

# **A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Jeffrey Fennelly**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Jeffrey Fennelly  
January 4, 2010

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Hello.**

JEFFREY FENNELLY: Hi.

**SS: So to start, just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

JF: Okay. My name's Jeffrey Fennelly. It is the fourth of January, 2010, and we're in my apartment at 304 West Tenth Street.

**SS: Which, can we just say, is next to historic Weehawkin Street.**

JF: Please. Shout it to the masses. Shout it from the rooftops.

**SS: Is there still any gay life going on around here?**

JF: Well, the bar down the street, the bar that used to be the – It's been through a number of incarnations, and I always forget. It had some baseball theme. I think it was the Dugout, which is sort of my reference point, you know that bar that you hit when you're on your way to the piers. Changed hands twice, and now I think it's in kind of kinder hands, because I wouldn't even go in there to use the bathroom because they were so hostile to their workers, the original owners. But other than that, the only real gay life is the couples that walk their dogs and the kids that every now and again I'll send up to Covenant House, being a social worker. There's even less of that, so there's really not a lot. On this block, no, it's been really gentrified.

**SS: Sad.**

JF: That's what happens. I said to somebody, Chelsea 1000 or 11 or 10011 is the gayest zipcode in town, and it's not anymore. It's like the gays go in, they

fix it up, and then the rich people move in, kind of like the mayor of Castro Street.

**SS: So where were you born?**

JF: I was born in Montclair, New Jersey, technically Glen Ridge, same hospital as my mom, in 1964. I didn't say how old I am. I'm forty-five. April 3, 1964.

**SS: You're second-generation Montclair.**

JF: Yes. Well, actually my mom is from Nutley, and I grew up in Madison, so it was continents from the city in a lot of ways. I had a loving family, but definitely it felt like a pre-Stonewall upbringing, and I had to kind of get away from everybody. I went to school at Dartmouth, and then I think I was on a plane a day and a half after I graduated, to go out to San Francisco and teach, and I was a schoolteacher for a while.

**SS: I've been trying to explain to young ones about what it was like when we were kids, and I was telling them no one ever brought up the word "homosexuality."**

JF: No. No.

**SS: Do you remember when you first heard it?**

JF: Well, actually, it's funny, because in my family, I'm the youngest of four, and one of the reasons I was so sort of tormented by it, I think, I'm a psychotherapist, so I kind of get it on different levels, but my dad is a doctor and he's a pretty liberal guy, he's got a real big heart, and he had these two gay patients that he would refer to all the time. But they were sort of his token patients, so it was other.

What I remember was knowing there was something different about me and knowing it was really bad. So the reason I was tortured was because I was conscious

both of the orientation, the feelings, and of how not okay it was. My mother has a brother who did these paintings, and he'll remain unnamed because he didn't sign any releases, but he's gay, and it was never explicitly acknowledged. Once it was. My sister asked once, and my mother covered it up. But I attribute that just to their upbringing.

Quentin Crisp said that gay and lesbian kids are the only kids who are born orphans, because they're not raised by people, which is why exposure is so important, which is why Harvey Milk is a hero, because he put the charge around coming out, and why I think Larry is such a hero, and Vito, and everybody who was in the streets with us back then, which is why I think ACT UP in a lot of ways was the second Stonewall, even though it was being driven by obviously different energies and needs. So that was pretty rough, I remember.

Tape I  
00:05:00

**SS: Do you think that your uncle figured out that you were gay?**

JF: I don't know, because my uncle – God bless my uncle, he was – I don't know. I was really good at hiding it, really good. They created a category for me in high school, "Most Typical Senior." I guess it just means a guy would could pass the best, or get by. My uncle also created a life for himself that it didn't really protect him, but protected his mother and his family. I did a research project on what it was like to be gay before Stonewall, and as I'm sure you know better than I do, a lot of those queer people had to really leave home once they found out what they were, and create entirely different worlds for themselves. So my uncle, there was a wall that I think was partially personality and partially just the culture of the family and the culture in general.

My mother, I think, figured it out before, because she's the one I told. I actually came out to my mom before I even had a relationship of any sort, and that's

something to be picked apart in another context. But when I told her, I had sort of realized that I couldn't change, and I had gone to Dartmouth thinking – I could have gone to these other schools, but I'd gone to Dartmouth because my brother went there and I saw it as a place that you could become a man. It was really like Dark Ages, the way my thinking was.

**SS: Was it all male still?**

JF: It wasn't, no. It was 1982 when I entered Dartmouth. What's ironic is that— you talk about being pushed back into the closet—my brother told me before he graduated, he graduated the year I got there, that Laura Ingraham, who is the devil, one of the minor devils of our time, broke into the Gay Student Alliance—they called it GSA back then—Office, and published the confidential list that spring in the *Dartmouth Review*. So it might as well have been all male, but it was definitely very conservative.

There were four or five people who were out. There was one woman and then there were these three guys who I knew, who I think it was kind of like they were my straw from under the water, really, in a lot of ways. I also ended up having a very beautiful relationship that was on the down low my junior year, but sophomore fall is when the shovel hit me in the head and I couldn't avoid it anymore. It was the year that Gerry Studds was outed, and I was painting my parents' house, because we all had to do service to the family, because my parents struggled to make good by us and so there was always one summer we had to go home and do something for the family. It was a bad thing for me, because I had had the opportunity to go up to Cape Cod. I assumed I was going to be near Provincetown, but I wasn't ready yet. I just remember being on the roof or on the ladder really high up, and I heard this. I had actually wanted to be a senator

some day. I was idealistic. Bobby Kennedy was my hero. I wanted Teddy to beat Carter, blah, blah, blah. And when I heard this, I almost jumped off the ladder. Seriously, the thought, I remember the thought crossing my mind, like I'll never be what I want because you can't be gay, and I'm pretty sure I can't fight this.

Then I went back to school and I was on my own for the first time, because Dartmouth really coddles you. They want to keep their freshmen distracted from the lack of activity up there, lack of culture. There's a lot of culture. They give you a lot to do. And I joined a frat because everybody in my frat was my friend, and they were all kind of cute, and they were stocking the pond. The frat wanted smarter, cuter guys to catch girls. So there were all these distractions.

Then when I got back there and I was an undergraduate advisor and I was in a single, one night I went out and I – back then when I smoked weed—I don't smoke weed anymore—I got stoned, and I guess there was something, it was really strong or there was something in it, and I ended up going home and hearing voices, and I heard my best friend down the hall say, "If my best friend were gay, I'd want him to tell me." And all this Catholic guilt came up, and I wanted to tell him, and thank god I didn't, because I think I would have – I just wasn't ready to deal with it myself.

So getting out of Dartmouth was a big deal. I remember, actually, when I first heard about AIDS. I had come home. Was it '83 when it made the papers for the first time, or was it '81? I don't even remember. It was '83, I think, '81. All right. Well, I learned about it '83, and my dad said something. It's so funny, people say certain things and you remember them because they cut, and he said, "I suspected something like that would happen because of the things they do." So there was a further sort of like

Tape I  
00:10:00

“they” and “don’t you dare.” I think I was developing this — I was both dying to get out of school and at the same time terrified because of what I knew was out there, I’d heard was out there.

**SS: Did you and your boyfriend talk about AIDS?**

JF: No, never, because, we were so each other’s first, and it was so kind of innocent, and we never did anything like that, we never did anything unsafe, because we didn’t even know that yet. I think he had wanted to because he had been with girls, so he kind of knew you put it in down there, you know? *{LAUGHS}* And for me it was like one day — We were in Mexico, I was on a trip with him, and he tried to have intercourse with me, and I was like, “Get the fuck out of here. What are you doing?” So it wasn’t even a question. But I remember actually when we were sort of breaking up, it was really rough. We were sort of breaking up and back together and breaking up for nine months. We had all these friends that were his friends. It was really rough because it was all on the DL, and he had a pretty high profile on campus.

I came down to do some research for my pre-practicum in education, because I was minoring in education, and I came to New York City. It was always my fantasy to live in New York. After I met him, I thought there must be more guys out there, and I couldn’t wait to get out of the starting gate. And I remember we had this conversation. We had talked about a lot of stuff, about how we felt about each other and how I wanted to be free and I wanted to experience sex and freedom and love and blah, blah, blah, and he’d been sort of through it with women and why was he settling for me. So I almost asked him permission if I could go have fun when I was in New York.

That's when I had my first sort of anonymous encounter, and, again, something that was burned in my head. I think it was 1984. I'm not sure it was '84, '85, winter. It was '85. I came down and I was staying with my brother, and I was supposed to meet my brother to see a movie. I remember I hated being in the movie theater because they still had smoking in the movies. I was picking up some wine for – I hope my brother doesn't watch this, because he never knew. Actually, I hope he does. I was picking up some wine for my brother. They lived on the Upper West Side with his girlfriend at the time, his fiancée. I saw this guy go by, and he was like a model. He was beautiful. I saw him and I couldn't believe that he looked at me. It was like getting – I always wanted a puppy when I was a kid, and my mother was allergic to them. It was like getting that puppy. It was getting the wish of my lifetime, and I think that's something that drives a lot of repressed gay kids when they come out and they have these lousy relationships, because they're always looking for this ideal.

So he walks by and I looked at him. I quick – I don't know what I grab, what wine I grabbed, but I got any old wine and I got in – I think I was in my car, it was an old Volvo, and I started circling. He was walking south towards – There's an AIDS piece of this, by the way. He was walking south towards the Museum of Natural History, and I started circling the blocks and following him. I cut him off at 79<sup>th</sup>, I guess it is, where the Natural History Museum, 81<sup>st</sup>, wherever that northernmost street is. He was walking into the grassy part back then. It was bigger and sort of darker back then. It wasn't the Rose Center yet. It was kind of more set back. He was walking into the grass, and I just couldn't let him go. So I was like, "Excuse me," and he came over to the car.

He was like, "What do you want?"

I said, “Um, um, the time?” I mean, it was just like, “Just get in the car. Why do I have to tell you what I want?” But he was just as nervous as I was. He was older. He was probably twenty-five, twenty-six, and I was nineteen, twenty. Got in my car, and I just looked at him and I go, “What do we do?” I didn’t know what to say. Then I said to him, “Do you have AIDS?”

He said, “I don’t know. Do you?”

Tape I  
00:15:00

And I said, “Well, of course not,” which, I mean, it’s almost scary for me to think that I uttered those words in my lifetime or that that conversation happened, but that’s how sheltered I was from it.

So we had this – It was kind of a really beautiful moment of bonding where we both kind of acknowledged how uncertain things were and how volatile things were and how he didn’t know and I didn’t know and he’d just gotten the test. I said to him, “You know, honestly—.” And I kind of knew after I said, “Of course not,” how stupid and how insensitive and how kind of zany that was. I realized I was in the city. Here I was. This is what it was going to be like. I said, “I’m really sorry. I don’t think I have the language for—.” I don’t think my language was as sophisticated as “We can’t really know, but—,” or, “I can’t promise you, but—.” But I was like, “No, you know, I’ve had sex with one guy, and he’s only slept with women,” and blah, blah, blah, blah.

So anyway, we got together later. I couldn’t get out of the movie fast enough, and I called him.

**SS: He gave you his phone number?**

JF: He gave me his phone number. He was staying with his aunt, and I called him and we met at some bar under the Queensboro or 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. It was

really weird, like it was really narrow. It was a gay bar. I remember he was a hand model. He had been in the military, in the navy. He was gorgeous. I mean, he was just — My heart, just thinking about it today, my heart just goes through my chest thinking about that moment. I looked at his hands, and I couldn't believe how beautiful he was, and he told me he was a hand model. He was kind of confused. He had just broken up with his boyfriend, and they had both been tested, and it was a scary, scary time.

We went for this walk on the bridge, and I remember we went under the bridge, and there were all these pilings. There were mice and rats scurrying over our feet. It was kind of like it was very old, old-school New York. And I just wanted to do everything with him. I want to rip his clothes off and go down on him and everything, and we couldn't because we were so scared. We didn't know what was okay and what wasn't. I remember our lips brushed each other. We didn't even kiss; our lips brushed.

I went home that night. I didn't sleep, and my sister came in. My sister is six years older. She's the oldest. I'm the youngest of four. She said, "You don't look well."

I said, "I'm fine."

She said, "Well, we're having dinner, Sunday dinner with Mom-Mom."  
She said, "What's wrong? You're a ghost."

So I told her what had happened, and I was out to her at the time. I had come out to her and my dad and mom. This is in response to your question earlier about the word "homosexual." She had a friend in high school—my sister was in drama and singing—and he was clearly gay, although we never talked about it. He died from AIDS and he died in '85 in my hometown. His name was Charles Metzger. He was the first

person that we all lost. She said, “Do you think if you could get it from tears or saliva that I would have it?” She saved my life in that moment. She gave me an extra day to get back to school.

I got back to Dartmouth, and that night *An Early Frost* aired, and I had this bisexual friend, woman friend, who was my only confidante. I told her what had happened, and I just needed somebody to tell me, “You’ll be okay.” And she said, “Well, I don’t know what to tell you,” and she got really cold, and she said, “Why don’t you watch that Aidan Quinn movie.” I almost said Aiden Shaw. And I watched it and it just terrified me. That was my first taste of not knowing and not wanting to know.

I did want to say one other thing about the word “homosexual.” I remember I was so scared and so closeted, and I was Catholic, so I would go to church and I’d get excited by the crucifixion, which I hear happens to women too. It was really scary because you couldn’t act on it, but what was acting on it? Something grew down there, so was that acting on it?

I just remember my brothers, they were tough guys and sports were kind of a big deal in our family, within the family at least. I remember watching a PBS documentary, I don’t know what the hell it was on, and I was laying on the floor because there was never enough furniture for me or I wasn’t comfortable sitting in a chair. Everybody else would sit on the couches or the armchairs. I was about twelve years old, and I was looking up at the TV and the word “homosexual” was uttered, and I looked up, and I broke into this hot sweat. “Oh, my god, they know.”

Tape I  
00:20:00

I had a therapist once who said, “You were kind of like Anne Frank. You were kind of like hiding all the time.” So that’s for the kids to understand, the kids nowadays.

**SS: Do you think that you didn’t go into politics because you were gay? Do you think you really did not take the life path that you wanted?**

JF: I didn’t do a lot of things because I was gay and because of HIV/AIDS. I have to be honest. I don’t like to play the victim, but I really do believe that, yeah, I think I didn’t go into a lot of things, and I think politics was probably one of them.

I remember when I was a teacher in San Francisco, and my boyfriend at the time was Harry Britt’s campaign manager, and Harry Britt was Harvey Milk’s replacement. So I knew all those people. I knew Dick Pabich. I knew of them. I was a kid. He was twenty-nine, thirty. And I remember we were having dinner with Michael Frank. I think he worked for Harry or he worked for somebody in the city government, and I was twenty-one years old, teaching seventh grade in this private school, really fine private school in San Francisco, and we were eating steak, I remember. *{LAUGHS}* It was like 1986, and he took me to task for not being out. I remember just thinking, part of me was like, “Yeah, he’s right,” but then there was this huge — I don’t think I’m over it yet. There’s this fear of what it can do to you, and it’s corrosive.

My big brother and I are very similar. My big brother does a lot of really incredible international work. He’s a doctor. He does a lot of AIDS work internationally. He’s a research doctor and pediatrician. I feel like I’d be flying around the world doing bigger stuff, probably, if I didn’t get so — What I was going to get into

later was that my experience, my personal experience with ACT UP was very tortured. It was very conflicted. I wasn't conflicted. I was a thousand percent for the cause, but my experience when I got home on Monday nights and I turned the lights off was terror. So there's the being gay thing, and then there's the "You're going to die" thing, which was a huge part of my – I'm negative. I think only one other person, whose name I won't mention, because I don't know if he's out, but he was on the swim team, he was one of the hotties, and we had a little bang on the side. But I think, aside from him, I deserve the title "Cellophane Pete," because I was so terrified of even sucking, and just I did everything you could, but then when you got into gray areas, I was terrified. I don't know. I still don't know why, but I wasn't. I was really —.

My first boyfriend, actually, my first sort of out-of-the-closet boyfriend, the one I mentioned who worked for Harry – I moved to San Francisco. That was going to be the shining city on the hill. I'd never been there. My boyfriend from college was from there, and he came from the gentry, and I thought it was just going to be like New York but with more sun. And it was in so many ways.

Actually, I want to back up a little bit, because the night I left, very significant. My mom said, "Go say goodbye to your Aunt Ann." She was a friend of the family. "And go say goodbye to Barbara," all these friends from town who didn't really know me. Both of those women had just watched the *60 Minutes* episode on AIDS, 1986, June, May-June. I remember both of them said to me, "It's a good thing you're not queer, because it's a seething cauldron of death out there."

**SS: They used the words "seething cauldron of death"? My god.**

**[laughs]**

JF: Aunt Ann, may she rest in peace — I don't really mean that, and my family will understand. She quoted them on *60 Minutes* as saying "seething cauldron" or "cauldron of death." I'm sure that somebody used that word, somebody who was being interviewed. I don't think Lesley Stahl used it. I remember her saying, "It's a good thing you're not queer." And the other one said, "It's a seething cauldron out there of death." I got home and it was another one of those, my parents said, "What's wrong with you?" We were very close in my family, a little too close. Gosh, I couldn't tell them, and then I had to, and I remember I like started sobbing. And my poor parents, I said, "I just want to have sex with men". And they were so cool. They were so present. They just said —

Tape I  
00:25:00 Well, they didn't know what to say. They didn't know what to say, and my father could have known what to say, but it wasn't his area of expertise or whatever. He's a hundred percent forgiving.

So he said, "Call your brother." So I call my brother, who had never not had sex, who had never not. He was the prince and he was the Don Juan, the Casanova.

He always had a girlfriend, and he was with this woman who was like this sexpot, voluptuous, and she was thirty-three when she met him, and he was twenty-one or twenty-two, and they'd been together at that point for five years, and they were doing it, as far as I knew, everywhere they could find a soft surface. And I had never, once,

maybe, if you want to call it that. So he said, "Call your brother."

Called him. Again, the first time he's going to see this if he ever happens upon the queer archives. I'm sitting there. I'm like talking to this guy. I don't even know when I told him I was gay, and I'm saying to him, "I'm freaking out. I'm moving

to San Francisco tomorrow, and I don't know how to protect myself. I don't know how to stay alive." I used some really sort of like indelicate phrase.

And his response was, instead of, "Don't do this, this, this and wear a condom," "Well, it's not all about sex. Life's not all about sex." And, I couldn't have gotten out there quicker, soon enough.

I got out and there and I lived sort of closeted for quite some time because I had to live with my boyfriend from Dartmouth, who's going to put me up in his mom's garage. The day we finished school or the week before we finished school, he said, "No go." That was his last "Fuck you" to me, "You're not going to be able to stay above my mom's garage. You have to find your own living space." So I stayed with these thirteen-year-old kids for two weeks at a time.

Then I made my way into the Castro and I found The Stud and had my little experiences. I ended up with this woman as a roommate who was quite a bit older than I was, thirty-eight at the time, and she insisted I go to a Stop AIDS Project meeting, which were these little groups of men who would host informational coffee chats in their homes, and there were not more than six or seven people at a time, and it was lovely. They were all Armistead Maupin-looking, or at least what he looks like today.

I remember going to the meeting, and here's this gorgeous, gorgeous teacher, fellow teacher. It was summer. His name was Wayne. He was from Cincinnati. He was blond and he was just gorgeous. I, apparently, wasn't his flavor, he told me later on. They had definitely unsafe, possibly unsafe, and safe. Under "possibly unsafe" was water sports. They said, "No question is too stupid." I'm a swimmer and I swim every day of my life, practically. I've swum every day of my life since I was six. I raised my

hand at the end and I said, “This really pisses me off. You mean chlorine doesn’t kill it?” I pointed to water sports, and they laughed. So that was little Stop AIDS Project pet story. I remember him laughing at me, and I was so embarrassed. So, anyway, I really learned a lot.

I want to turn it [the phone] off so it doesn’t happen again.

**SS: Your roommate was a straight woman?**

JF: My roommate was a bisexual woman, and she was in love with me, and we’re not talking right now. It’s been fifteen years or whatever. She’s very intense, and she was in love with me. She’d watch me have sex through like those little breezeway things they have in the Victorians, those air vents. They have them in some apartments in New York. She told me, “I watch you at night.” Whatever. I thought, okay, it’s fine.

Once I was in a bar when I was in graduate school, and I was talking to this woman up at Columbia, and I said, “I love California, but it lacks a certain—.”

She said, “Super ego?”

And it does. It lacks a super ego, which is why I’m kind of glad I came to New York, because there’s more order here.

So, yes, she was straight, but she was bisexual. She was hip and she was very loving. She cared about my life, and she sent me to this meeting, and it was great. It was weird, because I would meet guys who were just as freaked out about HIV/AIDS as I was. And the other thing about being in San Francisco at that time was, it was all around you. There were people walking around. It was as if the blacks in Harlem got something, or the Jews in the Upper West Side or in Williamsburg. Because all of San

Francisco, it was so small and it was so gay, at least where you would hang out. I guess it happened on Christopher Street. I guess it happened in the West Village to that extent, but New York seemed to me when I got here to be just a little denser, a lot denser, six million or eight million versus six hundred thousand.

So I just remember once I ventured into the queer — South of Market was sort of starting to pick up then and Castro. You saw the raspberries, you saw the KS. If I had a sunspot, I would just be convinced, because I was queer. I'm sure you've heard this billions of times, but it was really, really scary. So I'd meet these guys who were just as freaked about it as I was, and we'd have these one-night stands or whatever. I was really frustrated because it didn't deliver on that level. But what it did do is it delivered friends, and I had a really beautiful small group of friends who were artists and poets, and we would get together and draw and paint once a week. We had these two mentors who had been sort of part of the early Gay Liberation Movement. One of them was Aaron Shurin and David Weissman.

**SS: I know Aaron.**

JF: You know Aaron? I love Aaron. And David. I was just like starry-eyed about them. I was crazy for them, and they sort of took us under their wings and showed us culture. Aaron would always take us to the Jean Cocteau movies, and David introduced me to John Waters, and he actually introduced me literally to John's films, and he introduced me to Vito Russo. I think they had shown — No, there was no film version of the *Celluloid Closet* yet, but I remember meeting him, and I was mesmerized. He's one of my favorite people ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. Who'd I liked to have dinner with? Bobby Kennedy, Vito Russo, Jesus.

**SS: What do you remember about him?**

JF: He could turn a phrase like nobody's business, and he had such a heart. I remember how sick he got, which made me so angry. I remember we stopped at Larry's apartment on Fifth Avenue, and we had a die-in. I don't know if it was when we got to Vito's apartment, Larry's apartment, or what, but I remember looking up and seeing Vito and being like, "No fucking way." That was the first time. That was the first time I just said, "I'm going to hold onto you. You're not going anywhere. We've got to do something." Actually, this is my little—

**SS: Can you hold it so that the camera can come in?**

JF: Sure, absolutely. This is my little audiovisual aid, little show-and-tell. We're sort of jumping ahead, but I'll get to why I came back to New York. But I had missed the March on Washington in '87, so in '88 I came back and I was up visiting a friend in Boston, a friend from high school, and I found out about this action, this whatever it was, protest in D.C. I really don't know, when you're twenty-two years old, you don't think of where you're going to sleep. You just go. And I got on a train and went down to D.C., and I met these beautiful blond guys from Atlanta, and they had these t-shirts that they made, "America Isn't Doing Shit," and they took me to the FDA, or I met them at the FDA or whatever, and that was it. That was it. I just knew. I had a little affair with the prettier one. We slept in a bathtub because the room was so full.

I remember hearing Vito's speech on the balcony. This group of gorgeous men and women, one smarter than the other, had stormed the Food and Drug Administration Building on a Sunday, broken in, stormed it, and got what they wanted. They got talked to. It was the first time I'd ever seen anything of the sort.

Vito's speech, I wish I had a copy of it. I'm sure I could find it now. But Richard Goldstein – Not Richard Goldstein. I remember Richard Goldstein used to do the intro to the queer version of *The Voice*. What do you call it? We'll call it the version right now, issue of *The Voice*. Vito's followed his, and I was so grateful. Or I think they put Vito's first that year. It was '89 or '88, '89. I don't know, '88, I believe it was. It's on here. October 24, 1988. Yes.

Tape I  
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At his memorial service, Larry said, and I paraphrase, "The heart of the movement is dead. Now you just have the angry head," and he's talking about when somebody's talking about Vito. Vito was the heart. He was the heart, the love, and he could be angry and at the same time make you laugh. I loved him. I don't think I spoke more than ten sentences to him in his life. And he was always writing letters. I remember Larry talked about that. I remember Vito talked about it, and Vito would just lecture us, "Keep writing those letters. I write ten of them a day if I have to," to congressmen or whatever. So he really walked his walk. There are thousands of heroes, thousands of fallen heroes, but there was just something about him. I write, so I appreciate a good turn of phrase. Yeah, yeah, it's pretty amazing.

So my boyfriend in San Francisco, fell in love with him, was all ready for the picket fence and wanted to have his baby or him have mine or whatever, and suddenly things got a little bit awkward and quiet. And it was winter. We'd been together for about two months, long enough for me to fall in love. Back then, two months is like three years in straight years. It's even longer when you're that young. He was older, just a great guy. Tom Waits was his inspiration, so he was kind of like that.

We went out for pizza, and it was that expensive pizza that they serve with a fork and knife, but it's less pizza than you've ever eaten and they charge twice as much. It was on Church Street, and it was one of those lonely, pathetic San Francisco nights. I mean it was as if a bomb had dropped in that city at the time. So when you're meeting somebody, it was that much more intense, because it was like, oh, he's my island. And we went out and we went for a walk, and I actually insisted. There was kind of some drama. I slapped a twenty on the table and said, "We're not going to finish this dinner until you tell me what's going on." So we went for a walk and it was raining. We ended up at the Castro, and we were in the alley behind the Castro Theater, and umbrellas. He looked at me and he said, "You know that Narcotics Anonymous meeting I had just gone to? It wasn't an NA meeting." And I knew it was coming. He said, "It was a meeting for men who have been infected with HIV."

I remember saying I was really angry at him for having gone away. He'd emotionally gone away, and I said to him, "I love you. If this doesn't work out, it's not because of that." I said everything I was supposed to say in that moment, through tears and snot and just sobs and shaking.

Then we got home, and this friend of mine, he was sort of an ex-boyfriend—actually he was the one guy I did cheat on my boyfriend at Dartmouth with—was staying with me. He wanted my job. He came to San Francisco not for my job, but to work in the school. It was a really good school. He didn't know what to do with me because I came in and I was still sobbing.

Chris and I went to sleep. The only thing was, again, Chris didn't have the language for it, because the way Chris had found out, he had gone in for some temporary

arthritic paralysis in his leg. It had nothing to do with HIV. They came in and they said, “You’re going to get better. You’re going to be able to walk again, but you have HIV,” and they walked out.

I was sort of going over. You go over what do we do, what do we do, what do we do, because back then it was just AZT, and I didn’t want to know whether or not I was infected. I remember there was this moment when I got back from my doctor’s, when HMOs kicked in, so you had to go to whatever doctor you were assigned, and he said to me about HIV, his only advice was, “Find somebody who’s negative and stay with them.” I remember I got on my soapbox about that so many times after that, that it’s about having our freedom and being protected.

I remember years later Mark Schoofs was being interviewed on *Brian Lehrer*, and they had this camp. They had it divided into people who don’t care about their health and so they’ll sleep with guys who are HIV, and people who do. I called in and I said to them, “You know, we have to wait till we’re twenty fucking years old before we can come out and have a normal romance. Every other kid gets to start playing when they’re twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. Then when we come out, we’ve got to find our way to a ghetto so we can be exposed to the ten percent that are like us. Then of that, you’re going to tell me that I have to screen everybody and find out whether or not they’re positive?” Because I really did believe, and still do, that it doesn’t really matter, even though there’s a huge part of me that remains terrified. I think that comes from a family of healthcare practitioners and everything.

Tape I  
00:40:00

Brian Lehrer said to me—and I want to say it to a camera, I’m still angry—“Oh, well, I guess it’s a death wish. We’ve got a death wish camp over here,” or

something like that. I was just like, “No.” It was dead and he couldn’t hear me, and I was like, “No!” I didn’t really know what Mark Schoofs’ angle was on it, because I’ve enormous respect for Mark, and he’s another one of my heroes. I had a lot of heroes, especially from the Movement. I actually met Mark at the Gay Games in ’86 in San Francisco.

**SS: Yes, he’s one of us.**

JF: Yes.

**SS: So you and Chris were plunged into the AIDS world of San Francisco.**

JF: Yes.

**SS: So what happened?**

JF: Well, what happened was he was too raw about it himself and he couldn’t deal with it yet. So I needed taking care of on a personal level, and it was selfish. There’s a reason I was with an older guy, whatever, and, well, he was sexy. That’s why I was with him. So eventually I did something. I slept with his best friend and it was over, but what I ended up doing was, I got involved in ACT UP. Well, I didn’t get involved in ACT UP San Francisco. I found it repellant. I found it ineffective.

I don’t know if I had gone to an ACT UP – I think I had gone to an ACT UP San Francisco meeting before I discovered ACT UP New York. But I had to do something. I was always chomping at the bit to become active. I was active in the anti-apartheid movement in college, but this was like, this was it. If I couldn’t save him, I was going to save us, sort of what drove me. Also I was just angry. I was just angry and scared. That was pretty much it. Forget the part about saving us. It’s like I was angry

and I was scared. So when I found this, I had stopped teaching for a year, and I was going to become a filmmaker, and that didn't happen, although I did make a movie. I came back, and I knew in October, I knew at the end of October I was going to move to New York, and I made friends with a bunch of people in ACT UP.

**SS: What happened to Chris?**

JF: Chris is still alive. Here's what happened to Chris. Chris had a lot of integrity, and he did what a lot of people did, which was "I'm going to live my dream." He moved to Europe, went in the winter. I remember going over, it was like one last — I tried to get him to get back together with me a number of times. You can ask. I'm sure that half the people you've interviewed said I was a mess in my twenties, and he could vouch for it. "You're a handful," this and that. He was leaving for Europe and he said, "I want to go in the winter when it's normal, when people are living normally there."

Long story short, he met a guy in Paris, fell in love with him. The guy was a publisher and editor. I went to visit them like '98, '99. No, '97. I forget the guy's name, but he ended up getting sick and dying. So that was rough, and Chris, this was the love of his life. He came back and reconnected with his best friend Lee, who runs a travel store, travel bookstore, similar to Idlewild on Market Street.

**SS: On Market Street.**

JF: Yes, it's great. Actually, I think it's the predecessor to Idlewild. They're very good friends, and, as far as I know, he's still living in San Francisco. I Google him now and again. When I went to see *Milk*, I was dying to talk to him. Whenever I see Nancy Pelosi on *Charlie Rose*, aside from wanting to grab her head and make her stop shaking and make her blink, I want to call him and say, "If only you'd

worked a little harder to get Harry elected.” I do miss him. I do want to connect to him. He’s still with us. I Googled him a little while ago, and I saw a tweet from him on Twitter, which was very funny, because it was classic Chris. “The world’s greatest misanthrope is trying to connect with more people through Twitter,” or whatever he’d written.

I did lose my best friend in San Francisco. The roommate referral service was this thing where you looked through a loose-leaf notebook to find roommates, and that’s how I found Hester. I met this young gay couple, they were my age, and they had a one-bedroom and they wanted a third. They just looked for sex. So Johnny broke up with Jason, Johnny and I became friends. Chris came out. Chris found out he was HIV-positive first, and then, like dominoes, all these friends found out, and they were friends who’d been out for longer. Johnny was sleeping with his music teacher in high school in Dayton, Ohio, so who knows. We were a month apart. We were both born in ’64. He was born March 3, and I was born April 3. Aaron Shurin took care of him. Aaron nursed him. It was after the earthquake that he got really sick.

Tape II  
00:05:00

My friend Tommy Moscatello and I both left. I moved here and got involved in ACT UP and *Outweek*, and went to visit Johnny once. He was not well. He had — Oh, gosh, I forget the infection. It was the stomach, the thing you got the Hickman catheter for.

**SS: CMV?**

JF: It might have been CMV. No, it wasn’t, because that one made you blind. This made you waste. I remember him telling me.

**SS: MAI.**

JF: MAI. I was going to say M, Mac or something, MAI. Yes. Because I remember Johnny was joking about this porn star Jake, that he had gone to some orgy and he said, “Jake gave it to me. I ate Jake, and Jake gave it to me.”

Aaron was Johnny’s nurse. Actually, Aaron wrote a poem in *AIDS Dream*, a poem about Johnny, about us, so it was pretty incredible. I’ve been in touch with Johnny’s mother. I’ve never met her, but I’ve written her a note on his birthday and Christmas and sometimes on Easter every year since he died. He was a painter and poet.

**SS: Before we get into the ACT UP New York, I have to ask you something that we’ve been trying to track down since we started this eight years ago. Who was on the swim team?**

JF: Oh, okay. The swim team was funny. I was sort of an honorary member because I actually was a swimmer. The swim team was the hot guys, I guess, but I was late, and I wasn’t quite sure if I was on it, because they were kind of mean too. They weren’t very nice. Matt, I forget his last name, Mattie, he worked with Gus Van Sant, he did a lot of movies. Matt Ebert, great guy. John — Scientist, researcher. These are like the three top ones, Adam Smith, Matt Ebert, and John. I forget John’s name, but John – I mean, this guy’s brilliant, make your head spin, John. Then there were other people that were sort of honorary members.

It was so funny. It was so high school. ACT UP was so high school is some ways, I mean the cliques. I couldn’t get into an affinity group because I came too late. My best friend was in Maria Maggenti’s affinity group.

**SS: Who was your best friend?**

JF: David Gips, at the time. You interviewed him?

**SS: Not yet.**

JF: It wasn't even a question, like, "Love to have you, but can't."

**SS: So what year did you come to ACT UP?**

JF: '89. '88 for this, and I came back a couple times to visit. And Mikey Barr and Howard Pope took care of me. They actually got me my apartment in New York. But my touchdown was May of '89.

**SS: Where did you enter in ACT UP? What did you work on?**

JF: Well, I started the Youth Brigade, which turned into YELL, which was the condom distribution thing. What's funny about that is that there was an affinity group that was doing zaps, where they would go to high schools or street corners and hand out condoms to kids.

**SS: Do you remember which affinity group?**

JF: I don't, because nobody does, and everybody says, "No, this was your brainchild." I was like, "But, but, but, okay. I'll take the glory." But there was something — I remember Michelangelo Signorile's ex-boyfriend Gregg. Do you remember Gregg?

**SS: Bordowitz.**

JF: Bordowitz. I vaguely remember him having something to do with it, because Michelangelo's funny. I ended up living on Essex Street. Michelangelo was my next-door neighbor, and Jay Blotcher was my downstairs neighbor. It was like the ACT UP apartments. And Adam Smith got an apartment from the same old Orthodox — She was the first woman in the Orthodox community to sell real estate, Helen Miller.

So what I did was, I got involved in *Outweek*, because I was teaching night school, didn't get back into teaching full-time yet, and I got involved in *Outweek*, and Joe D'Andrea hired me, not because I was a good copy editor, but because he thought I was cute, he told me later on. Then he trained me in desktop publishing, and he said, "Your proofreading was shit."

We worked in this tiny office over near the armory at 26<sup>th</sup> and Lex with Kendall [Morrison] and Gabriel [Rotello] and Andrew Miller and Michelangelo Signorile. I always got so angry at Michael because his grammar was so bad, and like, "Why is he so famous?" But he was amazing, too. It was incredible. *Outweek* was incredible.

I remember it was Monday, Monday day. I was reading the *Times*. I think we had done an overnight, because we did a lot of overnights to put the paper together, and I saw on the front page of the *Times*, it was below the fold, that the only demographic in which the incidence of HIV infection was increasing or in which it was increasing at the highest rate was teens. So I called ACT UP and I said, "This is appalling. This shouldn't be happening."

Tape II  
00:10:00

**SS: What do you mean you called ACT UP?**

JF: I called the ACT UP hotline and somebody answered. They were over on Eighth Avenue in the big old where the Chelsea Market is now. There was a hotline.

**SS: Oh, the workspace.**

JF: Yes, the workspace, ACT UP workspace. Thank you. They put me in touch with a guy named Eric. I forget his last name. He was a teacher also. He had wanted to do this interview together, but that's the only time we sort of overlapped. So

we got together a couple minutes before the meeting and we stood up and we proposed that we start zapping schools and that at the same time we pressure Hernandez or Fernandez, what was his name, Joseph Fernandez, who's an incredible guy and got fired for this, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and all that stuff, the Rainbow curriculum.

Two things stood out. The first thing was that I became hated by the treatment people, by the cure people, because it was a diversion of our energies, according to them.

**SS: Can you tell me specifically who said what and how you came to that feeling?**

JF: Okay. I remember Bill. Bill with the glasses.

**SS: Bahlman?**

JF: No. Tall, dark hair, real committed to the cause. Bill.

**SS: Dobbs?**

JF: Bill Dobbs, I believe. Tall, skinny-ish?

**SS: Lots of hair?**

JF: Yes. We got up, we got our applause. I'd never spoken before or after that, since then. He argued that "This is not what we were about. We're not about education. That's GMHC or that's whomever, but we're not about that."

I was like, "But it will save lives in the long run. It's preventive."

"We're not about that. We're about treatment. We're about a cure. We're about saving lives through a cure."

I can be pretty righteous, but part of me deferred to that, which is why I was glad that Eric joined me and that we did have sort of a group. What was interesting

was, it wasn't so much the energies of ACT UP that ended up congealing around this issue, but it was there were these kids, literally high school kids from New Jersey, came in and started joining us in our zaps, and so it was really just Eric—

**SS: What's Eric's last name?**

JF: Forget his last name. I'll find out for you. It's a family thing. My dad has it too, forgetting names.

**SS: So what was your exact proposal on the floor?**

JF: Our proposal was that we need to get condoms into the schools.

**SS: And this was because what was happening?**

JF: Because the incidence of HIV infection, new HIV infection, was spiking among teens.

**SS: But what was keeping condoms out of the schools?**

JF: They weren't allowed in schools.

**SS: Why?**

JF: It was illegal, I guess, or it had never proposed. Maybe it was the Board of Ed back then, Irene Impellizzeri and all these people were very – there was this huge Catholic contingent from Queens and Staten Island. No offense to Queens and Staten Island or Catholics, except for Giuliani, a lot of offense to him. But they were gunning for Fernandez, and so either they didn't exist and/or they weren't going to let us in. They weren't going to let the condoms in.

**SS: So what was your action?**

JF: Our action was funny. That's the other thing that stood out. We were going to go with safe-sex literature and condoms to a high school and hand it out with

signs, call media attention and demand that Fernandez allow condoms to be distributed by healthcare workers in the schools, that they be readily available to New York City middle school and high school kids. So we really screwed up the first day.

**SS: What happened?**

JF: Learning curve was so steep. I knew Quark Express, I had to learn all that bullshit, desktop publishing stuff. It's just that I had wanted to be a writer that I learned this stuff, so I knew how to put a pamphlet together, but they were like, "No, no, no, we'll just go to GMHC." So we showed up. They chose a high school in Morningside Heights.

**SS: Who's "they"?**

JF: My colleagues, Eric and somebody else. I didn't choose the high school.

**SS: Your group.**

JF: Somebody else in my group had chosen a high school in Morningside Heights, a hundred percent African American, give or take, uniforms, and we showed up with GMHC safe-sex pamphlets the next morning at seven, seven-thirty in the morning.

Tape II  
00:15:00

There was Eric, a few other people from ACT UP who had joined us. There were only about five or ten of us. I mean, there were pictures of — It was anal sex, it was gay, gay, gay, gay, gay, gay, gay, gay. It wasn't targeted toward these kids.

So the next day we showed up at the same place, and their parents, the kids' parents met us, and they said, "Get the hell out of here. Who do you think you are?" It was a big—

**SS: This was 1989?**

JF: Yes, 1989, something like that.

**SS: So there were no pamphlets geared toward high school?**

JF: No. We could have made them, though. We could have taken a moment and done. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, learning curve was nosebleed steep.

**SS: So the parents were more concerned about the kids having gay information than—**

JF: To be fair, I think these kids – We didn't do any research, and we could have done some research to find out which schools perhaps boasted or hosted the more sexually active populations. But we went into Harlem, and I don't know why. I'm an idea man. I ended up actually sort of passing the baton to Eric and the kids who worked with us on this, and they named it YELL, which I couldn't stand, Youth Education Life Line. It just doesn't have a ring to it. But I don't think their kids were that group, necessarily. They were very religious. They were very subdued. But I don't know. I work with kids today. I'm always doing options counseling with the kids I work with, but they're older. It's a different world altogether.

**SS: So how did you feel when your action screwed up?**

JF: I felt contrite and I felt scared for the idea, because I really wanted it to work. I knew that it was a good idea. I think this is why I became a social worker; I also knew that the parents had a point, that we needed to rethink this. I was not scared. I was nervous that it was going to crash and burn. I think I spoke to Jay Blotcher about it and got some advice, and he told me what I needed to hear, and we redid the pamphlets and we made them more kid-friendly. I know we didn't get condoms that were kid-friendly. We just handed out condoms and lube and, I think, dental dams.

**SS: So then, subsequently, where did you go?**

JF: Then we continued. We just kept going to different schools. We went to Lower East Side. I remember we went to Irving Place, a school I ended up teaching at years later.

**SS: Washington Irving?**

JF: It was School of the Future, which I think had been Washington Irving. It's right on the corner, big, big, big school, yes. It was part of Washington Irving, but at the time we went to Washington Irving, I ended up working at it when it was called School of the Future. The teachers were great. I remember the parents met us there because the parents were catching wind of it, I guess, and I don't know how they found out, but there were some parents. And the teachers were like, "Keep it up, keep it up, keep it up."

Then a year or two later, a few years later, I was volunteering as a tutor in a school, in a high school, and this teacher said to me — I don't know, she was just venting about how hard it was to be a parent and a teacher and all these things to these kids, and she said, "You know, when they got the condoms in the schools, that really saved lives." And I just thought, oh, my god, that's beautiful.

So what ended up happening, though, was Sue Simmons met us at Court Street at the Board of Ed, and Fernandez opened his arms to us. He welcomed. I stayed outside.

**SS: How long did you have to do this before you got the meeting with Fernandez at the Board of Ed?**

JF: Golly. Not very long. A couple of weeks, couple of weeks, if that. It was ACT UP-y, it was loud, it was on the news. I think my mom called me one night. I don't think she called me. I called her. I said, "I'm going to be on the news tonight." And she was just like, "Do you have to be on the news for this?" *{LAUGHS}*

But it was happening. It happened quickly. It was a matter of weeks or maybe a month. I'd have to research it, but I remember I couldn't believe we made it over to Court Street [Livingston Street] in such a short time. I remember Sue Simmons going in, or Chuck or Sue, one of those two. Eric went in with them. We said, "You're more articulate. You're the practicing teacher now. You're the employed teacher." We just stayed outside with our signs and our condoms and our lube and our information. I don't remember when the official policy was instituted, when the condoms were allowed into the schools. I do know that only nurses are allowed to give them out in middle school. I think teachers can give them out in high schools. But there was this big, of course, struggle with the Catholic Church. It coincided – I want to say that it was around the time of Stop the Church. I want to say that, because we were just so furious at O'Connor, and he just was the big devil.

Tape II  
00:20:00

**SS: Did you participate in Stop the Church?**

JF: Oh, yeah.

**SS: What did you do?**

JF: I didn't go in, but I was outside. I was very good friends with Victor Mendolia, who worked on it. I think he organized it. I'm not sure. We were just outside getting the feed, who was it that screamed in the aisles and spat out the host or whatever

it was. I can't remember the names right now, but I remember hearing about it from the outside. Yeah, it was incredible.

**SS: I just want to ask Jim do you have any more questions about the condoms in schools or the founding of YELL? So you weren't involved when YELL officially started?**

JF: I was sort of an idea man. I was involved, but I wasn't going to the meetings. I think I had a night job or something at that time and it just wasn't convenient, but I would talk to Eric a lot.

**SS: How old were you at the time?**

JF: Twenty-six-ish. Yes, twenty-six.

**SS: So when YELL — There were a lot of younger people coming in at that time, I recall, and some of them were underage, I think.**

JF: Yes.

**SS: So what were the discussions around that?**

JF: I remember us being a little nervous about it, but we would talk about it and then we would just sort of let it go. We were like, (a), that really shouldn't be our concern, and, (b), I don't think we had to get parental consent or anything like that, but we were nervous. The actual discussions I don't recall, but I remember talking to Eric about it and I remember wanting to know where these kids were coming from and were we going to get in trouble because they were underage, because they were. There were a lot of them even from New Jersey. It was bizarre. I guess the time was right. ACT UP was this magnet.

**SS: Did you guys ever do civil disobedience?**

JF: I never got arrested, personally. Sort of a confession. I've always felt guilty about that. I got dragged away, I got pushed and I was in scuffles, but I don't think so. I don't think so.

**SS: So that wasn't an issue of minors getting arrested.**

JF: No, I don't think so. I think it was discussed. We always kind of did the teacherly thing. We always kind of stopped when it got too insane. I think it was dramatic enough that these adults were handing rubbers to these kids. These strangers were handing condoms to these kids.

**SS: So how did the kids respond?**

JF: They didn't care. They loved them. They wanted more. Some of them were silly about it. I remember, for some reason, because it was sort of traumatic, the first action is most burned into my memory. I remember the kids being a little bit nervous. They'd take them, but they were like —. They were definitely a more conservative bunch, but, by and large, the kids wanted them. They took them. They read them. They thanked us and the teachers.

**SS: It's part of the acculturation process of getting young people used to condoms. You had to get used to condoms and then they had to get used to condoms. So I'm sure for many of them it was the first time that anyone ever handed them anything like that.**

JF: I'm sure, and it wasn't candy, but it was like that, I think, to them. Yeah, I think there was a bit of shock for them, probably, as I recall. It's funny, I don't really remember worrying so much about that because it was really about getting those cameras on us and getting this thing some press.

**SS: So what did you do after that? What else did you do in ACT UP?**

JF: I worked with *Outweek* a lot.

**SS: Yes. Can you explain, what was the relationship between ACT UP and *Outweek*?**

JF: Well, it's funny because I feel like I'm telling secrets. It's like, oh, my god, is it time? Is everybody –. People said that *Outweek* was the mouthpiece of ACT UP, and it was, but it wasn't. We loved – We were all in ACT UP and we came from ACT UP, and it was the media people from ACT UP to a large extent. It's weird, the relationship, because it's almost like it was we were one being, almost. We were attached at the hip, I think. I don't know. Andrew [Miller] can tell you more because Andrew was writing the stories. It's not like there were any conflicts of interests. We weren't giving them more press. We *were* the gay press, because these guys, these guys [*The Native*] were the old crackpots. They didn't have it right. Look. Is chronic fatigue syndrome the epidemic of the nineties, in 1988. We used to always talk about how — And they questioned. They used to question. They hated ACT UP, the native did, so there was an us-versus-them with the native. So we were always on the side of ACT UP. I don't know, because everybody who came through those doors was in an ACT UP meeting, including Lady Bunny, including John.

I do remember, though, the advertising department. I used to get on their case for being closet cases or for worrying too much about making things pretty. “Why aren't you out there screaming in the streets?” There was sort of an us-versus-them within *Outweek*, the people who sold the advertising versus the editorial.

Tape II  
00:25:00

God, it was so heady. It was almost like my second home, being at *Outweek*. Signorile or Rotello or somebody would come in with some scoop, and we'd spend a lot of time around the campfire talking about last night's action or what was coming up. I don't know that I answered your question, because I can't, really. I wasn't an impartial observer.

**SS: Would *Outweek* ever critique ACT UP?**

JF: That's a good question. I don't know. I don't know. Probably. I think Andrew would have. I think so, yeah. I think they did.

**SS: But you don't remember specifics?**

JF: Don't remember specifics.

**SS: What's this other picture that you have here?**

JF: Winter. It's probably Sixth Avenue, and I think it's my first action. It's courtesy of Jon Nalley, who better get his ass into the ACT UP Oral History Project.

**SS: That's right. We want Jon in the project.**

JF: Yeah. And it's when I had hair, and I think it was when we marched.

**SS: It's a great picture. It's a beautiful picture.**

JF: Thank you. Thank you. We did a protest march on Saturday up Sixth Avenue out of the Village because that's how the first Gay Pride March or Marches happened in the earlier years. It was sort of getting out of the ghetto. The politics of it were that they put us in the ghetto and we want to get out. I think this was one of those. I'm not sure.

**SS: Is that Stonewall 25 or something?**

JF: Yes, it might have been earlier than that.

**SS: So what happened? You brought this up earlier, being in ACT UP and you said coming home and being frightened.**

JF: Oh, yes. I remember we did an action at Gracie Mansion and we took the subway up. It was when Koch was still mayor, I believe. I'm not sure. Maybe it was Dinkins. I took the subway with Romain Frugé and I met my first Broadway actor, and he was so cute. My first Broadway actor, and my tongue was really thick, and I was trying to like just get to know him. Then we started talking about the issue, and I don't know what the issue was. Even though we were angry and we were fighting, there was so much desperation and people were dying. This was way before — Time slowed down back then, because we were sort of counting the minutes. This was way before the cocktails.

I wasn't fully developed. I'm not fully developed today, but I was certainly — I don't think a twenty-five-year-old — Technically adolescence doesn't end till twenty-six. The brain doesn't fully develop till twenty-six. Emotionally, we shouldn't be getting tattoos or getting married, you know. You could write *Sugar Mountain* before we're twenty, but everything else, you should take your time. Here we were in this war, in this battle. I don't want to be too hyperbolic, but, it was pretty intense, and I couldn't process it. I just don't think I could process it.

At the same time, part of my going to the ACT UP meetings was to flirt with the guys on the swim team and to have Adam take me upstairs and make out with me. You can cut that, unless he approves, or Matt Ebert will be pissed off or whatever. [laughs] But there was that. And there was wanting to belong to something, but there was wanting to be saved. I think part of what was lacking, I think one of the Achilles

heels, or not Achilles heels because that means — Because it was a success. One of the weak points of ACT UP was that we never cried. We never talked about what we were going through with each other. I don't think that we could on some level. We would go to bars. It was sublimated into rage and creativity and the actions and the media, and Ron what's his name with his —

**SS: Goldberg.**

JF: Goldberg, yes, with his chants. But, I was still not sure where I stood in all this. I wanted to fall in love. I wanted to have a career, and I had really lifted the needle on the turntable at this point in time in my life when I moved back to New York. Unlike Peter Dinklage, I didn't have this successful career on Wall Street. I was just starting out, and a lot of my friends were giving up and going on welfare or on ACT UP welfare. I'm sorry, not ACT UP welfare. AIDS — What was it called? They were receiving welfare.

**SS: Disability?**

JF: Disability. I'm sorry, god. One of my friends was receiving welfare and he was on disability. We all got tested one Friday. We all went and got our tests, and then we didn't tell each other but gradually, like the five of my friends and I. David was one of them. I remember going to the doctor and he showed me my results. I remember David saying to me the next day, "We don't know. Nobody knows. It could be a lie." Also there was something I didn't like about getting the results, was he had actually showed me my results on a list, and I saw other people's results, which is really horrible. He's now been unlicensed or whatever.

But there was this sense of doom, and I internalized it. May have been part of my character development at the time, I don't know what, but I ended up kind of just wanting to be comfortable, and I didn't want to know. I remember how sensitive my family was around it, and I'm very close to them. I thought, "It'll be better to wait until something's invented. They'll discover something that will keep us alive. It will become a chronic manageable disease." I read all the *Village Voice* articles, and I think I started to get this sort of low-grade anxiety. You couldn't admit that you were that scared.

I remember I went to the Pyramid and I took this guy home. He was in that – I forget the documentary, but it's the promo for it, it has the swimmers, they're all HIV-positive, a beautiful movie. He's since passed away. I remember we were in the shower after we got naked and we did what we did, and we were safe. He said, "I want you to know I'm a walking petri dish for the virus."

I said, "Well, that's good news," after we just got naked and exchanged fluids. And I said, "So?"

And he goes, "And I don't know how I got it."

There was always that, and I would cling to that, and I would just sort of think, "Oh, my god, what next?" I did have all these little scares, and people didn't talk about it. You couldn't talk about it. It wasn't right to talk about it because there were people living with it who were the heroes, who were like they knew and they were surviving and they were fighting. So I was ashamed of how I felt, of my fear.

Also, the other piece that alienated me was that, like I said to you, I didn't become part of an affinity group. I never felt like there was a place to go. I was part of the swim team. I was friends with this person, friends with that person, but there wasn't

like – One of the reasons I never got arrested was because I didn't feel like I'd be taken care of in jail. I didn't think that it would be okay. So there was a sort of jitteriness around it. It was exciting as hell and I think about it fondly, and I wish we were still doing more and we were still banded.

Tape II  
00:35:00

But then there's that other piece, and I ended up, my best friend had been positive since he was nineteen, and when we were like thirty or late twenties, not even, he insisted I go to Friends In Deed with him, because he said, "Queen, I bet you don't even have it, and you're more fucked about it than I am," or, "You're more fucked up by it than I am."

**SS: That's a good friend.**

JF: It was a great friend. I ended up going and it pretty much kept me alive and it brought me to where I am today, and I was surrounded by all these people who were – At one point, I said, "I don't care. It's going to be all right no matter what." It got to that point.

**SS: But what about when people who you were friends with got really, really sick? Didn't you have more honest conversations with them or about them?**

JF: Yeah.

**SS: Can you think of any examples?**

JF: I was sort of lucky because the people that I was closest to never got really, really sick, except for Johnny and my friend. I remember a guy I met at the Gay Games. I did the Gay Games in '90, and I remember I couldn't have sex with this guy. We had flirted for two days, three days, and he just found out he was negative and he

didn't want to have sex. I was, "Oh, god," and then I fell in love with him. We're still in touch. He's been in love with the same guy since then.

But I remember I met Matt Astomski, who also died, and I remember talking to him about it. What was interesting about Matt was Matt lived out in L.A. and he knew a lot of guys in ACT UP in New York, and we wouldn't see each other a lot, but we talked a lot. I remember him. He was very matter of fact about it. He would say, "I don't know what's going to happen to me, but I'm going to live my life," you know, things like that. It was more these grand statements rather than personal statements. I mean, it was personal, "I'm going to live my life," and he talked about wanting to fall in love before he died.

I remember talking to people about being afraid of sex. You know what's really interesting is that it was hard to talk to each other even in the sack, because back then you didn't know. You didn't ask. You played safe. I remember I was dating this guy, he was another love of my life, and he was positive and everybody knew it besides me. He was this beautiful, beautiful, beautiful guy I had met at my gym, and somebody came over to me and said, "I hear you're dating Michael." That's not his name.

I said, "Yeah."

And he was a guy I used to work out with, I remember, and he said, "Well, you know he's sick."

And I said, "What? First of all, he's not sick," and I gave him the – And then I said, "You know, have you ever left Chelsea, Queen? You have no idea who you're talking to, and I don't want you ever to talk to me again. But I certainly hope if

that's how you're going through life—," and I sort of gave him the "Play safe, don't play stupid." So you just assumed and played safe and crossed your fingers.

**SS: But did people in ACT UP have safe sex?**

JF: I always did. I *always* did. One of my favorite cellophane types made me spit on his finger before he touched me in a certain place, which was totally psychotic and paranoid, but I'm not the one to answer the question, answer that question in a controversial way, because I don't know. I always assumed they did.

Now, I do remember there was Robert Hilferty, and this isn't gossip; this is actually Robert, may he rest in peace. Robert and Peter Staley were together, and I can't believe Robert — Robert's memorial service is in two days. I remember Robert saying to me – We'd always talk about safe sex. We would talk about safe sex. He was my elder. There were all these avuncular types, these sort of like big brothers more. I remember asking him about it, and I said, "But, you know, what about sucking dick? I can't not."

He goes, "Um, you know, there's certain things that make you gay that I'm not going to give up, even if my partner's viral load is off the charts."

I remember bumping into Brian something or another. He was in my stable, guys that I would date, and I remember it was the day that I was about to go get tested. I was this close to getting tested, and he said, "Oh, I've just been to—" This was after ACT UP. He was in ACT UP, and he had been in ACT UP with me, and it had simmered down. He said to me, "Jeffrey, I just got back from a week at GMHC and I looked through every study, and there's just no way you can get it." No. "It's just not that easy to get. So I think you're okay." I don't know. I always said had it been a

straight disease, we would have all known that, would have all known exactly what and how. Did people in ACT UP have unsafe sex? I don't know.

**SS: So you were telling an interesting story off camera about your boyfriend and his Hickman.**

JF: Yes, yes, yes. We were just talking about how whether people in ACT UP were safe, and it's funny, because when you asked the question, it was kind of one of those, it made me pause for a second and I thought, is there a scandal that I didn't know about? Was I naïve? Yet I just want to say, with the camera rolling, that we prided ourselves on being safe. We used to talk about re-infection. Not re-infection, but, yes, re-infection, or what did you call it when you would sort of complicate the virus?

**SS: Multiple infections?**

JF: Multiple infections or some word that's lost in the ether. But, yes, we prided ourselves on that, and it's interesting because personally, it was our rallying cry for our sexual independence, because we wanted that still. We wanted to still be sexually free, and we could have that, provided we were safe. I think all the way back to pre-ACT UP with my boyfriend Chris, used to say that as long as you're safe, it's okay. He did outreach to street kids, to youth on the street. But I remember it being such a point of – not even a point of pride, just this is how we lived our lives, and we would get indignant in conversations with the other, with the enemy around this.

I remember, why should we find out? Why should we get tested? Because it doesn't matter, because we're playing safe and they're killing us anyway, and there are all these conspiracies, and what do you do if you find out? You go on AZT and then there was the next one that was a little more mild but half the people were wasting

from that, and so the rule of the day was play safe. So even though I had my own paranoia about it and my own kind of tortured relationship with my own potential mortality, we played and we played safe.

Nowadays, it makes my head spin online, just how people deal with it, how people talk about it, and I think that as far as having safe sex goes, we were Carmelite nuns. *{LAUGHS}*

**SS: What do you think was the reason that safe sex broke down?**

JF: It's a great question. I think it's many-pronged, and I think there's no one answer. Frustration. I think on the part of those who turned to crystal meth — And that, to me, I am naïve in a lot of ways because I couldn't even go to the Roxy because I never did drugs. I drank and I used to smoke weed, but I didn't understand that, because you weren't safe. I think that — And I'm sorry to veer, but that came from being closeted. I didn't want to not be in control, ever. Then you add HIV and it was like how can you not be in control. But I think meth coincided, and the increase in unsafe behavior came at a saturation point where, on one hand, where on one finger, because there's a lot of fingers, that people were just fed up. "I just want to have fun."

I think also there was it may have coincided with the cocktails. I think generationally, the younger generation did not experience, see, feel, touch, witness, sit next to, hear people who were sick. It was not as immediate. It wasn't as proximate. I work with older youth, and they do act indestructible, many of them. They do tend towards that. So you have a whole generation that's no longer scared and to a certain extent is turned off by the generation that's telling them the stories. And at the same time, there's all this hope and there's the campaign, the testing campaign, and there are

the cocktails. I've gone on dates with people who have said to me – I mean young. I dated a guy this summer. I went on a date with this guy this summer who he's a scientist, so he was pretty rational about it, but he had had a crazy night in New Orleans, and he's twenty-seven, and he was infected. He said, "You know, I'm lucky." And he is lucky, because there's more now that you can do about it. But it's no kind of life to live, obviously, to choose to live. I don't want to get on that soapbox.

I guess I answered your question. I think it's generational. I think the older generation that did it were just burned fucking out. I got a call from one of my ACT UP heroes right after I got out of graduate school. I was a therapist, a clinical social worker, coming home from work. He said, "Jeff Fennelly, you've got to save me. I'm addicted to meth." I hadn't heard from him for years.

And I was shocked. I was like, "What? You what?" Then it was sort of like the domino effect with people coming out of it being positive. All of these people told me, and, mercifully, many of them were not infected, but there's some crazy statistic about HIV and infection and meth use. Yeah. So, older generation fed up, younger generation ignorant.

**SS: Why did you leave ACT UP and when did you leave ACT UP?**

JF: That's a great question. I really don't know. I wish I knew when. I remember I was getting more and more involved in the gay press, like the *NYQ* and then *QW*. It was a recession, '91. No, it wasn't, '91 was the Gulf War. Well, it was still Bush. I'd lost my job and lost my apartment. Didn't really lose my apartment, but I owed two months' rent. I can't believe this. Moved in with my parents at some point, which was *crazy*.

In retrospect, it was the worst thing I could have done emotionally, and that coincided — That was soon after Queer Nation came about. Queer Nation was short-lived. It felt like Queer Nation, and it was around the time of Vito's funeral. Queer Nation was sort of the marker for me of when ACT UP started to kind of dissipate. So it was around '91, I think, maybe '92. I was, I think, emotionally kind of decompensating a little bit, because I had begun to live like somebody with HIV, even though I didn't have it. It was seven years before I got tested. My mother had just bounced back from this intense hysterectomy and then she had a death scare. She had a pulmonary embolism and blah, blah, blah. I walked in to say hi to her and she said, "You almost had a dead mother on your hands. How does that feel?"

I was like, "I'm going to get tested. I owe it to everybody to know." It's seven years of living like that, and it was my formative years. It was twenty-four to thirty-one, and so I think I just couldn't do it anymore. It also didn't have the sexiness that it used to have, and it was becoming less relevant somehow. I think Clinton had been elected. There was some hope that things were going to take a change. I think we got exhausted. Michelangelo crossed the country and wrote his book, and people moved upstate.

I lost my friend John when I was twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and it became more personal then, I think. I think life was more about I wanted to live a quieter life. I couldn't deal with the energy anymore. It sounds like I copped out or whatever, but I still wanted to fall in love, but I didn't know if I was going to live. It's no wonder I didn't have a lot of long-term relationships or long-term apartments or long-term jobs. Finally, I remember when I finally got tested and I realized I had this, I was early thirties and I

Tape III  
00:10:00

didn't have a career. What am I going to do? The writing's not going anywhere. I'm not Sarah Schulman. What's going to happen? I gradually got back into it. I went to graduate school and became a therapist because of everything that I had been through in my twenties around this issue, I think.

I remember when 9/11 hit, it was interesting, because we were talking about it at graduate school, and a lot of the kids up there were kids, a lot of the kids in social work school. They should have a rule that you really should live your life for ten years before you become a therapist. And they were freaking out. I said, "God, this is nothing." But with an asterisk.

I remember running into somebody who was positive and was relying on their drugs, their meds, their regimen, and I said that to them, and they were like, "Well, you know, it's actually scarier for me because I'm worried that the system's going to break down and I'm not going to have my meds, and priorities are going to shift."

I jumped ahead a decade, but I think it was sort of natural progression. I'd had enough. When my friends started to die, when Matt died, my world had gotten really small when my friend Matt in California died, because I was that bridge generation where we were touched by it, but we weren't consumed by it. It was too much, and yet I missed it. I always talked about why aren't we out? Why aren't we doing something? Yet why wasn't *I* doing something? I guess I just decided to channel it in a more personal way and ultimately in a professional way.

But you had wanted me to tell you the story about the catheter. Johnny, my friend Johnny, passed away, Johnny Davis. He had a Hickman and he showed it to me. This was like fucking 1989, '90, when I went back to visit him. I had done a little

story on him, I think, for *Outweek*. So years later I'm with this guys and we're making love for the first time, because he was taking it real slow, I guess because he had this thing in his chest, which was for MAI. He was in total denial about it. He was a guy that this person had come up to me at the gym and said, "He's sick." And I didn't know yet. I had not been tested yet. So I couldn't throw stones.

I remember saying to him, "I'm going to Friends in Deed. Do you want to come? Do you want to come? Do you want to come?" And it was just like he wasn't ready for rehab. He wasn't ready to face it.

It was Easter, and I had come back from my aunt's house, and I couldn't wait to be with him. I was so crazy for him. He was so beautiful. I remember once we kissed and there were like sparks. It was insane. He took his shirt off and there was the little Hickman catheter. I guess that trajectory I had described of years of just this is what we do, this is what we fucking do, this is how we live our lives, and, guess what, this is how we are going to have to live our lives for the rest of our lives, so get off the bus if you can't live that way. I remember I said to him, "Oh, is it a Hickman?"

He said, "No, no, no." He lied and said he'd picked up TB on the subway and it was some strange strain of TB and that he was going to – And I loved him so much that it just didn't matter, and I was conscious of my own denial or my own fear of facing it, of being tested. I remember kissing it and saying, "Well, whatever it is," and I kissed it, then I kissed him. I learned years later that he lost work, obviously. He was in the hospital after I broke up with him. I broke up with him so I could get tested. I said, "I can't live in this mire anymore. I have to pull myself out of the quicksand and get clean

and figure out one way or another what's going on with me. You may, too, but God bless you."

I remember hearing from him that he was in the hospital, and he lost his apartment. He moved in with this older friend of his, this crazy old woman from Eastern Europe. We met like fifteen years later, and she said to me, "Do you know that the day when you kissed his catheter made him feel so loved?" I hadn't actually remembered it until she told me that. When you asked about ACT UP and safe sex and blah, blah, blah, I remembered that. I remember how not freaked out I was, maybe because he was so beautiful. I was in denial too.

Tape III  
00:15:00

Then the guy who mentored me at *Outweek*, Joe D'Andrea, was involved in ACT UP but was more a behind-the-scenes guy. He had started the first gay newspaper on Long Island in the seventies. He showed me some letters from these gay kids who said, "You saved my life," that sort of thing. He gave me his job at the *Wall Street Journal* doing the same stuff, and here I was, an aspiring writer with a degree in English from Dartmouth, and I was laying out pages at the *Wall Street Journal*. But I was still living that what-if life. I remember he quit to die, and he went on and he lived for ten more years, ended up had a heart attack or something. Brought Victor and me and a bunch of people together again, Troy Hickson and a bunch of people. I don't know who it was exactly.

So, survival, had to survive, couldn't deal with this anymore, couldn't come home, had to get out of that dark apartment and those dark thoughts, just needing to take stock of what was going on with me, going to Friends in Deed meetings, Cynthia

O'Neill and being totally inspired by her. Yes, I think that's why I burned out, to use a cliché. I think a lot of people did.

Then I ran into Jonny Nalley years later. He was walking around with this book bag, the thing not a backpack, not a bike messenger bag, but a book bag, and in it he had manila folders with everybody's names, hundreds of people's names on them, or fifty, and it was the pictures that he had taken of us. He had had a fire in his apartment and he had gathered all his belongings, and he gave me this folder of these pictures. I think I brought them home and dropped some coffee on them or something, but I salvaged most of them.

But you have these reunions, still. They're not the same. When we do the fucking marriage — I ran into Ann Northrop. I ran into her a lot, like buying fruit and on our bikes and everything. I said, "Ann, why are we being so reactive about this?"

And she said, "I know." I don't know, there's sort of this tacit understanding that it's not our lives anymore, so there's something different about the actions now and activism now. But it's all changed. It's all become prettier. It's all become Facebook-y.

**SS: I have one last question I want to ask you. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest accomplishment and what would you say was its biggest disappointment?**

JF: I think its greatest accomplishment — I think two greatest accomplishments. Number one was Fast Track, and number two was it kept so many people alive just in so many ways, not just because of the Fast Track. I think it's responsible for the cocktails. I think it's responsible. Peter Staley and those people in

TAG, those guys, Eric Sawyer, who's still doing the same work, who's still in the trenches, saved lives. But it didn't just save lives medically; it saved lives spiritually. It made the queers look strong when they were down and dying, and it brought us together. And the lesbians, fucking lesbians, just thank God for them, because I really don't think we could have done it without them. The healthy people getting together with the angry people with AIDS and just doing it all, it saved lives. But Fast Track would be the sound bite.

What was its biggest what? What was the other?

**SS: Disappointment.**

JF: That's a really, really hard one, because it's such a sacred cow to me.

It's so sacred to me. I think that it ended, I think that we didn't make it global, I think that it didn't become global. I just went through this long-winded explanation of why I dropped out, but I think I'm complicit in that, and I think we could have gone global, and there's still a need for this, God knows. Those of us who are fine could be doing a lot of this stuff in Africa or at the U.N. or at the White House still. There's still a huge need.

Tape III  
00:20:00

People are still falling and dying, and people need to be held accountable for their transgressions.

Personally, personally, my biggest, disappointment, and this is going to sound really namby-pamby, but it wasn't nurturing enough for me. There wasn't a nurturing element, and I don't know that there could have been. I really don't know that there could have been, because it was a war. We were in the trenches. I needed for Bill Dobbs to curse me out for draining that energy, and people weren't there to say, "How you doin'?" People were there to save lives.

**SS: Okay. Thank you.**

JF: Thank you.

**SS: Is that what you wanted?**

JF: I think so, yes.