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Interviewee: **Richard Elovich**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Richard Elovich
May 14, 2007

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So if we could start with you saying your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

RICHARD ELOVICH: Whew, this is the first test of memory.

SS: Your name.

RE: Name. Richard Elovich. The date is May 14th, 2007; it's a Monday.

And where are we? We're in Brooklyn, at my house; 280 11th Street.

SS: And how old are you, dear?

RE: And it's sunny.

SS: How old are you?

RE: Ah 28.

SS: No, really.

RE: Fifty-three.

SS: Fifty-three. Good!

RE: Okay.

SS: Okay. So, I know you were born in Queens, because I remember the name of your piece; "Another Queer from Queens." But I don't know which neighborhood.

RE: I was born in Kew Gardens.

SS: Okay.

RE: Which of course is a shock when you actually see the real Kew Gardens, in England.

SS: Oh.

RE: It's gardens! And so you think, you know – anyway. And then Douglaston, and then Little Neck.

SS: And then Little Neck. So where did you go to high school?

RE: I actually went to high school first in Pine Bush and then I left home, early, at about 14. Part of it was my parents moved to Great Neck and I didn't like it. So I moved upstate, to where there was a small, family with a small hotel. And they adopted me, and I worked there. And then registered for high school there.

SS: Did you go?

RE: Um hm.

SS: So where, what town is that?

RE: Walker Valley.

SS: So you were a displaced Jewish gay teenager from Queens in Walker Valley, New York.

RE: Restless.

SS: My god!

RE: Yes.

SS: How was that?

RE: And, well, it was, it's complicated. My mother was what today would be considered mentally ill. But at the time, wasn't really diagnosed. So, my father wasn't around; my sister had just gone to college. So I didn't like to go to school, so I liked the idea of being on my own. And this family was extraordinary. It was a Cuban-Italian family, and lefty hotel; sort of the alternative Catskills. And it's interesting, because they just sold the hotel, after it's been in the family since the 1930s. And Thich

Nhat Hanh — I don't know if you know who that is — he was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk —

SS: Oh yes.

RE: — and actually, Martin Luther King recommended him for a Nobel Peace Prize. So it was wonderful, because the family was really struggling with selling the hotel. So it's an amazing thing, of being able to pass it now to this monastery.

SS: So you've been in touch with them all these years.

RE: Uh, yeah. And, well, here's an interesting thing. I actually stopped being in touch in around 1972 through about 1992, because I had had such a wonderful relationship with them, and I was terrified that they might be homophobic. And I just couldn't bear to know that. And then one year, a whole crew of us from ACT UP were renting this house in Saugerties. And Daniel [Wolfe] and I, I called up, and Daniel and I drove over from Saugerties, near Woodstock, to the hotel. And Dolores saw me. And instantly got it. And said, oh, we have Mirth and Girth come to the hotel!

Tape I
00:05:00

SS: {LAUGHS}

RE: And she just opened her arms. And ever since then — she died a few years ago, but her son, who was always a big brother to me — and I took in their daughter. When she was having difficulties as a teenager she lived with us, and she's living with us again. So we just sort of, it's a great fit to family.

SS: And do you think that your ethics about community involvement came from them? Or do you think it was something from your birth family?

RE: Ah. I actually do think it came from, the family's name is Geronimo. And I do think it came from there. Because the hotel was a site of '60s activity; lots of

folk singers came through there. And it was a place of much greater freedom, for me. And as long as I worked, everyone was cool. And that's, it was the site of my first sexual experiences and drug experiences. And –

SS: It was your first Bohemia, in some way.

RE: I guess. I guess you could say that, yeah.

SS: So when did you leave there, and come back to New York?

RE: I came back in time to graduate from Great Neck.

SS: Okay.

RE: So I was back there, I was back in Long Island by '71.

SS: Okay. So that's a very interesting time to be coming back to this area –

RE: Yeah. I was living up there during Woodstock. There's even, following Woodstock weekend, I was driving with two folks who live up there. And they were driving a Volkswagen that was painted like an American flag. And since it was right after — it was the Monday following Woodstock — the police at the Florida/Goshen exit just converged on us. And I was carrying a knapsack full of marijuana cigarettes that I had — this'll really make it flaky — that I had painted with watercolors, and was selling at the public school.

SS: So would you say drugs and being an artist happened together?

RE: I didn't have an idea yet of being an artist. So it was hallucinogenics, I was attracted to them. And I was kind of, I wasn't going to school, but I was reading voraciously. And making my own education, and was very aware of the politics of the time.

SS: So what do you think came first for you; being an intellectual, or being gay? I mean subconsciously, or consciously.

RE: Gay didn't come to me until fairly late, because there was no, we, especially in Queens, we lived within a conservative Jewish community; that was very nice. And that was part of why I was alienated when we moved to Great Neck, because all sorts of things were happening that I didn't quite understand at the time. Both in terms of class; in terms of a difference of a neighborhood. In Queens, everyone walked around; everyone was in walking distance to the synagogue; you knew all the neighbors. And Great Neck was this lovely, lovely cemetery. Because the streets were empty. But it was very beautiful. And things felt much emptier.

And I remember, my mother would just buy me clothes, in Korvette's or, one of those discount department stores. And suddenly, moving to Great Neck, it mattered what clothes I was wearing, because everyone dressed preppy and had brown penny loafers. And that was just unheard of in the neighborhood where I grew up. And at first, that was very dominating. And then it was the end of the '60s, and so all of that exploded. Jocks were smoking pot. And it was a great connector between people.

SS: I was going to ask you a personal question from what you're saying. This is a projection on my part, but do you feel like being an old-school Jewish New Yorker is now an antiquated type to be?

RE: No, not really. Because there's so many forms of that. And so in the, I saw Allen Ginsberg performing at a benefit in — I was still a teenager; I must have been 16 or 17; maybe younger — in Sunnyside, Queens. And I then had this incredible privilege to really meet him in about '74. And we became friends. And through him I

met Burroughs. And I ended up working as Allen's secretary for two or three years; I think until about '76 or '77. And in fact, upstairs, I have Allen's bed.

SS: Oh, wow.

RE: Which is, it's probably the only captain's bed with a headboard.

Those who will understand will understand; he was able to get traction.

{ALL LAUGH}

And it had, it opens up, and that was where he stashed — because he lived between 12th between C and D. In the '70s that was still dicey for white people, so it was pretty good bet that your apartment would be broken into. So he used to stash his harmonium and things like that inside the bed.

But so I think I was exposed to, both through Geronimos', Bella Abzug was up there all the time, and that was one progressive Jew; people like that. And at that time, first when I met her, she was a labor lawyer. This was before she ran for Congress and everything. And then Allen was yet a different leftist. So I think I see it as, it has so many different forms and expressions that I'm not sure I could say it's not. But, I am Jewish. And I guess I'm leftist.

SS: Yeah. It's an emotion style –

RE: And tied in with school. So I suppose I'm intellectual.

SS: So a–

RE: A reluctant intellectual.

SS: Reluctant intellectual.

RE: Yes.

SS: So after you graduated from Great Neck High School, was that when you came to Manhattan?

RE: Yes. In fact, from my bedroom in Little Neck, in Queens, I could see the red light of the Empire State Building go on and off. And so I always referred to it as “the city.” And it was always, the gravitational pull was there.

SS: So where did you –

RE: I could tell you mischievous stories, but essentially, I knew from a very early age – and that’s where my father worked. So –

SS: So where was your first apartment? Or where did you first stay?

RE: My first apartment was on East 6th Street. Well actually, my first apartment was in Vermont, in an old schoolhouse, in North Montpelier. And then I shared an apartment with my sister, who was going to NYU, and I was going to art school, in probably ’72 or ’73. And then my first apartment on my own was in ’73, and it was on East 6th Street, between 1st and 2nd. And then my second apartment was basically next door to John Bernd’s which was above The Cauldron restaurant.

Tape I
00:15:00

SS: On the same block.

RE: Yeah. Just across the street.

SS: The Indian restaurant block.

RE: Yes.

SS: Yes.

RE: Yes. Right, the Indian restaurant block.

SS: All right.

RE: And then I moved to the Bowery. And I lived in the – a loft building on the Bowery; 222 Bowery, which was where the gymnas-, it was an old YMCA, and it was a gymnasium where Rothko had done the Seagram's paintings, and now there was a second generation abstract expressionist in there. And I was living with a guy named James Grauerholz. We were living in the locker room of the YMCA, and it literally had urinals in the bathroom and authentic graffiti from probably 1930. And I lived there for a few years.

And then I ended up sharing an apartment with my father on East 40th Street for awhile. Which was, again, a mischievous tale. Because it was his – alternative lifestyle apartment. So my parents weren't that far from – there wasn't a great schizophrenia. Though now having godchildren who are in their teens and twenties, and friends who have teenage kids, I realize that my generation, or our generation; our parents knew nothing about what we were doing. It was a benign neglect. They didn't have a clue to what we were doing. And now, my generation parenting teenagers and young adults, the parents know way too much about what the kids are doing. So the kids don't get to have that, make those secrets which then become their life.

SS: Well put. So was James, was that when you were working for Allen, and James was on his track towards Burroughs? And was Ira involved?

RE: I was working; actually I was working at the Gotham Book Mart.

SS: Okay.

RE: I was in two things: I was waiting tables in the West Village. And I was working at the Gotham Book Mart. And I met, through a guy named Bruce Hutchinson, which was working in the mail room, I met James. And I think James was

seductive. And he heard how much I admired William Burroughs. And so he said he could introduce me to Burroughs. And so one night, I went down with him to Burroughs's loft. And Burroughs was living at that point on Franklin Street. He had just come from England, and he was teaching at City College. And it was a kind of, for me, a milestone evening, because we became friends. And then after that, I met Allen, and Allen liked the idea that Burroughs had a secretary, so why didn't he have a secretary? So

—

SS: But there was a whole crew of you.

RE: — he asked me if I wanted to do it.

SS: Ira Silverberg worked for Burroughs, right at that time, didn't he?

RE: Ira was the next generation, yeah.

SS: Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah. And Eileen Miles worked for Jimmy Schuyler. Wasn't that it?

RE: That's right. Eileen was, at that point, she was — and I actually went through a period where, as crazy as things got, I was, I think — and it probably was part Jewish and part, that I got on well — I worked for Allen; then I worked for Jasper Johns. I briefly worked for John Ashbery, and then I ended my career as a secretary/assistant when Helen Frankenthaler asked me if I would work for her, and I thought, at the age of 30, I think I'm, this is tired. So I went to do something else.

SS: So can you give us a little insight — you worked for all these homosexual geniuses. Looking back, do you have any insight into that relationship?

Tape I
00:20:00

RE: I think it made, one, for me, it made that world possible. Because what I was going to say before was that in the Jewish community in which I lived, there was no possibility of homosexuality. Just there wasn't really a way of imagining it, because of the culture and the norms and the pressures. And I always knew I was different, so I think gender performance preceded my attraction to men. And I think it existed largely, also, in my imagination. From a very early age, I had the rubber mold "Men." Like firemen or cowboys. And I would make, I'd wake up very early in the morning, and I would imagine that they were characters on a ship; they were men on a ship that never — I predated *Star Trek* — they never docked anywhere, so they were living forever on this ship. And it's sort of, I think, fantasy also of remaking the house. But it was a house in which there were only men.

SS: And now you have one.

RE: Right, yeah. Although we have lots of women passengers.

SS: No, I know. What was the influence of being around these great iconic figures on your sense of yourself as an artist and your artistic practice?

RE: Okay. Then, it seemed, I actually think it was through those guys — particularly William — that started to seem possible. And it was in my early twenties, I think 21, hanging out with William and a couple of other people. It wasn't just William; it was also a number of other young people.

Steven Lowe was someone who I think at one point was William's lover, and he was this amazing character. He was the son of a funeral director in Miami Beach. And he was living a Jane Bowles/Paul Bowles life. Meaning he was gay, and his wife was gay, and she'd always have a lover. And they would make these really strange and

wonderful dinner parties in which everyone would sort of pile into their loft down on Howard Street. And we would just get, I'd get stoned; and would start writing.

And part of it was I was enormously shy in those years. And I would just get completely flustered, especially with adults. I remember the first time meeting Allen; I couldn't put a sentence together. I was just really, but not just with someone like Allen, who's a celebrity. I just would get very shy and it would degenerate into stuttering – you know, you know, you know. And I discovered that when I wrote, I could talk into my fingers, and I actually could say things that were intelligible.

So I loved that, and William encouraged me. And we would actually collaborate. We would get stoned, free associate; and if he was working on a chapter of something, I would write something, and maybe something would end up – “We see China through the binoculars of the people” became, I think, a chapter heading in *Cities of the Red Night*. So we were all playing, and we were playing games — not games like board games — but William would, he was like a kid. He would hook on to things. Like in Soviet Union, there were these things called the [Konstantin] Raudive Tapes, which were reel-to-reel tapes of silence in which you could hear, in the silence, voices of spirits talking.

So we would just sort of play with that stuff, and sometimes with, hallucinogenics; sometimes without. And we all had those, in those days, our Selectric typewriters, and you'd throw paint on them so they wouldn't get stolen. And we would just sort of go at it. And my friend Steven Lowe survived by writing porn stories for some 42nd Street porn book publisher. Except Steven was so on his own track. He would

fill these books up with writing about Lynda Benglis, the artist. And it's like all kinds of stuff was in it. But he'd just make sure, like every three pages, there was a sex scene.

SS: Like a Kathy Acker novel.

RE: And yeah, there was a set of rules.

SS: Yeah.

RE: And I ended up doing that for *In Touch* magazine. I wrote about, fantasy skateboard boys landing — it was the summer of the landing on Mars — so I can't remember what it was called; it may have even been called "The Mars Picture." But we were sort of just all playing with that stuff, and it was a great time.

SS: You said you went to art school.

RE: Um hm.

SS: Was that for writing, or for —

RE: No. As my mother was a painter, and as a kid, I picked up art pretty early on; and my best times with her were her bright days, when we would make — I remember really early on, we'd make scrapbooks and things. And she could make great school assignments. She was really creative. I wrote about this in a play. She would do things like paint the insides of all the drawers this really beautiful red madder. And I remember going to the Van Gogh show with her at the Brooklyn Museum. And I'd just never seen, it was like the museum was on fire with that yellow of his.

So I was drawn to colors and, I took some art classes. But I was always drawing. That's what I was doing in school; I was mostly drawing.

SS: Where were you going to classes?

RE: I went to the New School. And I think, earlier on, there was something on television; Jon Gnagy was this guy on Saturday mornings who taught perspective and stuff. And I would have my sketchbook out there, and on Saturday mornings, do that. But I think I also had some formal lessons, as well.

SS: So what was the role of drugs in your evolution as an artist? And I don't know if you had come out yet at this point, but –

RE: I didn't really come out until ACT UP.

SS: Oh, okay. Well then let's save that.

RE: Um hm. In fact, what happens – and I'm sure this is, I'm working in Central Asia now, and I deal with lots of young kids, and it's a Muslim country, and there's a criminal law against homosexuality, and there's all this pressure in families. The first question everyone asks you is, do you have children, are you married? So it's like what I went through, amplified exponentially. So I had desires. I knew, through my father's gaze, that I wasn't quite masculine enough, and my grandfather was a workingman, he was on the railroad, and he had been a minor league baseball player. And I knew, in both of their eyes, there was something unacceptable about me. So that really predated anything sexual. It was much about gender. I remember playing with a dollhouse, and my grandfather saying, that boys didn't play with a dollhouse. And I said, it's a hotel. And I think I was more interested in my sister's dolls than she was. She was actually a tomboy. Have I gotten off on a tangent now?

And then, when I was, it was smack in the middle of the '60s; I went to a summer camp. And there was this guy who was 24. I was 14, 13; and he was 24. And he just kind of turned me on to the total '60s experience, of reading *Siddhartha*. He was

a student at Temple University in Philadelphia. And he just, it was like the first time an adult — because he's 24, he looked old — he kind of turned me on to all these things to read, and I'd write him letters and stuff. And then once he invited me down to visit him at Temple University, where he lived with his wife. And I went and stayed with them.

Tape I
00:30:00

My father was uptight about it. But I thought, well, here's this guy who's paying attention to me. Because again, I didn't really fit in with the men, that were in my family.

And my father actually accurately predicted that it was homosexual. And I just didn't want to believe it. But I was sleeping on a mattress, or cushions out in the living room. And this guy came out, and started massaging me. And that turned out to be, like a first sexual experience. But it had no meaning to me. It was really about his getting off.

And I was actually bitter, for years, because I thought he deprived me of figuring out on my own. So it felt more like an imprint. And he did that a couple of times.

So I wasn't quite ready for it. In fact, at that point I was into girls. And lost my virginity pretty early.

SS: So when you were a performance artist in the East Village, you were straight?

RE: I, I never described myself as straight. But that scene — and I think for a lot of artists — we didn't want to be labeled. And that also came out of the '60s, was there wasn't an interest in being pigeonholed into anything. And I think it was less about homophobia and it was more about not wanting to be pigeonholed into anything —

to be pigeonholed as Jewish. That you wanted to escape any jacket that was being slipped on you or, attributed to you.

SS: Because I always thought you were gay, Richard.

RE: Well –

SS: During that whole time.

RE: – um, I –

SS: It was like '79 to –

RE: I had sex with men since I was 17 – voluntarily. But I was with girls from the time I was 14. And also because I was small and not very macho, girls were kind of gravitated towards me, because it was much more equal footing. And often they were the aggressor. And so it was fun. And I liked the fluidity. I didn't think of myself as bisexual, or anything like that. But my longest relationship was with a couple of women. And that went right up until the point I met Daniel. Daniel's really what changed things for me. It was 17 years ago – '89. And it was, we knew each other through Loring McAlpin. But it was the Cathedral action that we were hanging out. And when the screaming was going on — it was going on for hours, because people couldn't figure out how to get arrested — and I had had, I had a number of arrests already hanging over me, so I was their support person. And I was just trying, it was so cold, so I was trying to find a place for them to get arrested, so I could go home. Because it was getting pretty late. Had been going on all morning, and now this was, I guess, into the middle of the afternoon. And then finally, we found a, because the police wouldn't let you get into the street even to lay down and get arrested.

So, but your voice gets very hoarse. And Daniel, I asked him for a lozenge. And he passed the lozenge from his mouth to my mouth. And I thought, god, that's weird. And I thought something was more intimate there. And then after jail — as any activist knows — the libido is very strong after a demonstration. So he came back to my apartment, and that was our consummation date. And we sort of date our relationship to December 10th, 1989. But up until then, Daniel made it seem possible for me to be gay. But my long relationships were generally with women, who I think also were androgynous themselves and drawn to that, because I think I fit, in the '70s, much more of the glitter scene; and an androgynous scene, than what later became called the clone scene. I wasn't into the Western stuff, and I wasn't into leather. And I, it was the time of David Bowie and T Rex. And there were these great, great gay discos, like the first Limelight; the Roadhouse — that were on 7th Avenue, lower 7th Avenue. And the Ninth Circle had a disco downstairs, where the steak restaurant had been. I worked at the Ninth Circle.

Tape I
00:35:00

SS: Oh, okay.

RE: I worked there as a cook. And then, when I finally got promoted to waiter, the day I came to work, I think, the owner burned the place down. He was an inveterate, or unredeemable gambler. And so — the alternative economy had control of his cash registers, and they, a bookkeeper would come in each day — because he lived above the Ninth Circle — and he had a dog named Nathan, a dachshund, that would sort of slip down the stairs and made you smile every morning. And Bobby Krivitt[?], he called me Schmeckel. Because I think he hadn't seen a Jewish kid working in the, in a gay bar before. And he calls me Schmeckel, which is Yiddish for liquor. So I was like a, I was

like a dog to him, as a kid. Just thoroughly. And I was technically underage for working at the bar. But I worked there for a few years. And then someone took me under wing, where I – when I arrived and there were firemen and the place was basically gutted. And we went to work at the Lion's Head. Which was a sportswriters' bar. And the *Village Voice* had been down there, and the Village Independent Democrats were there. So I worked there for a couple of years, in the kitchen, cooking.

So the kitchen was always a center for me, and it still is; it's just that I don't make a living from it anymore.

SS: Are you a good cook?

RE: But it was always my trade.

SS: When did you get sober?

RE: Well, when did I get involved in drugs, first?

SS: Yes, okay.

RE: So teenage years; hallucinogens. And then, I think for me, the gay bar experience was pretty challenging. I was kind of, on the one hand, in love with the whole experience, because it was like, oh my god, this room is filled with men who want to have sex. And that seemed like the most miraculous thing to me, having gone through this thing where I was the only person; and I'm sure that's true for lots of gay men. And then — wait, wait, wait — but I was uptight. And so these, and I was like, I was 17. And these guys would come up to me and go, why don't you smile? And I realized, after a couple beers I could smile. And after a couple more, I could actually talk to people.

And so it was a lot what was called, in the field, state-learned behavior. So I essentially learned how to get on with men; and how to be able to talk to people —

because again, I did have this weird shyness at that point — through, getting liquored up. And I was fortunate and unfortunate that I could, for a small person, really hold my liquor. So that meant I would, I could drink till four in the morning. By which time I was quite drunk. But again, kind of, in control of it. And I loved that scene, because I liked working till four in the morning; and then going out with everyone afterwards for breakfast in the Village; and/or going to someone's house. It was that amazing experience of the '70s, early '70s, where you could, every night, wake up in a different apartment. And that was part of what I loved doing, was waking up in different people's lives.

James Wentzy: Maybe I'll change the tape now.

SS: Okay. And let's have a cigarette.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: So when did you go from alcohol to drugs?

RE: I had been using opiates and playing around with them for a long time. But I was mostly drinking, because that was the bar scene. And unlike today, the only thing you could get from the bar scene, essentially, were Quaaludes; you could get pot. But the heroin scene was completely separate. And so I had this boyfriend from Brussels who was using heroin, and he turned me on to it. And it just knew my name. It was so great. It was, one of the happiest moments of my life. I sort of describe this in a play, and I can rehearse it for you — is that the fir-, I had my fist in his lap. And he was shooting me up. And it was so erotic. And when the high — I've been working in Soviet countries — when the *kaif* came over me, it was like this blanket just dropped over me. And it had been like I was shivering my whole life, and suddenly I just felt wrapped in this embrace.

And I just loved it; it knew my name. I wouldn't say that I was addicted from the first moment, but I was in love from the first moment. And my favorite thing, in a way, was boyfriends who were outlaws. They were outliers from, the gay community, who – and sometimes they were guys who could only have sex with a man – they didn't identify as gay, but they could only have sex with a man when they were high. And it was the best drug on, Howard Brookner and I were really tight. I had been traveling, and Howard had sort of heard of me through James. And he just came over the night I was back. And we had sex, and we got into heroin together. And again, I wrote about this in a play, but we would just fuck for hours, and not come. And it was like so, it was just wonderful. It was wonderful getting high together, and it was wonderful having sex together. And a lot of the guys, Howard was gay, did self-identify as gay. And I actually introduced him to the guy who became his lover, Brad Gooch. Because Brad and I had been really, really good friends, and had messed around together.

And the Ninth Circle was my office. It was the place where no matter what I did, I would end up there by around 11:30. And this is now after it had reopened. And so my friends just knew that's where they could find me, because I had lots of friends who would, again, they, the gay scene was very, very varied, and there were lots of gay men who were not into the bar scene. But they knew they could find me there. In those days, you didn't have an answering machine yet, or anything like that, so it was a place where I would end up. And there all sorts of interesting people there: Joe Brainard hung out there; Mark Lancaster, who was a British painter. We had visitations by the likes of David Bowie, and it was a place; it was really, really well known as a scene. And when you were describing before about the hustler bar, that was well after the Ninth

Circle was no longer a scene that the downstairs became a place. And there was always that tinge to the place. Because there were lots of illegal operations that were going on around the gay bar, you know; everything from gambling to a call girl service to, mostly just marijuana dealing.

SS: So what year did you get sober?

RE: Uh, I got sober in – ch-ch-, ch-ch-, ch-ch, ch-ch-, ch-ch-, ch-ch – 1982. But that was a long, I didn't see it as getting sober, because I didn't, I didn't really see myself as an alcoholic. And it was mainly, it was heroin and speed that brought me to my knees. It was speedballs. And I thoroughly wrecked this wonderful, wonderful relationship I had with a woman. And I'll keep her out of this. But we were just best friends, and I think we thought, we'd spend the rest of our lives together. I had already been married.

SS: Oh, you're kidding.

RE: Yeah.

SS: When did you get married?

RE: I got married in 1978, to a dancer. She was part Indonesian and part Dutch. And I was very close with the whole Cunningham scene, which is not a big surprise, that I was working for Jasper Johns; I was living with Mark Lancaster at what was then Jasper Johns's studio, but later became The Bank. And uh – lost my train of thought here.

SS: And you got married to a Cunningham dancer?

RE: Oh. So then, well, she wanted to be in the Cunningham company, and we were sort of having a relationship. And the little network of friends I was in, we

realized that she, if she got a green card, maybe Merce would think she was more committed. But she essentially came, she was a Dutch ballerina who then got involved with Ton Simons, who had, she was in the Rotterdam Dance Theater, and they had, we were part of a young scene. Karole Armitage was part of it; Karole was my neighbor. And I think at that point she was going out with David Salle. And there was a whole scene of us, that crossed a number of things. But I was very involved in the dance scene, and I had, off and on, for about two years, I had a wonderful lover named Jim Self, who was a choreographer. Who was first a dancer in the Cunningham company, and then he was choreographer. And we started, Brad Gooch got me started writing stories. And Richard Horn. I started writing stories. And we'd go back and forth, because Brad had been writing poetry up until then, and then both of us started writing stories at the same time. And we'd sort of, exchange each time we had finished a story. And so through him and a number of other people — Steve Hamilton — I learned of the poetry scene. But I had never, I wrote some poems when I was in high school, but I didn't think of myself that way; I thought of myself as writing stories. So that's why I also had a greater identification with Burroughs, and Paul Bowles and, than I did with Allen.

SS: So you got sober really at the moment that AIDS was beginning; '82.

RE: Well, and it's an interesting thing. What got me, part of what got me sober was that my girlfriend, who hadn't been using any drugs – I would, every so often, try to stop using heroin. And I was on methadone program for two years. And during one of my periodic cycling in and out of using heroin, I meet her. And she didn't know; I didn't tell her that I was using heroin. And then she just casually showed me, in her

kitchen drawer what was in those days like a little wrapper — almost like an origami wrapper — with cocaine in it. And she was snorting a little bit of it, and I was like, why waste this on snorting? And quickly pulled out a syringe, and then stayed up the whole night. And I think after that, she had the clear impression that I was not a newcomer. And I was back on the horse again. And for the next two years, with her, I was in and out of heroin, and then she got involved with cocaine. And she got — so we met in the late '70s; we were together until '82. And she got a horrible case of hepatitis B, and got really, really sick, to the point that she needed interferon treatments.

And I felt enormously guilty. One, because I had turned her on to these drugs and had injected her the first time. And I was a mess. Because once you get involved like that, I would find any way to get money, including stealing from her. And I just wrecked our relationship. And it wasn't until I went out to Minnesota for drug treatment — basically what happened was, my family did a kind of intervention. They found me in an overdose. My sister — I had been taking care of her dog, and, and I was dragging the dog out to cop on the, I was living in Chelsea.

And this is pre-Chelsea scene. This was when Chelsea was a Latino neighborhood, and tough. In those days, it was gay bashing in that neighborhood. And I would take her mutt, Doc, to the Lower East Side, and I knew my way around there.

And actually, part of supporting my habit was that I would set white guys up to get mugged. So I, and I was a daredevil. Again, I was a little guy, and I wasn't physically aggressive, but I wasn't afraid of anything. And part of that was the drugs.

And it just turned into a very bad run. And one of the last things was, for example, I borrowed, I wrote a check at the Ninth Circle. And I hadn't been there in

years, but because I had worked there, I knew everyone. So I wrote a check, and the check bounced. And those guys weren't kidding around. And I was looking for the French Foreign Legion; I was looking to get out from underneath a lot of this. And so even when I was on methadone, I was still shooting speed. And in those days I was in for 21 days in Bernstein. And I think I was the only one who hadn't done prison. And basically, it was just sitting around all day, playing cards and telling war stories. And there was a social worker, but she hid at the end of the hall, and never really came out of her office.

Which later comes into play, because one of the things that I really got involved with in ACT UP was, I heard Tim Sweeney, who was then the, I think he was the policy director; I don't think he was yet the executive director of GMHC. He came to one of our meetings, and he was talking about the state budget and about treatment slots. And I started thinking through all the attempts I had made at treatment in New York. And I never could afford a drug-free treatment program – a therapeutic community. So I thought, was I in one of those slots you're talking about? It was a very weird way of hearing someone talk about it. And I set about, through ACT UP and then Ryan White, to create the drug treatment that I wished had been there for me.

But anyway, I just burned down the house, essentially. I just burned everything down. And then I took a deliberate overdose. I was always, I was the kind of user who was, like the, the glass is, just going over. And some people could really manage their addiction. Like Burroughs. He, basically, he used methadone to the end of his life. And he would cycle in and out of it. But he never got really into trouble. But I was the person who was always increasing my dose, and always looking for the nod;

looking for that wonderful moment when, between being high and being out. And so that meant I overdosed a lot. And particularly towards the end, when I was just shooting by myself and there wasn't someone with me, it's dangerous stuff.

Tape II
00:15:00

So my sister found me when she came to look for her dog, and I was dead. And I think she called an ambulance. And then my family learned of it, and they did one of those traditional interventions with me. And at that point, it was convenient for me to go into treatment. Because I had burned everything out on the street. There was no one I could borrow money from anymore; my girlfriend was sick, and she was now in London, getting interferon treatments. So, I was pretty aware that I needed an escape. And so I went into treatment really not intending to stop, but just to escape. And my parents gave me a one-way airplane ticket to Minnesota. And I think they wanted to be rid of me, in a sense.

So, I really took to it. I didn't think I would, but I loved the whole experience, and it was kind of, because of my sexuality and stuff, I think it was the first time that there was a group of people, and a group of strangers, who I let know who I am. And I do think, I do think part of my bisexuality was hiding behind it, as well; was as long as I was in relationships with women, I wasn't homosexual, somehow. and all that came collapsing down around me, and I think it was much more, it was less — and this is where, people get into the drugs, the drugs, the drugs — the truth is, treatment for me wasn't really about drugs. It was really about me connecting with people and, just putting' my life back together. And I was just turning 30. My 29th birthday was the worst. It was, it really was bottoming out. And though Minnesota was one of the

strangest, it was like Kansas; waking up in Minnesota. And I was as weird to them. Because a lot of those people had never seen a Jew before.

SS: Right.

RE: They'd seen blacks, because there were blacks in, that was Prince's scene; St. Paul and Minneapolis. But when I had to get recovery jobs; I could get almost any job, because I wore glasses and I was Jewish. So, I got a job at the St. Paul bus depot, working the lobster shift. And I was able to get that job.

I was a night clerk at the rent-by-the-hour motel. And the guy who hired me said, do you – you'll be the bookkeeper. Because that's what happens at night, is reconcile the books for that day. And he again just sort of assumed I could do it. And he said, well, you know how to – I said, I don't know if I can do this. And he said, well, you know how to balance your checkbook, don't you? And well, that was a little bit of white lying; no, I didn't really know how to. And I said, yeah, yeah, I, I get how to do that. So I was hired as the night clerk.

And then I had a couple more. I was a baker at the Sheraton Hotel in Minneapolis. And that also wended my way back to New York, because I knew Bob Wilson, and he liked what I did in terms of performances. Because I had started performing with Jim Self. And again, an indication of how far out there I was was that like the Cunningham-Cage thing, I was supposed to come up with a score. It didn't have to have any relationship to Jim's dance, but it had to be predictable, so that he could know, by the time he got across the room, I was saying this line. And I was so high that I would just go into the office of Dance Theater Workshop every night; get on the Selectric; and just be writing up a new text to keep it interesting for me. Which of course

made it impossible for him and made it impossible for the dancers, because they never knew what I was going to do next.

So this is when I say everything was coming down, was this had been a great opportunity; we had a kind of great partnership. And this came down; my working for Jasper ended; everything was really falling apart.

SS: So then, at this point now, you're sobering, you're back in New York. And I think this was when John Bernd really becomes a figure. Because I'm assuming that – I know you were really close to John, and you were in his care group, but that was a precursor to you getting involved in ACT UP.

Tape II
00:20:00

RE: Right. Actually what happened was, since I was working in Minneapolis, I had to be at my job at, I was a baker. So I had to be there at about five in the morning. And Wilson came through, and he was doing the *Knee Plays* at the Guthrie Theater. And he asked me if I wanted to be the dramaturge for it. And he had this text from David Byrne, and Byrne wasn't out yet; he hadn't come out yet to Minneapolis, so I basically created, out of his material, I created the text for the *Knee Plays*. And it, I would just stay, I'd sleep on Bob's couch every night. And you know – heh heh, I'll just get everyone in trouble; he'd be doing coke and drinking. And so he'd stay up all night long, doing these beautiful charcoal drawings. And I would finally run out of steam, because I wasn't using drugs, I wasn't drinking. And I'd fall asleep, and by about five in the morning, he was back in his bedroom, asleep, and I would go to the bakery. And it was really through working with Bob that I said, I want to get back to New York and I want to get back into performance scene and that whole thing.

And everyone was saying to me, don't go back to New York; everyone in Minneapolis, in St. Paul; they were saying, don't go back to New York; you'll use again. And they took a bat to me, with the statistics of relapses amongst heroin users. So, and they said, stick with the winners; that was one of the slogans. So I said, okay, I'm an alcoholic. Because they had much better statistics.

And so when I went back to New York, I just went to AA meetings. And I loved it. And I did that for a couple of years. And I slowly got my life back. I started performing. And then I kind of came out from underneath Jim's shadow and started making, we did a performance at The Kitchen. I mean I did this play based on Kathy Boudin's story at The Kitchen. And I just started, I was part of a curated evening of young dancers at the Grey Art Gallery. And that's when I met Karole Armitage and a number of young people who were part of that scene, of moving, separating themselves from Merce; but they were all Merce's dancers. Which had happened now through, this is like the third generation of that happening. And I just started making my own performances, and from about '84 'til '87 I was making plays, and largely working with dancers.

And I met John Bernd at an AA meeting. And John was not an alcoholic. But I think what was so painful for him was no one, even though he was part of the queer community, and an art community; but no one had a clue to AIDS. And technically, John didn't have AIDS; he had ARC. So he first had GRID –

SS: Right.

RE: – Gay Related Immune Deficiency. And John had come out very early on, in terms of being a person out in the open. And then he suddenly realized the

consequences of this, that he couldn't, his sister wouldn't let him spend time with his nephews; everyone was freaked out; even our friends, who were pretty hip on the dance scene, they were afraid to drink the same water as John. So in a sense, John started denying that he had AIDS.

SS: Right.

RE: He actually went in reverse. And so we met through AA, and I agreed to be John's sponsor. And it didn't take me very long to realize John was not alcoholic, but he, he was sick.

And I had first heard about AIDS, really, through, I had a friend from the Pyramid scene who was, ended up at a halfway house with me in St. Paul. And he was, his name was, Ammo was his dragster name. And he was really close with that whole Club 57 scene.

Tape II
00:25:00

SS: Oh yeah; Ann Magnuson –

RE: Yes –

SS: – and John Sex.

RE: – Keith Haring, John Sex; he and John were lovers; and Klaus Nomi was the first person who, from that scene who died of AIDS. John Sex later died.

So I was first getting it as this thing that was happening. And of course, I was a total double winner, because I was – I was using needles; I was getting fucked; and there was, up until '87, when I tested, I thoroughly expected that I had, that I had AIDS. And in fact, a number of people who were close to me, and had been lovers with me, were actually upset when I tested negative and they tested positive. Because I really was, someone who was as risky as you could imagine being.

And I also was just praying that I actually would test negative, because I couldn't face coming up with yet another problem into my family. It just seemed too much to have to explain, to my parents and my sister, that I had AIDS.

And it, I remember testing at the Center. But now, back to John.

So I became John's AIDS sponsor, because he just had stopped wanting to talk about it, largely, with people. But he was in and out of NYU. And at that time, NYU Medical Center was discriminating. They didn't want too many patients, because they didn't want to be known as an AIDS hospital. So very often, he was getting stuck in the emergency room, and kept there for days. And he had wild symptoms. He had just insane case of psoriasis. It was all immune-related. And then, he got — I'm not going to remember now what that opportunistic infection, CMV. He had CMV.

But in a sense, John died without having an AIDS diagnosis. Because most of the symptoms he had were not yet on the CDC roster.

And it was, it was crazy being part of John's support group, too. Because this was sort of my entrance into the Lower East Side performance scene, of Ishmael [Houston-Jones] and Yvonne Meier. And Lori E. Seid was really the glue to putting the support scene together. And John was in — especially towards the end, he was in fierce denial that he had AIDS. And we were trying to figure out a hospice or something to put him in. And I remember once going to — what was it called? — 102? Remember? Kiev was over here —

SS: Oh yea, 102.

RE: — and then there was 102? And Michael Stiller, who was like the youngest — he was a kid — he and I took John out for breakfast. And we were trying to;

Michael was already running his financial stuff. Because there was a tendency, in those days, for guys to, if they knew they had AIDS, to really run up credit card bills. And so John, who wasn't going out very much, would go out and buy, this really expensive winter coat. It's humorous now. At the time, it was pretty, it was all pretty challenging. It was all beyond our experience. Every one of those networks of support groups. No one had any blueprint for it.

And so Michael and I took John out for breakfast. And we were trying to say to him, look; we got to find a place for you, because the Co-Op Care at NYU is no longer working. I would often stay with John in Co-op Care, because that was the way you got a tiny apartment, as long as you had a friend who was willing to stay overnight.

Tape II
00:30:00

And for whatever reason, I was not freaked out about AIDS at all. And I think part of it was that I had come up through heroin and cocaine. I'd seen my girlfriend through hepatitis B; and it just wasn't, it was like the worst thing happened to me, and I was the agent of it. Which was, the heaviest thing that ever happened in my life — and that has ever happened in my life since, looking back — was to pry that needle out of my hands and out of arm. So to me, I never was flustered at all by what John was going through. And I met, a bunch of times, with his therapist and him.

And it was just, the story really is — and again, this is true for lots of people — at the a-, John hadn't pulled it together yet? He was, he was still a young artist; he hadn't really hit his groove. And he saw himself as kind of, his relationship with Tim fell apart, Tim Miller fell apart; and there were all these things he wanted to do. So it's totally understandable that death just seemed like, it shouldn't happen.

And so he would, when our little support group would get together in his apartment, he would see it as, we were organizing to be his support team for his career. He wanted a secretary, and he wanted Michael Stiller to be his secretary. And it was like, okay, we know, John has AIDS. But for, and remember, there was no HIV yet. So there was this real odd thing. And I remember, at breakfast, John was just concerned about the fact that the waitress didn't get his eggs right; the yolk hard enough or loose enough or something like that. So there we are trying to have this momentous conversation with him about, the next steps in his life, and about dying. And John was just talking about the egg yolks. And it was just so clear that he was putting every bit of strength he had into not acknowledging this. And we were young enough to not understand that, at the time.

And people would come in and out. And I think I was a valuable resource for John because we didn't have any luggage. We hadn't been boyfriends; we hadn't performed together. So I could be around him, and he didn't have to do any emotional work with me. Whereas with a lot of his friends, and especially people he had been involved with, he almost didn't want to see them at the hospital. Because he knew, if they came, he would have to do all this emotional stuff with them. Which he wasn't prepared to do, because he wasn't, even though he looked, to everyone he was very sick, he wasn't seeing it that way.

And in the last year of his life, he was sending me to HEAL meetings. And I, I've always been, to some degree, a rational creature. And HEAL didn't make, a lot of what was going on in HEAL didn't make a lick of sense to me. It really seemed like, okay; I knew enough about alternative stuff that that made sense to me. But it was

so clear that so many of the people going to the HEAL meetings were hawking goods — either tapes or different kinds of cures — but you couldn't separate out people. As critical as we can be of the crew that got around Treatment and Data at ACT UP, they were never making money out of it; they were never selling their own cure. But all the Louise Hay stuff, and all that; there was another person, I forget, who was — Williamson?

SS: Yeah, Marianne Williamson.

RE: Yeah. All that stuff, there was always someone selling it. Should we stop?

JW: No —

SS: No, we're fine.

RE: So John got me to the Center, because he had been into this stuff at HEAL. And then, he really wanted to go to a gay pride march. Now, I had been to a gay pride march in 19-, maybe 1974, I had been to it. But I didn't march in it. I was just, hanging out, as it would go down to Washington Square Park. But I remember being there, seeing people, listening to speeches, because there were speeches at that point. And then I'd never been to a gay pride march, ever. And I went to the gay pride march, basically, for John. Because he couldn't go. And I saw this group of people. And — you guys can correct me — but I think they had a float that was barbed wire, like a concentration camp. And they were just all screaming. And they were so angry. And somehow, I just knew this is where I belonged. Because we felt so powerless with everything that was going on with John.

And the truth was, I wanted to get away. Every time I would try to get away from John, he would call me up; call through my answering machine; and tell me to

get the hell up to the hospital, or to get to his apartment. Because again, I fit a certain niche for him.

But, I wasn't, it was actually, tell you the truth, it was mostly the women — and a lot of them lesbians — who were who had the ability to do a lot more nurturing, and had the emotional capacity to do a lot more nurturing. So Lucy Sexton and Annie Iobst and Lori E. Seid; the only person who never had it was Yvonne Meier. Yvonne was running for the hills. And Ishmael was in and out of it. Because he and John had been lovers, Ishmael assumed he would, he was positive. And they had a, still, a very intense relationship.

And I was still a selfish kid. I didn't get that part; it didn't come easy, the idea of taking care of someone. So what I could do was — and probably, again, it was valuable, and it was valuable to a number of other friends — was that I would hang out with him, so he didn't have to deal with sickness. It was, we'd talk about things that were going on. We'd plan. He would want to know; I was in rehearsal for something, he'd want to know what was going on. I think I made John the co-director on a piece I was doing — “Bobby's Birthday Like That” — at St. Mark's Church, at Danspace.

And I got Chris Cochrane, who I knew through Ishmael — and somewhere along there, Ishmael and I had been boyfriends; and I think I was involved with Ishmael at about this time. I went to the Center, and was curious about an ACT UP meeting. And Chris was a real artist. So the whole idea of getting, even though he was, and grew up, very lefty, when he saw a big crowd of people like that, his impulse was to stay very back; far in the back. And I was, this AA'er. So it's like, get in the front row.

And I was just totally amazed. It was sort of like the first time I went to a gay bar. Now it was, I, years later — because if that was, like 1969 or '70, it's now 1987 or 1988; and I'm seeing this room full of people. And knowing most of them are all gay or lesbian. And seeing men and women facilitating a meeting according to Robert's Rules of Order; and it was Roberta's Rules of Order, and it was political. That sort of brought my life together. Because I had been very involved in antiwar stuff in the late '60s and early '70s, and I was actually the last draft year. And I'd burned my draft card down at the Pentagon, which was one of the last of the big demonstrations. John Froines had been my college teacher in Vermont, so I went down with John, and I had silk-screened all these posters and stuff.

Tape II
00:40:00

But, once I was in the gay scene, I went to the Firehouse a number of times, but it was, aesthetically it was not attractive to me, to see gay men with beards. I didn't get it. Because, you wanted to be slightly feminine? And so I couldn't get the idea that these guys were wearing bandanas, and slightly long hair, and then beards. I just didn't get it. So it was not the politics; it was more having these — and I think they were alcohol-free dances, at the Firehouse — I just, it wasn't my scene. I wanted to go get drunk and be with men who were androgynous, and dressed in glitter, not blue jeans.

And I also came out of that side of the '60s, which is, I went to this hippie school in Vermont; and everyone was in coveralls. I mean it was a total — and I became known as Rizzo Ratso. Because I was from New York; I was using some speed; and I dressed in, tight black jeans; and I was always in a black T-shirt. And I was smoking, when they were all trying to be —

SS: Where was this?

RE: – groovy. I was going to say Woodstock University. Goddard.

SS: Oh yes. I taught there.

RE: It was the only school I could get into, because I had basically, again, not done much in high school.

JW: Now we have to stop.

SS: Can we move –

SS: One of the reasons that we so much wanted to talk to you is to try to get the complete overview story of needle exchange.

RE: Sure.

SS: When the idea started – from soup to nuts.

RE: Okay. So when I went to this first meeting with Chris — and Chris would just go once in a while to an ACT UP meeting; and there were these kinds of circles of people's involvement. Because now people say to me they were in ACT UP, and I think, I never saw you. And I realize that the thing that was so brilliant about ACT UP was that there were these concentric circles. There were those of us who were totally glued to every Monday night; there were other people who would come occasionally; and then there were people like, David Wojnarowicz, Steve Petronio, who were my friends, and I would bring them to demonstrations, to get arrested. But there was a whole crew of people who would come to demonstrations but never, maybe they went once to a meeting. And there were just, that was the brilliance of the organizing of it; of how, that could exist. And I think I've used that model in other things; that idea, notion of concentric circles; that it's okay to be involved at the level you want to be involved in; and that's what makes a movement.

Tape III
00:00:00

So what happened was, I was in drug-free rooms, supposedly, you know; in AA and NA meetings. And I tested in '87; and I did, I just shut down completely. Because I didn't really believe in safer sex. I could not explain why I wasn't HIV-positive. I could not explain it. So basically, I just shut down sexually. And I had already shut down in terms of drugs. And there was a year or two years when – and so that part of ACT UP was strange to me, that How to Have Sex in the middle of an epidemic. I just felt like I was watching my friends, and especially in the first couple of years, watching basically my whole generation that I had come up with, die. So it, I just wasn't ready to test fate again.

And I, I really got involved in the FDA action. And that was the first major action that I got involved in. And that was my first arrest. I had gotten arrested a bunch of times with antiwar stuff. But this was the first time, it was down in Rockville, getting arrested there.

And I got very involved in Treatment and Data. And then, I think, for a year or two years, I represented Treatment and Data on the Coordinating Committee. And Yolanda Serrano had come to try to get us to, I remember her doing the bleaching demonstration for everybody. And I had such a needle habit — I loved the needle — that to me, that was like having cocaine in front of me. So I just knew, okay, I can't handle that.

Then a combination of things happened. One was, she was really pushing Steve Joseph – he was the health commissioner at the time – the program he was trying to pull off at 125 Worth Street. So she was basically making that decoy quack. And I remember writing something for ACT UP, and basically saying, this is absurd. This is a

really absurd thing. And I was ostensibly against it. Because, and I didn't say why we should help the city pull this thing off. And, at the same time, something, I caught with Yolanda. And she and I clicked. And I just didn't want to get involved in it, except for this one thing, I wrote this thing for the floor, basically, saying, after Yolanda came and asked us to get involved with the Department of Health thing, I said I didn't think we should do it.

And then I went, as a representative, Treatment and Data – that was when there was that whole thing with the teaching hospitals, of trying to get the teaching hospitals to provide AIDS services to the city hospitals. And I went up to 103rd Street? – yeah, 103rd Street, to the Academy of Medicine, where [Anthony] Fauci was speaking. And I think I asked Fauci, or someone asked Fauci why there weren't injection-drug users enrolled in AIDS clinical trials. And Fauci said, because they're part of a noncompliant population.

And in order to get to 103rd Street, I had to get off the subway, and I passed my methadone clinic, which was New York Medical College, on 102nd Street. And I had, been there every day for two years. So it brought me home. And it was just a coincidence. But when I heard Fauci say that, I just became enraged, and hopefully in a more measured tone said, there's no such thing as a noncompliant population. I'm part of that population. Again, at that time, not knowing — did I know? — at that time, that was the first time I came out as an IDU.

And then Treatment and Data and Policy committee were the same committee, still; they hadn't broken up yet into two different committees. And I heard Tim Sweeney come and talk about the budget. And he was talking about treatment slots.

And it, suddenly this really spoke to me. It spoke to me in a way that maybe the gay stuff didn't. And, meaning the discrimination stuff; that I assumed that was reality, and that wasn't going to change. And I just got really involved with it.

And then I and a couple of people went out one Saturday with Jon Parker, who was coming down from Yale. And he was like Johnny Appleseed. He'd go to different places, and he'd usually buy, we went to two SROs, and he would buy a whole chicken, and open it up, and people in the SRO would come and I'd get needles from him. And this happened for me; and I know I made it happen for lots of other people, including Ruth Messinger; is, if you see needle exchange happening, it's no longer an argument. You totally get it when you see it. And when I saw what Jon was doing, I completely got it. And I think within a week, I and, I think Dan Williams, we went to the floor of ACT UP, and described this, and said we had to do it.

SS: What was the reaction?

RE: Positive. Very positive. And a little crew of us — we went off the floor — and a little crew of us got together. And I think initially Rod wasn't part of it yet.

SS: Rod Sorge.

RE: He was really young. Yeah. Rod was maybe 20 years old. And he just started showing up to what we were doing, the same way, later, Dan Raymond did, who was another really, really young kid. And so we just started going out. I remember, there was Jennifer Lacey, who was, I knew from the dance community. Her mother was a nurse. And her mother would get us — I don't know where they came from; they fell

off the back of a truck — she would get us red infectious waste containers. And I had this therapist, Pavel —

SS: Joel Pavel.

RE: What?

SS: Joel Pavel? Was that his name?

RE: No, Paul Pavel.

SS: Paul Pavel, okay.

RE: Paul Pavel.

SS: Right.

RE: He had been the person who actually helped me through the addiction stuff. And I was telling Pavel about this, and Pavel was like, this is a really good thing. Do this. And Pavel was the person I would go to and talk about John Bernd. And Pavel got me to buddy up with Richard Horn, who was also having real tough time with the death thing. And Pavel was a Holocaust survivor and had been a kid. And so he had no patience with God. He would say, there was no God in Auschwitz. And I, if I said, there, but there are spirits. And Pavel would say spirits? Ghosts, you mean? Think how crowded it would be.

So he just wasn't having it. But he was trying to help these young guys. And he helped me with Jon. And he, throwing all boundaries out, basically got me to start showing up for Richard. And I was mythical to Richard, because again, here's this guy dying from AIDS. And here I am, the person who he thinks is the wickedest person he knows. And I'm negative. So we just formed this tight bond.

So this all was going on. And I needed a way of dealing with that. And that's where, I kept just gravitating towards ACT UP, because it was actions I could do.

And so we just started doing it. And Pavel suggested, oh; because he had all these street dogs that he would adopt. And he would name them — it's, it may sound corny, but he had street cats and dogs that he would adopt from Central Park. And he named them for the kids who, like himself, were in first Theresienstadt and then in Auschwitz, and they all went up in smoke. Except for him, and I think another friend. And he would name these cats and dogs that he found after, Ari, Ami, and he would name them after the kids. And Pavel would give them medicines and stuff. And he told me; you can get, out of the veterinary catalog, you can get syringes.

So we did that for a period of time. And then, I forget who the person was who came up with the notion that we could buy them from Seattle, where it was legal. And we started doing that.

And then Rod really took off, and he was a great, great organizer. And he basically became the manager. And I wasn't a manager. So it was like, and one of the people who we thought was a manager absconded with a lot of funds. And, uh —

So Rod really took it on. And Rod was living, at the time, with Heidi Dorow, in the Lower East Side. And every Friday night, we'd get together and put bleach kits together, and at some point, Rod and I went up to Montefiore. And Ernie Drucker was up there. He used to be the methadone; he was a psychologist in charge of the methadone programs at Montefiore. And we were trying to figure out, we were always one stop ahead of what we were doing, in this sense; knowing that this was a temporary thing, that we couldn't sustain this. I described it as, it was ACT UP's longest

Tape II
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civil disobedience, because it went on for two years. But we were doing it because Yolanda, none of the NGOs could do it, and keep their registration status, their tax-exempt status. So we were hitting, we basically established points at, we made points of, and ongoing points, of the places that Jon actually established. So we were in Williamsburg, at an SRO there; and then on the street, in Williamsburg. We were at, in Bushwick. We were at the Lower East Side, and at that time, I think it was Attorney Street; maybe. Does Attorney and Delancey, are they perpendicular?

SS: They cross. Yeah.

RE: Yeah. So it was Attorney and Delancey. There was a little schoolyard there, where we were out there, on Saturdays. We went to 125th Street, and we went to Mott Haven. And that was, I was kind of, this was a whole thing I was leaping into; but I felt like God was on my side on this one. Because there were just all these odd coincidences. Like I knew this African American guy from the meetings. And he was running a soup kitchen in Mott Haven. And it was right where we were doing the needle exchange. So I went into the soup kitchen, and they were having an AA or an NA meeting there.

And I would catch shit from the needle exchangers, because they saw the world split, in terms of Alcoholics Anonymous over here and needle exchange over here. And I couldn't see that, because that's not the way I could have survived. So I had to see the two things. Like, so I would talk, in AA meetings, about the fact that I was doing needle exchange. And that's actually how Alan Clear got started — and I just busted him, but I've busted him before —

SS: Okay, you've —

RE: — is that he heard me qualifying. And one of the times I was qualifying, I was saying, look, this is what I got to do, because I'm seeing people come in to the meetings; they're already, they have AIDS. And so, and there's no treatment out there for them. So we've got to go back out to the street; I have to go back out to the street. Just the place everyone told me to stay away from. The people, places and things. We got to go back out.

And I was the only one who was openly in recovery. What I didn't know was that a couple of us were actually active users, who were hiding it. And one of those people overdosed, and died of an overdose. And it's one of the more painful things I associate –

SS: Rod.

RE: No. Brian Weil.

SS: Oh, that's right. Yeah.

RE: Because there was this other crew – because it was a bit vanguard; the needle exchange thing. So we had anthropologists out there with us — some of them from NDRI [Narcotic and Drug Research, Inc.] — and Joyce Rivera-Beckman had started off, really, in Outreach for NDRI. And she went into school as an urban anthropologist. And so she would see these things in the trees. The Latinos would weave dolls into the trees. And it was a recognition of children dying and stuff. And so she would find the meaning in it, and her mother was addicted to crack, and her mother was actually living in the soup kitchen; which is part of the reason she didn't want me to go in. And she managed to, because of her connections and the fact that she had grown up in the neighborhood, she managed to get us in with the guy who ran the protection on the

street, which allowed, then, the dealers to come in. And he basically said, you guys can do this right alongside the people who are standing in line to sell.

So each, each thing was a different scene. Mott Haven had its scene, and Joyce really helped us organize that. On Saturdays, on 125th Street, it was all the churches. They were out doing, if it was spring, they were out doing their little cake sales; trying to raise money on the street. And so there was always a education component to it. And we kept those sites running. And I did it for two years.

And then, after Dinkins came in – and one of the first things Dinkins did was he shut down the Health Department program. And then it seemed like, okay, we have to take this now to the political end of it. Whereas what we had been doing is service, and ACT UP wasn't into providing services unless it was a political action, like Housing Works forming. I think there were three different kinds of programs that started out of ACT UP. Housing Works was one; needle exchange was another; was there, did Risa [Denenberg] start a program? I'm trying to think. There were a couple of other things like that, that were political because the services weren't there; the services weren't being done. So, example was Housing Works started, actually, out of a lawsuit, right? Suing the city.

Tape III
00:20:00

SS: When did the trial happen?

RE: Okay. So the trial happened, we decided we had to get something to change. We had to make it possible that Minority Task Force and, at that time, ADAPT [Association for Drug Addiction Prevention and Treatment]; they were the two that were willing to go. And that was kind of courageous of Ronald Johnson, because people be critical in lots of ways. But he came out when no one in Black Leadership Commission

on AIDS was coming out, in terms of needle exchange. In fact, they were placing themselves in the way of needle exchange.

So we started making plans. And we met with Jill Harris — she worked primarily with us — to actually, and Deb Levine and, if you can help me; what's Deb's hus-, Mike Spiegel. Mike and Jill; Deb Levine, who didn't really do needle exchange with us, and was slightly outside that world. I think she was part of the Bedford Hills thing. But this was, I think, walking the streets and talking to drug users on the streets was pretty new. But she got totally behind setting up this action. The action was completely set up, like any ACT UP demonstration. This was completely set up, despite what we said in court. I have just announced that I've perjured myself.

And we planned it out. And we tried to figure out a time when we were ready to do it; when ACT UP was really behind us to do it. And 10 of us were going to — I can't remember if it was eight or 10 of us were getting arrested.

And I had been through the system enough to know that you didn't just drag someone who was a person of color; you didn't just drag a drug user into this kind of demonstration. Because they were, it was going to cost them a lot more than it would cost us. And that was why we were able to do it, because very few of the ACT UP demonstrations were we ever put through the system. Most of the time, it was maybe six hours; something like that. But also, that was about numbers. Now it was going to be eight or 10 of us getting arrested. And so there was a real issue about being put through the system.

And Jon was very street, from New Haven. And so Jon was like, he'd say to the guys he'd recruit. Then again, if I'm using two metaphors, he was a Pied Piper

with a lot of the guys on the street. And he said to them; this is what you got to do. You got to do this with us; you got to do it openly with us; and you got to get arrested.

And I remember Jon and I practically came to blows on the street, because I was saying, no informed consent here. These guys don't understand what they're getting into. And if they go through the system, they're going to get sick. And they're going to go through a different system than we go through. And this was stuff I had learned from ACT UP, which was the different cost it was going to be for a person of color going through the system than necessarily a white person, or a white middle class person. And Jon was just someone who was real stubborn. And he was just pushing ahead.

And this is where, it was largely over the trial, over the arrest and the trial, that we really made a split with John. Plus, John wanted to plant flags. And as far as he saw it, ACT UP was supporting his action. Which had really become, mostly under Rod's watch, had really become a service piece. I didn't do that; that was really Rod and the folks who would go to Heidi and Rod's apartment every Friday night. In fact, I was the lazy one. I wanted to do something with my Friday night. I knew we were going to get up early in the morning on Saturdays. And out of my laziness — and maybe out of being an addict — I was like, why are we making bleach kits? Why can't people just do this themselves?

So we got this idea of having seven pails, plastic pails that we would carry. And just the way we had the infectious waste container on the street; we just spread the pails out. And one had condoms, one had cookers, one had the bottles. And we'd give people their own bag, and they would make it. And it was a great intervention,

Tape III
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because now, they didn't just grab the needle or a bag and just leave us; but conversations started happening.

And I saw something, especially through Rod, watching it. Which was a great lesson for me that I have been able to use in lots of other countries. Which is that needle exchange needn't be a minimalist thing. It's right as a minimalist thing. Meaning, just giving the needle out is enough. *Dayenu*. It's enough if people bring their dirty needles back, or their used needles back. But, you can build all these things around it.

And I saw this, that Rod was capable of something that none of us could do. Which is, Rod was this 20- or 21-year-old. And these women on the street adored him. They adored him for being there; for being as cute as he was; for being such a, he was just such a loving person. And so when we hit the street, we'd all be greeted; but Rod was really greeted by people. They loved the fact that he was out there. And that he learned people's names. They knew him. And that, that's what made it maximalist thing going on, was that there were so many, he was doing case management. Rod would start referring people into services out of it, without us conceptualizing it as that. We started painting the needles. We'd paint a stripe, and that was Ernie Drucker's idea; that we could actually track how many of our needles were getting returned. So we had green for one, like green for the South Bronx; red, and we'd paint the needles. And it was like that model paint color. It's too much my generation; painting model cars.

So we had a lot going on. And we started secondary exchange, where people would make their own markings with masking tape, and they were doing secondary distribution.

And none of this stuff had been written about yet. None of this stuff had been codified. And it was just emerging from this great team spirit that was happening.

And again, there was a crew of us from ACT UP. But there was also a crew of people who were anthropologists from NDRI. There was this great Greek guy who was a contemporary of Philippe Bourgois, who did *In Search of Respect*. That did this great study of young crack dealers in the South Bronx; basically saying they're like everybody else; they want the American Dream. And the only way they can get into it is through dealing crack. But they're trying to get respect; they're trying to get a piece of the pie.

So there was a whole scene of anthropologists that added another layer to what we were up to, because they were really into the street, and they were into the street seeing it as this cultural scene that they wanted to support; but they didn't want to do something that would disrupt it. And that's how we could do it in a way that it wasn't like this public health intervention; these people coming in from an alien thing. And they taught us a little bit of ethnography of the rules of the street. Different rules of the street than the rules of the street I knew as a drug user. It was slightly different. You're there as a helper. But you're there as an observer. You're not there to change the scene. And so we were very responsive to what was happening on the scene.

Tape III
00:30:00

I made, I had gotten a grant, an art grant, from Creative Time. And I was starting to get tired of the art scene. And part of it was getting tired of, the NEA stuff started happening. And we couldn't really organize the artists. And I described it, and later it got described in terms of the art museums. As it was like herding cats. Because the whole performance art scene was so individualistic, that people were so afraid of

giving up some part of themselves by joining a collective, that the response, the artists' response to the NEA thing was, was piss poor. And it was a good disillusioning experience for me. Because I just started throwing much more, at a certain point, I stopped doing that stuff. And even people I really admired, like David Wojnarowicz; David would focus on his victimhood, and he didn't get the fact that he was part of a larger struggle. Or I forget; it was Artists Space. It was just constantly seen in the way art's seen, as this individualistic thing. And I was learning this whole different experience from ACT UP. And I gravitated towards it. And I was running a dance workshop place. And increasingly, that dance workshop space became a front for needle exchange and –

SS: What was that? Movement Research?

RE: That was Movement Research. And I eventually got into trouble, because I turned over an issue. We had, I'd started building up the calendar into a newsletter, and then people writing articles. And then Tom Kalin, I was part of Gran Fury, and Tom Kalin did an issue called – and I just said, you can do whatever you want. And he did this thing called "Gender Disarray." And there was, the centerfold was a photograph of a woman's pussy. And we know whose pussy it was. And it was basically making an intervention of saying, that this is, an erotic playground that then, the government seizes control of, and – and that was waved on the floor of Congress, or the Senate; it was Jesse Helms who did it, so it was the Senate. And everyone freaked out on us. Phillip Morris, who had been really supportive of me. It was like, why did you put our name on this.

It had Jennifer Miller, an interview with her, and Jennifer's got a beard in it. It was really about and Tom was brilliant at articulating those things, and recruiting people to participate in it. And we, the NEA started suing us to get their money back. And all this stuff was beginning to happen, with Ryan White. And I was ACT UP's representative on Ryan White at the same time that I'm in court during the day on the needle exchange trial.

And we went in front of a judge. We went in front of –

SS: Can you say what the action was, exactly?

RE: Okay. The action was that we – we announced, through ACT UP press — I forget what our committee was called – Media Committee?

SS: Um hm.

RE: We basically announced; what we had been doing underground, we now — although it was open on the street — we announced that we were going to do it openly. So we were challenging the police. We wanted the police to see us there. We picked the location where most, would be most likely for them to find us –

SS: What was it?

RE: Delancey. And Gregg got involved with me, so he became one of the group. And I think he was the only openly HIV-positive person on it. And in a certain sense, each one of us had a symbolic value. I was the former addict; and I went pro se, so that an addict is actually speaking for myself, although, Jill was guiding me, but –

So what we did was we just the needles openly. And we had to tart that up a bit, because we didn't want to put any real drug user at risk. So we wanted, we got a lot of media out there, and there was a lot of ACT UP — what was it, Dyke TV?

SS: DIVA TV?

RE: Yeah, DIVA TV was out there. And we got, basically we were just mobbed by the media. And the police had to come. It was basically, the classic demonstration thing is that, you open up a public s-, you open up a space within the public space, and it has to happen.

So, I'm forgetting now whether – I know it was an eight and a ten. But I think 10 of us ended up going to trial.

SS: What was the charge?

RE: The charge was illegal possession of drug paraphernalia. That was the principal charge. We might have gotten disturbing the peace or something like that, but –

SS: Did you go for jury trial, or was it a judge?

RE: What we first went for was the Clayton Motion. And we had already had a precedent, because, what was it, seven of us got arrested at the Stock Exchange; for disrupting the Stock Exchange so that no one could hear the bell, and the Stock Exchange was delayed, I think, for a half an hour. And when we went in front of a judge, our ACT UP lawyer offered the Clayton Motion. And the Clayton Motion essentially is, the medical necessity; that this shouldn't even be a case. But it's basically the medical necessity defense; that you're doing something, you're breaking the law, but you're really not harming the community as such, because you're doing a greater good. And we just managed to get a really cool judge – Bruner – who was with us from the beginning. And he basically said, the Stock Exchange does not constitute a community. And what we

were doing was lifesaving; the AZT, lowering the price. So we got off. It was dismissed, on the Clayton Motion.

So Mike Spiegel, Deb and Jill — and Rod was doing a lot of the work — Rod would just, threw himself into every aspect of managing these things. And that's what I have to say is, okay, I came up with ideas and stuff, and I did things. But Rod was really the one who always carried the water. And then the other person who we thought was carrying the water got us into big trouble, because we had to go to the floor of ACT UP, and announce that — I think it was \$30,000.

SS: We interviewed him, and he took responsibility for all of that.

RE: He did.

SS: Yeah.

RE: Okay. I didn't know, and I didn't want to.

SS: Yeah.

RE: And it tore the needle exchange team up. And, because there were people who were just, they didn't see race; they just saw this guy did something really foul, and we want to kill him. And —

SS: And you think he was a drug addict; that's why he took the money?

RE: I think he was probably doing coke. There was a lot of drug addicts with us. But I think he was doing coke. But I don't know; he could have been a compulsive debtor. I don't know what it was. But he was such a nice guy. And he was so, he was such a great partner for me in it. None of us saw it coming; no one saw it coming. And then Rod started raising the red flag when we couldn't do an accounting.

And I remember realizing we had to take this proactive, and actually go to the floor and announce it. And my thing with Rod was, I was, with Dan — I'll just say it — with Dan was to get him to come to the floor with me. Because I thought if we didn't do that, it was going to tear ACT UP apart, along race lines. And it still did. Even with him coming out and acknowledging it.

SS: What happened? What was the reaction?

RE: It was the beginning of the time of fissures, anyway, in ACT UP; where suddenly, ACT UP was taking on more and more things that were no longer exclusive to the gay community. And there were lots of divisions that were emerging. Which, now, having studied group dynamics, was inevitable to happen; is, every group forms, and at a certain point, you get groups within groups. But the, what was the committee called? I want to say it's called the Majority Caucus.

Tape III
00:40:00

SS: Majority Action?

RE: Yes, it was Majority Action. They were really getting it together. They had existed for a long time. But they were really getting it together. And I actually think this was, in a certain sense, during that time when it was strongest. And it was also a lot of identity politics. So I remember Rod's heart being broken, because he was in love with this Latino guy, and they were having a relationship. And at a certain point, the Latino guy said, I can't be in a relationship with you. So there were some real shadow parts to this, of the dumbest forms of identity politics. And in a certain way, that's what happened. But I also say, it happened in needle exchange, too; that I wondered what it would be like if a white guy had done this.

JW: We have to change tape.

Tape IV
00:00:00

SS: Okay.

SS: Let me ask you focus questions.

RE: Okay.

SS: Just back to the trial. So you were –

RE: Do you need anything else on the arrest?

SS: But, no.

RE: Okay.

SS: So you said first you tried –

RE: The Clayton Motion.

SS: Right. And that did not work?

RE: And these guys did incredible preparation. Because that took affidavits. It was, it was, several inches thick, the Clayton Motion. And we knew it was a good thing to do anyway, because it was preparing for our trial. And out of these affidavits would be the people who would be our witnesses. So we had Don Des Jarlais as a researcher, making the case, why, and that the President's Commission had actually said the first line of defense is needle exchange.

Because what you have to prove, first in the Clayton Motion, and then, certainly, through a medical necessity defense, is, even if it's irrational; even if you, the evidence doesn't support you; if you totally believe that what you've done is for the greater good, you can get off on medical necessity.

And the famous example of it is John Snow, with a cholera epidemic in London, when he figured out it was coming from the Thames. And he'd started taking the pump handles off the pumps. And he was arrested by –

SS: What was the grounds on which it was denied? The Clayton –

RE: It was denied, now it was, it was Judge Laura Drager. And Laura Drager was the judge for the Steve Joseph trial. And I had been the support for that trial. So, and I was fairly new to ACT UP at that point. And again, it's years later, you can kind of look at things.

There was a rational argument against Steve Joseph, in terms of the miscounting, in terms of his arrogance. But it took a very, very personal tone; in the same way as that, when that guy crumbled the wafer in the church. That wasn't supposed to happen. That's when it slips over the edge. Kramer, always slipping over the edge, into his rage in itself is justified; that that's what we're about, is rage.

So that trial made things difficult for us. And I watched it. Someone as brilliant as Mark Harrington. When Steve Joseph was on the stand, in that first trial; Mark would do really provocative things. Like you're taking a guy who's trained in epidemiology, and you're saying, can you tell me how many fingers I'm holding up?

And in a way — and I'm going to, I know, at the risk of psychologizing this; it was a bunch of gay men who – Steve Joseph embodied straight male indifference. For a lot of these guys, he was their father's age? And an enormous amount of rage came out. And Laura Drager was enraged that we were fucking up her courtroom. And maybe we would have actually done better at that trial if we hadn't done that.

SS: Okay.

RE: So –

SS: So what was the next step?

Tape IV
00:05:00

RE: Now we have another rehearsal of it. And, in two senses: one was that we had to do this in front of Laura Drager – and she certainly wasn't giving us the benefit of the doubt — so, Clayton Motion, out. And then we had the choice of a, we didn't have the choice of a jury trial, because it was a misdemeanor. And I think with a misdemeanor, it's generally, the judge makes the decision from the bench and you don't have the option. Maybe we did have the option; I don't think we did. Because I think we would have gone for a jury if we had.

And then I, there was a parallel thing that was happening, which was I was serving, again, representing ACT UP, on this advisory committee to the CDC. And Joseph was on this. And one of the times we went down to Atlanta, there was a really bad hurricane that was happening in New York. And we couldn't take off from Atlanta. So I ended up spending about three hours with Steve Joseph at the airport in Atlanta, with, also, Don Des Jarlais. And somehow, we kind of made peace. And just around strategy. And I never said, you're right. But he was able to vent his rage with me about the attacks on his home; the stalking, with the red hand; that went way beyond seeing him as someone who occupies an office to, again, just a uncontrolled rage. So he was able to kind of get that off. And I was able to get him to agree, by the end of it, to be a witness on our behalf.

And that was really important. Because, that was important for Laura Drager to see; that Steve Joseph was willing to testify now, on our behalf; and that none of those crew were amongst the ones. Because he just wanted to see them perpetually, misdemeanor or no, for what they did, he wanted to see them doing hard time. He was an angry guy. And he was an arrogant guy.

So I think there were two things we were contending with that were amazing — New York is a small town — that we ended up having the same criminal court judge; and that we're with Steve Joseph now, except the situation is different. And he basically laid out the case. We had, Jill and Mike Spiegel were brilliant at how they handled it. And they basically, like a play, they figured out what everyone's role was going to be. And Steve Joseph's role was to tell the history of medical necessity defense. And he used the story of John Snow in London and the cholera thing. And then, running, trespassing your neighbor's yard and stealing their water, in order to put another neighbor's house, the fire, out. And we had each of these experts tell their part of the story that contributed to what was a pretty persuasive case.

And it took, I think, a year for Drager to make, after the trial, for Drager to make her decision. And meanwhile, it was in the context of a whole bunch of things happening, was [John C.] Daniels, who was the mayor, African American mayor of New Haven, when faced with some of the evidence, he went ahead and had the City of New Haven back the needle exchange program. Which in turn impressed Dinkins. And Ruth Messinger; it was pure politics; Ruth Messinger was about to come out in support of needle exchange, and Dinkins didn't want to be behind her. So his political people were telling him, get out in front of this. And a deal was cut, in a certain way, that all he had to do was take his objection to it away, and he wouldn't have to put a cent in it. Because all of his drug treatment slots got cut. There were supposed to be 1100 drug treatment slots for pregnant, drug-dependent women; and that whole thing got cut in, in those days' budget crises. So he had nothing to show; he had nothing to show in terms of what he

was doing about the drug problem. And that was the argument, largely, of the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS.

Tape IV
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So Dinkins basically said, I'm going to do this; but I need support. And Tim Sweeney and I had to go up to Black Leadership Commission on AIDS and make the argument. And Debra Fraser-Howe deliberately, made it two gay white men. And she didn't know that I was a drug user, and that I knew – we went to Phase: Piggy Back. And that's where, it's an Islamic group of black men who put together a drug treatment program. And they had been against needle exchange. And I'm meeting this guy for the first time. And we sort of recognized each other. And then I started the meeting, when we were going around, saying, and it was the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS people; it was in Debra's office. And it was a scary meeting. Because it was just so clear that, this could go down so badly. We knew that Debra had also gotten instructions, kind of, get the Black Leadership Commission onboard. And our only ally there was Ron Johnson.

But this guy — I think his name was Assad — and he was wearing Islamic cap. And I said, I'm a former drug user, in recovery. And he looked at me, and he said, I'm a former drug user in recovery. And a dialog just started with us, and no one else was talking. It basically was about us. And at the end of it, he said, I can't support needle exchange. But I will go to Dinkins's Blue Room, and I will say that we shouldn't stand in the way of this, because it's saving lives.

Again, just the argument; who the fuck are we, as people in recovery — and if you believe in the day-at-a-time; that, relapse is likely — who are we to deny another drug user the means of survival?

And it was on those lines that Phase: Piggy Back got behind us. And we all stood behind Dinkins. And Dinkins reversed his position. And as a result of that – so that was happening. Three thing-, four things happened at the same time. Daniels and then Ed Kaplan’s research showing the efficacy of needle exchange. The work Don Des Jarlais had done at the President’s Commission on AIDS, where they were, they issued a thing on the interlocking epidemics of substance use and HIV, said you can’t pull these two things apart, and needle availability is the first line of defense. The ALIVE [AIDS Link to Intravenous Experience] study happened out in Johns Hopkins, that showed that, it was just following a cohort of IDUs, a huge cohort of IDUs in Baltimore. And they were able to pick out a group of IDUs who either themselves were diabetic, or had a family member who were diabetic. And everything else remained constant; nothing else distinguished this cohort from the rest of the drug users, except that they had access to syringes, to the diabetic syringes that everyone was using on the street. And they had a dramatically lower rate of HIV prevalence.

So that came out. The President’s AIDS Commission came out, and that was on Bush’s watch, the first Bush’s watch. So you now had the government with, one agency saying one thing, one agency, or commission, saying another. And then Messinger actually came out to the street. And it was like, she was a former school principal, and it was really like having a former school principal come out. And she was watching everything. But she saw — and it wasn’t just seeing the needle exchange — she saw what was happening between people. And she got it. Because her health advisor was against it; was this very progressive woman, white woman, white Jewish woman, who saw needle exchange as somehow racist.

SS: Okay.

RE: I won't name her name. But so she was stopping Ruth from going ahead.

Tape IV
00:15:00

So a whole bunch of things happened. Nick Rango, who later died of AIDS, was the head of the AIDS Institute. And he just got this; by logic of science and medicine, he got it. He, at some AIDS conference, met with all the English people. I was going on a tour, performing, with Gay Sweatshop, in England, and I just used that trip as an excuse to go visit the needle exchange programs. And I was able to see, okay; here's how it can actually happen, where you get, institutions to do it. Freestanding but still in proximity to a healthcare provider. And in London, it was nurses who were running them. So that added a whole great piece to it.

So all these things came together. And it really was critical mass.

And then the final thing was that Mathilde Krim said she would pay for it. And so there was a meeting up at her apartment with all these different AIDS foundations. And they all agreed that they would support us. And we had the NGOs come, like Yolanda, Ron. So they figured out a way it would be paid for. AIDS Institute figured out they would get the regulations changed. The law wouldn't be changed, but they'd declare a state of emergency in New York State.

And this is where I flipped roles, is I stopped doing needle exchange on the street; and I jumped into the advocacy role, in terms of, okay, how do we get this so that the people who do provide services can actually do it. And that's when, that, together with the Ryan White thing, is when I went to GMHC and said, you guys are doing {LOUD PLANE NOISE} –

I went to GMHC and said, you guys are doing nothing on drug policy. And you need to. And I can't work behind any longer a dance organization paying my salary to do drug policy. And so Tim Sweeney and David Hansell — and David Barr helped me write it, because I had never done anything like this — we wrote up a proposal and they hired me as a consultant to take GMHC's resources and put it behind helping to put this together and actually get it moved, and get the state funding and the private funding.

SS: So what was Laura Drager's decision?

RE: Her decision was, medical necessity was proven.

SS: Okay.

RE: And it really was, the thing that was great was that it existed informally at Judson Memorial Church. There was, both the Reverend Moody –

SS: Howard Moody.

RE: – Howard Moody and this really wonderful woman — [Arlene] Carmen – she died in the early '90s. But she had set up a great program with sex workers. Somehow her heart was there, and she did all sorts of things out of Judson Memorial Church for sex workers. So she got the whole AIDS piece. And Edith Springer, who wasn't doing needle exchange but was this great harm reduction activist; Edith would come to this meeting. And it just became this great collection of people. So that when we were ready to do the civil disobedience, we had Don Des Jarlais in the Judson Memorial Church, next to this person, this person. So we had our team.

And again, to me, it was like, it was school, for me, in community organizing, that I've been able to use elsewhere; of how something starts off, where

you're way ahead of everybody else, and you got nobody, really, behind you; and how that happened. And again, I lay a lot of it with Rod Sorge.

SS: Yeah. So let's talk about Rod. But he was a user.

RE: Well, I didn't know that at the time.

SS: Okay.

RE: And there's two things that really haunt me about it was that here we are supporting drug users; and trying to do this with a harm reduction approach; and yet, there were two among us that couldn't trust us to say that they were using heroin. And there's something about that that, it's not just hypocrisy — because I've seen it happen elsewhere; Yolanda Serrano died of AIDS. And there was all this courage amongst the women she organized — mostly sex workers and women who were using crack — to come out and tell their stories. But Yolanda, who was supporting her whole family, and had, half of her family was serving as workers in the correctional facility; and her mother was a cook or server in the school system in Brooklyn; Yolanda was afraid. And she was afraid of telling anyone. I think I and Mathilde Krim were, at that time, the only ones who knew — and Nick Rango — were the only ones who knew. Because she was paying out of cash. She was afraid of her insurance knowing. She was afraid, as a woman running an organization that it would be taken away from her.

SS: Now did you know that Rod was using, before he died? Or did you find out after he died?

RE: No, I knew. I knew be-, well before he died, I knew.

SS: And did you ever talk to him about it?

RE: Yeah. We met at a harm reduction conference in Oakland. And he had, I think he had a terrible outbreak of shingles. And he and I got reconciled. Because there had been a break. And it happened between me and Brian Weil. And the Dan piece was part of that. I made, I used my art grant to work with Gregg Bordowitz, in terms of making a videotape on needle exchange. And Brian saw this as self-aggrandizement and was accusing me of sort of self-aggrandizement by doing this. And our reasoning was, both the GMHC and ACT UP tradition, that Jean Carlomusto and Gregg were doing; but also the fact that there were all these journalists. It was in the *Times* all the time. There were all these journalists, TV journalists, who wanted to come out on the street with us. And we could have them coming out. So for us, it was B footage, so they could do whatever their front story is; and here's the footage for it. But it started to become a regular tension between the two of us. And I pulled myself out, and said, I'm not going to bring this ten-

And again, this is where, also, some of the recovery stuff worked for me, that I always got, in ACT UP, was the principles before personalities. Don't get on the ground with somebody. Is get bigger. Because that was, in a lot of ways, our biggest challenge in ACT UP, a lot of times; was, going personal. And Larry Kramer was the model for it. And he spawned a whole crew of people, like Joe Franco, who were innately conservative. But they thought, just because of antibodies in their blood, they suddenly became political. And I was actually in a conversation with someone about that – Julie, from CHAMP.

SS: Oh, Julie Davids, yeah.

RE: Julie Davids. Because she was trying, she wanted to respond to Larry about something. And I said, it's the prince and the pauper story; is that somehow, he went outside the palace, and sex with men outside the palace. And then he tries to come back into the palace, and they won't let him in. So, and he's asserting his privilege: Don't you know I'm the prince? Don't you know I'm the prince?

And there was that kind of, what I thought was conservatism running through ACT UP, which was people who felt that their anger was justification enough. And they attacked collectivity. They, they really were is, I belong in it. And Joe Franco did it. It's bad to speak of the dead badly, but –

SS: But there are so many dead that you can't –

RE: He did, he did some really destructive things. He went on one of our earlier meetings with the planning council. And Yolanda was there, and – Miguelina Maldonado, from HAF, from Hispanic AIDS Forum, was there. And he accused these two Latino women — now this is this Chicano guy who doesn't even speak Spanish — he accused those women of saying, you need to wear knee pads. He was basically accusing them of giving, the equivalent of giving blow jobs to the politicians. And it was just this really, really destructive shit that was going on. I've gone off on a tangent, Sarah.

Tape IV
00:25:00

SS: Well, let me ask you this, then: What is the state of needle exchange today?

RE: Okay. So needle exchange, so what happened was, with the support of, the way the regulations got changed was that AIDS Institute acted as the intermediary; and organizations would have to apply to the AIDS Institute for their waiver. But it was

Alma Candeles doing it, and a whole set of very sympathetic folks, who had, that's who they worked with; they worked with drug users, so they understood harm reduction up and down. So they enabled the first five programs to go forward. And so it was the moment when a lot of, even the secondary needle exchange became a program. ADAPT took over the Brooklyn programs. The Lower East Side Needle Exchange became – which is really an international model, at this point, because of so many things they built around the exchange. And I can say that because I'm not going to the board meeting I'm supposed to go to tonight, right now.

So the first thing was, they were able to do needle exchange. And that went on for a bunch of years, and it kept expanding, and I think it got as high as maybe nine or 10 programs; someone else may be able to give a more accurate count on that.

But any of these things become industries. That was what I was confronted with at GMHC. The, use a condom every time; is that – HIV prevention should never be a service; it should be something that's always questioning itself, and adapting, because the epidemic is always moving. And so, in the early '90s, we had to really throw a question into, why are we saying condoms are sexy? Why are we saying, use a condom every time? Why are we telling people to have messages? And especially young people, young, the House scene, the ball scene; if they all can diffuse this message of I know about AIDS; condoms protect me from AIDS; I use a condom every time. And it's basically teaching people a Catholic catechism. Sure, you recite it; but that's not what you're doing.

SS: Right.

RE: So the first thing that really happened was we saw a big shift when, research came out — and we actually got four federal agencies behind it — that said, bleach doesn't really work. And what would take bleach to work would basically be impracticable on the street. And again, as being a former injector, I knew that the diabetic syringe is like a Bic pen; you take apart the Bic pen; it never quite works again. It's cheap. So you take the plunger out. You separate the syringe from the needle. And you put it in a corrosive, like bleach, for 10 minutes, and it soaks. It's never going to fit, it's never going to have the slide that it should have.

And the other thing is that drug users watch the print, the calibrations on the side. Because even with water, it gets, it fades. And so drug users — I did — you want the newest needle so that it can go like a knife into butter. And so it made no practiceable sense. But now there was this industry — the bleach kit industry — and there were all these programs that, I forget what the state substance abuse agency; Bleach & Teach. And when we put a forum together, we put a community forum together to say what the implications — and I even got Steve Jones from the CDC to come up; and Catherine Woodard, who was a journalist at the time; she's the one who broke the story — that really, needle exchange is the front line. And they were against us. They were saying we've taught everyone to do this, we've taught the, and they wouldn't shift tricks.

And arguably, I saw, I was invited by Ruth Finkelstein into this gathering of the needle exchange programs. And it was really weird to see that the needle exchange programs, in a way, were now in the way. Because they thought, it has to happen like this. And the truth is that interventions are always going to be costly. Because it basically means there has to be someone, there has to be someone on this end

doing it. It means it always limits. So that's why you need secondary exchange to happen. You need what Sam Friedman calls intravention, where the community starts to get it themselves, and the drug users themselves do an intravention. They, in the same way that they do harm reduction around bad drugs or a new drug, or they do it around overdoses; they don't want to die. So they start taking control of it themselves. What's the most obvious thing, is pharmacy-based exchange.

So that was the next logical thing to happen. And again, the AIDS Institute was unlike any government agency. Because, first Nick Rango, and then Alma Candeles — and even Dennis Whelan; he's now high up; because now Spitzer's in; he's high up in the Health Department — and they behave like no other health department. And part of it was setting up the AIDS Institute to cut through red tape. But they have guided it. And they've actually, at this point, I would say they're ahead of the needle exchange programs. Because they were saying, it's not that we want to cut funding. Keep those programs going. But let's get, in every pharmacy we can, let's get needles available. Because once that happens, then you really address that ALIVE study: that, if drug users don't have to go through a program, but they can get it as part of just, getting their equipment; then you're going to have much more of an epidemiological impact.

So that's where it is now, is there's pharmacy-based needle exchange; and there are these programs. And the best of the programs are programs like Lower East Side, like Positive Health Project, where they've built around needle exchange services geared to active drug users, health services. So Positive Health Project is a full health-service organization, organized by drug users for drug users. Lower East Side, pretty similar. Great drop-in program. That's why I went back on the board there. Part of it's

to get my roots back in New York. But it's like I found myself doing this work in Central Asia.

And I know that ACT UP — for a lot of us, especially those of us who really threw our lives into it — it changed the course of our lives. For some, that meant death. But for, I think, a whole bunch of us, I stopped making art. Because I thought, I'm going to take seven thousand dollars and make two weekends of performance? It's like the reverse pyramid. All these resources going to an audience, maybe, of 500 people, at most. And I saw what you can do in public health; I saw what you can do through activism, of how many people you can reach. And it was like, take the same skills. Because people say to me, oh, so what happened to your art skills? And it's like, I'm a trainer; I'm still performing. I'm using all those things, I'm still using. It's just not within the gallery space, it's not within the performance space.

So now I work in countries where, and all the former Soviet countries are countries with injection-driven HIV epidemics, because the most efficient way — it's like if you go to a hospital emergency room; are they going to waste time putting pills in your mouth? No, they hook you up to IV, because it's the most efficient way. That's why it's also the most efficient way of, someone getting infected with HIV.

Tape IV
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So even though the epidemics are relatively small in the FSU countries, former Soviet countries, they're the fastest-growing. So needle exchange is really important there. And they're still, it's a Soviet mentality, so they're geared towards the government controlling it, and it being more about counting, and it being more about surveillance than it is about the outreach workers. They expect people, they call them *punkt daveria*. Which is trust points. And they're anything but trust points.

So it was like going back out, and outreach, and making sure there could be support for them. So I feel like I'm still doing that stuff. It was a long way around. Because I was doing stuff in the gay community for about 10 years, and it was very ironic that I ended up as Director of HIV Prevention at GMHC, when, it was when I was doing a benefit for the FDA action, and I was doing "A Man Cannot Jump Over His Own Shadow." And I decided, I'm going to come out. Because at that point, I hadn't tested yet. And I thought, we were learning how many people were gay through their obituaries. That's the truth of it, is that, you'd see a man in his twenties, thirties, forties; dying of tuberculosis, or dying of pneumonia, or dying of KS. And everyone knew; okay, he's gay. And I just thought, I don't want people to learn I'm gay through my obituary. And so it was in La Mama where, I came out. And it was the support of ACT UP, and it was the support of Daniel.

So in a way, that's where, I did take on a gay identity; I did become attached to the community. And that wouldn't have happened without ACT UP.

So both in terms of the work I do – and I was a dropout. I barely graduated from high school. And so, it was still a activism of going back to school and going to, a, whaddyacallit, University Without Walls, state system, down on Varick Street –

SS: Oh, Empire State College?

RE: – of getting my B.A. Yeah, Empire State College.

SS: That's where I went, too. Yeah.

RE: And getting my B.A. And then, getting a Revson, and going to Columbia, and realizing, I could do this, I can go to school. And part of it was my

frustration at GMHC, with the fact that we had no maps. Because researchers weren't asking the questions we as providers needed to ask. They were asking their own set of questions. And someone who's been a mentor for me, and a historic figure, Gary Dowsett, in the gay community in Australia; I said to him, why should I go for a Ph.D.? And he said, because you have permission to say things in the public space with a Ph.D. that you won't be heard saying if you don't have it. And that's what drove me towards research, is, okay; I've got the license. And I can make that available. So it was like doing qualitative research.

And again, ironically, making a turn, is that I'm known as the drug person. That's always been this weird split; and also because there's a lot of homophobia in a lot of the communities where drug use is common. So I would pass. I wasn't in the closet, and anyone who knew me well, knew Daniel, and anyone who knew me really well knew I was working at GMHC, in charge of, HIV prevention. But that was ironic. It was ironic that I end up becoming Director of Prevention. And that was when it switched, and it was really a new wave. And it wasn't, that whole construction of Larry Kramer and I forget the other doctor – he's a psychiatrist — Larry –

SS: Mass?

RE: Larry Mass. All of these guys, saying, Gay men are failing! Gay men are failing; they're relapsing! And the gay press feeding into this idea. Relapsing? These kids, first of all, they never had it! And they're living in a different epidemic than we were living in. It was a lot easier for us to put on a condom, because we're seeing our friends. It was like the worst Day of the Dead. Of seeing someone who you were totally attracted to, and you suddenly see that person, with that wasting disease that was

Tape IV
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so common, in the late '80s and '90s. And so, it is a different epidemic. And it's not just different epidemics, like San Juan and New York, or amongst drug users or amongst women. But even the generations of gay men, it's a different epidemic.

So I suddenly found myself working with young gay men. And they're dealing with the issues that I couldn't, I didn't have the capacity of dealing with, nor did I have the support network to deal with.

So it was a kind of, ironic place to end up. And a number of us realized, who are older, that we were giving, creating these retreats for these young gay men, particularly the Latino men who were immigrants, through Proyecto PAPI, out in Queens; were immigrants from Latin American countries; where they came to New York to be something they couldn't be in the world they came from. And they were willing to go deliver sandwiches, even though he was trained as a doctor or a lawyer, because he wanted to live as a gay man. Or the kids coming up in Harlem and the Bronx, in the House scene. Or young white kids, coming into a sexuality where, it suddenly is, it's become normalized, and we have gay people wagging their fingers: Oh, you should protect yourself against gonorrhea; use a condom every time. And it's like, wait a minute.

Tape V
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RE: I'm just going to keep talking till you guys run out of tape, so you better stop me.

SS: Well, this is the last question.

RE: Okay, but you know that doesn't mean anything, Sarah. What does that mean?

SS: You might be on record with the longest interview –

RE: I'll be sitting here, and you guys'll be walking, and it'll be dark, and you guys are walking out.

SS: Okay. Looking back: what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what would you say was its greatest disappointment?

RE: Its greatest achievement was so many people coming together in common cause, solidarity. The fact that so many lesbians weren't there for the dental dam; they weren't there for themselves. They were there, and it was a very big change from, where the gay community, gay and lesbian community had been years before, in terms of separatism. The leadership that women took there. The fact that it enabled, in classic collective action, it enabled a lot of us to do things that we never could have done by ourselves. You could not make a demonstration, or do something on your own. But with the power. The black people within ACT UP could not have voiced that anger themselves on the street, and had that turn into television. A woman couldn't have voiced that rage; she'd be called crazy. But somehow, all of that coming together — changing the CDC definition — is, at the best of it there wasn't, it was real common cause for ACT UP to get involved in needle exchange. Because, there weren't that many IDUs, or former IDUs, in ACT UP. But ACT UP enabled Louie Jones to move from an Emmaus House and that homeless community, and to believe that he could do Standup Harlem. It just birthed many things that never lived under the roof of ACT UP.

It did a brilliant partnership with GMHC. Because it was, it was doing what it could do; and the service organization was doing, and despite all the sparks and tensions, and real tensions, there were incredible kinds of alliances of common cause.

And so, what is the most disappointing thing? The most disappointing thing is when we turned on each other; is when we saw our differences as being bigger, and cavernous, compared with what we had common cause around. Now, the other thing is, we live in the world. So I forget who it was who said so brilliantly, at one of the most contentious meeting we had, that, it's like we all grow up in a racist society. We can't help that. But we do have the responsibility to be conscious of it. We all grew up – I grew up in a Jewish society in which sexism is just built into the culture, in so many different ways, besides the obvious patriarchal thing; but about privilege, for a male Jewish son.

So much of it was, that I think it also enabled, people who had no politics when they first came in, and no political consciousness; to come changed, in a certain way. And I think we didn't come to appreciate that enough, is that people were changing.

Tape V
00:05:00

Were we living in, suddenly, an idyllic world? We were organized because we weren't living in an idyllic world. And I think we started making demands of the collective that it couldn't possibly have given us. And I say "we" — not this person or that person — I think we all did it. And at the same time, that's a natural group process, that that happen. What's amazing is that we came together on as many things as we did, and had as great an impact. And I know; from just the Soviet countries, I know that ACT UP is a benchmark. It is such an incredible model. I know, from Zackie Achmat, from TAC, in South Africa, how important the model of ACT UP was to him. Our necessity defense; Zackie got all the legal papers on our necessity defense, because that's the defense he used for bringing illegal AIDS drugs into South Africa.

So there are all these ways. Gregg Gonsalves, living in South Africa now. He's living bigger than the gay world he came out of. And I think, to me, that's one of the powerful things, I hope, is in the wonderful project you guys are doing; is that in the best sense, it changed things collectively and in the world. And the whole notion of the empowered patient; but, which came out of the women's health movement; but, and took it yet another step. But I think it also changed a lot of our lives. I couldn't have dreamt that I would be doing the things in my life, and I felt like ACT UP was, and I grieve it, you know; and I know Daniel does, and a whole bunch of friends. Gregg Bordowitz does. We know that that was a magical period in our lives. The friendships that we had, that, the groups that were part of it, you know; of going out for dinner, to one of the endless Greek coffee shops.

But there was, there were, there was a collective way, a communal way, that doesn't exist now in New York. And it's one of the reasons why I left the city, and started working outside the country, and I find it in Muslim cultures; is a cohesiveness and collectivity that I like being part of.

And so I don't think there's a bad moment of ACT UP. I even think the Dan Williams thing; it, in some ways, it showed the best of ACT UP. That, one, there was a journalist in that room; and we were able to talk him out of making a story in the gay press about this. And saying, you know what? You're part of a bigger process; you're part of ACT UP. And we're going to air this now, here. But this is our business, 500 people, our business. But it was the best of ACT UP, was that Dan could stand in front of that room, and, and he could be honest. And that ACT UP never wavered in its support for needle exchange, even with that happening; that the bigger thing was there.

And to me, there's something in Muslim countries of Central Asia; they talk about the *khazan*; which is, big cooking pot. And people live *khazan bir*; they live around the cooking pot. And the cooking pot represents the home. And the fact that people, even when they separate from their families — and maybe they go to university — they still live *khazan bir*. You're responsible for your family members if you're the only one working, or something like that. And I've ended up using that as a metaphor for a lot of the ways we're working in Uzbekistan to deal with marginalized populations, particularly men who have sex with men. Because they're about the most stigmatized, in the way, in urban cities, a black, transgender — woman or man — a feminine black kid; is about the most stigmatized social status you can find. And the *khazan* is this cooking pot that we all hold, and it can take heat. It's not a glass. This glass would just explode, and it would break into pieces.

Tape V
00:10:00

And at its best, ACT UP was this incredible cooking pot. It was this incredible thing, that we could make this human, social container that could take, fierce, fierce, and sometimes ad hominem arguments, but somehow we could still show up at the same event. You know. That we could do the WHAM ACT UP demonstration, which was our biggest demonstration. But it was, part of it was bringing the women's health movement together with, in a certain sense, the patient activist movement, over the issue of control of our bodies.

So I have no, it's really hard to summon up a negative memory. My, the thing that haunts me most is that two of the guys I worked with side by side; I didn't know they were using drugs. And one died of an overdose. And maybe that didn't have to happen. And with Rod, as close as we were, that I didn't know that was happening.

And he later, wrote an article for a harm reduction newspaper — and I knew it was him, even though he wrote it anonymously — and then he and I got together at a harm reduction conference, and we had dinner together. And we were able to talk about a lot of stuff. And we were able to talk about his injecting and his using heroin.

And to me, the last thing is, I'm a gay man; I don't have kids. And I don't choose to go upstream, and try to make that family. But the idea of being in the presence of young people like Garance [Franke-Ruta] and Dan Raymond and Rod; is this really amazing privilege and opportunity, to be able to see that generation. And that generation mixing with Maxine Wolfe. If you think about, just again, you were talking, at the beginning, of three generations, four generations. And Gregg Bordowitz is still like a little brother to me. When he comes to New York, he stays in our house, and he, it's, it's his home.

So it's just given me so many things. And I have a feeling it's given lots of people so many things in their lives. AIDS took a lot away from us. But it, that movement, I think, gave us a lot.

SS: Thank you, Richard. Thank you so much.

RE: Thank you.

SS: Thank you.

RE: Glad to be part of this.

SS: Good, I'm glad.