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Interviewee: **Blair Fell**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Blair Fell
June 3, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: You could start by telling us your name, today's date, where we are, and how old you are.

BLAIR FELL: Okay. Oh, yikes. My name's Blair Fell. It is June 3, 2012. We're in Jackson Heights, New York, which is in Queens, and I just turned fifty.

SS: OK, *Mazel tov*.

BF: Thank you.

SS: So where were you born?

BF: I was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

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

BF: Well, I was born kind of lower middle-class, but then when I was twelve, we moved to middle middle-class, to Langhorne, Pennsylvania. It's a nice really pretty place, white middle-class neighborhood. We were kind of like the odd people out that's a little bit ethnic, Armenian, Jewish, guy with an English name.

SS: How did your Armenian Jewish family end up there?

BF: Well, my father was just a white guy. My mom, though, was, like—they both were the breadwinners when I was, up until twelve, and then my mom was one of the first women to own her own real estate company, like back in the day. They were much older when they had me. No women did real estate, so she was this matriarch with her own company, and she did really well, so we moved, moving on up, to the nicer area of Bucks County.

SS: Were they both born in the United States?

BF: Yes, yes. My mom was first-generation. Her parents were—that's first-generation, right? I always mix that up. Her dad was from the Armenian genocide,

came straight from that, and her mom was an Austrian Jew, and my dad was old Quaker family.

SS: So when you were growing up, were you part of the Quaker meeting?

BF: No, no, no. It was very religiously diverse. My mom, whose mother was Jewish and her father Armenian Orthodox, they were raised by any church they were near, so she was Presbyterian. So I was baptized Presbyterian, went to a Methodist nursery school and kindergarten, a Lutheran elementary school, and then was born again for a week in high school, because the cute people were a part of that – my dog is walking in – and then went to two Catholic universities before I eventually graduated from the University of Hawaii, Hilo.

SS: So when you were growing up, did your family—were they involved in community organizations or—

BF: They were Republicans. I remember when I was a little kid, going around with my mom, carrying the bag of Nixon buttons as she was going door to door canvassing for Richard Nixon.

SS: So you were brought up to be an active citizen in that regard.

BF: I guess you could say that. I guess you could say that. Having older siblings that were more progressive at the time, I think that influenced me, and also the television of the seventies made me at a pretty early age fairly liberal, and my father, who was a definite racist, the “N” word was heard constantly in my house. But then when I started being informed by *All in the Family* and *M*A*S*H* and all those shows, I became this little leftist and tried to change them, and certainly my mom became liberal. My

father stayed conservative Republican until the end. But definitely in college I found myself far more liberal than most of the other students.

SS: Were you involved in any kind of politics?

BF Demonstrations and stuff, but no one else was. Well, my first university was the Catholic University of America, which is, of course—they're involved in that case against the government now so they don't have to provide contraception. So everyone around me was pretty conservative, but I remember right after college going to a demonstration at the University of Pennsylvania—I was living in Philadelphia for a moment—and throwing myself in front of Jeane Kirkpatrick's car, learning about the stuff that was happening in Nicaragua and El Salvador. So I definitely had a leftist thing going on in me, contrary to everyone around me. None of my friends were involved in politics at that time.

SS: Why do you think that happened to you?

BF: I don't know, maybe just the influence of television and stuff. I was a television fiend, as far as watching, and the shows of the seventies, Norman Lear shows
00:05:00 were extremely progressive. I, of course, think if you're smarter, you're going to be liberal, but that's just my prejudice.

SS: When did you become aware that there was such a thing as gay politics?

BF: Actually, it's interesting. ACT UP kind of saved my life, in a way, because what happened was I actually—I had just done the Chinese Opera in China. I originally was an actor, and I had just done the Chinese Opera in China and I was coming back and stopped in Hawaii. My last university was the University of Hawaii, and part of

my family lives in Hawaii, so I was on my way home and I stopped in Hawaii, and my brother's like, "You need to go back to Philadelphia. Mom had a nervous breakdown." My dad was disabled from a stroke that he had when I was younger. So I had to go back to Philadelphia, which was my nightmare.

In the same year, so I moved back, I fell in love with this guy. My mom was still in Friends Hospital. My dad was diagnosed with cancer that Christmas. The same month, he died, I came out to my mom and the first guy I fell in love with told me he was HIV-positive. It was a really bad year.

That partner—his name was Brian Smith—who I was desperately in love with, didn't really want to talk about HIV, and looking back now, I don't know for sure, but he had a scar on his back from having had something wrong with his lung at some point. Anyway, I had real trouble dealing with the fact that I couldn't talk to him about it, and I was and am HIV-negative, and I was also—let's be honest. I was a mess.

Anyway, he dumped my ass, and two years later he died without ever having talked to me again, and I have a feeling he might have already had pneumonia before I met him. I really don't know, because there was no—and after we broke up, I never spoke, so I didn't even know until the same guy that introduced us told me that he had died.

I moved to New York to be an actor. Like after he and I broke up, I moved to New York and still was just heartbroken over this guy and decided I didn't want to be an actor, did a couple television shows and realized it just wasn't for me, and I was ready to move from New York.

I went to my first Gay Pride Parade and I saw ACT UP. It was like, “Wait.” This is where I can get, like, choked up. We can have a voice. I saw them, I joined them in the parade. It was like being completely silent about this thing that crushed my life and I wasn’t able to talk about, and I decided, “I’m not moving.” Gay Pride Parade, first time I saw that many hot guys in one place, and then this political group that was doing something, because at that point no one was doing anything about AIDS or HIV. It was just this mysterious thing that was killing this person that I wasn’t even able to talk to at that point. So it changed my life. I stayed in New York for thirteen years after that.

SS: Do you think Brian was ashamed?

BF: I think he was ashamed. I think he didn’t want to think about something he had no control over. I think that’s why he didn’t want to talk about it. Yes, and also probably my approach was—I didn’t want to lose him, and that’s one of the main reasons I really had trouble in that relationship, was that I couldn’t do anything about it and I couldn’t speak about it, and also probably there’s a bit of self-pity on my part, like why does the first person I fall in love with, the most beautiful man I had ever seen, why does he have to have this thing that none of us can do anything about? Which is another reason I think ACT UP was so important to me. It was like even though at first it felt mostly like screaming, there was actual changes that happened, that it was the only time I had any power at all, was when I was there involved in ACT UP at that point in making some kind of change.

SS: What year was that?

BF: I think it was probably 1989.

SS: So what was the ACT UP contingent in gay pride?

00:10:00 BF: It was just ACT UP New York. They just, were marching in the parade. You know what Gay Pride Parades became at that point was just like, “Oh, yay, yay, we’re going to dress in drag, get loaded, and have fun,” and then here was this political group that was asking for something, demanding something, screaming about the inaction that was happening around us and that nothing was being done, and it was just really powerful, and there were hot guys everywhere. It certainly was a motivating factor.

SS: So when you first joined ACT UP, did you join a committee, or what did you—

BF: I was on the Media Committee with Jay Blotcher. That’s really how ACT UP really impacted my life. There was a number of reasons I became a writer, but one big reason was there was a guy named Alan Contini who was on the Media Committee with me, and I became really close friends with him. He already had AIDS, and he was a playwright and kind of was inspiring to me to become a playwright. I guess he probably died within a year or two years of having met him on the Media Committee, and I became pretty close to him.

Actually, my mom—this is really sweet. He would come to my mom’s house in Pennsylvania, and my mom, she’s a crazy lady. She was wonderful, but she was a nutcase. But he was really sick by this point, and she let him sleep in her bed, and he said, “You know, I want to die in this bed.” So one day my mom brings the bed—it’s pretty funny. She brings the bed to New York, and Alan had her bed until he died, actually, which is kind of cool.

SS: That's amazing. That's incredible.

BF: It was cool.

SS: And you guys all carried it up five flights or whatever to his apartment?

BF: Right. Exactly. I think it was, like, two or three flights, but, yes. Actually, probably where the New York Sports Club is on 23rd and Eighth, I think it's either there or next to that is where Alan lived.

SS: So who was on the Media Committee with you?

BF: Jay Blotcher, Alan Contini, as far as the people I remember, Peter B—he's a friend of mine. Want me to look? I can look.

SS: Sure.

BF: He'd actually be someone—he works for, I think, IFC or Sundance.

JIM HUBBARD: Peter Bowen?

BF: Yes, thank you. Peter Bowen. And I'm blanking on everyone else as far as that. I can't remember. I can't remember.

SS: So what were you guys trying to accomplish at that time?

BF: Actually, it was kind of weird. First I was just, kind of one of the hordes that go to the meetings on Monday nights, and then the things that I did in ACT UP were in Media Committee, and then I did that thing where the monitors—what did we do, where we made sure the police weren't hurting anyone at the demonstrations.

JAMES WENTZY: Marshal.

BF: Yes, I did that. Eventually I pulled out of the Media Committee because I got a job with Miriam Friedlander, the City Council member, and so I kind of

set up at least one meeting with Miriam and an ACT UP committee, but I kind of felt like I had to pull out of the Media Committee after that, since I started working for an elected official, which, by the way, ACT UP completely was one of the things that got me that job, having ACT UP on my résumé at that point with Miriam, who was considered this old leftist. Of course, I was to the left of Miriam Friedlander and got fired for telling off a nun about condom distribution.

SS: Oh, wow.

BF: Mind you, I was just really contentious, but that was probably the final straw when I told her off—

SS: So her district was Lower East Side.

BF: Lower East Side, yes, and the Wall Street area too.

SS: So she had a lot of drug users who were not getting any services in her district. What was her position on needle exchange?

BF: She supported needle exchange.

SS: And did she work with ACT UP at all?

BF: Well, I know she had a meeting. I set up a meeting with her and ACT UP, and she pretty much was a supporter of ACT UP, but even though she was an old leftist, she was to the right of ACT UP. It was definitely about we don't need to be that abrasive. And she was a politician. She was a good lady. She was a good lady. I still had that "I want to yell the problem down" kind of thing. It wasn't a good job for me at that particular time in my life, politics and stuff. Writing was a much better fit than that.

But on the Media Committee I guess I just—I don't really remember anything specific I did, other than get things out, maybe put posters up, do whatever work

00:15:00

we did in the room. I don't really remember what else I particularly did. I was saying that—that's one of the things, that I just know I would go to the meetings, which is now the Google Building. There's that Starbucks on the corner of Ninth Avenue and—what is that—16th, 17th Street, right around there, and if you look over the Starbucks, that window was our—I remember that, because we used to get in the elevator on the other side on Eighth Avenue, walk up to—what's that cologne company? They make, kind of "Ye Olde" kind of colognes?

SS: Old Spice?

BF: No. They make, like, soaps and colognes. I can't remember the name of them, but they had their warehouse. You would walk through some—it just smelled really strong of their colognes and stuff, and then you'd have to walk across to the Ninth Avenue side and then go downstairs to that office.

SS: For the ACT UP workspace.

BF: For the workspace, in general, yes. Well, I just thought Media Committee space. I guess it was the workspace, yes. I don't remember details about it.

SS: Did you have consistent media contacts that you tried to develop relationships with?

BF: No, I didn't. No, absolutely not. They may have. I just remember going to the meetings and filling envelopes or just kind of doing grunt work on the Media Committee. Yes, I'm not sure how long I was in there before I started working for Miriam, and then just pulled out of that and just kind of get on the inside of politics and try to work from that angle as much as I could, and then just interface with Miriam and ACT UP.

SS: One of the really huge differences between New York and San Francisco during the AIDS crisis is that the San Francisco government was on the side of people with AIDS, and in New York the mayor was our enemy, and the City Council was important because they could mitigate that, but they didn't really. So were you involved with—

BF: Again, Miriam was on the side of that. Miriam was kind of like an outcast in the City Council. She was the one the *Post* always called “the old communist” and things like that, so she was definitely on the right side of that, the correct side of that, but, no, I didn't. I was a community liaison. My job was to help people deal with their landlord, and so I was terrible at it, by the way. That was not what I do, because I would rather have been doing stuff like that.

SS: Did you have AIDS eviction cases?

BF: No, unfortunately I—not that I know of. I was there for a year, I think, with Miriam.

SS: So tell us about Dr. [Anthony] Fauci.

BF: Okay. What was the name of that? It was basically like maybe thirty of us went down in the bus. It was about Parallel Track. It was a Parallel Track meeting, and for me, it was the most significant meeting or demonstration that I participated in. We went down, and the goal is we wrote this treatise to say why we wanted parallel track, so we could get AIDS medications faster to the people that needed them. It was given to Dr. Fauci and the board. We were in this big conference room, and we're all standing around. There's the table, and we had two members of ACT UP, I remember, probably Jim what's-his-name—

SS: Eigo.

BF: Yes, yes, Jim, and then somebody else was there on the board, and we were around, and we had our posters and we're standing up. It was Dr. Fauci or someone else, I can't remember, on the board said, "I haven't even read this yet."

And we all started screaming, "Well, read it! Read it!"

It totally got me worked up. I remember I was, like, crying when we did this because everyone took their watches and were holding them up to indicate, "We don't have time. You need to read this now. Why are you not reading it now?" Just kind of fighting against that kind of bureaucratic thing, like, "Okay, let's have a meeting to discuss whether we'll read this," and stuff.

"Read it. We don't have time. We're dying. We need you to read this now." And then to have something fairly recently after that come out that, whether it was right or wrong, to come out, and we made a change happen right there by just demanding it, for me, it was extremely powerful.

SS: Can you just explain for people what exactly Parallel Track is?

BF: Parallel Track was—if I can explain it, the idea was to get medications out sooner. Usually to get a medication out would take years and years and years, and this kind of thing, it would be basically getting it to the people that need it by doing studies and stuff still on the medication, but being able to give them access to that medication. I'm not sure if that's a great way of explaining it.

SS: But why was it called Parallel?

BF: I guess it was parallel to the studies. I'm actually not sure. Actually, I'm sorry. I'm really bad. That was twenty years ago or more.

SS: So what was Fauci like?

00:20:00 BF: Well, ultimately he was pretty darn nice, but in that thing—it was just kind of at that point. He eventually was our ally, but at that point it was still that—this was probably one of the first times we had members of our group on a board, that we were just slowly becoming part of that inside track, and so that was really powerful, but again, I was just a rabble-rouser on there just shouting and holding the posters. I wasn't on the inside of the business dealings of that.

SS: You weren't going to sit on ACTG or—

BF: Right. Exactly. Yes, yes.

SS: But I mean, that's what ACT UP was, right? There were only a few people who really understood all the information in the most sophisticated ways, the rest of us that were there to get them inside, on some level.

BF: Right. Right, and then there were those of us that were the crowd, the ones that were showing that there's a lot of us that care or that can be really loud. I can be really loud. That was one of my biggest gifts, is I could, like—at those meetings I remember I'd be shaking and stuff like that. Yes, actually I'm the one that shouted, "Read it!" I'm like, "Well, then read it!" I could feel the tears welling up and I was just shaking. I was so angry that someone would say that, and I think that was maybe my big gift there. Yes, I don't know. A lot of it I forget. Mostly things I remember were the personalities of the people that in any other circumstance I really kind of despised in many ways, just because the people that got involved were loud, sometimes abrasive, oftentimes miserable people that you don't really want for a cocktail party, but you do want

when you're in a situation like that and you're trying to save people's lives and get people to move.

SS: So you do you think you had a personality change where you were willing to be with a different kind of person or willing to act in a different way?

BF: I was desperate. I was desperate, I think, like many people back then. It's like we were hopeless people that finally found each other. We were on a sinking ship that no one cared about, that the straight world was like, "Die already. You're just homos."

And we found each other and said, "Let's make this change," and so we were united in that.

SS: Yes, but most gay people did not join ACT UP.

BF: No, they didn't, and I fought with a lot of my friends, because certainly the people I wanted to have sex with and date—I wanted to have sex with people in ACT UP because they were hot, but the people I wanted to date were not in ACT UP. They were the people that were like, "Oh, Blair, why do you have to get involved with those people?" They were the Upper West Side button-down gay guys that had really good jobs and were passing. They're the ones that I wanted to date, but this is what I was involved in, so I would fight with them constantly, and I think I had an impact on them. I mean, they were the ones that believe we have to be the nice good gays that don't shout and sit down with them and are just really polite, and I'm like, "But we need to scream. We need to shout, because they're not going to do anything," and ultimately I think we needed both. I think we needed the explosives, and then you needed the other people that could be a little bit more polite.

SS: But what was it about you that you ended up doing this thing that these people objected to?

BF: Well, I think it was the history with Brian. Also, my second lover ended up being HIV-positive too.

SS: But a lot of people had friends who died of AIDS or who had AIDS, but they didn't join ACT UP. Seriously, what was it?

BF: I guess it's just something in me that I just didn't want to accept it. I wanted to fight against it. I couldn't see accepting the—that man that I loved, the man that I was dating, I just couldn't accept that they were—well, one had already died by that point. He died while I was working for Miriam. I found out he had died. Then shortly after that, I started dating Dave [Somrak], and he was HIV-positive, so that, but it was just—I don't know. I don't know what made me different than that, other than, I've always had strong opinions, so it might be that I couldn't keep them to myself or something. I don't know. I don't think I was anything special or anything. I think I just was angry that people were dying and I wanted to stop it if it was possible to stop that from happening.

SS: Well, once you won Parallel Track, did you start seeing how far you could go?

BF: Yes, once Parallel Track—when that happened, to see that we could make a change in government. Before, it was like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we want to make a change!” and we're banging on a wall and nothing's happening. For me, this is my memory of it. And then, like, when that happened, a fairly major change, when you think of the protocols for getting drugs approved changed, it was like, oh, wow. How far could

we go? How far could we change it? I think of it as just one large scream. It's like, how far can this scream go?

SS: What was your vision?

BF: Well, I certainly—we want absolute, beyond acceptance. Practically for me, I want them basically to worship gay men and lesbians as their gods, probably, as probably my goal and my thought, because I certainly thought we were superior to heterosexuals.

SS: Why? What made us superior?

BF: Well, probably my self-involvement made me think that, but just the fact that we were these warriors of love. We were fighting to be able to love each other and to be able to save those people that we were in love with from dying. And also around—I'm not sure what point—no, it would have been after that I wrote a play called *Naked Will*, which is about Shakespeare's sonnets and just how straight people were always appropriating these great people to be straight when they were actually bisexual or gay or whatever. So many famous people were gay that no one knew about, so I kind of had this idea that we were kind of like the chosen people kind of thing. I don't necessarily believe that anymore. I think we're all good and all necessary.

SS: Have we become less special?

BF: No, we're still special. We can't help but being special because we're a minority. In that sense, I think we will become less special the more we're just part of everything, but we'll always, I think, be the oddballs out, because we're still going to have to figure out who's gay, and that hunt will always kind of make us a little special.

SS: So when you came back from working for Miriam, did you get back involved in a big way?

BF: After I left Miriam, after I was fired? No, I kind of dove into my writing. That's when I became a writer, was right when Brian died. It was shortly after that when I freaked out at Sister Mary Elizabeth Kelleher and told her, I said, "Look, sister, if you fuck without a condom, you get AIDS," and I did this at a board meeting, and I came back to the office and I was let go, but they, luckily, let me get my unemployment.

So I took a courier flight to China, and after the despair of Brian's death, after getting fired, and I just decided to do what I really wanted to do, which was to become a writer, and I started working on plays with gay content and wrote just a whole mess of plays after that, then eventually worked on television and all of that. But I think I didn't get back working with ACT UP after that. Well, I eventually moved to Los Angeles, but I remember going—I think I went to one or two meetings when it was at Cooper Union, which I didn't like very much.

SS: Why is that?

BF: To me, when we had it at the center, I don't know, it was the home of the gay community and it was like—we had all those paintings on the wall, those really rough-and-tumble paintings on the wall. You can still see pieces of them today, and then the Keith Haring in the bathroom upstairs. It's like our blood and sweat and tears built that place, and having it there, and we're all cramped in there. Cooper Union, it just felt kind of sterile and distant, and the hierarchy just felt more prominent. But again, I only went to one or two meetings there, and then I remember I think it would have been seven

years ago Larry [Kramer] did a speech at Cooper Union, and he was still the same old Larry, screaming and yelling and rightfully blaming us as well as everyone else.

SS: That we killed Vito, is that what you mean, rightfully blaming us? Because, you know, his famous speech at Vito Russo's funeral, "We killed Vito."

BF: It wasn't that speech.

SS: Why was it our fault?

BF: Well, it's not all our fault, but the irresponsibility of—I agree, the irresponsibility of the gay male community to realize that we have to take care of our own, that we have to make sure that we're not infecting each other, that it's not just, "Oh, blame the person who got fucked without a condom." Maybe blame the person who's fucking without a condom. I know for a fact, a good friend of ours that we've actually mentioned already—this is the whole thing, is these were amazing people, not all of them were as flawed as this, but that also did some really horrific things. What's that Bill guy, really miserable guy, tall—Bill Dobbs?

SS: Bill Dobbs, yes.

00:30:00

BF: Yes, there's an acquaintance of mine whose partner was in city government, and Bill Dobbs disagreed with his partner's work with city government, and so he said to the guy in the elevator, "You know, I hope you die." And his partner was sick. "And I hope your partner dies." It's like that kind of shit, fuck you, that lack of compassion, which was necessary as far as being these warriors sometimes, was kind of like, what an asshole. There's something important and brave about being compassionate and being understanding and being forgiving a bit.

The thing I was telling you about was I knew this really high-level member of ACT UP who—guy said, “Are you positive or negative?”

The guy said, “I’m negative.”

He was positive, fucked the guy raw, and told me about it. Until shortly before the guy died, I had trouble even being friends with him anymore because I was so angry about that, and stuff like that, which is part of it, and I know it’s not really a lovely part of our history, but it is part of things that have happened.

SS: So if you had sex inside ACT UP—because a lot of people say that people in ACT UP had safe sex, but then you have a different story. Some people say it was part of the culture of ACT UP at a certain point.

BF: This is, at least, this individual. I can’t speak for everyone.

SS: But what about for you?

BF: For me, I had safe sex. I dated some people in ACT UP that were positive.

SS: But did you experience that in ACT UP, who was negative and who was positive was not an issue in terms of getting together?

BF: When I was active in it, like in ’89, it wasn’t the kind of serosorting that is more prevalent now. Certainly there was a guilt feeling. I’ve had four major lovers in my life. Two of them were HIV-positive. That doesn’t mean I don’t have a problem with it or didn’t have a problem with it. I would certainly have preferred that they were HIV-negative, but it’s just who they were, and I fell in love with them. I did date people in ACT UP who were HIV-positive, and I didn’t break up with them because

they were HIV-positive; I broke up with them because they were kind of insufferable assholes who were wonderful and awesome also.

But the one story I have is having dated Eric Sawyer, who's a wonderful guy, but had the strength and ego to be able to be a founding member of ACT UP and also a founding member of Housing Works, but it'd be seven in the morning I'd get a call saying, "Okay, are you ready to go up to Albany for the demonstration?"

I'm like, "Eric, I didn't get to bed till three a.m. I really can't go."

He's like, "Fine. I guess you don't care if the AIDS crisis ends."

And I'd be like, "Come on. Please just let me sleep in," that kind of thing.

The guilt sometimes by dating certain members of ACT UP could be pretty—

SS: Well John Weir has those stories about Dave Feinberg calling him, "What have you done to end the AIDS crisis today?" But I don't think people mostly operated out of guilt in ACT UP.

BF: No, I don't think it was mostly guilt, but there was moments were it—definitely the phone tree and stuff like that. If someone calls me and says, "Are you going?" normally I'm going to go. Probably if someone else had called me, but having a boyfriend call you and try to guilt you at seven in the morning, you just don't do that. I don't know if I went or not, but I just remember it very—that's just so Eric and stuff. But he's a great guy, though.

SS: Okay, let's take a little break.

Just a little bathroom break. And while we're doing that think about if there are any particular events or projects that you want to talk about.

Can you unplug me?

SS: I want to get back to the thing you brought up about the guys who were not in ACT UP—how the community didn't like ACT UP. I wonder, was there ever a time when other people who were not in ACT UP got sick and asked you for help getting access to information or—

BF: I believe that did happen. As far as for me to remember a specific account of that, I can't. I ended up being kind of like the go-to guy about information about that for my friends, but I really can't remember. I just remember it definitely happened where it would be like, "Hey, you're involved with these people." It's like when you're the first person to use drugs, they come to you for ecstasy and shit.

SS: It's kind of like that. Was there anything that ACT UP did that really was scary to you or that you disagreed with?

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BF: The thing that mostly annoyed—and why I didn't go back after I left working for City Council, why I didn't want to go back was I remember being at a meeting at the center, and they were discussing budget, and having an argument about t-shirts for a lesbian softball team, whether we should budget money for that, and just arguments coming on the floor, and I'm like, "What's this have to do with AIDS? Why are we arguing about this right now?" Just like I got a little bit tired of that kind of bickering back and forth that started to happen more and more that seemed off focus. I thought one great thing about ACT UP was kind of a singleness of purpose, and that started to get a little bit murky.

SS: Can you give me some other examples of ways that you think ACT UP got off its purpose besides t-shirts for the lesbian softball team?

BF: Again, because it would have been around '90, '91 that I started working for City Council, so it was pretty much in the middle of when it was really big that I kind of like went on to the other side of that. I can't think of any other specific things. It was just the arguing at that point that just got—not as like, “Okay, let's go,” like an anger like, “No, we need to do it this way. No, we need to do it better,” that kind of thing.” It became, “No, we want to go this way.” “No, we want to go this way.” It's, again, hard for me to remember.

SS: Did you ever make a proposal in ACT UP?

BF: No, I was horrified. Probably if I ever spoke at all, I'd be like – I was horrified.

SS: So you didn't participate.

BF: No, no, no. I just sat in. I did speak maybe once or twice, but I always—

SS: Do you remember what you were—

BF: No, I probably was so horrified to speak in that room—When you have your Larry Kramers and you have those people like that, it was—when I would go to a demonstration, I'm fine for screaming at the cops, but in this place where these people who I thought were kind of brilliant but scary, and I just didn't think I could articulate it in a way that it would be cohesive. I definitely did speak once or twice, but from the floor, raise my hand and say something. All I can remember is just shaking and then saying that. I can't even remember what it would have been.

SS: How about as a writer? There were a lot of writers in ACT UP.

BF: I wasn't a writer in ACT UP. I was a writer after ACT UP, yes. That's when I started writing, after I left City Council.

SS: Right, and so then you became a playwright. Did you ever write plays that had any AIDS content?

BF: Well, it's interesting. One play of mine, which was kind of like a cult hit downtown, was called *Burning Habits*, and I didn't know it had anything to do with AIDS until a friend of mine pointed out that the fire—the background of the story was there was these three lesbian nuns who were burned to death in a fire in 1932.

SS: Oh, it's a comedy.

BF: Yes, it's a comedy, but with lots of dark stuff in it, and they come back haunting the East Village of New York searching for their assassins. A friend pointed out to me that, well, the fire's AIDS, obviously, and it's a comedy, but when you look at the serious stuff in it, it's all dealing with that, dealing with the loss of love.

Then there was a sequel called *The Ballad of Little Girl Jesus*, which is about the end of the world, and there's this one relationship between—I won't go into the details because it's quite absurd, but it's about loving someone at the end of the world. There's actually a movie coming out now like this, but this was in 1995 or something that I wrote this, and it was all about AIDS. It was all about having to be in love in the face of death, impending death, since my lover at the time was—who didn't die, who's still alive. The assumption was he would die soon, so it all had to do with that. I never mentioned AIDS in it.

SS: Were the nuns played by women?

BF: Yes. Yes, I was opposed to drag back then, until my roommate became Coco Peru, and that's when I wrote another play about *The Tragic and Horrible Life of the Singing Nun*, which was about the woman who sang "Dominique" who killed herself with her lesbian lover, and he was the transgender nun in it that narrated the piece, but before that, I thought drag was misogynist.

SS: You have a lot of Catholic iconography. How did you respond to Save The Church?

BF: Well, I marched in it. Was it Robert Garcia? Who did the host thing?

JH: Tom Keane.

SS: Tom Keane.

00:40:00

BF: I was definitely of the school like, "Oh, did you have to do that?" It could have been focused a little bit more on message, that I felt in a way—I waffled back and forth feeling like it took us off message, but then I thought it got us a lot more news coverage because of that, but it did kind of, like, take us off message. The church has just gotten worse. It's kind of funny, because I wrote a whole mess of plays, probably in all, like ten or twelve plays dealing with Catholicism. I've been blacklisted by Bill Donohue—what's his name, Donohue? From the Catholic League. I've been blacklisted by him.

SS: Oh, congratulations.

BF: Thank you. For the *The Singing Nun* and for *Burning Habits*. I've gotten over my anti-Catholic stuff, but they're getting worse. They're just getting worse, like that recent thing against the nuns and stuff like that. But, yes, I marched in Stop the Church. I was less involved and on the inside of that. The Parallel Track thing, I felt

that's when I was getting more involved. By that point, I would have been working for Miriam, so I was more just like a marcher for that. I was down at the City Hall demonstration, again, just kind of marching.

SS: Did you ever get arrested?

BF: No, because I was a marshal, so my thing was to watch that the police weren't abusing the things. I remember the technique where make sure they know their name. So if Sarah was being dragged away, you'd be like, "Don't hurt Sarah. Don't hurt Sarah," because we learned that if they know the name of the person, they're less likely to hurt them.

SS: Who told you that? How were you trained?

BF: You got training. You got marshal training.

SS: Who trained you?

BF: I don't remember who, but I remember going to the trainings.

SS: What was the marshal training like?

BF: Oh, the marshal training was giving us tips like—

SS: But what was it like? Were there a hundred people, five people?

BF: I don't remember. I just remember it was a group of us, and there'd be former marshals that would explain that technique, you want to try to make sure that the cop has some kind of personal interest in them and let them know that someone's watching so that they don't do anything to hurt the demonstrators who were being arrested. I kind of felt a little bad I was never arrested. I kind of felt like it was like a badge of honor to be arrested, and I wasn't getting arrested, and then when I started

working for Miriam Friedlander, it wouldn't have been good to be arrested, I thought, but I kind of felt a little bit like a wuss that I never was arrested.

SS: How was it to deal with the police as a marshal? Did you feel confident or—

BF: Sometimes it was fine. Sometimes they were respectful. Sometimes they were awful. Actually, I have a photo I'll show you.

SS: Tell us about about –

BF: Anyway, it was just, like, they would be scary, because it was the time they were wearing gloves, and I definitely had a resentment about the gloves. It's like that ignorance that they thought they were going to get AIDS by touching gay people. That was still the time when they thought that, and depending like—demonstrations in Albany, New York, and Washington, I guess are the three places that I've been to demonstrations with ACT UP—oh, and Kennebunkport. I remember Kennebunkport, we went up to Bush Senior's—even though we never even got close and stuff, but I remember going up there.

SS: Now, why were we going there?

BF: Again, to protest the inaction by the federal government of even—

SS: There was no event or something?

BF: It was just that was his summer house and stuff, and we were going to go up there to protest Bush and the lack of AIDS policy or something.

SS: So what happened? You all piled on a bus?

BF: I remember the bus ride up, remember—bus rides, you remember a lot of them, because that's where all the kind of mushy flirting and stuff like that happens, so

you remember that stuff, kind of thing, and I remember we didn't get very close to the place. But the bus rides, boy piles, when we'd be taking a break and we'd all just be lying in a pile all over each other. I think—yes, yes, but nothing really happened. It was kind of like a... Event, that one, the Kennebunkport. Yes, it was a really long ride. I remember that. It's a really long bus ride.

But, yes, the marshal training, other than just being taught those things, I don't remember. I liked being a marshal, though, because I liked the idea of protecting people. I think it was probably the motivation like as a whole, it's like, "Okay, I'm going to save the world from AIDS," so that kind of like, "I don't want any of these people to be hurt. These people that are here doing this fight, I don't want them to be hurt."

SS: Was there anyone in ACT UP who, when they got sick, it really affected you?

BF: Well, my friend Alan Contini, when he died.

SS: What happened to him? How'd that go?

00:45:00 BF: It went really fast. Again, I don't even remember whether it was a year or two years that I knew Alan, but I remember he put up a play. He had written a play about a serodiscordant relationship, and he was a Columbia student. He was an older Columbia student, because he would have been in his thirties, old to me at the time. I was actually in the play. I was in a reading of the play, because I had been an actor. Then he just kept getting sicker and sicker, and I told you about the whole thing with my mom's bed. Then I just remember being in the hospital with him the day before I think he died, and that was the time when you go in the hospital rooms and there's a warning

that they have AIDS, and you have to wear masks and gloves and everything like that when you went into the rooms.

Do you know the restaurant El Quijote on 23rd Street?

SS: Sure.

BF: I think it's still there.

SS: Chelsea Hotel.

BF: Yes. I remember he had this big meal for all of his friends, New Year's or Christmas there, and every time I pass it, I think about him. Even though Brian, my first lover, who died—again, I never spoke to him in the two years before he died. I wanted to. He didn't want to talk to me. He would have been the closest person at that point that I knew of, but Alan, I was with him towards the end, and I was close to his mom and his friends. He had a really great support system, and he was just really a big inspiration in my life, again, for the writing and all that and showing me that was possible. He was a great man. But then so many people died. More than I realize actually died, because in New York people just disappear, and also people don't realize—I'm someone who doesn't drink anymore, so I have friends that—

SS: You're sober.

BF: Yes, that's hard, sober, that don't drink or do drugs anymore, and when you're in that circle of people, you realize a lot more people than you know die, because if you're not sober, you don't realize it. You're like, "Oh, they moved to Miami. They moved to L.A., I guess," and, no, they were found in their apartment and they're dead. I knew seven people that I know of last year that died. A lot of them killed themselves.

SS: Seven people you know died last year?

BF: Yes.

SS: Gay men?

BF: Gay men, not of AIDS, either killing themselves or drug overdoses, and that's just the ones I know about. I know two jumped out of buildings.

SS: And how do you explain that?

BF: Well, a lot of these would have been crystal meth users, which is a really horrible thing.

SS: A lot of guys from ACT UP have had crystal problems, pervasive in ACT UP. Do you think it's just our generation, or do you think it's because it's related to being in the center of the AIDS crisis? Is it the aging thing or is it the—

BF: I don't know if it has to do with aging, because young people do it too. Crystal meth is about sex, for most people. There's some project tweakers that like to take things apart, but mostly tweakers in New York—I've been sober on both coasts. Tweakers in New York, it's a sex thing, and the whole—whether AIDS had anything to do with it or the homophobia in the world had anything to do with it, that, "Okay, let's forget about all the caveats. Let's forget that this act that we're going to do could make us sick. Let's get high," and when you're high on crystal meth, you can forget about the fact the person could be sick and you can have fun for eight to ten hours.

SS: So you think that the high rate of ACT UPers having trouble with crystal is just because everyone's having trouble with it. It's not related to—

BF: I don't know.

SS: —surviving.

BF: I was just saying when you were out of the room that I asked someone in ACT UP, that I knew in ACT UP, to—I had never done drugs before, and I asked this person who was this guy I knew in ACT UP to help me be bad, and he gave me crystal, two hits of X, Ketamine, and coke, my first night out at the Black Party, and I was off and running.

00:50:00 Yes, I don't know whether it's just in general. I think it definitely has to do with homophobia and the fact of we're doing something that's not approved of by society. Certainly it helped me get beyond my fear of HIV and other people having HIV. When I would get high, I could forget about that. I could forget that far more than two partners that were HIV-positive, but two major lovers that were HIV-positive. I didn't actually get high with them, but after that when I'd want to have casual sex, I had to be loaded, because otherwise I'd be obsessed about it. Is this person I'm with, I'm going to lose them? Is this person going to be sick? Fuck me up so I don't have to think about it so I can concentrate on this thing, hyper-focus on this thing. Yes, so I'd have to do a research study to know if it's higher than—is it higher than the regular population?

SS: I don't know, but some key people in ACT UP have died from crystal and some leaders in ACT UP have had really bad drug problems. I don't know. I don't know if it's higher. You would know better than me.

BF: I know people that are sober that were in ACT UP. I know people that have killed themselves in ACT UP, Robert [Hilferty], for example, but I'd have to—

SS: It's not related to crystal. That was related to—

BF: Right, mental illness. Yes, I don't know about—I'd have to think. I mean, I literally know so many people that died of alcohol and drug abuse that I literally don't know how many people I know. I'll be like, "Oh, right. That's right."

SS: So you don't have a sense of this being a consequence of having survived the AIDS crisis or having survived—no?

BF: Again, I really don't know. I believe in the scientific method, like study that to find out. I don't know.

SS: How did people in ACT UP deal with grief?

BF: How did people in ACT UP deal with grief? Anger sometimes. Grief like anyone else.

SS: When your friend Alan was dying, did you talk honestly about the fact that he was dying? You guys discussed it?

BF: Yes, yes. I remember when he said—ah, it made me really sad. The day before he died, one of the last things he said to me, if not the last thing, it's so horrible at the end when you've kind of got it figured out, but you have no time left to do anything with it, life, I guess.

SS: He knew what he was missing out on.

BF: Yes. He was kind of wonderful, because he knew how to ask for help. He knew how to get a group of people around him, and he had a lot of straight friends that were around him too. It wasn't only gay people.

Do you remember Robert Garcia?

SS: Of course.

BF: Yes, my last image of Robert—I didn't know him very well, but was when we were starting Queer Nation, and I remember the very first—were you at the first meeting of Queer Nation?

SS: No.

BF: I was. It was my first and last meeting of Queer Nation, because again, it was the same thing that happened at the end of ACT UP for me, was that – And he came in and was weeping and was drunk, and he was like, “I don't see any people of color in the room.” Of course, Jay Blotcher's Nicaraguan, but I guess no one acknowledges that his father was a Nicaraguan baseball player, but Robert didn't, and Robert was just weeping and just saying what was wrong with the group at the very first meeting. When you say grief, there's that element of grief, too, kind of like some people, kind of this self-pitying grief, and then others just like an anger and a rage about when people would die, “We've got to stop this. Something's got to be done,” kind of grief. I think I've had both.

SS: Because I wonder if ACT UP was a place of healing or if it just deepened the trauma, actually.

BF: For me, it was a place of healing. I don't know about the deepening of the trauma. For me, ACT UP was definitely a place of healing. It changed my life in a very positive way. Just because something doesn't last for me doesn't mean it wasn't—and it didn't last in the sense that I stopped doing it at a certain point because I kind of wanted to take my voice in a different way through the writing, first through the working for elected official, but then through the writing plays that dealt with gay and lesbian

issues. And also I worked also on a public policy television show in California and certainly advocated for gay issues and stuff to be dealt with on that program.

But ACT UP, it just changed my life. It made me from being this person that was just the victim of this misery that was happening all around me, to being an active part and trying to get to some kind of solution and change, and certainly without the AIDS crisis, without ACT UP, we wouldn't be where we are now in the gay community. We would not even be close to—

SS: Where are we?

00:55:00

BF: Oh, we have marriage in the State of New York, and say what you want. I know there's a lot of people that—I'm like, "Yes, we absolutely should have equal rights." That doesn't mean we have to get married, but we should have the right to marry. I mean, that's huge. We would not have had that without the AIDS crisis. We wouldn't have had that without ACT UP pushing those boundaries. It's without a doubt. That's just part of the whole—this process of getting equality was because of all of that. It's not like I wanted the AIDS crisis to happen for that to happen, but we wouldn't be here at this rate without that having happened.

SS: It's interesting that you say that, because my memory—and please disagree with me—is that ACT UP was not about couples; it was about gay male sexual culture. It was about a gay male sexual community.

BF: Absolutely.

SS: So it was kind of antithetical to marriage, in a way.

BF: Well, it was very sex positive. "Don't tell us not to have sex," la, la, la, la, la, la, la. "People need to take care of themselves, but, yes, don't—," that kind

of—and I think that was more of a hangover from the hippies that were like the old guy hippies that were part of that and also those of us that were young at the time that did want to have sex with a zillion people. But I don't think it was anti. I mean, that might have been the policy of that. That kind of liberal hippie, free love kind of thing was under there, but that doesn't mean that's not going to lead to the fact.

I mean, the fact is by having the AIDS crisis, it made Jane Smith see that her brother John Smith is gay, because he's dying. You had that, then you had these people saying, "Look what you're doing. You're saying we're a group that can die and this group can live. Don't you see that's wrong?" And then all the people like Judith Light, who was actually one of the first celebrities. A lot of people don't give her credit for that, but she was really amazing, even though she's kind of B-level. But Elizabeth Taylor and Judith Light were—Judith Light was at the AIDS Quilt before any celebrity was, those bit by bit coming to the aid of their friends that were dying. Rock Hudson, of course. But, yes, I don't think that negated the fact that without ACT UP, there would be no marriage equality right now. It might be ironic, but that's just a fact.

SS: It's ironic. It's ironic that there's only one couple in ACT UP that are still together, are talking about taking vows for life. Isn't that true? Richard and Daniel.

JH: James Wagner and Barry [Hoggard].

SS: Oh, right, James and Barry, yes.

JW: Ron Goldberg and Joe Chiplock

SS: Okay, there's a few, but it's not like—that wasn't the ideal. It's interesting how, without intending it, you can end up pushing something on a trajectory that's not your own trajectory.

BF: Right. I think I wouldn't say they were anti-relationship. I think they were anti any saying that this relationship is better than this. I don't think ACT UP was like, "Oh, you can't be in a relationship," but, "Don't force that on us and don't force—having ten partners in a night, we can't label that wrong." I'm not going to necessarily label that wrong. Tiring, but not wrong. Yes, I certainly have become more—not that I necessarily believe monogamy is the right thing or wrong thing for me, but I definitely think an overabundance of anything can be destructive, and I think back then, certainly for myself—I can't say for everyone in ACT UP, but certainly for myself, having a little bit too much fun definitely, definitely, sometimes at meetings in the kitchen in the back, yes, yes.

SS: Yes, or the stairwell, as we heard two days ago.

BF: Yes, no doubt. Yes. The center was good for stuff like that.

SS: So I only have one question left. Is there anything else that you—

BF: No. I wish I could remember more. Time just... Human beings have really bad memories, actually, unfortunately. I was looking at the photos I took.

SS: Do you want to show us some photos?

BF: Yes, sure.

JH: I'll get them.

SS: Yes, Jim'll get them for you.

BF: Yes, it's not that many, unfortunately, because I actually have a zillion photos, but I only printed very few, and these aren't even all that I printed. I just can't find them.

SS: Well, why don't you look at them and tell us what they bring back to you.

BF: Well, this is kind of—I was a marshal, so it's just a close-up of someone getting handcuffed at a demonstration.

SS: With those plastic handcuffs.

BF: Yes, with the plastic handcuffs. That's actually a better print of that. Just people being dragged away by the cops.

SS: Yes, where is that? It looks like a park?

BF: I think this would probably be in—I think in D.C., like a CDC demo or something like that.

SS: Oh, right, or NIH. Those are riot police.

BF: It might be NIH.

SS: Because they have those hard hats.

BF: This is, like, as far as—it almost looks like he's posing, like one of the scary cops and stuff like that.

SS: Right, and the white shirts were the precinct—what were they, the commanders?

BF: This guy's actually not wearing gloves, but the guy next to him has a glove on, but this guy's not wearing gloves. He just looks scary. Just kind of some of the characters and stuff.

01:00:00

SS: Who is that?

BF: I don't know, just one of the protesters. Just an angry ACT UP guy.

SS: That's Tony.

JH: Yes, Tony Malliaris.

BF: This is again—oh, this was Alan, by the way, Alan Contini.

SS: Okay, let me take a look. You got it?

JW: Yes.

SS: I don't recognize him at all. Do you, Jim?

BF: It's kind of close to the end. He was really, really thin there.

JH: I sort of recognize the face. That's at Columbia.

BF: Yes, he was a student up there in playwriting.

SS: Send me—oh, what does it mean?

BF: “¡¡¡Se Me Acabo la Paciencia Investigan o Fuera!!!” I don't know.

Even though I live in Jackson Heights, I don't speak Spanish. I should learn, though.

SS: What demo was that?

BF: I think that might be the NIH too.

JH: Oh, it means, “I've run out of patience. Investigate or get out of here.”

BF: It must be the Parallel Track demonstration.

JH: It's the NIH, yes.

BF: This is, like, a classic boys hanging out.

SS: Okay, this guy, who is that, Brian somebody, right?

JH: I never knew his name.

BF: He was funny.

SS: He was a writer, and these other three, I don't know them, here.

Brian Kate — no. I forget. I think it began with a "K."

BF: I've got the worst memory. I mean, how bad is this?

JH: Is he from San Francisco?

SS: Maybe originally.

BF: Yes, it's just hanging out. That was just really fun, just lying around with the boys waiting for the demonstration to get started again. It was really good. Yes, and I have a whole mess more, dozens of rolls, I just didn't print most of them up. So the stuff, but I also have, I think, more prints, I just don't know where they're at.

SS: All right. So my last question is, just looking back, what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

BF: In my opinion, ACT UP's greatest achievement was just giving us a voice. We were completely just victims before, and suddenly we weren't just victims. We were participating in trying to find a cure, trying to find a change, and certainly moving the issue of discrimination. I know that wasn't—well, it was the point, but the goal was to get a cure, to find a cure, to fight discrimination, to change the government, to make the government start doing something about HIV and AIDS, and we certainly did, we did that. We gave people with AIDS a voice, and before, we were just victims.

I think our greatest failure of all, if you can call it a failure, because I think it's what happens to every liberal group, is we eat ourselves up. We tear ourselves apart, because we all want to respect the individual voice, and we want to respect it so much

that we have too many individual voices and we— We just disappear or just get so exhausted that we have to just walk away from it.

Also, wait, one more thing, and it's kind of the Larry Kramer, and I think we could have done more by saying we need to take more personal responsibility about not passing the disease on to anyone else, that we were all at a certain point so much about pointing the finger, forgetting that it's, we have to be responsible, too, and not just as to not let ourselves be infected, but also not to infect each other, and also to demand that we be more careful, yes, with our fellow gay and lesbian citizens.

SS: Okay. Thank you.

BF: You're welcome.