

# **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: **Chip Duckett**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Chip Duckett  
April 26, 2015

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so you just look at me. So you start with your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

CHIP DUCKETT: Chip Duckett. I am fifty-two. We are in Sarah Schulman's apartment in the East Village, and today's date is April 26, 2015.

**SS: And is Chip your real name?**

CD: Charles Edward, but I've only ever been called Chip.

**SS: Okay. And you grew up in Georgia.**

CD: I was born in Atlanta, and I grew up in Dalton, Georgia, which is a town about ninety miles north up I-75, where all the carpet comes from in the country.

**SS: What is Dalton like, or what was it like when you were growing up?**

CD: A small town, very religious, but oddly relatively liberal in many ways. Close enough to Atlanta to benefit from being near such a big city. If you wanted to take part in that, you could. And very much a one-industry town, because the vast majority of carpet in the U.S. comes from that area.

**SS: Were your parents involved in that business?**

CD: No.

**SS: What did they do?**

CD: My father was a truck driver, and my mom was a housewife.

**SS: Okay, now, were you raised with any kind of community orientation? Like, were your parents active in the church or any kind of neighborhood organizations?**

CD: Not particularly. We occasionally attended a Southern Baptist church, and then when I got to be in my early teens, twelve, thirteen, something like that, Anita Bryant came along. And I had always known I was gay, and I was very uncomfortable by the things that were being said in the church toward gay people, so I refused to go anymore. I didn't give them a reason. I just refused to go.

**SS: And how did they deal with that?**

CD: They said, "Sure you are."

And I said, "No, I'm not," and I didn't. So it didn't really make too big of a— they weren't particularly churchgoing people.

**SS: So, in other words, you took a political position before you actually came out, even.**

CD: Yeah, yeah, sure.

**SS: That's interesting. So you were already sort of standing up for things before you had any of the benefits of being gay, in a way.**

CD: Sure. I mean, I knew I was gay when I was very, very young, and my parents were very liberal and flexible. I could read very young, and so I was allowed to read anything that I wanted, and I checked out books on homosexuality from the library, and I was fully aware of what was going on. I wasn't acting on it. But the sort of hideous nature of Anita Bryant's actions and the kinds of things that were being said in the church by the pastor made me just flatly refuse.

**SS: Now, did you get flak in high school?**

CD: No. I had lots of openly gay friends. It was relatively easy. I mean, I was in high school from '77 to '81, and it was relatively easy. There were other openly

gay kids. I was not so much openly gay as not in the closet. I did have flings with boys in high school, and I had teachers that everybody knew were gay. I used to go in high school—sometimes I would stop by the Atlanta Gay Center, and they'd be concerned about this sixteen-year-old in this small town, like, "What is it like? Are you okay?"

And I was like, "It's really pretty easy." Like, I got through that period, which is so hard for some people, very easily.

**SS: So why was is there such a discrepancy between the mythology of a small town in Georgia and the actual reality?**

CD: You know, I have openly gay cousins that the family just didn't talk about, but everyone was fully aware, lesbian cousins who lived with partners. At one point, I asked my grandfather if one particular cousin was gay, and he just looked at me and said, "We hope not." But it was so obvious that she was. I think in much of the South in particular, a lot more eccentricity is allowed, if not outright celebrated, than you would imagine, and I think that there is that sort of southern veneer of if you don't want to address something, just don't address it.

**SS: Why do you think eccentricity is celebrated in the South?**

CD: Maybe just because I have crazy relatives and crazy family members and crazy people around me. But I do, I think eccentricity is celebrated in the South.

**SS: But what is the cultural reason for it?**

CD: I don't know. I just think it's—certainly, I mean, Atlanta today is very different than Atlanta was thirty years ago. There was a big nightclub movement in the seventies and the eighties that produced people like RuPaul, who was, at the time in Atlanta, very transgressive. I mean, the first time I saw RuPaul, she was wearing

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elephant bellbottom jeans made out of an American flag, and football shoulder pads with no shirt, and kind of messy Diana Ross in Central Park hair, but shaved to a Mohawk on the sides, and that was how she went out for the evening the first time that I met her. So I don't think you—you thought of that sort of image as happening in places like New York or London, but you didn't really think of them as happening in Atlanta.

**SS: Do you think the South has its own gay tradition?**

CD: Yeah, absolutely.

**SS: And that maybe display and ornamentation maybe are part of it?**

**Is that possible?**

CD: You know, I don't know. I mean, there certainly have always been people in small towns in the South and big cities in the South where the community at large was fully aware they were gay, and there were no repercussions for that. I'm sure in some cases there have been. But as a societal situation, it's not always that way. I think some places, obviously, are going to be—not necessarily connected to the size of the place, but some places are always going to be more tolerant than others for whatever reason, whether it's socioeconomic background, whether it's longstanding families who've lived there forever and ever and ever, versus people who move in and out. I think there could be all kinds of factors. I just lived in it. I didn't really analyze it too much.

**SS: So then when you left high school, you moved to Atlanta?**

CD: Well, I went to Florida to college. I went to Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, with a semester in London. And after graduation, I was in a long-term

relationship with someone at school, and that ended after I left, so about six months after I left college, graduated, then I moved to New York.

**SS: So let's just talk about that period for minute. So since you were in a couple, were you part of a larger gay community then?**

CD: I had a few friends, and I started going out to gay clubs when I was in, like, high school. I was already going to clubs in Atlanta and Chattanooga when I was in high school. So I always—the nightlife world resonated very deeply with me. I always said that movies that I saw within a few weeks of each other that were very formative in my adult development were *Saturday Night Fever* and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I took a little from each and developed my adult life.

I also was very fascinated, when I was fourteen or so, reading all the articles about Studio 54 and how the sort of extreme glamour and, you know, Liza Minnelli and Mikhail Baryshnikov dancing wildly at five in the morning, and that was very attractive to me, and ended up being sort of part of what I did for work. But I was attracted to that, so I always felt a part of that kind of community, too, that whole sort of nightlife, artsy sort of thing. It played a role, I guess, in my development.

**SS: What year did you come to New York?**

CD: Eighty-five.

**SS: Okay, so AIDS was already in play.**

CD: Yeah.

**SS: So while you were in Florida, were you aware of AIDS at all?**

CD: Yeah, I was very—I mean, I was obviously openly gay, with a boyfriend on campus and off campus. I read every issue of the *Advocate*, everything.

Everything that was available, I would read. So I was aware of it when there were still very earliest reporting. I was in a mostly monogamous relationship from '82 to '85, which were very key years to be in a monogamous relationship for gay men, particularly in Florida and California and New York, where there were so many cases already. So I was aware of it. And then I began to see some people become ill who were college friends, who I was aware of what that was. None of them are still here. Most of them didn't make it a very long time. That was starting to happen probably '84, early '85, which is when I left.

**SS: So when you moved here, were you shocked by the degree of AIDS in New York?**

00:10:00 CD: I wasn't shocked, because I was aware that this would happen. I remember thinking—I moved into the East Village, which I've lived, except for a couple years in the West Village, lived only in the East Village for thirty years. There was a perception, this neighborhood, the East Village, was a very trendy neighborhood and a very artistic neighborhood, and remains to be, to a varying degree and in varying ways, but at the time it was very edgy and, you know, squats and all kinds of things happening all around. And it was a very young neighborhood in terms of the gay men who were moving into this neighborhood. As always happens in New York City, there's an area which twenty to twenty-five-year-old gay men sort of take over, and then it sort of gentrifies up, and then the next generation of twenty-, twenty-five-year-olds. So it was the East Village and then it was Chelsea and then it was Hell's Kitchen and then it was Astoria and then it was Bushwick and then it was Williamsburg or whatever, you know.

So at the time, this neighborhood was a very young neighborhood, and there was kind of a perception that AIDS was much more prevalent in the West Village, as if a virus stopped at Fifth Avenue and refused to cross it. But there was that perception very much. That said, I was very adamant about safe sex. So I was single when I moved here, and I was always very adamant about safe sex.

**SS: So then how did the nightlife scene and AIDS interact in the early years?**

CD: In the early years. Well, I became a club promoter in New York, and the first event I did in a club was a benefit for Bailey House, which is a residence for people with AIDS at the foot of Christopher Street.

**SS: Where James Wentzy lives.**

CD: Yeah. I don't remember if I even told Bailey House I was doing it. I was throwing a birthday party for myself in a club. I was working as a publicist, and I was throwing a birthday party for myself. I went to clubs every night. I went to parties every night. And I decided it was getting bigger and bigger, so I moved it to a club. Initially it was just going to be in my apartment. And one of the hot clubs at the time was on Avenue C called The World, which held about 1,100, 1,200 people, maybe more, maybe more, and I kind of enlisted different people that I knew. There was, like, a big ballroom dance floor upstairs, and downstairs there was a big lounge that had a stage.

So I enlisted a lot of people I knew from the performance world and from the nightclub world to perform. So people like Karen Finley and Karen Black, Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, and lots of different—Tabboo! and all kinds of the East Village sort of scene, which was very prevalent then, all came in and performed. So

the lounge downstairs was five or six hours of performance, just one show after the other, and then dancing upstairs. And all the money would go to Bailey House. And it raised ten or twelve thousand dollars, which I kind of just walked into Bailey House and gave them a check. I really don't remember if I told them or not. If I did, they probably didn't think anything of it, like some kid just wandered in.

And as I became more of a club promoter and stopped being a publicist, I tried to interject some of the things about sex positivity, about safe sex being important, did some stuff with ACT UP within the clubs, both benefits, but also just some other stuff where there was a presence or there was maybe an art exhibition or something like that. There hadn't been a whole lot of nightclub presence in the world of AIDS before that, because many people were afraid that it would depress people, you know, when you saw the clubs, which is sort of parallel with the time that I moved here a lot of this was happening. It wasn't in the crowd that I was running with. The Saint was a big club on Second Avenue and Sixth Street, which was like sort of the cream of the gay clubs, and AIDS really decimated the people who attended that club or who were regulars in that club or that scene. AIDS decimated that club completely.

**SS: Why was that scene hit so hard?**

CD: You know, I have learned in the last thirty years never to wonder why some people didn't make it and why some people did. You can postulate that there was a lot of promiscuity. You can postulate that there were people who were extremely attractive, therefore, perhaps having a lot more sex than people not knowing that, you know, that a virus was spreading. You can wonder if, you know, people refused to face it because they couldn't bear it or because they had developed a community after—all of

those things are possible. But why did that actually happen to that group of people, I can't say.

**SS: Because that was like the A-list Pines group.**

CD: Yes, it was. Yeah, it was. And certainly promiscuous sex was a virtue in that time period, and so if you didn't know what was happening and didn't know how this disease could be spreading, then that's perhaps what happened there.

So club owners were afraid of the idea of an AIDS benefits. Mel Cheren, who owned Paradise Garage, did the big one. I think he was probably the first in—I'm going to guesstimate—'83. It's in his book. He wrote a book. I knew him well before he passed, but I don't remember the exact details. But I think he did the first big one in a club, that was just a club saying, "We're going to do this."

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**SS: Because Bruce Mailman, who owned The Saint, also owned the baths, right?**

CD: Right. Well, he owned the St. Mark's Baths. I don't know about any of the others.

**SS: Did he ever do benefits?**

CD: I don't know. I don't know. Not to my recollection, but that doesn't mean that it didn't happen.

It was sort of cool. Once I was looking at St. Mark's Baths as a location for a club. I had backers. And Bruce Mailman took me into the St. Mark's Baths, which when they shuttered it, they literally just shuttered it. There were still towels laying on the floor. I mean, they literally just closed the doors and chained them shut, and it was kind of wild to see. You know, this was after—when would this have been—'89, '89-

'90? And I don't think anybody to speak of had even been in there since. It was like a weird time capsule.

So I don't remember Bruce doing AIDS benefits. I also don't know what he did personally with money. He had a lot of money, and he may have been giving money places. I didn't know him well at all. I mean, I knew him, but not well.

But, I mean, as I would get a little bit of publicity here and there, I would often try to insert—you can find a *New York Magazine* story about my birthday party in 1989, in which I talk about how important it is to realize that promiscuity can still be good, but that safe sex is what's important. So I would try in whatever small way to put it out there publicly I could. I mean, it's not like anybody really cares what some twenty-six-year-old who throws parties for a living has to say about their sex lives, but, still, you know, it was important to put it out there, because I was always a little bit afraid.

I guess because I started going out before the age of AIDS, so I experienced, you know, clubs and stuff in the seventies, I was always a little bit afraid that things would start to turn moralistic and that sort of that celebration of sexuality that's so much a part of gay life, period, as far as I'm concerned, but certainly in that very free period in the late seventies and early eighties, I was always afraid that there might be a schoolmarmish tone taken about sex, and which, indeed, seemed to be happening to some extent in the mid-eighties when I first came to New York and the bath houses were being closed and the sex clubs were being closed, which, of course, didn't do anything but drive it underground, because it did not cease to exist. It moved to unlicensed tenement buildings, and sex parties instead of being in a bathhouse that's licensed and safe, it then goes into a basement or an industrial building that's not set up for safety. So

it did nothing positive except create scare-mongering headlines and make things a little bit more dangerous for people who—because, face it, no one's ever going to be told by the government who they can and can't sleep with or under what circumstances.

**SS: Good. Thank you for saying that. So when did you first become acquainted with ACT UP?**

CD: I believe it was the 1987 March on Washington, which I was there, and I was just very attracted to the whole image. I was attracted to it being multigenerational, because I think that at least the perception of somebody in their early twenties in that period was that they weren't necessarily wanted in any meaningful capacity by some of the more established, establishment sort of organizations. And I was very attracted to the energy and the idea of direct action and protest.

When I was a kid, I read a lot as a kid about all different topics, and I still tend to sort of binge-read. Like I'll read a book on elephants, then I'll read another ten books about elephants. Like, I'll binge on a subject. And I went through a period in high school of studying about Students for a Democratic Society and different sorts of protests that happened in the sixties, and I was always a little bit envious of not having been of a time and of a place that you could be effective in that manner and sort of bond together with other people and using their strengths and your strengths, never knowing, obviously, that in the eighties I would end up in that sort of situation.

And the side of it that I hadn't really thought so much about was that that was happening because of the horror of the war and the horror of the things that were happening socially in the sixties, which is what fomented that. So that's clearly what happened with ACT UP, you know, as well. Like, we were voiceless, or felt voiceless, or

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felt that people wanted to take away our voices or ignore us or sweep it under the rug, and this was a way to sort of come together and do something about it rather than just take it.

So I was really attracted to the sort of diverse types of people that came into ACT UP, and I was attracted to what appeared to be a very high intelligence level of people within that group. That was a really—you know, you really felt that you could go into meetings with ACT UP and learn so much, and learn so much from people who under—I mean, I have certainly my strengths. I could never have been in Treatment Action Group. I could never have been in—you know, I still—I think it's breathtaking when you see what some of those people did and what they learned and what they taught themselves. And it was a real learning experience to be part of that, but to also feel like—it's hard to describe, but it always felt like, at least in those years, that lots of people contributed what they were good at, and that it worked together to form a unit. And that was kind of breathtaking, you know.

**SS: So when did you start bringing your skills to ACT UP?**

CD: I don't remember exactly, but it would have happened in late '87 or early '88, because by the time the FDA action happened, I coordinated the media response on that. So I had been around for long enough to do that, to be the person who was sort of overseeing that at that time.

**SS: What did that involved exactly?**

CD: I worked pretty closely with Urvashi Vaid from National Gay and Lesbian Task Force NGLTF, and we set up press releases and worked together to come up with everything from photo ops, because there were people from all over the country

at that action. I mean, obviously it would take an hour to describe that action, so just look it up. But there were people from all over the country, ACT UP and other affiliated groups and unaffiliated people. I don't remember how many. Thousands, I guess. And they were from all over the country. So, for example, we set up photo ops where people held up signs with the state or the city that they came from, all in a group, with the FDA shutdown in the background, because that's a photo that tells a story without having to read an article. It tells you exactly what you need to see in one picture.

So, you know, from that to having doughnuts and coffee at a press table starting at six in the morning, so as people were coming—I mean, obviously people were aware and notified that this action was happening. I don't think that the government really expected it to be anywhere near the scale it was.

**SS: How many people came, do you think?**

CD: I don't remember. I don't remember. Thousands. As is always the case when you work—because I worked on—I wasn't really the media coordinator for ACT UP. I remember I was for that action. I didn't oversee the whole thing. Michelangelo [Signorile] did and Jay Blotcher did. But I did on some specific actions. So anytime you're coordinating that sort of thing, your scope of everything is a little bit limited because you've got specific things that have to happen. You won't see me in footage in that action, because I would have been behind the cameras helping get that to happen.

One of my favorite realizations at that action was you realize that people were being arrested over and over because they were being taken to the jail and then released because there wasn't room for them, and they were coming back and getting

arrested again. I loved that. The idea that we were just sort of cycling through the system to shut it down was pretty—

**SS: So at that point, I mean, that was our first really major national action. When you were calling media, what kind of responses were you getting?**

CD: I don't really remember. I mean, I'd worked as a publicist, so I had—I didn't—I worked in entertainment publicity and publishing publicity, so I didn't really have news contacts, but I knew how to find them and how to do it. So I'm sure we put out press releases and press alerts, and I, sadly, didn't save any of that. I'm not a big saver. So I've always had this fear of being like Miss Havisham, knitting in the corner, pulling out press clippings and saying, "Remember when I was young?" So I kind of have a phobia of being that person, so I tossed it all.

**SS: Let me ask you this. So there were a number of individuals in ACT UP like yourself who were professionals and who had relationships with people in the media. Mike had come from *People* magazine, I believe, right?**

CD: I don't know. Maybe.

**SS: And Bob Rafsky had been in advertising. I mean, how important was that fact in propelling ACT UP forward in the media?**

00:25:00 CD: In the media it was very important because we were really savvy about it, you know. We knew what played on TV and we knew what played in a magazine article, and we knew how to give a sound bite and we knew how to train people to, you know, to do interviews, to respond to things, to do talking points, to do—you know, skills to use on the radio. I mean, I used to show people how to do that as part of my job.

So it didn't hurt that the pictures themselves were sexy, that there were lots of young people in tight clothes getting dragged down the street or whatever. Those are really sexy pictures, and by sexy I mean in terms of media pickup. So it didn't—you know, there was a lot to work with, and there were ways of sort of spinning, like the way that you target something or the way that you—the only time I ever felt like it missed and that I was really opposed to—and in retrospect I was wrong—I didn't agree with the St. Patrick's demonstration. I really thought that was going to inflame a situation that might not be—and I was wrong. I was wrong. In retrospect, it's good that—it had to happen in a shocking way to start that conversation, and it was plenty shocking to a lot of people, and continues to be to a lot of people. But I think that somebody needed to break that image of this infallible and inarguable institution, that it was beyond limits. So that's probably the only time I was ever wrong.

**SS: I just want to ask you a little bit more about the media. So, prior to ACT UP, there had been images of Gay Liberation Movement in the media, but they were still sort of exoticized. Gay people were still represented as freaks.**

CD: Right.

**SS: Now, when AIDS started, the initial images of people with AIDS in the media were dying people who were emaciated, that kind of thing. How come the media was willing to change the way they depicted people with AIDS from dying, defeated people to people who were proactive?**

CD: If you have a picture of Peter Staley standing on top of the FDA waving a flag and with the thousands of people shutting it down, you show me those people as being emaciated and dying. ACT UP was active, and ACT UP was taking

proactive steps, and it's very difficult to take those photos and say, "These poor, sad creatures who are wasting away," because it wasn't the case, and, I think, even made stronger by the fact that sometimes there were people who were very, very ill and noticeably ill at those actions, that it was, you know—I think the overarching, I don't know, theme that media coverage could take on was that these people are not going to shut up and they are not going to back down, and it doesn't matter if you're the FDA or the mayor of New York or the city of New York, because we'll just shut down the Brooklyn Bridge and see how that goes for you. So I think that it's really hard to paint these people as victims, "these people" meaning us.

I also do feel like that a lot was gained from people who were particularly savvy in doing interviews. Peter Staley on *Crossfire*, you know, to hold your own and to be smart, clearly smart, and respond back and forth to people who have an agenda against you, you know, that was being taken into people's living rooms. And I think it's hard for—purely from a standpoint of being a news producer or a television producer or an editor, it's hard not to embrace that kind of conflict and to show who these people are in ways that you didn't expect. I also do feel like you are talking about largely people in New York and Washington who were these producers and these editors. They weren't people in some hick place that, you know, the idea that there was a gay person or a person with AIDS was so mortifying. This city certainly had come past that. It wasn't always the easiest place to be gay, certainly, but I don't think the pariah factor really existed. I think there was a lot of fear about AIDS itself, and I think that maybe that played into some of that early coverage, because people didn't know how it was

transmitted. They didn't know, you know, was this a gay illness, was this—you know. I think that had to do with it a lot more.

00:30:00 I think one of the things that ACT UP, in terms of a media outreach, always tried to do was to—I mean, I can remember doing fact sheets for the FDA that gave terminology and that said “Gay Facts,” that were clearly and easily digestible for reporters, with, usually, and I think in this case, multiple contacts who could speak intelligently on different aspects of things, that, “Here are two contacts or three contacts for women’s issues with AIDS. Here’s two or three contacts that you can contact directly as a reporter, so you don’t have to funnel through one person or two people. Here are twelve people who can speak on these four areas that we’re focusing on,” so that that can maybe escalate coverage.

With something like the FDA, you needed that coverage to generate immediately, so you didn’t need to be calling Urvashi Vaid and say, “Hey, can you hook me up with somebody?” We tried to figure out what areas needed to be covered, whether it was how long do the protocols take, or whatever, figure out who could speak on these subjects best, talk to them, be sure they were comfortable with that and comfortable with being put in front of potentially a national news media, and are you comfortable with having us handing this out and not screaming it. Because if you’re doing that, then that name gets spread all over, and you need to be sure.

But people were excited to do that, and there were many issues that I could not have been the person—I would not have been the best person to speak on. I didn’t do very many of those kinds of interviews, only when somebody had to and there was nobody else around. I was much better at finding the people who really knew about

this stuff. Like the efficacy trials, sure, I can say what needs to be said, but if you ask me a deeper question, I would have to find out, and so you should bypass me completely and go to the people who can do that.

**SS: I have just one more question about this. In the early phase, were there journalists who were closeted about being gay and being HIV-positive, and were they obstructions or did they help?**

CD: You know, I'm sure there were journalists who were closeted. I'm sure of that, because I do know some people who were closeted who were journalists. I would never have thought to ask if they were HIV-positive, nor would I today. So I don't know about that. The people that I knew who were in the closet were not obstructionists, because I probably wouldn't have been friendly with them if they were. So, personally, I mean, I'm certainly aware that that happened. Never happened to me in any way. I was never, you know, never in the closet about working with ACT UP and about these AIDS issues. I mean, I was a publicist for the doctor on *The Today Show*, of his own company, not for *The Today Show*. But he was the doctor on *The Today Show*, for his own company. I had conversations with him about AIDS, including content issues about a book that he was writing about AIDS that I had some minor concerns but was totally comfortable in sitting down with him and saying, "I'm just a publicist," and saying, "I think that I want to ask you about some of the passages in this book, because I think that some of them may be a little bit problematic, and I think some of them may send a message that you don't necessarily mean to be sending," which we talked about. And I think he made one or two changes and said most of the rest of them I was overstating a

concern. But the fact is that I was out of the closet in terms of being an AIDS, not just being gay, but in terms of being an AIDS activist then.

I later moved to a publishing company, and that's when I began doing nightclub parties that I got publicity for, so they were certainly aware of what I was doing there. And then in eighty—I'm going to say '88; I don't remember exactly—all the publishing houses in New York, all the major publishing houses joined forced to do a book called *You Can Do Something About AIDS*. And there were about twenty-five chapters, and each chapter was written by either a medical person or a celebrity or somebody from the gay AIDS community, you know, each chapter on one particular facet, designed to sort of make it easier to grasp a concept for the public who maybe didn't know very much about AIDS besides that it's bad and gay, you know.

00:35:00 So all the publishers got together and did it, and they printed a million copies and gave them away free in bookstores all over the country and they asked—for all of the aspects of the book, production and promotion, they asked for volunteers from within all the houses. And so I was on the PR Committee for that. I specifically did celebrity people. So the people who wrote chapters, I didn't have access to Elizabeth Taylor, but I had Beverly Johnson; I had Greg Louganis. Beverly was particularly active and flew to L.A. to do a press conference with us. So that was sort of my niche from within that.

I can't find a copy of it, because it's an interesting book, and it's really a time capsule, the idea that some of the things that were in that book had to be expressed, that there needed to be that level of instruction, because, obviously, by the mid, late eighties, all of us in the LGBT community in New York were very well versed on a lot of

this stuff. But the idea was really that this would be in bookstores all over the country. I'm sure the major chains gave it out. I'm sure they all did, because nobody's going to tell Random House and Simon & Schuster and, you know, all of these publishers, you know, that they were not going to do this. So I did that aspect, and then I got some celebrities to do, like, radio spots to talk about the book and say that you could get it for free. So that was kind of what I did with that.

**SS: Which celebrities were attracted to ACT UP?**

CD: Susan Sarandon. Now, I was talking about that book project.

**SS: Right. I'm just moving on.**

CD: Susan Sarandon was. Keith Haring was part of ACT UP. Michael Connelly was in ACT UP.

**SS: Who's Michael Connelly?**

CD: Writer. Yoko Ono did the benefit. Grace Jones did a benefit. Yoko Ono came to a benefit. Grace Jones did a benefit. Who else? Some of the—I hate to say this, but some of the events that I worked on myself then, they blur together a little bit. I can tell you there was a couple ACT UP benefits, and I can tell you a couple celebrities who did events with me, but I can't really remember was Ricki Lake on that ACT UP event or was Ricki Lake on a different event. So it's kind of hard for me to remember that stuff exactly. Like, I don't want to say something and it be wrong. But there were—I mean, Keith Haring took part in protests. Who else was around? Jennie Livingston was part of ACT UP. Maria Maggenti was part of ACT UP and became a filmmaker in the course of that period of time and was never shy about asking for donations. And made a great movie, so good. Who else? I don't know.

**SS: So in terms of New York nightlife, what clubs were associated with ACT UP? Like, where did ACT UP people go and what was the process?**

CD: Anywhere I was working.

**SS: Like, tell us some of the places.**

CD: Mars, Carmelita's, Quick.

**SS: Carmelita's was on 14<sup>th</sup>, that upstairs place.**

CD: Fourteenth, yeah. It was over the diner. That doughnut place, Disco Donut, that was where the scene in *Taxi Driver* was shot, with Jodie Foster was the teen prostitute in the diner. That was that diner. And then there was a two-story sort of, I guess, Puerto Rican wedding reception house that was so, so gaudy and so brilliant. It had, like, flocked wallpaper and cheap fake crystal chandeliers, but the ceilings were so low you could pull things off the crystal chandeliers.

And I did that party, and in kind of an attempt, I called it "Boy Plus Boy, Girl Plus Girl." There were two floors, and I tried to do an event that sort of not just specifically targeted ACT UP, but that sort of younger East Village downtown sort of mentality, but to try to specifically create an event that lesbians and gay men could both enjoy and could enjoy mingling together, because that has never been an easy task in nightlife in this city or any other. And it worked. It was, I would say, probably 40 percent lesbian, and there were—because a lot of people from within ACT UP, I think this helped spur that, because there were so many lesbians working at ACT UP. And so there were young gay guys who, if they had just been going to the bars, maybe would not have had those friendships or known those people. I think that helped. It helped spin that along. It wasn't a specifically ACT UP hangout per se. I mean, it wasn't just like a post-

meeting trip to the diner or whatever, but I think it did kind of spur it. And it was very, very successful.

And then the Happy Land fire happened in the Bronx, which was the biggest nightclub disaster in New York history, and a lot of people burned to death inside, a nightclub without not proper licensing. And the next day we discovered that Carmelita's had the same landlord.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

00:40:00 CD: So that was the end of Carmelita's. Both for me, I moved that party the next day to the Mike Todd Room at the Palladium, which did not have the same vibe and did not really work. I mean, it was okay, but there was no point in doing something if it wasn't really cool. So, I mean, it wasn't unsuccessful, but it wasn't—there was this energy at Carmelita's and, you know, that—and it never got bad because it was really going up and up and peaking. And then the Happy Land fire happened.

**SS: Because Carmelita's was a new space, and people already knew the Mike Todd Room, maybe that was—**

CD: Well, Carmelita's was not a new space. It was just they had never done anything gay. There were all kinds of really hipstery heterosexual parties, but they'd never done anything gay. And I went to them said, "You know, this is what I want to do," and they were kind of dubious at first. But it, of course, made a huge amount of money for them, because my people like to drink.

So it was fun. There was nothing quite like it, and it was a real shame. But when Happy Land happened, there was no question that place was going down. I mean, it was not licensed as a dance club. It was licensed as a reception hall. It wasn't

wholly unlicensed, but, I mean, it had a legal liquor license. It had a legal certificate of occupancy. It was not licensed to be a dance club. And after the horror of Happy Land, there was no way the city was going to let that go on. No way. So it wasn't even a question. I pulled out before the city showed up. But I think the city showed up four or five days later and just shut it down.

**SS: As a promoter – we've interviewed a lot of people, and people say that in the early years of ACT UP pretty much everyone had safe sex at ACT UP sexual events, and then there was a certain point where that started to change. And when you started to see that change in nightlife, how did you respond as a producer?**

CD: Well, I didn't produce sex parties, so I didn't really see people having unsafe sex at my parties. So I don't really quite know how to answer that, because when I saw it begin to happen in friends' personal lives, we would talk about it. I tried to keep in mind that different people have different situations and that I'm certainly a public proponent of safe sex still. But if someone is HIV-positive already, that puts the decisions that they make into a different sort of place, and I'm certainly—I'm not the sex mafia or the sex police, and I'm not going to tell people what they should or shouldn't do. If it were a friend, a close friend, I would certainly have said something to them and possibly even if it was just an acquaintance, if I felt it—certainly if it was an acquaintance if I felt like they were putting themselves at real risk.

I had an employee once who I discovered was doing extraordinarily high-risk stuff, extraordinarily high-risk stuff, which proved to be connected to drugs later, but who I had a very, very firm talk with, because he was also putting himself out in a public

way that could—it was not acceptable, both on a personal standpoint and on the fact that he worked for us.

**SS: Because inside the ACT UP culture, of course, this was really a divisive question. Like, on one hand, people were like, “Well, everyone makes their own decisions.” And Aldo Hernandez had Meat, the Meat party, and was even brought to the floor of ACT UP at one point. People raised in ACT UP that they thought—this was at the beginning of unsafe sex in public sex clubs. Then you have the other extreme, Mike and Gabriel Rotello going around with the police and the media into sex clubs. So ACT UP really was all over the world on this. How did you experience those kind of discussions?**

CD: I think some of this comes down to what you considered unsafe sex and what you did not consider unsafe sex. Like blowjobs in a dark room did not concern me in the least. Somebody in a sling out of their mind not knowing what’s going on to them, even, that’s a horrifying situation, period. So, you know, I think you have—my own feeling always, in terms of safe sex, was that I am responsible for keeping myself safe. And you can never assume anything about any partner that you have. So in terms of personal responsibility, I always took complete responsibility for whatever happens, because I think that’s all you can do.

I don’t think I ever went to Meat, because I think I had a party the same night as Meat, which happened a lot. I only went to SqueezeBox once on New Year’s Eve because I had an event the same night, a weekly night at the same time. So I didn’t get—there were lots of holes in what my experiences were, so I don’t really know what

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happened, what went on there. I don't know. I certainly went to sex parties. I'm not going to say that I didn't do that. I just didn't go to that one.

**SS: Well, let me ask you this in a different way. So we've been interviewing a lot of people, and a lot of ACT UP people have had really serious problems with crystal. People from ACT UP have died. A lot of people now are really struggling. We've been doing this project for fifteen years, and as the years pass, more and more people are having that problem. So as someone who's producing gay nightlife, you must have started to see crystal appearing at greater and greater levels.**

CD: I see it—I saw it socially. I didn't see it in my kinds of parties and events, but I don't—I mean, I honestly don't know what crystal meth would look like at a party. Like how does someone behave in a nightclub if they're on crystal meth, I don't know the answer to that. I certainly have lots of friends who had problems with it, and a couple who still do.

**SS: How do you understand how our generation has been so troubled by it?**

CD: I don't know. I was interviewed by another study on AIDS very recently, and they asked the same question. They asked—I never had—I've never tried that, and it didn't appeal to me, and I don't know—I don't know and couldn't speak to why it had such a strong appeal to people, particularly people who are so intelligent and so accomplished. You know, I have friends who died from effects connected to that drug, who I loved and respected, and I really don't know the answer to that. I mean, I

certainly dabbled in a drug here and there, not that one, and I don't know why it suddenly became so huge.

I remember in nineteen—let me figure out where this was. 1990, Jake Corbin, who was a porn star who was also very active in ACT UP, went to work in San Francisco for, like, six months, and he came back and said, “Whatever you do, don't try crystal meth.”

And I said, “What's going on?”

And he said, “It's ruining people's lives, and it's coming this way.”

And I didn't have any plans to try it. I just sort of remember that. But I remember him saying that, after spending a few months in San Francisco where apparently it hit harder first. But I don't have an answer for that.

**SS: Okay. So let's go back to ACT UP. So when did you leave ACT UP?**

CD: There wasn't a formal break. I think there was a very widespread fatigue spreading at a certain period, and I can't even tell you exactly when that was. I'm going to guess '92. Does that sound about right? There was the period before the drug cocktails worked, where a very deep fatigue was setting in on so many people, because it seemed like no matter what happened, this promising drug didn't work well or that promising drug had bad side effects, or people were still just getting sicker and sicker and there was a period—and losing people. Because my bad year was '93-'94, where I lost so many friends. Certainly by the time that period hit, because I couldn't—I was having trouble functioning on a day-to-day basis, like there were times when I would get out of bed and just sort of sit and be depressed.

So there was no active aspect to—because I needed to put—I had to deal with that. There was a period of several months, almost a year, that I didn't even work at all. One of my best friends had a very long decline, that I decided I would spend a lot of time with. That wasn't the sole reason I wasn't working, but that enabled me—he lived not too far away, and it enabled me to spend hours every day there.

So certainly by '93, I wasn't active with ACT UP really anymore. There was never—like, I never had a break with ACT UP for me. There became a period where meetings were becoming very contentious, that you sort of came out with your stomach in a knot, and instead of feeling that you were banding together, you sort of felt like—and, you know, there were always rumors that there were agitators being sent in. And I wouldn't be surprised about that, certainly, but I don't know who those people would be. It would be fascinating. I wonder if the Freedom of Information Act stuff is—

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**SS: I have the file, and it's all redacted, so obviously there was somebody there, because it's all blacked out.**

CD: Yeah. Well, I didn't think they'd put the name on it, a nice big photo saying, "Hi, gotcha."

So somewhere in that period I did become active in the Boycott Colorado movement around that amendment, and I kind of did the media for that. And then after about a year, that sort of had run its course, for all kinds of reasons. I mean, I did the press for ACT UP's anniversary Wall Street thing last year, year and a half, two years ago. Yeah, I did the press for that. So they called and said, "Would you come back in and do it?" So I did.

**SS: So technically you're still in ACT UP, really.**

CD: Sure. I don't think you ever get out.

**SS: Right. Do you have any questions for Chip?**

**JIM HUBBARD: No.**

**SS: James?**

**JAMES WENTZY: What year did—was that Bailey House your first—**

CD: It would be '87 or '88, maybe eighty—you know what? It was around my birthday, because it was officially my birthday party, so it would have been '88. It would have been March '88.

**JW: And why did you pick Bailey House?**

CD: I read—you know, I read all the gay press here and everything, and I did a little research, and it seemed like it could use the money and was something I felt like could maybe—I didn't know how much money would be raised, you know. I figured a few thousand dollars, maybe. But it seemed like it could be put to really good use, and that there might be ways to further benefit it.

I don't remember what it was for, but I took Ricki Lake and this actress—was it Emily Watson, maybe? Somebody who had a hot movie at that time, and we went over and did a video tour of Bailey House, with Bailey House's obvious permission. I don't even remember what that was for. But I know we did it, because Ricki I had met because she was going to do—I think it was the—I can look this up and find the exact dates. But I was doing an event, and I think it might have been that first event, but there was an event that I was doing that Divine was either supposed to appear or to do a taped, you know, like a big videotaped thing saying, "Sorry, I can't be there," or appear. And

then she passed away. And so I somehow connected to Ricki and Michael St. Gerard. He played the cute Link, the cute guy in *Hairspray*. And so they came sort of representing Divine and said some stuff from the DJ booth or the stage, just, you know, supportive and sort of honoring Divine at this event. I know it was a benefit. I don't remember which one. It would have been in March 1988. No, that's when my birthday party would have been. It was one of the first two or three events I did. There's also a lot of alcohol involved in these events, so it's kind of hard sometimes. It's sometimes hard to remember exactly, and it's been a long time, you know, such a long time, but—you know.

**SS: So I only have one more question. Is there anything we haven't covered that you think we should?**

**JW: Were there any specific ACT UP benefits that you did?**

CD: I know I did. I just don't remember what, you know. I know I did one or two, but there was just—I did like three thousand parties in clubs, and they blur. They really do blur together, and I really did not keep anything, no invitations, no posters. I really did—I really felt like I was afraid of being that person who just sits around and looks at scrapbooks, and I always want to do new things. And I'm happy to look backward fondly, but I don't want to obsess on the past. I really want to always move forward. I don't want it to be like it was in the old days. I want it to be better than it was the old days. So I really kind of consciously made the decision to not take clippings and to not save invitations and posters and stuff like that.

I mean, let me think. I mean, everybody knows this, so it's not like I'm saying something that you haven't been told 185 times previously, but a very big part in

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the attraction was this sort of artistic explosion that happened within ACT UP, which I was not personally part of, but, I mean, the visual artists of the sort of—you know, the kind of creative people who participated in lots of areas of ACT UP, not always as a creative outlet, but there was such a creative energy that is different than any other group or organization I have ever heard of or ever imagined.

I think sort of the terribleness of the times plus action, being able to do direct action, spurred a lot of people's creativity in really exciting ways, and I think there was also, I think, about that, a sense of urgency that because so many artists were dying and so many creative people's voices were being silenced, that I think there was some—you know. I always felt like there was a sense of urgency about everything. I think that's why the burnout started to happen. I think you can only go at volume eleven for so many years before you just start breaking down. So if that makes any sense. I don't think I'm making sense. Tell me if I'm not.

**SS: Yeah, totally.**

CD: Okay.

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

CD: I think the greatest achievement is something that you alluded to earlier, which is that ACT UP helped change the way AIDS was viewed and the way people with AIDS were viewed. And I think that perhaps I did not even think about to what extent until this conversation, because I didn't really think about the fact that, as you mentioned, those media images were starkly different than they had been previously. So I think maybe the biggest achievement was changing the dialogue, not only on the

image of the person with AIDS but also on the Catholic Church. On so many topics, ACT UP was a game changer in the perception and in the coverage and in the conversation. And I think that the changes that needed to happen had to have something startling happen to force it, like the Church, like the Catholic Church, and I think ACT UP was able to do that and willing to do that.

And the other thing that I think was most important was that ACT UP brought together so many different types of people. I don't think that you could overestimate the importance of women in the early years of AIDS, and I think that ACT UP allowed there to be, you know, actual action going on together, not just in a caregiver sense, which was so important for so many people, but also that men and women were together working. Gay men and gay women have not always mixed so easily together, and I think that that was really important. And I think that changed the way a lot—at least this group of people and this generation, it changed a little bit the way that that interaction within this community happened, and I think that ACT UP was instrumental in that.

Disappointments. I think we all could have taken better care of each other emotionally. I think that.

**SS: Are you thinking about something specifically?**

CD: About what?

**SS: Are you thinking about something specifically?**

CD: No, I'm thinking about, you know, I think we were all fighting so much pain and so much individually difficult, that we should have been, in the ways that we were able to come together, to do actions or to, you know, go to a great art auction

that somebody managed to con Mapplethorpe out of some works to auction or whatever. I think that we should have had the foresight to take some real steps with each other to be sure that emotionally we were all supported in whatever ways needed to be, and I think that we failed in that.

**SS: Okay. Thank you, Chip. This has been a really great interview. I learned a lot.**

CD: Oh, okay, good.

**SS: Thank you very, very much.**

CD: No, my pleasure. You got what you needed?

**SS: Yep, totally. A lot of things that we had not heard before.**

CD: Really?

**SS: Yeah.**

CD: What?

**SS: Well, I mean, the way that the FDA was—the way that the media work was structured at the FDA. I mean, no one said—I never heard that before.**

CD: Ask Jim Fouratt. I fought with him all day long. He wanted my walkie-talkie and I said no.