

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

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Interviewee: **Bill Dobbs**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Bill Dobbs

November 21, 2006

BILL DOBBS: So is this a round of interviews? Or what do you —

SARAH SCHULMAN: Yeah, we got a little bit of money from [Broadway Cares/]Equity Fights AIDS.

BD: And what are you up to now?

SS: What now?

BD: What is the total number?

SS: You are number sixty-seven. Is that correct?

JIM HUBBARD: Sixty-six.

BD: Wow, that's quite a body.

SS: We have a hundred and eight more to go.

BG: Wow, are you going to do them all?

SS: We're planning on living VERY long. Otherwise it ain't gonna happen.

JAMES WENTZY: Well, it says recording so —

SS: Is there any way for you to check? The playback?

JW: Yeah, I should do that.

SS: You're not in a hurry, right? We want the equipment to work.

BD: We want the equipment to work. Do a sound check? Rubber-Baby- Buggy-Bumpers?

JW: OK, let's go.

SS: OK, if you could just say your name, today's date, where we are and how old you are.

BD: I'm Bill Dobbs. We're here in New York City in SoHo on November 21st, 2006, and my vintage is that I came out about 1973 when I was in college, so somebody else can do all that math.

SS: No honey, I need—

BD: But I have vivid, wonderful, memories of what life was like before the long shadow of AIDS.

SS: You're really not going to tell us your age?

BD: I really don't think you should ask actresses or gay men their age.

SS: You are the only person so diva that they refused to tell us, out of sixty-six.

BD: Well, hey now. Just getting into that ninety-ninth percentile I guess.

SS: OK, all right. So where were you born Bill?

BD: Detroit.

SS: OK. What kind of neighborhood did you grow up in?

BD: Middle class.

SS: Like in houses?

BD: Houses. Yeah, suburbia.

SS: Did you ride your bike to school or did you walk, or was there a school bus?

BD: Sometimes bus, sometimes walk, and sometimes I carried my lunch.

SS: Did your family talk about politics when you were growing up?

BD: Not a lot. I don't think either my parents were terribly political in that sense. In high school, I started to get politicized.

SS: But they didn't talk about what was going on?

BD: They did, but not in an ideological way I supposed that might not be the best word.

SS: Did you have a TV?

BD: Yes.

SS: Do you remember like sitting with your parents in front of the TV and the news coming on and commenting on something?

BD: Deconstructing it? Yeah.

SS: Could you give me an example?

BD: Gee, nothing is coming to mind like that. But I was an avid quester of knowledge, and when I was a kid I always read two daily papers, actually at least. And could remember to this day starting to read the *Detroit Free Press* in the morning.

SS: And what was happening in Detroit at the time?

BD: What was happening?

SS: In Detroit? What was the big news?

BD: Well this is such a random thought, but I remember reading that Henry Ford II, who ran the Ford Motor Company, gave contributions to both political parties and I was a little befuddled by that until I got older and I realized that there wasn't anything to lose, because whoever won of the major political parties, you'd have some influence.

I also remember getting an AP ticker, and I remember calling the Associated Press and asking how to get quicker news, but of course they all thought I was a complete joke and I'm sure it had some extravagant price tag then.

SS: So you were a total news hound. What was it that was riveting you?

BD: Just the idea of news. I loved getting the weekly magazines: *Times*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Reader's Digest* – I still love *Word Power*, when I find an issue lying

around. I always loved going off — wherever I travel to and getting the local newspapers.

SS: So did your parents talk about religion or discuss controversial issues?

BD: Well, I may have benefited from a split in the irrational because my parents were different faiths although they weren't terribly observant and so I felt like none of that was really for me and there was a little pivotal moment and I think it was second grade when I'd been sent from a kind of preschool to a parochial school, a Catholic parochial school. And at lunch one of the kids had brought chocolate milk which drew the attention of the teacher who said that there was a rule against chocolate milk and that this boy knew that rule. And that he had broken it and that she was going to inform the mother superior who had a paddling machine. So my eight-year-old mind thought of some incredible Rue Goldberg devise to destroy this boy's backside. So when I got home I announced that I was not going back to that school. So maybe that was an early lesson in rebelling.

SS: Did they listen to you?

BD: Yeah. Then I was off to public school, so — I did not go back to that school.

SS: Were you raised with any kind of sense of community? Like did your parents participate in church groups or any community organizations?

BD: Yeah, neighborhood stuff. But, not strong religious tradition.

SS: Maybe an idea of responsibility to be in some sort of organized relationship to other people? Was that a value?

BD: Probably like voting. That kind of thing.

SS: Right. So when you were in school and you were this – Were you slightly geeky, political geek? That’s what I am imagining. I don’t know. Did you run for student body?

BD: Well I blossomed much more in High School. I went away to high school in the Berkshires. Again, I am remembering what I used to read. I was voracious about subscribing to magazines. I loved getting things in the mail. *The New Republic*, the *National Review*. I read it all. Those were the years when I first went to protests against the war in Vietnam.

It began to – My political identity emerged much more and I would say, probably in those days, I was much more a mushy liberal. Couldn’t figure out why people would affiliate with the Republican Party. It was later that I became much more militant, perhaps even radical.

SS: So in your boarding school, where there a clique of kids who were against the war and would go to –?

BD: It was a liberal school, so there were lots of kids against the war.

SS: Did you go to Washington for the marches?

BD: Yes. And the nearby city.

SS: Were you in any particular organization?

BD: I was president of student council and all that kind of stuff.

SS: But you guys weren’t part of any youth section of some anti-war organization, Mobilization Against the War?

BD: No. Nothing like that.

SS: So how did your family respond when you started showing opposition to Vietnam?

BD: They were fine with it.

SS: They were fine?

BD: Yeah. I think they were opposed to the war by then. Actively.

SS: Were you gay in high school?

BD: Yeah, but I wasn't out. My closest friend was gay and he caught a lot of flak for being clearly, extravagantly, gay. Or vibrantly gay. And I used to look at him and think I couldn't stand that kind of pressure.

That probably was a sign of the times, which is on many issues the school had evolved some progressive affects, but on gay issues it had not yet caught up with the times.

SS: So what happened to him?

BD: Well he's still a little angry about the way he was treated but he went on to be a screenwriter.

SS: I mean in the school. Was he isolated from the other kids?

BD: No. He was deeply involved in theatre, I think in student government, and he pretty much did his thing but there was a level of flak that was always there.

SS: So when did you start to putting together being gay with your already awoken political sense?

BD: Late high school/college.

SS: How did that happen? Were you aware of a movement or was it a personal connection?

BD: I was aware of the movement from reading about Stonewall and then a few years later I went to a Gay Liberation Front meeting in Ann Arbor.

SS: Oh, OK. So what was that like?

BD: Well that was – It makes me nervous just to think about it, walking down this hallway into this room. I was kind of terrified because this was an electric atmosphere that was filled with political ideas and sexual tension and everything else. I got through that meeting and then a few days later a bunch of guys from the meeting came over and presented me with a pair of fake ruby clip-on earrings and gave me a drag name, Miss Dobbs. I sometime think back to that little moment and wonder when a gay boy now comes out, what's there to sort of pass on a legacy? The *Advocate* magazine? I shudder to think.

SS: Could you explain for our viewers what the Gay Liberation Front was at the time in Ann Arbor? What it meant and who was in it?

BD: It certainly was spawned by organizing that took place in New York right after Stonewall. I don't want to say New York sparked everything. There was organizing going on before and after it. But Gay Liberation Front was a group that wanted change not just simply, and had some radical politics and saw itself in solidarity with other movements of the time.

That was a separatist era. I came out at a time that it was unthinkable to fail to recognize that there was a lesbian piece of the movement.

SS: It was unthinkable to fail?

BD: Maybe I said that wrong. But there was very strong lesbian [influence] organically in Ann Arbor then and it was very separatist. I have a vivid memory of being

threatened with death because I had gone to a women's music event and stood in the very back. I said to my friends, "These dykes, do you think they are really going to kill me?"

And he said, "Yeah. I think they're pretty serious."

And we talked about the whole thing. The reason why *I* was the one who got threatened, there were several men there, I was the only one whose name they knew because I was more friendly with them

SS: So GLF was male in Ann Arbor. What was the look? What was it like being in that community?

BD: Well, there was a bar, and I had never really put any time in any bar before I came out. It was the only bar that had Dinah Washington on the jukebox and I felt a strong sense of community because there were things on campus, like Gay Liberation Front met on campus. And then there was the bar in town. There was also an active cruising scene on campus. So amidst a lot of oppression there was still some space.

I was in awe of some of the queens really in GLF because there was a fair amount of drag which was often talked about as "scag drag" so it was like beards and dresses and all types of kooky things. There was this guy, Harry Kevorkian, who was known as Kitty who was like a major figure. He died not too many years ago. He was dazzling to me and the way that he looked at the world. There was another guy, Danny Parker, who wore Girl Scout uniform one day. And the photograph of that Girl Scout uniform, it went around the world because people were so knocked out.

One of the lessons I was learning at that time was that the University of Michigan had installed a Gay Programs Office and they squeaked it in by calling it a "human sexuality advocate." It was a quarter-time position for "Gay-Male-Human-Sexuality-

Advocate,” and then, I think it was called “Female-Human-Sexuality-Advocate.” Maybe it was just male and female. I don’t know what they did, but there were a lot of politics around the name.

Tape I
00:15:00

Some years later, a few of us wanted to help organize the office to make sure that the records weren’t getting lost and just to have some sense of archives. And we weren’t allowed to, but long and short, the lesson I learned was that if you get somebody inside a system like that, a university, their first priority is going to be to make the institution look good, not to push for change.

So the fight to get the overall university policy about non-discrimination change and add sexual orientation, I think took years longer, precisely because there was a gay program’s office there.

Then, of course, many years later that same gay programs office was giving critical quotes about cruising on campus. So to really come full circle because the people, who fought back, the ones who were the outlaws, were then being pushed into handcuffs.

SS: Now you said that GLF saw itself in solidarity with other movements. How did other movements respond to GLF?

BD: The White Panther Party – do you remember them? – was around Ann Arbor at the time and they came out swinging. “This is bourgeois bullshit. And these guys who are into lipstick are sick and demented.” So it was very interested to watch that.

On the other hand, Kitty, Harry Kevorkian, was the president of the local bus drivers union, so. And there was this other lesbian, Carol Ernst, she died back in the

'70s, but the sexual politics were very interesting because in addition to the bar and cruising on campus and the meetings and all, there were also a couple of adult bookstores between downtown and campus. And one of them had massages and sex workers. And Carol Ernst picketed it. Gayle Rubin reminded me of this some years ago.

She said, "You know, Carol organized a picket of the place but it wasn't about shutting it down. It was about better working conditions for the women."

So Ann Arbor had some very interesting early history right after Stonewall. But a lot of those impulses were lost because by the end of the '70s, the city council had passed a law much like Giuliani brought to New York, which is that you can only have quote-unquote adult business in very limited parts of the city. So it was a direct attack on sexual freedom and these days, Catherine MacKinnon holds forth at the law school.

And one of the fascinating things is that I was out then in law school and was part of the crew.

SS: So you went there undergraduate and law?

BD: I went on to law school, and slightly before law school a group of us decided that there was a need for a space in Ann Arbor that was not University space, that was not a church space, and that was not a bar. So we started a community center and rented a space. The whole concept was a gay space. I didn't fully understand that at the time. It just felt very important. It only lasted a year and a half, but it made me think a lot about the model, for example, that the gay community center in New York uses which turned into a social service agency. Or, Los Angeles. And this was driven by other motives.

SS: Like what?

BD: To want to enable gays and lesbians to be able to flower and not be in hostile territory because we have to often carve out territory. And one of the memories of that time is that the people that kind of ran the collective, once a week would take turns staffing the hotline, there was a hotline phone and various other things. A guy called and said that he was into cross-dressing, and he was straight and that he wanted a place to set himself up in case other people who were into cross-dressing wanted to connect and feel like they could have some space. This was batted around a fair amount, and in the end we realized that there wasn't another space, so this is an early reminder to me of the solidarity that sexual minorities can have with each other, or I think there is a big gap even though lesbians and gay men have worked by side since the '80s, that the separatism has subsided. Or separatist thinking, but there's a big gap just between the G and the L, and then you go further into B and T and it's an even deeper chasm to cross.

Tape I
00:20:00

SS: What was it like being a law student at a time when you had no legal rights?

BD: Well it was funny because there was one law professor who was somewhat out. He was not out to the faculty, but he was frequently at the bar. And I kind of liked the idea that here was this guy at least who was participating in a social world. Now in those days, since there wasn't anybody out in the faculty, the work of pushing the University, and pushing the law school in particular to do a bunch of things, all fell on the students. Now it is pretty much reversed.

So the group that we started, I think was called, "Lesbian Gay Law Students". Then became, "Bi Lesbian Gay Law Students." Then it became, "Outlaw." Then it became "Rainbow Law" or something. It's gone through all these mutations because of

the feeling of the time. One thing has remained which was the bulletin board that each of the students get in one part of law school. The gay law student group has glass on it and it's a locked case. The only other group that has a locked case like that is BALSAs, the Black Law Student Association.

SS: When you were in law school was there already a gay legal movement?

BD: Yeah.

SS: And what was your relationship to it?

BD: Yeah, because this was the late '70s by then. I think I was already getting the newsletter from what was then called, BAHRGNY, The Bar Association for Human Rights of Greater New York. And when I moved to New York after law school I remember meeting Art Leonard who has been a stalwart of that group. And Art always thought that he had to have a subtle name. Not be too obvious or it would lose members. And then finally they became, "Lesbian and Gay Law Group" or something [Lesbian and Gay Law Association of Greater New York]. It is called LeGaL these days. But to look at those early newsletters is to realize how many things were burbling all at once.

And my friend asked me recently, when did all this push to have children all begin?

And I said, "Well I can remember a big hoo-ha over a friend of mine's custody case. Margareth Miller in Ann Arbor and that must have been 1974, '75 or something. So stuff goes way back."

But Michigan certainly had a very tough sodomy law. Dan Tsang was there at the time in library school. And he and another man named Lionel Biron gave me a great respect for archiving and hanging on to history because Dan found a couple of clippings

from the student newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*, from the late 1950s, front page stories about raids on the bathrooms where cruising was going on, and what happened to the students and the faculty who were there. Which is that they were, if they were students, they might have been let back in with a psychiatrist letter. If they were faculty, they might have gotten prosecuted or had to leave and a student who was there in 1960 told me that in those days you didn't go out on the street with more than one gay person, and as far as phone numbers, either remember them or write them on the bottom of a drawer, and he was asked to leave after a year. He lives in New York now.

To me it is fascinating when you go back. There was a marvelous guy there named Ed Weber, who arrived as a grad student in the early 1950s and he was, for those of us who knew him, a most wonderful pre-Stonewall link. He had a lot of black friends in those days and he was out also to some degree. He ran the [Joseph A.] Labadie Collection for years, which enabled him to do all sorts of things kind of under the radar.

So, long and short, I learned a lot of political lessons there and watched as some of that organizing culminated in two people who were on city council coming out while they were on city council. And then there was a radical third party called The Human Rights Party, which elected somebody who ran as an out lesbian. Kathy Kozachenko. And she was elected possibly even before Elaine Noble, who's often thought of as the first elected lesbian. Nancy Wechsler, who was on city council.

SS: Nancy Wechsler from GCN?

BD: Yeah, I hope I have that right. Because she and Jerry DeGriek had both been involved in student government I believe, and then in college, and then they also got involved in, so there was a lot of stuff.

Tape I
00:25:00

In those days, when I'd come to New York, I'd go to the Oscar Wilde Book Store and just buy all of the things that I could afford. And I was in heaven, just to read what was going on.

There was *The Gay Liberator*. There was a radical gay press in Toronto. There were all kinds of Lesbian feminist stuff that was at least as radical and interesting. But you know. Now?

SS: So did you come here for a job after law school?

BD: No. No. I did a bunch of miscellaneous things. Some of them law-related, and some not really driven by money.

One of the things that happen at law school was the mother die of breast cancer. So when I came here I wasn't so eager somehow to get involved in politics again because I felt like all that political stuff was always stirring up bad juices. It was very hard emotionally.

So I was racking my brain last night trying to think of who did I know who died before ACT UP. Because ACT UP made a huge difference in my life. It kind of expanded the world dramatically of people that I knew and everything else.

I can put my finger on a couple of people, but part of what was informing the way that I related to AIDS and people I knew –

SS: Can we wait a second for that cat to be quiet? James Wentzy's cat.

JH: Old cat.

BD: Am I moving too much? How am I doing?

SS: You are fine.

BD: OK, OK. That had a huge impact. Fast forward to sitting in ACT UP the summer of '87 and I have a vivid memory that the room was fasting west, those were the early days before it was turned around. Something very important about that room, was that people going off to their twelve step programs, and everything else going on at the center, had to walk through ACT UP. And there was tremendous free zone and cross-pollination of people having to see this very political charged group.

These days of course, the Lesbian Gay Community Services Center has been renovated beautifully. Its circulation patterns are so perfect that any meeting in the building is completely inert. They have nothing to do with any other meeting. So the old funky center was actually a wonderful place.

But sitting there, and somebody had to have made some reference to how many of us were going to die and disappear. What I kept thinking about was the struggle that my mother, our family went through, dealing with her illness, which is, how do you find an effective treatment, or even think about a cure. And this means looking at Western medicine. This means looking at alternative things. This means doing a lot of research. And I saw that same incredible drive, but the drive in that room on Thirteenth Street translated in, or magically, all the ingredients came together for a really potent political force. Never, I suppose a mass movement, but one that had, I think, has left a rich legacy. And had some very important and lasting impacts on public health policy and on pharmaceutical industry.

SS: Yes. We are definitely going to get to all of that. Let's see. So you got here in '79?

BD: No. Early '83.

SS: Oh, so AIDS Crisis started when you were still in Ann Arbor?

BD: Yes, and a friend had already found me an apartment that I was going to take, so there was like three or four months before I actually got here. A friend had called in the fall and said, “Did you just see that article about a new gay cancer in the *New York Times*?” And he read it to me.

I’ve thought about that many times because when I did get here in the winter of ’83 it was in the midst of a wave of AIDS awareness. I am using awareness because in some respects it sometimes felt like hysteria. And I have mused to myself, if I had gotten to New York a year earlier when there wasn’t that kind of consciousness, be careful. I may not be here.

SS: That is what I was going to ask you. You are a sexually active guy. You are an advocate of public sex and sexual space.

BD: Sexual generosity.

SS: Yes. So you came here and suddenly there was AIDS. How did that affect you psychologically? What did you have to change from the way you were living?

BD: Well, it was creepy. It was a challenge because I wanted to move to New York because I felt like New York is this big glamorous, wonderful, metropolis and it was already making a dent into sexual New York.

It was no longer just STD or VD screening, it was all this stuff about AIDS. Somewhere I know I got early GMHC pamphlets, and I believe I got a copy of Michael Callen and Joe Sonnabend, [Richard] Berkowitz’s *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*.

I was reading *The Native*. I was always reading the papers, of course. So I used to keep the back issues, so I had a huge stack of them. So reading them those first few years here gave me a really – I felt I had some sense of how awful it was. I certainly remember reading Kramer's piece.

SS: Do you remember making the decision that you were going to have to have safe sex? And having to adjust to that?

BD: I don't remember making the decision, but I do remember that in my time before New York and before AIDS that jerking off and masturbation, in those days, was like a side dish, and then it became a main dish.

SS: What were some of the sex places that you went to in the early '80s when you first came here? What were they like?

BD: I wanted to see all the baths. I don't know if I saw all of them, but I probably saw a half of dozen of them maybe.

SS: Those were still open?

BD: Yeah, because the St. Marks, I think was closed, maybe in '84 – I could be off – '85. So, St. Marks, The Club, there was one in Chelsea, you know all of those kind of places as well as Times Square.

SS: What were they like in '83? I mean this was right in the beginning of AIDS hysteria. So what was the St. Marks bathhouse like at that time?

BD: There was – I can't pinpoint this exactly, but I remember a time when they pretty much kept everybody out of the group sex area, and they wanted to push everything into cubicles, so it was essentially behind closed doors. And ultimately, the idea that a bathhouse compartment or cubicle was the equivalent of a bedroom and

shouldn't be tampered with by the state was a losing argument. AIDS actually has been very powerful weapon against a lot of sexual freedom.

But one of the things I treasured in those years that I spent a lot of time around ACT UP was that it was a given that sexual freedom had to be defended in the face of a deadly epidemic and not just that, but the whole atmosphere, what ACT UP was, was a bubbling cauldron of tremendous political energy and ideas and action, *and* flirting and cruising.

SS: Right in the period before ACT UP. So you're in the baths or you're cruising and there is this fear or hysteria in the culture, how were people negotiating that? Were people discussing it? Were the condoms everywhere? Were people ignoring it?

BD: I don't have a memory from New York that relates to that but I can remember a phone conversation with a close friend of mine who lived in Ann Arbor the time I did and then left, and he said that he had stopped and had sex somewhere with a guy and it was oral sex and the guy spit his cum out. And I said, without really thinking too long, I said, "Well in New York you'd be lucky to get somebody to suck you off, let alone think about whether they were going to swallow or not."

So there was definitely a big shift. I also have a memory, but again this would be during ACT UP days towards the end of the decade, of Joe Nicholson saying to me, who was an incredible pit-bull of a tabloid reporter for the *New York Post* and out in the newsroom in this town many years before hardly – when nobody was out really. Joe asked my how many people I thought were positive on Christopher Street? Or going in any gay bar? And I said, "I don't know. How many do you think?" And together we

Tape I
00:35:00

thought it could have been fifty percent. So the odds of encountering somebody who was positive in a social setting or an assignation was very high.

SS: Were you afraid?

BD: Yeah. Sure.

SS: And how did that manifest? What did you do as a result of being afraid?

BD: Well sometimes I'd worry. Like, had I done too much? Have I gone too far? One of my straight friends, a woman, in that early '80s period, she was worried because her hairdresser was gay. And was she going to get AIDS? Now it seems ludicrous all these years later, but that's the kind of specter that people were dealing with.

Joe Sonnabend had gotten an eviction notice from his co-op. That was an early legal case that I remember. On 12th street. Just because he was treating AIDS patients. There was tremendous fear. It also helps to realize that GLAAD was formed before ACT UP, but it formed in part because of really incendiary reporting by the Rupert Murdoch owned *Post* about the Mineshaft and other sex spaces in the city.

SS: So in that pre-ACT UP period did you feel that fear created more isolation for you or connected you more to other people?

BD: It was one more thing. It's like, in New York, it's always important to watch who's in back of you. Make sure you've locked the door twice. It is one more background noise that will not shut off. And I'm fascinated that there were some people who simply would not change what they were doing, or there were folks who suddenly decided – I ran into people from ACT UP days a couple of years ago and he said he

couldn't put up with safe sex anymore. And he wanted to have oral sex. And all he could do was cross his fingers and hope that his number was not up.

SS: Did you know anyone who had AIDS before ACT UP?

BD: Yes.

SS: And what happened when you found out? Did he tell you to your face?

BD: Well, I'm trying to summon some of those memories because one guy ended up, again, on the *Post*. What is it about the *Post*? Tom Wirth, he worked at a bookstore and he was on the cover on the post. And his caretakers were trying to follow his wishes, I think, to let him die. And the doctors were not honoring – there was some awful fight, I am not sure of the facts all these years later. But to make it even worse for everybody, for Tom, who was in the hospital, and all these people around him. A photographer snuck in and took a photo of him in his hospital room. So that was weird.

Another friend of mine who was an artist, he died in the summer of '87, so those are the two. And then probably –

SS: What was his name?

BD: Brian Buczak. He was an artist. He was originally from Detroit but I knew him here. Then there was one other death that kind of hit me, which was Jim Martin, who was a law professor at the University of Michigan, my law school alma mater, was the first to die of AIDS in the county that Ann Arbor is in. So was really the first AIDS death there. And it was all being kept very quite what he was sick of. And then finally the *Ann Arbor News* did this almost creepy, wretched, exploitative article about all the parties that they used to throw. It was pretty icky, but then it was all out in the open.

So, those are the ones that I can think of right now.

SS: So did you get tested at that point of time?

BD: Not immediately, no.

SS: Do you remember why?

BD: Not sure the test was good.

SS: So how did you first become aware of ACT UP?

BD: I think I saw the SILENCE = DEATH stickers and a friend of mine, Todd Haynes, kept on saying to me, "You've got to come to ACT UP meetings."

So I did. I remember going to a protest at Sloan-Kettering, it was the middle of the night, I was riding around in a bike and there were still people there. The room was very exciting and hadn't like gelled and I didn't really have a scorecard, but I have vivid memories of people standing up and giving reports. Like Bob Rafsky giving a media report in seventeen seconds that would have taken an ordinary person three minutes. How did they do that? Who were all these people? Why was Bill Bahlman constantly getting criticized for running around with the National AIDS Commission? I didn't know, but I was intrigued.

SS: Why was he?

BD: I don't know. I think some of it was personality clashes.

And then later I learned some of the pre-history which is the Lavender Hill Mob had done some very important work to help pave the way, but of course didn't have the scale that ACT UP did.

Tape II
00:00:00

JW: Can you pause because we have to change tapes? Keep that thought.

BD: Is the lens cap off, I can't tell?

SS: No, no. OK. Just want to ask you two questions: The Lavender Hill Mob, can you tell us who they were and what they did?

BD: I only knew some of them later. Bill Bahlman, Michael Petrelis, Jean Elizabeth Glass, think Marty Robinson was in the Mob too. In the same way that Stonewall is not the beginning or the end, or the magic moment for larger gay organizing, that there was a lot of stuff going on before it, with ACT UP organizing against AIDS to kick the government, to kick the pharmaceutical industry. There had been organizing, both on the East Coast and the West Coast and I am sure other places. How large and how effective it was remains to be looked at because it was smaller stuff, but the Mob was an interesting bridge because Marty Robinson was a key figure in Gay Activist Alliance, which came right out of the split from Gay Liberation Front. He was an early post-Stonewall organizer. And in the same way that there was a nice bridge there, on the floor of ACT UP there were people who had long histories of organizing: Sarah Schulman, Maxine Wolfe, Mike Spiegel, who had been a national secretary for Students for a Democratic Society. And even though the number of people with that type of life experiences was small, the influence was great because a lot of the people that came into that room were blank slates politically.

SS: So what brought them in?

BD: Outrage and there was definitely more than a pinch of glamour and the idea that ACT UP was a very important scene to check in with and it became a magnetic force. Sometime when I run into people from those days I am struck by how the magnetic force was able to get all of us as individual much more militant and fascinating

and extravagantly outrageous political action that as individuals many people wouldn't go any further than pulling a lever in a voting booth.

SS: And how does that work?

BD: I think it's the magic of seeing people have a bigger, more vibrant vision about what political activity is and a broader vision of what citizenship is. That's very important and one of the sadness is – I think it is great that there are videotapes of ACT UP actions, but there isn't a good written history that somebody could pick up and access. Because if you didn't see or smell what went on in that Monday night room, it's a lot to miss.

SS: Can you explain the dynamic between the seasoned organizers and the people who you call the blank slates?

BD: I am being harsh in saying blank slate, but a lot of people did not have a lot of experience in political organizing or political groups. Sometime it was very positive dynamic and sometimes it was contentious, like "I know better because I've been around." On the other hand, as has been a tradition for generations, sectarian organizers often appear when there is a new group. And I have vivid memories of people standing up in the group and saying, I'm so-and-so from International Socialist Organization, or that organization, number of different organizations. And more or less because there were some very smart people with long memories ad experience in the room, the sectarians were not able to glom onto ACT UP, and pretty much, New Alliance Party, same thing, pretty much found themselves driven out of the room. Or if they wanted to stay in the room, nobody made a conscious effort to say get out, but they were not made to feel welcome to bring a lot of other political noise and static forward.

Now that said, there was often a tension between what's an issue that the floor, the Monday night meeting, ought to take up. And I recall a thousand times somebody not even bothering to raise their hands, yelling out, what does this have to do with AIDS? Somebody watching this film may think that AIDS is a single issue, but it is actually a hundred issues. It's a huge bundle of issues, and to be able to focus just on that one was one of ACT UP's strengths.

I was in the room one night when there was all this talk, I think it was the Julio Rivera murder, and I was looking at the clock and it took something like 27 minutes. And there was only two prime hours from 7:30-9:30 and that was taking up a hunk of time. So it was the relief to some of us that Queer Nation and other groups were spawned by ACT UP because it meant that the focus could remain quite sharply, AIDS. And of course within in that work, lots of effort when into reckoning with homophobia and gay/lesbian related issues.

SS: Let's go back to when you first came to ACT UP. So you said your first action was Sloan-Kettering, can you describe that action?

BD: Well I am not sure if I can remember the first meeting, but I definitely remember when the room faced west so that those were the early days, that summer. Sloan-Kettering involved some kind of vigil, there was something that Sloan-Kettering was doing that we knew was bad, so this presence was intended to draw attention to it. And one of the, I mentioned Bob Rafsky and media reports and all, and it's not to be forgotten that it was not easy to get attention to AIDS, especially any group that was trying to reckon with AIDS as a political crisis. And was some time before there was a first piece in the *Village Voice*, let alone the *New York Times*.

SS: Do you know why?

BD: Well I think the *Voice* was initially hostile to covering AIDS in a serious way and that's why the little resources that they had – the gay and lesbian community newspapers around this country, whether it be the *Windy City Times*, *The Chicago Free Press*, *Gay City News*, they are very important. And the *New York Native*, whatever anybody might say about its later days, was a critical source of information and news in those days.

SS: So when you first got involved in ACT UP, where did you decide to fit in?

BD: I just went to the meetings at first.

SS: And what did you do? Do you remember how long it was until you started to speak?

BD: No. But I remember one of times having to go before the floor, I was very nervous. And it may have been related to, I had to do some of the legal work, and it was probably Wall Street II.

SS: Can you explain what that was?

BD: Well, the first big action that ACT UP was involved in, was before I joined, was a sit in down at Wall Street. And then a year later, in March of '88. There was another sit in that about 111 people were arrested at, and it got considerably more attention, of course, than the first one. And ACT UP operated on so many different levels, and one of the things there was always a need for was legal support and information. Because what was going to happen to all those people? It kind of revived a

tradition of civil disobedience. So I helped out with the processing of some of those cases.

SS: So what was the point of that action?

Tape II
00:10:00

BD: Millions of dollar being made on Wall Street by drug companies and other corporations and very little attention to a disease that was thought to be affecting a pretty marginalized constituency.

SS: Do you remember what the actual action was?

BD: Waves of people sitting down in the streets. That's where I think, Wave Three, came from. Bob Huff made a little film of it, and it's a loop where he asked people on the street, "What do you think about all this? What do you think about AIDS?" And this guy said, "I think the government is doing all it can about AIDS." And he looped it, and after five times it's quite a wonderful poetic meditation on how little the government was really doing.

SS: Now was this a symbolic action or did ACT UP actually have a concrete demand that this piece of civil disobedience was backing up?

BD: I don't know. Let's see. I'd have to go back and look at the fact sheet. Well that was '88, so Bush took office, so this was after Reagan. Well it's not as if we are trying to cover every historical detail, but I don't want to leave out that the SILENCE = DEATH was putting its posters up, and later stickers in that period when Reagan was still around. In the summer of '87 I was with a friend at the Gay Pride Parade, and we saw what I had heard about on the floor, and it was really quite startling to see it, which was a three-quarter ton pickup truck decked out as a concentration camp with Eric

Sawyer and others on the back of it. It was a jaw dropping visual. One of many, many jaw dropping visuals that ACT UP managed to produce.

SS: I want to talk a little bit about legal stuff at ACT UP. Was that the first thing that you plugged into organizationally?

BD: First thing I can recall. I definitely moved around and went to different committee meetings. I remember going to Treatment and Data as well as other things.

SS: Why do you think that you settled on legal?

BD: It was one thing I could do, that I felt I could contribute.

SS: Now were you licensed to practice in New York State?

BD: Yes, I took the bar. I passed.

SS: So how was it constructed? Like who ran it? Was it all lawyers?

BD: Well, it wasn't any tight operation. It was very result oriented. Which is what information do people need if they are thinking about getting arrested. Often that was woven into planning and training sessions for civil disobedience. There were efforts to coordinate with Legal Aid Attorneys and other lawyers who would actually do the court representation. Then there were civil suits. There was a fair amount of legal issues that would present themselves, and there was a handful of lawyers. If you look at the contact sheets you can see who was taking on a lot of that responsibility.

The contact sheets, by the way, are a fascinating way to track what ACT UP was doing because you can see the number of committees that were burgeoning. There were so many people meeting on a weekly basis. It was phenomenal.

SS: Can you tell me who some of the lawyers that were working there?

BD: David Barr, Joan Gibbs, Jill Harris, Mike Spiegel, and John Zirinsky.

SS: Did people all agree on how to do forward or were there debates amongst the lawyers?

BD: Well, that kind of law is not something you can really learn in a textbook. Which is, in the same way that ACT UP stood for insuring people get to make their own treatment decisions, ACT UP members as clients felt very strongly that they wanted to be presented with options and to do what they wished rather than what might have been expedient legally. There were people who often did not want to take an alternative disposition in New York City, an ACD. What does that stand for? I can't even think of it right now. [Adjournment Contemplating Dismissal]

There was always that kind of issue. The people who actually want to go to trial. Now who is going to do a trial? Well if you want to do it yourself, ok, we can teach you some stuff about the trial. But if you actually think that that is going to further your cause, that's a fine decision, but there may not always be lawyers that can devote that type of time to you.

SS: Let's look at an action from a lawyer's point of view. So here's Wall Street and you are watching 111 people get arrested. What do you do?

BD: Well one of the questions in those days, was how are they going to be processed?

There was just an obituary in the *New York Times* of a woman who did some very important reform work, was that she forced the city to bring them up before a judge within 24 hours. But in those days it could be 72 hours, I think. So one key juncture was to see if there were any legal or political pressures that you can bring on the processing on those arrestees to get them out with a summons or a desk appearance ticket.

SS: So did you know in advance who was going to be arrested?

BD: No. And one of the ethical restrictions was that I couldn't advise people to break a law or to be in the middle of a situation where people are trying to break a law. So I would step out of a room if there was active talk about civil disobedience.

On the other hand, as a theoretical matter, if a person says, "Look we are thinking about getting arrested, what do we need to know?" If you look back through the papers on the previous actions, somebody would take the trouble to make up a list of potential charges and what the penalties were. Or give some general sense of how the court in Rockville, Maryland, or the court in the place where there would be civil disobedience, would handle it. Now that is just one layer of the legal issues.

Another issue was there were times when the police would try to stop what ACT UP was doing before it even started. And one marvelous legacy of another era of red squad surveillance, was that there was a little incantation at the beginning of ACT UP meetings: "If you are an on-duty member of the New York Police Department or other law enforcement agency, you are required by law to identify yourself." The reason for that was because there was a lawsuit in New York, the Handschu Case, because the police were surveilling political meeting for no reason except to gather information about perfectly lawful, constitutionally protected activity. The Handschu Agreement stopped them in some way from doing anything they wanted. So that incantation was a way to put people on alert that there could be agents here. One morning, some ACT UP members, at like six in the morning, found detectives from the major case squad at their door wanting to investigate some graffiti episode, or something –

SS: Do you remember which ACT UP members?

BD: No. But in the aftermath of that we revised – Mike Spiegel, Joan Gibbs, and myself, probably David Barr, whoever was around at the time. We wrote a sheet of legal advice for members. Since in those days so many people would have parties for ACT UP members, it was typically on the back door of wherever the party was. So if you went to somebody's house you saw this sheet about what to do if the police come knocking. I got a great deal of satisfaction thinking that some of this legal knowledge that I happened to have could help a movement that was trying to save people's lives.

SS: Was there police harassment?

BD: ACT UP was definitely a lightning rod. The way the police treated protest, sometimes you could see things get out of control, that it was some other group – even years later, just that name, oh, this is an ACT UP demo.

There were certainly situations. There was a group stripped searched, I think it may have been all women, and again it was another set of legal issues. What do you do to stop this kind of thing?

SS: Do you think ACT UP was infiltrated?

BD: No doubt. But we may not know for years and years. And one of the dangers of infiltration, of course, is that people can get into finger pointing, and trying to figure out if somebody is an agent can be more destructive than whatever the police are doing.

I do remember one episode where an action was announced, and it really wasn't an action, but the police showed up anyways. I don't recall all the exact details but I think it was a great way to see what they are up to.

SS: Did you ever do direct negotiation with the police?

BD: Sometimes. I wouldn't do it. One of the things to learn in those situations is that I wouldn't want to be a middle person. So you can carry a message back and forth, and also in dealing with the police it is important that more than one person does it so it's clear that you're not putting a lot of power in one person, and so that misunderstandings don't happen.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: Do you think that ACT UP had good legal support?

BD: Yes. There was good institutional support, the National Lawyer's Guild, over the years, certainly put a lot of effort into being legal observers in many actions. Center for Constitutional Rights was always helpful. LAMBDA Legal Defense Fund, likewise. And Legal Aid.

SS: Were there ever times that you disagreed with something ACT UP was doing in relation to the court system or civil disobedience?

BD: No. These are tactical and emotional choices that people make. Are the police the problem? Or is the bureaucracy, or the government agency, or the drug company that they are helping to protect the problem? And sometimes people fall into the trap of wanting to get mad at the cops.

Now that said, there were some ugly episodes. Somewhere on Sixth Avenue I remember somebody being slammed into a cab, that may have been Jeff Gates. And then there was the whole Chris Hennelly episode.

SS: Can you explain that?

BD: Well, three people were charged with spray painting graffiti in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral. I think it was Dolly Meieran, Scott Sensenig, and one other person, I've forgot. They were handled very roughly by the police. The floor of ACT UP was

not happy about this. I, for one, was not happy. The decision was made to leave the meeting that night and go to the Midtown North Precinct that had a reputation for roughness and misconduct even. And there was a protest outside the precinct house at which one of the marshals, Chris Hennelly, was seriously injured. And it looked from the videotape as if a lieutenant on the scene, Joe Nash was his name, had taken a radio and hit him on the head with it.

We didn't figure out all this for hours later. Nobody was allowed to go see him. He ended up in the hospital. I forgot the exact sequence of events, but it was a horrendous episode because someone was injured at a peaceful demonstration. And certainly the police get extra anxious when you demonstrate right outside their house.

But nonetheless the effort to vindicate what happened and organize around it was a marvel because it went on for many months and consumed the energy of what some group in another part of the country would have for its entire direct action.

There were many demonstrations and lots of pressure on the district attorney. And eventually the charges were dropped and some years later he got a monetary settlement. But that was one of the ugly hazards of challenging police authority.

SS: Were you ever involved in any trials as a lawyer?

BD: Just some arraignments usually. But in Chicago I was a legal observer and unwittingly I did get arrested a couple of times – but in Chicago I did get arrested unwittingly. And they put handcuffs on so tight that I was beginning to wonder if my hands were ever going to operate again. And that happened to a lot of people at that protest. It was a national one. It was like a coordinated protest by people from ACT UP chapters around the country.

SS: Do you remember what that was about?

BD: I don't. I think we went to the AMA. Yeah. It was a health care action and that actually reminds me that in those early days the message that was repeated over and over was, drugs into bodies. We've got to get drugs into body. But as time went on, the consciousness of people on the floor started to change, which was a wonderful thing to see, because it was not just finding those drugs, if they were out there, it was also ensuring that there was access.

Tape II
00:25:00

And some years later, I got the idea that it was time to start an insurance committee and Larry Kramer helped a lot to get members. But after a month it was so sleepy sickness inducing, that the tedium of trying to understand the awful ways the insurance company destroys your ability for you to get health care, that I stopped. But I think that arc of drugs-into-bodies was very important.

One of the first CDs that I was pretty much myself as legal observer was in '88 was an action against a Japanese company that manufactured either Dextran Sulfate. It was either Dextran Sulfate or AL721. It was a very interesting crew that was there for this action. Marty Robinson, Peter Staley, Stephen Gendin, this whole flock of people. Marty Robinson was in a coat and tie, and they walked into the tenth floor of a small high-rise building in Midtown, and they chained themselves to the front desk. Now you have to understand that this office was not the part of the Japanese company that sold Dextran Sulfate, it was an office of the company that sold shoes. So they were quite befuddled about this.

But Peter Staley, who had worked on the media, and whoever else was around at the time, had gotten every Japanese TV network to show up in the hallway, it was very

tiny. It was six-feet by twelve-feet or something in the elevator, before you actually entered the office. And I was a little scared because I didn't want to get arrested. But I was still on private property even though I was not a participant in this sit in.

So after a while, the police arrived, and the police said that they had to wait for a sergeant. So more time passes, and the sergeant comes and the sergeant says that, "I can't do anything, because I need a sergeant who deals with political protests." More time passes, and the new sergeant arrives, and says, "Well I need to get a bolt cutter." So, all this time went by, and one of the things that I learned was, yes, this was a very powerful way to send a message. Whether Dextran Sulfate was effective or not effective, but there was a certain choreography in these protests that was very important to both sides. And usually things unfolded in a slow enough moving manner that no one was hurt. So the Chris Hennelly episode was that an exception. Some of the things that ACT UP did though, in retrospect, in this post-9/11 era, it would be extremely difficult to do.

SS: Why is that?

BD: The action at Grand Central Terminal.

SS: Can you explain what that was?

BD: Day of Desperation, one piece of it, was a group of ACT UP members going into Grand Central Terminal and they commandeered the boards where the train information is and hung big banners, and had balloons to send banners up to the ceiling, and took over that wonderful information booth in the center of the floor. Well Grand Central, as much as I love the building, happens to be a major transportation hub for the most important city in the country. And if you were to bother a building like that now,

right on scene, depending on what level of alert we've got, are guards, uniformed military guards with huge automatic weapons. So the risks are much higher.

For that one actually – one of the things that ACT UP did do was it tried hard to cultivate people who could help in some way whether it be Susan Sarandon, or, in that case, Ronnie Eldridge, who represented people – she was on the City Council from the Upper West Side. I know that she called the head of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which runs Grand Central, and said, “Take it easy, because those are my people.” Which is a way to signal inside the political elite that these people have a serious cause, and you can't just flush them away.

SS: Getting back to something you said before. You were talking about ACT UP's transition from drugs-into-bodies into access. How would you characterize that transformation? What changed and how did it change?

BD: If only there was video of those meetings. But people have, there's got to be shrieks, there had to be shrieks about, wait a minute, for white gay men, access may not be an issue, but for people who do not have money, who may not be white or gay, the ability to access these treatments is a huge hurdle, and what do we do about that.

SS: Now, let's back up. At what point do you think that for white, gay men access wasn't a problem?

BD: Well, health care in this country, it's always been an issue because it is usually tied to – except for those who are quite rich – it's usually tied to a job. So for those early years, '81 for the next three, four, five, years, there was huge tumult in how the Social Security Administration, and how New York City itself and how all these government agencies are going to handle claims. Disability claims, insurance claims, all

Tape II
00:30:00

of that stuff, and one big issue was even if you had insurance, what if a treatment is not approved. So there was a multitude of those, so in relative terms, there may had been people who were white, gay, and middle class who had more access to health care, but even that could vanish with a pink slip.

I can't recall anything that led to it, but I just know vividly hearing, drugs into bodies, I'm sure that was one of the chants at those early demos. And as time went on, it was plain to people that that was not enough vision and that it was critical to recognize some larger structural problems.

I don't think ACT UP was a revolutionary group at all, but I think it had a firm grasp on how you take a piece of policy, chew on it, and force a reform. That's what I think was it's really strong suit. It depended on – one of the more amazing things was that it was always potluck who would shows up for group, who's willing to roll their sleeves up. And there were some people – Jim Eigo, one of the great-unsung thinkers and drivers in those days. How to become expert at all of this scientific knowledge. And look at some of the papers, file cabinets full of stuff that is really not sorted, and just look at the amazing amount of stuff. ACT UP certainly killed forests, and rented a very expensive copying machine. And if money was wasted over Xeroxing things, or sending people to conference, is nothing compared to an advocacy group would have done. Or what AMFAR was doing in those days. Because one of the lessons that I learned from ACT UP was the difference between activism and why it was so important compared to advocacy. Advocates, the nonprofit agencies, they're fine, but they are mostly concerned about keeping their payroll going.

Activists chopped all those deals. Whatever deal there was between the Koch Administration and the gay community, people worried about AIDS, suddenly all bets were off. That was a wonderful thing. I have a vivid memory one night of people being really mad and GMHC, Tim Sweeney who was running the shown and a hand went up from the floor, and someone said, "We're cannibalizing our own." And it was one of those things when I just started talking without raising my hand, I said, "Well who do you work for?" It was someone who worked for GMHC. It wasn't the worst thing in the world. That kind of tension is actually healthy.

In ACT UP's later years, in it's recent years, there has been no sense that the purpose of an activist group is to do that which nobody else is willing to do, and to keep an arms length from Pharma, from politicians that can co-opt you. Politicians always wanted to come into ACT UP's meetings. But they were pretty much given the bum's rush.

SS: I want to get into TITA in a minute. But before I get there, do you remember any major actions or policy decisions that you really disagreed with?

BD: Well, probably. One small thing comes to mind. I thought that Keith Herring t-shirt design was a bit much, because we ended up promoting Keith Herring more than the message. And although me and Peter Staley and I disagreed about plenty of things, he said, "Well look, it's are biggest selling t-shirt."

SS: That's it?

BD: No, well probably not, but nothing's coming to mind.

SS: How about Stop the Church?

BD: I think that in the end, Stop the Church certainly created a backlash, but it also was the kind of thing that nobody else was willing to do. Here was the principle American city that gave more airtime and ink to a religious leader than any other place in the country. Who was going to challenge that?

So if we suffered some short-term damage, in the long run that was a way to really stand up against deadly policies. No-condom policy and whatever else they did.

SS: So let's get to Tell It To ACT UP [TITA], the unofficial ACT UP newsletter of which you were the sole editor. How did you decide to do it?

BD: One day I just decided I thought it would be interesting to have some kind of internal newsletter because the group was big enough, it might make things more interesting. I made an announcement, and passed around a box, and whatever was put into the box got published. Few things I didn't publish, like somebody said, so-and-so's a police agent, I wouldn't feed that.

SS: Let me ask you, were the same people accused over and over?

BD: I don't know, but it took off like crazy, but it was ahead of its time. It was like what you can do on the Internet now. But on those days, it was both irresistible, the 400 copies or 600 copies would just vanish off the tables, it was a hot read, but it was sublime, smart, and also petty things. I'd run them all. I'd get attacked. I'd run those attacks. Very interesting to look back and peek at some of those items. It triggers memories of what people were thinking about. It was a little more real than the official publications.

It was mixed. There were some things about it that really rankled people because it was easy for people to make an anonymous attack because I had no requirement about

signing items. But it also meant that things would get out there that might not have gotten discussed otherwise.

SS: Can you give us some examples?

BD: Well the *Wall Street Journal* did a profile about Peter Staley. And this ticked up many people I'm sure because it felt like ACT UP was being pushed into the box of having leaders, or even a cult of personality. Like some were more important than others. So there was an item in one of those issues, asking why was this happening. Asking questions. So it was a bit of a steam valve that way.

There was at least the one effort to shut it down.

SS: Who wanted to do that?

BD: I can't even remember. But I think Bob Rafsky was still alive then, and he said, "This is ridiculous. I might not like what they said, but leave them alone." But I used the Xerox machine. This was the marvelous thing about ACT UP. This big, fancy, very expensive Xerox machine. If you had something to do that was related to AIDS and ACT UP, it was possible to do it. Like Petrelis, I said, "Why don't you do a newsletter. So he did a newsletter called, *Piss and Vinegar*." And it got laid out on the table.

And the table by the way – one could read *The Native*, or later, *Outweek* which was very important because it came out Monday mornings. But the table, full of literature that was out at the beginning of each meeting, was an incredible cornucopia of news and got stuff out in a way that is almost unimaginable now that we are in the computer age.

JW: We need to change tapes.

Tape III
00:00:00

BD: I've lost all time/space orientation because I'm in the basement and there are no windows.

SS: So tell us when you started TITA, and how long you did it for?

BD: I started TITA in 1990, ACT UP was almost three years old, and I think it ran for a little over two years, and it took anywhere from a couple to three or four, five hours to do it because I didn't have a computer and I did it on a typewriter so everything was cut and pasted, and it was sort of a pain in the neck to do. But, it had its pleasures.

SS: And you had a new edition every week?

BD: Yup.

SS: Well can you read some of it to us?

BD: Sure. Where is something good to read – OK, here's –

SS: Show it to us, so we can see how primitive it was.

BD: OK, this is issue number six. (Laughing) “Who elected Peter Staley ACT UP poster boy? *Advocate*, *Rolling Stone*, Donahue Show, etc. Anyway, ironically, for a group that goes through such great agony to be democratic there is an air of high school cliquishness and elitism developing within ACT UP. Coordinating Committee = Student Council, Media = Year Book, ACT UP star = Big Man on Campus. Really, we all are valid ACT UP spokes people, not just the cute, white, middle class, males among us, because we all are ACT UP. Let's institute a random selection process to handle media request so a more balanced and representative image of us are projected so that none of us become icons. The current process, which I assume is handled by the Media Committee, smacks of old-boy-networking. Come on ACT UP stars (you know who you are), you're fifteen minutes are up.” Singed, *A Plea*.

SS: Now do you think that is accurate?

BD: Well I think there was a lot of pressure on a few people who became very visible and that was a painful thing because the media absolutely adores individuals and faces; it is very hard to fight against it.

I mean, go back and forth, what do you do with spokespeople? There've been gay groups, for example, over the years that have used pseudonyms as spokespeople. There are lots of approaches to that.

SS: OK. Let's hear some more.

BD: "An ACT UP member wrote in *Outweek* why he became an activist. When I read that the reasons that I became an ACT UP member immediately leapt to mind and I cried on the spot at Pennsylvania station. I felt better then and have for two weeks since."

I should have picked some interesting ones...

SS: It's OK. We have time. Or can you just go through one issue.

BD: Well here is issue number 7:

"I was saddened by a few recent anonymous items in TITA, which were highly personal, nasty, and mean spirited attacks onto others. So one of our many courageous members allegedly didn't sufficiently acknowledge a compliment. Big Deal. We aren't here for group therapy. Lighten up people. Fighting for our lives is more important than bruise egos." – Hal Bramson

So there was dialogue back and forth.

SS: Was there treatment information in there? Like if someone disagreed with –

BD: Occasionally, there would be disagreement. Well there'd be all kinds of things in here. Suggestions, comments, political sentiments. No doubt, there's got to be stuff about denialists in here.

SS: Like I know there was a huge fight in ACT UP about AZT, for example.

Would that be discussed in TITA?

BD: It depends on when that happened, because this only covered from 1990 to '92 or so.

SS: Would that have covered Stop the Church?

BD: I think it did.

SS: What do you say were some of the major contentious issues in ACT UP?

BD: The Stop the Church demo was definitely contentious; dealing with drug companies; how and who got to sit on government panels and have access to power and how that was handled.

SS: What's your assessment of how that was handled?

BD: Well I recall, I think was Jim Eigo, who got an early appointment to a government panel, and there was a whole discussion about whether he was representing ACT UP, or there as an individual. I'm not sure of the exact details of how it was resolved, but I thought there was a very thorough discussion about how to ensure that this person on the panel was not doing something different than what ACT UP wanted to do. That was the bottom line.

SS: I wanted to ask you about Bob Rafsky because he is such an important figure and we can't interview him obviously. Can you tell us about him? How you met him? What he was like?

BD: A lot of people stayed in the room the whole meeting, 7:30-9:30 was really like prime time, but some of us would get antsy and go out in the hall. When Bob's voice would start to waft out of the room, everyone in the lobby and the halls would run to get into the room. Such was the power of Bob's words. He spoke with the clarity of a sledgehammer. He was a master at media work. He'd been a senior vice president at Howard Rubenstein and Associates, a very high-powered public relations firm. He wasn't out, but one day he was in a demo, and his photo ended up in the *New York Times*, and then he was out and he was able to do some things that were very, very important to ACT UP. Not just as a powerful voice, and as a PWA, and somebody who was living with AIDS. He got the first placements in the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*. After some years, ACT UP had a big, heavy, horizontal file cabinet filled with clippings, but it's important to realize that that group of people started with nothing, and to push them into projecting their voice through the media was a heavy lift, and Bob was there to do it.

What I was always in awe of was just how compressed they were, he'd give a report, he was the head of the Media Committee, and it would be over in seventeen seconds. There was nothing extra. He was totally fascinating. I felt a handwritten note. I have a folder of memorial programs. Cause ACT UP, a lot of it is about loss, and I have this note, there was a memorial in Central Park on a lovely day for Scott Slutsky, I hope I have his name right. I made a note that Bob was there and he said, "I'm here because I'm one of those next in line." I read it last night, and I was ready to crumble.

Tape III
00:10:00

You know, he was an extraordinary talent amidst many people who learn to do things and push their limits in that group. Many people shined, but Bob was one of a kind.

SS: What was it like to watch him get sicker in the organization?

BD: It was very painful. It was very painful because he had been one of Vito Russo's caregivers, and I saw him come to court one day. There were some people on trial for something, maybe The Day of Desperation – oh, speaking of – a little digression -- the Day of Desperation, there were little affinity groups that made it their business to get into the network TV shows. Imaging doing that in the post 9/11 thing. You could end up with dead bodies. Because the media is viewed as important as Fort Knox these days, you can't mess with them. And several of them did, indeed, cause a sensation, even if they didn't get fully on camera or whatever happened. But Bob had been to the trial, and I saw him one morning, and he said, "Vito died last night." And there was nothing to say after that.

SS: I remember he had – A lot of times people would get sick and they would disappear, but as Bob got sicker he was still present at the meetings. Even when he was covered with KS, he would still speak and be a spokesperson. Was that unusual?

BD: Well, you are touching on something that has changed, which is that there is a cocktail since '96 or so, and certainly the number of people who I know that died of AIDS-related complications and all this, have gone way down over the years. But, in those days one of the really great things that ACT UP did was that they pushed AIDS right into public view. The demonstrations were public manifestations of political

sentiment. The posters; people who were walking with canes, or had visible lesions, was part of that, and now things are much more isolated. It is almost like a private torture. Where you see demonstrations, there is not as much media coverage. It is all like a quite thing. But to have to take very, very heavy drugs and not know how long they're going to work, that's quite something.

SS: Let's talk a little bit about the culture of ACT UP apart from its actions. What were the relationships like between people with AIDS who were sick and people who were either not symptomatic, or negative inside the organization?

BD: Generally good, but sometimes tension would break out. And there was a PISD caucus, People with Immune System Disorders, to highlight for those that AIDS was a very personal issue, may have a different take or priorities for those who didn't.

SS: Did you have very close relationships with people with AIDS inside ACT UP?

BD: Yeah.

SS: Like who were some of your friends?

BD: Well I was just thinking of one friend. Well he died after ACT UP came into existence. Maybe this doesn't answer the question. But one day he asked me, "What do you know about suicide Bill?" I thought that it was just an idle question. But it wasn't. He ended up taking a lot of pills and his signal was to not answer the phone or something, but he hadn't died. And he didn't want to be revived at all. It was awful

SS: How did people in ACT UP deal when somebody died?

BD: ACT UP was a very powerful and marvelous kind of community, so to organize for the folks who were sick, and their supporters, the people taking care of them and their political allies to organize in the face of a deadly disease is pretty phenomenal.

I, like many people, would always have our breath taken away at the beginning of the meeting when deaths were announced. I don't know what the rhythm was like. Meaning, it could have been that through '87, '88, that there were deaths, but I wasn't listening to them, but as ACT UP was around longer and more of us had some sense of who was in the room, when they died it felt like a bigger loss. Much has been written, I think, or some things have been written about the way that memorials evolved. My own way of coping with those memorials was that I always wanted to hear something about sex in them because it is like a funeral, but I want to hear something about pleasure and sex. I don't want to just hear platitudes.

Tape III
00:15:00

SS: Was there safe sex in ACT UP?

BD: Yes. Although there was at least one dispute about a fundraising event at a club, where there was some safe sex and there was a big hoo-hah on the floor if ACT UP should be doing events like this.

I seem to recall that Jean Elizabeth Glass wrote something that was pretty clear saying that sexual freedom means that people make their own decisions, and frankly a lot of the things we dealt with over the years – like I helped to raise bail with ACT UP's help, for a guy who was accused of having sex with another man and not telling the partner that he was positive or that he had AIDS beforehand. With those kind of things, it's not easy to assert sexual autonomy and civil liberties, but it's got to be done.

SS: So how much of your week was spent on ACT UP related activity?

BD: I felt like a lot of hours. I am trying to think about what other regular meetings I would go to. Definitely on Mondays, I am trying to think if there was something on Thursdays. For a lot of people, they were spending ten, twenty hours a week on ACT UP.

SS: Did you socialize with the members of ACT UP?

BD: Mmm, hmm.

SS: Would you say that it was half of your social life or most of your social life?

BD: Well it was hard to go anywhere, either a bar or a party, without running into this big extended community.

SS: What were the hangouts?

BD: Bars in the East Village. Maybe not so much in the West Village.

SS: Like which ones?

BD: The Bar. I can't remember the names of bars anymore, because they are always changing.

SS: So would you say that a lot of people in ACT UP were having sex with each other?

BD Yes.

SS: Would you say that safe sex was pretty much what was the standard or would you say that that was not the case?

BD: No one would know. And what would safe sex mean if someone was positive, or both positive. There was the whole debate about re-infection. Whether that is possible or not.

SS: Do you think that people who were positive and people who were negative had a sexual division between them in ACT UP? Or was there a culture of inclusion.

BD: You know, anger welled up on lots of things. I think it is good to take a moment and note what powerful driving force anger was in what ACT UP was doing, and that anger translated into militancy. And without that kind of militancy, the group would not have been able to accomplish what it did. It was both very sober and extremely thoughtful and intellectual and all about policy working. But the anger created a lot more space for what it wanted.

SS: And what were you angry about?

BD: Well, I think we were under siege. I felt like gay men were under siege. And the medical establishment, the biomedical research establishment, the government were doing very little. To go back to Bob Rafsky for a minute. After Clinton was elected, and certainly I think a group like ACT UP has a certain lifecycle of really being vibrant and all and momentum. But as Clinton came, certainly the participation had already started to fall off, but Bob confronted Clinton at a fundraiser in Midtown Manhattan after Clinton was elected, but before he took office. It wasn't just that it was the hothouse atmosphere of a president elect; it was because Bob's words were so powerful. He told Clinton that, "We were dying of his ambition. His ambition was killing us." Words to that effect.

All this stuff. I think there is a generation now who doesn't know a lot about the way direct action and activism saved the day.

SS: Why do you think it was effective?

BD: Because it was very goal oriented. There was no worry; well we can't piss off funders, or this or that. Somehow the money was always found. It was an emergency situation and you just keep plugging away until there is something.

But even after all that. If you would ask me, "What was the progress?" I think one of the legacies was to change that people relate to doctors and scientists and drug companies, which is the patient's in the driver's seat. We're in the driver's seat, not some doctor who's seen as god. That is a great thing. And that has had a great spill over effect on the breast cancer movement, for example.

For the policy changes, Parallel Track, and helping to get drug released sooner and all that, that is all very important. I think, though, that in the end, there has still not been a president who has felt like making it a real priority and really exerting leadership. So Clinton discovered AIDS after he left office so that he could burnish his god-awful image.

SS: So I want to talk about The Split. What is your analysis of why ACT UP split?

BD: Treatment and Data. Well, one tension in any kind of group, even like individuals among a coalition is how much are those members willing to give up what they want individually or personally to the collective? That was always an issue because Treatment and Data was a very important committee and it was doing some of the most important work, like frontline drug work. But didn't want its – how much were those folks willing to put up with lots of questioning and poking from the floor?

I have a vivid memory of being out – one of the nice things was that always people went out for coffee or food or something afterwards. I was at an East Village

restaurant with a lot of the T&D and Larry Kramer was there that night, and he said something like, "Do you think it's time to take T&D private?" Fascinated, and I still remember that phrase, because it is a phrase from Wall Street. As if you are going to take some publicly traded thing and turn it into a private ownership or something.

But, even for Larry, who apparently thought that it was a good idea at first, but then he changed his mind. Because it always a wing. Do you get more from sticking with the group or going away? Different people have done it over time. He went away at times, and came back as he realized there was a limit to what that you could do as one person. Petrelis did it. T&D did.

I was racking my brain trying to think of all the stuff around 076. I was drawing a big blank. I know that was a huge part of the T&D stuff.

These days, as a good friend of mine put it, all the good AIDS activists are either physically dead or they are working for advocacy groups. That's a sad thing. In the last couple of years, I've been to some ACT UP meetings in New York and I think some of the operating principles, like to do what nobody else was willing to do, like hold people accountable. A lot of that has been lost. And I'm sure that there much be some progress, I'm not sure about what's going on in the drug pipeline, but it's going to be a lot slower, and it's going to cost a lot more. The needle exchange work that ACT UP did, very important stuff, and even though a lot of money had been filched apparently. What did ACT UP spend, I don't know, \$3000 a month on x number of needles. When AMFAR took it over it cost ten times as much, not just because they had to pay people but because there are so many coffee breaks, and so much waste involved in bureaucracy. It's not that advocacy groups are bad, and activism is good, but they are very different things, and

I hate to hear the word activism thrown around when people are talking about, say, Nancy Reagan, or Barbara Bush putting a candle in the White House window. It's not activism. Activism is something that you do in your own time because you want to get a result.

SS: I only have one more question. Do you guys have anything?

BD: Let me peek – I brought these notes, just to remind me of things. Wow, I did say a lot of these things.

SS: Well you have been talking for two and a half hours.

BD: Sectarians driven out. Yep, we got that. Do you remember Sherry Wolf?

SS: Sure.

BD: And the AIDS Bill of Rights. Anyone remember that? Well, it was like The New Alliance Party wants an AIDS Bill of Rights.

SS: That's right.

BD: Those were – I mean one point that maybe I should add is that for all the incredible ways in which ACT UP gelled, there were very large odds against it working because there were so many forces that could have torn it apart: identity politics, the tension between PWAs and people for whom it wasn't that personal of an issue, the ability of politicians to get in there and co-opt things, the role of money, the way money was being spread around like AMFAR was getting grants and things. Tom Duane, I know, one other point I want to make here, the tension that built up with the Koch administration with the AIDS policy was interesting to me, because there was a time where there was nobody with a "seat at the table." There was no city council member, or hardly anybody, except some political patronage jobs that didn't have a lot of

prominence. I think that that is one of the ingredients that led to ACT UP being so strong and so successful in New York as opposed to San Francisco and I was reminded of all this because in about 1993 a conservative politician, whose name escapes me right now, made some statements about the “Gay Games” coming to New York City. And that it was going to mean more HIV infections, because the “Gay Games” was coming.

So there is an uproar and, in the aftermath of it, I was down at City Hall, and they asked Ruth Messenger, who was Borough President and done lots of progressive things in her tenure, asked her press secretary why Ruth hadn’t said anything about this, and what I was told was that Tom Duane had taken care of it and that he had asked for an apology from the guy who had made these statements. And I thought this is all very interesting because as soon as somebody who happened to be gay and who happened to be HIV positive got elected they became the steam valve and the deal cutter, and you had to then figure out a way to get around them. In contrast to years before when there wasn’t anybody like that.

Another year went by and Tom came back to ACT UP because he needed some help with something. He actually wanted to use ACT UP for its force, its noise, its action, but there were hardly any people left who could do what he needed.

JW: That was Diaz, wasn’t it?

BD: Yes, Ruben Diaz, was a Reverend and was on the Consumer Complaint Review Board, I believe, and he was the man who said more HIV infections if the Gay Games come. But that was my lesson. And it sort of underscored what I recalled, oh I think Liz Holtzman or some other political figures had come to Monday night meeting and there was great rancor that politicians had been let into the room. They could come

into the room if they had some specific thing to present, but to just be there could give them what they wanted: credibility that they were doing something, when they were doing nothing.

So that was one of the strong suits. Having just finished three years of work with the anti-war movement, I wish that the anti-war movement was as shrewd in dealing with congress as ACT UP was in dealing with federal, state and local officials. Because the Iraq war would be over if people had that much sense to holler.

Let me take one last look at the notes.

SS: OK.

BD: Sometimes I don't know how this works – do you edit out the part where I am looking for the notes?

SS: No. We don't edit anything out.

BD: One thing that I always got a lot of pleasure out of, and I can't tell you what it would be, but sometimes we would be in these intense protests, literally in some tight spot with lots of cops raiding against us, and there would be some sort of juvenile thing that would happen and it would just make everybody's day. Whether it would be getting a cop to laugh at the line, or scowl at "your gloves don't match your shoes," whatever it was, some little thing like that magically made it. The protests worked on the level of, here's something that is being done to put a placard up, but also there was more elaborate performance going on. And more levels of irony.

I came across one of the sheets. Some of the stuff that ACT UP did to work the media was amazing, like they put out a sheet of buzz words how reporters should talk about AIDS and all, and how they should talk about people fighting against AIDS and

living with AIDS, and some of that build on the Denver principles in the same way this is a group PWA that met in '83 to figure out how to navigate this horrendous epidemic. The idea of people demanding dignity and autonomy in that situation certainly influenced the way that ACT UP dealt with –

SS: Like Michael Hirsh? That group? And Max?

BD: Navarre, and I think [Michael] Callen was there for that.

SS: Jane Rosette. That's right.

BD: We talked about surveillance. *Outweek* Monday morning, ACT UP Monday night. It was like a one-two-punch. It was very powerful, and how it happened that ACT UP became not just a political group but was like a scene that was just wired – like to drop a little pebble in that pond on Monday night, was a great way to reverberate in many, many, directions. So if something went wrong, like Julio Rivera, whatever was going on before Queer Nation came into existence, or the [Lesbian] Avengers, it was an energy supermarket and very important, and one of the losses is that right now virtually every major city I know of there is no general gay/lesbian political group whatsoever, it's all advocacy stuff and there is no ability to respond if there was really an attack.

I think that is it.

SS: You said that one of ACT UP's greatest achievements was transforming the patient's relationship to pharmaceutical companies and doctors, but what would you say would be the biggest failure of ACT UP?

BD: Well, I mean to the extent that there was a demand for a cure that didn't happen, but maybe back up a bit and say, ok, was ACT UP able to get a full throttle effort to attack AIDS and everything AIDS is? And that didn't come to pass. So I think there

were some very important gains, but in terms of leadership, I mean it's just ludicrous that a Log Cabin Republican is appointed an AIDS czar under this Bush, but it's not much worse than what Clinton was doing. The patronage has increased, but the results have not increased.

SS: I don't have anything else. Do you guys? Thank you Bill.

JW: Was ACT UP ever asked to be a Sex Police?

BD: The episode that that evokes is some event at a club, I think it was The World –

SS: Aldo Hernandez's Meat

BD: I wish that there was a way that we could have documented everything, but some people didn't want everything to be taped. It's funny the group was so schizo that way. Because with all the media attention it got, here we are almost twenty years after it's founding, and there still isn't a good history of it. There are big slices, but to pull them all together is a shame.

SS: If you read our interview with Aldo we actually discuss this incident.

BD: Oh, that's right, I forgot all about – that's the thing picking through these files there so many people, there were so many works being done. Art Positive.

SS: Art Positive.

BD: That Aldo and I were in and we battled Artists Space up the street here. That is why I was so flabbergasted that Imani Henry was calling to shut down a performance artist at a Chelsea Bar.

SS: What is that?

BD: Well there is a drag performer, a white, gay guy –

SS: You mean now or at that time?

BD: Yeah. In black face. Just a couple of years ago there was a fervor over it and Imani Henry who happens to do performance, a trans person, sent an email around saying, shut the guy down. This is totally frustrating because so many of us were on the street to stop attacks on free expression, whether by the government or otherwise, and now we are in a totally different era.

I suppose that is the big question. What's the legacy of all this? And I think that the impact on patents or people who are living with disease, that's a really big one. The impact on gay, lesbian life and culture is huge because it was a nice bookend to what was going on in the '70s. When I look back, there is Stonewall and then not seven years, eight years passes, and suddenly Anita Bryant. And just a few years after Anita Bryant is AIDS. So you had AIDS casting this very, very long shadow over the bulk of the years since Stonewall. That's very tough.

Douglas Crimp just popped into my head, where he wrote that thing that he was at dinner one night after an ACT UP meeting and these younger guys that were there had never tasted cum, and nobody ever talks about this but it very important stuff, because what is life really like when you are living in an epidemic.

SS: A permanent epidemic.

BD: Well, yeah, and then to watch what [Michelangelo] Signorile and [Gabriel] Rotello were doing, I mean that was painful. By that I am referring to efforts to crimp sexual expression, using AIDS as a weapon. That was very hard to understand coming from people who should have known better.

I was at this one public meeting and we learned later, like Signorile was in the back, Michael Warner and others were in the front. In the back of the room Mike was there and he was talking and he said how bad this is because people have to learn how to control themselves because he had had some unsafe sex in Hawaii and suddenly the whole world has to listen to him, and Heidi Dorow was there and she said, “That’s just what they’ve to women and their bodies.”

And that was a wonderful way to tie it all together, because that was exactly what he was proposing, which is giving the state more power to regulate sex and use AIDS as an excuse.

SS: Did you ever talk to him directly about that? One on one?

BD: Yeah, but it at some point broke off. It was just a sex war where there is just a gulf. What I fear is that if something like that happened now, or it happened on a larger scale – there was a sex space that was closed, El Mirage – that there wouldn’t be anybody to respond. The fear is that we are still a minority and we are in a time where everything about marriage, domestic life, people who want to look and act and think straight is celebrated, but for those who are sexually active depending on what you’re sexual practices are, capital punishment is available in this country. And there is little awareness of that. It’s one of the lessons of ACT UP, which is sexual freedom.

SS: Can sex ever be permanently repressed?

BD: No, but you can drive a lot of it underground.

New York City doesn’t have any competition. So the more that they close down spaces.

(End Tape)