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Interviewee: **Steven Cordova**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Steven Cordova
October 22, 2010

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you just start by telling us your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

STEVEN CORDOVA: My name is Steven Cordova. I am forty-six years old, forty-seven next month. We are in – we were debating whether it's Ditmas Park, Kensington, or Flatbush. I call it Flatbush in Brooklyn. And what was the last thing you wanted?

SS: Today's date.

SC: Today's date is October 22, 2010.

SS: So you were born in Texas.

SC: Yes.

SS: Where in Texas?

SC: I was born in San Antonio, Texas, and grew up there. After I graduated from high school in 1982, I went to college in Austin, Texas, and I graduated from there in 1986 and moved to New York right at the time ACT UP was in its beginnings.

SS: What was San Antonio like when you were a kid? It must have been very different from when you moved to Austin.

SC: Yes. The high school I went to, I grew up in a mostly black and Latino neighborhood on the west side of San Antonio, which was kind of an assumed scary place to be from. It wasn't that scary. Its reputation was worse than it really was. I remember that—

[interruption]

Tape I
00:06:11

SS: So let me ask you this. What was the message about gay people in West San Antonio at that time?

SC: I often say to my mom – you know, my brother has had a tougher time in life than I have, didn't graduate from high school, and I've often kind of said to my mom, "Do you realize that the reason I didn't get caught up in this stuff that my brother got caught up in is because I'm gay and I realized I wasn't accepted and knew that I had to get somewhere else?" I was smart, so that was a tool to use in getting out.

SS: How did you get that message? Were there any visible gay people at all in the landscape?

SC: No, and not through elementary and certainly not through junior high or elementary school. When it came time to go to high school, I used my dad's address, who lived in a better neighborhood, which instead of being black and Latino was white and Latino, and went to a high school where I thought I would be safer as a gay person. I'd heard that the high school I was supposed to go to, there was an incident where somebody gay had their fingers broken in the bathroom.

So I used my father's address, went to this other high school, and at this high school, Thomas Jefferson, all the sports teams sucked, but there was a speech and drama team that was just a real – in Texas there's something called University Interscholastic League, and in a certain season of every school year, they have

competitions around the state in poetry reading, prose reading, debate, impromptu speaking, and I joined the speech and drama team, not surprisingly. I was always inclined that way. Some other kids on the team were gay, and so I was able to come out to my friends when I was about fifteen or sixteen. I didn't come out to my family until after college.

SS: Was your family involved in any kind of community activity or did they act out or tell you about any kind of value of helping others or being community oriented?

SC: No. I think that comes completely from being gay and part of the HIV communities. They were just kind of struggling to get along. I mean, they always voted Democrat. That's the most that I can say, and, in fact, when my mom did know I was up to the ACT UP stuff, she was wary of it. When I did move on from ACT UP to work at the Gay Men's Health Crisis, she was wary of it. All these many years later, she's kind of gotten used to it. {LAUGHS} But it was not a message I got.

SS: So then when you first came out at fifteen and started to find other gay people, did you understand it politically or was it first a social thing? How did you conceptualize the larger questions?

SC: I guess that there was the acceptance and the association with my friends on the speech and drama team, who are still my friends today. We're still all in touch. There's embarrassing pictures on Facebook of me and them. Then when I moved on to college, certainly at UT Austin there was a gay and lesbian group. I went once or twice. It was mostly a social thing with people who went to bars a lot, and though I did

go to bars and liked to dance and party, it wasn't my thing. So I didn't have any other kind of gay life, one that recognized or one that formed around things like people in ACT UP formed around till I moved to New York.

SS: So you weren't politically involved in anything else?

SC: No.

SS: So what made you move to New York?

SC: There was just some vague idea in my head that I wanted to live in New York. I knew that there was more gay people here. I also knew that there was, you know — in Austin I remember knowing one person who was HIV-positive. That was the extent of my exposure before I moved to New York. I don't think that it wasn't there. It was there. People just weren't as open with it, about it, as they would be in New York. So I wanted to move to New York because I knew there was more gay people here, and I knew that it was an epicenter of HIV as well, and people cautioned me about that, but it couldn't dissuade me for the world.

SS: There was an idea that New York had AIDS.

SC: Yes, exactly.

SS: So when you first heard about HIV while you were still in Austin and you knew one person who was positive, did it affect your behavior, or was it some other worldly vague threat? Did you think twice when you had sex with someone or did people talk about it?

SC: No, it did not affect my behavior, I think, one, because of lack of — I mean, I knew what safe sex was, but the message wasn't constantly reinforced because

people talked about things like that less, and I think just because of personal things within me. From the time I was a kid, I started sexually acting out with other boys, so I was kind of on that path there.

SS: So it was avoidable in Texas?

SC: Yes.

SS: Definitely. And what year?

SC: It seemed avoidable, yes.

SS: What year did you move here?

SC: I moved here in '86.

SS: So where was your first apartment?

SC: In Queens. Jackson Heights, Roosevelt Avenue.

SS: A gay Latino neighborhood.

SC: I did, yes. {LAUGHS} I didn't ever thought about that. That's true.

SS: Did you have to go through a huge adjustment for a gay Latino world of Texas versus New York City?

SC: What happened was that I came to go – I mean, I came to New York because I wanted to come to New York, that's the first and last thing. But the vehicle I used to get here was NYU. I was going to get a master's in American studies. So the student work-study job I got there was in a place called The Center for War, Peace and the News Media. It was a media watchdog organization housed by NYU. It was a 501(c)(3) housed by NYU. And two things happened. One, the grad program sucked. My undergrad program in Austin had been better. I'd gotten more individual attention.

Tape I
00:15:00

My classes had been smaller than they were in this program at NYU, and I was very lucky when I went to school in Austin. I had a full-paid scholarship, so I didn't have to work. In order to afford NYU and the money I was borrowing and living in New York, I had to work at the job at NYU or in the program at NYU. So I was having a hard time keeping up.

Then somehow or the other I ended up at an ACT UP meeting. I don't remember how exactly. I think it was probably because I saw the posters around town, the "Silence = Death" posters and the AIDSGATE posters, and maybe it just got me to a Monday night meeting or something. So my interest and involvement and personal stake in ACT UP just started to rise like this, and my attention to the program at NYU just started to go down. So I eventually dropped out of the program but continued to work at NYU at The Center for War, Peace and the News Media.

You were asking where did you get the idea to be an activist. I think that I came to New York to go to a program. I found that I wasn't learning a whole lot, and ACT UP provided this whole other structure, because if I was in that meeting on Monday night, the general meeting, then I was at a committee meeting or subcommittee meeting almost every night of the week, and I was being exposed to all these people with a lot more experience in activism than I had. So it became my classroom, and, of course, it was also – my cell phone is going off.

SS: That's okay.

SC: And, of course, it became a social outlet for my being gay that I'd never had before.

SS: It's a real interesting point you're making, because that's the Angela Ross era, right, of American Studies at NYU?

SC: It was. At that point it was not a department. It was like some English teachers and some American studies teachers pitching in and creating this program, which is why you didn't get much individual attention, because nobody was really that invested in it.

SS: We have interviewed a lot of people who just could not justify going to school when ACT UP was happening.

SC: Really? Interesting.

SS: That seems to be very common. Even programs that see themselves as radical, sometimes they're a substitution for that for a lot of people.

So when you came into the room, did you know anybody?

SC: No.

SS: So do you remember who was the first person you met or talked to?

SC: No.

SS: Do you remember how you got into the organization? Did you volunteer for something?

SC: One of the first things I remember getting really involved with was there was the '87 March on Washington, and even though there was another group organizing that, they were working — I think that they were working with ACT UP to get affinity groups out of ACT UP to come to the '87 March on Washington and do the

protest against *Bowers vs. Hardwick* at the Supreme Court. I think that became a vehicle for having nonviolence trainings in ACT UP, as people were preparing to go get arrested at the Supreme Court, and I remember working really hard on that in that committee and certainly getting arrested at the Supreme Court at the '87 March on Washington was a big – it'll always be a big thing in my memory.

SS: Did you go through the nonviolence training?

SC: Yes.

SS: Was it Amy Bauer?

SC: Yes.

SS: Had you already decided that you were a person who believed in nonviolent civil disobedience?

SC: I think I was just going with the flow, I think. I think that I found I just connected with the group so much, and finally this smart gay boy – well, no, that's not true. In high school I had an outlet for being smart through that speech and drama club. But ACT UP was not arts related but politically related, and so when I was there, I was in Rome and I was doing as the Romans were doing. {LAUGHS}

SS: In those trainings, they go through all these different scenarios of what could happen and how to respond.

SC: And you go around the room at first and you talk about what *Bowers vs. Hardwick* means to you and why you're there.

SS: Do you remember what you said?

SC: No.

SS: Do you remember what anybody said?

SC: I remember Amy always talked about, and probably still does, talked about one Supreme Court justice, the one who wrote the dissent in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* and how eloquent it was, and she could quote from it, I remember.

SS: So when they were running through all the things that could happen to you, that makes it very real.

In a way, you have to cross a line at that moment and become a person that's going to do something like that. Was that exciting for you? Was that frightening? Did you have to suspend reality to become that person, the one who could get dragged away from the Supreme Court?

SC: Well, it's interesting what happened. I do remember we did the trainings in a room at the Center, I think up on the third floor, and the floor in that room is still pretty rough, I think. I do remember us practicing being dragged, and it was kind of a rough ride on that floor, and I remember joking about it. But, again, I think I was mostly conforming and having fun. It was cute boys in the room who were smart.

{LAUGHS}

But what happened was that I was so naïve, that when they said you can resist by making the officers drag you, I thought, "Okay, well, this is what we're going to do." And when we actually got to the Supreme Court and got arrested, I did resist, and I was the only person resisting, and the cops were not dealing with me well, but my affinity group and a few other affinity groups around us really coalesced around me and were making sure that the cops – were there to make sure that I was okay.

Finally, they had us in a basement of a federal prison, the bus that I was on, my affinity group and the surrounding affinity groups, and they encircled us with motorcycles and had the lights shining on us. I mean, what were they going to do to us? Run over us? I don't know, but it was intimidating. {LAUGHS}

So everybody kind of said, "Steven, maybe you better start walking now," and at that point I started walking. So it's a good story to show how naïve I was.

SS: Maybe we have footage of that, of you being dragged away.

SC: Well, I remember that as they stopped us as we were trying to go into the Supreme Court, they took us around to one of the sides, and they put these tight plastic handcuffs on us behind our back, and they made us kneel down. While we were kneeling, a federal officer, I suppose, with a camera just went and stopped in front of each one of us and filmed us for a while and went to the next one and went to the next one and went to the next one. So somewhere in the files in Washington—

SS: What were you charged with?

SC: Civil disobedience. I can't remember now if I had to spend the night in the federal prison, but I do remember the federal prison really well. They put us in this futuristic-looking elevator that was kind of glass, and we went from the lower levels up, and as you're moving up, you can kind of see through the glass, the prisoners, and I saw four or five black men in a chain gang, with chains on their legs, being walked.

Tape I
00:25:00

They held us in cells there for a long time. I met a cute boy. {LAUGHS}
Then they let us make a statement when they took us into the courtroom, which was a very dramatic kind of modern-looking courtroom. I remember the judge was a black

man, and you kind of walked up these little steps to this little podium to make your statement. You were not too far from the judge. I do remember what I said then. I think I said – I'd just read John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. The judge seemed like a very humane guy, actually, and he just listened to everybody kind of very seriously and intently, didn't seem to be judging what you were saying. But he was a black man. I think he wanted us to say something apologetic, that we wouldn't do it again or something like that. So I made this little speech, culling from John D'Emilio's book a whole lot, about how I couldn't believe that a man like him who was from a community whose rights had been not respected in the past would ask a gay man who has similarly been disrespected by the law to apologize. I was not sorry, and I was going to do it again, or something to that effect, and walked away. I was very full of myself and proud.

SS: What did he give you?

SC: He let me go. {LAUGHS}

SS: It worked. That's great. So you came back to the city, you came back to ACT UP, and now you had been arrested. So where did you—

SC: Well, then I remember – gosh, you're making me remember things I didn't remember. I got to D.C. early because I was helping to organize the civil disobedience there at the March on Washington, and then I was into disobedience and I was at the parade. I was just there leading up to and then throughout the official days at the event. I remember very distinctly hanging out with David Feinberg at the rally. It's

the only time I really spent like a lot of time with him, but I remember getting along with him really well that day.

So then when I got back to New York and was on the train going back to work the next Monday morning or something, I remember like getting watery-eyed, because I had just been in this gay activist world for about two weeks straight, and it just seemed so weird to be back in the workaday world.

SS: The real fake world?

SC: Yes.

SS: So after that, where did you put yourself in ACT UP? Did you join a committee? What affinity group were you in, by the way?

SC: I don't remember what we called ourselves. I was looking for pictures this morning, so I couldn't find any. They're around here somewhere.

SS: So did you join any committees?

SC: Yes. I guess that maybe that kind of led to the Action Committee, because I remember being at most of those meetings.

SS: Can you explain what the Action Committee was?

SC: Whenever we decided we were going to have a protest or a civil disobedience or anything in response to something going on in city HIV policy or politics, and we decided the whole group was going to do an action, the Action Committee was entrusted with doing the organizing and honing the message.

SS: So did the Action Committee have to bring proposals back to the floor?

SC: Yes, and the Action Committee was always rather large. I remember it taking place at Avram Finklestein's apartment. He had a big loft apartment. Maybe sometimes at Charles', Charles with the long hair. Do you know who I'm talking about, Charles with the long hair and glasses? You remember him.

Tape I
00:30:00

JIM HUBBARD: Charles Stimson.

SC: Stimson, yes. His apartment, I believe, and in rooms on the first floor at the Center, and it also spawned various subcommittees for smaller actions.

SS: Could anyone be on the Action Committee or did you have to be approved?

SC: No, anybody could be on. Were there committees where you had to be approved? {LAUGHS}

SS: It's interesting in ACT UP that you could just volunteer for leadership.

SC: Right.

SS: You didn't have to be chosen. So what were some of the actions that you worked on with the Action Committee?

SC: Well, I can't actually remember. The things I recall are me and Charles Stimson and Bill Monahan and Gregg Bordowitz and Adam – I can't remember Adam's last name.

SS: Rolston?

SC: Maybe. Thin Jewish guy?

SS: He's a photographer?

SC: Yes.

SS: Is he an architect? Yes, he's an architect, but he was an artist at the time.

SC: Yes. I'd love to know how to contact him. A black man maybe in his thirties, forties, was very popular and had a lot of activist experience. I can't remember his name. Anyway, we called Joseph the – help me.

JH: Stephen Joseph.

SC: Stephen Joseph had done something we didn't like, something in a long string of things we didn't like, and so I may have even made the call to his office from my job at NYU, and we just said we're from a community group, we made up some issue, and we wanted to talk to him, and we were so surprised they didn't, like, you know — they said sure, and they gave us an appointment and they didn't make us jump through any hoops, like ask for more information about the group or anything.

So we just all showed up at that appointment on a weekday, the middle of the day. I took the day off work and he was there, and we were in a big conference room, and he shook our hands and was friendly. We all sat down, and we had a list of demands and we just pulled them out and said, "We're not leaving this office until you meet these demands." He got a little flustered, not very flustered, and walked out and called security, and they came and took us away. That may have been my second arrest, maybe.

SS: Do you remember what the issue was?

SC: I do not.

SS: Was this about counting AIDS statistics?

SC: That sounds vaguely right, yes.

SS: So what happened to you guys?

SC: You know, I never had an experience, I think, in New York because there was so much of that sort of thing going on at the time because of ACT UP, that, as I recall, the police just kind of got it down to an art of arresting us. I never got treated too badly and I never really saw anybody getting treated too badly. They processed you quickly and you were out just a few hours later. So the Supreme Court definitely stands as the dramatic one.

SS: The Stephen Joseph thing is really intense, because that was our own government and they were doing nothing, and here we are in New York City, and it's so frustrating. Now, Stephen Joseph was this object of a lot of ire, I think for those reasons. So when you guys were organizing around him, did you discuss that overtly, or was it just that as gay people we were used to being treated that way?

SC: I'm not sure what you're asking.

SS: Were you outraged that our own elected officials were ignoring the AIDS crisis, or was it status quo for how gay people had always been treated?

SC: I'm not sure how to answer that. I think that the general feeling was outrage.

SS: So you think the outrage was not a pose?

SC: And I think that we were such a collection of smart people in crisis and together instead of just separated and alone, that it was outrage.

SS: But where does outrage come from if you've never had rights?

SC: Hmm. I don't know. I feel like saying maybe something corny. I think we all saw our worth. We were so smart and so talented and so responsive to what was going on, and I guess we realized the hypocrisy that we were considered less than human beings as gay people, less than human, much less than human beings if you were HIV-positive on top. We knew there had been talk about segregating, isolating people with HIV, and yet it was so clear to all of us that we were such humane people because we were being so responsive. For instance, it's kind of where the women and lesbians and gay men came back together and were in the same room, not always getting along, but in the same room.

SS: So were there particular people in leadership who affected your thinking?

SC: Well, that group of people I was just talking about, actually, Adam and Bill Monahan and that affinity group, we kind of really stuck together.

I remember another action we took was that there was an exhibition about AIDS at the Museum of Natural History, and I think our beef with it was that all it showed was people being victims, people with Kaposi's sarcoma scars in bed, being administered to by doctors, and that it was showing people with AIDS as victims, and there was images from Africa and that it didn't educate and it didn't show people being empowered. The big word of the day, right?

So we made like a list of things people should know about HIV, just some basic things people should know about HIV as it stood at the time, what we knew, and

some basic facts about what the city wasn't doing, what the state wasn't doing, and what the federal government wasn't doing. I can't remember which one of us, maybe Adam, made it so that we could peel off the information that was in this poster. There wasn't a lot of guards in this exhibition at the museum. So when nobody was looking, we'd peel it off and stick it over their posters. We made them the same size. One of us, Bill Monahan, I think, went back every day for a couple of days to see how long it took them to notice that we did it, and it took them a while. {LAUGHS} But they did eventually, of course, and took them down.

SS: What do you think was their investment in not telling an empowered story about AIDS?

SC: I think we all had different investments, because, as I said, for me, I didn't know a lot of people with AIDS before I moved to New York. Even once I got to know people with AIDS in ACT UP, I was very removed from their deaths because the way it would happen was that you would see them at meetings, you would see them at actions, you would see them at subcommittee meetings, you would see them at a party, an ACT UP related party, but then as they started to get sicker and sicker, they showed up less and less. Their friend coalesced around them, you know, but the rest of us kept on with keeping ACT UP alive, and so then you would eventually hear that they died. So my investment was still more the fact that this was an outlet for me as a gay person that wasn't a bar. That wasn't sexually acting out. Other people's investment was that their friends that they had known for years were dying.

SS: What about the people who died publicly like David Feinberg or Bob Rafsky, who would come to meetings, getting sicker and sicker and sicker in front of everyone?

SC: Well, yes, that had to have its effect on me, I guess.

SS: Do you remember responding? Bob would be like very upset, expressing his pain in the meetings. Do you remember what you felt about that back then?

SC: Well, it sounds like a terrible thing to say, but I guess that you also knew these people more, so, one, you were trying not to treat them any differently just because they were sick, and you were trying to listen to them and give them respect, and also you may have just heard what they were saying a million times already.

{LAUGHS} So at the same time you were being respectful and listening, another part of you was rolling your eyes, because, “Oh, god, he’s going on about that again.”

JW: We have to change tapes.

SS: We were just talking about David Robinson.

SC: Oh, no, not that David; a different David. But, let’s see, you were asking about people who influenced me. Another person I spent a lot of time with, maybe through Prisons Committee but also through Action Committee and also because she was plain old just so deeply involved, Maxine [Wolfe], of course.

Another demonstration I remember well was going to Montreal for the International AIDS Conference.

SS: Let’s talk about that. Can you explain why it was in Montreal?

SC: No.

SS: Because it couldn't be in the United States because we had a ban on [people with HIV travelling].

SC: That's right. That's right.

JW: Not yet.

SS: Not yet?

JH: I thought it was later.

SS: I thought it was later? Oh, okay.

SC: Oh, it wasn't because people who were HIV-positive couldn't come into the country?

JW: No, not yet.

SS: It just was in Montreal. Okay. So what was the point of ACT UP going to the conference?

SC: I think maybe to protest the makeup of the people who were presenting at the conference, maybe what was being presented, and also just to have a presence outside the conference that was one beyond the pharmaceutical and scientific world, to have the activists' presence.

What was so great about that action was that Keith Haring, I believe, paid for two buses, and when it came down to the morning that we were leaving, a good amount of people went, but there wasn't enough of us to fill up both buses, but we took both buses anyway, so on each bus you could move around a lot, and it was a lot of fun. The bus I was on, Maxine was on, and I remember her holding court. She would sit on a

chair and talk very calmly about her experience and her opinions, and people would just kind of sit around and listen to her, pitch in, and then kind of go back to whatever else was going on in the bus.

SS: So how many people would you say went?

SC: Maybe fifty of us, actually.

SS: So did you plan your actions while you were on the bus or when you got there? Was there already a plan, or did you –

SC: There was already a plan, I'm sure.

SS: So you arrived in Montreal, and where did everyone sleep?

SC: Somehow there was a school, elementary, junior high school, I can't remember, in the French Canadian part of the city, and I guess it was summer or school wasn't in session for some reason, and so there was cots in the classrooms and we slept there.

SS: What was the action at the conference? What did you guys do?

SC: I don't remember what we did, to tell you the truth, but I do remember that we were eclipsed by Tiananmen Square, and we all went back to an office space that we had rented for organizing, with phones and photocopy machines, whatever technology it was we used back then to copy things, and we were just all glued to the television watching Tiananmen Square, so it kind of took over. I remember that was very moving, sitting with all these people who felt we were doing something like that and watching what was happening. It was very moving.

SS: What was the Prison Committee? You said the prison project or the Prison Committee. What was that?

SC: The Prison Committee was a small committee. I think Maxine was on it. Gerri Wells often held the meetings in her apartment. She lives on Second Street, between First and Second Avenues. It's funny, I see her sitting outside at that corner of First and Second, or First and Third, at a café, and back then the East Village hadn't become so gentrified that far out. So I remember walking to Geri's apartment to do Prison Committee meetings seemed like I was going very far deep into the East Village. Now it's not very far into the East Village at all. {LAUGHS} But it seemed like it back then.

I remember we got the ire of Larry Kramer because he just kind of felt that it was making things with all these committees forming about and serving populations that seemed to have so little to do with gay men, I guess, that he felt we were not using our energies well.

SS: How did he express that? On the floor?

SC: Yes.

SS: How did the Prison Committee get started?

SC: I don't remember.

SS: Why did you join it?

SC: I don't remember. When you ask what influenced me, who influenced me, and who were some leaders that I looked up to, I mean, when you walked into the general meeting on Monday nights, there was tables and there was just

photocopies of articles from newspapers, from magazines. We were all just kind of getting our hands on whatever we could get our hands on, and then people were composing stuff as well. Committees were putting together handouts. So you would just go up to the table and take these stacks of information. So what would happen was I'd put it in my bag and then I'd be so busy during the week working and being in meetings and subcommittee meetings, that they would build up, but then I remember every couple of Sundays I would stay home and sit there and go through the material, and that was a big part of my education.

SS: So what did you guys do in the Prison Committee?

SC: You know, I can't remember what we did, really. I mean, we did research.

SS: Because there was a whole group of women, right, who came out of Bedford Hills Prison into ACT UP. Now I don't know, were they connected to this?

SC: No. No. I think that mostly we were trying to generate interest in the issue, so we had some research to do. Because I worked at this nonprofit at NYU – it was run by two professors, and they liked me, and so I would miss so much work doing ACT UP stuff, and I would just tell them flat out, “Going to a demonstration in D.C.,” or downtown or wherever it was, and they're like, “Okay, whatever.” So it was advantageous to have that job at that time.

I remember one of the things I did for the Prison Committee was when I was supposed to be working, I would just close the door to my office and get on the

phone and call people maybe Maxine had suggested to call, who somehow worked or had some idea what policies were in prisons and talked to them and did research.

SS: Did you guys get anything out of it?

SC: We were small. There was resistance.

SS: Yes, let's talk about that. What did you think that was all about?

SC: This theme probably comes up a lot, right, no matter who you're talking to or what committees they were on, and I've been thinking about it, and because I went to the White Columns exhibition and saw some of the interviews you've already done on tape, I think that it was mostly just about the fact that – well, let me back up a second. I think when people who weren't in ACT UP think of ACT UP, what they often think about was disrupting the services at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and when I've encountered those people, it always seems to me they have this feeling that everybody in ACT UP was of the same mind, which if you were in ACT UP you know how laughable that was, because we weren't of the same mind at all. One thing I've kind of just heard said in my years in New York and the gay community is that besides being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, if you include transgender, and I certainly do, beyond that, you don't have much in common because you're from different ethnic backgrounds, you're from different levels of education, different parts. There's just so many ways that the community gets split up beyond that. And I think it was just that. It was a big organization. Monday night's meetings were overflowing. There wasn't enough room for all the people that were coming. So it was just our simple diversity that made it so hard for us to get along, and the conflict made it interesting too.

Tape II
00:10:00

SS: There were so many different Latinos in ACT UP and so many different countries and backgrounds. What was that mix like for you?

SC: Well, that was actually the last thing I did in ACT UP once I was starting to burn out. I joined the Latino Committee. It was actually one of the most unsafe places that I ever was in ACT UP. I mean, in the other ones, the Action Committee was very contentious. There was resentments and fights and conflict, the way there will be. But it was rather limited to the room and to the meeting, and the Action Committee or other committees and just the general group is large enough so that you kind of picked and chose your friends and went out to eat together afterwards and hung out together and stuff. In those times the fights got put to the side, and there was a social outlet for everybody.

The Latino Committee, maybe because there was the not only dealing with being gay, not only dealing with the issue of HIV in the community, but also because there was the trying to raise awareness of our ethnic background and diversity, it was always very serious, and we couldn't put down the seriousness.

SS: Why is that?

SC: I think, you know, maybe — I don't know. What do you think?

SS: I have no idea, but maybe you could tell me some examples. I know there were the Latin American guys who came from this left background. There were Nuyoricans. I mean, there were people all—

SC: Well, yes, so, again, you know, I mean, I remember — I don't know if it was my own self-perception or reality, but I always felt like in a sense I was considered

Tape II
00:15:00

less Latino, the least Latino on the Latino community because I grew up speaking Spanish and English, but English is really my first language, my preferred language. I can still speak Spanish but not very well. I pass for white. I think maybe it was perceived that because I was from America that I'd had access to some kind of privileges that I didn't really. {LAUGHS} And what was ironic is that sometimes the people that did come from a Latin American country were darker than me, spoke Spanish better than me, actually had a better material background than I had had, but you wanted to associate yourself with the most radical, least accepted contingent of any community because it seemed to make you more radical and enhanced your investments.

SS: So how did these things play out in terms of the work that you guys were doing? I know there was translation. What were some of the projects? You're talking about the Latino Caucus, right?

SC: Yes.

SS: What were some of the projects you were involved in?

SC: I remember we went to Puerto Rico.

SS: To do ACT UP Puerto Rico?

SC: Yes.

SS: Oh, please tell us about that.

SC: It was a mess.

SS: Oh, tell us.

SC: I think that just organizing-wise it was a mess. We got there. I think we had rented on the beach a large condo on the beach, and we were so raucous the first

night and so motley that they kicked us out the next day. {LAUGHS} They didn't want us there. So the next day we had meetings and organizing an action plan.

SS: Who were you meeting with?

SC: I don't remember.

SS: Were you meeting with ACT UP Puerto Rico, or were you meeting with the government or you're meeting with officials?

SC: I think this was one where we hadn't organized what we were going to do beforehand well, so a lot of it was just meeting ourselves to figure out what we were going to do, but then that all became complicated by the fact that we'd gotten kicked out of this place and now we had to do everything, try to figure out what we wanted to do at the same time that we had to figure out where everybody was going to stay that night. I remember one or two people got entrusted with, "You make sure that by the time the sun goes down we all have a place to stay."

So then we were all separated into different parts of the city and had to get together every day and only had so many cars and so much money for so many cars, and so it just became this big logistical nightmare of when we pick up people. I remember just being in a car with five more passengers in the car than we probably should have had. We were just kind of all squished. And every day was like that. When you throw that together with the usual contentiousness and debating that a committee had to do, it made for a big mess.

SS: Did you accomplish anything?

SC: I don't remember.

SS: Why did you decide to go?

SC: Well, it's going to Puerto Rico. {LAUGHS} It was going to be fun. Just for myself personally, and my perception of it all might also be the fact that I was burning out by this point and this was late in my activity.

SS: Why did you burn out? What burnt you out?

SC: Well, I think, as I said, you know, I got to ACT UP, I was at the Monday night meetings, I was at meetings every night of the week, so that in and of itself led to burnout. But when I knew we were going to do this interview, I was thinking about the fact – do you know Kayton Kurowski? Do you remember him?

SS: Yes, I do remember him.

SC: He's a therapist and a social worker. I never went to them, but he formed a therapy group. So now in addition to committees and subcommittees and sub-subcommittee meetings that you had your choice of to go to every night of the week, there was a therapy group. I never went, but I was friends with Kayton and I knew other people who'd gone.

SS: Do you think you burned out because you were just going to to many things, or do you think it ceased to be interesting or that it was emotionally taxing?

SC: Here's what it was. I heard that at the therapy group one issue that came up for a lot of people was that, "Jeez, I'm so totally committed, I'm at a committee meeting every night of the week, or subcommittee meeting or making posters or doing something ACT UP related Monday through Friday, but on weekends if there's not an

action or something going on, I'm sitting home alone. I don't have anything to do." So I think that ACT UP performed the big service of bringing people like me who may not have had an outlet that was appropriate for them and their interests as a person together in a room, and certainly, I mean, with all the dying and with everything that was going on, it was certainly one of the funnest times of my life. We had a good time together. But we were probably still, a lot of us were still operating on the isolation that we'd experienced before. So, yes, if there was something to do, we were together. So I think people were, and I was, certainly feeling maybe a little jerked. {LAUGHS} Like you work so hard but then you're lonely on the weekend. I think that was one thing that was going on.

SS: Did you ever have a close friend who died inside ACT UP?

SC: Yes and no. I mean yes in the sense that you – like getting arrested at the Supreme Court or any of the other actions I've described could be intense because it was kind of scary or it would be intense because it was fun, and so I got very close to a lot of people in those situations, but I hadn't known them before ACT UP, and it always seems to me that a lot of the people there were New Yorkers and they had known each other even before they got there. So, yes, they were my good friends that got sick and they died, but I always felt like some of them had known each other longer than I had known them.

SS: Did you visit people in the hospital?

SC: Yes.

SS: Like who? Who are some of the people?

SC: That black fellow that I can't remember who did the Stephen Joseph action.

SS: Ortez?

SC: Yes.

SS: What hospital was he in? We don't know that, right?

SC: I can't remember.

SS: Do you remember who –

SC: Randy.

SS: Who's Randy?

SC: I can't remember Randy's last name. He had longish brown hair.

JH: Randy Snider?

SC: Yes, Randy Snider.

SS: What was it like to see ACT UP people in the hospital? I mean, do you remember being surprised by people having really good conditions or really bad conditions or having family there or not having them there?

SC: You were talking about you remember Bob being sick at meetings and stuff. I don't remember that as much so well, and maybe it's because my involvement was much deeper than just coming to the Monday night meetings, because there were some people who'd just come to Monday night meetings, right, and there was some people who'd just show up for a demonstration, and god bless them, right? But then there were the other people working behind the scenes that were at the committee

meetings every night, and I think that demanded a certain level of health. So I think that's mostly what I remember, actually.

SS: That's interesting.

SC: When I burnt out on ACT UP, the nice professor at the job I had at NYU quit in frustration with the other professor that none of us liked, that job started to go sour, so then I got a job at the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and I think that's where I was more exposed. That's where I remember, I start to remember people deteriorating.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

SC: About the time that I – and then besides the fact that I was burning out, then I got a job at GMHC, and it just seemed like, oh, my god, AIDS was being my whole life. {LAUGHS} So I just kind of focused on it as a job. I mean, it wasn't just a job for me, but the nature of it, of my involvement changed then. So, yes, '89, because '89 is when I started working at GMHC.

Tape II
00:25:00

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

SC: I know I've been thinking about it a lot, but I think we've covered a lot of what I've been thinking about.

SS: So my last question is, just looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

SC: I think its greatest achievement was that the variety of things we did, because, as I said, there's some people who just remember, who weren't very involved, who remember St. Patrick's, so they remember the radical traffic-blocking ACT UP. But

then there was those guys on the Treatment and Data Committee who taught themselves a lot. They assimilated a lot of information and could sit across from an FDA official and speak intelligently and persuasively. I know they were instrumental in getting the drug that stopped people from dying from pneumonia. What was it?

SS: Bactrim?

SC: Yes. They got it through quickly.

SS: Pentamidine?

SC: Pentamidine, yes. So, in fact, that's whenever I encounter one of these people who only knows ACT UP through St. Patrick's, and I'm trying to persuade them that ACT UP wasn't a bad thing, that's often the example that I use, that there were so many things going on in ACT UP. From the Treatment and Data stuff to the street-action stuff and then there was this whole panoply of stuff going on, it brought men and women together, gay men and lesbians together again. I don't know, I don't consider myself an activist anymore, not because I'm not of the mind, but just because I've kind of given myself over to writing and I have to work for a living, but I don't know what young people in America that feel passion about any issue, if they have some activist outlet anymore. It seems to me, a person who doesn't keep up with the news so much anymore, it seems to me that it was like the last hurrah of activism. So when I'm sitting around older people who are remembering the sixties and the things they did, I feel like, oh, I have that, too, because of ACT UP. If it hadn't been for ACT UP, I wouldn't have that similar sense of like, oh, yeah, the good old days when we did something.

SS: And what would you say is its biggest disappointment?

SC: I don't know that there was one.

SS: Okay. Thank you.

SC: Sure.