

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

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**Interviewee: Steven Keith**

**Interview Number: 118**

**Interviewer: Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Steven Keith  
June 22, 2010**

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So you start out by saying your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

STEVEN KEITH: Okay. I'm Steven Keith. Today's date is June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010; and I'm 50 years old; and I'm very happy about that.

**SS: Great. And where are we?**

SK: We're in New York City.

**SS: In your beautiful apartment.**

SK: It's okay. It's rent-stabilized, and we intend never to leave, if we have anything to say about it.

**SS: Good. So where did you grow up?**

SK: I grew up in Massachusetts.

**SS: In what kind of community?**

SK: In a community that now is a really serious bedroom community. But when I grew up, I grew up on a dirt road, and about half the houses in our town were summer houses, that were up on stilts, as there were lakes nearby to swim in, and people from Boston would summer there. So it really changed a lot during the time that I left it and –

**SS: So you were a townie?**

SK: I was a townie, yeah. I was a, one of the – but I wasn't angry.

**SS: So when you have tourists, or summer people, coming in and out; does it bring in more sophisticated ideas? Or does it just impose a kind of –**

SK: That's a good point –

**SS: – fervor –**

SK: – there was one family down the street who were more sophisticated, who had a summer house. I hadn't thought of that before.

**SS: Do you think – because we're the same age, so I know that your childhood was during the '60s, and you probably watched it on television –**

SK: Yeah –

**SS: – more than participated in it. But do you think that having people from the city come in and out brought some of that with them? Or it wasn't that kind of –**

SK: In terms of gay life, no. But just in terms of being aware of a larger world than the one of my immediate neighborhood – it was probably a good thing. The funny thing about my neighborhood is – my dad died only two years ago. And about a year ago, I had to clean out the house that we grew up in. And the neighbors were all still the same ones. So they just kept coming by, and we would talk. I'm only talking about three or four different houses, but – and offering to help me, which was kind of crazy, because they're older people. But I grew up in a very intact, very close neighborhood; a working-class neighborhood,

where most people did things like drive a truck, or work in a concrete plant, or something like that.

**SS: What did your parents do?**

SK: My dad worked for the Air Force, in human resources; and my mom is a secretary.

**SS: So do you think you were raised with community-oriented values?**

SK: Very much so.

**SS: Was that expressed – how was that expressed?**

SK: Well, it was mostly just a very stable neighborhood, and so you just spent decades with certain people, and you knew all their sort of good and bad aspects, and – in many ways, my college experience was similar. I went to Cooper Union, here in New York. And in other ways ACT UP was similar, in that I like to be in a tight group, and I'm willing to put up with the pains and troubles that come along with interacting with a group of people.

**SS: Okay. When did you become aware, or start thinking politically or socially, or start thinking about the outside world?**

SK: I was a very – politically inclined teenager. And I wanted a national healthcare system when I was like 14 years old – a real one; a single-payer healthcare system. And I also wanted the Equal Rights Amendment, because I thought it was as radical as the people who were against it thought.

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When they mentioned things like, that it would bring unisex bathrooms, or women in combat, or whatever they could think of to act as a cudgel to defeat the

Equal Rights Amendment, I thought, yeah, it really does mean equality, and that's going to be, maybe have repercussions that we don't even know, but it's the right thing.

I had a chance to speak at my high school graduation, and I spoke about the Equal Rights Amendment, but for it. And you know, it's, it was one of my early disillusioning moments, that – we still don't have an Equal Rights Amendment passed. So, in terms of political awareness; yeah, I was a very – very much political, even as an adolescent.

**SS: So you were already politicized in high school. And then coming to Cooper Union – you knew were an artist of some kind from an early age. Did that set you apart from other people?**

SK: I don't know. Because Cooper Union is – the architecture school is kind of like a monastery. There are only 30 people in a class. And so there are 150 people in the school, because there are about, there are five years. I say “about 150 people” because approximately half the people who start don't finish, so there are people coming in and out. So it's really tough, and small, and peculiar. And – what was your question?

**SS: Did it set you apart from the people you grew up with?**

SK: Sure it did. I used to go home, and I would see various ladies from church, or wherever. And they would ask me: When are you coming back? Which I always thought was an amazing question, because I'm never – I had no plans to ever return. It was a beautiful town I grew up in, but it wasn't big enough anymore for me, once I had come to New York.

**SS: So did you come out before you came to Cooper?**

SK: Absolutely not. And I didn't even come out in Cooper. I'm from this older generation of – gay men who grew up as good boys; who are very – good at school, and somewhat of a teacher's pet, and good to my parents.

And the only reason I went to Cooper Union was for my parents, because it was free, and it would have cost them a lot of money to send me to the Rhode Island School of Design. And I was terrified of New York, so I'm one of the only people that ever got a letter from Cooper Union saying, you're accepted, and I went like, oh, shit. Because now that means I have to go to New York.

So, but I went, and – yeah, my world changed. And – I like to think for the better.

**SS: What was the gay community like that you came out into?**

SK: Oh well, I should finish that part. I – did another classic thing that older gay men of this time do – did — which is fall in love with a really nice straight boy; and spent a lot of time with him. And then, basically because I'm more or less a person who likes to be open and honest all the time, and didn't like the lying part of being in the closet, I decided the only smart move was to make an abrupt change, and take a year off from school, and go to San Francisco; and have a classic coming-out experience on the West Coast. And that was amazing. And then I came back for my fifth year at Cooper Union, which is the thesis year.

**SS: So you were in San Francisco – this is like 1978?**

SK: I was in '83.

**SS: '83. And what was it like, for you?**

SK: It was – back in 1982, at Cooper Union, our shop instructor was a hippie named Max, an older man with a big gray beard, and super mellow, and very smart. And Max was notorious for hanging out in the bathrooms at Bloomingdale's; and understood that you bring two shopping bags, so that your friend can put one foot in each bag, and you won't get caught.

So Max was very aware when AIDS, or GRID, or whatever it was first came up, and – all of a sudden, we heard Max was being very careful nowadays. That was my first awareness of any odd thing happening within the gay community regarding this virus.

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So when I went to San Francisco, I was somewhat aware of what was going on. And – being a fairly, a politically — I like to think — open and somewhat radical person, and a personally conservative person, I was quite careful, even in my, all my explorations in California – although I had lots of fun, also.

**SS: Was AIDS visible when you were there? Were people talking about it? Could you see sick people?**

SK: Didn't see sick people. It was – it was more just a lot of talk; and – I remember, in '85, I went to Europe, after I graduated from school. And I was told not to let on right away that you were American, because you would have a harder time getting laid. So – which of course is ridiculous, because Americans stick out like a sore thumb in Paris.

**JAMES WENTZY: Anywhere.**

SK: But that was an interesting thing that someone would bother to say it to me. And I do recall being in Central, Bar Central, in the Marais, in Paris; and talking to some guys. And they said that we were overreacting, we were ridiculous. No sucking, no fucking; it's, it makes no sense. And I tried to talk to them about the possibilities of having fun and being careful at the same time. But they were quite resistant to it. They were still in the early understanding of AIDS, I think, and didn't – and wanted to look down on Americans, if they had the opportunity.

**SS: Right. So when did it first come into your life? When did you first have to really deal with it, and confront it?**

SK: Oh. That's a good question, because I have been really fortunate. I lost my first friend to AIDS in '87. Which is later than many others. And there was one isolated, it was one person, and then more time passed before I knew somebody else who was sick. So – I haven't had – as far as getting into AIDS activism is concerned; it's an interesting story, but it isn't, it was all rather gradual, and not involving any kind of epiphany or a radicalizing event.

**SS: Um hm. How did it unfold?**

SK: How did it unfold? I'm a – such a lusty person; not even, not only in my heart, but otherwise. And – this beautiful young man invited me to a demonstration against, at St. Patrick's Cathedral, in December of 1989. And I figured, well yeah, sure.

But I mean, but for more than one reason; to enjoy the company of him, but also to – I totally agreed with the thought that the Catholic Church shouldn't be setting any kind of – shouldn't be, not so much setting, but – well –

**JW: Know your scumbags.**

SK: They did – know your scumbags. They did knock down a safe-sex plan a few years earli-, two years earlier, or so. And it's my, was my opinion, and it still is, that if the Church is going to be involved in public policy, then they should be paying taxes. Otherwise, they should stay to their spiritual needs.

So I was totally up for it. And it was a very exciting demonstration, as you know. So that was wonderful.

I was raised to be, to not make a scene, to be, not draw too much attention to myself, to be relatively quiet. And here was a group giving me permission to be loud and in someone's face and to make a scene, literally. And that was fun.

So it's important, I think, not to understate the fun part of ACT UP. As much as it was a lot of work, too, and troubles, sometimes.

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So right after that, he encouraged me to come to a meeting, but I didn't want to join, really, any group that was, where I suspected people might get into groupthink, or where there might be some sort of personality dominating the group. And so I – but I did go in, I think, the next month — I think in January 1990 — to a kiss-in on Sixth Avenue, which was basically a Queer Nation demonstration. And we stopped traffic on Sixth Avenue, and made out, to see if

anyone would mind. And some people did, which made it even better. And of course it was fun to just go up to someone and kiss them because you wanted to. And so that was pretty good.

So then I – did make up my mind that I would check out the regular meetings, and see what it was, and I wanted to include – what I think happened at my first meeting in this discussion, because – there was a – it may not have been my very first meeting, but I was at a meeting early in 1990 where people were complaining about an article written by Gina Kolata, on the front page of the *New York Times*, that contained misinformation and some sweeping conclusions that were just weird. And someone asked, well, why does she do this, write this way? And someone else said, well the only explanation is that she's a media whore, and she just pushes the articles in a certain direction to make them more interesting so they'll land on the front page, versus deep into the newspaper.

And then we moved on to another subject. And yet, Amy Bauer, who was facilitating, took note of some, a comment, and announced to the group that somebody has objected to the use of the word “whore” in a derogatory manner. And I thought, oh, this is an excellent group, because language is alive here, and people are sensitive to words and how they're used, and that really interested me a lot. So – and little did I know what I was getting into, in terms of the interesting writers and speakers who were involved in ACT UP.

So I did kind of ease into it, versus – I know some people – I met somebody who had a dream; and Larry Kramer told him, in the dream, to get to

ACT UP. And of course, he didn't last very long. Somebody who I think was there for like two months.

But that happens, too, apparently. But mine was much more — I don't know — more in my head than in my heart. It was — but although — the more I got into it, the more — the better it was for me, and the — the more I wanted to continue. I basically went from Stop the Church to Hoffman-La Roche, which is almost a five-year span.

**SS: So that was, Hoffman-La Roche was the first big campaign you got involved —**

SK: No, last. It was —

**SS: Last — oh —**

SK: This really cold — demonstration, where we shut down the campus on Route 3, in Nutley, New Jersey, for the day. I think it was February — '94? And I'm not quite sure if that date's perfect. But — they had just shelved a promising antiviral — for no other reason than for marketing reasons, and we wanted them to get it back, even though, I don't know, it might have been just like one of the other five or six that were available at the time.

I think that it's important for everyone involved in ACT UP to acknowledge that most activist groups don't achieve their ends; and that the main goal of ACT UP was to find effective drug treatments for people with AIDS. And it's impossible to quantify in what way ACT UP contributed to that. But the fact that there are such treatments is satisfying to me. And of course, we had all sorts of other goals, too. But that, it is fantastic that ACT UP could, I don't know if

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you can say it was successful, but it was a highly effective activist group, despite all sorts of likelihood that it would simply disintegrate, or whatever, and relatively soon. There was enough urgency to our – enough passion and emergency feeling to what we were doing that we were able to just keep going.

**SS: So when you really decided that this was going to be part of your life, or that you were really going to be part of ACT UP, how did you enter in? Where did you first put your energies?**

SK: It's funny, because – we mentioned that I was married a year and a half ago. And I met my husband, Roscoe, only because the ACT UP meeting that night was canceled because of Rosh Hashanah. And so we celebrate, actually, Rosh Hashanah, whenever that is; and the date of our meeting – so we get to have two good nights out.

So I mean, it really was part of my life. And I think he was taken a little bit aback. Like, we – right after I met him, or shortly thereafter, we went down to the National Institutes of Health, NIH, and I was very much involved in planning that demonstration, and working on the posters and stuff. And – we even had a mole. I had a friend whose mother worked there, who got us maps. So I mean, it was – I think it was hard on Roscoe to – who might be coming through the door –

**SS: Hey, Roscoe.**

SK: – right now. Who – wasn't quite sure what he was getting into, although it seemed all good, and I seemed commonsensible enough about it.

So –

**SS: Hi, Roscoe.**

ROSCOE: Hi.

**SS: How are you? So you worked on the NIH organizing.**

**What was the point of that demonstration?**

SK: It was interesting, because I remember when it was brought up – I never participated in the big demonstration against the FDA, because that was before my time. But I remember somebody — maybe Mark Harrington — saying, now we're really going to the, to the belly of the beast, whatever—

And – it is true that the NIH is a very slow-moving institution, that wasn't going to respond to an epidemic in the way the CDC would; and that an organization that needed leadership in order to do anything differently than what they were doing previously. And obviously, the Bush administration wasn't going to be providing that leadership.

And so I guess we were thinking that we had to kick NIH in the ass ourselves; and provide some sort of political impetus to change the way they were doing things. Such as even having a committee to study the effect of AIDS on women – which is something that, well, the NIH is notoriously sexist in their clinical studies.

So I don't know a lot about, by the way, about TAG-related stuff and treatment issues. But that was a very interesting demonstration. I think it was – it was uncomfortable, in many ways, and somewhat successful just in that – I like that we were interacting with the real people who were actually there. I've always found direct action to be the most – effective.

A lot of stuff we did was good visually, and worked to the media very well. But I liked it when you could confront the commissioner of health, or Bill Clinton, or somebody, absolutely directly; and either make them so angry at you that they'd do something, like go visit GMHC or something – or – or just call them out on their hypocrisy to the point where they had to pretend to be the kind of person they were, the good person they were pretending to be. Which happened, which on a local level is something that is really effective. It doesn't really matter whether you change the person's mind, as long as you get them to do something effective. And if they do it just because you're saying, you're failing your job, and you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing; then that works. So – I like that we were speaking to — at least we thought we were — speaking to the scientists directly. They were in the windows, and whatever, and – they were – I'm sure it was a very odd experience for them. But – that was an interesting action. Brian Zabcik was the sort of actual physical leader of that, and I just sort of enjoyed hanging out with him, and trying to keep the flow good on the action.

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**SS: How did ACT UP approach a huge event like that? How many core organizers were there; how long did it take to prepare the event?**

SK: Yeah yeah.

**JAMES WENTZY: Hold on just for a second –**

SK: A long time.

{MICROPHONE ISSUE}

SK: So yeah. I don't know how many weeks. I guess typically we would spend – two or three months preparing, right, in terms of the time. And always it got a little more urgent close to the time the action would take place.

**SS: What was your task exactly?**

SK: Well, I was involved in the Outreach Committee. So – once again, for better or worse, combining fun with activism. And – so we would try and get people to go to the action; and try and get people to contribute to the planning. And because I am an architect and I can wield a Magic Marker and paint reasonably well, I made some banners and posters. So I was more involved in that end of it. And –

**SS: I have some questions about those things.**

SK: Yeah?

**SS: So let's say you wanted to make a banner or a poster.**

**Could you put anything you wanted on it, or –**

SK: Ah, it's an interesting question, because I like working with a group, and coming up with consensus. But I have quite a few personal messages that I enjoy seeing, if I see old footage of a demonstration.

At the NIH, I created — well, a group of us — created this dragon. It was like this, a bunch of signs that were linked together with cloth ties. And the head of the dragon said, AIDS is More Than One Disease. And it listed the different, each signboard was a different condition or disease, opportunistic infection, that we could use effective treatment for – even if there weren't treatments to attack the virus directly. And I thought that was a very – I – I sort of

have a personal quest for being competent, maybe out of some deep-seated thought that I am not. And it seemed to me that we should speak to the scientists at NIH in a way that – I didn't even know the correct spelling of some of the things we were putting on there. But we had expert – oversight. So –

**SS: Did the group try to – did you have to pass things by the group? Or were you allowed to do what you thought was best?**

SK: Well, see, I'm a – kind of – in everything I do — architecture is a lot like making films, where it has to be done by a group. So I'm – it's hard for me to see a – in ACT UP, you can pretty much do what you want, as long as it wasn't violent or way off message, right? In fact, I sometimes minded it when people were going off on tangents. It is better to have one clear message, and to be able to teach people before an action that if a microphone is thrust in your face, please say these five words; then say anything else you want to say. But if you can just get our point across, why we were there that day, it would be helpful.

So there's more freedom and disorganization than maybe I would have liked. But of course, I wouldn't have wanted anyone to – be running the group, either.

ACT UP was definitely a, a kind of organized chaos. And – that was a very, that worked, actually.

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**SS: I want to ask you about outreach. Who were you outreaching to? Who were you trying to get to the demonstration, and how did you try to get them there?**

SK: Yeah, actually, in a weird way, anyone. I was involved with the Latino group for a while, and we went to Puerto Rico. And there's a small ACT UP chapter in San Juan, and we had one of the first, if not the first, AIDS demonstration there. And we went to the governor's mansion, and a lot of police presence, and a very – a society I didn't realize was actually quite — well, it is a colony, after all, so that's, it shouldn't be so surprising — but a very quiet society, that, where a demonstration is considered a big deal. And – and what was your question? I guess what I was saying related to it.

**SS: Oh, how, who were you –**

SK: Oh, yeah. So we were – even in the few days before that action, just trying to talk anyone into coming. And that was at a point, in the early '90s, when many more women, many more people of color, were being affected by AIDS. And so there was no reason not to ask anyone, to try to convince anyone, to be involved, or to at least do actions.

Because I started out going to those two demonstrations before I went to any meetings at all; I used to talk to people about not going to meetings, but doing actions. If we could get people to come to demonstrations, then that was totally – cool –

**SS: Okay, but when you're trying to recruit for the NIH action, did you go to bars, did you go to AIDS organizations, did you stand on the street?**

SK: We did some tabling on the street. That's sort of a mixed bag. We did a lot of just stickering and wheat-pasting. And wheat-pasting late at night,

with a bucket of paste, is really fun. Because you do run the risk of getting caught, and because – you want to get up as many as you can, in good spots. So – that was, we did a lot of wheat-pasting, actually. And I can sort of smell it right now.

**SS: So did you feel like the demonstration was a success?**

SK: The NIH demonstration, per se? So hard to know what, when you're successful and when you're not, at those sorts of things.

I think that – the NIH – some people at NIH really resented being acted upon; having people come and scream and complain. Because they felt they were doing good work, or even God's work; and here were people saying that, in any kinds of terms, that they were doing it wrong, or that they were bad, or whatever. And – I do figure that it couldn't have hurt when the more kindly people in ACT UP, who were involved with, who were on NIH committees; if they needed to push for a change in policy – for example, to study women or people of color with a particular drug that there would be a little bit more, people would be a little bit more open to listening to the ACT UP person who is at the table, and being totally businesslike. So they wouldn't have to deal with the uncouth element. And I, of course, especially liked being part of the uncouth part of ACT UP.

**SS: What was that? Can you explain what that was?**

SK: Oh, it was – young and loud and flamboyant; and – we used to – I was just talking with somebody — I don't know who — about how – how scary lesbians are to some people. And it always seemed to me that in most of

our big demonstrations, that – if you have a thousand people, by the way, you can go anywhere you want to go. It's probably not true right now; you probably need two thousand people. But in the early '90s, you only needed a thousand people, and you could do anything.

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But what would happen is, we would basically pretend to be out of control; really banging on our foamcore signs, and yelling, and pushing on whatever barricade or whatever. And then one of our beautiful strong women would go up to the lieutenant, in his little white shirt, and say: These people are going to – you can either stay here for hours, and hold up traffic, or you can let us go through the next 20 blocks, and we'll be done. And just kind of explain to them calmly that it would be better for us to do what we planned to do, instead of stopping us, which they would rather do, because the police are very much – psychologically and as a group, they're – they really don't like not being in control.

So really, in a way – the women in ACT UP seemed much more effective at somehow partially disarming them and partially scaring them, at the same time.

I was just thinking about that. It was very rare that guys would be going up to the cops. I'm not sure – if that's always the case. But I just noticed it quite a few times.

**SS: I wanted to ask you about ACT UP Puerto Rico. How did that come about? Was it Puerto Ricans in ACT UP New York, or –**

SK: Yeah, the Latino Caucus in New York — which was oddly split between pro-state Puerto Ricans — or Nuyoricans — and pro-independence Puerto Ricans — with very few Commonwealth-loving folks. Which of course presented problems, which meant certain people didn't even go on this action, because they didn't agree with the other people. I forget which faction, though, it was that went.

Well, that was – really interesting, in that it was a lot more like working in New York City, trying to get local officials to respond to local health concerns; to provide more housing and nutrition for people with AIDS. So it was – on a sort of mechanical level, it was a lot like trying to get Ed Koch to respond to AIDS.

On another level, it was weird, though, because easily, for a month and a half before I went to Puerto Rico, my phone had lots of clicks on it. And I didn't know what that was. But I am aware that, and disagree with the fact that the United States is occupying Puerto Rico, and that whenever there is a referendum for independence, according to U.N. charter, the military is supposed to leave first – which of course never has happened.

**SS: Now were people in Puerto Rico who wanted to start ACT UP – was it an ACT UP New York project to start ACT UP Puerto Rico? Or –**

SK: No, there already was a chapter in ACT UP, in Puerto Rico. And there was a, there were a few people — maybe only two or so — who were in both, who went back and forth.

**SS: Who was that?**

SK: I'll have to think about it.

**SS: Okay.**

SK: Get back to you. Only because time passes, and things get hazier. I worked on this small newspaper called *ACT UP Reports*. And one of them was all about our trip to Puerto Rico.

**SS: What was that paper? I'm not familiar with it.**

SK: It was basically a newsletter. It was really meant for outsiders, as an outreach vehicle. Sort of a tabloid, with maybe only four or eight pages. And it only came out for a year; maybe there only were five of them. We were very ambitious, but it's hard to publish something.

But it was, I think there was so much misinformation about ACT UP. Even, I would run into gay men from the Upper West Side, who said: Well, it's all about anger, and I don't want to be near so much anger. And I would try to tell them, there's a lot of joy involved in it as well; and that maybe they should be angry, to some extent; and whatever else. But –

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**SS: Do you think that was an excuse, on their part?**

SK: Sure, it easily could have been. But I really subscribed – I'm not a goody two shoes in general, but I really subscribe to the ACT UP idea that — which is, I guess, a Marxist concept — that from each according to their ability. If I could get people to just come to an action, then I thought that was perfectly good. And I didn't understand whenever anyone sniped about

somebody only doing this or only doing that. If they were doing something, then encouraging it just seemed like the way to go.

**SS: Right – change tapes.**

Tape II  
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**SS: So for years, gay people always felt like they had to vote for the Democratic Party – that other party is doing nothing for us — because they had no choice. And then, in the 1992 primary, ACT UP decided to take a slightly different role. Can you explain? Can you set that up a little bit?**

SK: Sure. I remember that the pins that we were distributing at the time said, “Vote as if your life depended on it.” Which is one of our better, more pithy slogans. I remember handing one to Barney Frank, during the New York primary. And he looked at it, and – but then he was like, oh, and then he put it on right away, and he – so I liked that it – people understood it right away. Which is good. Although voting as if your life depended on it, for me, as a general political junkie, also sort of meant that anyone who cared about AIDS should remember to vote, at all.

But that primary was really amazing, and was written up on the editorial page of the *New York Times* afterwards, as the in-your-face primary. ACT UP was part of that – getting in people’s faces.

We had gone to New Hampshire, for the first primary, in ’92, where we were an equal-opportunity harasser, with Paul Tsongas and Bill Clinton, who was on the ropes, but seemed like he might still come back, and others.

And of course, New Hampshire presidential politics are retail, which works well for activists, because you can go right up to a person, and shake their hand, and tell them how many friends you've lost, and that a president should be better than the one we had presently. Although we weren't always that polite.

I remember, I met a neighbor of Bill Clinton's, from Arkansas, who was pushing hard for and wanting to sell me. I was presumably a New Hampshire voter. And I told her I was an AIDS activist. And I somewhat upset her, because I said, yeah, I like Bill Clinton. He seems really smart and aware. And I said, and, for us, the fact that he's an adulterer and a draft dodger is basically a good thing. So she was real taken aback by that. And I said, no, really. He's sex-positive and antiwar. So that's not necessarily a problem.

So I lost her. But –

{LAUGHTER}

We ran around, and got in their face. But interestingly enough, even — I think it was in April, when the New York primary took place — and by then, Bill Clinton still did not even have a position paper on what he would do to fight AIDS if he were president. And he was on the, his comeback, and was surging ahead.

So we were convinced that we needed to get some potential policy out of the Clinton campaign. And so there was a whole group dedicated to just going wherever he was going to be in New York.

And one of my proudest moments as an activist occurred somewhat accidentally. We were staking out the Hilton on Sixth Avenue, because Bill Clinton was upstairs, speaking to the United Federation of Teachers, or another, or a more local teachers union. And we thought we might have a chance to confront him about not having any stated AIDS policies, or promises, or plans.

But since I'm not somebody who is the bravest person, it worked out really well for me, because I was near an elevator bank, and I saw a very bright light, and I just moved forward. And all of a sudden, this man with a big pink face was directly in front of me, being interviewed by a reporter, and being followed by a video camera. And I just screamed at him; that, you don't have any policies on AIDS! People in New York are dying! What are you planning to do about it?

And he scowled, of course, because his interview with the other, with the reporter had been ruined. But we just said, New York is dying! You're doing nothing about it! And yelling that. And I remember walking right up to, and he walked through, a line of Secret Service. And I – at that point, I was a somewhat experienced activist, so I could look at the Secret Service guy, and say, you're not going to have any problem with us; and then continue yelling at Bill Clinton. Whereupon he went into the parking garage, and got ambushed by Amy and a bunch of other people. And I remember, after the New York primary was over, there was an article in the paper, of Clinton being relieved to be out of New York because he really hated being confronted by these snot-nosed whoever – I

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forget what word he used. And I thought, oh; I was one of those snot-nosed people who was in your face, and you deserved it.

We had four demands in spring of 1992, of Bill Clinton. We wanted an HIV-positive speaker at the Democratic National Convention. We wanted for him to sit down with local AIDS groups, like GMHC. We wanted — I have to think — oh, obviously, a massive increase in AIDS research. And fourth, we wanted a national healthcare system.

And we got three of those things, from the Clinton administration.

And —

**SS: Who was the speaker? Was it Bob Hattoy?**

SK: Yeah.

**SS: Okay.**

SK: And that was probably not so significant, in our minds. But it may have been important to your average TV viewer. It's hard to know. Having him sit down with local, with people working in the AIDS community in New York was probably huge, because that was the beginning of Bill Clinton, in a weird way, becoming quite comfortable with discussing AIDS, being with people who have AIDS, and just the beginning of his understanding. And now, he's a better man for it, I think.

What was your other question?

**SS: How long did it take for him to produce a position paper?**

SK: It was pretty fast. They were pretty fed up with us. I remember — near the end of that period, when they were going to be leaving New

York, and we were going to the primary — he was going to win it; I guess he won it; I can't even remember that — and leaving, I made up this false *New York Times* article, that said that — that activists were planning to disrupt events wherever, in other states — which was something we weren't really able to do — and tried to convince a lot of people to fax to their headquarters in Little Rock. I wanted to really keep the pressure on.

I think that was an example where activism really worked. And it was ugly. It wasn't nice, at all. But he had, he got position papers, and our smart people reviewed them, and they were pretty good — most certainly better than anything that the Bush administration had come up with.

**JAMES WENTZY: He gave a speech the day before the election in New Jersey.**

SK: That's right!

**JAMES WENTZY: About AIDS.**

SK: That's right. And that may have been a direct result of wanting to quiet the snot-nosed activists.

**JAMES WENTZY: Which was actually KS.**

SK: Oh, James.

**JAMES WENTZY: Like, I feel your pain.**

SK: Well, the thing about phonies is it's okay — it really doesn't matter all that much whether you win them over, as long as you get them to do the right thing. Taking the right sort of actions to make yourself look good is still taking —

**SS: Right.**

SK: – some good actions. So you know – it's very impossible to separate out, for anyone to, even a great psychiatrist would have a hard time figuring out which part of Bill Clinton is a very good person, and which part is pretending to be a good person.

**SS: Right.**

SK: But it really doesn't matter, and didn't matter, from my point of view.

**SS: I want to ask you a little bit about the culture of ACT UP.**

SK: Um hm.

**SS: How much of your life were you spending in ACT UP?**

SK: Well – every Monday night. And –

**SS: For five years; four years?**

SK: Yeah, pretty much.

**JW: Except Rosh Hashanah.**

SK: And – it really depended, because certain actions were more interesting to me than others. But Outreach Committee usually met once a week, although that wasn't for the whole time I was involved in ACT UP. And working on things like the *ACT UP Reports*, the little newspaper, we did for days and days and days, and that – it was really – interesting.

I remember, I have a friend who now is a mental-health counselor at the Center. And she – at the time, I told her I have so much more fun doing this than my real job. And it was just sharing that thought. But she told me

afterwards that it really caused her a shift in the way she was thinking about how she spent her time. And at the time, she was male, and was an architect. And I don't credit myself with changing her whole life — certainly not her gender — but just in terms of getting involved in something political, or something that you're passionate about, and – I really have to say that it was mostly a labor of love. It was really – something that I looked forward to doing. And of course, most work, in most jobs, is work.

**SS: Right.**

SK: So –

**JW: Can I ask a quick in-between question that's related.**

**When you did the *Reports*, did you guerilla Xerox the pages at work, or did you use the workspace?**

SK: Well, we had some patronage. So we went to Microsoft Systems Journal office, at Worldwide Plaza, where they had something that's still remarkable; giant monitors, where you could have multiple pages out at once to do your layouts.

**JW: Thanks, Michael Longacre.**

SK: Thank you, Michael Longacre. And so we were able to make an actual little newspaper for awhile.

**SS: So you're spending a lot of time in ACT UP, and there's a lot of sick people, and you're interacting with them all the time; and people that you're working with are sick and dying, and you're dealing with**

**people's suffering in a daily way. Did that affect your relationships with friends, gay and straight, who were doing nothing?**

SK: Hm. It's a good question. I'm not all that judgmental about what people do and don't do. I'm not even all that judgmental about how openly gay people are – although I had a rule for awhile of not dating — for quite a long time — of not dating someone who wasn't — that's a different story, though. Because you don't necessarily want to be involved with a closet case.

But in terms of judging – I'm sorry, I have to ask you the question again, because –

{SIRENS}

**SS: It's not about judging, it's about feeling.**

SK: About feeling.

**SS: Did you –**

SK: I, I – honestly felt that the best way to involve anyone was in a positive way. And – I don't know. Now that I'm older, I can be bitter about some things. But I was a fairly idealistic younger person. And let's talk about the fact that I was HIV-negative. And there was always a funny frisson between HIV-positive and HIV-negative people in ACT UP, and we weren't – it's one of the only things we sort of generally – weren't supposed to talk about, or rarely talked about.

It sometimes came up that an HIV-positive person would speak in a meeting and say all of what you're saying about changing the world is fine. But you know, we need to focus on this. Because they were HIV-positive, their words

had more credibility, and they sometimes were able to focus everyone at that moment. So that was a good thing. But –

It's true that HIV-negative people had different motivations. And one thing that's possibly horrible to say — but we may as well — is that some HIV-negative people thought that HIV-positive people should be more grateful for their involvement, since they didn't – well, let's put it this way: there was some sniping that some of these upper-middle-class white boys wouldn't be involved in nitty-gritty activism if their lives weren't on the line.

**SS: Do you think that's true?**

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SK: It's true to some extent. But – of course, people are much more complicated than all that. And as I said before, I don't find much value in questioning different people's motivations.

There were some real old-time activists in ACT UP, who were involved in the civil rights movement, and who were involved in SDS and the antiwar movement; and who did not like the domineering of certain men, who seemed to be involved in activism, AIDS activism, because they had AIDS. But I don't know that – these sort of tensions were subsumed by the more important things, which involved the actions themselves, and trying to make any kind of difference.

**JAMES WENTZY: How were they domineering?**

SK: Well, as you – well – a very few times, we had a consciousness-raising sort of discussion, where women in particular would point out that you can be domineering just by raising your voice loud enough; and

speaking long enough; to discourage other people from speaking, even if they were speaking right at that very moment, quietly and assertively, but not somehow loud enough. And it's true that, even now, that men take up space, and dominate the airwaves in any given room, just about.

**SS: I –**

SK: I agree with women on that particular issue.

**SS: All right, so I'm going to take back –**

SK: Sorry –

**SS: – the microphone here –**

SK: – I spoke over your words!

{LAUGHTER}

**SS: What I'm trying to get at is – your personal relationships and friendships with people inside ACT UP who were sick. Did you have really authentic, honest conversations with them about what they were going through?**

SK: Yeah, how could you not?

**SS: All right.**

SK: Well see, one thing I really prized about ACT UP was that everything was so authentic and honest. I like really genuine people in my life, and I have some friends who are kind of high-maintenance and problematic; but they're real, and their realness is what I like about them. In ACT UP, most people were very real, too.

**SS: Were there particular people who passed away or who died while you were working –**

SK: Sure.

**SS: – who you really connected with, that you can remember here?**

SK: Yeah. Um – there are quite a few. I don't know. And – in a weird way, I guess – I feel not prepared to talk about it, although I might – because I – sort of, it's awful, but part of living is putting some, certain things behind you. I am one of the few people who really liked David Feinberg, even though he was a pain. And – he's a good example of somebody who – I felt like I was fighting for. And – there are lots of people I didn't necessarily know well, like Aldyn McKean, who were just really sweet and sparkling, and you, even if you weren't a close friend of theirs, you wanted to fight for them, too.

But my motivations were largely – intellectual and political, and fun-loving, versus having a very personal emotional need to – well, I guess it met my emotional needs, but in a different way. But in terms of being radicalized or being, or staying with ACT UP for a while; it was, for me, it was an avocation of some sort. And I know for some people, it was very personal, very emotional; and it wasn't fun, even. So –

At the Hoffman-La Roche action, there was a very sick guy who was with our group of five who were, we would – we were handcuffed together, and also our arms were in steel tubes, so that they couldn't cut the handcuffs too quickly – well basically, too quickly. And this guy didn't have a decent sweater.

And it was – heartbreaking. We got him a sweater, and – and we got him, he actually wore my ski – what do you call those – leggings, so we could sit on the ground and not freeze. But – I’m sort of a relativist, and I see everything in shades of gray, and the fact that there were sick people around us, and that some of us were going to die – I somewhat – as sad and hard as that was, I somewhat took it as, this is how it is. It just is this way. And it’s kind of like I know some people who avoid, who are afraid of intimate romantic relationships, because they think they might get their heart broken. I have never been that sort of person. I’ve always been the sort of person who just rushed in, and got my heart broken. So in the same way, I took, I understood ACT UP to be something that was constantly changing; that I might not stick with; and ended up there awhile; and – just dealt with the realities of it. Like Bob Rafsky, and all sorts of people who – I remember hugging Bob once, and I hurt him, and I didn’t realize. He said, I know you meant well. And it was just – I don’t know.

I sort of arrived at ACT UP intellectually, with my heart broken already, as far as AIDS was concerned. So I didn’t experience sort of a lot more continued – sadness. And I know some people – did; some people, I think, were changed by ACT UP – I am sure that’s, that happened. But I’m not sure that ACT UP changed me very much. It’s not an interesting point.

**SS: Why did you decide to leave?**

SK: Well, ACT UP really atrophied in sort of ’94 and ’95. There are some diehards still doing stuff, I’m aware of that. I still, I’m still on the phone tree.

**SS: Um hm.**

SK: I have done some local actions when I could, just for the chance to get out there and yell, and be part of it. And I have gotten slightly involved in gay marriage – really only because I wanted to be married, and secondly, because they didn't want me to get married. And thirdly, because despite the fact that I think marriage is a discredited institution, I – I thought it might – really radicalize society if we took on their most – whatever.

X: Sacred?

SK: Sacred thing. Or for Catholics, sacrament itself.

**JW: You just don't like winter demos, do you?**

SK: I don't like winter demos. I don't like winter anyway, so that's just that. But – there were hardships. I remember, when we went up to Kennebunkport; our bus broke down in New Jersey. And so we arrived there at like three in the morning, and then had to get up at six to go to the demonstration. So there were, it wasn't all fun. But –

**SS: Why did ACT UP atrophy? What was the reason?**

SK: A lot of other activist groups were amazed that ACT UP survived for more than a year or two. So that was considered remarkable at the time. Why did it atrophy, and getting back to your other question, which I didn't answer very well — why did I stop being involved in it —

Well, partly because of having successful drug treatments. And partly because I think activist groups do have – they are unlikely, and also do have a lifespan that –

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It's so funny, because my mother-in-law is a member of NAACP. And for the life of me, I can't tell you what the NAACP does today. It's a formerly great organization, although as I read history, they were always not radical enough. But they were at one point really effective, and they had almost no money. And now they have a fair amount of money, and they do almost nothing. And I think maybe that's normal for political activist groups. And maybe in any endeavor, it's better coming up than going down.

**JW: Dog years.**

SK: So – and you know, I guess, it's important to be honest: my life became more bourgeois and grown-up and relationship-oriented, family-oriented. And that meant not having the time to do ACT UP. It was easier to be involved in AIDS activism if you were single, because you had time, and you wanted to be with people, and perhaps even meet somebody. Which of course happened.

**SS: Why? Did you meet Roscoe in ACT UP?**

SK: No.

**SS: No. You met him because ACT UP –**

SK: But I did meet him because ACT UP wasn't meeting that night.

**SS: {LAUGHS}**

SK: So I went to the gym instead. And we met at the gym.

**JW: Can I ask?**

**SS: Yeah, sure.**

**JW: Do you have any recollections, visual or otherwise — emotional — of those Ashes Actions? And also, maybe, I assume you saw David Feinberg's last appearance at ACT UP?**

SK: I'm not sure that I did see David Feinberg's —

**JW: — that vitriolic speech, like a hundred-and-ten-pound man walking into the ACT UP meeting —**

SK: I have different — I don't remember that exactly. I remember Larry Kramer going off a few times, and — and then writing something in the handout, where he tried to make up with everyone.

**JW: Yeah. We didn't let him speak.**

SK: Or presumably he was back on his medication. But in terms of visual memories — as an architect, I liked being in a group that was visually astute; and where there was a design in mind, when we had an action. But you know, it's very funny, because the things I liked most about demonstration was just raw energy. For me, it was — I didn't grow up, unlike most of my contemporaries, on rock and roll. But for me, it was kind of like being in a rock concert, or something like that, in that the energy was so pleasant — however much anger might have been the source of it.

**SS: Hm. So —**

**JW: And the Ashes —**

SK: The Ashes Action — let's see if I can — I don't remember the Ashes Action very well. I remember it was quite cool, and gray, and just why that

photograph I showed you looked so good. But I wanted to – after that, Jon Greenberg died.

**SS: Um hm.**

SK: And we had – and as I recall — and I forget who it was whose ashes we brought to the White House; it's terrible that I forgot, but — I recall that they said, throw my body over the fence. And instead, it became the Ashes action.

Jon Greenberg, we took bodily up Avenue A, into Tompkins Square Park – and had a funeral in the park. And in terms of one on one, interacting with whoever you encounter in an action, it was very interesting, because the people in the park were enjoying the spectacle until they – and a number of teenagers kept asking me, is there anybody in there? And I said, yes, he's in there. And then they weren't sure what to think.

That was an extraordinarily moving afternoon, that I remember very, very well. And we had an open-casket funeral in the park. And John Kelly sang – which was rough, for me, and so beautiful. I remember, I kissed John, and then I immediately, because I hadn't cried up until that point at all, for Jon, that I pretty much just went to pieces, and held on to the nearest person, who was BC Craig, with whom I was currently having a fight, for other reasons. So that after I calmed down, I looked up and said, thank you. And she said, oh, it's you. And I said, no, it's you. Which is kind of nice. It was a sweet moment, because being there for each other was more important than whatever it was we were skirmishing about.

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But that was a really powerful day, in terms of it being so visceral and something that I can, where I can see the entire action from beginning to end now.

And of course, Day of Desperation was fun. Because shutting down Grand Central Station was considered pretty challenging. The war was on, and so the beginning of the police state that we live in now. And we weren't sure if we were going to be able to accomplish the action. And this was the day after Ann Northrop and John Weir and others had invaded NBC [CBS] Studios, at the beginning of the news, to say, Fight AIDS, Not Arabs. Which was also what was on the banner of the balloon that was sent up to the top of Grand Central.

Shutting down Grand Central was fun, and we couldn't get arrested that day, no matter what we did. So it was always – unclear how it was going to end. Maybe that's another thing that I found exciting about it. But –

**JW: Handcuffs?**

SK: We didn't have handcuffs. That's your thing.

{LAUGHTER}

The handcuffs for Hoffman-La Roche – nobody cut them off either, or took advantage of us while we were handcuffed, so –

**SS: Right.**

SK: But they did send all their employees home for the day. And we have – it's funny, because – nowadays, when they talk about the war in Iraq, they talk about asymmetrical warfare. Or when you talk about the Palestinian situation, it's this very uneven thing, and – ACT UP was a lot like an insurgency

— was — in that we don't have any – real clout, or money, or power or weaponry. So you only do what you can do. And I think some of our actions seemed pathetic to some people. But they never did to me – even a very small action, at some city agency — just going in the hallway and making trouble — I always thought was worthwhile, because I did my homework at a meeting, and learned that that person needed to change something. So – I think to be effective at all worked for me.

I imagine some people really wanted to have a huge effect, and I never, that wasn't my personal bent.

**JW: And it should be noted, you should note that the Hoffman-La Roche action, they had like 18 or 22 entrances to the plant. So you guys had to block at all of them, in the cold winter.**

SK: Well, I, but getting back to the retail part of it — I remember, since we had nothing better to do, and it was freezing cold — that those employees who had arrived, and didn't know that they could have stayed home; we were just calling out to them: What would you do if your brother and sister needed a drug, and the company you worked for was not going to, was putting it on the shelf, and not going to even study it?

**SS: What did they say?**

SK: Oh, you know – they mostly ignored us, and – or even smirked, or something. But – you'd like to think you can touch a person in so-, get the, you can their brain working, or touch them emotionally. But – I don't know, I just really believe in this idea that you can make a difference in your

everyday encounters, and in little interactions. So I guess that kept me from being frustrated in ACT UP, to some extent.

**SS: Right.**

SK: Because I imagine people who had bigger ambitions often were frustrated. Because it was a, the classic big dysfunctional family, as you well know.

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

SK: Ah. Greatest achievement. It would be hard not to consider that to be in any way encouraging anyone to come up with effective drugs. And while the drugs we have now are far from ideal, they're changing, they're helping people all over the world. And if we made that happen any sooner — like maybe it was going to happen anyway — but if we made it happen any sooner, then that's great.

And in what way did ACT UP fail? In many ways. But maybe the biggest way is in not lasting longer, and being able to work harder on those things that — those more long-term campaigns. While I care about national healthcare — I was telling James earlier — I'm sort of resigned to the fact that this country doesn't love itself enough to want single-payer healthcare. And it's just sad. But I haven't wanted to work on it. Guess I just sort of felt like the work wouldn't be, that I wouldn't be able to make a difference. And if the Clintons and the Obamas

and the, all the various people who care about that issue aren't able to make it happen, then I just kind of didn't feel I could.

But with AIDS in the nineties, I felt like I could, in some tiny way, be part of something that actually mattered. And as I look back, and I think we were.

**SS: Okay, thank you.**

SK: You're welcome.

Hey, Rue.

**SS: Great. See it was easy.**

SK: It wasn't hard. It was – and you were noisy!