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Interviewee: **Brent Nicholson and Nathaniel Siegel**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Brent Nicholson Earle and Nathaniel Siegel
December 11, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: Here we are with Nathaniel Siegel and Brent Nicholson Earle, who are two friends who met in ACT UP and are still friends to this day. The way we start is if each of you could tell me your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

BRENT NICHOLSON EARLE: Okay. Brent Nicholson Earle, sixty-one years of age, bearing down on sixty-two next month. Today is December 11th, 19 — no, December 11th, 2012. What is it?

SS: December 13th.

BE: What is it?

SS: Oh, today's the 11th? Oh, sorry.

BE: Today's the 11th, December 11th, 2012.

SS: And we are —

BE: We are at 2350 Broadway, Apartment 1016, where I have domiciled for thirty-eight and a half years.

SS: And Nathaniel?

NATHANIEL SIEGEL: I'm Nathaniel Alan Siegel. I'm forty-five years old, and we're here in New York City on December 11th, 2012, and I'm at Brent's apartment.

SS: Great. So let's get a little bit of your backgrounds. Where did you grown up, Nathaniel?

NS: I grew up in a small town in Massachusetts called Mattapoisett. It's on the Cape.

SS: Were there a lot of Jews there?

NS: Interesting you should ask that. There were two religions in my hometown. You were either Protestant or Catholic, but there was a synagogue in New Bedford, Mass.

SS: How did your family get up there?

NS: My great-grandfather was a federal judge in Brooklyn, and he had a summer home in Mattapoisett. It was a summer community. And all of his children fell in love with that community, and they stayed there.

SS: That's very interesting. Where did you grow up, Brent?

BE: I grew up on the Niagara frontier. My family's Canadian. I'm Canadian by blood, but I was born in the States, Niagara Falls, New York. My parents immigrated to the U.S. after World War II, and my family stayed in — well, I grew up in a small village called Wilson, New York, about 1,200 people, from '51 to '60.

Then my father got a new job. He was running an institution for the aged in the big, bustling metropolis of Lockport, New York, about 25,000 people. Lockport is the county seat of Niagara County, but it was created because it's right on the edge of the Niagara escarpment. So when they were building the Erie Barge Canal, they had to put locks in to get the canal to reach up to Lake Erie. So, Lockport for many, many years has had a very high capita of bars per population, since that's what really created the town originally, the bars that grew up while the boatmen were waiting for their boats to go up through the locks.

SS: Now, in your family, was your family involved in any kind of politics or community identification or —

NS: Absolutely. As I mentioned, my great-grandfather was a federal judge at the Kings County Courthouse in Brooklyn, and his politics were really great. At the turn of the century, he emphasized the rights of immigrants. He was the first to put translators in the courts in Brooklyn. He was also responsible for letting women testify without feeling intimidated in cases of rape or abuse. He also separated men from women in the jails at the turn of the century, because at that time they were put together. So this is information I've just recently discovered, researching my great-grandfather, and his politics are in line with mine.

SS: What about your parents?

00:05:00 NS: My father is a jazz musician, and he worked for the State of Massachusetts in the Welfare Department. So he was responsible for the Department of Social Services, making sure that people received their checks. So that was a way in which he was helping people out socially. My mother was a stay-at-home mom.

SS: What about your family?

BE: My father was raised on a farm in the middle of Manitoba, and he was a linotypist by trade originally. He was a Canadian paratrooper during World War II, and he was stationed primarily in Germany and then the Netherlands during World War II. When he returned from the war, he started getting jobs like — they actually moved to Bermuda for about three years, and he worked for the paper there, and then they finally emigrated out of Canada and he ultimately had his own printing business for about ten years, which he then got swindled out of by his best friend who he'd started the business with, which led to the job where he was administrator of the home for the aged for about ten years, which brought us to Lockport.

SS: Were your parents politically aware?

BE: Oh, they were aware. My mother was the daughter of Methodist missionaries, she was born in China, and the family had to move back to Toronto. I think it was about 1914, when my grandfather took ill, and he ultimately died.

And my grandmother then remarried another missionary, who happened to be a friend of the family, kind of thing. He'd lost his wife, and then they started working with the Cree Indians in northern Manitoba at a very far remote outpost called Norway House. My mother took her high school by correspondence and then went to college at the University of Winnipeg. And to go home, the stories were always that the only way to get home was by canoe and portage.

SS: What were their attitudes toward the Vietnam War, for example?

Because you were draft age.

BE: I was draft age. I was indeed. I wasn't about to — I mean, I did contemplate moving to Canada, because I certainly wasn't going to go to Vietnam. But I came to New York to become an actor, so I gave an all-out performance the day of my induction physical.

SS: Performance of what?

BE: Of all sorts of things. I didn't simply rely on checking the box, you know, to get out. I got a 4-F because they really didn't want to have me at all, because I wanted to make sure there wasn't any chance that I was going to be inducted into the army. It was a high-drama performance that day.

My mother was more socially active. She was a schoolteacher. She was involved with the community relations project. She took a sabbatical from teaching for

about three years to do something called human relations projects, that she did out of Buffalo, and a lot of working. This is right around the time of Martin Luther King's assassination, Bobby Kennedy's assassination. We were working. We were doing a play. We did it maybe fifty times in the western New York area, about prejudice, a small one-act play called *Some of My Best Friends*. So that raised my consciousness a great deal. But I was not politically acclimated. I came to New York to be an actor, so I was very career-driven. Even though I was a child of Stonewall, I mean, Stonewall was my first gay bar and I met my first boyfriend there, but it took the AIDS crisis for me to become socially and politically conscious.

00:10:00 **SS: Ok then, let's back a little bit. What was your gay life like before you moved to New York?**

NS: It's interesting you should ask that. My gay life started in Boston, at Boston University, where I came out in graduate school. But, I was just thinking about — if I can keep my train of thought. So, my gay life really happened when I was in graduate school.

SS: And is that what made you decide, in part, to come to New York?

NS: No, I came to New York because I was going to be a buyer for Bloomingdale's. I was recruited out of graduate school to be a buyer, so I bought men's designer clothing in the early nineties.

But, I do remember what I wanted to say. It had to do with politics. I was in high school in a small town. I was my class president, and the reason for that is I got along with every group of people. I was among the top students, but I got along with the artists and the jocks and everyone. And we had something called Boys State, which is

kind of like a model government. I know you didn't ask me about political involvement

—

SS: That's okay.

NS: — but that was in early — just talking about being active politically.

SS: And what was your gay life like before you moved to New York?

BE: Well, I took my last year of high school at a place called Interlochen Arts Academy, where I'd gone for five summers to national music camp. So my last year of high school, all my friends were really two years ahead of me and they were all graduating, so it served me well to be able to leave when they were leaving and to kind of get kind of a college living away from home type of experience, because I really was really into getting a professional theatrical training.

So I missed out on getting into Juilliard, which would have given me the degree that my parents so coveted that I would get. But, instead, I went to the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater, and then did not get along with Sanford Meisner, and almost left theater completely, but started studying with Uta Hagen, and studied with her for about six years, which kind of put me in good stead for my training as an actor. But that all kind of evolved into writing stuff.

SS: But did you have a gay life before you came to New York?

BE: I knew I was gay from the time I was about in fifth grade, but tried my darnedest to hide it and sublimate it and wish it away and all the things that one tries to do to — well, you know, in the sixties, in the early sixties, it was a tough row to hoe. There were so few role models. But I would come to the city on these spring and

Christmas break junkets for theater and hopefully to try and figure out how to discover what it was like to become a gay person in New York City.

I had my first experience with a man — well, I mean, a horizontal experience. There was a queen in the little theater company, but that doesn't really count. But I met this fellow, his name was Devereaux Dana, at the intermission of a Tennessee Williams play on Broadway, a bomb, *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, it was called, which was renamed *Kingdom of Earth*. I think it ran about two weeks. But as fate would have it, he lived at the corner of Minetta Lane and Minetta Street in the Village. It was Easter weekend of 1968, and he invited me to come back the next day because he had some friends coming over, and that was my first experience of socializing, gay social life. We sat around his apartment and watched *Easter Parade*, of course. And then he said, "Well, we're going over to the bar. You want to come with us?"

And I said, "Okay. Where's that?" And that was the Stonewall, and I met my first boyfriend that night.

SS: Wow.

00:15:00

BE: And fell in love for the first time in a complete way, you know, not just romantic love, physical love; the whole nine yards. He was an architectural student at Carnegie Mellon. And the affair lasted about two or three Christmas and Easter breaks. Actually, I'd come in for my Julliard audition in February of '69, and stayed at the Taft Hotel, had sex, and then he informed me that he had a boyfriend and he was going to have to be helping his boyfriend's parents paint their house for the weekend. So it was over. It was crummy.

But by then at least I knew my way around. I knew where gay bars were and things like that, and I actually met somebody that weekend who I certainly wasn't in love with, but gave me the foothold of getting established in the city. He lived in Bayonne, New Jersey. Took me a while to get into the city.

But then as fate would have it, I got my first job in the theater in a play called *And Puppy Dogs' Tails* in 1969. I mean, I had gone with that same boyfriend, I'd gone to see the *Boys in the Band* in the spring of '68 — no, summer of '68, and it was transformative. Even though Mark Crowley probably still gets knocked about the negative, "Show me a happy homosexual, I'll show you a gay corpse," kind of idea, the very fact that we had nine different types of men, that was revolutionary. We'd either seen gay men as being portrayed as either victims or villains or the butt of jokes, and so that was really amazing to sit in that theater with Paul and watch that play.

Then in the wake of that play, there's suddenly all these plays that were inferior, but they were capitalizing on gay male nudity and situations in which there were gay situations in the plays, and this was one of those plays. It was a play that was produced by Swen Swenson, who turned out to be one of my dearest friends. Swen politicized me more than almost anybody, because he was always having me write my congressperson about this, that, or the other thing. He made it his business to clean up the West Village. He owned a building at 16 Minetta Lane, right at the corner of Minetta Lane and Minetta Street, literally across the street from where I had my first sexual experience. It turned out to be my first New York address, because I moved in there after the play closed.

That house was the East Coast version of Barbary Lane in many ways. It was a really wonderful community of artistic folks. Peter Link came to live there, and I ended up becoming his assistant. He was a Broadway composer, and I worked on many, many productions with him at the New York Shakespeare Festival and then ended up writing musicals with him and that sort of thing.

And Swen, Swen was very, very important to the run [American Run for the End of AIDS (AREA)]. He was instantaneously supportive when I told him about the run, and he was always doing stuff for the run. We needed a national recipient since we were running all the way around America, and so at that time there was no national organization. There was amfAR. There was the AIDS Action Council.

SS: You're getting ahead. So I just want to get back — did you want to say something?

NS: Well, I actually thought of a couple of things. Going back to my hometown of Mattapoisett, our town government was selectmen, and we had town meetings. So the politics in Massachusetts, you were just involved in it. You went to your local high school and you were part of the town meeting, and people spoke up all the time. That was the way things were in government in Massachusetts. We also had Ted Kennedy as our senator, so my understanding of politics always was that these people were public servants who represented you. And in terms of my political life, I still think in those ways.

SS: Now, you came out after AIDS had begun.

NS: Yes. And, actually, when I was in high school, I graduated high school in 1985, and I was aware of my feelings towards men at that time in the early

eighties, and every story I read, Sarah, equated — if the headline had “gay,” it also had the word “AIDS.” They were synonymous. And in a small town, did I know any other openly gay men? No, because I didn’t come out. At that time in my high school, no one was out. I had a Latin teacher who was — rumors had it that she was lesbian.

SS: So when did you first start having personal experiences with AIDS? When did it first enter into your life?

NS: AIDS first entered into my life when I moved to New York, and as I mentioned, I worked for Bloomingdale’s in the men’s designer department, and we carried all high-end fashions in the early nineties. And the buyer for that area for men’s designers was a man named Chuck Peters, and Chuck had been diagnosed with AIDS, and I was his assistant. I’ll never forget him being in his office. I’m sure he was being treated. It wasn’t really spoken about. But I’ll never forget him crying in his office and he would close the door.

I have a line about it in one of my poems. I remember him being pushed around. I felt like he was being — I don’t know how well — and I may be just making this up, but I’m not sure that he was treated very well in his position at Bloomingdale’s in the early nineties, being HIV-positive.

SS: Also, I mean, at that moment, it’s the epicenter of the AIDS crisis, and you’re right in this very gay environment.

NS: Yes, I am.

SS: So were you surrounded by people with AIDS?

NS: You know, I wasn’t. I guess I may have been naïve, because my sexuality, I was just acting on it. So I came to New York and I was going out to places

like the Limelight and the Tunnel, and I'm sure there was a big gay scene and I was part of it, but being aware of people who were dying, the other person who I know, Chuck's was the first memorial service that I went to, and it was at the Catholic church down off of Lower Fifth near Xavier, I think. I remember the priests swinging the incense, and just being very moved by that service. So Chuck was the first man I knew who died of AIDS.

The other man that I knew was the manager of the Tommy Hilfiger shop, and he just stopped coming to work and it was never explained. He just didn't come to work anymore.

So I'm aware that New York was the epicenter, but I was in an executive training program and my job was to merchandise and to sell, and I wasn't aware of groups like ACT UP, to be honest with you. I wasn't aware of what the politics were. I was just going to a job every day, but we had a lot of gay men as customers, obviously.

SS: And what about you? When did you first understand that the AIDS crisis was happening?

BE: Well, it kind of happened in a twofold kind of thing. I discovered night life through my mentor, who mentored me into AIDS activism.

SS: Who was that?

BE: Mel Cheren was his name. He was part of that original group of gay men that met at Larry Kramer's apartment that started GMHC. Mel also gave GMHC their first home in a building that he owned — he co-owned. Mel's former life partner was Michael Brody, who owned the Paradise Garage. And at the same time, Mel had been in the music business and had come up through the ranks through CBS Dunhill, and then worked under Florence Greenberg at Scepter Records and then, with someone from

Scepter, formed his own record company called West End Records. It was one of the early independent dance labels, very synonymous with the Garage, that kind of music, which, of course, then gave birth to house music.

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Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles were Nicky Siano's balloon boys at the Gallery, which was one of the very earliest clubs. Nicky had taught them how to spin, and then, of course, when Frankie left New York to go to Chicago and started playing at the Warehouse, that's how House happened. But Mel broke a lot of his biggest hits at the Garage, and I guess — I mean, if I went out — I mean, I was in a long-term relationship with another actor, singer, dancer for about twelve years, and everything was our careers. If we went out dancing once in the summer - that was it! It wasn't part of our lifestyle. But I heard about this club, The Saint, and went there towards the end of the first season and was totally blown away. It was a huge shift in my life, and it dovetailed with the whole raising of consciousness about the AIDS crisis.

It was through meeting Mel — I originally met Mel, I was a photographer and I started taking up doing a lot of photography and I'd been photographing a sculptor's work by the name of Ignacio Zuazo, and he told me about Mel and wanted pictures of his paintings taken, and that's how I happened to meet Mel. It had to have been in 1980 — probably '82, maybe a little bit before that, and discovered the very first night we met that we had a lot in common. We were born on the same day. He was known as the Godfather of Disco, and he played the godfather role for a lot of people, and he played that role for me.

I can remember one of the first times he asked me, "Do you enjoy being part of the gay community?"

And by then I'd become a member of The Saint and I was going with Mel to the Garage, and all this sort of thing, and I said, "Sure."

And he said, "Well, you're not really a member of the community, because all you're doing is taking from the community. You're not giving anything back. And right now your community is in great need, so until you start giving something back to the community, I don't want to hear you referring to yourself as part of the community."

I had never marched in a Pride march. My first Pride march had to have been '82 or '83, and I marched with the original people who created GMHC. So in many regards, the AIDS crisis politicized me as a gay activist as well. And in '84, I mean, like a lot of gay men at the time, I was deeply in denial about AIDS and not letting the left hand know what the right hand was doing. I was up in the balcony of The Saint with everybody else and knowing I shouldn't be. I think it was by the beginning of the season, the '84 season, that's when they closed the balcony and that's when the baths were closing and things like that.

For a number of reasons, I decided to end my relationship with my partner, my first partner, with whom I lived here in this apartment for a number of years. There were many reasons for the breakup, but I believe the primary reason was this politicization, this chemicalization that was happening in me as a social activist was trying to emerge, and it wasn't going to emerge within the security and comfort of that relationship, and so I ended the relationship.

I remember saying to Mel, "I left Al, and I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't know what I'm going to do. I mean, I've got to move out of here. I mean, I

found this apartment, but I can't ask him to leave. It's just not right. It's not morally right."

00:30:00

So Mel said to me, "Well, GMHC is going to be moving out of Colonial House." This was a single-room occupancy building on West 22nd Street, and as he would get rid of tenants, he would give another room over to GMHC. His plan was that he was going to turn the building into condos once GMHC moved to their new quarters, which was going to be in the fall of '84 down on 19th Street and Eighth Avenue. So he said, "I can give you a room right now where you can move in immediately, and when we start to renovate the building and I turn it into condos, you can create an apartment for yourself, and you can have it all rent-free if you will superintend the building." So I agreed, and so this all happened Gay Pride weekend. This was all happening Gay Pride weekend of 1984.

My eldest nephew also happened to be this phenomenal runner. The next year he became the fastest runner in New York state and then got a five-year track scholarship to go to Michigan State. I'd gotten very excited watching him race, and part of me just said, "I want to try this." I mean, I was a recreational runner at best. If I ran around the reservoir once in a while, that was about it. But I heard about the Gay Pride Run, and that weekend was all about — it was like I was tossing everything in the air. I was reinventing myself.

So I entered that race, and I remember picking up my race number the night before the race, and the number was 605. I'm not sure exactly what prompted me to do it, but I put the names of five friends I had already lost to AIDS on that race number, and the next day, I couldn't help but think about them. I couldn't help but think

about all the people who were likely to become affected by AIDS, and at the same time I was overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude to be alive and to be able to experience the glory of Central Park in the summer.

That was also the summer of the Olympics, and I was watching the Olympics. Mel lent me this little Watchman TV. I was watching the Olympics on two inch of screen. And I joined Front Runners. I had no sooner joined Front Runners but I got notice that they were doing their second benefit run for GMHC. Now, this was the kind of model that the AIDS Walk was based on before there was an AIDS Walk. You get your friends to pledge for however many miles you're going to run, and that's how you raise the funds.

Meanwhile, I'd been working on the apartment. GMHC is moving out a little bit at a time. I'd finished the apartment. I ran the benefit run. It was October 13th, 1984. I ran the furthest I'd ever run, twice around Central Park, twelve miles, and I had the first of a number of epiphanies on that day. The first was a moment on the second loop around the park as it was starting to get dark and the wind picked up the leaves that blew across my path, and suddenly I had a, I don't know, some kind of a vision or a prophetic vision about how many lives were going to be affected by the AIDS crisis. It was terrifying and horrifying.

I was really in pain and exhausted when I finished this run. I had never run any kind of distance like that before. But at the same time, I felt empowered in the face of AIDS for the first time in my life. I finally was pushing back instead of, at the effect of AIDS, always running in fear, putting my head in the sand, whatever. I felt really great. I had been able to raise about \$500 for GMHC.

00:35:00

And I went home and Mel got a hold of me to tell me he had some very important news for me. He'd been in financial problems, had been having some financial problems with Western Records and stuff, and a friend of his had convinced him that he needed to abandon the idea of the condos, and so he was going to turn the building into a gay bed and breakfast, and so my apartment was no longer viable.

So all of this happened all in one day, and I was having Al come over to go out. We were going to go out to The Saint that night, and this was our first attempt at trying to reforge the friendship after a twelve-year relationship, and yet here's my apartment that's no longer to be. I didn't stay long at The Saint and said I had to go back home, I wasn't in good shape at all, and I had one of those truly dark nights of the soul where I was as lost as I've ever been in my life, and not knowing where to turn or what to do. I couldn't go back into this apartment; we'd already sublet it to a dear friend. And Al was about to leave with the *La Cage aux Folles* national tour, which ended up playing a big role in the run.

But just before dawn, I found myself talking to my father in a way that I'd never been able to speak to him in life. He died from cancer four years before. And I asked him for a sign, you know. Through my tears I'm saying, "Dad, give me some help here." And I got a very specific message, and the message was, "Follow in Terry Fox's footsteps." Do you know who he was?

SS: He sounds familiar, but —

BE: Terry Fox was a young Canadian lad who'd lost his leg to cancer, and he'd begun a run across Canada to raise funds for the Canadian AIDS Society. Now, I knew who Terry Fox was. I mean, I'm Canadian by blood, and I've seen a couple of his

memorials. I've seen where he's had to stop his run just north of Lake Superior. It's a very moving memorial. It's a bronze statue of him. And I didn't like the sound of it, because I knew what it meant. It didn't take a lot of figuring out. It wasn't, "Oh, I've got to go up to Thunder Bay and finish Terry Fox's run across Canada." No. I'd just done this benefit run for GMHC. What the message meant was I need to do something like Terry Fox had done for cancer - for AIDS.

Well, it didn't go away. As much as I would have liked it to have gone away, it didn't go away, and within two weeks, I had realized that a run from New York to San Francisco wasn't going to cut it. That was part of the problem: everybody thought it was the cities' problems; it wasn't America's problem. So some kind of ultra marathon by a gay guy for AIDS was not going to cut it. I needed to do something that had never been attempted before, something totally unprecedented, and what's when I stumbled on the fact that no one had attempted to run the perimeter of the U.S., and that's what I came up with.

I remember going immediately — I talked about this on World AIDS Day. I went immediately to Rodger McFarlane, who was the first executive director of GMHC, since I had access in the building. And I said, "Rodger, I've got this idea. I'm planning to run around America to raise awareness about AIDS and hopefully raise funds, and I can raise funds for GMHC, but I don't know how to do this. I need the support of an organization like GMHC to help me get it started.

And Rodger said, "Absolutely not. We couldn't possibly take this on. This is a totally — no, we can't do this." So it was a gift in that I realized GMHC was the biggest AIDS organization in the world at that point. If they can't do it, don't bother

looking anywhere, you know. There's nobody else is going to be able to do this. The only way to do this, if I'm going to do this, is start from scratch. I have to start my own organization and go from there. And that's how it happened.

SS: So what did you do next?

00:40:00

BE: I invited some people here to this apartment, even though I wasn't living here. Anita [Ross] was living here. My friend Anita kind of like, with a sublet, ended up becoming the president of the board of the organization, and she ended up anchoring the run from this apartment for the entire twenty months that we were running around America, for the entire year and a half it took to establish the organization, raise the funds, establish the credibility, also train. I'd never run a marathon.

NS: And the organization was called?

BE: The American Run for the End of AIDS. It's also the name of the run.

SS: Now, how did it function as a fundraising organization? Did people pledge per mile?

BE: They did, actually. I talked about Paul Popham on World AIDS Day because not only is Paul — I mean, he's famous, he's been immortalized in *The Normal Heart* and the controversy with Larry and all of that stuff with the early formation of GMHC. I used to refer to him as the Johnny Appleseed of AIDS organizations, because Paul also went all across the country and to Canada teaching communities how to create community-based organizations in the face of AIDS.

SS: Really? I did not know that. He was a former Green Beret.

BE: He was. And a very handsome guy. He was a model for Marlboro cigarettes. He was a Marlboro Man. He was a corporate executive. He was a bank financier guy. He was very handsome. He was a Fire Island Pines guy. He was part of the “Patient Zero House,” that house, that little shack on the beach. He knew all those people that died so quickly early on.

And Paul not only was the first president of the board of GMHC and one of the founders, he also helped establish the AIDS Action Council, which was the lobbying group. It was the only kind of organization in which the different AIDS organizations came together. They had about a yearly conference. There had been talk in the works that they would create a networking arm in the AIDS Action Council. With AREA being a 501(c)(3), we couldn’t raise funds for a lobbying group, so we really — I remember going to the AIDS Action Council Conference that fall, fall of 1985, and made the appeal for them to move forward with creating the National AIDS Network, so we would have a national group that people could pledge to and we could raise funds on a national level. And that’s exactly what happened. That’s a very long story about how we did not have a very good working relationship with the National AIDS Network, and that organization ultimately did not survive.

SS: What are the dates of your twenty-month run?

BE: The twenty-month run began on March 1 of 1986, and I finished it on October 31st of 1987, so we just passed twenty-five-year mark.

SS: And you ran the entire periphery of the United States.

BE: Yes, 9,000-plus miles.

SS: And how much money had you raised?

BE: We raised — well, for the National AIDS Network, I think we raised around 50-grand. We raised an additional \$350,000 that remained in the communities the run was passing through, so it had a lot more bang for its buck. Most of those monies went for prevention programs, awareness programs, sometimes service things. It was kind of interesting to see how the larger the AIDS organization, the less we would have to do with them. Those bigger organizations, organizations like the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, AIDS Project Los Angeles, they were threatened by us. We interacted with the medium-sized community-based organization like the Milwaukee AIDS Project, or in a larger city like San Francisco or L.A., we aligned with those organizations that were grassroots, that came along behind the big monolithic bureaucracy to provide immediate relief for people living with AIDS. So in San Francisco, our efforts benefited the San Francisco AIDS Emergency Fund. In L.A., we didn't benefit AIDS Project Los Angeles; we raised funds for The Shanti Project. That was the kind of a scenario that got repeated over and over again.

00:45:00

SS: Did you run every day?

BE: No. I ran — every seven to ten days, I would take a day off.

SS: And where did you sleep?

BE: We slept in an RV, in a Winnebago. That was our mobile headquarters that leapfrogged with the run. My mother, my seventy-year-old mother, was the only road crew member to go the entire distance around America with me. I called her up very early into the process, and I remember the conversation vividly, and said, “Well, Mom, you're not going to believe what I'm up to now.”

And she, without batting an eye when I told her I was about to run around America to raise awareness about AIDS, she said, “I guess I’m going to have to go with you.”

And I said, “What are you talking about?”

And she said, “Well, who is going to take care of you while you’re doing this? Who’s going to make sure you’re eating? Who’s going to do all the laundry?”

SS: You’re a mama’s boy.

BE: Yes. We had twin beds in the back of the RV. That first summer I had two lesbians as road managers. They were my Charlie’s Angels, the three women that were traveling across the country with me. In August of ’86, I was losing both of them, and we could not find a suitable replacement.

Allan Sobek was my partner, former partner, had created three fundraisers with the *La Cage Aux Folles* national company to raise funds for the run and for the local AIDS organization where the show was at the time. The first one was in Toronto in the summer of ’85, the second was at the end of the first week of the run in Philadelphia, and the last one was in Chicago just as the run arrived in Chicago.

But in December of ’85 we planned a benefit here in New York to raise funds for the run. One of the earliest AIDS fundraisers had just taken place at the Metropolitan Opera with Equity Fights AIDS. This is before Broadway Cares. They did it. It was Actors Equity, Equity Fights AIDS, and the Actors Fund produced this amazing fundraiser at the Met. Through Anita’s dad, Bill Ross, I had gotten support from Colleen Dewhurst, who was president of Equity at the time, and that was a fundraiser for GMHC, amfAR, and I think it was called CRIA at the time.

So all three of those executive directors were announced from the audience, and through Colleen's lobbying, I was announced as well. Ellen Burstyn talked about the run and introduced me from the audience. I remember Mel had one of those VIP tickets where you also got the dinner. We didn't have the dinner, but we wormed our way into the dinner, and that night got a lot of our advisory board from those celebrities.

But one of the things that struck me really about that night was that it was a wonderful night, but where were the people with AIDS? So I said, "You know, we've got to do something about it." And our benefit was coming up a month later down at Tribeca at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, the Triad Theater down there, it was called. And I said, "I want to honor somebody with AIDS." I always considered David Summers to be one of the first AIDS activists. He had gone on the *Phil Donahue Show* as a person living with AIDS, and he'd made this incredible speech at a conference, which he had then repeated at one of the very first candlelight marches on the night before Gay Pride of, I guess, '84. And it was David who actually turned me on to the Robert Kennedy quote that I quoted all the way around America, quoted even on World AIDS Day again this past year.

SS: What is it?

00:50:00

BE: It's Kennedy's address in Cape Town, South Africa, during the height of the Apartheid Movement, in which he said, "Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills, against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. Few of us will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of

events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man or a woman acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends a tiny ripple of hope. And crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

It’s been one of the catchphrases of my life. It’s encoded. I used it at the March on Washington in ’87, at a high scream. I’ve used it on several World AIDS Days. But it’s always within the context of David’s speech.

SS: I saw him in *The Faggot* in Al Carmine’s —

BE: Did you?

SS: He played the new boy in town. But I think he was the first PWA to be arrested.

BE: I think he might have been.

SS: At City College. Wasn’t he Sal Licata’s boyfriend?

BE: He was indeed.

SS: That’s right.

BE: He was indeed.

SS: Okay. So let’s get to ACT UP.

BE: Okay.

SS: So how did you get to ACT UP?

NS: I got to ACT UP following an ad that I had seen. There was these controversial bus stop ads that were in Chelsea connecting crystal meth use and the

prevalence of HIV infection, AIDS infection from unprotected sex. So a group met, and it was around the time of something called the Queer Justice League, which was an outgrowth of this meeting that — they had a meeting at the Center, and basically Larry Kramer was saying ACT UP was done. And a lot of people got together. It was the anniversary of ACT UP.

BE: It was the twentieth anniversary.

NS: It was the twentieth anniversary of ACT UP.

SS: It was 2007?

NS: 2007. So, I'm a recent member. But what I learned in that meeting was I felt that the messages that I was seeing regarding safe sex and AIDS prevention had all changed. They changed in the fact that I wasn't seeing those sort of messages anymore, and I wondered why that was. This meeting that connected drug use and risky sex, afterwards they had another meeting at the Center saying, "What's our action? What are we going to do next?" And I made a note. I'm an avid note-taker. I noted what people said, and I turned those phrases into positive statements or statements about safe sex or HIV/AIDS prevention, and put them on little pink triangles, and as an artist, I handed those out at World AIDS Day events.

So there were a couple things going on, and I just felt like educating myself on the early actions of ACT UP and the artists affiliated with it, Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz. I felt the messages were already there. We didn't need to reinvent them. We just needed to make the next generation aware.

SS: Now, was this Peter Staley's poster campaign?

NS: Yes, the one with the big disco ball and the —

SS: These are the ones people said were triggers to get high, right?

That's what I recall.

NS: Is that what they said?

SS: I don't remember. Yes.

NS: I mean, they had this guy in a Speedo or some sexy guy, and there was a — instead of his face, there was a large disco ball, and it said — you know, I'm sure it connected "Use drugs, get AIDS." It was meant to be shocking.

But what the outgrowth of this, so there was one panel at the Center that was talking about crystal meth use and the frequency of AIDS, this new spike in infections in New York City, and simultaneous to that, there was the anniversary of ACT UP, so there were all these people together wanting to do something new or reinvigorate ACT UP, and that's when I became involved. I went to my first meeting and met Brent.

SS: That's interesting. So what do you think is the connection exactly between crystal and AIDS?

00:55:00

NS: I don't know. I know people that are, quote, unquote, "in the program," that either they have the disease of alcoholism or are addicted to drugs. I don't personally know anybody who uses crystal meth, but I imagine that it inhibits — it takes down some sort of thing about feeling comfortable in your own skin and having sex. And the problem is, there's nothing wrong with having sex. It's just don't have unsafe sex or unprotected sex.

SS: But there's a particular connection between AIDS and crystal meth. Some very key people in ACT UP have died of crystal meth.

NS: And I don't know how they — I've never been a drug — I've never been on the drug scene or —

[cell phone rings]

SS: So you didn't go to these meetings because of crystal; you went because of the —

NS: This seemed to be the focal point for activism in the gay community around HIV and AIDS infections, and I was concerned that these infection rates were bouncing back, and I felt we have all the information, why are we trying to come up with new messages or trying to be shocking? Can't we just tell people to use a condom?

SS: And why doesn't that work?

NS: Why doesn't telling —

SS: Yes.

NS: Who mentions that? Who says that it doesn't work?

SS: Well, whatever prevention campaigns we have, whether it says men who have sex with men, or gay men, or subway cards, or free metro cards if you come to GMHC, or whatever it is, there's a certain percentage of people who still get infected every year. So, prevention campaigns have not been effective beyond a certain percentage, no matter what they are.

NS: Well, that may be true, and I trust that you know these things, Sarah, but what I would add to that is that getting back to when I came out in the early nineties and being a gay man in high school in the eighties, I've only known safe sex. That's the only sex I've ever had. AIDS and, you know — it wasn't even AIDS education, it was sex education in high school in a public school in Massachusetts. And to hear you say

that prevention campaigns don't work, if the infections are rising in gay youth in New York City that are thirteen years old and we are still not teaching how to use a condom in the public schools, I would argue the fact that we haven't been teaching prevention.

SS: Okay. Now, how did you get to ACT UP? Of course, I remember you from ACT UP.

BE: ACT UP came into being when I was just beginning the final leg of the run. The eastern run up from — Miami was the southeast corner, so we were coming into the home stretch, and, of course, following the news about how a bunch of people had gotten arrested down on Wall Street. Ironically, my first direct contact with ACT UP was when we got wind that ACT UP was going to zap our homecoming.

SS: Oh, why was that?

BE: Because they were planning to have Ed Koch there, and I was adamantly against it. I really — and still to this day — feel that the man has the blood of men far greater than he on his hands. Even after seeing *Stonewall Uprising*, I realize he's had a black eye with the gay community long before AIDS.

But the people that were working so hard on the homecoming and wanting to — you know, we didn't get any national media the whole time I was running around America. Often the *raison d'être* was, does the runner have AIDS? And they would say no, because they hadn't tested. And we'd say, "Do you understand anything about AIDS? Do you think if I had AIDS I'd be able to do this?"

But then they would come back with, "Then there's no story. If you're not dying and covered with KS, there's no story," even though no one had ever run the perimeter of the United States before.

01:00:00

NS: Brent, you did receive — this is part of the lesbian road crew. They weren't, you know, doing your laundry. They were organizing events in each city, and he had coverage.

BE: I don't mean to say we didn't have media.

NS: He had media coverage.

SS: What were their names, by the way?

BE: The two lesbians?

SS: Yes.

BE: Susan — why am I blanking on Susan's last name? Susan McGaravel? Susan MacDonald. And Terrah Keener. Terrah actually came out and road-managed the Rainbow Run for the End of AIDS in 1990.

NS: The point of the run was coverage —

BE: Oh, sure, it was to get —

NS: — and locally —

BE: We always had — I mean, interestingly — and this really keys into how entrenched homophobia was in the media in 1987. We had a PR agency working on the homecoming for the final four months of the run. We did not sneak back into town. One of the reasons we were able to keep ACT UP off our backs was that we had Koch at the George Washington Bridge, not at the rally. We had Joe Papp and Raquel Welch at the rally with 4,000 people at Union Square.

The homecoming day we had over 300 runners taking out pledges for the People with AIDS Coalition, similar to the AIDS Walk. They would take out pledges for however many miles of the final 10 miles from the George Washington Bridge to Union

Square they planned to run. We had about maybe 50 at the bridge, and by the time we got to Union Square, we had 300. And through Times Square it was this awesome, you know, phalanx of people. I mean, we didn't sneak back into town. We had airplanes.

NS: And how many miles were you completing at that point, coming back to your home?

BE: It was 9,000-plus. The run was supposed to be 10,000. I'd wanted to raise \$10 million in 10,000 miles. You know, a lot of things went by the wayside. We judged our success in many other ways. But the fact that we had this — we didn't sneak back into New York City. We had a big deal for the homecoming. We had excellent television on all the networks in the city that night, but not a single New York paper printed a word. Nothing. Like if we don't print it, it's not important, it didn't happen, it's not of any consequence. The *New York Native* ran an article, but even the *New York Native* wrote that article from a press release. They didn't send a reporter.

SS: So your first interaction with ACT UP was that they were threatening to zap you.

BE: Okay. So they were going to zap us, and they backed off when we said we weren't going to have Koch at the rally, but everybody thought that we needed the mayor of New York to acknowledge this event and this accomplishment, and he gave me the seal of the city. It was one of the hardest moments of my life to stand up there and accept that from him. In some of the pictures, totally I wasn't able to hide my true feelings. You see how I really felt.

The next day was the New York Marathon. It was also Tom Waddell's birthday, the founder of the Gay Games, who became one of my heroes and who had died

on July 11th of that year. A few weeks before, I had resumed the run at the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court had published the *Hardwick* decision on the Monday after Gay Pride of 1986, which gave rise to the March on Washington. They did the same thing in 1987 with the Olympic decision against the Gay Games. No one can tell me there wasn't malice in the timing of the publishing of those judgments.

01:05:00 So I decided I wanted to draw attention to the Olympic decision, since all the focus was on *Hardwick*. So I conceived of my first Marathon of Protest. I was going to run a Marathon of Protest around the Supreme Court during the demo. But we already had scheduled a — I was to meet with a support group at Whitman Walker that morning, so I wasn't able to start the run until about two hours into the demo. This is an image that if we ever make the movie, people would say, "That's really gilding the lily." I mean, talk about farfetched.

After the last of the 700 people who were arrested at the court had been hauled off, I still had another 13 miles to run. We had done some placards, and there was a sign there that had a drawing of the court, and it said, "The run for life continues here," and had our mileage of where I was starting. And Mom was doing laps. It literally was a quarter mile around the Supreme Court, so it was about close to 100 times around the Supreme Court to make up the marathon. So for the last 13 miles, everybody was gone, but hundreds, I swear to god, hundreds of tactical police standing shoulder to shoulder around the Supreme Court with their riot shields down, protecting the court against this lone runner running my Marathon of Protest around the Supreme Court.

NS: Was that one of the times you were carrying the rainbow flag?

BE: No, no.

NS: And that protest, was that an ACT UP protest, or that was a national?

BE: That was a national protest. That was a civil disobedient action that followed the march, which was on October 11th. This was on Tuesday, October 13th. I was three weeks away from finishing, but it wasn't my last Marathon of Protest.

SS: No, it wasn't. Should we take a little break? A little water and bathroom break? Remember that you are plugged in. So we need to unplug.

So I want to focus a little bit on your relationships with ACT UP. You told us about when you came in. So then after this bad kind of introduction, how did you get involved with ACT UP?

BE: Okay. Well, we had been talking about the whole thing with the Gay Games. The run came home on October 31st. November 1st was the New York Marathon, and it was also what would have been Waddell's fiftieth birthday. So the best statement I could make would be to run the marathon, by saying that the Run Around America is over, but the race against AIDS is not, and to honor Waddell and the rest.

So that was on a Sunday, the next day was a Monday, and I went down to the Center because, you know, I'd done everything I could do at that point. So I went to my first ACT UP meeting and was totally thrilled, energized by the energy in the room, the incredible sense of empowerment in the room.

Swen was deeply involved in ACT UP already, and I can remember Swen almost sold his 60 Minetta Lane to Keith Haring. Keith didn't buy it, but they ended up becoming very good friends. I had met Keith through Mel at the Garage, and then independently Keith had been asked to do the logo for the homecoming of the run, which was the little runner. I don't have it on me right now. We ended up - we've used it over

and over again and incorporated it into all the Rainbow Run events that have all been in honor of Waddell and Haring.

So Swen said, “I’ve got this plan. I want you to come to brunch on Sunday, and I’m going to invite Keith and I want you to convince him to come to ACT UP. So that’s exactly what happened, and he did come the very next night.

SS: How did you convince him?

BE: Oh, I just talked to him about what we were doing and why it was important for everybody to get involved with ACT UP and especially if you were a gay man and especially if you were affected by HIV and AIDS.

01:10:00

SS: Was he openly HIV-positive at the time?

BE: I think he was. Yes, I think he was. The very first thing he did with ACT UP was a kiss-in at St. Vincent’s, and he’d done the, I think, that — I’m trying to remember the timing of all this, but I think within only a couple of months he pulled off the party at the Sound Factory that this shirt was done for, and which he gave them all away for free and all the money went to ACT UP.

But it was after that, that he called me up on a Sunday night all excited and said, “I can’t wait for you to see this new design I’ve done for ACT UP. I’m bringing it to the meeting tomorrow night. It’s going to be a beautiful shirt and we can make a poster, and I’m giving it to ACT UP for posters.” It was a very expensive shirt to make, that’s for sure.

SS: Why was that?

BE: Because of all the different colors, you know. It’s a very expensive shirt. Dee Finch, who owned a company called Paint Inc., that did all the AREA shirts,

she was a lesbian owner of a t-shirt company, she came up with an odd way to do that shirt — you may have seen it — on black with white and pink ink. It looks very powerful, but much cheaper to do it that way.

NS: So he also designed for your run. He designed the logo for the American Run to End AIDS. He designed for the dance parties.

BE: He designed for the homecoming. We ran under another logo but he did the homecoming, the little runner for the homecoming, which then when I came up with the idea in '90, after we'd gone through all the stuff with the Gay — I mean, I was a charter director of the Federation [of Gay Games], which was formed in '89, when we realized we needed to make this an international movement. San Francisco Arts and Athletics took their 501(c)(3). It got turned into an international organization based in California under California law.

1990 was the first time that the Gay Games were happening outside of San Francisco, which was the Athens of the Gay Games, and I thought we needed our own torch run. But an Olympic torch was certainly not the right symbol, but the rainbow flag was. So I hadn't thought to do another ultra marathon. I wanted to do it as a relay, but by the time I'd gotten the idea and gotten things in motion, there was just no time to organize a relay.

So I knew I could pull it off the way we'd done the Run Around America, just truncate it, and asked Mom if she wanted to go out again. She did. Fortunately, I didn't know I was going to lose her the next year. And that is when I ran my second Marathon of Protest. We'd left from San Francisco. We were three weeks up the road and returned to San Francisco for Pride and the AIDS Conference, the last AIDS

Conference held in the U.S. until this past summer. And so I ran a Marathon of Protest around the Moscone Center to protest the U.S. immigration ban on HIV and AIDS.

SS: Now, was this still a subscriber system where people were paying, donating money by mile, or was this just a symbolic action?

BE: We were not really raising much funds with that run. It was more of a symbolic act to bring the rainbow flag as a symbolic torch and a symbol for AIDS awareness and prevention to the games, and it was in honor of Waddell and Haring.

SS: What did you like about the rainbow flag?

BE: I loved the universality of it. It took a while for the rainbow flag to take root here on the East Coast. I'd seen them on the West Coast, you know. Gilbert Baker had them in San Francisco. He created it in San Francisco.

SS: He did the Freedom Rings. Isn't that how it started?

BE: No, that's David Spada.

SS: That's who?

BE: That's David Spada created the rings. He was never able to copyright those rings, you know. He couldn't patent them.

NS: So it was hard getting New Yorkers to warm up to the flag or —

01:15:00

BE: I guess. I liked the fact that it was the universal, international symbol for the LGBT community. It was a beautiful symbol.

NS: I wanted to just ask you the question about, you - helped bring Keith Haring into ACT UP with that dinner meeting, and he was really excited about this design. Now, Silence = Death was something that was designed by Gran Fury. No, not

—

SS: No, no. The Silence = Death Collective precedes Gran Fury.

BE: It does precede them, right.

NS: Please forgive me for getting that fact wrong.

SS: That's all right.

NS: So, Silence = Death was associated with ACT UP and/or that iconography, which is the pink triangle, and that's part of the design that Keith has behind us. The Ignorance = Fear, did he say anything more about his design and where it was coming from, the See No Evil, Speak No Evil, Hear No Evil?

BE: Sure, that's in there.

NS: What did he have to say?

BE: I mean, he did another one called Silence = Death, which is the image that we used for Out of the Darkness now on World AIDS Day, which is the pink triangle with the overlay of the white figures over the pink triangle. It's his take on the original image.

NS: But did he say anything about the design, where it came from or his thinking around it?

BE: Just how excited he was by the design and how in a way it was — as far as our designs go, it's a little light. Let's put it that way.

SS: Well, these figures were already known, because these were his signature figures.

BE: Right.

NS: Yes.

BE: But in terms of the coloring and all of that, it certainly didn't have the wallop of Know your Scumbags.

SS: It's branded Keith Haring. I mean, you look at it, you know Keith Haring designed it.

BE: Yes, you do.

NS: But I guess what my question was getting to the politics around it. The year in which he designed this was —

BE: It had to have been '89.

NS: So the idea of See No Evil, Speak No Evil, Hear No Evil —

BE: It was '89.

NS: — if you can contextualize that for me as to what other messages were out there at the time, like Ignorance = Fear. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of HIV/AIDS? Ignorance of transmission?

SS: Kissing doesn't kill.

NS: Kissing doesn't kill.

BE: Kissing doesn't kill, right.

SS: ACT UP slogans at the time, as well, some more.

BE: Things were moving so fast in his life.

NS: Okay. Just wondering how it fit into the whole —

SS: I think it fit in.

BE: I mean, we'd had the ACT UP auction that year. He donated several pieces that raised us a good chunk of change.

SS: Is that true? Did he donate? Did he donate for the auction?

BE: The Totem brought \$65,000 into our —

SS: Who bought that?

BE: I don't know who bought it, but I know that the Totem alone — and he donated a number of pieces — the Totem alone brought 65-grand.

SS: It's interesting that you say this, because I think there was a second auction after he died, and that his estate did not donate. I think Patrick Moore discussed this.

BE: Really?

SS: Yes.

BE: That's interesting. The estate or the foundation did not?

SS: The foundation.

BE: Okay. Because, you know, the mandate of the foundation is they have two issues that they fund: kids and AIDS. That's it.

SS: Well, they just did a Planned Parenthood bus.

BE: Oh, they did?

SS: Yes, this week.

BE: Oh, that's interesting.

NS: That's great.

SS: So it's expanding.

BE: I mean, the Keith Haring Foundation is AREA's prime benefactor. We don't have any other benefactor other than our AIDS Walk team keeps us afloat, basically.

NS: But Keith also designed the Dance for Life, which was - ties into Mel Cheren and these parties that you helped organization.

BE: Yes, yes.

NS: Do you want to talk about that?

BE: Sure.

SS: Who did that benefit?

BE: Well, the first Party of Life Keith created with Larry Lavan and David Spada at the Garage. It had to be — I think it was '83, and it was a free party. It was just like — and all these stars came and everything. And the invitation was a —

NS: Bandana.

BE: — bandana. Then they pulled off another one at the Palladium, two more at the Palladium. The next invitation was a puzzle, and then the last one was a tank top.

NS: And these raised money?

BE: No, I don't think they did. I don't think they did at all.

NS: They were just fun parties?

SS: Just spiritual events.

BE: Just these events, right?

SS: Yes.

BE: But then when the Rainbow — we had a large debt from the Rainbow Run, and I approached the foundation and asked if they would let us do a Party of Life IV to help us retire the Rainbow Run debt, which they did, and gave us an image, one of his images with the rings and things like that, and we did it at Shelter. That was in 1991, and

it did end up retiring the debt, and I think we raised funds for another organization as well.

Then in '94, I had not thought to do yet again another ultra marathon, but through conversation with Anthony Rapp, I ended up coming up with the idea of leading a team of six inline skaters. We roller-bladed the rainbow flag from San Francisco to New York for Gay Games IV.

SS: Who were the others?

BE: Well, I wanted to create a rainbow team, so I'd originally conceived of a seven-person team that would be biracial, multicultural, and pansexual. The seventh person was Ken Meeks, the Robert Mapplethorpe model, who only a couple of weeks before we were to leave, I learned that he had diabetes and it had reactivated, and he couldn't do it. Rather than replace Ken, I decided to leave the seventh position as an open position, since as we were recruiting for the team, many people wanted to participate but couldn't commit to the seven-week journey, so we left that seventh position as an open position, and we rotated skaters in throughout the seven weeks.

There was a two-week stretch from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City. Then it was just the core six. We had two African Americans, an Asian, and three Caucasians, three men, three women, two straight, three gay, one bisexual.

SS: What do you feel that that accomplished, that particular one?

BE: That particular event helped solidify this idea of bringing the rainbow flag as a symbolic torch, as a symbol for AIDS awareness and prevention, for bringing a very diverse face to HIV and AIDS with the six of us having all those different colors and types. We actually divided right down the middle in terms of ability as well. Three of

them were these genius brilliant athletes, and three of us were neophytes. Roddy and I had never been on rollerblades ever.

SS: You're really a performance artist, aren't you?

BE: Yes.

SS: You are. With an epic theatrical platform.

BE: Yes, yes.

NS: I'm going back to when Mel Cheren said to you, "You're not part of the gay community until you're giving something back," and you've run the periphery of America, you've been involved in the Gay Games, you've been involved with ACT UP, and one thing that we haven't mentioned, or you haven't told Sarah and the people watching this video, is about those terrible years in which you came to New York as an actor and lost so many friends. And I think saying the names of your friends who you lost really speaks to what drove you to bring attention to —

SS: Why don't you tell us the five names that you put on number 605.

BE: Oh, wow. Okay. I wonder if I can remember them now. Richard Christopher; Max Justice; Duke Kant; I think Bob Brubach. Who is the fifth? I'm not sure now. I'll have to dig up the number to see. Yes, that became something that I did over and over again.

Mel did a painting, I guess the last marathon I ran, which was New York in '90, I put twenty-six names on my marathon.

SS: So Mel, Swen, and Al are all still alive?

BE: None of them are alive.

SS: Did they die of AIDS?

BE: They all died of AIDS. Mel died five years ago this past week. When he didn't die on World AIDS Day, I knew he was going to die on my dad's birthday, and he did. I looked up the urn, and there was my birthday to my father's birthday on the urn. It was just bizarre.

01:25:00

SS: He died in 2007?

BE: Yes. What made it even worse was that Mel was HIV-negative for over twenty-five years. That's one of the reasons why, I mean, he left me the copyright of his book, the copyright of his documentary film. He left me all his paintings. Right now it's just a huge burden I have.

SS: What's his film?

BE: His film is called *The Godfather of Disco*. I can't release it. I have to come up with a good chunk of change, because what's left of West End Records, I have the permission of the estate to use the music from West End Records, but Mel only owned the masters. So I still own publishing to all those composers and lyricists to use that music in the film, not to mention the fact the film needs to be reedited.

It's an important film, especially now that Mel died of AIDS, quite a cautionary tale about how fast HIV can move in a person of Mel's age if they don't intervene immediately. And he hadn't tested. I didn't know he hadn't tested for a couple of years. Here's Mel and I, these AIDS activists for a quarter of a century, not seeing the telltale signs. We'd been to GMHC's twenty-fifth anniversary, and Larry had recognized the signs. He saw them in Mel, and he asked him pointblank if he was positive. And Mel was all insulted and in a huff and said —

NS: Larry Levan?

BE: No, Larry Kramer. And Mel said to him, “No, I’m not. No, I’m not, Larry. Sorry to disappoint you.” Mel and Larry had a very thorny relationship at best.

SS: How unusual.

BE: And even then I didn’t tumble, because I kept thinking Mel was negative. He hadn’t been with a regular doctor for a while. Mel’s a tough case, tough cookie. When we finally, finally figured out what was going on, it was all too late.

NS: But, Brent, just the numbers, there was a year you lost how many friends?

BE: In the twenty months it took me to Run Around America, I lost twenty-five people. I lost that many again every year after that and more until the protease inhibitors finally took root around ’95, ’96. The worst year, the worst personal year of the crisis for me, the highest fatality year was 1991. I lost forty-two people in one year. Ninety-two wasn’t much better; I lost thirty-seven. But it never got any worse than ’91.

SS: What happened to Swen?

BE: Swen died of AIDS in 1993. One of the reasons ’91 was so bad was that Alan died a week before his birthday in September of ’91. Bill Konkoy, who was the administrator of the run, the director of the run, who when I lost my two lesbians six months into the run, we couldn’t find a suitable replacement, Bill came out onto the road and took over road management duties for what was going to be a temporary period of time, and he ended up completing the final fourteen months with me and Mom, and administrated the entire event from the road. Little did I suspect that he and I were both dealing with AIDS at the time. He died two weeks after Al. If Al and Bill had not died,

my mother would not have died. I count my mother as a casualty of the AIDS crisis. She died twenty-one years ago this week.

SS: Now, when did you seroconvert?

01:30:00 BE: 1989. While I was running around America, conventional wisdom was, you know — I mean, I was asked all the time, should I test, shouldn't I test? At that time, you ran the risk of losing your job, losing your housing, losing all sorts of things if you got an HIV-positive test. What I used to always say was, "If you need to test to change your behavior, test. But your actions need to be the same whether you're HIV-positive or HIV-negative. You need to modify your behavior."

SS: What do you attribute that you've lived so long and that you were able to live from '89 up until the protease inhibitor period?

BE: Well, I had been with the same doctor for over forty years.

SS: Who was that?

BE: Ron Grossman. He lost almost his entire practice to HIV and AIDS and rebuilt it again. He's a dear friend. I think he's still a little taken aback by the fact that he somehow missed this heart attack that was looming, but both he and my surgeon are pretty much convinced that given my general level of fitness, that HIV and AIDS and the antiretrovirals had to have played a significant role in my heart attack.

SS: Of course.

NS: So the cure was responsible for the heart attack you just experienced.

BE: Yes.

SS: That's true for a lot of people.

BE: Yes, long-term HIV/AIDS survivors die either from heart failure or liver failure or kidney failure or something like that, or some combination thereof.

SS: So what medications did you take before the cocktail?

BE: I was on AZT for three months. At the end of three months, I told Ron, “If this is what life is going to be like, forget it.” If it hadn’t been for marijuana, I wouldn’t have eaten a thing. It totally destroyed my appetite, my desire to live. AZT is a horrible drug.

SS: And it doesn’t work.

BE: It’s a horrible drug. So I switched after three months to Zerit and Epivir. Zerit gave me horrible neuropathy, but I stayed on it for a number of years. I’m very lucky; I’ve never taken a protease inhibitor. I’m now on Truvada and Viramune. So I’m on an antibiotic nucleoside — a nucleoside analog and a non-nucleoside analog, and now a hell of a lot of other drugs for my heart.

SS: So you never had to take Sustiva or any of the —

BE: No, I didn’t take Sustiva. The whole idea of managing my HIV, in many regards, some people used to say — my pain management doctor truly believes that a lot of my back problems are not just related to my athletic history, because he has so many patients who have HIV and AIDS and have been on the antiretros for a long time and are compromised. It affects bone. It affects spinal stuff. My teeth are falling out of my head because of the antiretrovirals, the bone loss. But my athletic history also did play a role. I pulverized the discs in my spine.

SS: You did extreme sports.

BE: Yes, I did a lot. It was a lot.

NS: A lot of impact.

BE: But what's kind of funny is I've often been asked, "Is your back problems HIV- and AIDS-related?"

And I used to say, "Only the fact that if it hadn't been for HIV and AIDS I never would have run around America."

SS: All right. I have a couple tough questions to ask you. Ready?

BE: Okay.

SS: Do you think in any way this run was a way to get away?

BE: Yes, in many ways. When my father was dying of cancer in 1980, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross had just come out with the five stages of death and dealing with death, and I could easily see how the run was part of the bargaining, you know. "Oh, if I do this, maybe you'll save me." But in point of fact, it's all tied up with my spirituality. I believe I got a message from my dad, but maybe it was somebody else. But it was definitely a spiritual message.

01:35:00

I can remember at times when it looked like we weren't going to be able to pull this off. I mean, one of the more amazing things about the run is that the whole twenty-month event was funded without a penny of corporate sponsorship, not a single dime of grant money. It was all funded by the sale of our t-shirts and buttons and private donations, which is pretty amazing. And the fact that AREA is still existing the way it exists out of this apartment, and that we just pulled off our twenty-first Out of the Darkness for World AIDS Day. I had hoped — I'd planned to do several things for the twenty-fifth anniversary. I actually was going to run another Marathon of Protest around the Supreme Court on the twenty-fifth anniversary of that, but that didn't happen.

NS: Sarah mentioned earlier that it was kind of like performance art, these runs. You didn't tell the story or share with her yet when you came back to New York and there was no local coverage, the issues of the day, what ACT UP was fighting against and how you happened to be in the hospital. Tell the story about then-Governor Cuomo.

BE: We've got to do some ACT UP tales here. This is an ACT UP Oral History Project.

NS: This is a great ACT UP tale.

BE: We need to start talking about ACT UP.

NS: You were at Roosevelt Hospital.

BE: Well, first off, let me just say that I jumped into ACT UP with both feet, and it really did save my life in many regards. It's like, you know, what was I supposed to do after I'd finished doing this? If it hadn't been for ACT UP, I would have been completely at sixes and sevens. So - I was in Wave Three for Wall Street Two. I remember Alexis Danzig was part of my affinity group. Naomi, her mother, was very involved in ACT UP at the time.

SS: Because her father had died of AIDS.

BE: Her father had died of AIDS. Her father was a boyfriend of mine for a number of years, over a number of years. I mean, he was in a long-term relationship with Rick Tieger, but it had long since cooled, but they were a couple.

SS: Alan Danzig, was that his name?

BE: Yes. He was a brilliant English professor at Columbia University. It's one of the things that's so cruel about this disease is that invariably it attacks the greatest gifts about a person, and Alan's mind was destroyed by HIV and AIDS. But it

was an awesome thing to be involved with Naomi and Alexis in ACT UP. So many lives bisected in —

NS: I'm sorry. What was Wave Three in the action on Wall Street? What did you guys do?

BE: Wave Three was the affinity group that we worked with. We sat down on Broadway in front of Trinity Church to stop the buses from taking the first two waves of protesters away. I can remember being thrown onto the bus by a policeman and ended up with his whistle in my hand. That same whistle was used to great effect two years later when we stormed the FDA. I had promised my mother that I would not get arrested at the FDA, because we had house seats for *Les Misérables* at the Beverly Center that night.

SS: That's so faggy of you Brent.

BE: So she didn't want to be —

NS: You did come to New York for Broadway theater.

BE: She didn't want to be stuck out in Bethesda by herself. But she was quite busy that day herself. She did lookout for a couple of people who put Silence = Death stickers on about thirty police cars. I remember Anita telling me about watching the news. She was watching a moving picket, and she goes, "But there's this funny old lady in the middle of the moving picket with a purse." And she goes, "Oh, my god, it's Marion."

Anyway, I'd been using the whistle. It was very cold that day, and they were doing terrible things. They were, like, using the plastic cuffs, and there was this one fellow, his wrists were bleeding, and so to cover the bleeding wrists, they literally took

01:40:00

his shirt and jacket and cut down off of him and covered his wrists, and in the shadow of the FDA, it was freezing. I was using the whistle a lot to try and draw attention to some of the things that were going on that day.

NS: The police brutality.

BE: Yes. And I remember somebody — I can't remember who it was. It wasn't Jay [Blotcher]. It wasn't a real media person. It was somebody who was acting like they were media and who wanted to let me know that the police had had it with me and my whistle, and they were going to find any excuse to arrest me. So that's when I told Mom we should check out the other side of the building.

But that first arrest was a watershed moment for me. It was a way for me to put that rage into action. The fact that some of the best people in the world were being taken from my life, it was just too horrendous to even be able to think about the fact that I could attend — there was one week when I attended ten memorials in one week. It's just — and then the rage that I would feel over the fact that I'd become numb, that I was benumbed by it all and couldn't feel anything anymore, that was one of the worst of all of it. So I needed to put this anger somewhere, and civil disobedience fit the bill.

The story that Nathaniel wants me to tell is February 15, 1988, we'd gotten word that Mario Cuomo was going to announce his five-year AIDS plan for New York State. At this point in time, he'd been getting a free ride. Koch had been zapped. Reagan had been zapped. George Bush II had been zapped. Cuomo had been getting away with murder, and we'd found out that not only was he going to give this press conference at Roosevelt Hospital, he was going to also not so blatantly announce it was going to be another year before he funded it.

So we were pairing up the activists. We went off the floor to work on this action, and we were paired up, and I was paired up with Tony Daley. The night before was Valentine's Day, and I lost three friends to AIDS, two of them on the ninth floor of Roosevelt. One of them, it had taken us four days providing round-the-clock care before we could get him a bed.

So everybody else went in, got in as media, but Tony and I were waiting because I'd been going as visitors, because Griff Gold was still on the ninth floor.

NS: And the goal was to zap Governor Cuomo.

BE: Yes. And we didn't know where the press conference was happening. The media all got taken in, and we didn't know where. So as soon as the visiting hours started at eleven in the morning, we went up to the ninth floor. I found Griff. I said, "Griff, we need to hang out until Cuomo —."

Because we knew Cuomo and his party were going to pass through the ninth floor before the press conference, so that's exactly what we did, and we followed them, and we got on the elevator with them. So that's how we found out where the press conference was. It was in a small room. All the press were seated in folding chairs with an aisle in the middle, and then there was a dais at the end of the room with Cuomo and the state commissioner of health and a bunch of other muckety-mucks.

So I waited till the moment when he said that he wasn't going to fund it for another year, but then he made this thing that was quoted in the *Times*, saying, "But keep me honest. Keep protesting. Keep holding up your placards."

NS: "Hold me to it."

BE: "And hold me to my word." Right?

NS: That's he's going to do something in a year.

BE: And the *Times* said, "He didn't have wait long. He didn't have to wait a year."

NS: Because?

01:45:00

BE: Because I elbowed my way through, and I yelled at him that my friend Len Calder had died the night before and that it had taken us four days of round-the-clock care to get him a bed in this hospital, and how long did he think it would take for us to get a bed for someone who needed it if he waited another year to fund his program, and that we couldn't wait. "We're dying right now."

He looked at me like if he could have called in a hit man to shoot me on the spot, he would have. The great irony of this moment for me was that I ran all the way around America to raise awareness about AIDS and not a single New York paper printed a word. I raised my voice to the governor of the state, and there was my picture on the front page of the national section.

SS: What does that say? What does that tell you?

BE: Well, it tells me a lot of things. It told me about the level of homophobia at the time, but it also told me that if you make enough noise, if you find ways to act up that will draw people's attention, will draw the media's attention, you can get your issues at least addressed.

But forever one of the ironies of it all for me, the next year, 1990, Sal Licata had a terrible end.

SS: That's right.

BE: Things were so bad at NYU, there were not rooms. They had people, H1, H2, H3 for hallway. He was left on a gurney for over a week at NYU in a deplorable state, not cleaned. He finally refused a colonoscopy in the hallway and asked to be taken home. A letter about this had been written by a friend of his, who is also gone to AIDS, and I think it was printed in the *Native* at the time.

And I asked him for permission to take my arrest — when we stormed Albany that year, I wanted to take my arrest getting that letter into Cuomo's face. That day I could not get arrested to save my life. I tried so many ways. I was trying to get arrested and trying to get that letter to Cuomo, and it didn't work, and I was totally frustrated.

And I'd found out that they were going to take one of the buses, and they weren't going to go back to New York because they'd heard about George Bush I was going to be making his first speech about AIDS at some business conference in Arlington and they were looking for people to go down there and zap it. So I thought, "Hell, I couldn't get arrested in Albany. I'll get arrested in D.C." I was fired up. "I'm mad as hell. I'm not going to take it anymore."

And that was a great day because the hotel people in Arlington were not ready for ACT UP. They just were not ready for us, and we had a great fact sheet, and we leafleted every single person that came into that conference. I think it said "Talk's Cheap" or something like that, you know. "One speech does not equal leadership."

NS: This was for George Bush I.

BE: Yes. And everybody got leafleted that day, and they just didn't know what to do with us. And finally the hotel manager showed-up, announced that we were

trespassing, told us to leave or we would be arrested. I said, “I’m not going anywhere. This guy is part of the administration that caused this disaster. His hands weren’t clean then, they’re not clean now,” whatever, whatever, I was saying. So they arrested me.

Five other baby activists who had never been arrested sat down in the lobby in solidarity so I wouldn’t be arrested by myself. That was when Urvashi Vaid got into that meeting and held up a big sign.

SS: Oh, right.

NS: What did her sign read?

BE: I think it said “Talk’s Cheap.”

SS: Who wrote the letter about Sal?

NS: His lover?

01:50:00

BE: Ron Shelton? Ron — it’s Ron. Ron. Where’s the list. He’s on the list. I’ve got the list here. I can’t remember his last name.

SS: I can look it up in the *Native*.

BE: Yes. He wrote the letter about Sal.

NS: We’re taping this after the two documentaries about ACT UP have come out. Can you share with us the experience of the action at St. Patrick’s Cathedral? Because I know you were part of that.

BE: That was an awesome day.

SS: We don’t mention that other documentary FYI.

NS: Oh, I’m sorry.

SS: That’s okay.

NS: There’s been one documentary out about ACT UP —

SS: That's right, thank you.

BE: The Stop the Church action —

NS: Cut that. The Stop the Church action at St. Patrick's.

BE: — was a great action. I had a wonderful affinity group for that action. Alexis was with us again, and we had decided we were going to take our arrest passing out condoms and safer-sex literature on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

SS: We have footage of this.

BE: You do?

SS: Yes.

NS: And you were one of the people doing it?

BE: Yes. We created — we got, like, painter's aprons and we were up all night the night before, stapling the condoms. We'd done our own prevention materials and stapled the condoms and everything together and we had them all in our aprons. I remember I had done my thing and written — the aprons were covered with the names of the dead.

We managed to — and I can't remember if that was the last time I laid eyes on Keith. He was a moving picket that day. He didn't have any business being out there. It was 7 degrees with a wind chill of god only knows. He died less than two months later.

SS: We have footage of that. He's with the very short guy with thick wavy blond hair —

BE: Wavy blond hair?

SS: — and a black woman. Do you know who they are?

BE: A black woman? I'm not sure. But I remember seeing him that day in the moving picket.

NS: Do you consider yourself religious? How did you feel about doing that action? This was to call out Cardinal O'Connor.

BE: I have to admit I was a bit upset with some of the activists inside the church.

SS: Which ones?

BE: Well, the ones that — well, the ones that crushed the host underfoot.

SS: I think that never happened, right?

JH: Well, he crumbled it.

BE: He crumbled it, but it was like I think what pissed me off about it was the fact that we had a wave of public support that evaporated overnight with Stop the Church in many regards. A lot of people decided we'd gone too far, even though, believe me, I love "Know your Scumbags." I think it was "This one prevents AIDS." Loved that.

But the fact that we had done our work and after we passed out all our literature, we still hadn't been arrested. We were the first people to get arrested that day. They hadn't been arrested in the church yet. We thought, "Well, what are we going to do? We can't get arrested." So we took the street.

The moving picket was one block south of the church. It was, like, on both sides. It was Rockefeller Center and Saks. But there was nobody. We were up on the steps and nobody was doing anything to us, so we just linked arms and took the street and started marching the street. And when they weren't arresting us, we plunked our asses down on Fifth Avenue in 7 degrees weather. I remember I was on the left-hand

side, and they were arresting from the right. And I kept screaming, you know, “The whole world is watching!” and, “ACT UP! Fight back! Fight AIDS!” and everything, just to keep from passing out. I was so frozen. I was never more grateful to be arrested in my life. When they threw me onto that bus, I said, “Hallelujah.” To have my ass on that Fifth Avenue in nothing but jeans, it was like —

SS: Right. You were a fashion victim.

BE: Yes, I was a fashion victim. I had not even slept. I’d been up all night at The Saint the night before.

NS: I can take you in front of Saks Fifth Avenue in this past year when they put together — all of the front windows of Saks had the panels from the AIDS Quilt, which Brent was also involved in, and I have to tell you that it was the first time seeing those panels. I never went to Washington and saw the quilt laid out. I had seen panels that Brent had created for friends at different World AIDS Day vigils. But seeing these panels from the original quilt, on a sunny day on Fifth Avenue, in Saks Fifth Avenue’s windows, and reading the stories that each panel had, that I was truly moved. It’s such an overwhelming feeling to see those panels.

01:55:00

And what connected for me was recognizing not only how young people died, because I came to New York in ’91, and when I was out on the club scene in New York, I literally could see an entire age range was missing from the room. That was my experience. I felt like there was a generation of teachers and artists —

BE: There’s a whole generation lost.

NS: — and people that were lost to me. I just had literature. I had novels. I had stories. I had monographs. I educated myself about who these people were

and what they were doing. But seeing those panels for people who died, one of the things that connected for me is how many of them seemed to be born in the fifties. So I thought of these men who died in their late twenties and early thirties and thought of them as the children of parents in the fifties and what that means to have been — so if you're childbearing age, you're twenty in 1950. So are you a product of the forties or you're a product of the fifties and you lost your son or daughter to AIDS. Just all that sort of came across really quickly. I don't know what that means culturally.

BE: I know a lot of activists look at the quilt as kind of being toothless and somewhat even worthless. I don't hold that opinion at all. I mean, I have a lot of problems with the Names Project Foundation and the way it's being run and has been run for the last ten years, but the quilt is still one of our most powerful tools for raising awareness and creating activism around AIDS. It's a way to take the AIDS crisis out of the realm of statistics and numbers and make it real for people.

NS: You have to bring it back to the person because we just had this situation or circumstance where in New York City they're about to build an AIDS Memorial Park without including the names of the people who died. And I don't understand memorializing a disease. We remember people. Brent remembers his friends. He's running for his friends.

SS: How will AIDS be represented in this park?

NS: I don't know. The new design only has a small area, and I don't know. I don't know.

BE: It's very toothless. From what I understand, they're still trying to squiggle out from under it anyway.

NS: I feel like, in the words of David Wojnarowicz, “I’m watching.” I’m watching what the media says. I’m watching what AIDS organizations are saying and the message of getting tested being emphasized as opposed to AIDS education and prevention and use of a condom and/or remembering specific people. We’ve zoomed so far out at times that we forget the personal, because what it comes down to is me picking up somebody in a gay bar, a gay disco, and insisting on safe sex when we get home and negotiating that in the cab. That’s what it’s about, those conversations. And when we put together an AIDS Memorial Park and we don’t remember the people who died, what are we remembering?

BE: Exactly.

SS: It’s interesting. You’re saying about testing, because testing has a totally different function now, now that there’s treatment.

BE: Right.

SS: Earlier, I mean, in our era, it made sense not to get tested.

BE: Right.

NS: Well, the thing, as I’m observing all these articles, I actually did a Google search. On World AIDS Day there may have been 180,000 articles written about AIDS, World AIDS Day. I think only 4 percent mentioned the word “condom.”

BE: Wow.

NS: And maybe 20 percent mentioned the word “prevention,” and that doesn’t count the organizations that have “prevention” in their title.

SS: So what was some of the coverage?

02:00:00

NS: The main message is about testing and getting to zero. But if you take that down to a personal level or micro level, if I decide I'm going to get tested, as I have been tested, and I'm HIV-positive, then you already have somebody who's infected. So I obviously didn't take the precautions. So telling everybody to get tested to know their status, what that will prevent — I mean, it means that they can get on a regimen and get proper care if they can afford it in this country, and it also gives them the opportunity to tell their sexual partners, "No, I'm positive, and we have to do this safe. When we have sex, it has to be safe sex." But what I'm trying to get to is I feel like we need the larger message so that that first person doesn't get infected.

SS: It's very complicated. It's really interesting. Marjorie Hill says 1,600 people died of AIDS in New York City last year, and 50 percent were diagnosed in the emergency room.

BE: Wow.

NS: Wow.

SS: So there's no awareness that they're infected until they die.

NS: And how many people have they had sex with?

SS: That's because we have no healthcare system.

BE: Right.

NS: There's no healthcare system, and that's why one of the actions that I was involved with ACT UP, in the last five or so years, was about universal healthcare. That was the message of ACT UP: "healthcare is a right." And that's actually what I came out of the documentary about — I mentioned it to you at the time. When did they start chanting, "Healthcare is a right" with ACT UP?

BE: That's pretty early on.

JW: Ninety-one.

JH: No, '87, '88.

NS: In '87 or '88 —

BE: Early, early, early.

NS: — ACT UP activists were saying, “Healthcare is a right.” So, imagine, we're in 2012, and it was my Senator Ted Kennedy who had pushed for universal coverage who, unfortunately, passed away before he could cast that vote, and we're still trying to move towards universal healthcare. So, yes, access to healthcare is a problem.

BE: When did we go to the CDC?

JH: In 1990.

BE: In 1990? The whole idea about “Women don't get AIDS; they just die from it.” Women die four times faster. Because the CDC didn't — all these cofactors and CDC-defined illnesses that they weren't listening for women who were getting AIDS.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

BE: When did I leave ACT UP? I've never left ACT UP.

SS: You're still in ACT UP?

BE: I'm still in ACT UP.

NS: I haven't.

SS: Do you go to the meetings?

BE: I go as often as I can. Since the heart attack, I haven't — I'm thrilled to see that something is afoot - something is going on.! I went the Monday before World AIDS Day to make sure — Tim Linceford had gone and made sure that we'd gotten the endorsement. ACT UP has been a co-supporter of Out of the Darkness for a number of years. And I was thrilled to see — this was also before the World AIDS Day action, that they went down to the bus; they were taking the bus down. This had a lot of people. There was over twenty people in the room.

When I first met Nathaniel in the twentieth anniversary, I said at the time, I said, "I certainly hope this doesn't turn out to be like *Brigadoon*." And here's everybody all involved and now after it all dies down, we're back to John and then Nat and Ken and a few others.

NS: I'm an artist, and I created an installation to mark the twentieth anniversary of ACT UP, and what I did was I took calendars, male calendars, pinup calendars for those years of the Reagan administration, and I wanted to see what seven years of silence looked like. I think it's 2,117 days that Ronald Reagan was in office, and he never mentioned the word "AIDS." So I put these up on a wall at the Bowery Poetry Club, and I marked the day that there was that first article in *The New York Times*, "Rare cancer seen in fourteen men — ," fourteen or forty-one, something.

BE: I think it was forty-one.

NS: And marked that day, and then I looked at all — and I laid out these calendars so that you could see what seven years of Ronald Reagan waking up every day and not — what does it mean to be aware that people are dying, citizens are dying of

AIDS, and you can't even say the word. And by not saying the word, we mean he wasn't taking any action.

BE: That was the year after Rock Hudson had died. Rock was dead a year before he said "AIDS."

NS: Yes.

SS: Now, is there anything on your list that we haven't covered?

BE: Oh, my gosh.

NS: Let's take a look. Friends diagnosed.

BE: Friends who died by name.

NS: Media coverage of your run. The action with Governor Cuomo. The action at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Dance for Life. The American Run to End AIDS. Safe sex, condoms, and prevention. Mel Cheren, who ran Colony House which is where —

BE: Colonial House.

NS: — Colonial House — Colony House. Paradise Garage, the AIDS Quilt. You've created panels for the AIDS Quilt on an international basis, because you took the Gay Games International.

BE: The New York chapter of the Names Project, that was part of the whole thing with the Names Project that got so screwed up. Basically when they started, they wanted to just change the way business was being run, when this was a totally grassroots effort. All these chapters were autonomous, but then they needed these chapters to keep the Names Project going, but they suddenly wanted to have it all run differently and micromanage everything.

02:05:00

Well, what happened, basically, was that over half the chapters just folded up their tents and went away, important chapters, you know, D.C., San Francisco. Two, Rhode Island and New York, rather than go away, we changed our mission, altered our mission and changed our name. So the New York chapter is called International AIDS Prevention Initiative. So we're predominantly with Global Quilt. The Names Project charges a disgusting amount for you to hang a quilt, hang a 12-by-12. It's just — that this is what they have to do —

SS: How much do they charge?

BE: Oh, I think it's over — I think it's \$500 now per diem or a \$500 rental.

JH: You mean if someone wants to put up some of the quilt, they —

BE: A 12-by-12, one 12-by-12, I think, is 500. Roosevelt had eight. On World AIDS Day, they had eight 12-by-12's up.

NS: Well, one of the things that you brought up that I was really struck by in describing your run and funding these grassroots AIDS awareness organizations in cities outside of San Francisco and Los Angeles and New York, which you also went to, is that in '85, you're saying that these organizations had become monoliths.

BE: In some regards, they were.

NS: And how long had they been put together? Within a few years already, they're not accessible. So it just speaks to the grassroots nature of what you've always done, and I guess in New York City grassroots is a different thing —

BE: Yes, it is.

NS: — because of access, because of who was have around us.

SS: No. There are grassroots organizations like MIX that never become co-opted.

NS: Right.

SS: So have we covered everything?

NS: The only thing is the World AIDS Day Candlelight Vigil, which Brent has kept going, and you should talk about that. When was the first time —

BE: I think it's worth talking about in the fact that Out of the Darkness was born because it was the fourth World AIDS Day, I believe, because this is our twenty-fifth World AIDS Day, and we just did our twenty-first Out of the Darkness. And at that time, there was no way for the public to observe World AIDS Day. If you had a lot of money, you could go to an amfAR benefit, or if you were really motivated and embedded with ACT UP, you could take the streets. So that's why I created Out of the Darkness. It was, I mean, the only way for the public to even participate was if they happened to look out their window and see the Night Without Light.

So in 1992, we started the candlelight march in Madison Square Park, and so it was a good vantage point because you could see the Empire and the Met Life and several of the buildings. They don't do the Night Without Light anymore, which is sad. I mean, it's the kind of thing there's no reason in the world that the things that they —

NS: And what happened? They shut off the buildings on World AIDS Day?

BE: Yes, for fifteen minutes, from 7:45 to 8:00 at night for a number of years. It was an initiative of Visual AIDS like the Red Ribbon Project and things, was that —

NS: And A Day Without Art.

BE: And A Day Without Art. They would get buildings to agree to turn off their exterior lighting for fifteen minutes. So we keyed off of that, and lit the candles at the moment when the lights went out. We had a thousand people march from Madison Square to Washington Square, and the next year we had a thousand people again.

02:10:00

Then the next year, Rudolph Giuliani came into power with this vendetta against homeless people with AIDS, and Housing Works spearheaded the vigil at City Hall, and there was a whole coalition of people, of groups and people. So to be in solidarity with that effort, we changed it to starting with a rally in Washington Square and marching to City Hall. For almost ten years we marched on City Hall, but that's a hell of a long way to go on December 1, and once we cross Canal Street, it's totally desolate. It's a very weird experience. You're like, "Why are we doing this? For who are we doing this? For ourselves? For the dead?" The only thing that would keep us even keep moving through these really horrendous conditions a lot of the time on December 1 — obviously, the World Health Organization, when they came up with December 1 for World AIDS Day, were thinking about other parts of the country other than how cold it can be. But we lost numbers every year.

NS: And now you've brought it back to our church, your church.

BE: Yes. Now we're on the Upper West Side in —

SS: What's your church?

BE: Broadway United Church of Christ. Such a long history with this thing. But the last time — 9/11, they didn't do the vigil there. For two years they didn't

do it at City Hall. They went up to Harlem and did it in front of the Federal Building at Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. We always supported the vigil.

NS: And this is the reading of the names on World AIDS Day, which is organized by Housing Works. But you are the one that's kept the candlelight vigil on World AIDS Day going.

BE: Yes, and we used to be part and parcel with them. The last time I actually marched to City Hall, only six people went with me. It was so demoralizing. And I said to Charles, I said, "Look, I'm demoralized. You folks have got to be demoralized for me to only show up with six people. I can't keep coming to City Hall. I've got to find somewhere else to march to."

The reason I ended up doing it at the Center all those years was because we've been doing it — well, five years into the event — four years into the event it rained on us, so I said, "We've got to have some kind of place to get inside." This was too hard on my volunteers. Between setup, the rally, and the march, that was a long time to be out in the elements.

So the next year we had Washington Square Methodist Church lined up as a failsafe if things were bad, and they were horrible. It was like single digits with, like, 30-mile-per-hour winds. It was just horrendous. So I think it was one of the best programs we ever had, because the energy, everybody was, like, jammed into Washington Square Methodist Church, and a lot of people marched that year afterwards.

NS: I'm so thankful that you did it this year, because it gave an opportunity for this young man to speak about being harassed by the police in New York City for possessing a condom. Under the state law in New York right now, possession of

a condom is evidence of prostitution. So the very groups who we would want to use condoms and to prevent AIDS are being harassed in the streets. So this is alongside “stop and frisk.” And if it wasn’t for Brent organizing a coalition of AIDS organizations, we wouldn’t be remembering our friends who have died, we wouldn’t be talking about safe sex, and we wouldn’t have an opportunity for somebody who’s in that risk group to share his story of what’s going on today.

BE: When I finally wrested it away from the Center, I mean, I finally had had it with the Center. When you collaborate with the Center, it’s “The Center” and everybody else, right? So it was like I’d actually kind of gotten encouraged because it actually asked for the logo, everybody’s logos and everything. I thought they were finally going to at least have everybody showing this was a collaborative effort.

I mean, the Keith Haring Foundation logo is the little baby. It was so small you couldn’t even see it with a magnifying glass. I was so embarrassed. They had sponsored this event for over twenty years.

NS: So, thank you to the Keith Haring Trust —

BE: Yes, thank god for them.

NS: — for keeping the Out of Darkness candlelight vigil.

BE: So we finally got it away. I took it away from the Center. The reason I’d left Judson Church was because the disability activists got on my case and said that if we didn’t do it in an accessible venue, they would boycott us. They would protest us. So I promised that we would be out in an accessible place. That’s how we happened to go with the Center.

02:15:00

I thought I might have a fight with the Center to be able to use Out of the Darkness, you know. I thought they'd want to lay claim to the name, since for a number of years, six years, seven years they'd been doing this event with us. But they jettisoned the whole thing. They turned it into — the candlelight march was happening at one in the afternoon that year. It was so ridiculous. I remember going to ACT UP and appealing. I said, "Look, AREA will pay for the signage. Please, we need to get some ACT UP signs to make this march look like anything. Let's do current statistics and stuff like that."

NS: The New York Gay and Lesbian Center came up with a candlelight vigil on World AIDS Day in the afternoon.

BE: And they got rid of the name. They didn't use "Out of the Darkness." So then I thought, "Well, this is not going to be a problem when I take it away from them. They didn't even use the name this time."

So we did go back to Judson because they'd gotten an elevator lift in. It was a great year, and that was the year where we really got a —

NS: I helped after that.

BE: Yes.

NS: It was great.

BE: We reconfigured the coalition. And I had a great partner with Krishna Stone at GMHC and Jeff Bosacki with International AIDS Prevention Initiative. We've already established some new traditions, which we now incorporate every year.

NS: And how about the reverend who — who's the very activist reverend?

BE: Oh, Pat.

NS: Pat.

BE: Pat Bumgardner. When I used to put this together, I used to try and find someone from the world of politics, someone from the world of medicine, someone from the faith-based groups. That was the first time I had Pat speak. Little did I know she was a fiery activist, and she would be the activist voice that I always wanted to pack a wallop at the end. So we had her last year, because it was the twentieth anniversary. I just can't ask her every year, you know.

I'm happy that we've moved it uptown now. We were down in the Village a long time. It's great that we're now starting at Trinity Church, which has got an LGBT youth shelter. So we immediately have youth factored in right from the get-go. And it's great to do the march first, so we don't lose people through attrition. I don't know what we have to do to get our numbers up. I mean, we had really good media this year, too, in terms of coverage, but media ahead of time. *The Metro* did a big thing with the photograph. *Time Out New York* picked us as the pick for the night. I thought it being a Saturday night, not a school night, we might increase our numbers, but we didn't.

SS: So I just have one last question. So looking back with hindsight from where you are, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment? Let me start with you.

NS: I'd say the greatest achievement would be getting the meds, because when ACT UP started, there was no medicine. Brent mentioned earlier the effectiveness and what it did to your body to have AZT, so I would say that's the greatest accomplishment of ACT UP, and putting that political pressure to get the government to act as people were dying.

What was the second part?

SS: What's the biggest disappointment?

NS: The disappointment is that I think it's hard to move through that organization now. I think that there's other groups that are doing the work of ACT UP. I haven't been to a meeting recently, maybe it's reenergized, but in watching the documentaries about ACT UP, I feel that there was room for multiple affinity groups, and now because of the size of the number of members that are involved, that it's sort of — it's a little bit hard to get things done sometimes.

02:20:00

BE: I think ACT UP's greatest achievement is showing that by joining forces we can empower ourselves and that it doesn't take vast amounts of money and organizing to be effective. I think it's one of the greatest things about living in this country, that we can actually put our democracy into practice and exercise our rights in a way.

NS: Creative dissent.

BE: Yes.

NS: Creative dissent and action.

BE: True civil disobedience is an amazing thing. I think ACT UP showed that there are all kinds of ways for people to participate in making a difference, and you didn't have to be — even if you didn't want to risk arrest, you could still do support work. You could make a sign. There were so many different ways to participate, and that's what I still love about ACT UP. I still love the name. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power is an amazing thing. And we haven't done that for a while, but we used to always end Out of the Darkness with the ACT UP chant. It was like it was a wonderful way to —

NS: What is the ACT UP chant?

BE: “ACT UP! Fight back! Fight AIDS!”

And I used to love the way Out of the Darkness would bridge all those different realms so that we would have people leaving memorials on a signature quilt, seeing sections of the quilt, hearing about people whose lives are affected by AIDS, people who are infected with HIV and AIDS, hearing — and the whole gamut, you know. So being able to end with the ACT UP chant and having people actually singing “Amazing Grace” and then chanting the ACT UP chant. It was a wonderful way — and there are people that come every year because they know not only it’s just the right thing to do, it’s important to not let the day go by without acknowledging it, observing it in some way, but that it’s multi-purposed. In many ways, ACT UP is multi-purposed as well, I believe, that it’s a way for us to continue to be effective, but it’s also a way for us to create community. It’s a way for us to keep up the fight, to know that we have a democracy that can be practiced. It’s a living, breathing way of being.

I still believe there are great things for ACT UP to achieve, and that’s why I’m so encouraged to see new people that I haven’t seen before. I didn’t get to go last night, but I saw the list on the agenda, and I was thrilled to see all the things on the agenda. I mean, this whole issue, this thing about testing and the issue that Sean has brought to ACT UP about criminalization, that you can’t be criminalized if you don’t know your status, and how much this could —

NS: Backfire.

BE: — backfire, could drive the crisis further underground again. If people are not willing to get tested, how are they going to know to get treatment?

Of course, in some regards seeing how for our twenty-fifth anniversary last year we joined forces with Occupy, it was, I think, a good move because the economic injustice is definitely part of it. Our theme for this year for Out of the Darkness was “We are all sex workers.” That was Krishna’s thing.

NS: Krishna at Gay Men’s Health Crisis.

02:25:00 BE: Somebody had said that a few years ago, and I tripped off on that as well, in terms of the idea of when Kennedy went to Berlin and “We’re all Berliners,” you know. We’re all — the idea, the old AIDS anthem, “We’re all in this together.” The thing that we are constantly having to fight, is that that fatigue, that this old news —

NS: Well, this idea, the new thing of getting to zero, how do we get to zero with all of these organizations, and yet if somebody decides to get tested, that can be used against them. It’s at odds. Or if somebody wants to use a condom to protect themselves, they’re harassed in the streets of New York City. I always take it down, back down to the individual.

BE: Well, I’m thrilled that they’re working —

NS: So that’s why we need ACT UP.

BE: — on the stigma issue. I mean, let’s face it, you know, for whatever progress we’ve made in the fight against AIDS, we have made very little progress against the HIV and AIDS stigma.

NS: And I’ve never seen Elton John more incensed than when he was on CNN and all the money that he’s raised for AIDS with his organizations, when he said, “I can’t believe we’re still talking about stigma.”

BE: It’s bad.

NS: It gets him crazy.

BE: It's very bad.

NS: So it's about coming out. It's about taking action.

BE: I mean, we demonize one another. I mean, I'm thinking of Waddell when he was very sick with AIDS when he spoke at the closing ceremonies of Gay Games Two. He lived another year, but he —

NS: This is Tom Waddell, who started the Gay Games.

BE: Yes. He talked about the fact that he was urging everyone at Gay Games Two to come out, because he was talking about the fact that, it's not that people don't know us; it's that they don't know that they know us. And that's why it's so important to come out in more ways than one, why the stigma is not going to go away if people aren't willing to self-identify as HIV-positive.

And the other thing is that people who are HIV-positive have got to take responsibility for infecting people with HIV. To me, that's the elephant in the room. The infection rates aren't going down. Okay, no, they're not going down. But who's doing the infecting?

NS: We have to take care of each other.

BE: In that regards, I think that's one of the reasons your archive project, I'm thrilled to participate in it because I think it's really, really important that the lives of the people that made such an amazing difference when they were with us are not forgotten. This is the thing that gets me every World AIDS Day is when the names start to be read, and these names just wash over me. I'm never really quite prepared for it, to realize that they're not just names, that when I hear those names, their faces —

NS: Loved ones. They're people. They're friends.

BE: — their faces are coming before my eyes, and the feelings of survivor guilt is immense, the fact that I've gone another year and I haven't thought about these folks until now that I'm hearing all their names being read again. That's why I will always support the quilt being shown wherever and whenever it can be shown and for people to be involved in making a panel. It's all fallen off, but it's still an amazing thing to think about this largest piece of folk art ever created in the history of our race on this planet. It was very upsetting for me to miss the conference and the quilt and everything this summer.

NS: You were in the hospital.

BE: Yes. I mean, I have to fight with my Gay Games community to keep some of these elements integral to the event. It's been a long struggle, and I can never let down my guard. I have to constantly convince new people from different cultures, different generations, of why it's important that this is the Gay Games. "It's an athletic event. Why do we have to be concerned with HIV and AIDS?"

02:30:00

And even with the Rainbow Run now, the Rainbow Run still happens, but it's not an ultra marathon anymore. It's kind of generic. It's for AIDS and breast cancer. I ended up adding breast cancer because I couldn't get any lesbians involved, and they said, "Well, if you added breast cancer, we'll get involved."

So I added breast cancer, and we added Ricki Stryker to Waddell and Haring, and we do this memorial moment, but now we do a memorial moment every year at the Federation annual meeting. In some regards they've learned over the years — I mean, of course, that means I have to keep two lists. I have an AIDS list and then I have

the list that every four years we read for the Rainbow Run. It's called the International Rainbow Memorial Run, and it's small runs in the host cities, past host cities of the Gay Games.

NS: Brent, I'm going to ask a difficult question. How would you like to be remembered?

BE: How would I like to be remembered? Jeepers.

NS: Because you spend all this time remembering your friends. I don't want you to go anywhere. I just want to know.

BE: Well, when I came home from the run and I got over the whole thing with Koch and everything, I said, "This run has not been run for any honors, but for the love of friends. So I accept the seal of the city in honor of my friends." So that's how I'd want to be remembered, that I loved my friends and I'm proud of the service I've given shoulder to shoulder with people like Bob Rafsky and Tom Cunningham and Aldyn McKean and all the others.

Those moments — I'm thinking about when we were sitting in the Kennedy Center watch *Les Mis* and —

NS: And you did not get arrested, so you made it.

BE: I didn't get arrested so there we were sitting in the house seats-

NS: You made it with your mother.

BE: They're storming the barricade, and I said, "Mom, you know, this show is about us. It's about ACT UP." When I first heard the score, I mean, it's kind of weird, its coming out on Christmas Day, because I'd first heard the score of *Les Mis* when somebody sent me the tape on that final run up on the eastern leg up, and, of

course, “Empty Chairs at Empty Tables” now became — at every AIDS memorial it was being sung and stuff. But it’s just — I’m just grateful to while I had the strength of mind and body to do something I was able to.

SS: Okay, thank you. Thank you both.

NS: Thank you, Sarah. Thank you so much.

BE: thank you. It’s been great. Thank you.

SS: And you got to tell everything you wanted to tell.

BE: Oh a lot. We’ve got a hundred stories.

NS: There’s a lot of stories.

BE: We told a lot of stories.

NS: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.