

A C T U P
ORAL HISTORY
P R O J E C T

A PROGRAM OF
**MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Frank Jump**

Interview Number: **033**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **November 1, 2003**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Frank Jump

November 1, 2003

Frank plays guitar and sings Joni Mitchell's "People's Parties."

SARAH SCHULMAN: Thank you Frank. If you could say your name, how old you are, today's date, and where we are?

FRANK JUMP: My name is Frank H. Jump. I am currently 43 years old. I live in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and today is November 1st, 2003.

SS: Thank you, Frank.

FJ: Thank you.

SS: So, when you think back on ACT UP, what kind of feeling do you have?

FJ: It was probably the most invigorating experience of my life. It was at a time in my life where I was looking for an outlet for my fear, my anger, my creativity as a young artist. And, I was very theater oriented, and ACT UP kind of provided the best street theater stage for political theater, that I could have ever looked for.

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SS: So, you grew up in Queens.

FJ: Basically, in Queens. I was born in Far Rockaway. I lived around JFK Airport my whole life. My father worked for Pan Am, so I was kind of like an airport brat. And we wound up in Howard Beach, which was an interesting place to live to say the least. I got out of Howard Beach as soon as I was able to support myself. So, by age 17, I was already sampling different neighborhoods in Queens – like Jamaica, Briarwood. And then, I met Eric Sawyer, and I moved to Harlem.

SS: Were you sampling Riis Park, by the way?

FJ: Oh, I used to go to Riis Park almost every day in the summer. I'd ride my bicycle there – chain up my bike on the fence that was adjacent to the nursing home, take

off all my clothes and hang out with a whole bunch of other naked people that I didn't know and got to know. This was, like, '74, '76, '78 – that whole period through there.

SS: Did you go to Far Rockaway High School?

FJ: No, I actually went to John Adams High School, because Howard Beach was in the district that was part of Ozone Park. We were going to be bused to Franklin K. Lane, and the only reason we moved to Howard Beach – because I was being bussed to an all-black school, when I was living in Laurelton. Not that my parents were intolerant, but they were just tired of me being harassed all the time for being the only white kid. So what was interesting is when I moved to Howard Beach, I had a pretty rich experience of listening to black music. I knew a lot more black history than my white teachers knew at the white school that I was going to. I had no idea that there were famous white people, until I moved to Howard Beach. To me, it was all Ralph Bunch and Martin Luther King. So it was a great experience, but my parents thought it would be better for me to be in an environment where I wasn't a target all the time. Needless to say when I got to Howard Beach, I was a target then for being a “sissy boy.” And that all started.

SS: How sissy were you?

FJ: Well, you know – when you're an adolescent – I mean, I teach middle school now so anything that is slightly not part of what is accepted for your gender to act is focused on. I was somewhat flamboyant as a sissy. I had really long hair and I wore big platform shoes and Huckapoo shirts. You know, I was pretty out there as a teenager. But I had a lot of fun. I mean, I think my memories of John Adams High School were all happy memories, except for some of the more unfortunate drug experiences I had with

the various stuff that was going around at the time – from Angel Dust to barbiturates and stuff like that.

SS: You mean, Quaaludes and Black Beauties? That era?

FJ: Quaaludes, Black Beauties. But, Angel Dust really did a number on me and I didn't do that for very long. By the time I was 19, I was at Queens College – I was already quitting marijuana. My mother was still smoking, and I had to move out because I couldn't be around that environment.

SS: She was smoking pot?

FJ: Pot, yeah.

SS: Your mother was smoking pot?

FJ: She's from Amsterdam. And she didn't smoke when I was a kid until she realized that I would get in trouble on the street smoking pot. So she said, "Why don't you just smoke in your room?" And, slowly but surely my friends would leave joints under her pillow and it was better than her taking tranquilizers – which was the thing, at the time for most women. You know, they were popping trannies and I didn't like to see her like that either. So, I was much happier that she was smoking pot.

SS: So, how did you first enter into the gay world?

FJ: The gay world. Well, what is the gay world? The gay world is whatever world is around you at the time. I was pretty self-realized at a very young age. I came out to my Mom when I was about 11. And then I came out to her again when I was 13. And then I finally did the final look, this-is-it come-out when I was 16 or 17. At Queens College, I think that's where I became most political about being gay. I kind of took over the gay organization there in a coup – appointed myself President.

SS: What was the name of the organization?

FJ: Gay People of Queens – lovingly known as Queens at Queens.

SS: Why did you need to take over? What was going on?

FJ: Because there was nothing happening in the group. The people that were meeting were just meeting to pick up each other or do it in the off-campus house, and I immediately changed the locks, painted the place, got a budget from the school and started taking out ads, got the school to pay for my trip to Philadelphia in '78. That's when we planned the first march on Washington. And then in '79, my mom marched with me in Washington – that was her first march. And that's where she met Amy Ashworth and Jeanne Manford and her whole life changed at that point. She became a PFLAG Mom.

SS: So, you both got into gay activism together, in a sense.

FJ: Yeah, basically.

SS: What was your Dad's take on all of this?

FJ: Mr. Jump – his sister is a lesbian, so when I came out to him, he just kind of patted me on the back and said, "Well, you know it kind of runs in the family." But, that's a whole other story. You've got to see the musical.

SS: When did you start working as an artist, or realizing you were an artist?

FJ: Well, I'd always wanted to write music, and I never took myself seriously as an artist until I found out I was HIV-positive. And back in – it was between April and August of 1986 that I found out that I became positive – between April and August of 1984. There was a vaccine program that I was a part of for Hepatitis B. They had all

these frozen blood samples on me and they said, well, since you're in the study, can we roll it over into an HIV study? We'll go back to all your blood and retroactively test it from the beginning of the study to the present. So, I would get all these things in the mail that would say – August 1978: negative. December 1978: negative. And that went on and on until the '83 postings and then finally, they stopped and I got a phone call that said, "You need to come to the office." And I was 26 years old and I had about \$80,000 dollars of available credit, so as soon as I found out I was positive, I went shopping.

SS: Were you surprised you were positive?

FJ: I wasn't surprised, because I had Hairy Leukoplakia on the sides of my tongue – so, I kind of knew. And, I knew since the moment I became positive that I was positive. I was in San Francisco. I went to the Rainbow Gathering in 1984, where I fell in love with a boy named Graham who is now Graham Norton, which is kind of bizarre.

SS: Who's Graham Norton?

FJ: He has this show that we get on the BBC now – BBC America. It's this wild, gay talk show in London and I met him when he was 19, I was 24. He found me through my website and we had met at the Rainbow Gathering in Northern California. I probably sero-converted at that gathering. I came back to San Francisco with a wild fever. And fortunately, Graham is still negative. That was the first question that I asked him when we reunited a few years back. He found me through my website. So he came to New York and we had a couple of drinks and reminisced.

SS: So when you were 26 and found out that you'd been positive for two years, did you have a lot of people in your life who had AIDS?

FJ: Well, I had had a lot of friends who had already died earlier on who we had no idea what they had. I had a friend that died in '79 mysteriously.

SS: What was his name?

FJ: My friend Arnie. He lived in Sheepshead Bay.

SS: Do you want to say his last name, just for the record?

FJ: I don't remember. I know he lived on Bragg Street – Arnie, I forget. He was much older than I was. I had met him through my first boyfriend. I was 14, my first boyfriend was 28, and he had introduced me to many, many older gay men that turned me on to lots of things from music to theater. Many were mentors. Some were not.

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SS: Where did you meet your boyfriend?

FJ: He was my summer camp counselor. He was the dramatics counselor. I mean, it sounds like a sweet story, but it was somewhat a story of abuse. He was 28, I was 14. At this age, I see it as an inappropriate relationship. At the time, I would have not had it any other way. And my poor mother had to endure it. Even though she kind of knew what was going on, she didn't want me to be around him at all and threatened to call the police several times. I threatened to run away from home. So, it was either living with it and keeping me home or putting her foot down and me maybe becoming a runaway.

SS: How long were you guys together?

FJ: Two years – until I was 16, and then he dumped me a younger guy.

SS: Are you still in touch?

FJ: No, no. I think he's married with kids. He was really kind of an icky guy. But still it opened me up to the whole world of gay men and the Village, and I learned

how to take the A train from Howard Beach, the Aqueduct Station, to West 4th Street by myself – and the rest is history.

SS: So, you knew some people who died in the late '70s – and when you first realized that there was this thing called AIDS, what do you remember?

FJ: I was a patient of Dr. Joseph Sonnabend and basically he had to stop seeing all of his “healthy” patients because he had such an overload of patients with GRID.

SS: And you just coincidentally were one of his patients?

FJ: Yeah. So I kept in touch with Joseph over the years and I kind of learned a lot about what was going on through him and I was always aware that there was some kind of a disease that was striking gay men for some odd reason. And when I became positive in '84, I kind of knew better at the time. I could have avoided it I'm sure, even though becoming HIV-positive changed my life in profound ways that in some ways catapulted me into taking my life much more seriously. That's when I started buying musical instruments and recording equipment and photographic equipment. I started taking photographs and writing songs. And by the time ACT UP kind of came around, I was ready to write rap about AIDS and wound up working with a production company about the Hotel Martinique about the homeless. We did a musical about that.

SS: What was that called?

FJ: It was called *Hotel Martinique* and I did it with a production company called TWEED, with Kevin Maloney and my friend Anne, who lives in this house with us.

SS: What's her last name?

FJ: Pope. She helped me write that as well and produce it. And we used all the recording equipment that I bought on credit because I thought I was going to die, so I figured, let's access all my credit lines and make a mark. And I thought by the time I was 30 I'd be gone, because that's what they told me basically. They said, "You have a few good years left." So I made sure I did.

SS: Let's go back a little bit, because you just brought up a lot of things.

First of all, how did you get to Sonnabend, in the first place?

FJ: Do you really want to know? I had anal warts and he was the only one that I knew that was treating people who were gay.

SS: So, you were really in the loop, though.

FJ: Well, when I was 16, I used to go to Gay Activist Alliance meetings, and then it folded and became a lesbian and gay organization, and that was the organization that I went to Philadelphia with to march.

SS: Was it the Task Force?

FJ: It wasn't the National Gay Task Force –

SS: Community [Coalition] for Lesbian and Gay Rights? With Andy Humm and all that?

FJ: Right. That's where I met Andy [Humm] and Eleanor Cooper and all the gay and lesbian politicians in New York. Morty Manford and I became friends.

SS: So, you were really in the movement, from the beginning?

FJ: Yeah, as a teenager, basically.

SS: Okay, so you're saying, when you got diagnosed you thought – they told you were going to die. Who told you that?

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FJ: Well basically it was the counselors at the blood study. They said, “Your blood work looks still very good. You’ve got a lot of T-cells and you probably had a few good years ahead of you, but we really don’t know what to tell you. We just discovered the virus and how to test it and we’re not sure how it works on healthy people, like you.” I started to watch my T-cells decline, and it was through the whole ACT UP experience – I was kind of anti-drug therapy because we were all fighting the drug companies, because of the outrageous prices they were charging. So I was reluctant to start AZT right away. I didn’t start drug therapy till 1990. And that’s when my T-cells fell under 700, which was still a lot at the time. And I’ve been in many studies since then for experimental drugs – Interleukin-2. I’m probably one of the most tested persons with HIV in the city, in terms of drug studies.

SS: At the time, when you first got your diagnosis – the other people in your life who had AIDS – did they all feel that they were going to die? Or did some feel that they weren’t?

FJ: It was more like – the people in my life who had AIDS were already sick, and when I found out that I had HIV there was no in-between. You were either sick or you weren’t. And everybody assumed that if they weren’t sick, they didn’t have HIV. So I had this limbo kind of existence, and I was one of the few people to find out so early on. So a lot of my friends who were already sick were sick and dying. And, a lot of my friends who were supportive of me – to help me get me through that whole phase – wound up becoming sick. So it was a very stressful time because here I was trying to deal with having the virus, trying to figure out how to keep myself healthy, and then all of a sudden all of my friends, who were my support, started getting sick and then started

to die. Many of my mother's friends who were in PFLAG also had sons who started developing AIDS and then dying. And then there was a kind of "Well, why is your son okay?" "Why is he still healthy?" So, there was that survivor's guilt.

SS: What do you think the reason is?

FJ: I hate to sound metaphysical because I don't really believe in an afterlife or stuff like that, but I kind of knew when I became positive – at the Rainbow Gathering – that I had become positive. And I decided then that I wasn't going to die. I said, this is not going to get me, and I need to stay alive for my mother, and I need to stay alive for me. And I want to make an impact on the world somehow, and dying did not fit into that picture. So it's easy to say that that's why I'm alive. It didn't work for a lot of my friends, who had the same strong desire to live.

SS: Since they're not here, can you just tell us what some of their treatment approaches were at the time, if you recall?

FJ: There are so many. My friend Adrian Kellard tried to do a lot of Chinese medicine, acupuncture – alternative treatments. My friend Rick Beatty, who ran for Mayor in Columbia, South Carolina, was into homeopathy and macrobiotics. He wanted me to give up meat and ice cream, and I told him that he was out of his mind. I said meat and ice cream have kept me alive for all of these years, they're going to keep me alive for the rest of my life. So, there were varied approaches. And then I had a lot of friends who were very into western medicine and doing whatever their doctor said. Almost all of my friends were very AIDS savvy, so they questioned everything. They didn't blindly take these drugs that they doctors told them to take, but they had enough confidence in them because there weren't many doctors who were advocating the treatment of people with

Tape I
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HIV at the time. So much of the medical and dental community were shunning people with AIDS. So if you found a doctor that was willing to treat you, you believed in them – although a lot of people made mistakes in the beginning with some drugs. We just did what was available – Ribavirin – and all the stuff that made a lot of people sicker. But I kind of held off until 1990, and I was already out of ACT UP by then.

SS: Let's talk about how you came to ACT UP. Were you with Eric at the time?

FJ: Yeah, I was living with Eric Sawyer. We had met at a nightclub that I was working the coatroom.

SS: What club was that?

FJ: It was called Shout. It was a '50s and '60s club. It was a straight club, but it was gay-owned and gay-run, so we kind of terrorized straight people every night. We would dress up in drag and kind of had a party every night. And it was so much fun. His company had a company party there, and he was there with his boss Sharon, and it was his birthday. So he hung out until the end of the night and I went home with him, and we lived together for two years straight after that.

Our first public date was in March, on my birthday, and that was the first ACT UP meeting. Larry [Kramer] had called Eric up and said, "Come to this meeting. We're going to have a town meeting, and there are going to be a lot of celebrities there – a lot of people talking about their experience with the disease up until now." And it was a wild first date. People like Martin Sheen were there, and Colleen Dewhurst. Martin was sitting next to me and I was explaining to Eric who all the people were coming up on stage to speak, because I had known many of them from the gay and lesbian movement.

So I would say, “Oh, that’s Eleanor Cooper” or “That’s Colleen Dewhurst.” He didn’t know who she was. And finally Bill Bahlman came up, and I said, “Oh, he’s a DJ at Danceteria. I’ve known him for years.” And finally, Martin Sheen leaned over and said, “Who’s that?” And I said, “What are you doing here?” And I thought it was going to be a light moment, but he started to cry and told me about his best friend who’d died. And next thing you know, I had Martin Sheen sobbing on my shoulder. I had no idea that this one night was going to turn into something so historic, but it was.

SS: Why did Larry call Eric?

FJ: Well, Larry and Eric are friends. I knew Larry as well, but through a mutual acquaintance. I used to go out with a guy named Lou who was friends with Larry, and then became not friends with Larry, because Larry outed him in the book *Faggots*. So I kind of got them back together again as friends. And Larry and Eric knew each other – I guess from the gay movement. I’m not sure.

SS: So what was it like in 1986 [1987], to go into a relationship knowing that you had AIDS?

FJ: Well, it was comforting to be with someone else who had HIV, and that was one of the strongest attractions to moving in with each other – that we can be a support for each other. Plus, we were wildly attracted to each other in other ways. It was a very creative relationship. And we’re still friends, which is good. It was pretty turbulent, though. We had a turbulent two years. It was stressful being in a relationship and going through all of the fear that I had of dying. And here you have somebody else who was also – who just lost a lover, and they’re afraid of dying too. So you try to be

supportive as you can for each other, and hopefully you both feel taken care of. But it's hard – especially with the uncertainty of what can happen.

Most people who are 26 – I think Eric was 33 or 34 when he met me – aren't grappling with their mortality at that age. This is something that we go through maybe in our 50s or 60s. We start to lose friends for various reasons – cancer, whatever. And then here we have address books filled with pages that were ripped out, because everyone was dying around us.

SS: Just skipping ahead – because I want to ask you about that. Now you're in your 40s, right? And now, you have people in your life. You have older parents – your mother and your friends who are older – and so, there are people who have lived a natural life span. How has that earlier experience impacted on how you look at it now?

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FJ: Well it's certainly given me a perspective of focusing on the moments as they come, instead of dwelling on the past or worrying so much about what's going to come. It forces you to live in the moment. Having any life threatening disease does that. It kind of alters your perception of time, in a way. And I think it's a survival mechanism, because you really need to focus on the moment because every single minute that's passing by is precious. So, you have to enjoy them. And I think that's what all of these years have taught me – you have to really put things in perspective. You have to enjoy life as it happens because some people don't have that luxury. And now that I am 40 – going to be 44 – I have friends that are getting high blood pressure and I'm worried about developing some of the inherited diseases that I never thought I would get. Like, my biological father died of heart disease and my stepfather – Mr. Jump – he has diabetes

and he's not in great shape. My mother's in pretty good shape at 67, but she's starting to develop – you know frozen shoulder last year, her blood pressure is kind of eh right now.

SS: Do you think you look at that differently?

FJ: Well, having HIV definitely altered the way I see the world, in a profound way. I can't imagine what it would be like to see the world any differently now because this coming April 2004, I'll be positive for 20 years. So it's almost half of my life. So, I can't – I can – remember what it was like before. And again, before finding out I was HIV-positive, I really didn't take myself seriously. It forced me to grow up. When I found out in '86 that at 26, my mid-life could have been 17, you're forced into a midlife crisis right away. What have I done with my life, and what am I going to do with the rest of it? The urgency that I had in the beginning has dissipated. Although I still do things in a very urgent way, it's not the same urgency, but it's a mode that I've never really gotten out of.

SS: So, let's go back to ACT UP. So you came and you saw Colleen Dewhurst and Martin Sheen cried on your shoulder, and this was Larry's big thing. Larry's day. How did you respond?

FJ: It was a life-changing event. Here we had the opportunity to tell the rest of the world that AIDS is not going to be just a gay man's problem for very long. We saw that coming. We saw where it came from.

SS: Where did it come from?

FJ: Well basically we recognized it was a problem in Africa.

SS: That was known by that meeting?

FJ: I think many of us knew that there was AIDS in other parts of the world. I wrote a rap song called “Lily White Lies” which was a response to the Reagan Administration and Nancy Reagan, and it became kind of an anthem for ACT UP.

SS: **Well, now you have to do it.**

FJ: I have to do it, okay.

Hey yo yo, how you go?

I hear you don't like me 'cause I'm a homo.

I heard rumors 'round you don't wish me well.

You say I'm the devil child and going to hell.

You preach to crowds: I'm bad, I'm wild.

Spread disease, rape your child.

Say if I don't repent, it's God's punishment

A case of AIDS I get. I say, you wanna bet?

You hate me, berate me,

But you forget, God did create me.

You say it's true, your hands'll heal,

But let me tell you preacher, you ain't the real deal.

So listen, minister. Hear my story, Reverend

'Til you love me, you ain't going to heaven – ho ho.

And then the chorus goes: *It's just another case of lily white lies.*

Hey yo yo, what you know?

Having some trouble just saying no?

You read the papers, ya hear what they say?

You only get AIDS if you're black or you're gay.

So don't worry America, you'll live a long life.

Keep your eyes shut to the pain and the strife.

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There are millions out there that will die in a year,

But don't get excited, don't shed a tear,

Just keep living your lives like it doesn't exist

'Til it hits you, then you'll be pissed.

It may be too late just to pick up and run

With your daughter, your wife, your husband or son,

Because it's over in Europe, it's big in Japan,

Africa's got it, even Iran.

So come on home, open your eyes,

Everyone knows a young person who dies.

It's just another case of Lily White Lies.

So if everyone you know is either scared to death or dying,

It's time to ACT UP, because they'll kill you with lying.

They don't care about your lover, they want to find a cure,

But all the money's spent on weapons, to fight a secret war.

They love to watch the numbers mount

'Cause people of color and faggots and women don't count.

When they round us up and jail us, it won't be new news

Remember, 60 years ago, Hitler did it to the Jews.

Take it to the street and write the President a letter,

Denying there's a crisis won't make anyone better ...

And that's how it kind of faded off.

SS: It's interesting, because in the content, there is this real wish for other people to identify with gay people, because you're saying, we're part of this whole global event. You're saying blacks and gays. But was any other community looking at gay people as part of them? Or were we the only ones wishing for it?

FJ: Well certainly the black community have their own issues around homophobia.

SS: I mean, at the time?

FJ: At the time even more so. I think less so, now. So if you even compared the gay struggle to the civil rights struggle, a lot of black leaders became outraged because it didn't compare to them. So there's always been a desire for me to identify the gay struggle with other oppressed people. It's just when you sit around talking with other oppressed people, then you start comparing pain and nobody wins. Everybody's pain is worse than the other person's pain, and everybody's oppression is more oppressive.

SS: But, it just seems like you were imagining and articulating a kind of wish of a commonality that the other people you saw yourself in common with didn't see.

FJ: Well, we kind of knew as a group of young activists that this disease was going to start spreading to teenagers and children and heterosexual couples, and it was our desire to warn the world – not just the world but the United States, because the United States basically at the time was shutting their eyes because we were expendable. We were Haitians, homosexuals, IV-drug users. And we were all lumped into this group of undesirables – expendable people. And we knew that if we didn't stand up and say, this is something that is going to affect everybody, please start telling your children to have safe sex. The response was, well, who the hell are you? Faggot – to tell me how to raise my children? But we did it anyway. We didn't stop. And I sang that rap song with my very '80s production soundtrack in the back and I had my backup singers with me – my friend Isabel, who is now the mother of Rosario Dawson. She would tour with me, with that song. We went to a club and did it for the ACT UP No Talent Show at Siberia. At first, we were preaching to the converted. We were telling everybody in the audience that you've got to watch out. Everybody in the audience knew. It's just when we started getting coverage from the news doing other theatrical events like zaps that people started becoming aware that here's a group of people that are truly concerned – not just for their own lives – but for the lives of the greater public.

SS: Let me ask you about that one more time.

Tape II
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SS: I just want to finish up this one topic. ACT UP's desire to place gay people in a broader community – do you think that was a strategy to try to get the world to pay more attention to what was going on?

FJ: Maybe in some ways. I don't think anything that we did in ACT UP was by chance. I think we were all very calculated about what we did. Just from the anatomy of our demonstrations, the links that our demonstrations had with prior movements – the civil rights movement, and the literacy movement in Brazil, with Augusto Boal. The kind of level of theatrics was, I think – even though it seems to come instinctually – I think we were all very aware of how to spin AIDS to the public. We knew that unless we were recognized as people worth saving that the country was in big trouble.

SS: So just broadly – how did we transform ourselves from what you called “expendable people” to people worth saving? How did we do that?

FJ: I think a lot of it was echoed in the gay and lesbian movement. For instance, my Mom being at PFLAG. When you have parents' groups standing up for their kids – you know, Mothers Against AIDS, and those groups, then you start putting a different face on the “victim,” so to speak. None of us saw ourselves as victims. We really didn't want to be treated like victims and we didn't feel victimized by being HIV-positive. We were victimized by a public identity that we thought was dismissive of us because of who we were, morally, in their eyes.

SS: Did you personally have experiences of discrimination, being HIV-positive?

FJ: Being HIV-positive? You know, living in New York you've got the luxury of insulating yourself from that whole mentality, even though I heard of other people's experiences because I worked in a gay and lesbian dental practice that treated HIV from the start.

SS: Which practice is that?

FJ: John Wolf, and Evan Cohen later came into the practice. And our practice grew from like 200 people to about 2,000 after we won our case with the Human Rights Commission here in New York. So I'd heard a lot of stories about people being thrown out of practices, people not being able to bury their lovers in funeral homes because as soon as they found out they had AIDS, they wouldn't deal with it. I personally never really experienced discrimination.

SS: Did you have any friends whose families were not there for them?

FJ: Oh yeah. I had friends their families didn't even know they had AIDS. They didn't know they were gay, until they were dead.

SS: Like who, do you remember?

FJ: It's so hard to think, there were just so many people. My stepfather's wife lost her son and to this day, she won't admit the fact that he had AIDS. She'll argue until she's blue in the face: "He had a rare fungal infection in the brain." Okay. "He was a designer. He wasn't married, but that didn't make him gay." Fine. You can't argue with people who don't want to see it. But there were so many stories of people who never came out to their parents and then got sick, and then their way of coming out to their parents was, "I have AIDS." Of course, it would have been so much more ideal to come out to your parents when you were healthy and felt good about who you were in your relationship and your "lifestyle" – which, I hate that word. And then you have to tell your parents not only are you gay, but you have *the* disease – the gay disease. So they're dealing with these two things at the same time, and they're lumping it into one experience. I never had to deal with that. I came out to my mother at a very early age.

SS: Did you have any friends who got sick and died without any family support?

FJ: Yeah. My friend Raymond Safro. I met him through the dental practice. I met many, many people living with HIV/AIDS as patients. Raymond's mother until the very end just denied the fact that he had the disease. She would come to the hospital with Godiva chocolates and Brie cheese for him. He couldn't eat, because he couldn't digest food. He was being fed through a tube. And she'd say, "Well you never know, you have to entertain your visitors."

SS: And how did that affect him, since he's not here to tell us?

FJ: Oh, he felt very hurt and very marginalized by his mom. It's just fortunate for people that they had a very supportive group of people around them – you know, their extended families that were there for them. And that grew from sometimes their physician, and then the front desk people at the physician's office, and that became people you met at the waiting room. This was before there were organizations for people to go to, to talk about what was going on. So your immediate, everyday experience became your support group. And that kind of grew as the AIDS cases grew in New York.

SS: Who was your support group when you were sick?

FJ: It's funny, because I've really never been sick because of HIV. Even though when I was diagnosed with rectal cancer in 2000, there was a possibility that because I have HIV, I developed it – but it could also have been possible that at age 40 I would have gotten rectal cancer anyway, because of my history with Papilloma virus as a teenager. I'm sorry, what was the question again?

SS: Who was your support system?

FJ: Well my mom has always been a support for me, ever since I was a teenager and she was involved in gay and lesbian rights. When I came out to her as HIV-positive, she had just toured the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta with PFLAG, and she came back and she told me, “Do you remember that test you took?” Yes. “Did you ever get the results of that?” I said, “Why?” She said, “Well, you know having HIV is not a death sentence,” and she just kind of spouted back all of the rhetoric she had learned in Atlanta. And I said yeah, I know. She goes, “Well tell me, did you find out if you were positive or negative?” “I’m positive.” “Oh, my God!” And it became – I had to take care of her. That took awhile, before she became able to take care of me, but that’s somewhat family history – going back since I was a kid. I’m her only child. And I’m really her only family in the United States. Her brother in Holland and herself were estranged for many years. They’re finally just talking now on a regular basis.

SS: Okay, let’s go back to ACT UP. So, having been in the movement for a while, what was different between ACT UP and the earlier organizations?

FJ: What was different about ACT UP and the gay and lesbian movement was that gays and lesbians were finally getting along. And I think that the prospect that lesbians had of being abandoned and left with heterosexual men only was so fearful to them that they felt they had to mend the bridges and set aside whatever differences they had, for whatever reasons – be it man-boy love, at the time was a big issue and age of consent laws – you know, lowering the age of consent. Most men wanted the age lowered, most women wanted it raised. Lesbians had a broader vision of their struggle as women, and men are men. They go through life not recognizing the privilege they have

as men, and didn't really have the time – I'm generalizing – there were some of us that did. So, the difference was, gays and lesbians were immediately bound together in a struggle.

SS: You think it was fear of a straight male planet?

FJ: That's kind of one of the things. I mean all of a sudden, every lesbian that had a gay friend was at risk of losing them.

SS: Who do you think had to adjust more – the gay women or the gay men – in order to get along?

FJ: Well, I think lesbians always felt that they were in the backseat of the gay movement to begin with. It was the gay men that were getting all the attention and focus because of drag queens or whatever. It was always a gay men's issue for the greater public, too. And here was another event that, even though it galvanized lesbians and gays, it was again focusing on the gay men's disease. So, they had to deal with it over again. But I think from a totally different perspective than earlier, because this was something that was affecting their friends and the risk of losing their friends because of public denial of the disease. Reagan never said the word AIDS on television. So I think that was the difference – that lesbians were part of a group. They were basically protecting their friends, and trying to keep them alive. And during the gay and lesbian struggle there was still that sense of survival, but it wasn't as urgent.

SS: Did it change your relationships with women?

FJ: I've always had very close relationships with women – gay and straight. My girlfriend in high school was a lesbian. We were deeply in love and we still are – my friend Elaine Calenda. She's a physical therapist and she's a professor at the University

at Boulder, and she runs the clinic there. She lived with my mom actually for awhile, after my mom got divorced from Jump. So I've always had very close relationships with women.

SS: What were the differences in the privileges between the gay women and the gay men?

FJ: Well, I think the privilege that men have in general – living in a patriarchal world – we're men, and when you're a gay man you're giving up privilege in a way, because you're acting like women. I think a lot of the homophobia stems from gender discrimination, and just what's perceived to be acceptable behavior for a specific gender. Men are supposed to act like this and women are supposed to act like this. And I think the AIDS activism made a lot of the issues that were important at the time, unimportant. And then all of a sudden, the whole flavor of gay and lesbian politics changed. Women became much more, I guess, experimental with the way they're perceived in terms of gender. There's a lot more women who weren't afraid of looking butch or being identified as being a man on the street. So a lot of women started exercising male privilege just from appearance. And a lot of this came out through AIDS activism.

Tape II
00:15:00

SS: Do you think ACT UP attracted a different kind of lesbian than a group like CLGR?

FJ: A different kind of lesbian? There were so many different kinds of lesbians in the movement, you know? You had your typical traditional, overweight, flannel shirt lesbians, and now there was this new skinny, pierced, tattooed lesbian and funny lesbians – what a thought, you know. All of a sudden they started popping up

everywhere. Before we knew it, lesbians were funnier than gay men. Gay male comedians became unfunny, all of a sudden. We witnessed a cultural revolution that was somewhat accelerated I think because of the AIDS movement. And, even though we felt like we were experiencing a backlash, and taking steps backward in the greater American view of gay's and lesbian rights, I think it galvanized us to a point where we became a lot more focused on how do it, as a movement.

SS: You're so interesting, that I keep getting away from ACT UP. You're just bringing up all this stuff. So let's go back to that. So then you got involved with the organization right from the top, right? Because other people I've interviewed have been, "Who was at the first meeting? Frank Jump." People remember you from the beginning – Maria Maggenti and a few others.

FJ: That's nice. Maria's wonderful. I wound up doing a soundtrack for her student film. When she graduated from NYU, she did a 15-minute film about an AIDS memorial, and I wound up doing the music for that.

SS: *Name Day.*

FJ: Yeah. That was a great experience, and that's what kind of got me thinking about maybe going to documentary film school. And then, I went back to Empire State College and got a Bachelor's, which is something I never thought about doing. I didn't have long-term goals for a long time. I thought I was going to die, so I had these very short term goals. And then after I hit 30 and had to go bankrupt because I owed \$60,000 dollars to Citibank and American Express, I started thinking well, maybe I do have another five years. Let's do my Bachelor's and take it from there. That's when I discovered photography and I started photographing fading advertisements and drawing

the parallels between the unexpected long life of these signs, and my unexpected long life, as a person with HIV. And that also changed the way I saw HIV. I all of a sudden had other metaphors for living with AIDS that weren't so concrete – that were a little bit more evanescent, in a way.

SS: So how did you plug into ACT UP at the beginning?

FJ: Well I was there from the beginning, so it wasn't really anything to plug into. It just kind of landed in my lap.

SS: Did you join a committee, or did you work on any projects?

FJ: Well, I immediately started the Zap Committee, with a few other people. We were the Zap Committee.

SS: Who was on it with you?

FJ: Oh, God. I forget. I'm so bad with names.

SS: Was it the old Lavender Hill people, like Marty Robinson and people like that?

FJ: Yeah, Marty was part of it. Eventually the Zap Committee became four zap committees. All the committees divided and multiplied, and before you knew it, there were other organizations.

SS: Did you choose Zap because you had already known about zaps from the gay movement? Morty Manford did a famous –

FJ: I chose zaps because of my background in theater, and I wanted to do things that were fun. And zaps were incredible fun. They were very subversive.

SS: Had you experienced them from earlier organizations? Had you ever done zaps before ACT UP?

FJ: When I was a kid, I would do zaps at my elementary school against the war. And I would read about the Yippies and Abbie Hoffman *Steal This Book*. I stole that book. To me, it was a great opportunity to do social theater, and have the most relevant reason to do it because it was my life.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: What were some of the zaps that you did?

FJ: We infiltrated the Conservative Party's fund-raiser for [Ron] Lauder, and we were all dressed in suits and ties and we looked very white and male.

SS: Where was it?

FJ: It was at one of the hotels. I forget which one it was – like the Ritz-Carlton, or something ridiculous like that.

SS: How did you get in?

FJ: We just wandered in – dressed in our fancy suits. We looked like we belonged. We fit the part. It was like *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, except it was the conservative party's fund-raiser. And before they knew it, they were raising their glasses to toast, and we flipped all the tables over where all the food was on, and started screaming "Shame on you!" We did this all over the place. We did this at the Republican convention. And pretty soon they got wise to us. The security started becoming much tougher. We knew what advantage we had as white men.

SS: Okay, let's slow down. You turned over tables at a Ritz-Carlton. And then what did you do? You just ran away? Did they come after you? Did you get arrested?

FJ: No. I didn't get arrested. The first time I actually tried to get arrested, I couldn't even get arrested. It was the demo at Wall Street. The first ACT UP Wall Street

demo I'm laying in the street, and the cop comes over to me and says, "Are you on the list?" I said, "What list?" "The list – the people that are getting arrested. Are you on the list? Go talk to him." So, I go over to Larry [Kramer]. "Larry, what list are they talking about?" "Oh, you wanted to get arrested? You should have told me, I would have put you on the list." I said, "What is this, fucking Studio 54? I want to get arrested today!" "No, no, don't get arrested because you'll get lost in the system. All the people being arrested are already processed." And I'm like, "That's awful. Doesn't that defeat the purpose?" And he said, "No, no, no – all the press wants to know is, 26 people got arrested" and blah, blah, blah. So, the cops are like, listen to him, listen to him – get arrested next time.

SS: That's interesting, I haven't heard that one before.

FJ: Yeah. We worked with the police in the very beginning, because they told us it would be better if we worked with them. And then, we started not working with the police and they got much more aggressive with us – like, the demo in front of the Post Office on Tax Day – April 15th – they literally scooped us out of the street with their billy clubs, and Marty Robinson wound up with a cop's shoe and a walkie-talkie, and before you knew it, we had found each other somewhere in the Village and some of us had got beaten up. That was the end of love affair with the police.

SS: So, that was the demo when ACT UP stopped working with the police? Tax day?

FJ: I think that was the deciding one.

SS: Was there a debate about it? Do you remember?

FJ: Well, there were always the people who wanted to work with the police because they felt all that really mattered was the press. If media publishes that X amount of people were arrested, then why have to put people through undo stress of having to sit in the Tombs for three days when they can kind of be compliant with the police?

SS: Do you remember who defended that point of view?

FJ: I forget who, but I know Marty Robinson – his big word was complicitous. It's when I first learned the word "complicitous." "We couldn't work with the police – what are you nuts? Working with the police? They're against us!" So, zaps were not planned with the police in mind.

One of the other zaps we did was the Northwest Orient zap. We had found out that a man with AIDS was stranded in China and couldn't get back, and he was getting ill, and his family had to pay for the Air Force to airlift him out of China at the expense of maybe \$40,000 dollars because Northwest Orient had a policy that they did not let contagious people fly. So the Zap Committee met at our apartment – at the brownstone. I was living with Eric Sawyer, and we started making phone calls. We booked about a million dollars worth of roundtrip tickets on Northwest Orient, and then called up the next day. "Outrage! I heard what you did with that gay man with AIDS, and we are never flying Northwest Orient again!" And then, we went to Northwest Orient with picket signs and posters and we told CNN or someone we were going to be there. And fortunately, there wasn't a fire in Brooklyn or something, and everyone came from the press that we called, and it became this like big demo. There were four or five of us. There were only four or five of us that made the calls, but it was responded to as if it was

a public outcry against an airline because of their AIDS policy. And they changed their AIDS policy.

Tape II
00:25:00

SS: How did you learn that four or five people could get so much attention? At what point did you realize that?

FJ: Well, we had no choice. It's not like we had hundreds of people willing to do this. And at the same time it worked better if there were only a few people doing it because we felt like we had more control over what happened. If hundreds of people at the beginning started participating and there was a risk of many people getting arrested or in trouble. I think the reason why – it's not like we *knew* that four or five people would make a difference, it *was* four or five people making a difference, and that's how we knew that it could happen. It was after the fact that we discovered that.

SS: It is interesting, because one of the excuses that people use for not doing things is that they don't have enough people. And somehow that never stopped ACT UP. One person or two people were able to make a big impact.

FJ: Right. If you wanted to go to City Hall and chain yourself to somebody's desk – only one person could do that just as effectively as 20 people, maybe more effectively because how did 20 people get into City Hall? But one person can slip in – throw on a dress and put on a wig and put on some glitter and then chain yourself to a desk. My friend Timmy did that.

SS: Right, Timmy.

FJ: Timmy Spree. He was living with me, before I moved in with Eric Sawyer.

SS: Back on turning over the tables – it’s not a typical ACT UP type of thing. How did the floor feel about that? Did they think it was violent or destructive of property or anything like that?

FJ: Everybody had their opinions at ACT UP. We were a sea of dissent. It was healthy and productive, and sometimes exhausting. People that worked on these zaps got a lot of criticism.

SS: Did you ever get in trouble?

FJ: I got in trouble with ACT UP.

SS: What happened?

FJ: I really don’t remember any specific details, except there was always somebody who was going to criticize you. And the atmosphere was so tense to begin with. Everybody was fearing for their lives. People were getting really sick. And there were some people who were very vocally out on the fringes. Michael Petrelis from the start was very loud and contrary to any consensus. So, anybody that stood up and took any leadership role was at risk of being shot down by the group. It wasn’t always the most supportive environment. We did not expect pats on the back for what we did. And, I remember saying to Michael Nesline, “It would be nice if somebody would thank us.” And he said, “I hope you’re not here for any pat on the back, because you’re not going to get it from this group. Just do what you do, and do what you do well and keep doing it and fuck everybody.”

SS: Why do you think that was the big culture of ACT UP?

FJ: It’s kind of like – any theater company is going to be competitive with another theater company. If you pulled off a really effective zap, that’s like having a

major hit on Broadway. So, another group gets all jealous: “Well, we could have done that, and we’re going to do it better.” So it was kind of like we fed off of each other. We all tried to top each other. And there was so much irony. In one moment, Larry would be running up to the front. We’d be trying to decide what we’re going to do with Gran Fury’s logo. Are we going to put Silence = Death on t-shirts? Are we going to put it on stickers? Are we going to put it on pencils? And he runs up: “Sissies! People are dying, and you’re worrying about t-shirts!” And then flash to a month later, we’re in Washington DC and he’s up on a table saying, “Get your t-shirts!” It was one after another of ironic, extremely hilarious moments. I think it’s the whole ironic comedy of it all that kept people going.

Tape II
00:30:00

SS: Why do you think Larry was constantly telling people they weren’t good enough?

FJ: Well, I’m sure that’s what his mother told him his whole life. That’s what he knows. Not everybody grew up with supportive parents. When I was 20 years old, my mom and I had already marched in Washington. She had decided to march with me in 198[7] with PFLAG, at the gay and lesbian march. This is when the march used to go uptown, from the Village. And I said to my mother, “Meet me at 11:00 in the morning – an hour before it starts, it shouldn’t be too crowded. I’ll meet you on Bedford and Christopher.” So, I’m walking around going, “Mom! Mom!” And this guy comes up and he says, “Wait a minute – you’re not really looking for your mom, you’re looking for some big queen you call Ma, right?” And I’m like –

SS: I wonder who that was?

FJ: “No, I’m looking for my mom.” “Oh my God, if my mother would just acknowledge who I am as a gay man and walk with me, I can die now! I have to meet this woman! Mom! Mom!” And my mother comes over and says, “Hi Frankie, who’s your friend?” I said, “I think this is Harvey Fierstein.” And they became friends. They wound up sitting on panels together.

SS: There were so few parents at the time.

FJ: Yeah, but I’m sure Harvey’s mother told him he’s not good enough, and that’s the kind of mentality that you approach life with. And, not everybody comes from very supportive backgrounds. So I think there’s always that second-guessing of “Am I doing the right thing?”

SS: Do you think that Larry’s criticisms were effective?

FJ: Yeah. He was kind of like our Mommy. He was that voice of – “Don’t become an actor, become a lawyer” voice. And he kept us focused, I think. He kept us on track. And sometimes he wasn’t productive and effective, and sometimes he was annoying, but we loved him anyway.

SS: You said your first med was AZT, and you didn’t start taking it until 1990. So when you were in ACT UP – you came in at ’86 [1987], at the top. Were there discussions with other people who were HIV inside the group about what meds they were taking and what to take?

FJ: I think almost immediately there became a drug treatment group. It was so random and at the same time, it was so organized. It all fell into place. There was an immediate dissemination of information from the people who knew about medications and drugs, and before you knew it, Peter Staley and the rest of them were –

SS: Did you go to their meetings?

FJ: I didn't have time. I went to zap meetings.

SS: It's interesting. You were HIV and you chose to go into the zap thing, and you were not involved in treatment. Why is that?

FJ: Because I'm an exhibitionist and a media whore, and I wanted to do things that got attention. I walked around wheat pasting with Dan Butler, who's now on *Frazier*. We all found each other – the media whores. So we did that, and people that were book-smart and inorganic chemists wound up with those people. And lesbians, who had hairy legs and wanted to beat up straight men, wound up with their group and they did their thing.

SS: Like who?

FJ: And lipstick lesbians did their thing.

SS: Who are you thinking of?

FJ: Well, Rebecca Cole was kind of crunchy granola. Maria was the more lipstick lesbian type. Rebecca had her glamorous moments, but she had this wonderful blonde hair on her legs. I remember having a crush on her. And then you know, she became real glamorous when she did her book and got her TV show. But I think everybody found what they were best at, and gravitated towards the people who did what they were best at. Memory is weird that way. It's hard to construct the history of what happened in an objective way because a lot of it, in my mind, has become very romanticized. So, it's hard for me to really remember the nuts and bolts of how things happen. But, it just all seemed to happen so spontaneously.

SS: Do you remember any moments of real frustration or anger, specifically?

FJ: Oh yeah. Frustration and anger at the government, frustration and anger at the drug companies, frustration and anger at City Council people and each other, just for being intolerant. We hated people who were dogmatic against us, but we were just as dogmatically ACT UPpers.

SS: In what way?

FJ: It was our way or no way. I mean, how dare gay people not be involved in this movement. How dare you sit behind your desk and make tons of money and not come out.

SS: And you think that that was wrong, that attitude?

FJ: No. No. It's not that it's wrong, it's just that's, that's how we felt. We were just as dogmatic as the fundamentalist Christians, you know.

SS: Except we didn't want them to die. That's the difference. When did you leave ACT UP?

FJ: After I broke up with Eric it was difficult for me to see him, and if I was going to ACT UP meetings, I would see him. So, that was one of the reasons. And also I think I became a little bit clearer about my path as a surviving person with HIV, and ACT UP had given me the focused direction and willingness to be out at the fringes that I needed to do in other areas of my life. And there were younger people with more energy coming into the picture and I say, you know what? It's time to let other people do what I did for the last two years. It was a burn-out situation. It was extremely stressful, but a lot of fun. But I wanted to explore who I was – not just as a person with HIV. I wanted to

explore who I was and do other political work and do plays about the homeless and talk about women's issues. Not that having a narrow focus is a bad thing, it's just that I guess I have a very short attention span.

SS: In some ways, it was like you decided you were going to live, so you had other things to do.

FJ: I always knew I was going to live. I never really felt like I was going to die from AIDS. I refused to let that be part of my reality, and that could be one of the reasons why I'm alive or maybe not. I have no idea. I know that if I stop my meds, my viral load goes up to a million and if I hadn't been on meds, I probably would be dead, or maybe not. Who knows?

SS: That's one thing I wanted to ask you because we've been asking everyone who is HIV if they could just say what meds they're taking, just for the record.

FJ: I'm on Viramune and Trizivir, now. And, my viral load kind of crept into the detectable range. It's over 300 now. It could have dropped below, but my physician's mad at me because I go in and get my blood draws and never make appointments to see them. I've been a bad patient in a way over the years. I think after being through chemo and radiation with rectal cancer, I just don't want to see physicians a lot. I don't want to remember all the time that I have HIV. It's not like I'm in denial, but I don't want it to always be in the forefront of my consciousness, and it's hard to not have it be there in the forefront of your consciousness.

SS: You were telling me your medications.

FJ: Yeah, some medications worked and some didn't.

SS: What are you taking now?

Tape II
00:40:00

FJ: Viramune and Trizivir. I take two tablets of each, once a day. It's not very hard to be compliant. It's not like in the old days, when you were chewing Videx, that made you throw up. And once I took this other thing – I forget the name of it now – that made me hallucinate in my bed. My bed would turn into a sieve and I would fall through it, and I was the size of a molecule and fighting to get back to the top of my bed. I forgot what the name of the drug was. I know this young kid who wasn't HIV-positive, wanted me to give it to him because he thought it was fun. I was like, oh please, flush it down the toilet.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: This is my last question, Frank. So, you come from this family where you went to anti-war stuff, and you've been a good citizen all your life. Your mother is a very involved person. Did you continue to be socially active, after you left ACT UP?

FJ: In my own way. I've always lived a very public life – as a gay man, as a person with HIV. And I've always been in relationships that were supportive of being a public person. My lover and I have been together for 14 years now. He's HIV-negative. So we are sero-discordant. His lover had died of AIDS, so he was not a stranger to the struggle of HIV. What was the question again?

SS: About staying socially involved.

FJ: There's a bigger picture. As a person who lead a somewhat privileged life. My mom is a domestic – she cleaned floors for a living. And my dad always worked two full-time jobs – he's my stepfather. So, we always had money. We never

did without. But I think that's one of the reasons why I became a teacher, because I wanted to make a difference in other areas of the world. Besides AIDS activism and gay and lesbian rights, there are other issues that need the attention as well. And becoming a teacher for me happened in an interesting part of my life. It kind of occurred in where I would have normally had my midlife crisis. When I was 40, I got a job teaching movement to kindergarten through second grade, right nearby here in Flatbush. And the kids thought I was invented for them – dancing with Mr. Jump, come on.

Then I got the New York City Teaching Fellows gig, and I started that right after coming out of the hospital, doing chemo and radiation. So I never really gave myself much time to feel sorry for myself or feel depressed or whatever. It's now that I've finished my Master's degree and I've got equity in my home that I'm starting to realize, maybe this is what I'm feeling now is like depression. I never really gave myself time to be depressed.

I don't know. It's just the way I've dealt with being gay, being HIV-positive. I've kind of thrust myself into social causes, so that I feel productive. But there's so many causes. You can't spread yourself thin, either. I mean you have to focus on the causes that are important to you – that spring from your own experiences. There are people who get involved with causes that are totally different from their life experiences. Maybe it was narcissistic of me to become active in AIDS politics or gay and lesbian politics.

But I think that the older I get, I see that being a cultural worker can mean being a teacher. I ran into a friend whose mom is a teacher, and he was in ACT UP, as well – I'm blanking out on names. But I saw him coming out of a Broadway show. He goes, "What

are you doing?" I said, "I'm teaching." And he goes, "Oh, that's so subversive." And it's true. Once you close that door and you're with your kids by yourself, you can really do whatever you want in that classroom. And, whenever you hear the word "faggot," and they say "homo," that becomes a teachable moment. You can say, "Well, this is just as bad as racism. It's the same as racism. You're picking on somebody because of how they are, who they are, how they're born, the way they live, and you want people to treat you with respect, don't you?" "You never know whose feelings you're hurting in the room. Someone in here may be gay, you don't know it." All the heads turn around. And middle school is just rife with homophobia. It's part of their developmental state, you know? Their brains are the size of adult brains. They're still children. They've got these adult hormones coursing through their veins.

It's interesting working in a neighborhood that is extremely poor and disenfranchised – an immigrant population. It really puts into perspective, just how privileged a life I led – even though I grew up maybe a mile and a half away from where I'm teaching now.

SS: Thank you, Frank.

[END OF INTERVIEW]