunteer. I was in charge of recruiting volunteers. I might have had a title; I don't know what it was.

So I just went, and listened, and —

SS: Where was the meeting?

RC: It was at the community center. And –

SS: How many people were there?

RC: Oh, I remember a lot of people. Uh – I guess it could have been 30, but I think it was a hundred. I think it, I think it could have been more than a hundred. I, everyone had a seat. There wasn't standing room only at that point yet, but – but there was Larry Kramer, just – being radical and interesting and everything, in those moments of despair and frustration at the hotline, he was now saying what was really happening. And then all those, all the faces of the people who'd called up, I felt like were in that room. And it was just, that – that just felt much more at home, being there.

But I stayed doing both, which became a kind of an interesting conflict.

SS: Because –

RC: Well, because really, what, early on, the idea — and I think it's a good idea; I think radical politics are established by radical people and radical ideas, and if it's a bunch of people being safe, then it's not going to become a movement. So it has to be all the people who are willing to push the envelope sit in that room and push the envelope even more and more and more, until there's a few people who say, wait a minute, that's a little too far! So right away, it was everyone pushing the envelope. Whereas the National AIDS Hotline was the opposite; it was the envelope.

So every single person that had anything to do with the government was the enemy. Because the government was ignoring ev-, was ignoring AIDS. So the National AIDS Hotline became a target. And so there I was, at ACT UP, planning – I wasn't planning it, because I just said, oh, this is too much of a conflict, but – they were going to come and sit in, and lock themselves up around the hotline. And I just, it was like, okay; that might be a good idea. I don't think I can wrap my head around it. But please don't do it when I'm working! Don't do it during my shift.

SS: Did they do it?

RC: Yeah, they did, and they did it during my shift.

SS: And when was that?

RC: Here was the big conflict of that: because an action only is an action if someone calls the police. It was my job to call the police, and I was like, go ahead, tie yourselves up. Seems like a good idea. I'll feed you; I'll help you too; but I can't do that part!

I don't remember when that was. But it was well enough into it that I thought, are these my friends? Did they have to do this?

SS: Do you remember who was there?

RC: {SIGH} I think Gregg Bordowitz was there! {LAUGHS}

I remember my friend Mark Simpson, to be loyal to me, did not go. Because he knew that I would just be – in such a conflict over it.

SS: And did they win their demand?

RC: I don't remember what their demand was. I think sometimes the demands were a little vague. {LAUGHS}

SS: Okay. Well then let's go back to –

RC: This one might not have been one of the best organized events ever, thank god!

SS: So after the first meeting, who did you meet, or where did you position yourself in the organization?

RC: Well, I don't think we knew it was an organization yet, or there was a position to be had. I stood out, because I was the girl. At the time, I was the straight girl. That evolved , but –

SS: Oh yeah.

RC: I – uh – is that how I met Mark? I think it is. It must have been, because I can't think of how else I would have met him. So probably the very first person I s-, I don't totally remember; the first moment, meeting Mark. But it definitely was at the, I think it probably was the first meeting, because I remember having friends right away at the second one, and Mark was always my friend, so, uh – I also think that it was all about image and those little stylish guys. I was the stylish gal. I didn't look stylish, but that, I was an artist, and liked design. So all those designers who hadn't yet invented the pink triangle and the Silence Equals Death; those all became my friends. One was a hairdresser, and he definitely thought I should cut my hair and have my hair cut, so –

SS: Was that Avram?

RC: Yes, Avram!

SS: Avram Finkelstein!

RC: Avram gave me a nice haircut that I could never have afforded! So, it was a good group to radicalize yourself with, because you could look cute while you were doing it. But really, my best buddy was Mark Simpson, who just, I don't know, right away was a soul mate. This, this part's going to be hard, though.

SS: Well, try to tell us a little bit about him, because we're trying to remember all our friends on record, if you can. What was he doing at the time?

RC: Mark was a –

SS: Do you want some water?

RC: Okay, wait.

SS: Do you want some water?

RC: No, I'm okay.

SS: Okay.

RC: So Mark was a – he, he would never, he would hate this as his title: Mark was an artist. Meaning that Mark was an unbelievable painter, who sold nothing. But the way he was the most, he was an artist, was the way he lived his life. He lived his life the way we imagine, if Andy Warhol didn't become famous, he would have been Mark Simpson. He just invented a great life for himself.

And he came from this – very intense background: Texas. His father was not a minister; like what's one step above a mi-, we, I am Catholic, so bishop, but what's, whatever the bishop of, of ministers are; he was that. And he had, a hundred brothers and sisters; I don't remember how many; I think 11 or some–

And at a very early age, Mark was wearing a dress and – and embarrassing the bishop father. And – I'm going to be really bad at telling his story. I can't really tell his story, because he could tell it bet-, he was unbelievable at telling his story.

SS: Let me – go ahead.

RC: Yeah, go ahead.

SS: Let me ask you this: Did you, at the beginning of your relationship, were you aware that he was infected?

RC: No. We did not know; I don't even think Mark knew that he was infected, at the beginning. I think – no one was getting tested. And he was not sick. He just was there. He, so he wasn't, I, there were a few people that were identified as the people who have it. They identified themselves as that. That was a radical way of introducing yourself.

SS: And who were some of those people?

RC: Oh, god, I, you know, I'm going to be bad if I say who they are, and I'm going to be wrong. Who are the ones I remember? Larry Kramer. I believe Avram did say it early on. Did he?

SS: I don't think so. I don't know.

RC: He may not have. Okay.

SS: I don't remember that.

RC: I might be wrong about that.

SS: Okay.

RC: You know what? I don't really remember.

SS: Okay.

RC: I know that Mark wasn't, though.

SS: Okay.

RC: I do remember that. And that, not that that was a, of course – I knew everything within the first, that night after the thing, we went out and had drinks and I knew every single reason why he should be. And all the people who he knew that had died, that he had slept with, or – so – but – he didn't know at the time. Because I remember when he got tested.

He was completely, that was the other thing; he didn't wear dresses anymore. He could, he was one that could have passed. He was cute as could be, but really – down to earth, regular guy, and funny, and amazing and brilliant and not a star there. He just was one, everyone adored him. But he was a little aloof. I don't know why he wasn't with me. He just, he was like my brother or something, right away.

SS: Did you guys talk about him deciding to get tested? Do you remember the switch to when people decided to get tested?

RC: I remember that Gregg Bordowitz and I got tested together.

SS: Why don't you tell us that story.

RC: That was, what was that, two years into the whole ACT UP thing? Three, maybe, could it have been? Basically, I'd fallen in love with a couple of people that I knew there. Probably Mark Simpson was the one that I fell in love with most with, but not in, not, we didn't, it wasn't, we weren't a couple. But, and I think we both did. I mean, we used to go, he used to come home for Christmas with me. And my mother adored Mark. And I remember, he'd have a pile of presents that was this high. They'd be things like macaroni and cheese wrapped up, because that's the way my mother gave presents. She just liked a lot of them; it doesn't matter what they were. But the two of them could talk about, like, China patterns and – so he was really my best, best friend.

But Gregg – I don't remember, really, how Gregg and I. Through the whole thing, we got together. And it was always a, it was a, there was a, a messy line. Because here we were, in this world, that was, totally fine, healthy world; the news was not, didn't have anything to do with this. The economy was pretty good. Everyone went about their business; buying groceries, what is the price of gas. I don't even think that was an issue. Whatever.

And then the world that I was in, were all these young, beautiful people, in that world, dying. And I think we became more close, because it's very odd to have a 21-year-old, 22-, 28-year-old friend who's doing everything you're

Tape II
00:20:00

doing, every single day. And then one day, has to go to the hospital, and never comes out.

So odd love relationships happened in the midst of it. And – one of them was my friend Gregg. And I would really say it was odd. It wasn't, I don't think either one of us thought it was – the one and only, but it was really passionate and intense and loving and short. But, since I don't know why somehow, in the midst of that, we decided to get tested. I know one of the reasons was that I was living, I was – I had a time clock that had been ticking for a little while, that I didn't realize it had been. And I decided I wanted kids. But not really very consciously. Just sort of like, I'm thinking maybe I should do that someday. And I didn't know anyone who had kids. I wasn't around any kids; I lived in the city; I didn't –

So I kind of put the word out that I wanted to be around more kids. And I became a nanny for a woman, a single mom, and her little baby. And did that for a couple years. That was during the time that I was – had – a love affair with Gregg. And I think in some ways, because she was very worried. She had had a friend who had died of AIDS. And because I, we had had ACT UP meetings at the house. This is on the Lower East Side. She had this huge apartment in this very funky neighborhood. And she started worrying that maybe we should, that I was bringing this into the home.

I don't know if that's the reason why I got tested. I can't really remember. But I did get really sick one winter. There was no heat in my room,

so that was really the reason I got sick. And I probably even had pneumonia. But I didn't have health insurance; I didn't go to a doctor. This was all very funny and odd, that everyone else is worried about every single T-cell, and I couldn't get rid of a flu. And – I think that was really why we went.

But we went to, right down here, on 23rd Street, or twenty-whatever street, and Ninth Avenue. Got tested and – found out the results together.

SS: So how did you feel when you realized he was positive?

RC: That was in – that was a terrible moment in life. Because everyone else that I knew already knew by the time I knew then. That to go from the transition of sort of the innocence of thinking you might have it, but really kind of knowing you didn't — which is exactly where I was — to the young – he was really the youngest person I knew that heard. And he was also the healthi-, he was the, he was the one, my other friends, I thought could. I did not think he could. I was just so sure that he would not have been positive. And it was an interesting – to say “interesting” going to sound so –

Everything you do in life is very personal for you. This was a huge moment for him. My memory is about me.

SS: Right, right, right.

RC: Much more important was what happened to him. But to be told that, there's so many emotions, for me. Because – and not just, not so much in, oh my gosh, that means maybe I could have it, and I could have it, the testing

period. I knew every single; 30, 30 days, one. Then it became 90 days. Not so much that.

I think because I, when you're on the front lines, you almost want the wound. It's terrible to say, but I think there was a lot of that going on.

I knew I would, that he would, we would be totally never together again. And I knew it was more because of him. He went from – a youthful, experimental, sexy, funny, adorable guy, that had lots of lovers; to a radical, overnight. He had to – we, it just, I knew that that would be, I would never under- he would feel like I would never understand him again. And he had to be with the people who would. And that, I was right. That's exactly what happened. And, and it needed to happen. I think he had to – innocence was lost when you find that out. He had to now decide if he wanted to stay alive. And if he did, then he had to do everything to do that. And before you know, you don't really, you just, you're like the way all of us are. We're experimenting when we're kids, doing dumb things, and when you're older, you say, I can't believe I did that. It could've killed me. But then when you know that it really could; you change.

SS: You ever seen his movie about getting infected?

RC: I remember that whole Evel Knievel thing, with the father; the

–

SS: But that he felt —you remember this in the film — what was the name of the guy, the curator from the New Museum, who he names in the film?

JH: Bill Olander?

SS: Bill Olander? Was that it?

RC: Yeah, yes.

SS: In the film, he talks about that he thinks that that's the person who infected him, and he tells the whole story of the moment.

RC: I kind of don't remember that.

JH: I don't think he named him.

SS: Oh, but what was the guy? You know who I'm talking about. That was his name, right? Bill [Olander]?

RC: Yeah, oh, uh –

JH: Well that's the guy's name, but I don't know that he was the guy Gregg was talking about.

SS: Oh, oh, oh, oh.

JH: He tells the story of when he thinks he gets infected, but he never says –

SS: But he tells the story of feeling, in the moment; thinking, oh no, I just got AIDS. Doesn't he say that?

RC: Yeah, I, I remember he used to say that. But I don't remember who it was. I remember there was a question as to whether it could have been Mark.

SS: Oh.

RC: But I don't know what really happened with them. They chose not to tell me the truth about that whole situation, but –

SS: So I mean, this is your world. You are having sex with, being in love with, spending every single day with, people who are dying.

RC: Yeah.

SS: I just want to ask you this: How did you think that you ended up in that place?

RC: I don't know. Uh – It was not the place that I was brought up to be in. I think probably things I don't necessarily want to talk about on, out in the world. But the way I grew up, and there's this – there's some illness in my family – that was never really talked about. And – I remember, when I went from this rural upbringing to Northwestern, which I wasn't prepared for; then from Northwestern, or Chicago to New York, which I also kind of wasn't prepared for, and – that it was, it felt much better to be with people who were being completely rawly honest — they weren't being appropriate anymore; there was no mask anymore — that felt so much more real, so much more family, so much better, than I had ever known. I think that's probably why.

SS: Okay. How much more time do we have on this tape?

JAMES WENTZY: Twelve minutes.

SS: Okay. Okay, so I want to go back to some of the, the history of everything. Like I said to you during the break, I remember meeting you, because I wrote an article for the *Village Voice* about women

being excluded from experimental drug trials, and you were the contact, and I came to your office, and we talked about it, and the article was published.

Okay, that was absolutely crucial information that changed history.

Tape II
00:30:00

RC: Yeah.

SS: Because many, hundreds of people spent the next many years trying to get adequate services for women with AIDS. And it kind of started with your information from the hotline.

RC: Um hm.

SS: Do you remember back to that? Or could you –

RC: I remember that phone call exactly. That phone call was not to the hotline. That phone call, I had an office phone, too, that was like the volunteer, my, if you were just going to call me at the office. And someone — and I don't know her name; I don't even know if she told me her name — but someone called from Connecticut, and asked for me, in my name. And did introduce herself to me by a first name, and I wish I could remember, because it's history-making. It's not just history-making for AIDS; it's history-making for every drug trial and women in it, from that moment on. Heart disease. The fact that we even know that women get it is because of that moment, I think. Not because of me, but because of her.

She called, and she had AIDS. And she was right next to a trial that was for – Ampligen. Can't remember, I remember that. And she qualified in every way. It was like, certain T-cell, I can't remember what the qualifica-, I don't

even know if we knew T-cells then, but you know, it was something. She was qualified in every way. But they wouldn't let her in because she was a woman. And I was like, eh, I'm sure you got the information wrong. That can't be.

No no. They said because I'm a woman.

There are, there's laws agai-, I, I don't, honey, you gotta be wrong.

And – what did I do?

Hung up the phone; called the trial; asked them what the criteria was. And they said, they didn't say women. I said, do you exclude women? They said, no. We exclude people of child-bearing potential, that was the term. That's, you can't be of child-bearing potential. And I said, you mean like, you have a period?

And they said, well, that's what you, how you interpret it, but that's.

So I called a, I don't even, how did I know – someone from the ACLU, I think, through maybe something else ACT UP-related. I can't, I don't really remember how. I knew someone who worked for the ACLU. Because I thought, well, that seems like sex discrimination. That's going to be good. So I called up the ACLU, and talked to someone there, a lawyer there, and they gave me an intern lawyer. And I said, I just found out that women can't get into any clinical trials. Because before I called her, I called a number of other clinical trials, because we had the lists. That was something about ACT UP; you didn't

even need the Internet yet, because they just knew everything. So I think I called someone who – Peter, whatever? Peter something?

SS: Staley? No.

RC: Peter Staley, I think, maybe, had the name of every single doctor of every single clinical trial in the country. So I called them all up, and I asked them all, and everyone had this child-bearing-potential rule. And I would say: that means women, right? Well no, we've never had women. But there's no women in any clinical trials. It's not just for AIDS; it's everything. You can't have women, because their hormones are, go up and down, so it's not a good test.

I said, you mean for cancer, for everything?

No, nothing.

I said, this is - no one's ever said anything?

Oh no, this is science, lady; this is what it I, this is normal.

So I called up the ACLU, and I said, did you know? And they said, that can't be true. And I said, it is true! Call up!

So they call up; they call the NIH. They find out that they have a rule that's been written since, like, 1957 or '63, or whenever the NIH was formed; I think it's 1963. It has these rules. And there has not been a woman in a clinical trial in 30 years.

And so – oh, gosh, I'm so bad. I should remember her name, this lawyer, this young, gorgeous – she looks like – the woman on *Law and Order*.

That was that, beautiful, skinny woman, who now has another show. Anyway, she looked just like her!

Jill something.

Anyway – I called up Anthony Fauci. And said, we need a meeting. And, they're like, you can't have a meeting. I said, I'm with ACT UP! And somehow, the, back in those days, that – it's like, ooh, we, maybe we'd better. And I said, this is about the fact that you discriminate against women, not just in this, in AIDS, with AIDS, but with everything else. And we are already talking to the people at the Susan G. Komen Foundation, and whatever. I don't think that had been formed yet. But other women's cancer thing. And we're going to, we're going to start a movement here. You better meet with me.

And he did; he met with me.

SS: Just you?

RC: Well, me and this person I can't remember, from the ACLU. But, two 20-year-old girls, he met with. And – explained it to us. Explained the reasoning.

SS: You went to Washington?

RC: Went to Washington; went to the NIH; and talked to Anthony Fauci and – if you said his name, I'd – the other guy; there was another famous doctor. I want to say Bernard, but – I think he was sort of in charge of HIV, and then Anthony Fauci was the whole NIH. And they gave us really good reasoning as to why, that women really couldn't be in clinical trials, and that this was – and

I, and we said, well you know, that's going to have to change. And you can either change it yourself, or we're going to have to do a big lawsuit against the federal government, and I just don't think it's good reasoning. Because – and the real good reason is that up until then, there had never — not never; I shouldn't say never — but never, to this extent, been a disease that you absolutely definitely for sure would die of. There were diseases that you could possibly get other treatments for, that was chronic disease, but you might not die of it. So up until then, the argument was pretty good. We're going to test it on men because they don't have that hormonal problem. And they don't have the, they might get pregnant, and it will, kill that baby with this bad drug, that's going to turn out to be bad. But in the meantime, they could go and get treatment somewhere.

Now there was AIDS. And there was no treatment. And everyone knew that you got AIDS, you're dead in six months. And we said, I don't even think it's a good, it was good for the last 20 years. But I can see that the argument, why the argument never came up. But now, there is no drug on the market to treat AIDS; women with AIDS are definitely going to die. Men with AIDS will probably die, but they might luck out in a clinical trial, and they could live. And that's discrimination now. That woman should decide. Whether her hormones are crazy, or she might have a baby in between, she should be allowed to possibly live. That's a pretty good argument.

And I remember them even kind of going, hm; let's – I could see how they could win this. And – eventually women were allowed into clinical trials.

Remember, there was a big muckety-muck from DuPont — because Ampligen was made by DuPont — came up by helicopter to take me to lunch or dinner or something, to talk about how it would be way better if I allowed Ampligen to go forward in the clinical trial, because if we stopped it now, and either let women in or changed the trial, it could be years before it was, got to the market, and I could be killing people, and –

SS: And it turned out to be worthless.

RC: And it turned out to be worthless, so, they actually pulled the trial. They did pull it, out of that. Which, that was, I thought, oh my god, what if that's the one drug, and -. There was always, that was another interesting part of it, that we were in a kind of ragtag way — because we were really ragtag; if you really thought about who everyone was, sitting around in this, kind of crappy hall, deciding what the next action would be, or the next person we'd go after — it did change history. And sometimes you didn't have enough information, and maybe you were on the wrong side, and years later, you found out. At the time, Anthony Fauci was supposedly not such a great guy. I think he's an amazing guy, and look at him still, to this day, is still totally committed to it, and – I actually liked him a lot. I thought he was charming and – he listened; he got it.

SS: But he didn't change the policy. We had to make him change the –

RC: We had to make him change the policy. But I think that's pretty normal. I – was he going to change the policy? I don't know. I think that's a government office, so I don't –

SS: Well, what happened to the ACLU suit? Oh, we have to change –

RC: Yeah.

SS: – tapes? Okay. Do you need water?

SS: ...that it's all just regular people, stumbling their way through –

RC: Right.

SS: – realizing they have to.

RC: I know, but do people really realize that there was such a change made? I don't think, I think it's, it was one of, people know that when people protested against the war in the '60s, change was made? I don't, I think they're like, oh, I remember when people were kind of angry, but now there's drugs.

SS: Right, well that –

RC: That's sort of the –

SS: That's what we're trying to change.

RC: Yeah.

SS: Exactly. That's exactly the problem. Yeah. What happened to the ACLU suit?

RC: You know, we didn't ever have to bring it. We started bringing the suit. And – one trial at a time – because it was not a law; it was a recommendation. And slowly, they changed some of the criteria. And it did – it did eventually change, so it wasn't, the suit, they never went to trial with the suit.

SS: What did ACT UP have to do to push that forward?

RC: Well, that was an interesting moment in the evolution of ACT UP. This is why this was such a fantastic, amazing time, and a horrifying, awful time; it was such an amazing combination.

We were all young, or most of us were young. We, our friends were dying, at a, way too young an age. That was really the first shocking thing. That was what politicized most people; like, I should not be dying. And that was the first year of ACT UP, probably. And at 20, you shouldn't be dying, particularly if it's out of so–

Neglect isn't right away the first thought, because why should anyone know how to cure it, right away? But when you realize that no one wanted to try; that's when it became political, of like, wait a minute; why, why should I be expendable?

But then you get to this next stage, where, because “we” really, were a lot of gay men. That's that group. And then learning about certain things that were available; certain kinds of drugs, certain kind of treatment, or clinical

trials, or whatever; and then seeing that other people didn't have access: that politicized all of us who were politic-, became politicized through this, we don't want to die, we don't want our friends to die.

Oh. We shouldn't also want to have people we don't know die, too. Because, and we've got to all now be together. And – mostly, the men were excited about, I think, in some ways, another way to tell the story, and another way to kind of capture the headlines, and, see how unfair this is, that women can't get into clinical trials? But there was another group, that said, we're dying, and we're going to fight for ourselves, and we can't, that can't be a part of it. We need to have drugs now, and they need to be affordable now, or –

So there was a little bit of a conflict as to how much more open the group should become, both – around how, the whole thing about how did you get it. "How did you get it" made you a certain kind of group that fought in one way, then "how did you get it" – in another way. So – that was interesting.

The most interesting for me personally was when my mother got diagnosed with breast cancer. And, well, she had been diagnosed many years before, and had treatments and she kind of was in remission, I guess. And then it became fatal. She was told –

SS: While you were in ACT UP?

RC: While I was in ACT UP. While we were planning the NIH, the march on the NIH, whatever.

SS: Storm the NIH.

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00:05:00

RC: Storm the NIH, right. So I had to go home, and take care of my mother, who had no, there was no hospice, there was no anything. I was hospice. She wanted to die at home; she didn't want to go to a hospital. It was very similar to my friends. And my friends were too busy planning the NIH and all these other things, and so a lot of them didn't call, didn't – and I, I kind of saw the issues, like how much we need to fight for the whole cause. It can't be so specific as our own – it's, we get radicalized by our own needs, but it can't be the fight.

SS: Were you angry at them?

RC: Yes, I was really angry at them. I was –

SS: Do you think that they were being narcissistic in their –

RC: Yes and no. It was always hard to be too mad, because there's always, there but for the grace of God go I. Fortunately, I had – I was somewhat prepared for my mother's death over the, it was almost, I don't know, it was nine months or something that I stayed home then, with her. Never really fully went back to ACT UP after that, because of my feelings about – just being, just losing touch with them, and with the cause. Not the cause, their cause, but like how this was all, all of our cause.

Yeah, there were no treatments for my mother at that time, and there was no – there was an insurance problem. If she stayed in the hospital, she could get covered. There was nothing they could do in the hospital; she wanted to go home. She was done.

But – I don't know how much energy I'd have, if I was dying at the age of 27, for my friend, whose mother was dying at the age of 57. I didn't – I was more sad. And I remember watching on the news, the Storm the NIH, and knowing that if it wasn't for my mother, who was lying in the bed right next to me while I was watching it, that I would be there, and sort of the irony of it all, and –

When was the NIH?

JH: May of 1990.

RC: Was it the NIH then?

SS: Could it be the FDA action?

RC: FDA, it was FDA. Because my mother died in '88.

SS: Okay.

RC: Or '89.

SS: Seize the FDA.

RC: '89. Seize the FDA, that's the one.

SS: Seize Control of the FDA. Oh. Here. Can you just re-pin me? Excuse me. I want to ask you about the Cosmo thing. But I really want you to contextualize it, because – I'll just put this on the table – my perception is that it was partially a political response to an event, and partially an expression of what was going on between all the women in ACT UP.

RC: Definitely.

SS: Okay.

RC: Yeah. *Cosmo* was an acting out of ACT UP. And it was actually kind of a fun release. Because – and –, the part that's hard to describe is the first part of ACT UP, when it was so passionate and so – it was the radical part of the movement, the very first time we went to Wall Street. That – most of us had never done anything like it. That kind of combination of absolutely exhilarated and humiliated. Not that I didn't want to always be a good girl, but I really kind of was. So to get arrested or to do something against authority to such an extreme; and my father was a stockbroker, so I was in Wall Street, and it was all very confusing. But it felt so important, and it felt like there wasn't an ounce of me that felt like we were on the wrong side. And I could see that every single person watching thought we were on the wrong side. And I knew that someday, they'd know that wasn't true.

I didn't quite feel that same way at *Cosmo*.

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SS: Can you give the background?

RC: Yeah, okay. So the *Cosmo* thing, there was an article written in *Cosmo[politan]* magazine, by – what was his name?

SS: Robert Gould.

RC: Robert Gould! Dr. Robert Gould. Doctor. He was a shrink. No no, he wasn't even a shrink, he was a therapist. I don't even think he was a medical doctor. But he might have been a psychiatrist; I can't remember. But anyway, Dr. Robert Gould wrote an article basically saying that good girls —

meaning white ones — would not get sex, uh, get, get AIDS; they would not get AIDS even if they had unprotected sex with men who were positive.

SS: Because why? What was his argument?

RC: His argument was that it would, that the only way to really have the transmission happen was lacerations and, just the act of sex wouldn't give it to you. But if you had a cut, or something more, and that most of us don't have cuts when we're having sex with guys, and that unless you had sex in a — and I think he said a cruel way; and he said, like men in Africa — He was being, wow. The fact that that got past the editorial board was —

So, the guy was ridiculous. And *Cosmo* was ridiculous to do it. But it was almost like every other stupid article. Imagine if you protested every dumb article in a magazine today that's telling women — girls, young girls — the wrong things. There's a lot of them. But, whenever it came to, this could kill you with this information, it was exacerbated.

So, I think I called him first — Dr. Gould — and said that I'd read this article, and that I was confused by it, and is it really true that you don't, because I'm confused? And he basically said everything he said in the article. Because I thought because at the National AIDS Hotline, this is what we were trying to debunk. No no: women can get it. It turns out, faster than anyone else now, it seems. And — fascinating, that 20 years later, that's what's happening. It's — it's the women of the world that are really the ones that are innocently — innocently — getting it. Meaning — being told that they can't. Not that that

article started it, but I think there's always this little thing out there, that just having regular old sex, straight sex, you won't get it.

So he puts it out first. And – and he happily repeated all this stuff. So then we set up this, this, this sting operation. Like a video sting. Where we went to his office –

SS: Who's we, who's we?

RC: Okay, we was – Maria Maggenti; and – okay, GMHC, the woman –

SS: Jean Carlomusto?

RC: Jean Carlomusto, okay. Maria Maggenti – this is only because I've, I'm getting too old, that I can't remember anything. Not that these people weren't incredibly important, because they were. Maxine –

SS: Wolfe.

RC: – Wolfe. And, were you there?

SS: No.

RC: There was someone else, though. Was there someone else? Jean Carlomusto; me; Maria Maggenti; Maxine Wolfe; and, um, oh, the woman who used to be the, she worked at – the clinic. The Community Center clinic.

JH: Denise Ribble.

RC: Denise Ribble! Thank you! Oh my gosh, you guys are good! Okay. Denise Ribble. So we all went to his office. And with a camera; he let us bring a camera! It was so great!

And had this interview with him. And it was under the guise of doing a documentary, or doing something on – I don't think it was even HIV-related. It might have just been – oh, women afraid of having sex, and, is sex, something like that. And he just could not have been more open about this, this idea that it was, if you have regular sex, even if the guy's positive, you're not going to get AIDS. And you don't need a condom, and if you get roughed up a little bit, then that could be a problem. But other than that, just have at it.

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And the first hour was this very calm – for all those girls. These are girls that are ready to fight? And I remember thinking, how long is it going to take before someone breaks and admits, that this is – ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!?! {LAUGHS} WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MEN IN AFRICA?!?! WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!?!

But there is a nice, long amount of time. And then, I think it was Denise Ribble that started it, like, as a counselor. Oh, but the first part of the questioning was: What kind of medical license do you have, and what studies do you have? How do you know this?

And it was, through my practice.

And we were like, well, what kind of practice do you have?

He's a therapist! He talks to people.

So you know that they don't have HIV?

No, I don't recommend that they get tested.

It was so ridiculous.

So then, you know, then we had our ammunition. And then they went back to ACT UP. And I think really, for the purposes of the fact that there was no woman – demo, they rallied around this. Which I thought was a little sad. Not, not sad. It was fun.

The men wanted to do it. They wanted to be supportive of the sisters. They were ready for an action. And Helen Gurley Brown and Cosmo and midtown: it was, it was a good setup for all that. And the article, really, it wasn't vague.

And it turned out, as far as, like, picking the right thing, we were right. Women in clinical trials, I think might have been a better one. But, because then, overnight, Phil Donahue – that's how old this is – *Nightline* –

SS: You went on Phil Donahue?

RC: Well, no. Here's what happened. *Nightline* had, did Helen Gurley Brown; and, it should have been one of us. But we were too radical, and not sophisticated enough or something. So we had to pick someone. And I picked Mathilde Krim. And she went on, on our behalf, saying our side of it. And all of them — Donahue did the same thing.

We went on some cheesy show in Jersey, where they kicked us off the set, because they did a whole setup with us. And then they escorted us out of the thing, and – oh, it was ridiculous, but –

SS: What were the relationships between the women in ACT UP?

RC: The relationship of the women: I think there was a nice camaraderie, in some ways. There was definitely, what were we, 10 percent, or fi-, two per-, well I mean, at first 2 percent. And then eventually maybe 10. And by the end, I heard, like 80.

It was – on the outside, incredibly kind and generous and supportive. I think we got into it much more with each other, though, than the guys did. And the guys did, maybe, at the meeting. But then they could go out and have a really g-, well, we could too, we could too.

Oh, it's complicated. What was the – I hate to say that it was competitive, and all those other things. But I think – I think there always was a little bit of a struggle with all of us; I know there was with me. Like, why am I here? Why is this the movement? What is this, what did this have to do with me? Although the politics of it was, this has to do with everyone. But – young people protesting against the Vietnam War so that they wouldn't get drafted is really understandable. Young people who don't know anyone who have AIDS unless they join the group; that's an odd connection. So – and I think lesbians in particular; there was so much – there was so much that needed to be said about lesbians and gay men and their kind of movement and non-movement together, over the years, that this became the place that it got said, that didn't have that much to do with AIDS. And yet it was a, it was men coming of age, kind of radicalizing themselves politically; women who had been much more political for a much longer period of time, radicalizing themselves about some movement that

wasn't as much about them; and having to give some of that over. It was a fascinating combination of connections.

Tape III
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So – just like in any group, there was pitting one group against another. But I thought we kept it pretty much together, and pretty – there was a lot of respect for the women among each other. But it was probably communicated much more through the men. We didn't tell each other as much. We told the men.

Oh, but I think she was really right. I know that sounded crazy, but I think that was pretty, that's something you really should think about. Or –

And it probably wasn't until I went home and took care of my mom that I realized how right a lot of the women were. If this had to do with us, would everyone be there? It's an interesting question, but that's not what happened in history, and it doesn't really matter. I totally know they would be now.

SS: Right.

RC: I think that changed.

SS: Even though everyone thinks of ACT UP as gay, there were a lot of straight people, and there was a lot of bisexuality, and a lot of people who were gay ended up straight, and etcetera. What was the experience of that? Was there a feeling of, if I'm not this, people aren't going to like me? Or it did not matter? Or was it –

RC: I think the oddest and weirdest and most distrustful thing to be there would be a straight woman. I don't think there were very many straight men, so that might have been the weirdest thing. But everyone would have just believed that you probably eventually would date me if you were a guy, if you were a straight man. There were more straight women, certainly, than straight anything else. And, uh –

I think the other interesting thing in the politics of it all is — though it really didn't get talked about that much; it got acted out more than it got talked about — a lot of people, and a lot of gay people, are on a, the pendulum. Not all the way on one side or another. But definitely to be out in the world.

And that was also that was the beginning of outing and coming out and being out and even for very sad reasons, to begin with, you came out on your deathbed a lot of times. So many people I knew, that's the first time their family found out, or acknowledged it, or didn't acknowledge it. Weren't there. I can't tell you how many people I know that died – not alone, because they had their friends. But not one family member came, or came to the funeral, or anything.

But the lighter side, I guess, of all that was – the necessity to be totally out. Meaning, if you're gay, you only sleep with your gender. That's not really what's happening in the world. Not everyone's doing that. And also, at the coming-of-age time, you're not. And as you were growing up, you didn't.

So, and this was the place where – not very many other people understood what we were going through, at the time.

So to fall in love with the person next to you, it didn't necessarily all that much matter. And maybe for the first time, some men slept with women, and for the first time, some women slept with gay men; some women slept with women, and – it's kind of understandable. And I don't even know if it's all that different. It just was, it was more out and open.

It wasn't even all that open, though. It wasn't all that accepted, I don't think.

SS: What wasn't accepted?

RC: Well, I just think that there is a whole, there's a politic that's, there definitely is the gay politic of – the traitor; the deceiver, the instigator, the – it's unfortunate, but I think it happens. I think it happens in any movement. If you're not completely the thing that is being identified, then you're just – you're somehow wrecking that thing. And there was a little of that.

Tape III
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SS: Okay. I just wanted to ask you about what the culture was around people dying in ACT UP. You've said a few times: when you're that young, and this thing is happening, and you can't believe it's happening, and doesn't make any sense. But how did people interact as a community around that constant death and dying? Was it openly discussed? Did you talk to people about their own illness?

RC: You know, that was interesting. Dying wasn't that accepted. People were fighting so hard to get, have drugs to be kept alive, and to be alive and to be energetic and to be on the front lines that if you had to, if you ended up

going into the hospital, or not being able to show up anymore because you just couldn't get out of bed; there were some peop-, you would have a huge group before that that were your best friends, and that you'd see all the time. You'd have a much smaller group on those daily visits to the hospital, and by your bedside.

And then actually, some people – hid away. Some people, you didn't know, they went home, or they went, you just, like, where's so and so, and they weren't there anymore, and two months later, you found out they were dead, and you didn't know.

And people who were, this isn't a society that prepares you for dying. There are societies that do, that say it's a part of life, and even if it was – I don't even know if in those societies, if then all of a sudden, a whole generation of people who died much younger would be very prepared. But we're not even prepared at the age of 70 or 80. It's done, in a hospice or far away. And there was nothing to prepare anyone. So it was an interesting thing to watch – both people who – was it brave and amazing to die heroically and be really sweet to all your friends? Or was it more interesting to scream at them and hate them and act out to them all? There were so many combinations of the way people died at the age of 22, 25, 35. Lovers left lovers; people became lovers as someone died. It was all – so, what, if you put it in a movie or in a little, a little story, it would seem inappropriate, but, because there was no one way.

But I think dying was not, we didn't deal with dying very well.

SS: So, I'm thinking, if you could think of some specific cases, like a particular person died; do you remember talking to them about the fact that they were dying? Or would you talk to your other friends, after they died? Or was it not discussed?

RC: I never talked to any friends after they died, for some reason.

SS: So other survivors wouldn't discuss it.

RC: There was some, I think, I don't think that happened to everyone. But for some reason – we became – it was so surprising. You knew they were going to die. They knew. They didn't know. That, that's actually the other odd thing. The most gorgeous, beautiful men at the prime of their life; would get this disease. And then there'd be sometimes a couple of months of beauty, and still. And then some things. Or – there'd be this time where people would go away for a little while. And you'd know that that was why; they must be sick. And you'd go, and you'd make them, you have to, you, I found that I had to make people stay my friend while they were dying.

SS: Are you thinking of anyone in particular when you say that?

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RC: Well, I guess Mark is the one. He did, Mark was – Mark died totally the way he lived: he was completely irreverent. I'm still completely annoyed that he gave me paintings, and then I, they got loaned — I'm going to say this here, because I'd like them back! They got loaned to Maria Maggenti for a movie, and I still don't have them. But he – he – knew he was, and – some of

his family wanted to get in touch with him, and he was so angry that they didn't before, he was like, forget it, I'm not going to be helpful. Others, he was.

And – he stayed in his house, a lot, in the end. And at first, with really good humor and nature and, have people over, and – it didn't seem like anything big was happening. But he got really sick of the drugs, the amount of drugs, how sick they were making him, that he was going to stop, and he was just going to – let it go.

And I remember that his dog died. He claims his dog committed suicide, because his dog jumped out the window to his death; five stories, at the back of his apartment on the Lower East Side. And that was it for Mark. Like he, after that little, the ugliest little dog on Earth died; that was the connection that kept him there, and he gave up.

And – he was a little bit of a loner all the time. So there were less people, but not as dramatically as some other people that had lots of friends, that – but he didn't want to be in a hospital.

And when I first met him, he had a lover that was, that, totally didn't take of, not, not take care of him; like they were in a bad relationship, and it was ending. That was the first Christmas he came home with me, because he was going to stay there, hoping that his lover was going to come back. And I said, he's not coming! Just, you have to come, we have to leave, and we have to go home, and – and this was three years later, four.

{RING}

Should we get that? That's my phone.

SS: Will the machine pick it up?

RC: No. It's just a cell phone. I'll give –

SS: Be careful, you're plugged in. What were your issues with the *Cosmo* tape?

RC: Well, I liked that, there was, there's been several things about the *Cosmo* demo that has been produced. There was a *Cosmo* tape; that I actually thought that was kind of good, and a little bit radical and stuff. But personally being involved in it; it was really fluffy to be involved in it. And then the way they were making the tapes was as if, isn't this, wasn't this radical and amazing? And it wasn't. I'm glad we did it, but it was one of many things. Much more radical and amazing things I don't even think had tapes. I don't know if, was there a tape at Wall Street? Was there?

SS: There's a little footage. Right?

RC: Yeah. Was there a tape at City Hall? Was there a tape when we went to – the Waldorf, and protested the cardinal getting an award?

SS: Oh, you have to tell us that one, because we don't have that.

RC: Oh, my god!

SS: What was that?

RC: Okay, who was the really cute guy; I can't even, ah, this is terrible that I can't remember my date. But I, of course, was chosen as the girl

that could wear the fancy dress. So I was given, someone, I think Avram; someone gave me a fancy dress. And we went to, the Church was getting an award for being the best – the – who were they getting it from? Probably the go-, I don't remember who was giving the award, but the cardinal was getting, Cardinal O'Connor was getting the award. And it was all of high society people, and a fancy, in their fancy dresses. And it was for all the great work that they were doing with homeless people and people with AIDS.

And of course, they weren't allowing any condoms, and they weren't, that was the other job I had. When I left the National AIDS Hotline, I went and worked for the Community Family Planning Council. And I worked in the South Bronx, and in East New York. And at these homeless women's shelters, where women were pregnant and homeless and there was a lot of HIV, and it was a rough place. And the Church had rejected most of them. And if they even went to those places, they weren't given any AIDS education.

So we thought that was quite scandalous. So we went – and I can't remember who I went with. Hopefully he'll e-mail me. Because he was so cute. He was all dressed up in his little tuxedo. And we were in a, this, I was terrified. This was really the do-gooder girl, grown up to be respectful and shake hands, look straight in, someone straight in the eye and shake their hand. Well, my father, the Navy officer: this was – I was terrified. But we, when the cardinal went up to get the award, we unfurled this banner – and I can't even remember

Tape III
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what it said, but – you have blood on your hands. I don't know, something like that.

And before we even got the banner unfurled — we were in the little balcony part of the fancy dinner — we got arrested, and dragged out like 25 officers, in our fancy dresses, and – AHHHHH! Society was horrified.

Now that, to me, was the most radical thing. It's not that radical, but it was, because it was really, it was in the face of everyone. It was very humiliating, the feeling of it. But I knew it was the right thing, because half of me said, well, what's wrong with the cardinal, what's wrong with the Catholic Church? This is way before the –

SS: Stop the Church.

RC: Stop the Church demo. And it was the start of this conversation of how can you give you these contracts in the city for shelters, where this is, there's a lot of HIV being passed around, and no AIDS education. So that was the – so the *Cosmo*.

So I don't think – I think to pull out the women of ACT UP as somehow special and different and really, wasn't it amazing that the girls were there, and that we were all, that it was very difficult, because there's so few of us: that, I don't think, I didn't, I did not experience that. I experienced that – that I was – to say lucky. But in some ways, really lucky. Definitely lucky to meet some of these incredible men, at this moment in their li-, the last moment of their lives. And in some e-, the, at a great moment of their lives, and they all live

happily ever, and they're doing great. But – that, I loved that, and I loved that we learned something about women's health care and about women and AIDS, and – but that wasn't what we were there – that wasn't my experience. My experience was, we were there with some guys who – changed the world, and the way we looked at the world. And we were a part and a partner to that. And so pulling the Cosmo demo out of it, as like some really special thing seems odd to me.

SS: Okay. Jim, is there anything else you wanted to ask about that?

JH: No, no. That's fine.

SS: Okay. I'm almost done, Rebecca, and thank you for all of this. I just want to go into one other thing, and then ask you a final question.

You've changed your life entirely. You're an entrepreneur. You have all this stuff going on around you. And you live in a world where this time is never mentioned, and where all these dead people are never acknowledged, and their absence is not recognized. How do you experience that?

RC: {LONG PAUSE} It's, I guess it's – it's – it's funny, when I see *Sex and the City* — which is, I have a business where I hire a lot of people, and it's mostly young people. And I had to give all the girls in my office off the day that *Sex and the City* opened in New York. And none of them were alive during this time, I don't think; the time we're talking about. They're all, well, they were; maybe they were four. They're 21, -2, -3, and -4. And something

came, I think it was this interview, maybe; during that time, came up. Were you going to go do something, or something about ACT UP, and I, what's that, or I kind of remember, or – and I said, oh, well I was, with these people when that whole movement started.

All those crazy people, or those – some of them didn't even know, but they, they had little snippets, or, that's something about, those, that, that gay group, or, some little sentence.

And I said – I always wear these peace-sign earrings that I have, to, at work now; they're very cool, and they like them. But they were from the '60s; I still had them from the '60s. They think that's the coolest thing. And I said to them, the much cooler thing was that I knew this group of people in a really unpopular time that did something that changed the way you are accessing healthcare; the way we're thinking about this whole world. I – not saying that this group of people did it, and changed the way we're now looking at this whole world is our world; that AIDS in Africa is our problem; that all of it, the Green movement; all of these things; that used to be pockets of movements. I think this was, this should be {SNAP} in that history, the way – and in a really humble way. I don't mean like I did it, or even anyone there. No one knew what they were doing. We actually said it pretty often: I think we're a part of history.

JW: I have to change the tape.

SS: Change tape? Okay.

SS: We're not asking you it that way.

Tape IV
00:00:00

RC: Okay.

SS: In terms of yourself: do you feel like, do you ever feel like you're hiding? Or you can't be known? Or – do you know what I –

RC: Well, I, I'm, my – the world that I'm in is like the Martha Stewart world. And – I think two things about it. One is, is it really that important to make your house really pretty and your garden really pretty? And I think, yes and no.

We deserve, all of us, to have a really great, beautiful life, and should make it as fabulous and beautiful and amazing as possible. And those boys, they knew how to make a movement really pretty and sexy, because they had the best design, the best everything.

But the other part is, I think it's really the homophobia, is the biggest part that I experience, still, to this day. Whenever anyone interviews me, and then it goes on PBS: how do they, I'm on *Surprise By Design*; and do a little Discovery [Channel] show, and you know, the *Today Show*, and it's all, like, gardening and all. And then, this other thing. Oh, is she gay, is it – she's a radical, is she whatever. There is, it's, there's still a closeted world out there. You can't really be – totally out and get, and have the, the big marketing companies sign you. And it's, I find it really funny that I felt so radical then, and still believe that it's essential to be truthful and out and open in your life. But really difficult to run a business and – try to get someone to do a licensing deal with you and have them know everything about who you are.

And it's pretty minor compared to what other people have gone through. But it does affect you.

SS: So how does it affect you?

RC: For a long time, it wouldn't be something I would have talked about. Not, not, I would have talked to my friends about it; they all knew. But, I've written three books; I didn't put that in it. I mean they're gardening books and they're design books, but I put a lot of personal stuff about my life in it. More and more so, I'm really proud of it, and – and feel, I understand how brave it was for a lot of people then to come out, at a much more difficult time, and that it's more important to do. But I know that – well, I know two things: one is, it's a much different world, and it's a lot easier now. And it's still hard. It, it, it still –

SS: But I've looked at your books. You have some kind of butch photos of yourself and some burly woman –

RC: Oh those? I, I can't believe how butch I am in that second book. Did you see the third one? I looked really pretty, and I had little matching outfits and everything, because I learned my lesson!

SS: Oh, okay. Because I saw some of them –

RC: Oh no! I –

SS: You had some burly-girl –

RC: Totally!

SS: – with a wheelbarrow.

RC: Yeah!

SS: Yeah.

RC: No no, I was really butch in the second book. Because I thought, well, who's going to care? They're going to just look at the pictures of the plants.

Duh! No! So, but I also have become so much girlier that – well, I was really girly then. Then I went through a real butch stage; and then I became girly again. So – it's –

SS: So you've become more aware of it, in terms of your image.

RC: I'm very aware how – the outing movement was at the sa-, was sort of at the end of my ACT UP time. And I thought it was, sort of funny. And – I mean meaning funny that these politicians who were so evil and homophobic and horrible, who turned out to be gay, they outed them. I thought that was kind of great.

But, and I didn't have that much sympathy for the people who they outed that were, were horrible. But eventually, I did. Because I saw how – I'm in so many worlds now, and I hear what people are saying when they think there's someone in the room that it wouldn't affect. And I can't believe it; I can't believe how homophobic people still are. And no one, no one in that, those girls that went to see *Sex and the City*; they don't think they know one person with HIV. And I know they know a few. Because they work with me. And they would be shocked. And that, like, it's become the underground – disease now. And it's an interesting time in the world. Because elsewhere, you know, we're fighting AIDS

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in Africa, but we're not thinking about it right here at home. And I can't believe how many of my friends have it now, and didn't have it then, and got it again; not got it again, but got it much later, and how –

SS: Let me ask you one more thing about this, and then we're going to wrap up. I really appreciate what you just said. The thing I'm trying to grapple with you about is that those of us who are from that time who are still here are walking around with all of these corpses in our minds and all of these people whose names we can't remember. And the fact that they're gone is invisible.

RC: Yeah.

SS: And so sometimes I feel, because I'm a teacher, that people don't understand that I, or we, are the people who lost all those people that there's no signifier for that.

RC: Yeah.

SS: And what I'm wondering is, how does that change us; that that's not acknowledged, that we're not acknowledging it; that it only happens in this type of conversation?

RC: It's true, it only does, because I haven't talked about this – there's, I have friends that I've known for a long time, that talk to me about it, like – wasn't that cool that you did that? Not – Mark and Ray and all my friend-, best friends; they were my best friends. And then there were a lot of people I didn't know all that well. Or all the names on buildings now that are –

SS: You mean like Michael Callen?

RC: Michael Callen has a building named after him, and, Michael Callen was, I remember Michael Callen in his apartment in the Village – what was he talking about? Some – the difference between how much brighter yellow is than a really bright orange, crazy things that I remember, that, that weren't, that aren't that important, except that – {SIGH} – I guess it, thinking about it now, I guess it really did affect me. I've never really had – did anyone who came out of that have the permanent relationship forever afterwards, or –

SS: Oh sure. There's three permanent couples that came out of ACT UP: Avram and Phil – they're still together, and have a business. Richard Elovich and Daniel Wolfe. And Debbie Levine and Mike Spiegel, speaking of straight people in ACT UP, who got married and have a child.

RC: Yeah. Well – ha. Interesting, the names. Debbie Levine? Okay, you can't share this part.

SS: What –

RC: Well afterwards, when we turn it off, we'll talk about that. Really? No, I was actually thinking, not only from that time, but like, after that. I think that it affected my personal lives with everyone afterwards. I think it – there is a, it's a little like being from, living in New York in the '80s, when you, why don't you take a subway very much, Rebecca?

Well, because I think I was on a subway at least 15 times where I watched someone stabbing someone, and I don't like it anymore.

Well, that was 20 years ago.

I know, but it affected me. I remember it.

And so, I know no one stabs anyone on the subway anymore, but they did then, and I saw it, and I don't like that.

Yeah, we were in a war. We were in a – and I think in some ways, it's, I don't know if this is fair; I watch myself with everything I say, as you can see. Because I don't want to – I don't want to not acknowledge what someone else went through. But – it may be particularly odd, or it feels it to me, that being the girl — and the very early girl, with not very many other girls; and definitely early on, none of us talked to each other. We just didn't even really know each other. There were maybe three girls there, that first night that I was there. And it took — girls, women, you know; but we were girls — it took probably six months before we did say, oh, we should maybe be a little group.

I don't know if this is true, but are gay men, 20 years later, talking about the time that they all remember with each other? I think maybe. No one I know knows what this was like. And I don't mean like going to the protests. That was so irrelevant to my memory of this time, when – my, it was all about surviving or dying, and which way were we going to go, and which way were we going to do it; and how many people were going to say evil, horrible things about your really close friends. You loved them. And if you went home and told your family, or even went out with your other friends, and mentioned it, it was – completely dismissed.

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Six months ago, I got a e-mail from someone; whose last name, I think, was Simpson, or, somehow it was a niece of Mark Simpson. And she had never met him. She was 16 or 17 or something. And she was going to do a documentary on her uncle. And she had this whole way she wanted to tell the story, and she knew that I was his closest friend, or something. And she called me up, and asked me about him. And I started talking about him, and – that was the first time in 15 years anyone had asked me much about him.

And just telling his story, and what an unbelievable man he was; like these funny, philosophical ways he looked at the world. Like what he thought the history of the world; his theory was that the history of the world – was marked by three important events: wildebeests – and I can't remember what it was about wildebeests, but something about the end of the wildebeests. Turning hops into beer; and frontal sex. And that somehow, the whole way the world has evolved was about those important events in life. And not only telling that, but just this incredible, amazing man. That's just one man, I knew, at the age, he was actually 40; he looked like he was 25, but – but we lost him. And then all these other people, and that no one – David Garrett was 22 years old. So, yeah: it's something you don't, you just hold on and hide and, not hide, but who do you talk to?

SS: So you said you felt like it's affected you your whole life. What is the consequence on all of us that that time is so hidden? Because it was all about not being hidden, and –

RC: Well, I, I know, it was about being out. But I think one of the things that's really been hard is that everything that's written about it, not that much has been written about it. People have written about their personal stories. But any of the documentaries or whatever that's on it is about that one event, that one this, that one – but capturing what it was like for – what was it? It was a brief time; two years for me, probably. But every single minute — waking, sleeping, thinking, reading a paper — I certainly have not gone to jail since. Every moment that we lived was this haunting, surreal life, at the age of 20, of people dying around you, and saying, we don't think this is fair. How does that affect you? It just does. I have friends that are still, at my age, haven't lost a family member yet. And, they say to me, what was it like to lose your mom? And it was really hard to lose my mom. And not to say necessarily that it was harder, but you know what was weirder, was losing all my close friends. And I watch *Army Wives*. And they're all very glamorous. And all these guys were very glam-, we were kind of glamorous. There's something about that, they're in a world that's their own little world, that the rest of the world doesn't acknowledge, although everyone's, they get medals and stuff for doing what they were doing, what their husbands are doing.

I don't know, it affects you. I bet you I don't have a relationship today in the way I would have if I didn't go through it. I would have – I would have been different.

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SS: Okay. So I just have my final question, which we ask everybody at the end. It's very easy.

RC: Okay.

SS: In your view, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

RC: I think – that's a hard, that's a really hard question. I guess there's maybe two things that I think later, looking back, it did. I definitely think that the world is less homophobic because of ACT UP. It's definitely plenty homophobic still. But it's not acceptable to be, like it was.

But I think the – what it never will, no one will ever give it credit for, and that it really did, was it changed –

SS: Okay, you're plugged in, you're plugged in.

RC: Oh yeah, I keep forgetting. Should we just wait for it to stop ringing?

SS: You can get it. Whatever you want. Come back –

RC: You, you act, you, you, you act so important. It's not really real.

SS: You're used to being on camera. Most of the people that we interview have never been interviewed in their lives, and have never been on camera.

RC: Okay. So they are really real.

SS: Yeah.

RC: Yeah. Because I feel like if there's so much sort of like –

SS: Well you're being careful, but you really don't have to be, because nobody else is careful.

RC: Yeah.

SS: Because you have the image issue like other people don't have.

RC: Right. Which is so stupid. Let's just –

SS: But anyway, you were going to say that ACT UP –

RC: Okay. Okay.

SS: Yeah.

RC: So the thing that I think that ACT UP is not going to be credited for that really should be is the way that healthcare is delivered in this country, and I think maybe even globally now. That the thought that curing something, or going after something medically will help a group of people that have something; and if that group of people is, if there's a lot of difference in that group — whether it's class or race or gender — in the past, there was a reason to go after something, because you could make some money to cure it, or, and you'd get access to that; you could buy the healthcare; or you couldn't. That's just the way it was. Couldn't afford it; okay.

That's not acceptable anymore, and I really think that ACT UP should be credited for it. I think every, a lot of cancer, things that have happened in cancer treatments, and the way it's delivered, and the access to the screening,

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and all that; I would pinpoint the moment, that year in ACT UP, when ACT UP radicalized itself, and realized that this has to become the movement. And, women in clinical trials; all of that. Because it's not the clinical trial; it's the fact that women are dying of the same disease, and we might get it differently, and so it needs to be studied differently.

If it wasn't for ACT UP, I don't think that would've changed. I think it still would have been a recommendation: you still watch the commercials on TV, saying, not recommended for people who are, become pregnant. If you will become pregnant or you might become pregnant or you think about being pregnant – that's women of childbearing potential shouldn't take this drug, so you don't sue us. But it's, that's not acceptable.

And I'm really proud of mostly those guys, who were dying themselves, and needed to be treated themselves, and let that movement move into that direction. And they went for it, and did it, and were incredible.

And unfortunately, not one person's going to ever say, when they say, well, why is there much better healthcare in America, or why is it distributed so much better, or why do we test the women in heart disease? I would say, because of ACT UP.

SS: And what do you think is the greatest disappointment of ACT UP?

RC: I – I always wished there was a song.

SS: {LAUGHS}

RC: {LAUGHS} Because the '60s had music. And so, another generation knows of that protest because of the songs. We should've had a song. And I used to say it at every protest: we need a song! Our chants were terrible! I mean – we should have, and I, I say that kind of humorously, but we should have had a song because it should've been remembered. And it should've been remembered not to honor everyone who was there. Honor the people who died, yes. Honor the people who lived through it; not necessarily. Because we all went off in our own directions and did our own crazy things. But do it again, and – would it happen again? Would it happen – it's hard to – it's easy to get people because we have e-mail and Internet. But it's hard to focus into one crystallized movement again. And the last really big one we had was that one. And – I think if we had a song – {LAUGHS} – we'd remember it better.

SS: Well I think we should end on that.

JH: Yeah.

SS: Although I think Deee-Lite was our soundtrack.

RC: Yeah!

SS: But I know exactly what you, we didn't have “We Shall Overcome.”

RC: But we're not going to go sing it. Yeah, we don't have “We Shall Overcome.” It's like, you hear it, your, your eyes well up. Like, oh, I remember those days, those guys.

SS: Thank you so much.

RC: Thank you all for doing it. It's really –