

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

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Interviewee: Mary Cotter

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**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Mary Cotter
June 23, 2010**

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so you look at me. Hello. So we start – if you could say your name, your age, today’s date, and where we are.

MARY COTTER: All right. It’s Mary Cotter. I’m 48. It is June 23rd, 2010; and we are in my apartment in New York City.

SS: Okay, great. Where did you grow up?

MC: I grew up in the Bronx and in Yonkers, in a very working-class, huge, Italian Catholic family and neighborhood.

SS: Cotter is Italian?

MC: No, I married a gay man {LAUGHS} – from Staten Island. And I inherited the name, and it’s a lot easier to assume it than get rid of it. And as my career kind of took off, I just decided to – it’s also a lot easier to spell than my full name.

SS: What’s your real name?

MC: My full name is Maria Francesca MaestroBerardino. Sort of a mouthful. So Mary Cotter is a lot easier and shorter, and –

SS: Oh, so you’re like classic Italian from the Bronx.

MC: Right, yeah. Well – some people would say no, I was. {LAUGHS} I was, yeah, definitely.

SS: And when did they come over, in your family?

MC: My parents came over in the big rush in I guess the teens and twenties –

SS: Your parents –

MC: Yes.

SS: – or your grandparents?

MC: My parents.

SS: Okay, so your –

MC: Yeah, uh huh.

SS: – and so did grow up speaking Italian?

MC: No, I was prohibited, actually. My grandmother used to speak Italian with me. And my mother was horrified. They wanted us to be Americans. And it's still to this day, a problem, because I have a very difficult time with languages; I have a fear of them. And I blame my parents for that. Other than Latin.

SS: I guess, you went to Catholic school?

MC: Oh yeah, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

MC: Definitely until middle of Catholic high school – I went for a couple years, so –

SS: So growing up in the '60s, what was the political environment of your neighborhood?

MC: Well, my parents were – my father was actually pretty liberal. My mother was pretty conservative. So it was sort of an odd mix of things. Very Catholic, but my father was very justice-oriented. So he would do things like – and at the time — I supposed it's still a big idea — but at the time — and at that

point, we had moved to Yonkers, which was basically the same neighborhood; slightly bigger homes; all white, all Italian — and my father, he used to invite friends of his, guys mostly, that worked for him; he had a trucking company. And most of them — not all — were African American. And he would invite people over, quite frankly, just to piss off the neighbors. And I thought it was awesome. My mother was horrified, because it pissed off the neighbors.

And so there was this kind of struggle in my family with politics. And it was confusing to me, but I definitely lean more towards my father's sense of justice. And I think coupled with a — one thing that I did get, and retain, from Catholicism is that very strong sense of right and wrong, justice and — not that it's applied consistently in the church, but I won't get into that.

So that, I really did retain, and that was something that my parents obviously had a huge impact — my father in particular.

SS: Right. So when do you think you started to develop your own political views?

MC: I think actually after my — my father was, I was 15 when my father died. And I think that was a catalyst for me. I started — for, some, obviously, psychological reasons, but I started to see how things, the world operated in relation to me and my father's death. And a lot of it was hypocrisy, and particularly within the Church, and saying one thing, doing another, that sort of stuff. That really was a catalyst for me. And I think it really moved me into a much more liberal, directed way of thinking. But it wasn't really until — and actually I'd say I had a general sense of outrage. It was the '70s, and — I

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remember at the time, I guess – nuclear war was a big thing, and I remember that being a big protest element. And later on, it really wasn't until I got to college, which was not right after high school, which was significantly later, that I started to really get more of a very specific political identity. And that was much more about access to education; and tuition hikes at CUNY, that sort of thing.

SS: Okay, so what happened in the time between high school and college?

MC: Well, after high school, I developed a really bad drug habit. Actually, the very first person, I think, who died from AIDS that I knew was a woman who had all the classic symptoms. Of course, nobody knew it at the time; and nobody would even call it AIDS at the time, because she didn't fit the bill.

So there were a group of – it was the sort of classic '80s, Lower East Side bunch of crazy punk-rock kids. Many of us were slumming, and living in this neighborhood; and doing an enormous amount of drugs. And very risky behavior. And at the time, I have zero recollection of any kind of harm-reduction efforts being offered. I don't even know if it was really at that point something that was widely even known, let alone available. And I can honestly say that many people I knew then may still be alive, or would certainly be not infected had there been some access. It was just constant.

SS: This is the late '70s?

MC: This was more the early '80s.

SS: Okay. And were you out yet?

MC: No.

SS: No.

MC: No, I was not. I actually didn't come out until my late twenties. I had – and I attribute that mostly because I had zero role models. I knew no one that was out. No one. And so the – the only out lesbians that I knew were in this local bar — it was a biker bar — in the neighborhood I grew up in. And they scared the shit out of me. And I was intrigued, and I wanted to kind of go there, but I was afraid. And that was all I had, and I wasn't able to really grasp that identity.

But I had a lot of gay male friends, and I think over time, going to college and whatnot – also being in – at that time in New York's history, and being in that neighborhood, there was a tremendous mix of people. Obviously – a lot of dope fiends and gay people, sometimes the same person. It was a just big mixup.

So my world got more and more queer – which was really nice. And then I had a kind of a frame of reference for living in a way that I thought I needed to live. But I didn't have one until that point.

SS: So what made you go back to school?

MC: Well, I got my act together. I married a guy, and we both were like, we're so gay, and why are we doing this? We need stuff. Right?

So – Seriously, it was like, well, we really need an apartment. And we have nothing. So if we get married, people will give us things. I was 20. It was ridiculous. And –

SS: Did you have a big Catholic wedding?

MC: Yeah, we did.

SS: Oh my god!

MC: Yeah, it was a little scary. Oh yeah, pictures in the church. Big, not by any stretch of the imagination compared to my sister's. There was no big wedding – no, I bought off a dress off somebody– but it was in a church. And we did have to go through a pre-marriage ritual. A priest tells you how to manage your money, and how, sex for procreation only. It was horrifying. And I knew, we both knew that it was a total mistake. But we went through with it anyway.

And at the time, I had no skills. I had one semester of college. I had a lot of retail experience, which really wasn't getting me anywhere; and not a clue what I was going to do.

And so I thought, well, I really need, I guess, to go to school, hah. And so – actually, then – I was working towards, I was actually working at Barnes and Noble a hundred years ago. And saving money, and trying to save enough money to go to school. And – my mother died when I was 25, and I inherited money. And that allowed me to speed that process up.

So I went to Hunter. Which I loved. And which was, is gay as it gets, and as lesbian as it gets. And I just had a really –

SS: Did you have all those classic lesbian professors –

MC: Oh, god, are you kidding? Like all those, those women's studies professors – I didn't want to leave. {LAUGHS} It was like, let me lay here in your bosom and stay forever. It was so wonderful, it was so wonderful.

And that definitely, I think for me, was a – it was obviously tremendously helpful in part because it was college. So, whatever. It's just college, it is what it is. But also, the professors, and like my classmates; the age difference was wild. There were kids right out of high school; people like myself; and there were women in the class in their thirties, forties, and upwards. And many, not all, but many of those women were out. And it was so important to me to have that. And there were certain professors I can look to in particular that were just – at the time, I didn't realize how important they were to me.

SS: Like who?

MC: Like Joan Tronto. I don't know if you know her name. She's a political scientist. She was amazing. She just was brilliant. And just very, she's like the first really butch woman that I ever saw as being so matter-of-fact about herself. Like, just whatever. It's not an issue. She was like, this is me. And I loved that. I thought that was really wonderful.

And then, of course, nobody else I can remember. I can't remember any names right now.

I also had a, I ended up studying Greek and Latin. Yeah, I know. Really – good for the workplace. Awesome! {LAUGHS}

But in a funny way, it actually helped me with my entrée into ACT UP – and I'll tell you about that in a minute.

But I had a Latin professor who's a gay man, and he was just a lovely guy. And I guess one year I was doing the AIDS Walk; the GMHC AIDS Walk. And he signed up, and he got a bunch of his friends to sign up. And I just

developed a friendship with him and his partner. And sadly, both he and his partner died. And that was obviously traumatic.

But my relationship with them was wonderful. They were like two — his partner was also a professor. They were two professional guys in this wonderful relationship, doing something they loved. And I was just like, wow.

So I was exposed to so many different kinds of gay people – just doing what they liked. And I thought, wow, that’s really pretty lovely. Because up until then, I didn’t think I had a choice to be gay and successful. I thought I had a – I was like, well, I guess I can be out and work in a bar. Or whatever. I didn’t think it was an option for me.

And really, until I went to college, I really had no clue that I could do that. And that’s why, I sort of gave myself permission, really gave myself permission, to kind of just be out, and be happy.

And of course, all my friends were like, whatever; what took so long? Nobody was surprised. Other than my family, who was freaked out. But – yeah. So –

SS: So then you were out in the lesbian community.

MC: Um hm, um hm.

SS: And what did that mean? What years are we talking about?

MC: This was in, I graduated in ’92. This would be like the early, like late ’80s, early ’90s, I would say.

SS: Okay.

MC: It's around that time is when I really came out, and came out politically, too. Yeah.

SS: Had you been involved in anything before ACT UP?

MC: Yeah, I had. In college, there was a lot of – as I mentioned before, access-to-education stuff that I participated in, because the CUNYs – the pricing – this is when Cuomo was still — I'm dating myself — Cuomo was still governor, and the pricing, tuition was going up and up and up and up. And so there was a huge amount of work around that. A little bit of environmental stuff. But mostly what I did was – I actually started to do a lot of prison work – which really came up in my life later. But a lot of work with female prisoners.

SS: How did you get into that?

MC: That was actually through Audre Lorde.

SS: Professor at Hunter.

MC: Professor — thank you. There she is, that's another one. Who was, I was so fortunate to actually participate in my intro to women's studies class, and she taught us for a week. And I, I am still, to this day, in awe of it. She was extraordinary, wonderful, brilliant — all those things — and funny. She was really funny. And she got us thinking about things that – she talked a lot. And what I remember most, taking away from her, was the whole issue of like the hierarchy of oppression, and the master's tools, and all of that. And it was so important for me to get that, and really kind of apply it to myself and apply it to my thinking in the world. And she got in my head this sort of bugaboo about – my life isn't that hard. I grew up in this like relatively – certainly weren't poor,

but didn't get everything we wanted, had everything we needed. I got to school late, blah blah blah. Life's not so hard.

And what it did was make me look at people whose lives are harder, and do something. And that really connects back to – my father's role in shaping me as a non-practicing Catholic. But the whole philosophy that he took from Catholicism, to mean what it really meant, for him.

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And that's really what started me doing prison work. And what that involved was – at the time, I don't recall there being any particular programs, but one of my classes had adopted – actually, I had – do you know the journal Poder? [Poder: a Journal of Feminist Literary Perspectives, 1987-1994] I don't know if they're still around. But it was a Hunter journal – also it was the Audre Lorde – oh – women's poetry center? Published a journal. And it was just great. And it was this group of women had decided to take on a group of female prisoners as our cause.

And what that meant was we would communicate with the prison officials, and they allowed us to send books and – they would, the women would send stuff for publication. And that was a really wonderful –

SS: Was it Bedford Hills? What prison –

MC: It was Bedford Hills. Yes, that's absolute-, it's like really — and may still be; it's been a while since I've been connected with them — the only female prison that really had great programs, and really supportive staff.

So we were really fortunate at that time that we were able to access – that was just such a wonderful experience. And it really propelled me into

wanting to do something like that, wanting to connect with people who were incarcerated, or something about that that really spoke to me.

So that was sort of a – my political awakenings were in a lot of different places. And – when I graduated – heh – there’s not a whole lot of job opportunities for Greek and Latin majors. But, I developed really good writing skills. I can diagram a sentence like nobody’s business. Between Catholic school and Greek and Latin; not a problem.

And a very good friend of mine was working at the People with AIDS Coalition – which I guess had been around probably for four or five years, at that point. And they needed an assistant editor. And I’m like, I’m your girl. And I had not really done much AIDS work, at all. A little bit here and there, just awareness stuff. But mostly actually what it was through Audre Lorde’s cancer diagnosis and her activism around that, and kind of bringing the AIDS and cancer connection – that was the first place I ever heard it. That was really illuminating. And there was, obviously, in women’s prison, that was prevalent, too. But I hadn’t really done any work.

And so I got that job. And I loved it. I loved everything about it. I worked for a completely crazy queen.

SS: Who was it?

MC: Bree Scott-Hartland.

SS: Oh yes!

MC: Yes. He was the first of many – difficult people that I just got along with. I don’t know what it is, but I always had a knack for getting along

with, honestly, people who could be really nasty. And we just had a wonderful friendship. And –

SS: Can you tell us a little bit about where was the office, how many people worked there?

MC: Sure, sure. At the time, we were in Chelsea, in, I guess, really, the, what would now — I don't know if it's the Flower District; the office was on 26th Street, between Sixth and Fifth, I guess – yeah. And the agency had purchased parts of the building, but that never really worked out financially. It was just difficult. It was a time in New York where AIDS organizations were exploding, and there was a lot of money. But the agency was never really big enough to justify that kind of an expense. So floors were purchased in concert with another organization. Financially, it was very weird. And eventually, really became a problem. But the agency kind of extrapolated itself from that.

And so what it was at the time was three floors, if I remember correctly; one that was administrative, one that was all publications and PR, and another that was a hotline, which was one of its biggest programs, was a hotline for people with AIDS, staffed by people with AIDS. And a few other smaller programs, like a letter-writing program; like the program for inmates; some advocacy work; there were mothers that participated in – they had their own thing, but they also participated in other things, and they represented the agency.

SS: Mothers who had AIDS, or –

MC: No no. Mothers of people with AIDS –

SS: Okay.

MC: – actually – I don't know if you remember Iris De La Cruz –

SS: Sure, of course. Iris with the Virus.

{LAUGHTER}

MC: Her mother, Beverly, who is a piece of work and then some; she really was the driving force behind a lot of the mothers programs. And

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actually, she and her colleagues did sit in on, they did take some calls. And they had, I think, an afternoon, maybe, that was dedicated to them being there and taking calls from mothers, or family members.

So it was a very solid pro-, a really solid organization. And – there were two publications; there was an English-based one, and a Spanish-based one. But the Spanish-based one, it was its own magazine and its own entity – it wasn't a translation. It was really very focused on issues of importance to the Latino community in New York, and Puerto Rico. Moises Agosto was – that was his baby.

So at the time, things were going really well. And then there were – it was a difficult time in the economy, and – all kinds of financial shit started to happen. It just became really difficult to warrant the inclusion of a lot of programs, and programs got shut down and shut down and shut down. And the board decided that – It was just a big mess. And there are so many stories, but – I'm not the person to talk to. You know John Hatchett?

SS: Yeah.

MC: He's the person to talk to. He's at Cicatelli now, I think. He was really –

SS: What's Cicatelli?

MC: Cicatelli & Associates – they're a consulting firm.

SS: Okay.

MC: But he runs – the PWA Leadership Institute, I think it is. And he trains people, he and the staff train PWAs, and then they train others. And they go and they do lobbying and advocacy efforts. It's a very cool program, and he's been doing it for a while. A lot of education stuff that they do – for themselves, to then train others.

But he was the deputy director. And for a million different reasons that I really do not remember, the board decided that the agency needed to dissolve and re-form. And there was a lot of political dissatisfaction with that. And what I mean by that: there were some people in the community that thought it was a terrible idea, and had done some wheatpasting around the neighborhood of some things. And – it was not fun; it was really kind of a shitty thing to do. But what are you going to do? It was there.

Accusations of all sorts of things. Some of it, parts of it, may be true. But ultimately – I thought, from my perspective, it ended up being kind of a pissing contest – between the former executive director and the people that were doing the wheatpasting.

So we moved down to 17th Street – the Ladies' Mile. And there was nothing there at the time; nothing there at the time; and set up shop as the People with AIDS Coalition of New York. And that was a really interesting experience, because things were changing then. This was in, I guess – I'm trying

to think — 1990? '91; '91, '92. I'm sorry, maybe a little later. Maybe it was '92-'93. And we moved into this massive loft space. Had no offices, other than the E.D., and we had a conference room. We could still smoke. Everybody smoked. It was sort of bizarre. But in any event, I was very lucky, and Bree was — left, or shall we say, there was an agreement that he would leave. And sadly, he died not long after that. He wasn't very sick, and it happened rather quickly.

But I then was blessed with this opportunity to have one amazing boss after the next. Because my role was a supportive one. I'm not a person with AIDS, I am not, it's not job to be the editor of these magazines. I was able to provide support and admin and some direction and proofreading. But I felt very strongly that it needed to be a person with AIDS.

First was a — really, one of my favorite people in the world — and to this day, I miss him — was a guy named Michael Slocum. He used to work for Body Positive.

SS: As a therapist?

MC: Yeah, he died in '95, I think. And it just, it was devastating. And honestly, I, at that point, I realized that I didn't know anybody — that I didn't know before they had AIDS. Do you know what I mean? All the people I knew that had AIDS had died. And now, anybody I knew that had AIDS, I'd met after the fact that they had AIDS. And so it — his death really shook me up badly. We were very close, and it was very disheartening.

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And then I worked for a woman named Becky Trotter. Do you know Becky? Yeah. And she was a lesbian from Missouri. She had one crazy

fucking story. And she was in your face, and very fierce, and crazy. And wonderful, and difficult, and all those things. But I felt really lucky to be involved with both of them.

And actually, at the time, I started to do a lot of prison work. We had a column that a guy from prison used to do. It was amazing. It appeared in every, it was a monthly magazine. And his column appeared in every other. He would get letters, assemble them, and literally cut out, kind of paste it up; mail them to us; and if it made it in time, we would put it together, scan what we could, do Photoshop – it was whatever, the '90s. But we still had decent computers. But it was just ridiculous. It was like impossible to do. Sometimes it wouldn't come, sometimes they'd confiscate it; sometimes they'd rip it up.

So we changed that, and that became my thing, and I would work with him. And we had – really, it was a section about prison issues. Some of it was letters from prisoners; some of it was – we'd feature prisoner stories. We had, we actually got sued by – I don't remember the name – a lot of prisoners get this mystery meat. It's called – I wish I could remember the name of it. But it's essentially a patty, stuffed with things, that's supposed to be nutritionally sound. And one of the inmates that was really sharp and really into investigating things did a lot of work, and we ran it through a bunch of other people. And it turns out that it was not at all close to what the company was suggesting it was.

So we published that story. And then this little company tried to sue us.

And we're like, go ahead. We're a bunch of people with AIDS, in this tiny organization; have a ball. And we called all the connections we had, news-wise. Never heard from them.

So that was rather amusing.

And then there were – there were actually a lot of stories about – some of the stories were just horrible. There were a lot of stories about transgender inmates, and where they would end up. And one inmate in particular — Dee Farmer, I believe, was her name — who fought to go to a women's prison. And it took years and years and years and years. And she finally got there. But that's not – that was after spending a lot of time in a male prison, even in special custody, she was still raped and horribly assaulted.

So giving voice to that stuff was really important.

SS: I just want to ask you sort of a conceptual question.

PWA group –

MC: Um hm.

SS: Okay, so it's prisoners, Latinos, a Latino-run publication; sex workers, mothers – How come it was so diverse, as opposed to other organizations?

MC: I think because the management encouraged and allowed it. I think that – I guess because the magazine in particular was – we needed to fill pages, honestly; and we somehow got on a roll with themes. And first, it started off; Bree Scott-Hartland, back in the day; the last issue I worked with him on was the AIDS ribbon, and he hated that. And – okay if I take a – so we had a whole

issue about the AIDS ribbon. Okay. At the time, it seemed like a really big deal. And I understood why he did it. Really, after we moved, honestly, and reincorporated; then John was the executive director. And he was like, you guys do whatever you think you need to do. And he really trusted us. And so we came up with the theme idea that there'd be mostly, 9 times out of 10, it was a group of people, a particular population that was underserved — or that nobody knew about — and we'd highlight them.

But there were consistent things, like prisoners, always in there. We actually had a Mother's Corner, where they would write on occasion. And so I think we just had freedom. And also, I would say, the people that were involved in the publication were a pretty diverse group. Michael Slocum was a very out African American gay man. The two guys — Woody]— actually, two guys and one woman that worked on SIDAhora, the Spanish publication, were all out. The whole agency was. And there was just a lot of support for it.

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So I think it was just a certain amount of freedom. And I think also, maybe, at that time, the one-stop-shop thing was necessary. It seems that that stopped for a while, and then maybe it's necessary again, in different ways. So for whatever reason, it fit what needed to be fit at the time. And honestly, a lot of other people didn't want to touch the prison thing. It was just too scary and weird. Which I understood. It's like, if you don't know about it, it is scary and weird. And I should also say, at that point in time, the numbers in New York State prisons of people with AIDS were just — off the charts. I think because we

had a reputation – Then we got the floodgates opened, and we had a lot of people sending us stuff.

SS: So when did you go to ACT UP?

MC: It was around the same time. Actually, my friend David, who introduced me to the PWA Coalition, said, you want to go to an ACT UP meeting? I'm like, yeah, sure, no problem.

And I guess it was in 1991, I want to say. I remember going to a meeting, and thinking; oh, this is pretty cool. Not saying a word, and being very much, very intimidated. Not intimidated because I didn't feel like I could participate; but intimidated by the, the quality of the discourse, and the depth of knowledge that people had – coupled with outrage. I thought, wow; this is pretty awesome. And the specificity with which people wanted to do things, whether it was writing a letter to X, Y and Z; or organizing some big, big action. I was really quite floored by that.

And so continued to go to meetings, I'd say for about a year or so. I would go to events, but I'd sort of act on the sidelines, and – the very first ACT UP event I remember going to was Jon Greenberg's funeral. I actually have a candle from that, still, that I found the other day. It was really, wow.

And that was the first time where I said, okay, I can be a part of this. It felt – I don't know, it felt to me somehow necessary to make – and I did not know the man well at all. But for me, it was a really important moment to – I don't know, I felt like everything in my life had prepared me for that particular moment. In other words, the sort of sense of injustice, the death of my parents,

the hypocrisy of the Church — all of that stuff — for me, was like, this needs to happen, and it needs to happen now.

And I was there. And then, I was like, whatever you need me to do, heh.

And the one after that was the Ashes action, in D.C. And that was really hard, but not — for an odd reason. I was a worker bee, in the back, and holding signs. And I remember not being able to look at anybody on the side, because I was afraid I'd burst into tears. I spent a good portion of that day trying not to cry.

I don't know why. It was just — I felt as though I needed to maintain composure to sort of honor the severity of the situation. That was just where I went with it.

SS: How many people were at the Ashes Action?

MC: I want to say that there were probably about 50 people that were committed to doing something. But there were a lot more people that came down and participated as bystanders, or just joined in as the march. But there were kind of a group of maybe 10 people with ashes; and a group of people in front of them, protecting them, that led them to the White House lawn, and the back of the White House lawn, I guess it was. And then a bunch of us marching behind. And then a lot more people joined in. So I think it was around 50, because I remember there being a couple of buses.

And that was a really — very intense experience.

SS: Did you know any of the people whose ashes were —

MC: I did not, no. My best friend at the time had been given ashes of someone that he didn't know. And he was really freaked out by the whole thing. And he, he struggled with – He was in, in the front, they, whatever, they, he's a small guy, so they picked him to stand in the front, with ashes. And he really struggled with the fact that he didn't know this person. But he just felt like, well, you know what? It doesn't matter; this is my role, I can do this.

So I did not know anybody. There were, I want to say, at least in the front, there were like four or five people with canisters. One woman had her brother's ashes. A guy had his lover's ashes, and I don't remember the rest. There were at least two people holding ashes of people they didn't know.

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But it was made very clear that it didn't matter; that all these people are worthy of this. And there were a lot more people that joined in that had ashes; a lot more.

And it was – yeah, it was really, really intense, and very, very painful, emotionally. Mostly though, what I remember is as we got to the gate — and throwing the ashes, and the police on their horses got hysterical — a whole bunch of us getting shoved very hard from the police bumping up against the journalists with cameras. And a whole bunch of us just coming down hard. And that was not fun, I have to say. That was actually quite painful. And quite a few of us — myself included — stopped. I couldn't walk after that. I had big swollen le-, whatever. Nothing lasting.

But that was the first moment where I realized: oh, this kind of stuff can happen. Like it's real, heh. You are literally putting your body on the

line. And I need to know that, I need to be okay with that. I'm not going to do this if I'm not okay with that.

So that was really an eye-opener for me. Yeah.

SS: Did you at some point join a committee, or an affinity group?

MC: Yeah. I should say also, at the same time or prior, I had joined the Women's Action Coalition. Which, as wonderful as they were, really were not down with the lesbian thing. There was a big issue that had to be dealt with. And I was like, okay, the Art Committee were phenomenal, and I would love working with them. But I couldn't deal with the large, I just like, I'm done with this; you figure it out, and come back when you're okay with it. And the Lesbian Avengers. But that was, honestly, both those groups, it was sort of like, on the sidelines for me. ACT UP was really my primary organization that I participated in.

I'm sorry, what did you just ask me?

SS: Did you join any committees?

MC: Oh, join any committees. Yeah. I joined, it was a lesbian committee – it was a small group, that would sort of – there was the Women's Committee, that would morph into the Lesbian Committee, and back into the Women's Committee. It was kind of amorphous, both of those.

I also went into –

SS: Wait, let's talk about that for a second.

MC: Sure sure. Um hm.

SS: Why was there a separate Lesbian Committee and Women's Committee?

MC: Well, I think because, at least when I got there, there was – I don't remember if there was a Lesbian Committee. There was definitely a Women's Committee. But I remember at the time, I think, that it – the concern was that it be a women's issues committee. In other words, that the focus would be on issues relating to women with AIDS.

This was right around the time when the CDC definition was being changed. And so there had been a lot of work done. And not that the work stopped, but after that, things really needed to change. Like okay, what's next? Treatment, drug trials, resources; what do we need to do here? Because unlike many of the men, there were not that many women — lesbians or straight — in ACT UP that were themselves infected. So it was a little different, the approach.

And then I think also – so there was that. And so the group, the Women's Issues Group, was focused on issues that related to women with AIDS. A lesbian group was a group for lesbians. So there was a tremendous amount of overlap, but the focus was really different.

SS: Were they working on lesbians with AIDS?

MC: Yes.

SS: Okay.

MC: So in other words –

SS: So like Keri Duran, and –

MC: Yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. It was like '92, '93, whenever – Donna Shalala got in – who is president of my alma mater, which I reminded her of? We had a big action. That was also the March on Washington, it was that whole year – '93, '94? I don't even remember now. But there was a huge, huge protest, lesbian protest, to bring the issue to the forefront. Because this was also the time — and I think – have you interviewed Risa? I'm sure you will.

SS: Yeah –

MC: Oh, great, great. This was after, I think, she had done a whole wonderful bunch of articles on who is the junkie, who is the queer; and the overlap. And also this debate around – do you stop being a lesbian once you start shooting drugs? Just a lot of questions around identity then. And so the problem at that time was that nobody was studying lesbians as lesbians. Kind of folded into groups, either of women or of drug users. But there was no real directed effort. And so given that the numbers that we were able to access were really bad — and these were, a lot of these were the same women that were going to prison; a lot of them had had sex with men, continued to have sex with men; a lot of them were sex workers — so there were all these identity issues coming up. And the Lesbian Committee wanted to keep the issue of lesbian identity at the forefront.

So –

JAMES WENTZY: We have to stop.

SS: Oh, we have to ch-

SS: Okay. So can you tell us like a campaign that maybe you worked on?

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Tape II
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MC: Sure. There were two in particular that I recall. The first one did occur around the March on Washington, at HHS, not long after Donna Shalala was appointed head. And there had been a meeting of activists, with her. And no lesbian representatives were invited. Now that's not to say there weren't people in the room that didn't push the issue. But people were invited from all areas, to focus on issues of concern to women.

So the issue of lesbians and lesbian identity and lesbians with AIDS really was not prominent. And this pissed a lot of people off.

And this was also around the time of a study that I think Risa may have been involved with, that was really alarming. It was a large study, and the – I forget the particulars, but the percentage of lesbian women – women who identified as lesbians who were HIV-positive was off the charts. And there was a lot of correction for sample size and whatnot, and it kept coming back to the same thing; that even if the numbers were lower, it was still really dramatic. And why is that; what is that about? Is it about marginalization? Is it about not having access? Is it about services not being acceptable? Who knows.

So all of these things needed to be addressed. And so that is when the Lesbian Caucus, the Women's Issues Group; and I think the Lesbian Avengers, at the time; and some other lesbian and women's groups from other ACT UPs around the country came; and we all created a large campaign around that. And what it really was, the focus really was – okay; lesbians get AIDS. We're not going to push that anymore, because it's just fucking true. Okay? Let's not belabor this point. They know it. HHS knows it. They may be in

denial about it, but they know it. And so what the concern was there was, lesbian gets AIDS; do something about it. Get some money in there for research. Get some money in there for training of medical staff. Get something in there to address this issue as a problem of the usual lesbian invisibility; and lesbians just not accessing care, for whatever reason; and certainly not accessing testing.

So that was the bulk of it. And it was actually really successful, because we got on the cover of Newsweek. Well actually, we got bumped from the cover by David Koresh, but, ha ha ha, we got, we got, we were inside. We had quite a few pictures inside. Which was really a big success. It made it a very — it made it something that they could not just dismiss.

And so what that then did was actually provide an opportunity for — and I do not remember — I want to say maybe — I don't know if Risa was there. But maybe Mary Beth Caschetta, and — maybe Alexis Danzig was there. I don't recall the people — but got a sit-down with her.

It did result in some funding for some studies. Not enough. But, it was a, as far as I'm concerned, it was effective in that obviously the issue was raised. But more importantly, it was taken right to the people that could do something about it, and they did something about it.

An unfortunate thing, I think, is that after the fact — honestly, partly because there was so much lesbian infighting, and everybody was sleeping with everybody else — that it kind of imploded. And the focus of that really never came back.

SS: But also it was confused – I'm just going to –

MC: No, please.

SS: – yeah, get into it with you a little bit. The confusion was that lesbians had HIV infection, but not through lesbian sex.

MC: Right. Right.

SS: And that was not clarified for a while.

MC: That's true. You're right.

SS: Once that got clarified, then people understood: oh, it's from IV drug use, or sex work, or –

MC: Right.

SS: – they had sex with men.

MC: Right, um hm.

SS: But that, the beginning part was so unclear, and that caused –

MC: Um hm.

SS: – a lot of divisions.

MC: Yeah, I think you're absolutely correct. And it really was a problem. There was that, and it was also – Celia Farber's thing.

SS: What was that?

MC: There was her whole thing about – AIDS denialists and whatnot, right? But she also felt that –

SS: Just explain what it was.

MC: Oh sure, sure –

SS: So she wrote for *Spin* magazine.

Tape II
00:05:00

MC: Right. She – *Spin* magazine, and I don't know what others. But she had sort of, for whatever reason, taken on this issue that she was, it was her beat, about, focused primarily on the group of people — Peter Duesberg, I think it was — who believed that HIV did not cause AIDS, and that the problems that needed to be addressed were the meds. The meds were what poisoning people. The meds were causing the multiple infections, and other diseases within. That was a big, big, at the time, it was huge.

And so that was her kind of bailiwick. But she also, after the Donna Shalala meeting, with the group representing lesbians; really pooh-poohed it. And she was there. And she felt that it was a waste of time; and that money could be better served elsewhere; and that there is no reason for lesbians to be identified as such because — and she said something, and I may be paraphrasing — it was the effect of, they're not lesbians when they're getting HIV. They're drug users when they're getting HIV.

So therein lies the issue. And you're right, in that it was not clarified. And I think that was a tactic for some people. Because the idea of trying to kind of bifurcate people is – right now, I'm a lesbian. If I go over there and shoot some drugs, I'm no longer a lesbian, I'm a drug user. And then what's my sexual orientation? I guess I don't have one – until I move over here, and become a lesbian again.

So I do remember that being a big, big, big cause for concern, a big, big conversation. I don't know if it ever really got resolved. But I –

SS: Because part of it is having to conceptualize the consequences of oppression on lesbians' behavior.

MC: Yeah. Well –

SS: And that was not –

MC: You're right.

SS: Yeah.

MC: You're right. And I think – there was also a tendency — not a lot, but a tendency — to sort of replicate, to a certain extent, a lot of the — well not a lot, but some — of the actions and campaigns that were specifically about gay men and male sexuality. And so for a lot of lesbians, we sort of had to bend that. So that was one thing.

So you're absolutely right in that it was like, well, that's not really – have there been cases of woman-to-woman transmission? Perhaps. But I think they're minuscule, right? Who the hell uses a dental dam? I don't know anybody who uses – once, and it was like, well fuck this; this is ridiculous. It's just, it just – it was just pointless. But I think the other thing was that – so it was that, so it was like, how do we kind of glom onto this as an identity? We're all gay, let's all be gay together, in this really horrible way! Heh. But the other problem was that – in going into these meetings, the fear that lesbian identity would be lost, and that – oversimplifying it, but it's like, okay, so we're going to look at women who are injection drug users. No mention of sexuality ever gets brought up – ever. And there very well may be a role that that plays. Or sex workers. Same thing. Or women in prison; same thing. All those things.

So there was this – this sort of weird, I think, unclear struggle to figure out how to kind of not create something that was useless, quite frankly – because why bang this drum if woman-to-woman transmission is really minuscule? But that’s – from where I stood, it was not what it was about. I think it could have been so much clearer. And I think we had to do a lot of work after the fact. Which was unfortunate.

Although I do think that getting the meeting with Shalala was really helpful, because it did at least put the issue on the table. And it did also put the issue on the table of lesbians not accessing healthcare at all. Because childbirth, for the most part, at that time, was not an option. So there was that.

SS: So that was a major campaign that you were involved in.

MC: It was a big one. Yeah, that one lasted for a while. And the other I remember being — and I was only involved in New York — but there was this woman in Florida –

JW: Kimberly Bergalis?

SS: No no. I know what you’re talking about. The lesbian whose, yeah –

MC: Her house –

SS: – house burned –

MC: – was on fire?

SS: – yeah.

MC: Yeah.

SS: I forget her name, too.

MC: I forget her name, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

MC: She was an HIV-positive lesbian, and her house had been burnt down. And I think it was mostly the Lesbian Avengers, but the ACT UP lesbians also – worked together to go to Florida, go to Tampa, I think it was, where she lived; and to provide support, and raise money, and try to help her out. And it was just sort of a no-brainer. It's like, well, hello. She's a lesbian with HIV, somebody burns her house down. Of course we're going to go help, right?

Tape II
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But I think it sort of devolved into – not so much help, and a little bit of debauchery. But more importantly, a huge police presence and clampdown on participants from both ACT UP and Lesbian Avengers, and there being – I just recall, it's been so long ago, but I recall that some women were on the beach — I don't know, in T-shirts and shorts. And they were told that what they were wearing was obscene. There was a whole big thing about that; about all these women, identifying and visible as lesbians, appearing in a manner that was offensive to the local community. And that became a big issue, like a really big issue. And there was money that had to be sent for bail, and –

Unfortunately, that overshadowed the cause. And in the end, if I recall correctly — and I could be off, because my memory is just getting so bad as I get older; it's really good that you're doing this — there was some issue with the woman whose house had burnt down. I don't remember what that was. Maybe some kind of dubiousness about her story, or something to that effect. And I don't really remember what that was. So those were the two rather significant

events that I recall being – and with the second one, I was involved from New York. And that was where, I mentioned before, my Greek and Latin studies came in handy, because – posters and palm cards and wheatpaste stuff would go out; and I would see typos, and I'd be horrified. I am a total grammar Nazi. So I would, I was devastated by that. It was like it didn't sit well with me. And I was very lucky that I had the job of formatting and editing all of the propaganda for that campaign. So I was able to sit there, and use all of my grammar skills. It was very gratifying. It was like, yay! A skill! I can use this! I'm not just another body.

SS: What was the social life of lesbians in ACT UP?

MC: Oh. Between lesbians, or just in general?

SS: No, with lesbians.

MC: Well, let's see. I got two girlfriends out of it, heh heh. It was a small group – within ACT UP, I should say. There were probably about 10, 12 of us. And there were –

SS: Ten or twelve lesbians in ACT UP?

MC: No, in the group.

SS: Oh, oh –

MC: When I was there, in the Lesbian Caucus. No – there were a lot of other people coming and going.

SS: Right.

MC: But in this particular group of women that socialized – then again, people came and went. Like if we were in Washington, hanging out, a

bazillion other people would show up. But there were a core group of about maybe eight or 10 of us who would go out all the time. And it was fascinating, because I never had that experience of being in a small group. It seemed to me very much like college – if I had gone to a college with an actual campus, and a dorm situation. I'm like, this is what it must be like.

And so it was very tight. It was very focused and driven by our schedules around our jobs, but also around ACT UP. So we would try to coordinate things. Like, oh, we have to go to so-and-so's house to I don't know, blow up 50 million balloons. So let's do that, and then go blah. There was a lot of that.

And then with the men – it was a little different, I think, for every woman – in the smaller group of lesbians. I was probably, if not the oldest, one of the oldest women. And I had a core group of gay male friends that I had known from before. Including my roommate. And so I would spend a lot of time with them. And it was sort of an awkward – it didn't transition well. Until the groups, both groups, got smaller. And then it was more of a core mix of people. But it was – there were definitely, I found, hierarchies. It's the high school thing. I mean, it's life, right? Life is like high school? With the cool kids over there, the sort-of-cool kids over there, and the so-not-cool kids there, and the kids who really don't care about the cool kids there. I'm not being facetious. I'm exaggerating. But that really was – that did exist.

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I never had a problem with that, quite frankly, because when push came to shove and something needed to happen, it happened. And everybody was

a part of it, and I appreciated that. And everybody's politics were in the right place.

I think the bigger struggle, particularly with the women, on a social level, was, one, because there were so few of us; we were like, great, we're all going to run out of each other pretty quickly. How are we going to manage this?

But the bigger issue, honestly, was dealing with a lot of the sexism from the men. So how are we going to handle this? Like, a lot of discussion amongst ourselves, of –

SS: Can you give an example?

MC: Well – I'm trying to think of a good one. There were – at the – the event at NIH – it was an all-women's event. What does that mean? It means –

SS: Which event?

MC: The event to address Shalala.

SS: Oh, okay.

MC: Yeah. So it was women only. And I remember men asking: well, what can we do? Well, you guys can provide support, which would be great. You can keep people away from us. You can be, obviously, legal – what did we used to call them; legal sponsors; people who watch the –

SS: Legal support.

MC: Legal support, thank you. And just keep an eye on things. And if somebody's looking like they're going to pass out – that sort of stuff.

And a few men, one in particular, whose name I do not remember, said, well, what if the press comes up and asks a question?

And the person at the time, who I don't remember either, said: direct them to a woman. And it did not sit well with him. And that became an issue.

I think it ultimately got resolved. But it was an example of, this is just such a clear and obvious thing, and there is really no need for this to complicate it, because this is about lesbian women accessing things. So your participating in it is kind of counter to the whole point.

SS: But it's part of like a larger paradigm, because the women are coming from this whole history of feminism and women-only, and all of that –

MC: Right.

SS: – and already know all of that.

MC: Right.

SS: And some of the men coming from that –

MC: Some do –

SS: – but some of them have never heard of it.

MC: Exactly.

SS: Right.

MC: That's true, you're absolutely right. And some of them, I think, were like, what the fuck is that, right?

SS: {LAUGHS}

MC: What do you mean? And also, I think — and this is something I saw later on in my career, when I was at God's Love We Deliver — a sort of a ownership, a disease-ownership question came up a lot, I think, for a lot of the guys, who were either positive themselves or had friends, a lot of friends die. It was like, oh, what are you doing? You don't have rights to do this. And many of my sisters were really pissed off about that. But I kind of got where he was coming from. It's kind of like – me coming in and saying, I know what's best to do about what you've been dealing with for X number of years; and I'm going to tell you about it.

So it was, to me, that was the first example I had of like, who owns this disease.

So –

SS: Let's talk about that. That's very interesting.

MC: About disease ownership?

SS: Because in ACT UP, there were two different kinds of women with AIDS in ACT UP, right? There were the women of color, most of whom came out of Bedford –

MC: Right.

SS: – and a lot of whom were in the Latino Caucus.

MC: Um hm.

SS: Almost all of them are dead now.

MC: True.

SS: Including Katrina Haslip, right.

MC: Yeah. Um hm.

SS: And then there were a few dykes who had been IV drug users – Keri; there was someone from L.A. whose name I forget right now –

MC: Yeah, and – oh, god –

SS: – and then there was the other woman whose lover was raped at St. Vincent’s. There were a few.

MC: Yes, I’m –

SS: And they were separate.

MC: Um hm.

SS: Because the women from Bedford were straight.

MC: Yeah, um hm.

SS: So the women with AIDS inside ACT UP were not a cohesive unit.

MC: No.

SS: So the HIV-negative women were saying, women get AIDS, too. But those women were not a cohesive –

MC: That’s true.

SS: – body inside the organization.

MC: You’re absolutely right. Yeah.

SS: So that’s kind of the context for that, right?

MC: Yeah, and I guess it’s the – to me, it was always sort of, the thing that always struck me about the difficulty of all of that was that – one of the things I always loved, loved, loved about ACT UP was the immediacy and the

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directness. It's like: this is bad; we know what's good; we're going to make you change that. And with the various groups of women, it was so not clear. And I think also because the women brought a lot of other shit — baggage — of like, children and institutions. Not that men don't bring their own baggage, but the complexity of it for women — was really difficult; really difficult.

I think that's just been an issue. And I don't know if that's something — I doubt that's unique to AIDS organizations. But that's been — since the first meeting I went to, that's been an issue.

SS: Okay.

MC: So, yeah. So.

SS: Now, when did you leave ACT UP?

MC: When did I leave? I guess the — I'm trying to think of the last meeting — I don't know if I can remember the last meeting, but the last demo I went to. May have been the Burroughs Wellcome — pipes, chaining the pipes thing, before they had — it was right around the time when the protease inhibitors were being released. Whatever year it was, at whatever conference. I don't remember when that was — in '94, in Vancouver? I don't know if I'm making that up. But being in a van; and, very exciting, you're there, this covert action, you're ski cap on — ha ha ha — and chaining ourselves. Which was fun. I was always happy to be a body. I really was. I was actually very comfortable in that position. I'm like, I don't need to be in the lead; I don't need to talk; just put me somewhere where I'm needed.

And that was actually, to me, it was actually a successful event, in that we did prevent people – not from leaving, because they could go around to an area that we didn't know existed – because we did circle the place. But it did really fuck up their day. And that's what we wanted.

The problem, for me, was afterwards, when we had the debriefing. We were there all day. And none of us got arrested, I don't – maybe one or two people did; I don't even remember. But – they got the bars taken off, and all that.

And we ended up back – maybe at the Center, maybe at somebody's apartment; or maybe at the old ACT UP office, right? And we got chastised by a few of the leaders — one of whom was this guy from Greenpeace, who I guess had been brought in to show us how to chain ourselves to those pipes in a way that wasn't going to break your arm; and he sort of hung around. And we were chastised for – for taking it lightly, I guess was the word. For laughing.

And I'm thinking to myself: man, I take this as seriously as anybody else. But it's like, if you're going to give me shit for laughing while I'm – it's freezing, it's zero degrees. I'm sitting on a block of ice. I've got my arms in a pipe. I can't pee, I can't do anything. And you're giving me a hard time about singing and laughing–

SS: But that was ACT UP people criticizing you, or –

MC: This was this guy from Greenpeace –

SS: Okay, so it wasn't from, okay.

MC: – yeah, who had been brought in –

SS: And this was about pricing, right?

MC: – to help.

SS: Okay.

MC: And he sort of hung around, to see how things were going.

SS: And this was about pricing?

MC: This was about release. This was about – fast-track releasing, I forget what it was, compassionate release – of a couple of different protease inhibitors. Yeah. That's what that was about. And I just, that was really such a turnoff to me. And not that that was the end for me, but it just kind of did something to me; got me thinking, like, huh; maybe this is not the most effective use of my time. Maybe I need to be doing something different.

SS: Let me just ask you about that –

MC: Sure, sure.

SS: – because I've had many people say things like that.

MC: Um hm.

SS: One guy says one thing –

MC: No –

SS: – oh, okay.

MC: – no, no. Uh, you're right, it's not –

SS: So it's symptomatic of something else.

MC: – absolutely not. It's not that one event. But I think some things had been building. I think that at the same time — yeah, this must have been later; it must have been like '94, maybe — my boss was dying. And my head was not in a good space, clearly. Also, right around the same time, my gay

ex-husband committed suicide. So it was just a banner year for me. So I was not in a really good space. And I think that him saying that to me really set something off, on a personal level. And obviously, it had already existed. And I began to feel really impatient with – I don't want to say the politics so much as the personalities. I could tolerate people being pissy, and whatever, and like so-and-so needs to get himself – fine, that's the way it is, it's just the way it goes. But we really need to have consensus on this, la la la la, all that stuff.

But after that particular event, and that period of time in my life, I found all those things really difficult to endure. And I think that's because all these outside forces were – were conspiring to make things very difficult for me. And I think also in part, while we did accomplish something — we did force people to not leave their offices — it didn't feel as like – I'm — what was the – oh, god, who was it? Who – they created the DAS office, in the middle of the street? It was Eric Sawyer?

SS: Uh huh.

MC: Did he do that? Like – like that was so wonderful, I thought, like that was just a very clear-cut thing. And I guess the bars – it seemed a little too ambiguous to me.

SS: Okay.

MC: So I think it was just a variety of things. Look, I was also just, I was getting older, getting a little burnt out.

SS: But you did stay in AIDS for a while –

MC: I did, I did.

SS: – after you left ACT UP.

MC: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

MC: I had gone – I also had a girlfriend. And she wanted out. She was an artist, and going to, wanted to go to social-work school. And I was starting a new job, and going to night school. So it was just, our schedules were like, we can't do this anymore. So. And the social aspect of it kind of died. So that was even more of a reason. And I think also a lot of the people that we had faith in kind of, some of them died, but a lot of them just sort of disappeared. There seemed to be a shift, like there is any agency. New people come in; old people leave. It's just the way it is. So yeah, I went to – the Open Society Institute, because I had – because of prison-related work, I had done a lot of work with – the Osborne Association, with the AIDS in Prison Project there. You know Steve Nesselroth?

SS: Yeah.

MC: Yeah. So Steve and I had known each other, and they needed – help on the phone. Because I, there were no women to do it. And I'm like, sure, I'll do it. And like, they didn't get a lot of female calls, but they would get them, and they really didn't have anybody good to talk to them. Ninety percent of the time I was talking to men. Probably got a half a dozen marriage proposals. But I loved that work. And it was very striking to me, the gratitude of people who just wanted somebody to talk to. It really would shake me up, but in a good way. And I did that for a couple of years, and I loved it. And through that, I met

Steve's boss. And she was asked to form a program at the Open Society Institute – basically to completely redo the criminal justice system in the country. With focus, obviously. And so she asked me to join her, and I said, sure. It was a big time for me, because I was also getting a little burnt out on the work that I had been doing. I think I'd hit a wall, and thought, I can't do much more here. I think – I'm not going to move up, because these are not positions I should be in. So I need to – there's no lateral move for me. I need to leave. And this just worked out beautifully, and we were charged with coming up with direction, criteria, mission, all of that, for criminal justice.

And – the only criteria we were given is some – needs to be in-prison stuff; post-prison stuff; and – I've forgotten the third one. I guess access to justice may have been it. And that was mostly around death penalty. So people actually getting good counsel. Or any counsel. So I got assigned the internal prison stuff. And that involved so many things, including trying to work to overturn some hideous policies – like segregation of people with AIDS; not just about AIDS, but just healthcare in general. And higher education. All these things.

And so I was very lucky, in that I was able to access things that I would never access, because I represented all this money. It wasn't mine, but I – it opened doors that would never have opened before.

So we were able to create hospice programs – which are everywhere now. And – we were able to work with mostly the women's prisons to get, to really try to get their health systems in line with current treatments.

Because a lot of them — not so much anymore — had private companies running their healthcare. And whatever — I can't even go into that. It was just not good.

And so we would push really hard to make sure they had the most updated treatment information, to make sure that the people with AIDS and other illnesses were being cared for. So there's some advocacy; pushing with, honestly, the superintendent's off-the-record blessing. She's like, go for it. And there were some really tremendous successes there. And it's funny; it's like going from working with people with AIDS to working with inmates. It's like — the battle is so tremendous. And — the population is just, they're not a voting bloc; they have zero, they have negative power. And it's really heartbreaking. And for people with AIDS, it was doubly heartbreaking.

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So it was also trying to fight to get — experimental meds in, which is really tricky in a prison, obviously. People who are incarcerated and in experimental trials — how do you work that out?

So we were trying to come up with models of how to do that. And that was a really big thing. So the healthcare side of it was coming up with treatment models, and plans to implement those models; and standards of care, and standards of practice for the nurses and the physicians. Because that stuff was nuts. There was like nothing. There were no protocols.

And we were able to do that in New York, in Massachusetts, in Maryland, California, and Louisiana. And by far, the place we made the most impact was Louisiana. Go figure. New York was insufferable. And I would be 90% sure right now if the programs and the work we did is probably all gone.

You know, it's the unfortunate thing about criminal justice, is you – {SNAP} go like that.

SS: So I just have one last question.

MC: Of course.

SS: So looking back on ACT UP with some hindsight now, and especially with all the work you did subsequently: what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

MC: I think that – this was an ACT UP achievement, or it was somewhat peripheral. But you know what? There are two things. I think that the CDC definition change was enormous. And the impact saved women's lives. No doubt. And I think the push for needle exchange also. I think those two things were – if you look at where we were – the numbers of people who were injecting drugs who were HIV-positive was some insane amount. And that number has been cut in half, and half, and half again. And the decriminalization of needles would not have happened otherwise.

So to me, those two things were – really quite profound. And I don't think anybody thought it was going to happen. So I – I look back on that, and think, wow; that's really something.

My greatest disappointment: I think was the – because we all bring it with us, and it is an institution, no matter how much we don't want it to be – the – it was a homogenous group, no matter which way you look at it. Now, there were groups within groups within groups. And it saddens me that things couldn't

have changed a little bit more; that there weren't more women; that there weren't more people of color.

I still think that the work that was done was obviously huge, and as a friend of mine said, look; ACT UP opens the door, kick-opens the door, and everybody else follows. And another woman, another friend of mine, who is HIV-positive, said years ago, she's like — she's an African American lesbian, with HIV — said: I follow the boys. I don't give a shit if they notice me. I don't care. I follow them, because they know what they're doing, and that's my job.

And so – the reason why I'm saying this is it's much more complex than what I'm stating it to be. It's not simply a matter of this is sexist, this is racist. I think that the immediacy of the disease maybe did not lend the group to have time to really kind of shift gears as much as it needed to. So I guess that is my biggest disappointment.

But honestly, my biggest disappointment is not that big. Seriously. To me – I look back on it like graduate school. That's kind of how I felt. And without a doubt, all the work that I did and saw, and all the amazing people that were there, completely changed my life going forward, on a personal level; and allowed me to be a much better employee, and be a much better partner; and just to be a much better citizen. I really can't emphasize that enough.

Tape II
00:35:00

SS: Okay, great. Thank you, Mary.

MC: Yeah. Thank you.

SS: Thank you.

MC: Oh my god, was I just blathering?