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Interviewee: **Richard Jackman**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Richard Jackman
October 15, 2014

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay good.

RICHARD JACKMAN: I'm talking to you. I'm looking at you.

SS: So let's start. You tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

RJ: Okay. My name's Richard Jackman. I'm fifty-six. Today's August—
August. Today's October 15th, 2014. And what was the last question?

SS: Where are we?

RJ: Oh, we're in Alexis' [Danzig] apartment in Harlem.

SS: Great. Where did you grow up, Rich?

RJ: Oh. Southwestern Pennsylvania, in the boonies.

SS: Was it like how small a town? Was it a town?

RJ: I grew up outside of a town. The nearest town, if you want to call it that, was Lycippus, which was a road with two churches and a hardware store. But I grew up in, like, surrounded by farmland and woods.

SS: Did you grow up on a farm?

RJ: No, no. My father was a steelworker. My mother was a nurse.

SS: Where was the factory?

RJ: The steel plant was in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, so a small steel plant. They call it a boutique steel plant. Actually, they make titanium steel, so I guess it is a boutique steel plant.

SS: So most of the people who worked there were living in the country?

RJ: What?

SS: So most of the people who worked there were living in the country?

RJ: Yeah, mostly. They might live in town, but, yeah, a small town or, yeah, they lived out in the country. People were—it's really spread apart, yeah.

SS: So did your parents—were they very community oriented, or did you belong to a church? Was there any kind of union participation?

RJ: No. Well, no, I wouldn't say so. It was family oriented. My father, on Sundays, my father would drive my two sisters and I to Sunday School, drop us off at Sunday School, and he would go to the American Legion to drink with his buddies. And then after Sunday School, we would walk over and get sodas and play pool and pinball with him. I think basically they did this because they thought sending us to church would keep us from growing up to be axe murderers. So I mean, they were the kind of people who went to church like a couple times a year, for holidays, that kind of thing.

SS: So which came first for you, politics or gay?

RJ: Gay.

SS: And how did that unfold in being where you were?

RJ: I was in Columbus, Ohio, at the time.

SS: So as a child or in high school, you didn't really—

RJ: Well, I was in severe denial. It was a very, very conservative culture there, very conservative, and that was just not all right, and, yeah, I really pushed that down. So it wasn't till I was twenty-five, really.

SS: But do you think that that made you leave town or did—

RJ: No, no, no. That's not how it happened.

SS: Okay, tell me.

RJ: I went to school in Pittsburgh, I went to Carnegie Mellon, and then after I graduated, I had a girlfriend. She moved to Columbus, Ohio. She was a glassblower. I followed her out there to get a job, in—my first architecture jobs, and we lived together there for a few years. All told, we were together about four years, and then we broke up. It was after we broke up that I'm, like, putting the pieces together and—you know. So that's where it happened. So, in 1984.

SS: Okay. In 1984?

RJ: Yeah.

SS: Now, had you been politically active at all, or was that—

RJ: No, no, not at all. I had opinions. Don't we all? But no. I think it was context. Like I had no context for being actually political. You know, growing up in this rural working-class thing, there was no sense that you could have any impact on anything. That was just not conceived of. And Carnegie Mellon was a very apolitical kind of college too.

SS: But you must have been ambitious, because you went to Carnegie Mellon, I mean.

RJ: Hmm. I must have been ambitious. Well, I don't know. Yeah. No, I had this very vague dream of becoming this incredible architect, but in retrospect, I had no idea what I was doing or how to do it. I didn't realize—I didn't know that you had to have things like connections.

SS: But also buildings. Like you didn't really grow up around buildings.

00:05:00

RJ: No, but when I was fourteen years old, we went to visit Fallingwater, which is not far from where I grew up, actually. It's about an hour away. And I was already interested in it, reading books and stuff, and that clinched it for me, I think. I was just—

SS: What's Fallingwater?

RJ: Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater is probably one of the most famous houses in the world. Fallingwater was built by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Kaufmann family of the department store fame. That was their weekend house. Anyhow, that really kind of clinched it for me, and Carnegie Mellon was pretty close, and, yeah, I got in.

SS: Cool.

RJ: I had no clue what the fuck I was doing. You know? I mean, my sisters and I, we were the first generation to go to college, so it was kind of we were trailblazing and didn't have any guidance.

SS: So how did you meet men in Columbus, Ohio, in 1984?

RJ: Oh, okay. Well, you went to bars, of course. There were a couple bars that I typically went to. That's a long time ago. Let me see. Yeah, I don't know. There were a couple bars I went to. There was a pretty active scene in Columbus.

SS: Do you remember what they were called?

RJ: One of them was the Trade Winds. The bars I preferred were quasi semi leathery kind of—. And the other one was the Eagle in Exile. The Eagle was

always in exile. It just kept moving around. Anyhow. Yeah, yeah. And the bars, there were like three or four bars in this same kind of warehouse district near each other, within walking distance of one another, and the cops would bust people for driving drunk in that area. Of course, people were driving drunk, but they were driving drunk all over the city. But that was their thing, so you had to be cautious about that. And there were a couple other bars in other parts of town too. There was a bar that did drag shows in another part of town, one up closer to Ohio State.

SS: So how was AIDS viewed in that milieu?

RJ: Oh. The first time I even heard anything about it, I think, was a pamphlet that was sitting on top of, like, the cigarette machine or something, that was printed by the State Health Department. It was a reprint of a GMHC pamphlet, actually. I recognized it later. I'm like, "That's the same pamphlet," you know. And I picked it up and I'm reading it. It seemed very remote to me. Nobody talked about this. It wasn't real there. I didn't know anybody who had AIDS that we knew of or anything like that. My first boyfriend there died of AIDS some years later, but—

SS: Was he diagnosed while you were together?

RJ: No, not to my knowledge. He didn't say anything about that. I only found out some years later through a friend that he was already dead. I wasn't in contact with him. Yeah, it wasn't really real. I was seeing a therapist at the time who was very well intended but pretty—not too smart, but he brought it up with me. And I'm the kind of person, generally I'm pretty cautious, so I took it seriously, even though it was this kind of abstract thing.

SS: Were people using condoms in Columbus, Ohio, or that hadn't reached—

RJ: I think they started to. I'm trying—you know, it's hard for me to recall exactly. I mean, there was what I was doing, but that doesn't mean that other people were doing this. I mean, initially I was having, in retrospect, unsafe sex. Of course, I wasn't thinking of it that way. Yeah, so, with a guy who may well have been HIV-positive at the time. I don't know. I have no way of knowing that now, right?

SS: So when did you leave there?

00:10:00

RJ: 1985. 1985, I moved to South Jersey. A friend of mine from college got a job there, this architect that did beach houses and stuff. So I wanted to move to New York, and this was a way that I could—I got a job there and I was closer to New York, and I could job hunt, you know, do a day trip to job hunt. So I was there for like a year and a half. We designed a summer stock theater when we were there. And then I moved up to New York in '87.

SS: So what did you find when you came here?

RJ: Okay. Initially, I was just spending a lot of time. I was very engaged in—I was seeing a lot of art and just really soaking it in, some theater and stuff. Then actually it was—when ACT UP started in April, I want to say, '87, is that right?

SS: February.

RJ: I think my first meeting was in August, actually.

SS: How did you go from being completely apolitical to going to an ACT UP meeting?

RJ: Yeah, that's a pretty good question. Well, actually, I'm thinking maybe as far back—it may have been as far back as when I was still in Columbus, I had a subscription to the *New York Native*, and I got a lot of books out of the library. That's how I, like, learned about being gay, was by reading books from the library, and then the *New York Native*, which, if I recall correctly, what did not go completely insane immediately. It took a while before there was something about porpoises.

Yeah, so I was reading that and I was following that and I remember being very—AIDS was still fairly abstract to me, and I was more focused on all the talk about camps and things like that, and the reaction to it, The right-wing reaction to it was what really concerned me initially, because that was more real to me. So I was getting more and more concerned about that, actually.

The first thing that actually happened was there was an ad in the back of the *Village Voice* for a little group that was meeting, and I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was some kind of lefty sort of gay something. And there were a couple people who also ended up in ACT UP who were in this little meeting. We were in a little circle in a room upstairs in a community center, and ACT UP was meeting downstairs. And every once in a while it went through us, like, "Who are all those people down there?" And every once in a while, this roar, and we're like, "Okay, whatever's happening down there is more interesting than us," and we ended up just sort of drifting down there and checking it out and being absorbed. It was—oh, god. I'll think of the people's names later. Marion Banzhaf, I think, was one of them, and Bob Lederer was in that little group. I think they maybe had only met a few times or something.

SS: So then you came into ACT UP?

RJ: Yeah.

SS: And then what did you do? How did you get involved?

RJ: I'm sitting there, trying to figure out what the hell's going on. It's hot; it's exciting; it's interesting. The first meeting I went to, I think, was the meeting where they/we decided that you had to go to three meetings before you could vote, because the New Alliance Party, was it, had taken over briefly, and then they must have been kicked out in the previous meeting than I went to. So that happened, and then I don't remember which meeting—it was not long after that that Eric Sawyer stood up and was talking about housing issues, and I'm like, "Okay, that has something to do with something that I know and care about," and I started making a connection.

00:15:00 You know what? At the same time, now that I think about it, so my first job with an architect in New York was this small firm, one architect and a couple drafting people doing like high-end interior renovations and stuff. And there were some homeless people in Columbus, Ohio, but not like New York. I'm like stepping over people on my way to my job to design kitchens for very spoiled people who basically were redoing their kitchens because they were bored, and something was not—I'm like, "This isn't right. This is fucked up," you know. That started to pull me in. Also eventually it's what made me quit that job and go to work for Pratt Architectural Collaborative, doing nonprofit affordable housing and stuff like that. It was just—yeah, I think I was kind of waking up, I guess.

SS: Does that group still exist?

RJ: What?

SS: Pratt. Does that still exist?

RJ: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yes, yes. In fact, my second boss there is still there running it, I think, yeah, Joan Byron.

SS: Oh, yeah.

RJ: You know Joan Byron?

SS: Sure.

RJ: Yeah, yeah. She's the one who laid me off. I sort of feel like she didn't like me too much, but that's another story.

SS: So your first real involvement in ACT UP was with the Housing Committee?

RJ: I think that's the first thing that I really got engaged in specifically, yeah, I think, and even then it was just kind of this nascent thing. Yeah.

SS: So tell us what was it like? Who was in the Housing Committee? What were you guys doing?

RJ: It shifted. The people shifted over time. Initially it started out, I remember, Eric. The naiveté was unbelievable, you know. It was like, oh, somehow we're just going to collect some money and we're going to find a building, and we're going to buy this building and we'll fix it up, and it will all be great. And he got involved with this South African developer, who I think just ripped off a bunch of money and disappeared.

SS: Do you remember that person's name?

RJ: I don't remember her name.

SS: Ripped off money from ACT UP? I don't know this story.

RJ: What we did is—I don't remember. This must have been probably '88, because it was Gay Pride, and even though you weren't supposed to collect money, we had a big trash can on wheels, and we just rolled it down and asked people for money, and they filled that thing up. And we had garbage bags full of money in the back of Eric's pickup, and a cop stopped us and asked us what we were doing. I forget what it was exactly. He asked us if we had a permit or something, and Eric said, "Oh, it's in the truck. Let me go look for it." And while he was doing that, I was shoving the bags in the back, and the cop got bored or distracted and left, and we took off. And I think she probably absconded with that money. I don't really know what happened with that, but it was just naïve country white boys. Isn't that what Eric was as well?

SS: He wasn't redesigning Harlem yet at the time?

RJ: I don't know. I guess he was redoing his house, I think, probably. Yeah, I don't—you know, I didn't pay too much attention to people's non-ACT UP lives, but, yeah.

SS: But I mean that he had knowledge about renovation and housing.

RJ: Yeah, I think he was doing that kind of stuff, but what I mean is I don't think he—I think he was just naïve about people.

SS: So what were some of the programs or campaigns that you were involved in?

RJ: Okay. Oh, there were a lot. We focused a lot on issues around homeless people with AIDS, and AIDS in the shelters and stuff like that. So how many? We did so many different actions and related stuff that I'm not quite sure where to start.

SS: What was the goal? What was the demand?

RJ: Okay. The demand. Well, a couple things. One was we focused a lot on trying to get housing for people with AIDS. At the time, this was the first Bush administration. There was the McKinney Housing Program, which was money for supported housing for people with disabilities of different sorts, but they would absolutely not give money to anybody who applied for AIDS-specific housing because they said that was discriminatory. I mean, they were giving money for housing that was specifically for people with visual impairments, and they were doing this and that and the other.

00:20:00 And I remember we had this meeting in D.C. We finally got a meeting with these people at HUD, because they administered it. And I can't remember this woman's name who was like their right-wing policy person. She had written this welfare reform book that was published by the Heritage Foundation. I remember she was shocked that I had actually read it. I don't think anybody read that thing, but I actually read the thing. I was doing my homework. And they were just—they were such dicks, you know. And the irony is that [Stuart] McKinney, he was from, what, Connecticut? He died of AIDS, right?

So things started loosening up at some point after that. I think Congress basically told them, "Look, yeah, McKinney money is for AIDS too." Then [Jim] McDermott, they passed the McDermott Act. McDermott was from Seattle, and Seattle had a strong kind of housing movement going on, and that was specifically for AIDS housing, and things picked up then, but it was always inadequate. It was always grossly inadequate. That was sort of the primary thing, you know. Housing discrimination was also an issue that we dealt with a lot, and NIMBY issues, you know, a lot of stuff around

communities reacting to AIDS housing, which is sort of an extension of the reaction to affordable housing in general.

SS: So did you have a particular plan for a specific housing project that you wanted to set up that you were advocating for?

RJ: Well, that was, in the beginning, that whole bullshit thing with that developer. I want to say her first name was Charlotte for some reason. I don't remember. I met her once.

SS: That's funny. I have never heard this, that ACT UP was ripped off by an architect.

RJ: I don't think Eric—I don't know. Have you interviewed Eric?

SS: Yes.

RJ: He maybe didn't want to talk about it. She was a developer.

SS: How much money did she get?

RJ: I don't recall. I don't remember, it's been so long.

Anyhow, yeah, but that never developed. So we did policy work to try to make sure that there was funding and that it could happen, and fighting NIMBY when people—you know, different nonprofit groups were developing housing, and we were trying to help them and that sort of thing. Eventually Housing Works evolved out of the Housing Committee, though. That was a spinoff of—

SS: We'll get to that in a second.

RJ: Yeah, sure.

SS: Can you give me any specific examples?

RJ: Let me think. There was a proposal to develop the Northern Dispensary into AIDS housing at one point, and there was a lot of NIMBY about that. I remember specifically the owners of the Monster, the bar, were opposed to it. We plastered the neighborhood with posters that I think the headline was, “What kind of Monster would oppose AIDS housing?” Something like that. We supported squatters. We did some marches with squatters.

SS: Where were they squatting?

RJ: Well, there was the Glass House squat, and there were a lot of very young people.

SS: On Tenth and B?

RJ: What’s that?

SS: Just for people who are watching this and don’t know what it is, can you—

RJ: The Glass House was a big old industrial building in the East Village, Lower East Side. I think it was on Avenue C. I can’t remember the exact address. But there were some young people in there. And Councilman Pagán was—

SS: Antonio Pagán?

RJ: Antonio Pagán, he was trying to—he set up a plan that was basically—supposedly it was going to be developed into AIDS housing. He was trying to pitch AIDS activists against squatters in order to facilitate gentrification, and we saw through that one. We saw, yeah, yeah, you know, it could have gone the other way. You could have had middle-class white AIDS activists saying, “Why are these grungy squatters getting in the way of “real” housing?”

SS: Right.

00:25:00 RJ: I think we pretty successfully turned that around mentally. I don't know how successful we were in the end, but we forged some alliances, if nothing else. I don't know.

SS: But did you produce any housing?

RJ: Not directly. Housing Works did.

SS: So let's get to that. So can you explain why did Housing Works have to leave ACT UP?

RJ: Why did they have to leave ACT UP? Well, I think in order to actually produce housing, you have to go in a somewhat different direction. You have to become a service agency of some sort. That's what it is. ACT UP was never a service agency. It's not meant to be. It's an activist organization, and that's something very different. I mean, Housing Works still has a very activist character to it. I'm very happy about that, that it end up being, what, the largest AIDS service organization in the city and it's very—it was Charles King. He's very charismatic, and he just bulldozed it through and did what I think everybody thought you couldn't do, which is have a service organization that was actually going to get government money at the same time that you're doing civil disobedience against the very departments that you're getting money from. But it worked.

SS: Did you get involved in Housing Works?

RJ: Not much. I did a little consulting for them here and there, but I wasn't very involved in it. I wanted a job, I didn't have a job, and I thought maybe I

could get one through them and I didn't, and I'm not quite sure why, but that's water under the bridge.

SS: So what was the culture of the Housing Committee, like who was on it?

RJ: Okay. Well, it always ran on consensus. In the earlier days, I think it was mostly Charles King that was spearheading things a lot, and then as he got less involved, I more or less started leading it, insofar as we acknowledged that anybody was leading anything. We were always very open and went out of our way to accommodate people who may have had mental disability issues and that sort of thing, because of what we were about, right?

SS: You mean activists who may have had disability issues or clients?

RJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah,

SS: Activists.

RJ: Activists, yeah, yeah. I mean, well, some people just, I think, came there because it was a comfortable, safe place.

SS: Where did you meet?

RJ: We met most—well, early on we met in different people's apartments. For a while we met in G'Dalia Braverman's apartment, and then later we met in the ACT UP—the workspace, not the office, the workspace, the one that was on—

JAMES WENTZY: West 29th.

RJ: Yeah, West 29th. Thank you. That one, yeah. We did different actions also around basically trying to counter the dehumanization of homeless people, you know, like when they were cracking down on squeegee guys, for example. So we

did the squeegee action across the street from Tiffany's around Christmas and put on top hats and we had our squeegees. I tried to squeegee a Rolls. They wouldn't let me. But stuff like that. It was just trying to turn it around a little bit. Later on, it became more sort of—how do I put it? It became more about people trying to counter the narrative of homelessness.

SS: What about the Trump action? I was at that.

RJ: Oh, yeah, the Trump action. Yeah.

SS: What was that about?

00:30:00 RJ: That was very closely related. So we did this big action at Trump Tower at Thanksgiving, around Thanksgiving, called Trumpsgiving, that was really, you know, it was countering this whole glorification of gentrification and this just disgusting kind of Trumpism, I guess you would call it. So there were multiple groups, different affinity groups doing different actions simultaneously mostly in that whole court mall thing in Trump Tower. The group I worked with, we handed out empty paper plates, Happy Trumpsgiving plates. I know that somebody blockaded the front doors. I don't remember. There were a bunch of things happening simultaneously. It was semi-organized chaos.

SS: Wasn't it really about funding, that Trump had gotten all these tax breaks from the city?

RJ: Yeah, yes, of course, yes. That's quite true. Thanks for jogging my memory. Like I said, my memory's for shit about lots of this stuff. Right. Yeah, he's getting tax breaks and all kinds of funding while there are homeless people with HIV on the streets. Funding. But ultimately it wasn't about money, because it always costs more

to have people in shelters and have people homeless than to house them, right? So it's not really about money, and it's not even about not wanting to spend money on those people—"those people."

SS: What's it about?

RJ: Because you are spending money on those people, and you are spending more money than you would if you treated them more humanely.

SS: So what was it really about?

RJ: Hate and fear. It's about hate and fear and maintaining—I think ultimately it's very important that people are afraid of being homeless, that you are afraid of losing your job, that you could see how far down you could slide, and our society has to maintain the possibility of personal disaster to keep people in line, and that costs money, and that's okay.

SS: Were there homeless people on the committee?

RJ: Depending on your definition, yeah. Well, yes. Sometimes yes, on and off.

SS: How did that affect things?

RJ: I don't know. Kept it real, I guess. I guess it did keep it real. I would just ended up there was one point, here I am doing this stuff. You know, truth be told, I care about these issues and I try to do work around them, but I'm not very good dealing with people one-on-one, especially people who have issues. I'm just not good at that, but I got stuck into it somehow.

A friend of mine, my ex-boyfriend, had a friend, a bar friend through Tunnel Bar, who, when he tested positive, became very depressed and he lost his job and

he ended up getting evicted from his apartment. So Danny called me and said, “Can you help him out?” because he figured I had some connections. And I did what I could, but I couldn’t get him in anywhere initially. He ended up living in my studio apartment with me for four months, and then finally we got him housing. And that was like—I could never be a social service person. I’m just not that person.

SS: But I mean that’s a typical kind of ACT UP story because so many committees and affinity groups ended up with people really taking responsibility for each other.

RJ: You kind of have to.

SS: Did anyone on your committee get really sick?

RJ: You know, no, not really. Not at the time, no.

SS: Were you in an affinity group?

RJ: Yeah, I was in a couple affinity groups. I was in MHA.

SS: What’s that?

RJ: MHA stood for different things at different times. It initially formed before I joined. They did a sit-in in Stephen Joseph’s office. I don’t remember the specific issue. And they had formed—I think they were supposed to be the Metropolitan Health Association or some bullshit, a made up doctors’ group or something in order to get this meeting, and they got booked for a meeting by somebody who had no idea who they were. As long as they were doctors, they could meet, and they wanted to meet with Stephen Joseph, I guess to talk about various issues around AIDS, and that’s how that started.

00:35:00

And I joined them later on, and we just kept changing what MHA stood for, depending on the—it was the Mad Housewives Association for a while. That's the one we used the most often. It wasn't an issue-specific group. It was more about sensibility, I suppose. I don't know. We did a lot of different kinds of actions. We were an affinity group for the FDA action, for example.

SS: What did you do there?

RJ: We decided to try to get inside at some point, and we went around the back, and there was one of those rolling metal garage door kind of things that was locked, but you could kind of push up the middle, and it bent and it went into this kind of like loading dock kind of space. And we started with the skinniest of us getting through this thing. I never got inside, myself. I don't remember how we were doing. And a couple people got in there, and then there was a door that the knob was missing, and it was like wired shut or something, and they peeked through there. It's some kind of lab, there were people working in there, and they kind of got it unwired and kind of wandered in. But we didn't really have a very good plan. It's like, "Okay, now what?" you know. Everybody flipped out, and they're like, "Oh, maybe we don't want to do this," and they came back out, and that was kind of it. But it was kind of like, "Yeah, we could do this if we wanted to."

Yeah, that's a good question. What was it about? It's you're surrounded, right? You know. It could be, yeah.

And we did a few other things. We did an interesting project once where we made these posters in English and Spanish, how to put on a condom, with diagrams, and we plastered them all around different subway stations around the city, and they

stayed up like for a day or so before they started pulling them down. They were hot pink and they were really hard to miss, and we just plastered them over the different ads.

We also did an action at the Natural History Museum. They had this exhibit on plagues. It was called “Plague,” I think. And they had a section on AIDS, of course, that was just like really kind of what you would expect. “It’s bad,” you know, whatever. It’s not grappling with the fact that there’s this horrible crisis going on in the city that this museum is in. It’s treating it in this totally abstract way. And there was this—they’d have this narrative thing at the beginning of each section about each plague, and they had this narrative thing about AIDS, and it turned out that the font used on it—and this is all pre, all the stuff you could do with computer graphics and everything, or that we had access to. But the architect—this is the first architect, the gentrifying architect that I worked for—had a Kroy machine. It printed text on these sticky strips that you put on drawings with this big disks. The font was exactly what they were using there, so we duplicated that, but put our own text in it, talking about the crisis and how you had to take action and that sort of thing.

And one night just when I think they were having like a singles night in the—so you could just in the evening in the Natural History Museum, went in there with some spray glue and just put it up over there, and it stayed up there for several days because nobody actually noticed that it had changed, because graphically it looked identical. And went back and watched people wander through and read it, read that along with everything else.

So many things like that. It's like you don't know what impact it had or if it had an impact or not. Maybe you woke somebody up, one person. You don't know, right? Something like that, it's, just guerilla kind of stuff. Yeah. It's fun.

SS: What was your favorite thing that you were involved in in ACT UP?

00:40:00

RJ: Hmm. That was good. The squeegee action I liked a lot just because the way it inverted the narrative that was going on, that there are these horrible squeegee people and they're a problem, like they're an infestation of some sort that has to be gotten rid of. And by having these nice mostly white boys in the middle of this shopping district in the holidays—

[Alarm from outside]

RJ: Take a breather?

SS: It's fine, it's New York. That's the way it is.

RJ: Yeah, exactly. Uh, I need some water actually if that's okay.

SS: Oh, okay.

RJ: Can—

SS: It's right there.

JW: You can unplug your, uh, microphone.

SS: Your water is—

RJ: Yes, there it is. I left that there, thank you. Alright, alright. We're good—All right. Where were we? Squeegee. It was about, we did it in a very fun, colorful way, lighthearted attitude toward it, which is basically a way of getting press, getting media attention. People like that kind of stuff. But it was really just about

making—turning around a really, really heinous, demeaning way of talking about people and dehumanizing people, basically by parodying the people who were doing it and parodying the wealthy. Yeah. Yeah, I think—

SS: So what was the biggest screw-up? So that was your favorite action in ACT UP. What was the failure?

RJ: I think I told you about the biggest screw-up.

SS: Oh, the money.

RJ: It was at the very beginning about that money, yeah. Yeah, I think that's lost in the mist, and I don't actually know a lot of details about it. I just know that money was gone.

SS: Now, did the Housing Committee ever have conflicts with the floor?

RJ: Here and there.

SS: Do you remember what any of them were about?

RJ: Well, one around the squeegee action, you know, and it was basically always—yeah, the squeegee action was a few people saying, “Well, I don't like these guys squeegeeing my window. It's obnoxious, it's a pain in the ass, I hate it,” whatever, and just trying to get people to think about that in a different way. It's an inconvenience to you, but this is how somebody else is surviving. So think beyond yourself a little bit and just—you know.

A little bit similarly when we were working with squatters, we did the squatters march together. It was called “The Lifestyles of the HIV-positive and Homeless.” We had big torn cardboard signs and things. Again, it was the scenario that

Pagán had tried to set up of pitting middle-class activists against squatters and the idea that squatters were in the way of the development of affordable housing for people with HIV and other people, and turning that around and saying, “These squatters are those people already, and to some degree they’re doing it for themselves, so you’re just undermining your own goals.”

00:45:00 But I think the pattern was this underlying subtext of the way middle-class people think about these problems and poor people are dealing with them in their everyday lives. You know, you’ve got sick people who are homeless, and over here they are just doing what they can to help themselves, so they break into a building and they’re living in the building, and over there, now you set up this nonprofit agency and you’ve got all these people working there and you get government funding and you do all this policy work, and that’s how you do it, right? And one is not necessarily more efficient than the other, you know. I mean, that has a lot of overhead.

SS: Were there homeless people who came to the Monday night meetings who were part of ACT UP?

RJ: Yeah. Sometimes, yes. Not necessarily consistently, but I think yes, on and off, and some people who were squatters, some people who had become homeless due to AIDS and things like that. Homelessness is not a—it’s a situation, not a state of being, right? So, yeah, you could be homeless and not homeless and, you know, so yes.

SS: I need to take a little break for one second. Sorry about that. Okay. So let’s go on to something more glam. So what was your social life like in ACT UP?

RJ: My social life in ACT UP, not as good as it should have been. I think I had ACT UP instead of a social life, mostly. That *was* my social life, being an activist.

SS: Did you make close friends?

RJ: I did make some good friends that way, but everything focused on that, you know. If you're asking who I had sex with, that's a limited list, very short limited list.

SS: How did you feel about the social life? Because some people in ACT UP were in a social whirl, right? How did you feel about that?

RJ: Sometimes I felt strangely isolated, you know, like I couldn't break past the business to just being friends with people. Know what I mean? I'm not sure why that is. A lot of it's my personality and it's just—you know.

SS: A lot of people have the same feeling, that we've talked to.

RJ: Yeah, yeah.

SS: It's very common.

RJ: Yeah. I mean—

SS: Did you ever get in any big fights with anyone?

RJ: I don't think I really did. I mean, there were people who maybe didn't like me and I didn't like, but we—

SS: Nothing explosive.

RJ: —kept that to side.

SS: Were you ever involved in any big controversies or faction fights in ACT UP?

RJ: Well, there was this sort of split thing.

SS: Oh, yeah. How did you experience that?

RJ: Well, I do remember you fictionalized this. You called me Rick.

SS: In what?

RJ: In one of your novels.

SS: No, it's not you.

RJ: It's not me?

SS: No.

RJ: The mild-mannered architect named Rick?

SS: No, it's not you, honey.

RJ: All right.

SS: I swear to you.

RJ: Well, I was like, "Who's this mild-mannered architect who's named Rick?" And I did, in fact—I call it the night Larry Kramer dissed me, because it was like he doesn't even know who I am. It's like I said something, and he's like, "What this guy over here said." I was like, "You don't even know who the fuck I am. I've been here every Monday night for, you know, it feels like half my life, working my ass off."

SS: Right, but what happened? What was it about?

RJ: Oh, well, what initially it was about—there was the—do you call it a boycott, exactly? I don't remember, but basically we were not supposed to be engaging with the CDC. My memory is very fuzzy on this, and I remember it had to do with the Women's Caucus, so it probably had to do with women's definition of AIDS and
00:50:00 women's health issues around that, and the Treatment and Data Committee broke this

kind of behind our backs. I guess the information got out, leaked out, and there was a big fight on the floor about it, you know.

I see both sides of that, but to me, the real problem was a lack of respect for other people's positions and concerns and interests. Instead of coming back and saying, "Look. This isn't working. We really need to talk to these people. We need to have this open line of communication," and talking about that until you could reach a new consensus, they just went behind everybody's back.

SS: And why did that happen?

RJ: I have an idea about why I think it happened. I think that on a surface level, it's like, "This is a crisis. We don't have time. I have AIDS. I'm going to do what I need to do." Underneath that, it was, "What I want and what I need is more important than anybody else's needs. Me first." And AIDS was sometimes a justification for "me first," and a hard one to argue against, you know.

SS: And how did you get in a conflict with Larry about this?

RJ: I don't remember the exact thing, I think, what exactly I said about it, but it was probably something along those lines, you know. It's like, "This is the decision the floor came to, and if you don't like the decision the floor came to, you should be coming back to the floor and we should be having this openly. We should be working together on this and not just bypassing the process."

It's like I'm sure Larry said something along the lines of, "Fuck the process," you know. He never understood how activism worked, did he? He just never got it.

SS: That's an interesting comment. What was it specifically that he didn't understand?

RJ: I don't think that he understood that the way it really works is that people work together collectively and you make decisions collectively, and every good activist is not a follower, but a leader in their own right, and so you've got a roomful of leaders, and they all have to work together. I mean, there are followers, but you know. I said not that long ago on Facebook, I said that he started GMHC wanting to start a movement, and he got a social service agency. So then he started ACT UP wanting an army, and he got a movement. He wanted an army of followers, but that's not how it works. That's not how you get people who are really committed, who are really doing smart, innovative stuff. If you want an army, you get a bunch of dumb people who are going to do what one person that's leading them wants to do, which is always going to be a disaster of one form or the other, because one person is always stupider than—and usually not very well intentioned. So, yeah.

SS: So what did you do after the split? Did you stay in ACT UP?

RJ: I did stay on. What year was that?

Unidentified: Ninety-two, '93.

RJ: I did stay on for a while, but sometime after that, I was getting burnout. I would go to the meetings every night religiously. It was sort of like church, you know, and my life revolved around it. If I didn't go to a meeting on Monday night, what would I be doing? And I would sit there and I would doodle. The worse the meeting to me, the more doodling, and I ended up with page after page, and I wasn't

absorbing anything anymore. I was just like I wasn't there except physically, and I couldn't do it anymore.

00:55:00 People had died. People had moved. Being in New York made less and less sense to me. I think that unless you were born in New York City, you have to really have a reason to be here. It's your career or whatever it is. And the reasons for me being here were disappearing, and it stopped making sense to me. Yeah.

SS: So is there anything else that we haven't covered that you think is important?

RJ: Hmm. Yeah, yeah, yeah, because the documentary that's having its premiere now. ACT UP formed my politics. ACT UP, I really developed my world view there, and my anarchism comes out of that. That's why I went on to try to understand how a community works together on consensus and how their physical environment can evolve out of—how ordinary people can actually control their own lives, including the physical environment around them, which has always been a very important focus for me. And that's ultimately why I went to Copenhagen and studied Christiania and did this documentary, and I think that's going to continue to the next phase of my life which I'm brewing right now, is going to be continuation of that thinking. Yeah.

SS: So here's my last question. So, just looking back, what do you feel was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

RJ: I think its greatest achievement—well, the obvious one was keeping things moving forward to the point where we got to protease inhibitors. That's kind of—yeah. And the obvious failure was that there's not a cure for AIDS. But I think really its

greatest achievement was it changed a lot of people. It changed people like me. It created a vision of something that's possible, that happened then and there. What we did, what we were doing was what everybody thinks can't happen: leaderless organizations. Leaderless organizations. The intelligence of groups, which I didn't believe in before. And I think that's probably actually its greatest achievement but not visible, because that's how it changed individual people who are moving on and doing other things in the world. But that spreads out, right? I mean, did that influence Occupy? Did that influence—you see that in activism all over the world now. I mean, it's evolved over the decades, but it's in there. So, yeah.

SS: Okay great I have a question. Like when TAG split apart, do you remember any of that process when Housing Works decided to split? Was there any floor discussion?

RJ: I don't recall it, really. I think there was an announcement, "We're starting this organization." It was sort of like the way it looked at the time was, okay, some people in ACT UP are going off and they're doing this thing, and godspeed, you know, and give us some money on the way. I think we gave them some seed money. It was kind of a split, but it was more like a spinoff, really. It was okay.

SS: But it was a bureaucratic split; it wasn't an ideological split.

01:00:00

RJ: No, right, right. It was like we're doing this different thing that doesn't work within this framework, so we have to go off and form this other organization. I was nervous about it to some degree because, of course, I figured it would turn into just another typical social service organization and get absorbed into the machine, and I'm very impressed that that's not what happened. I didn't think that was

possible, and, yeah, we showed something else was possible there. You could be a complete and utter pain in the ass, and I'll still give you money. That was amazing. Everybody thinks you had to be nice to them, right, to get money. It seems it's the opposite.

JW: And just because I had just recently a year ago plus two months or four weeks ago moved into Bailey House—

RJ: Oh, you did?

JW: Yeah, I did, went on the dole, and the dole is good. But Bailey House was formed probably just about four months before ACT UP. What do you remember about Bailey House as the only AIDS housing in the city?

RJ: I remember talking to people there about—I mean, a lot of our ideas about what AIDS housing should be came out of that and some of the other—and we established some standards, quality standards—actually I wrote them—and they kind of—it's the important stuff. The important stuff is invisible and happens behind the scenes. Like nobody knows that I wrote this thing. You know, it's pieces here and there. Oh, you've got to have bathroom counts and privacy and this and that and the other, and that was established. It wasn't always adhered to, but that was the goal. And it came out of the Housing Committee, and a lot of it came from Bailey House because that's kind of where they started putting things together in those early days, different org—you know. Right. So scale, scale is important.

SS: Great. Thank you.

RJ: All right.

SS: Thanks a lot.

RJ: Great. Whew.

SS: And good luck with yur film. I hope it goes well.

RJ: Thank you.