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# **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: **Charles Hovland**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Charles Hovland  
June 5, 2012

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

CHARLES HOVLAND: My name is Charles Hovland. I'm fifty-eight. We're at 217 East 83<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City, and it's June 5, 2012.

**SS: And we're in your absolutely amazing apartment covered head to toe with your own artwork and your lifetime collection. How long have you lived here?**

CH: I have lived here for almost thirty years.

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

CH: I was born in Minnesota in a small town, Northfield, Minnesota. I grew up on a farm. My father was a farmer. I went to college in Minneapolis, and the minute I graduated from college, I came to New York.

**SS: So when you were growing up, did your family—were they community oriented? Were they involved in any kind of politics?**

CH: Yes and no. My parents were both very involved in the church.

**SS: Which church?**

CH: In the Lutheran Church, so in the politics of the church, which then goes into the politics of the community, yes, they were involved in that. They weren't really involved, say, in being any kind of mayor or a councilperson, but they were involved in the church, the politics of the church, and my father was the president of the congregation for a while, so that part they were very involved with.

**SS: So when you were growing up, I guess on the television was all the Civil Rights Movement, campus unrest. How was your family responding to those events?**

CH: Well, first of all, it was small-town Minnesota, and we almost were isolated from it. We really didn't have those kind of issues, and, yes, we were aware of it, but it wasn't—since they weren't political, there were never any household conversations about it. I would say the first time that we got to anything that was political was more the Vietnam War, because at an early age I was against the war, and they never expressed any feelings towards it either way. When I wanted to go to demonstrations, which means—the high school did have buses that went to Minneapolis for demonstrations. They didn't discourage, but they didn't encourage it either. They were very kind of nonplussed about it.

**SS: Did you know people who had gone to Vietnam?**

CH: No.

**SS: So what was the basis of your objection?**

CH: It was mainly the idea of the war. I was against the war. I didn't understand why it was happening and why there was so many deaths, so much violence, and I was approaching the draft age, and, of course, I didn't want to be drafted. I didn't want to go to the war.

**SS: So did you also start to become aware of art at the same time?**

CH: It wasn't until I was in college that I became aware of art, and when I was in college was the first time I went to a museum. My parents never took me to—

they really had no interest in art, and we never went to a museum. We never really went to really even movies.

**SS: So when did you start to think that you could be an artist?**

CH: It was when I was in college, I did go to a museum.

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**SS: Which museum, by the way?**

CH: I went to the Walker, and I remember the first thing that caught my interest was Pop art, because the Walker did have a fairly good collection of Warhol, Oldenburg. I remember seeing Lucas Samaras, and it was stuff that right away I could look at, and it was funny, but it really caught my interest, and that was what really opened my eyes to art. And then I started taking some art classes and then I ended up majoring in art.

**SS: When did your homosexuality emerge in relationship to this? I mean, was it before you started to see yourself as an artist, or do you think that they were connected in some way?**

CH: They were kind of different, and it really wasn't—again, when I was in college, that's when I was aware of it, and I guess it was when I was maybe a junior in college, I went to a gay bar for the first time, and I met somebody that first night and I was with them for maybe two years, and we had this very intense relationship. He was going to art school and I was going to this Lutheran college, and from that point on, I didn't go to my classes so much. I went more to his classes, and that also really gave me an education in art. His classes were so much more sophisticated than my classes were, and I learned so much from him and from those classes.

**SS: When did you realize that there was a gay political movement?**

CH: I had read articles when I was in college, but it was a Lutheran college and it was really a bedroom college, which meant that everybody goes away for the weekends, and so many of the people in the college were from small farm communities, and so they would be there during the week, and then on the weekend they would all leave. I don't remember having any kind of political rallies at my college.

[interrupted by phone call]

CH: I don't remember—

**SS: Because we're talking 1972, right?**

CH: I don't even remember any kind of Vietnam War protest there. I don't remember anything. But it was fairly close to the University of Minnesota, and they were, of course, a lot more political, and there were things that we could go there. I don't remember any type of gay issues there. It really wasn't until I came to New York that I became interested in any—and even when I first came to New York, I kind of got a job right away.

**SS: What were you doing?**

CH: And I worked at the Guggenheim. I worked in the bookstore at the Guggenheim Museum, which, again, was eye-opening, and I remember even Gay Pride Parades. I had to work on the weekends, and so I didn't really go to them. I remember going to the rallies. There was a time when the rallies would be in the park. The parade would march up Fifth Avenue, go into the park, and the rallies would be in the park, and I remember going to those rallies after I got off work. It wasn't until I left the museum that I started going to the actual parades, and that's what made me a lot more aware of the gay politics in New York.

**SS: But when you started working in the porn business, obviously you were really seeing a whole huge part of the gay community in New York City.**

CH: Absolutely, absolutely.

**SS: How did that start?**

CH: It started that I had a friend who wanted to answer some personal ads.

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In those days, with the personal ads you had to send a photograph along and you mailed it to a P.O. Box. So I took these pictures of him, and then he told a friend of his, and so I started taking these pictures for personal ads. Then it turned out that I photographed one of the editors of the magazines, and he really liked the pictures, and then he said, “Why don’t you get a model together and bring it down to the magazines, and I can use them. I can print them.” And I did, and that’s what started my entry into the porn business.

**SS: So which were the operative magazines at the time that you were working for?**

CH: I worked for *Mandate*, *Honcho*, *Playguy*, *Torso*, *Inches*, *Black Inches*, *Latin Inches*, and then there were a couple of—*Heat* was one of them. *Stallion* was one of them.

**SS: How did you meet models?**

CH: The models were always the issue, and when I first got into the business, it was difficult finding the models because I had to pay for the models, but there was no pressure. The editor just said, “Anytime you have some material, bring it down to me.”

There was no deadlines, until I met one of my editors, was corrupt. So I had an editor and he said, “I didn’t get a raise this year, so if you will give me \$100 in

cash every month, I will guarantee you that you will have at least three or four layouts per month.”

Well, all of a sudden I thought, “This could be good,” but it put so much pressure on me because I had to go out and find models, and finding models is the hardest part of the entire porn business. It’s the most guarded aspect. Once you have models, that’s what everybody wants, and it’s the hardest thing to find.

**SS: So how did you find them?**

CH: Any way you can imagine. I’d go up to people on the street, I took ads, agents sent me material, and also, the porn business is really a small area, and once a model knows they have found somebody who’s reliable who will pay them and will not put them in any kind of precarious situation or demand to have sex with them, then they tell their friends and it gets to be a word of mouth.

**SS: What was the relationship between the porn business in the seventies and the gay community?**

CH: I think a lot of people at that time did not realize that porn was a political statement, where it was a type of liberation, and people have very different reasons for doing porn. Sometimes it’s men spend a lot of time and energy at the gym and they’re just willing to show it off. Other ones, it is a political statement and they want to do it for some type of political gain. Other times people just plain need money.

**SS: So you were involved in two arenas, the art world and the porn world, of the gay community that were both absolutely devastated by AIDS. When did you first start to notice AIDS showing up in your world?**

CH: Very early. I would say around maybe '81. I had a friend that died very fast, very fast. We barely knew what was going on, and all of a sudden he was gone.

**SS: Who was that? Do you remember his name?**

CH: Hibiscus. I knew Hibiscus. I had a friend from Minneapolis, John Rothermel, who was in the Cockettes, and then in the late seventies he moved to New York with the whole group, with Hibiscus and Angel Jack and that whole group.

**SS: The Angels of Light.**

CH: Angels of Light. So Hibiscus was really the first person that I knew that died, and it was fast.

**SS: And people didn't realize what was wrong with him, right?**

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CH: No. So gradually I had other friends that were dying, and I wanted to do something to be involved, and I just didn't know what to do. Then it's maybe in '85 I read an article about God's Love We Deliver, which was just starting, and Ganga at that point was just cooking meals in her apartment for her friends, and she was looking for people who, if she cooked the food, if they would deliver the food to her friends. I responded, and there were no questions. There was nothing. That was, "What's your name? Could you deliver this food?" And giving me the address, and you just did it.

**SS: What's her name? I don't know about this.**

CH: Ganga Stone. She was really the founder of God's Love We Deliver. She was a character. And that was in about '85. And then it started growing, because I told her people that needed food, and then other people. So then it turned into a restaurant business, where in my neighborhood they would make arrangements for a

restaurant to prepare a meal, and then they'd say, "Would you go to this restaurant, pick up five meals, and you're going to walk them around to these people." We did that for a while, and then it started to be that the food was so rich that it didn't agree with people who weren't feeling well, so they decided to expand the kitchen. So that's when they got a space at the church that's on 86<sup>th</sup> and West End, and a vehicle then was donated. So I'd go over there. It was one day a week I'd go over there, and all the meals were packed, and then they'd give me a long list of people to deliver the food to, which was great.

Everybody was so grateful, and it was a wonderful program, but, man, I'd be delivering food to some of these people, and they'd be living in terrible, terrible squalor, terrible, because they'd be so sick that they couldn't take care of themselves. Most of the people had no place to turn, and I'd come back and I'd be so upset, and I'd tell them God's Love has to do something. They have to get involved, and it can't be just food. It also has to be medical and housing. They'd say, "It's just not our mission. We just can't do all of this, but we've heard that this new organization called Gay Men's Health Crisis. Why don't you go to them and see if they can help."

And I did, I went to them, and, of course, they were so overburdened with taking care of all these people, and I'd say, "I went to this place, and this place was terrible. You have to go and help this person."

And they'd say, "We just can't take on all of this. We just don't have the resources. We don't have the people. We can't do it." This would happen over and over again, and I was getting so angry and so frustrated.

And then I started seeing these notices about ACT UP demonstrations. At that time I didn't even realize that meetings were going on, so I did, I went to a number

of demonstrations before I even knew that meetings were going on, and then at some point I think somebody said something, said, “You know, if you’re coming to the demonstrations, you should really start coming to some of the meetings,” which I did, and it was great right off, because I could see now here’s a group of people that feel the same type of anger and the same type of frustration and the same thing of wanting to help, wanting to get involved, wanting to do something, but not knowing where to turn.

**SS: Simultaneous to this, how was the porn industry responding to AIDS?**

CH: It was another frustration, because with Mr. [George] Mavety, one of my editors was very involved politically, and Mr. Mavety would—

**SS: Who’s Mr. Mavety?**

00:20:00 CH: He owned this big corporation, that they had maybe twenty girlie titles, and then they had this eight or nine gay titles, but then they had these other titles, like self-help titles and knitting magazines. It was a huge business. One of the editors went to him and said, “You’ve taken so much money from the gay community. It’s time for you to give back. Couldn’t you give something to some of these charities?” And he wouldn’t do it, and he was fired for basically—

**SS: The editor was fired?**

CH: Yes, he was fired for basically standing up and demanding that Mr. Mavety do something, and he wouldn’t.

**SS: Who was the editor? Do you remember?**

CH: Yes, it was Freeman Gunter.

**SS: Because I had a friend, Stan Leventhal, who was the Editor of *Torso*.**

CH: Yes, this was later. This was later. At that time the editor and the art director were two very separate commodities, so in all the years that Stan worked there and I was working there, I never had anything to do with him. I only dealt with the art directors, but I know that Stan was also more vocal and was maybe a little bit more influential about getting Mr. Mavety involved. But basically there really wasn't any—there were separate fundraisers where I was asked to get models together to perform at different events, but other than that, the porn industry as a whole at that point really was not doing that much.

**SS: Did you ever have friends of yours who you had worked with as models who were sick and were asking for work, and that you could see that they were ill? Were you ever in that kind of situation?**

CH: Yes, there were times where we tried to work around. There were times, a couple of times, people came to me and needed money and had lesions, and we used makeup. I was very anti-makeup on a regular guy. It just always made me crazy when somebody would show up for a porn event and they had all this makeup on, so I never wanted to—I really wanted somebody to be real, but there were times where people had lesions and I did use makeup.

But the other thing was that a lot of times the art director would come and say, “You know, people are looking at these magazines for escape. They don't want to be dragged down by looking at somebody who maybe could be a little sick, and if you

have somebody that needs money, let's find a different way of getting money to that person rather than having him photographed and it doesn't turn out."

But, yes, there were times when people did call me, and I would try to—I always could hook them up with food, with God's Love, and I always tried to hook them up with GMHC to make sure that their housing and everything was stable, but with extra money when they needed it, that's what was difficult.

**SS: Okay, so when you got to ACT UP, where did you first put your energies?**

CH: Well, and it's probably one of the first meetings that I went to, Jeffrey Aronoff, who was the head of fundraising, stood up and he made this announcement, "We'd really like to expand fundraising and we'd like to start doing some t-shirts, some stickers, posters. Is there anybody here that has had any experience with this kind of merchandising?" Well, of course, in my past life I had been the manager of the bookstore at the Guggenheim for a while. This is what I did.

So after the meeting, I went to Jeffrey and I talked to him, and he said, "Please come to one of our fundraising meetings and let's talk." So I did, and I liked Jeffrey. He was great. He was a very hard worker. So I started working with fundraising.

**SS: Now, just back to the Guggenheim for a second, how did the Guggenheim treat its employees who had AIDS? Do you know?**

CH: How did they do what?

**SS: How did they treat their employees with AIDS at the time?**

00:25:00 CH: At the time that I was working there, I was working there during the transition. There was a transition when Mr. [Thomas] Messer was the director, and he was an old-time European sensibility, and the staff was very small. It wasn't until Tom Krens came in, where he had this big, expansive personality and big ambitions, where they really expanded everything. So when I was there, the Guggenheim itself, it was small.

But one of my employees who I had hired also got sick very early and very fast, and the Guggenheim didn't really do—I think that he went on disability right away, and the Guggenheim did not fight it. But other than—I remember doing staff benefits for him, but other than that, I don't remember the Guggenheim doing any, and I don't really remember the Guggenheim doing any major AIDS fundraisers. Maybe this was before amfAR or where some charities really got into the art business, but I don't remember the Guggenheim really doing anything.

**SS: So what specific projects did you do for the Fundraising Committee?**

CH: So Jeffrey and I worked with t-shirts, posters.

**SS: So these t-shirts were the “Silence = Death” t-shirts, or this was after that?**

CH: Yes, all of that and the Keith Haring, the Keith Haring t-shirts, “Read My Lips.”

**SS: How did you get the Keith Haring—was Keith Haring still alive at the time, or was this through the estate?**

CH: Yes, he was alive, and, actually, he was coming to some meetings, because I remember there would be buses going to demonstrations either in Washington and in Albany, and I remember times where people would get up and say, “Okay, the bus is going to cost this amount of money. We need to raise this amount of money to get a bus to take us. What are we going to do?”

And I remember Keith Haring raising his hand, “I’ll pay for it.”

So I do remember him being there and saying with David Wojnarowicz — I remember him also being there at meetings.

**SS: But it’s ironic, because at the famous art auction, didn’t the Haring estate refuse to donate?**

CH: Yes.

**SS: Now, how did that happen?**

CH: Well, he had died. He had died, and they refused to do anything. Again, I was really angry that they wouldn’t do anything, so I put a notice—I called *Page Six* [of the *New York Post*], and *Page Six* did something, and the next day we got an explanation from the Haring Foundation. They said that they had been getting advice from the Warhol Foundation, saying that when an artist first dies, they really have to be careful about what money and what art they donate, and so because of the Warhol Foundation telling them that, they were pulling back all donations to any causes for a while. So that’s why they wouldn’t. That was our explanation, anyway.

**SS: So of all the t-shirts, what was the best seller?**

CH: It was probably the “Silence = Death.” That was probably the best. The Keith Haring did pretty well, although the problem with it was that because it was

kind of a complex image, it was on kind of a heavy kind of plastic, and when you put that on, you couldn't breathe and you would sweat. Maybe if we did not have the Keith Haring poster, the t-shirt would have sold better, because that poster really sold well.

**SS: So how did it work? The fundraising would raise money, and then what would they do with it?**

00:30:00 CH: Well, it really wasn't until the art auction that we really had much money. So before the art auction, anytime fundraising raised any money, different affinity groups at each meeting would stand up and say, "We need X amount of money to do this." So then the money would be allocated.

It wasn't until the art auction where there was really quite a bit of money, and that's when it became difficult, because if fundraising had not stepped up and said, "We spent so much time and energy raising all of this money. Everybody worked so hard. We don't want it to go that fast, so we really, first of all, want to take 50 percent of it and put it away someplace and save it. The other 50 percent, we want to have some say in how that money is spent." And, of course, that's when the fighting started. But we said, "It is so hard to raise this money and everybody else wants to spend it so easily. If you want to spend the money, why don't you also come and help us raise the money?"

**SS: So who was opposed to the Fundraising Committee having the say on it?**

CH: Almost everybody. Everybody, everybody. But I think that it got to be where if it was over a certain amount requested, then it went to a committee who would decide if that amount of money could be taken out of the reserve, and I think that there were people from fundraising on that committee.

**SS: Okay, so let's go back to the art auction. Can you tell us the whole story from the beginning, like who were the organizers? How were the artists approached? Where did the idea come from?**

CH: Well, it was two separate groups. First of all, Matthew Marx and Paul Morris, they had been doing an internship with a gallery in London, and they had both come back to New York, and they somehow—they were involved in the art world, but they wanted to do something to get some excitement, to really get their name out there. So they came with the idea of doing an art auction, but also—

**SS: They came to ACT UP with the idea?**

CH: Yes.

**SS: And was Matthew in ACT UP?**

CH: No, neither was Paul. But then Annie Philbin, Patrick Moore had been working with amfAR, with another art auction, and they'd been traveling around the country for quite a while promoting this work and promoting this auction. So then they had this experience, and it just happened that they started coming to meetings. So it was almost these two different groups came together at the same time with both having ideas and experience. They came together and said, "We would like to do this. We have contacts in the art world. We can make it happen, but we need help. We're not going to do it all alone, because there's too much."

So I was in charge of the framing, so they would call me up and say, "Okay, so-and-so is donating a piece. Will you go pick it up? And then you have to find out who will donate the framing, and then go pick it up and then store it until the auction."

**SS: How did you get people to donate framing?**

CH: You just had to call around.

**SS: You mean framers?**

CH: Framers, framers. And a lot of times I would call the gallery that represented that artist and say, “What is the framer that you use?” So then they would tell me, and then I’d call that framer and say, “Okay, you do a lot of work for this gallery. Now, this gallery has donated the artist’s work, so would you be willing to donate the framing?”

**SS: So tell us some of the artists who donated.**

CH: Bob Gober, which probably was the most—that piece probably got the most attention and the highest price.

**SS: What did it sell for?**

CH: I think that it sold for around 65,000.

**SS: What was the piece?**

00:35:00 CH: It was a leg. It was an incredible piece, and now a leg would be—but somebody came in—

**SS: What would it be now?**

CH: Probably 800,000. But I remember somebody came in—there were previews of the auction at Paula Cooper, at the gallery, and I remember somebody came in and basically said, “Whatever it goes for, I’ll take it,” and so we knew.

But I remember going with—somebody said, “I know somebody that has a stack of Basquiat drawings, and she’ll probably donate one.”

So we went over to this girl's apartment, and, yes, she had a stack of these drawings, and she just said, "Pick out the one that you want," and there was no—she didn't say, "You can't have that one," or, "This one's too good." It was just a stack of them on the floor. But I think at that time it certainly didn't get the prices that they're getting now. But still, it went for a fair amount.

**SS: And who else donated?**

CH: There was Mapplethorpe. I have to think. I'm thinking what other big—

**SS: Did Ross Bleckner?**

CH: Yes. Yes, Ross Bleckner did. I have the catalog from the exhibit, but it's probably underneath some—the whole thing was very exciting and it was great, but it was a lot of work. Then there were pieces that didn't sell, which somebody then donated a space and we took everything over to that space, and I remember being there for about three days afterwards calling people and calling galleries and saying, "This work is left over. Could you come over and look at it and either give us a bid or give us an offer or something?" Because we had to get rid of it. We weren't going to give the stuff back. What were we supposed to do with it?

**SS: So where did you hold the auction?**

CH: The auction was in the building that's called the Cable Building. It's where the Prada store is now, and I think it was on the second floor, and it's Peter Brant that owned that building, and so the auction was there.

**SS: What was the date?**

CH: Oh, I think that it was '90, '91, so it was really just before the crash of the art market in the early nineties. We were lucky. That was just right before it happened.

**SS: Who was the auctioneer or who was the host?**

CH: The auctioneer was a big problem, because Bob Gober said, "I will make sure that we'll get this big auctioneer from Sotheby's."

Well, and Bob talked to this big auctioneer, and, "Fine, sure, great, I'll do it," until he found out that it was with ACT UP, and then he wouldn't do it.

**SS: Because he hated ACT UP or because it was AIDS?**

CH: No, I think that ACT UP—that was after the church, and I think that there was so much negative publicity towards ACT UP because of that, that I don't know if Sotheby's put pressure on him or he didn't know if he would have the same clout with his rich clients, but he backed out.

**SS: Wow. So who did it?**

CH: So there was another auctioneer, but it was a much lesser—it wasn't really a known name. It was a professional auctioneer, but it wasn't the known personality that we wanted.

**SS: Who were the people who came and bid?**

CH: It was really crowded, and a lot of people from the art world came. It was a huge success.

**SS: How much did you make?**

CH: I think that it was around \$650,000. So when you think of this small grassroots organization, and all of a sudden we had all this money, and what do we do

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with it? Of course, the next meeting, it was announced at the meeting, all of a sudden everybody's hands went up, "Well, I know how we can spend it. We need—."

Everybody wanted money, and that's why we said, "We have to sit down and think how to use this money wisely, because it could be gone in two minutes."

**SS: Now, a lot of that money, didn't it go to all of the traveling that ACT UP did?**

CH: Sure.

**SS: It facilitated a national movement, in a sense.**

CH: Yes. We gave money to other organizations, to other ACT UP organizations.

**SS: Like who?**

CH: They would contact us and say, "We need this amount of money to do this," and we would give money.

**SS: Do you remember some of the groups that you gave money to?**

CH: I think Chicago and I think—

**SS: Chicago ACT UP?**

CH: I think San Francisco, and I think maybe Philadelphia. But I remember the big issue was setting aside a certain amount of money so it would not all be spent right away.

**SS: And did they agree to do that?**

CH: Yes, but it was contentious. There were people that didn't—"We've got the money. Let's spend it, because we can go out and raise more money."

“Well, you know what? Then come and help us. Then come and help and raise it, because it’s a lot of work.”

**SS: Now, weren’t there some theft issues in ACT UP about money?**

CH: Yes.

**SS: Can you tell us about those?**

CH: The problem is, a lot of it, we really couldn’t get to the bottom of it, and we knew the money was gone, but we don’t know how it happened and who was responsible.

**SS: How much was stolen?**

CH: I think it was around 15,000. And a lot of people were really angry about it, but part of it was with ACT UP, because there were so many different people, and there were some people that blamed themselves for allowing it to happen, and another group’s going, “Wait a minute. We didn’t do anything. Let’s really investigate it.”

“No, no. We allowed it to happen. We should have been more careful.”

So I don’t remember that any of that money was ever given back, and I never remember that it was really investigated that thoroughly, but it was that kind of thing that really made fundraising frustrated.

**SS: Was there ever a particular expenditure for an action that you felt was inappropriate or that you thought was excessive?**

CH: No, not really. Partly it wasn’t my decision. Anytime a large amount would go out, it was a group that decided it.

**SS: Now, also, were there major individual donors who gave money to ACT UP?**

CH: Yes, but the problem was the tax code. The money had to be channeled through another organization who had the correct tax code, because ACT UP never had that, so if somebody gave money to ACT UP, they did not get a tax deduction.

**SS: Oh, right, because ACT UP was a political organization.**

CH: Right, so it had to go to—and there was a couple of different ones. We used the Stonewall Foundation. They would donate the money to them, they would get the tax deduction, and then they would give the money to us.

**SS: Do you remember any really significant private donations?**

CH: No. I remember \$2,000 or \$3,000, people would give, and I think once I remember somebody gave \$10,000, but I never remember anything more than that.

**SS: So really ACT UP was—it's interesting, because it's always this idea of rich gay men, right, and so how does ACT UP get its money? It's like people make larger donations to ACT UP than they would, perhaps, to Planned Parenthood or something like that. It's a different kind of constituency. But you're not seeing super-duper gay men writing \$50,000 checks. Why was that?**

00:45:00 CH: Well, I think that a lot of times when somebody gives money, they want to know that it's going to go for a concrete cause. Say, if we would have said, "We need \$25,000 to start research into this one drug, and we're going to start it," that would be one thing. But as soon as they found out that ACT UP, we couldn't do that, that the money would go into the main treasury, and then the money is split all different ways. And even within ACT UP that caused some of the problems, and that's why eventually

some of the groups split off, because they were raising money and they wanted to spend that money themselves, as opposed to raising the money, going into the treasury, and they didn't get all the money.

**SS: So who split off because they raised money and wanted to—**

CH: I think that the treatment group and also I think Housing Works. Eventually when ACT UP was a little bit more established and money was coming in and the affinity groups were becoming a little bit more independent, then—but they still had to abide by the ACT UP rules, and I think at a certain point they said, “You know what? It's not working anymore. We want to do our own thing,” and they broke away.

**SS: That's really interesting, because, of course, ACT UP was a coalition, so certain constituencies in ACT UP would have access to be able to raise that money and others wouldn't. Like I know that ACT UP would pay for women with AIDS to go to the meetings in Washington, for example, and women with AIDS couldn't raise money the way that TAG could.**

CH: But it was a growing organization, and once you're together for a long time, and you really see that people start having different ideas of how it should be run, and that was one of the great things about ACT UP, was that anytime anybody wanted to, they could raise their hand and stand up and say something. We know ultimately that was part of the downfall, too, because some people would stand up and they would go on and on and on, and we'd have this pressing business, and they had something that they thought was important. It wasn't always easy.

**SS: How long did you stay in fundraising?**

CH: I was really in fundraising till the end. Even when we moved back to the center, I stayed in fundraising, and then there was a time when Jeffrey, Jeffrey Aronoff decided that he couldn't do it anymore, and so he asked if I wanted to take over all the fundraising. I didn't really want to, because I'd also been there, by that time, quite a while, and I said, "I'm willing to do something. I'm willing to stay involved, but I can't take over the whole thing," and I did, I did stay, and then somebody else became kind of the overall head of the fundraising. Then I continued to do it for a while, and then eventually I burnt out too. I just couldn't do it anymore.

**SS: At the height, how much were you raising a year, aside from the art auction?**

CH: It's so hard to say, because with the art auction we raised so much. But I remember selling t-shirts—and again, this was probably at the height. I remember having at the Gay Pride rally—and it was Saturday, and I had to go home because I had \$30,000. That's a lot. That's a lot for one day of selling t-shirts and all the other stuff.

**SS: That's amazing. So how much in total would you say ACT UP raised?**

CH: As I said, their t-shirts were very—I remember once we took the t-shirts unannounced and uninvited to the AIDS Walk, the GMHC AIDS Walk, and we set up kind of at the beginning. GMHC came over and they were so mad at us, and they said, "What are you doing here?"

We said, "Well, why can't we be here?"

"Well, this is our event. You wouldn't like it if we came to your event. You wouldn't like it."

“This is what we do. We turn up at different things unannounced, uninvited.”

00:50:00 “All right. You can stay, but you have to play it down.”

I don't know who got these big sticks, and they put the t-shirts on top of the sticks, and they were going all over, and it got so much attention, and we sold so many t-shirts, because everybody wanted that Keith Haring t-shirt. We sold more that day—and also the “Silence = Death.” We sold a lot of those, but I remember they were so angry that we would dare show up at one of their events.

**SS: So from, let's say, '87 to, I don't know, '93 or something, how much would you say ACT UP raised?**

CH: I don't know, but they did well. They did good. Those t-shirts and the posters, they provided a lot of money for ACT UP.

**SS: Were you working in any other capacity inside ACT UP?**

CH: I did go to the demonstrations, but that was really—and that took quite a bit of time. It was a lot more than just going to one meeting, because we had to go to the fundraising meetings, too, and there were always things during the week that we had to keep my eye on, because we had to order the material all the time, and then they'd come in and we'd have to find a place to store everything, and then to drag that material to all these different events and to every meeting.

**SS: So you're spending all this time on ACT UP and all these meetings and all this stuff, and then what happens when somebody gets very sick, like when Patrick's lover, Dino, died and you had this personal upheaval that's in the middle of all of that? How do you integrate that?**

CH: Yes. It was painful, because everybody was so involved and so—everything was so emotional, because, yes, we had this—on the surface there was this anger and frustration, but inside there was all this emotion, all this hurt and pain. Even at some of the meetings there would be terrible—when people would get up and say that, “So-and-so is so bad, and he really needs help and he needs something.” It was just week after week we would be hearing this, and it was very emotional.

**SS: How did you cope with that?**

CH: And the other part was I was also continuing to deliver food with God’s Love. So on the one hand, I felt that I was still delivering food with God’s Love, so that was one outlet, but then I was also doing the ACT UP, which was a different type of outlet. But there was something that was very gratifying about delivering the food.

**SS: Well, as the years went by, did you start to notice that people with AIDS had more services and were living in a less abandoned way?**

CH: Yes, and actually, I still deliver food with God’s Love. I still deliver it on Wednesdays. It’s very different. The people that I deliver food to now, it’s very different.

**SS: Tell us, how is it different?**

CH: Well, part of it was when I was—before, I would really start—because I’d see people week after week after week, I would start having relationships, becoming friendly with them, and I remember—it was only at the beginning when I would actually drive the van, and then at a certain point they hired a driver, and so the volunteer—the driver would drive the van, and then the volunteer would deliver the food. I remember a time that the driver would get so angry with me, “What were you doing up

there so long? We've got other people to go to. You can't sit and be talking to these people for so long." But I would see them for such a long time, and maybe for some of these people I was the only contact that they would have from day to day. So now there are so many people that I have seen for such a long time who have never said one word to me. It's so different.

**SS: You're like the delivery boy.**

00:55:00

CH: Yes. I deliver the food. They don't even say, "Thank you." They don't say a thing.

**SS: Why? What is that?**

CH: I know. It makes me so frustrated. There's one person that I've seen for the longest time. I have never seen him. All I see is he opens the door, he sticks his arm out, I put the food on the arm, and he brings it in.

**SS: So they're not looking for community.**

CH: I don't know. I don't know if they're still ashamed or if they feel so terrible or they just don't have any manners. I don't know what it is.

**SS: Interesting.**

CH: But so many of these people, I don't know a thing about them, never said a word to me.

**SS: Now, a lot of people who were in ACT UP ended up with bad drug problems and a bad alcohol problem. Some people died of it, some people got sober. As you were witnessing the consequences of the epicenter of the crisis on people, where do you think it all is now? How are people living with this?**

CH: Well, there were people, even in fundraising, that had drinking problems. It was difficult for me, anyway, because I was handling this money all the time, and I was responsible for lugging these t-shirts. They'd want to be involved. They'd want to do things, and then I'd give them something, a task, a job, and then something would go wrong. So, yes, there was somebody that actually had a bad drinking problem, and then came to somebody on fundraising and talked about the problem, and then the person said, "Okay, I will give you money to go to rehab, with the condition that when you get out, that you will work and you'll pay me back." He gave him the money, and he went to rehab, and he came out, never mentioned the money, never mentioned anything. So even during the time when I was with ACT UP, there were people that had the drug and the drinking problems.

**SS: What do you see now, though, as the long-term consequences of all of that? I guess what I'm trying to get at is we all know the good that ACT UP did, but what do you see as the toll on the individuals?**

CH: By that question, do you mean did we enable certain people to continue a lifestyle that was—

**SS: Well, I guess that's another way of looking it. I mean, do you think it's part of the trauma of AIDS or do you think we were just enabling people's addictions that would have been there anyway?**

CH: I do. I think part of it was we enabled them, and partly it was with our so-called white guilt, that we had this white entitled background. This goes back to part of the problem when the money was disappearing, and there were people that were blaming us, "You're to blame because you let it happen." Well, I didn't accept that, but

it still goes back to there are some people that thought that we were enabling these people who had these problems to begin with, and because ACT UP was such an open forum that was open to anybody, that we enabled them.

**SS: Now, I just want to go back to the parallel with the porn community. So when somebody died in ACT UP, there were care groups inside ACT UP, there would be memorial services, but what about in the porn world? I mean, when people died, was there any acknowledgement? How do you think it affected people in the business to have such a high death rate?**

01:00:00 CH: Well, part of it was at that time drugs also were very prevalent in the porn world, and so a lot of times there would be an overdose, and it would not be HIV-related or AIDS-related, so there was always a lot of death. There was always a lot of different things going on. Also, the porn world is such an unstable world, you know, to begin with, because sometimes people can make one or two movies and decide, "This work, it's not for me," and then they leave, and then a year later, they come back because they need money again. So it's such an unstable world to begin with, so it's so difficult to make any kind of statement about. But I had a number of people that did die AIDS-related in the porn world, and it was very difficult to get the whole porn community together to do anything. It's such a diverse crowd, and as I said, even the people that produced porn, so many people are in it for different reasons.

**SS: Were there any stars who were openly HIV-positive or openly had AIDS?**

CH: I did not know any big stars, but in the porn world it's really the women that become the big stars because there's so much more money in straight porn.

In the gay porn, yes, there are stars, but there is never the money or the fame that straight porn got.

**SS: So what made you decide to leave ACT UP when you did?**

CH: Well, ACT UP was changing. It was getting smaller and smaller and they weren't doing as much, and also, so many people that had been important were now in the inside of the AIDS business. So many of them got jobs because they were so knowledgeable. They were smart, they were knowledgeable, they were aware, and they got jobs inside to really—they didn't need ACT UP to be screaming and fighting in the streets anymore, because they could do their work inside, and we all saw that happen, and it was great. So, yes, there's always been a need for ACT UP and there always will be, but it wasn't quite as desperate as it was. And also, I'd done it for a long time and lugged those t-shirts around for so many years, and at a certain point I thought, "You know what? I just can't do it anymore."

**JAMES WENTZY: What timeframe? What years?**

CH: It was late, because I remember coming to ACT UP at the end, and there weren't that many people at the meetings anymore.

**SS: So would you say you stayed until '95 or '96?**

CH: Oh, much later.

**SS: Later?**

CH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, much later than that. I would say early into 2000.

**SS: Okay. So you were in fundraising for ACT UP for thirteen or fourteen years.**

CH: For a long time.

**SS: Oh, my god, Charles. Thank you for that.**

CH: But as I said, there was a certain point where I wasn't that involved. Yes, I still went to the fundraising meetings and I still lugged around those t-shirts, but I wasn't so involved in the production or the other fundraising events as I used to be, but I still—yes, I would say up until—

**SS: I only have one question left. Is there anything important that we haven't covered?**

CH: No. I mean, ACT UP really was life-altering for me. I had great experience and great friendships, and people that I have met during my ACT UP days I'm still friendly and close with. So, yes, ACT UP has had a major influence on my life.

**SS: Okay, so the last question is just looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?**

CH: I think that their bringing awareness to AIDS, but also the frustration that the services and the drugs were not there and people weren't doing as much as they could have been. I think that the worst part of ACT UP was really the only time I thought that there was a bad—was really maybe even during the church, where I think somebody became a little overzealous and did more than anybody expected and/or wanted them to do, and unfortunately, that's what got so much bad publicity. So maybe there were times where, in the thick of things when the emotions were running high, there were some people that became a little too overzealous.

01 :05:00

**SS: Well, that's not too much.**

CH: No, no, it wasn't terrible. I mainly think of ACT UP in positive terms as far as negative.

**SS: Okay, great. Well, thank you so much for your time. Thank you. That was great. I learned a lot.**