

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

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Interviewee: **Larry Kramer**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Larry Kramer

November 15, 2003

Tape I
00:07:00

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

LARRY KRAMER: My name is Larry Kramer. We are in my study, in my lover's and my house in New Preston, Connecticut.

SS: How old are you?

LK: I'm 68.

SS: Mazel tov. What's today's date?

LK: That I've lasted this long is a major miracle.

SS: And today is?

LK: November 15th, 2003.

SS: Well, Larry, you've been interviewed many times and you have a lot to say, and what we really want to do is ask you the questions that you probably have not repeated ad nauseum before and that, maybe, more of an internal conversation from people who were inside ACT UP together. So we're not going to be asking you these generic questions or things that anybody who is interested can find other places. I just want to ask you a few background questions. When did your family come to this country?

LK: My father was born in this country, and his mother was from Russia and no one knows where his father was from. And my mother came when she was four, also from Russia.

SS: When you were growing up, did your parents participate in any kind of politics or community activity?

LK: Yes and no. From when I was about six until I went away to Yale, my mother ran a suburban chapter of the American Red Cross. She was called the Home Service Director – basically the second person in charge – and dealt with taking care of all the problems mostly having to do with the war and servicemen off fighting and their families, and things like that. My father worked for the government as a lawyer and was I think probably quite puzzled by the terrible things that were going on in the government through the '50s around him. He had never done anything, but he had friends – we all did – people living across the hall from us disappeared one night because the husband had been named by McCarthy. Kids in my school suddenly weren't there anymore. So, I was surrounded by a lot of that.

SS: Where did they go?

Tape I
00:10:00

LK: Where did they go when they disappeared? Who knew? There was a famous story about a man called Service who was fired by Eisenhower or somebody for some presumed malfeasance in the China department and he just disappeared and the kid disappeared and the family disappeared with them. They surfaced again, at Harvard and Radcliffe, I might add.

SS: And what was the name of the suburb?

LK: Mt. Rainier, Maryland. It's just on the wrong side of Washington in west Prince George's County, which is pretty much black now. Then, it was exceedingly rural and was the Prince George's County chapter of the American Red Cross. And that covered an enormous area, almost to Baltimore – from Washington to Baltimore. So she was always schlepping out to take care of – when I was a kid, I was taken to families whose kids had rheumatic fever, and I was put to work on the bloodmobile and all that

sort of thing, which I loved.

SS: Okay, so the community involvement was really something that your family emphasized.

LK: Well my mother was very much a teacher and an exceedingly moral woman – that it was our duty to help, yes. And she was able to do it, and she took a great deal of pride in her work. She drove my father nuts.

SS: So, before GMHC, had you ever been involved in any kind of political organizing?

LK: I would have to say no.

SS: Do you know why, thinking back?

LK: Why I wasn't?

SS: Yeah.

LK: I don't think it came from lack of interest. I think it came from a lack of ability. I grew up late. I was a late bloomer. I was a very unhappy child. I was a very unhappy teenager. I tried to kill myself at Yale. And it took a long time to pull myself out of those troughs. I went fairly quickly. I was transferred to England, to work for Columbia Pictures there, and that's what probably saved my life in a way because I was able to be psychoanalyzed for very little money, and it was enormously helpful. I wanted to write and I was terrified to write. I was afraid to write as so many young writers, wannabes, are. And through the analysis, I was able to work through all of that and the first thing I really wrote was my screenplay for *Women in Love*, which turned out to give me a certain amount of confidence. Through the '60s, when all the political shit was going down in America, I was living in London.

SS: That screenplay was the first thing that you wrote?

LK: Yes.

SS: How did you get that gig, if you had never written anything before?

LK: Well, I worked in the film industry. It was the first thing I wrote on my own. I helped write a movie called *Here We Go Round The Mulberry Bush*. I worked in the film industry. I was assistant to the President of a bunch – first Columbia, and then United Artists, and my job was to find writers and find stories and find books for movies, and work with young directors and all. And London in the '60s was the film capital of the world. Hollywood was on the down and out, and Rome had been in the '50s. And in the '60s, and part of the '70s all the big movies came out of London, and I worked for Columbia. We were king of the heap. We made movies like *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*, *Bridge Over the River Kwai*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Pumpkin Eater*. I can go on and on. It was just incredible.

SS: So, you said, I want to write this and they said okay, give the kid a break?

LK: No, no.

SS: What happened?

LK: Interested in all this? Okay.

SS: I'm just trying to understand how your first assignment could be something so –

LK: Well, I wanted to write and I finally found that I could. I basically wanted to produce movies. And I worked in an office, and how do you find money to make movies and all these things. In those days, there was no such thing as video and you

Tape I
00:15:00

couldn't make the kind of movies that you can make today for next to no money – that the kids can make. You had to do it through a studio. That was the only way. You couldn't get any kind of distribution any other way. So part of my job was finding young directors, and I found a young director called Silvio Narizzano, who went on to direct *Georgy Girl* which was a big success, which was sort of my package. And in gratitude, he said, "I have a book I would like to make as a movie and I'll let you produce it. You can go out and get the money." And it was *Women in Love*. That's basically how it happened, and then it went on from there. Silvio made a terrible – it becomes involved how we got to Ken Russell and all that, but that's basically how we got it.

SS: This was actually Jim's question, and I think it's a really good one. Since you had not really been involved in political activity before and, especially in the book *Faggots*, you have a very critical view towards the way that the gay community was constructed.

LK: Still do.

SS: What was it that made you think that people should be accountable and could be?

LK: *Faggots* has a slightly different genesis than *The Normal Heart* and with AIDS. I was very much in love with the man who I now live with. But that was 17 years earlier, and I wanted him to fall in love with me, and he wouldn't or he didn't, or he loved me but he wouldn't live with me. And, those were the days of extreme whatever you want to call it – hedonism. *Faggots* is about a guy coming back to America or coming into the gay world – naïve and inexperienced with that world. Because there wasn't much of a gay world in those days, remember. It wasn't a community, it wasn't a

political community. It was very little of all that. It was exceedingly diffuse, dispersed. And, I went out to look at that world. As my shrink said, “Why don’t you go out and explore what the gay world is really like?” And that’s what I found. Most of the stuff, in one way or another happened to me or people who are based on real people. There’s not much made up in *Faggots*. That’s not to say that one doesn’t take a certain amount of license. And I wanted to know why our love affair didn’t work out, and I came to this realization that no love affair, no relationship could withstand the baggage that we were putting on it by having so much sex with so many different people. Who can exist through that, in a relationship without one person or both going nuts?

SS: So, how could you expect that that group of people, as you just defined them, would be able to meet the challenge of AIDS?

LK: Sarah that’s a great, wonderful question. But I did and I still do and they still haven’t. I guess I felt it was little different. We were dying and it happened first – so far as I could tell – through my people around me, my friends, our group. And you just think, oh my God, we’ve got to save our lives, I guess. To this day, I don’t understand. At its heyday, at its peak, ACT UP – how many did we have across the country? Ten thousand people maybe? With how many millions of gay people in this country? How did I expect it? I did.

SS: This is kind of tough question, but if you had never been involved in fighting for anybody else, where did you get the expectation that other people should come and make a stand for us?

LK: I guess I never thought of it that way. We needed help and you had to scream for it, and I asked for it nicely, originally. We tried to be very nice to *The New*

Tape I
00:20:00

York Times and to Ed Koch and you learn very fast that you're a faggot, and it doesn't make any difference that you went to Yale and were assistant to Presidents of a couple of film companies, and that you had money. You suddenly know what it's like to feel like a faggot or a nigger or a kike. I did. I have said that. And, I did. And I remember the day it happened. And I didn't like it. So I don't know if your question is – I was always an angry kid. My father and I fought like tigers – screamed at each other all the time. I may have been unhappy and I may have been shy, which I still am, but I knew how to yell back at him. And I guess, if the one thing that various analyses and working in AIDS – whatever we were working in – taught me is, was how to make the anger productive and creative and useful. But I always had the anger. So, I think it was more that. And I grew up with a mother who was always dealing with what was wrong with the system. Why aren't these people being taken care of? And she knew how to do it – to go at the system and find money or something to get somebody transferred, or money for sick kids in a house or a burned out family. She knew how to do all that and she was confronting the system all the time. So I guess I don't think I was paying that much attention to it, but perhaps I was.

SS: When did you first become aware of direct action?

LK: I think we all made it up as we went along. I don't know that we became aware of it. There are all these terminologies for these things now.

SS: Where did you first see people doing it?

LK: In the speech I made that night in the Center, I referred to this group of Catholics that went up to Albany – ten or twenty thousand of them – screaming at the legislature there and I said, why can't we do that? I remember pictures of the Vietnam

thing and all that. I don't deal with the linguistics of all this very well – either sexuality or homosexuality or politics. I was not a political person. In London, the film world was filled with Marxists when I worked there. And a lot of my friends who were directors all grew up with Marxist viewpoints and I didn't know what the fuck they were talking about and still don't. Tony and I joke about it.

SS: Correct me if I'm wrong – but the history, as I understand it is that you felt that GMHC was ineffective. You wanted to create another kind of response. So, you must have had an idea of another way of acting, and I'm wondering where that came from?

LK: GMHC was an extraordinarily moving experience. I have become very friendly with Anna Oliveira – who's the head of it now, and we've become very good friends. And we had lunch the other day and we were talking about various problems that she still confronts and things that happen. And I've got to tell you, I started to cry a couple of times during lunch. And yet, I was locked in this vise there, because I was surrounded with a Board of my friends that I had put on that Board because my brother's law firm, who still represents GMHC, drew up this thing that we had for tax-exempt status, so we had to have a Board. So I turned to the guys I danced with and put them on the Board – including, Paul Popham, who was a close friend. And they didn't like anything – when I would raise my voice, when I would criticize the mayor. Very fast, I did all that. They didn't like it, so it was hard. And I couldn't push them, I couldn't push them.

And I thought, at one point – I didn't even think – I either go to that meeting with the Mayor or else I quit. That's just Larry's MO. I didn't think twice about it – didn't

Tape I
00:25:00

think in advance, I'm going to do this. I just did it. And then, I couldn't believe it when they said go. Then began these years in the wilderness. That was in 1983 or 1984 – before 1987, I wrote *The Normal Heart*. Everybody was dying. How could you not respond to that in some sort of way? Well, a lot of people didn't, but I just couldn't believe that this country was so hateful.

SS: So, then you didn't come to the ACT UP idea with –

LK: Any preconceived notions? No. I didn't come to GMHC with any preconceived notions, either.

SS: Direct action was ACT UP's most effective tactic. Where did that come in?

LK: The big difference between the two organizations was this – I was determined that whatever got started, it would not be structured because that's what GMHC had become. Everything had to have a job description and approval by this, and approval by that. And I didn't want that. So we went the other way. I often describe it as democratic to a fault. And when people came and said, we want to start this, or we want to start that – fine. Because I remember – GHMC, when I tried to get different groups started, different people who came and said, I can do epidemiology, I can do – it was forever until we could get a lawyer in there and do legal services. People came to ACT UP and said, we want to start – there was – we were allowed to do it. And that was great. There could have been more committees, as far as I was concerned, as long as they were focused on this sort of thing. I tried to steer it, but after awhile, I didn't have any power to do that but you know, you can influence things and welcome things.

The analogy is really with the movie business. I was trained in the movie

business, and you call it direct action and I call it putting on a show. And, one of the many things I learned in the movie business is that you get so much more energy out of people if you love them, if you thank them, if you say, job well done. I worked for a shit – my first boss, a man called Mike Reichartz – who wouldn't say thank you if his life depended on it. And I realized how many people resent all that. And, I worked for film directors – Ken Russell, being one of them – who would take this riding crop and hit a camera person or someone who was in the way. And they hated him. Why *Women in Love* is so good is that I saw to it that that crew was just nurtured and loved every minute we possibly could. Give them parties, give them thank you's, whatever – remember their birthdays, take out their wives – because Ken Russell was such a shit to them. And the movie is all there on the screen, because of a lot of that. And I tried to do that at GMHC in the beginning, but then when I came up against my first job description – what is a job description? I didn't know what the fuck a job description was. Why did we have to have a job description? Why can't we go get the best person? And then it became all this business about – you know, you've got to have this person and that person and it's got to be –

SS: What do you mean, this person and that person?

LK: There had to be – you had to take people whether they were good or not, because they represented certain genders or certain colors. We didn't have many women in the beginning. The first paid employee of GMHC was a black person – Phil Patrick. We couldn't get black people there. So somehow to have to deal with all of that when I always say get the best person, somehow – and you get in a lot of trouble with stuff like that. No offense meant. As I said, we were making it up as we went along. There were

no rules. There were no rules with GMHC, until we got all these job descriptions and then hey, it became the Red Cross. I'd had my Red Cross in my lifetime. And they wouldn't go after anybody. They wouldn't criticize anybody. They wouldn't picket, they wouldn't protest – any of those things.

SS: That's what I'm saying. Okay, picket – you wanted them to picket. That's a direct action, that's not like a bureaucratic service –

LK: It's trying to make yourself heard, I guess. You call it direct action. Did you call it direct action before you knew what direct action was?

SS: There's a long history of that kind of activity, for people trying to change the country.

LK: I didn't come from that, at all. I really didn't, and I guess that surprises people.

SS: So you just started ACT UP, and then people brought that with them?

LK: I remember those meetings, when we would all sit around and talk. The first action – I don't remember how it got to be Wall Street. We were in the room. Were you there, then? I don't remember.

SS: No, not at the first meeting.

LK: We were in the room, and all right, what are we going to do? We knew we had to do something public because – because, because. I don't know, because of the Catholics had marched on Albany, I guess – because there wasn't anything else to do. How do you get attention? And somebody said, let's go against the FDA, because they were so slow in approving things. There was a big to do over something called – no, that was too early, but – Mathilde said to me – Dr. Krim – the big heavy in all of this is Frank

Young at the FDA. So I sat down, and I wrote an op-ed piece for the *Times* and they took it. It's called "The FDA's Callous Response to AIDS." Was it called AIDS? Yes, it was called AIDS. They took it, and it ran on the very day that we had the demo. So we were able to pass out at Wall Street these flyers. And I had gotten Joe Papp to make an effigy in the shop at the Public [Theater] of Frank Young, and we hung him in effigy down there on Wall Street. Where did it come from? I think it just came from all of us talking with each other all the time, I don't know.

SS: How did you get your piece in the *Times*? Did you know people there?

LK: Not like I know them now. I have to say, I don't know.

SS: Let's get to ACT UP. What were some of the concrete projects that you worked on in ACT UP?

LK: I don't think anybody did anything specifically all by themselves. That was the great thing about it, is that we worked as a group. I tried to be like a den mother, I think, more than anything. If there were big disagreements between a lot of people, I would try to smooth them down. I don't know if you remember the whole thing with Suzanne Phillips and –

SS: What was that?

LK: I don't know – she had a big fight with some other woman. I've got it written down somewhere. There were a lot of personality things. And if somebody had a great idea, I'd just let them know it was a great idea, and if I didn't like the idea, I would try to say maybe we can work it into a good idea. But it was a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff, I think, more than anything. I remember in the beginning, nobody would go on a

committee, particularly, trying to encourage people to join committees, because committees I thought were so important, and that was how the work was going to get done. I used to go all the committees.

SS: Which committees did you like to be part of?

LK: I became very attached as you know to Treatment and Data, mostly. Iris Long was this incredible thing that happened to ACT UP. Just incredible. You want to talk about the miracle of grassroots organizing. This woman just shows up one day – this straight woman – and after a few meetings, she gets up and she says, “You guys don’t know shit.” And that’s – in her nice way. And, “I’ll teach you.” And she did. And she took two or three people initially, and then there were four or five and then they were bigger. And she taught them everything she knew. And then they branched out and met other people in Boston and at the NIH, and all of that. So that by the time – a few years later – I would take Mark [Harrington] to a meeting, and they would think he was a doctor. That was the amazing thing. We were at this incredible meeting at Bristol-Myers, in some big office building, and we had a break in the john, and then the schmuck from the Bristol-Myers – we were pissing next to each other in the men’s room and he looks over at me and says, “That Harrington, it is Doctor Harrington, isn’t it?” I just kvelled – he was one of my children.

SS: So, when you say you brought him to a meeting, did you make the contact with Bristol-Myers?

LK: Who made what contact? I don’t know that anybody can remember who made what contacts, basically. There were people working on specific drugs who, by that time, were dealing with representatives in the drug company and able to ask for

specific meetings. I was trotted out to scare people, by that time. I remember another meeting at Hoffman-La Roche. I remember a lot of meetings at Hoffman-La Roche, where the man next to me was shaking. And, I turned to the guy on the other side and said, "What's wrong with him?" He said, "He's scared of you!" And I thought hey, wow.

SS: Why do you think they were scared of you?

LK: Because by then, I had had all this publicity as the Angriest Gay Man in the World. Are you familiar with all that? Fine. I think I'm a pussycat. And people would always say to me, after the interview, "You're so soft spoken and so nice, how come you got this reputation?" Fine. In the movie business, I know that that publicity, that image, was useful to ACT UP, and useful to me. We could play good cop, bad cop. Let them be scared of me, fine.

SS: So, you were the bad cop?

LK: Whatever they wanted.

SS: Who was the good cop?

LK: The bad cops were all the kids on the floor, and the good cops were all the people inside doing the negotiating. In the end, that's what it boiled down to. And that I learned in the movie business. That's how every successful company of any kind really works. You've got a shit executive, who fires everybody, or cuts everybody's budget. And you've got a saint executive, who keeps everybody happy. And don't think they don't talk to each other, at the end of the day, to compare notes. And that's basically what I think I was trying to steer ACT UP towards –

SS: Towards a dual strategy?

LK: Yes. There was a lot of flak from people like Maxine [Wolfe] about going inside, when we were finally able to go inside. And I said, “Are you crazy? Of course, you go inside! They let you inside! What can you do from the outside?” You can only go so far on the outside. I’m convinced that the destruction – well we can get to that later, but – the destruction of ACT UP was the severing of this dual nature. What destroyed ACT UP was when Treatment and Data picked up their marbles and went somewhere else, leaving only the bad guys, so to speak.

SS: And why do you think that happened?

LK: Because they became drunk on hubris – drunk on their brains, drunk on the very things Maxine predicted, I might add. They were drunk on their power. They could sit down with the head of Bristol-Myers or the chief scientists. They could call all these people up and they could do it on their own from then on, and they didn’t need anyone fighting on the outside for them. And perhaps they became a little ashamed of us, I don’t know. But I will never forgive them for it. I feel that strongly about it – to this day. Mark and I don’t talk – haven’t for years.

SS: But hadn’t you, yourself, pretty much separated from ACT UP before then?

LK: I never separated. I don’t know where that came from.

SS: You stopped coming to meetings at a certain point.

LK: Only because I was writing a play or I was sick or whatever. I did do a play. We had the longest run I think of any grassroots organization, ever, of success. And you have to pull back every once in awhile, just because you get burned out. You get tired. I don’t think I’d ever – you couldn’t disassociate yourself from ACT UP. It

isn't like the GMHC, where they throw you off the Board. Mind you, we wish we sometimes had a mechanism for getting rid of people. We had a number of people who we should have gotten rid of, who stole money from us and all that, but we didn't.

SS: This may be a bad memory, but I seem to remember one time you quit because you wanted ACT UP to have a President. Did I make that up?

LK: I think so.

SS: You didn't bring in a proposal? I remember you got angry, because you wanted a certain kind of structure.

Tape II
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SS: You had a structure proposal for ACT UP.

LK: Structure is the wrong word. We were processing a lot of people after awhile, a lot of people – especially after we moved to Cooper Union. And to have to deal with that size of a room got to be distressing and boring for a lot of people, too. Because of the rotating nature of the Chairs, people were constantly looking for ways to make it all go smoother, and we used to have meetings about that – how can we make it go smoother? How can we get rid of the bullshit? How can we cut to the chase? Whatever. And there were a lot of ideas. I don't think a general was ever one of them. I think at some point, as things got really awful, I became much more militant in visualizing ACT UP as an army, which didn't go down very well. I think at one point, I actually tried to interest people in taking shooting practice.

SS: Yes, I heard that speech. You invoked the Irgun, actually.

LK: I'll invoke anybody – that's useful. But, I believed it.

SS: Let's talk about that. What was on your mind at that time?

LK: Oh, who knows what was on my mind? You have to be able to go back to those times and realize how totally everything was. Sick guys would come up to me at meetings and would beg me – isn't there anything? Isn't there anything out there for me? Tell me what you know. Who do I call? You know everybody. What's coming? Can I hold on? All the time. And that's hard. And we still – even though we might have been inside certain meetings – we still really weren't inside this. These were the days when we weren't in there yet, and we didn't have the drugs yet. The best demo we ever had, probably, was at NIH. No publicity. Nobody picked it up. There was a fire in Washington that day. All the papers went to cover the fire. That incredible show, for nothing. And, it's like – you, as a playwright will know – it's like closing on opening night, somehow. All your work goes for naught. So you increase the desperation quotient inside yourself, I guess.

SS: Did you take gun training?

LK: No, but I would have. My best friend is Rodger McFarlane, who had been a Navy Seal – the equivalent of a Green Beret – and he'd had training in a lot of that stuff. And we used to fantasize about if the two of us could somehow just go and knock off people around the country.

SS: Like who?

LK: Jesse Helms. People. Enemies, basically.

SS: Why do you think that nobody who died of AIDS took anyone with them from the other side?

LK: Good question. In this book I'm working on now deals a lot with –

SS: *The American People?*

LK: Yes. And it deals a lot with this whole question with the Jews and with gays and not fighting for their rights all through the years -- that almost everything that happened against Jews in this country happened against gays. And in the world, I might add. History is written that Henry Ford was anti-Semitic, and tried to get rid of the Jews. It's not written that he hated gay people and did the same thing for them. The things that I'm discovering would literally blow your mind. There were concentration camps in this country -- in this country! -- in the wilderness, for black people, for lesbians, for gay people. I'm talking about in the early part of the last century -- rich people who didn't like them. This country had mammoth, mammoth expanses of land that nobody knew anything about or how to find it, and they would go and they'd put a hundred black people in a camp that they couldn't get out of and let them starve to death.

SS: Where was this?

LK: Texas, Arkansas and places like that.

SS: And who was organizing it?

LK: A lot of them were Mormons -- people like that. And a lot of them were crazy people. The stuff that I'm finding out and the stuff that people are sending to me -- now that they know I'm writing this kind of a book -- how I found out the Abraham Lincoln stuff. And it has the same -- and I guess this is what I get from my mother -- it has the same effect on me as how we were treated, in the early days. It's wrong, it's just wrong, and that makes me very angry. That I can't walk down the street holding David's hand is wrong. That we can't have those thousand benefits that straight couples get when they're married. It's wrong. And that's what motivates me. And when that prick -- I can't even remember his name -- Herb Rickman, who was Koch's gay assistant -- his gay

assistant! – hung up on me, when I was trying to be nice: “We don’t want to know about this!” A *gay* man working for a *gay* man telling a *gay* man that this city would not help us. Wrong. You don’t have to have political action. You don’t have to think in the kind of terms – the dialectics that you’re talking about to know that it’s wrong.

SS: You’re talking about a certain kind of tribal relationship that wherever gay people are and wherever they’re situated in any power struggle, they should have an accountability to each other. Is that how you feel?

LK: Well, that’s how it came to feel. In those days, I just thought, you could die from this shit, too. Whatever. Yeah, I guess I got that from being Jewish – tribal accountability. We all stuck together. I remember – I grew up in Washington. Not so many Jews there. I was the only Jewish kid in a number of my schools, or one of a couple, until I got to high school. Yes, I knew that we were safer than other people to be with. Yeah, good point. I remember that feeling.

SS: Do you operate that way yourself – like, if a gay person calls you and asks for help, do you –

LK: Oh, God, yes.

SS: And do you find that that ethic has increased or diminished among gay people now, in this era?

LK: I no longer talk about gay people so much, in terms of – it ain’t a community, I’ll tell you that.

SS: It ain’t a community? Why do you say that?

LK: It’s a population. Community is too small and insular a word for what we are, and that began to become increasingly evident in ACT UP as we went along – was

that we couldn't support each other in a communal way.

SS: You talked about one of the most important structural ideas in ACT UP, which was the idea of an inside and an outside – that there would be people sitting in meetings, with pharmaceutical companies and government officials, and then there would be people out on the street.

LK: Well again, that was something that developed. I don't think anything from day one was calculated. I've said it over and over again – we made it up as we went along. What were we being handed that day? What shit did we have to deal with? And, it was all new to us. We didn't have experience in all of this. We didn't come from all of these political backgrounds or service backgrounds or anything. We were mostly white and privileged, and there was a lot of flak against us in the “community” because of that. The same with GMHC – there was tons of flak against GMHC early on that we were all white boys. Paul Popham and I used to go to black churches and black organizations trying to get them involved. They didn't want to have anything to do with it. So, yes, we were all white. Anyway, we made it up as we went along. It was all pro – whatever the word is – reactive, to what the government was doing, or not doing. Or doing! In the city and the state and the country. There was plenty to deal with, and how are you going to deal with it, with the limited resources we had? All we had were voices. All we had were a lot of very creative people who could make beautiful posters and had big healthy lungs. And because so many people were sick – that gave us our spirit. What the fuck? We had nothing but die –

SS: As the strategy naturally evolved, what do you think determined which group a person would end up in? Whether they were inside or outside?

LK: I think we were all both, at some point or another. I don't think it was black and white. Peter Staley, who was certainly a good cop, was a bad cop when he locked himself inside Burroughs-Wellcome. I got arrested plenty of times, too.

SS: So, you think that all people were involved in both aspects?

LK: Again, it wasn't so black and white. And it changed from day to day. And it was a long time before the good cops could actually do anything. We were all bad cops in the beginning, and this is a bad terminology, because it connotes saintliness and devil, and it wasn't that, it was just pressure versus honey or whatever.

SS: You say that ACT UP was criticized from the community for being white?

LK: Well for being white, for being – as you well know, it became a place to go where all the hot guys were. And they all wore their black jeans and their black boots. It became a look. And those were, unfortunately, the people who were sick. But, enough of them came so that that gave us the image. And, there was a lot of criticism of that by people who didn't look like that or didn't want to look like that, or were older. Older people felt unwelcome there, who probably wanted to do something. There weren't that many older men there or women. And yes, there was criticism. It also gave us our image. I think the most successful demonstration, in terms of what it accomplished for us, was the St. Patrick's Day thing. I remember going to the meeting after it – everybody was terrified after it, because it had been in the paper and every editorial page in town had dumped on us. People were scared, and I remember saying, "Are you crazy? Are you crazy? They're afraid of us now! That's the best thing that could ever have happened to us!" And it was true, it was true.

SS: Do you think that being in ACT UP gave you, personally, more access to the power system or less?

LK: Oh God, yes.

SS: In what way?

LK: It came slowly. I remember, when I was active in GMHC, I'd come home and my answering machine would be all full – 30 or 40 messages, or whatever they could hold in those days. The day I was thrown off the Board, and I came home – zero messages. And I said, ho, ho, ho – I had destroyed my soapbox, and I had to remake it somehow, slowly. Rodger has a different view of all this – he thinks that I subconsciously wanted that to happen so I could write *The Normal Heart*, which I did. I think that's giving a little too much power to my creative unconscious. I don't think it was that powerful. What was your question?

SS: Did you get more access to power as a result of ACT UP?

LK: I'd come out of the movie business, as I say, and I learned very early on the power of publicity. And I always had felt that the media was my friend. I used to say this to people. Make friends of the reporters. They may not be writing what you want, but they can be useful. And I cannot tell you to this day, how I can call so many people because we have become friends over these years. I learned that in the movie business. I say to people who run not-for-profits, "Why are you hiring communications people from other not-for-profits? Go to the movie business, and hire people from there." They know how to get the stuff in the paper – they've got an attention getting device. So, as I began to get more and more of the publicity, and wrote more and more of my op-ed pages, and wrote *The Normal Heart* and wrote *Reports from the Holocaust* and all – well, then you

become, sort of – people will call you, and you do have that access and it has been sustaining. Also, everybody else is dead, too. So, I get a lot of it by default.

SS: Do you think that you personally wanted the attention?

LK: I don't look at it or that or myself that way. The whole thing about ACT UP is results. That's all I was interested in. I was not interested in airy-fairy theories. Results. How do we get these fucking drugs? That's what it was all about. How do we get them? And it was a slow process to getting them. And if I had to go out there and yell at somebody, I made myself able to do that. Again, you may find it hard to believe, but I am essentially a shy person, and it became like a Jekyll and Hyde thing, and I took so much of my energy from everyone else. That gave it to me. Could I do it by myself? I've learned how to, but originally, it was hard. Yes, it's given me – I can call people up, now, and yes, I have – I can still get an op-ed piece in, if I want. But, it isn't necessarily transferable. Case in point is that I would very much like to be an activist for organ transplant, because I've been so lucky there. Talk about an issue nobody's interested in. It's just like AIDS in the early days. The numbers are nowhere comparable, but the issue is just as bad. Now I know the head of the op-ed page. He actually called me: "Would you like to write something?" I said yes. "What do you want to write about?" I said, "I would like to write about organ transplant." He said, "Oh, do something on AIDS." That's what it comes down to. It's very hard, and again, the people who can be your activists – by the time they know they need to be an activist, it's too late.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: Let's move on to some other things. I'm thinking a lot about the trajectory of the development of drugs, and I know that you were very involved in that. I remember – you know, there was a time at the beginning when people put

faith in a lot of drugs that didn't pan out. You know – Dextran Sulfate, AL-721 – all of that stuff. And I even remember when you came in and said, "They're dancing in the streets in San Francisco!" – Compound Q. When the protease inhibitors – when the vision of protease inhibitors came to be, did you know instinctively that that was going to be successful, or were you concerned that it was going to end up like the previous wishes?

LK: Oh, by the time the proteases come – now, you're talking about the late '90s. ACT UP, for all intents and purposes, is no more. I think – and to this day, still think – that you hope for the best and expect the worst. That was something that's always been my philosophy. The days of AL-721 and all that – I didn't think it was so wrong to explore all these things. And, I don't want to say that false hope is better than no hope, but we didn't know it was false hope. AL-721 came out of the Weizmann Institute, for crying out loud. So, you go with it. Compound-Q came out of San Francisco, and Marty Delaney whom I'm still very close to – they believed in it. And it did help. Would you believe there's still people on it? And it did help some people. I knew instinctively, from the beginning, AZT was no good. I did say that.

SS: Was there a fight inside ACT UP about AZT?

LK: No, what there was, was about the dosing, and we were right – T&D was right – that they were giving too much. I don't know – they were giving 1,000 milligrams a day, and really all you needed was 200 or 300 – 400, at the most. And that was because of ACT UP that that happened. That wasn't within ACT UP. It was ACT UP versus probably the NIH.

SS: I want to ask you a little bit about yourself, as a person with AIDS, in

the ACT UP context. When did you begin to think that you were positive? At what point in all of this?

LK: Theoretically, I still don't have AIDS. I've never had a defining illness, and I've never had low enough markers. I am the luckiest man alive. I never had to take any HIV drugs, until I got my liver. And the only reason I had to take it was because the transplant people insisted, to protect the liver. They wanted to keep HIV in check – whether it was out of check or not.

SS: So, you've been HIV-positive, asymptomatic?

LK: Since – I forgot when I was tested already – '85, '86.

SS: And why do you think you were asymptomatic?

LK: I am lucky. I have no idea. Not everybody, but almost everybody I knew is dead from those years.

SS: Do you think it's a strain issue? Or, do you think it's a genetic predisposition you have?

LK: I don't know. I don't know. You don't know how close I came to dying a couple of years ago because of the Hepatitis B in my liver. I was given six months to live. I don't know if you remember – I looked like this. And, I had no energy. And they told me – that was the end, because livers were not available. And the days were ticking away. Just prior to that, Dr. Fauci – the man I had called a murderer many years before – has become one of my closest friends. Talk about a moving story of irony. He saw me somewhere and he said, "You look terrible." And they put me in the NIH hospital, and they discovered a lot of this shit, that had not been discovered in me before.

And there was a Hepatitis B experimental drug in trial there. And so, I got what

is called Adefovir, and that calmed down my liver for a while, but then it stopped calming down the liver and that's when I only had six months to live. And I was down there one day to pick up the medicine – you had to go there once a month to get the medicine – and my doctor down there – a woman called Judy Falloon said, “I think you may be eligible for a liver transplant.” The minute she said that, I knew I was going to get that fucking liver. I just knew it! And she didn't say how I could get it. She said I had to apply. They were just beginning to transplant people with HIV and Hep-B – co-infecteds we were called – and there was, in fact, a NIH trial out of San Francisco, with Michelle Roland – our old ACT UP lady out there – putting it together – that wanted people like me. So, that's how I got the liver. I didn't get it because I was Larry Kramer. I got it because they had this trial just starting and nobody wanted to go into it.

SS: By the way, what year did you test positive?

LK: That's a long time before. I tested positive for HIV in, I can't remember, in '85, '86 or '87. Somewhere in there. I can't remember. But, I knew I had Hep-B, from the late '70s – then I knew.

SS: At that era, a lot of people were advocating for early medication before symptoms – how did you resist that?

LK: Because my doctor Jeff Green said, “I don't think you need it.” We had ordered Crixivan, which was the first one out, and I had the bottle in my hand. And we were going to start, and he called me up and he said, let's wait awhile. I said, fine with me.

SS: So, which HIV meds are you taking?

LK: I took AZT when my liver started going bad, when my platelets went

down. AZT, unknown to a lot of people, raises your platelets, so I took it for that. And then, I took Epivir, 3TC – whatever it's called – for the Hep-B. And, that's all I took for a number of years. And then since the transplant started, I've taken a bunch of them. I took Viracept, until I became resistant to it. I took Sustiva, which I loathed, until fortunately I became resistant to it, because it drove me nuts. And now, I'm on something which is an amazing drug, because it has absolutely no side effects – it's like taking aspirin – it's called Reyataz. Only now, they've just discovered – Steve Miles, the UCLA AIDS man has just discovered that Reyataz interacting with the other drugs I take is bad for Hepatitis-B. We know so much now, and I have so many doctors that I correspond with. I mean, talk about patient empowerment. I brought it to a new art. I have six doctors who I e-mail everything about me, and I pester them all to death, and I take advantage of everything that I possibly can, to get the information I need – just what we advocated everybody to do. They don't like that I do this group e-mail. And, not one of them who answers me will copy all the others – out of courtesy. They only send it to me, and I got to send it around. Too many cooks, Larry!

SS: Which one of these drugs do you feel exist as a consequence of ACT UP?

LK: All of them. I have no doubt in my mind. Those fucking drugs are out there because of ACT UP. And that's our greatest, greatest achievement – totally. From that day Iris Long came in and started teaching the pharmacology of everything – whatever was known – or what little was known about the virus – through all of that. We had guys teaching us civil disobedience. I don't know if you remember that. We had some big black guy who had done something for Martin Luther King or something come

Tape II
00:30:00

and give us civil disobedience lessons about how to lie down in the street and let your body go limp and all that. All of those things. We taught ourselves everything. I didn't know what the NIH was, until – I don't know when it was – '85? After *The Normal Heart* I think. A guy called Tim Westmoreland, who was a wonderful man – who we owe a lot to – a gay man, who worked at the time for Senator Waxman [Congressman Henry Waxman], who was the only guy in the government who was our friend and he said, you really ought to go to visit – it was before *The Normal Heart* – go and visit the NIH, and he set up this meeting for me there – and this is before Fauci was head of NIAID.

It's a famous story. All the heads of the various institutes can live in their own houses. It looks like a college campus – it's very pretty. And the head of NIAID was a guy called Richard Krause, and he invited me out to lunch, and his assistant was a guy called Jack Whitescarver, and they gave me all this bullshit about – there was money for this, and money for that, and this is happening and column A, and column B – and I called him on everything. And he had to leave and the dishes were all there, so Jack Whitescarver and I washed the dishes in this house. And I had to go to the john, and I went upstairs – there was only one john on the second floor. And coming out of the john I look into this bedroom, and there are bookcases and things and photos all around. What writer isn't nosy? This one certainly is. So, I go in the bedroom and on Krause's bureau are pictures of him with all these guys in bathing suits. And I say, "Holy fucking shit, this guy is gay!" And I go downstairs and I say – Whitescarver whispers to me, "I want you to know that my friend and I just loved *Faggots*." So I looked him in the eye and I said, "Jack, is Krause gay?" Not a sound. So once again, we're crucified by our very

own. You've got Koch in New York City, you've got Krause at the head of NIAID, which is the most important institute at the NIH for looking after infectious diseases, and we've got this prick in the White House, who's got a supposedly gay son.

SS: Do you still think he's gay?

LK: I know he's gay.

SS: Let's take that paradigm, and let's move it to show business. So in terms of science and politics, we have gay people who are telling the truth about what gay people's lives are like and who are uniting together, and who are changing the world and saving their own lives. And then you have gay people in positions of enormous power who are not at all dealing with the reality of what's happening.

LK: I moved to Washington –

SS: Now let's put that into the Hollywood arts representation category. Your play, *The Normal Heart* is probably – and I'm just guessing this – but I think it is the only work of art that actually shows homophobic cruelty against gay people that has been acclaimed and made it into the mainstream. Any other time gay people make that kind of work, it remains underground. And most of the representations of gay life and of AIDS are really predicated on showing a certain kind of heroic heterosexual who overcomes their prejudices to benevolently help the poor, alone, isolated gay people. And if you look at most of the work about gay people and AIDS, there is no movement. The story that you just told about ACT UP creating the drugs – what you are taking today – that story is not present in commercial representations of AIDS and homosexuality, even though many of those stories are made by gay people themselves. How do you account for that?

Tape II
00:35:00

LK: How many millions of us are there? Tell me – ten, twenty? I believe Jews walked into the gas chambers. That’s what I believe. I believe they walked willingly into their own destructions. How did six million people do that? I’m reading now so widely into the literature of those times, but they did – over and over again. Who walked them in? Other Jews. Mengele’s chief right hand surgeon at Auschwitz was a Jew.

SS: So, gay people who misrepresent the reality of gay life –

LK: Nobody took anybody with them. Nobody – to kill, one person was willing to lose his own life.

SS: But today, we see so many gay people involved in false representations of homosexuality and AIDS. Why are they doing it?

LK: Do they know they’re doing it, I don’t know. You’re cursed with too perceptive a critical mind in all of this. People don’t want to make waves. *Reports From the Holocaust* is filled with one essay after another trying to understand why all of this goes on, and in the end you have to throw up your hands and say, “I don’t know!” I don’t know why ten million men, or 20 million men at the height of the plague, didn’t fight to save their own lives – to this day. Believed I told every one of them. I was barred from Fire Island. People stopped inviting me to parties. To this day, I’m not on any social list in the gay world in New York.

SS: Right now, we’re not at the height of the AIDS crisis, so the life and death issue is constructed a bit differently. So there’s got to be something else at stake. Do you think that gay men just want straight men’s approval and they’re willing to tell a story that isn’t true to get it? Or is it about money? What is the motive?

LK: I don't know. I don't think they want straight men's approval. I think people just don't want to make waves. Leave me alone. Life is hard enough. I want to go home. Straight people don't want to do it either. You show me a movement that's any different. You show me a population that's any different. I was at Harvard at the Kennedy School lecturing a couple of weeks ago and this beautiful reporter from Kenya – a woman – asked me, what message did I have for her people who were in such terrible straights. It wasn't Kenya – somewhere else – one of those countries. And I said, “You're not going to like what I have to say. Get out there and do something. Don't take it lying down. Throw blood at somebody. Sit in on somebody. Close down a hospital.” Whatever. You have only yourself to fight for. Why is everybody so passive in all of this? And I say it to gay people to this day. I mean, this gay marriage thing – I'm so sick of all of these people who say, “Oh, I don't want to get married. I don't believe in gay marriage because I don't want to perpetuate a straight” blah, blah. It's more pragmatic than that. There are 1,003 – whatever the number is that NGLTF came up with – benefits, tangible financial benefits that you get from the government if you are married – that straight people get – and I now face all of that. I have a lover, I want to leave him my estate, or he wants to leave me his estate – without whatever the excruciating taxes are that a straight couple doesn't have to pay. That's worth fighting for. All these people who are adopting babies – there are a lot of rights there involved that we don't have. So don't give me that – you don't want to perpetuate a terrible, heterosexual ceremony or something. You don't want to call it a wedding, call it a whatever – just give me those rights.

LK: Those reasons are as good as any – I don't know. I don't give a shit what straight people think, and I don't give a shit what other gay people think, for the most part. And it's been a hard lesson to learn – not to care what other people think. It's probably one of the hardest lessons I ever had to learn, and I learned it long before all of this started to happen. But, it's the best thing I ever learned.

I think that it is so hard to get anything that you have created out there. It is so hard to get a job – to get a screenwriting job, to get anything made, to get a book published. And some of it has nothing to do with the talent or the worth of the project. It's just the nature of how we've been condemned as a people, and most people don't have the skills that I have – that I've learned, that I've taught, or that I've forged in myself through all of this – to scream and yell and kick and get attention and calling the names and whatever. And they don't know how to do it. And you have to do it from a position of having nothing to lose which fortunately I'm in. I don't have to worry about making a living – a very valuable gift my brother gave me, exceedingly. And I know that I've been lucky, so I feel that's part of my responsibility to honor all of that, by doing all of this. But people don't have that. I hated *Philadelphia*, and I said so in print in an article that was reprinted all over the country. And I hated Ron Nyswander, or whatever the guy's name who wrote it. And I hated them all for making it, and I loathe the movie.

SS: What do you think would have to change –

LK: I just know how hard it is for all of them. Like all the rest of us, I went after Barry Diller and David Geffen and all these people in the movie business forever and do they change? David Geffen did, Barry Diller didn't.

SS: Well, if the true story of AIDS is that gay people were despised and

abandoned, and people with AIDS and gay people and some straight women, like Iris Long, united together and built a movement and were brilliant and changed the world and saved their own lives – if that is the story, how long will it take, before that story gets told in a mainstream way?

LK: Somebody's got to write it. I'm writing a certain amount of it, but not that specific. Nobody's written about it. I got Mark Harrington a book deal, after the Fast Track thing was fashioned because of us – when we were still talking. And he wrote the book and it was never published. I was never given the opportunity to read it because by then we'd stopped talking. So I don't know if it was any good, but it was indeed about the mechanism of all of this and how we had fought through all of this.

SS: Do you think that the culture is ready to face the truth of that story?

LK: I don't think people give a shit about us. You talk about it as if they're doing it intentionally. Some of them are – you know, the Jesse Helmses and the right-wing blah blahs are. But most people really don't care. It's like, I don't give a shit about football. And I'm sure there are a lot of people who have a lot of gay friends who love football. But talk about something that puts me to sleep. If we are at all lucky, it's because enough people have come out and enough gay sons have died, so parents are more – and younger people are more accepting of their gay friends and things are a little better in the schools and all that, and that's just an evolutionary thing. But if you want to put people asleep fast, just say the things that you're saying.

I believe in conspiracies as much as the next person, and I think that there are plenty of those around, against us, particularly. My book is a history of conspiracies made against us. There's no shortage of them. What there is a shortage of is people

getting up and fighting back. That's what you're talking about, and to this day I do not know why people don't fight back. And, I go back to this Jews walking into the gas chambers analogy. They did. I know I wouldn't have, I think. But an awful lot of them sure did.

SS: Is your new book a novel?

LK: I don't know what to call it. It was originally just called *The American People*. Now, I call it *The American People: A History*. An awful lot of it is true, and a lot of it is fictionalized only for legal reasons. Some of it is out and out fiction, but a lot of it is true – I would say over half of it is true.

SS: Are there characters?

LK: Oh God yes, thousands. A cast of thousands!

SS: Is it true – I've heard that it's thousands of pages.

LK: Three thousand at this point. They love it. My editor loves it – doesn't want it shorter.

SS: When is it coming?

LK: When it's finished.

SS: Larry, do you think that you are taken seriously as an artist?

LK: No.

SS: Why?

LK: Because I'm an activist.

SS: So what does that do in people's minds?

LK: I know I am not a part of the literary "gay lit mafia," and I know that I'm not respected and I know I've been ostracized in many ways, and when there's a list of

100 Best Gay this and that put out by gay people, I'm never on it.

SS: And what do you think the reason is?

LK: I think it's because I'm an activist and I'm known as this activist person, and this is not a country where political involvement by creative artists – I don't like to call myself an artist, but you know what I mean – is respected. I identify far more with German writers like Boll and Grass and Sebald, and South American writers – who write about it as a matter of course. And part of my fury at the gay writers has been over just this – that in the height of AIDS, people like David Leavitt and Ed White continue to write books that are about nothing but fucking. And I'm sorry, I'm about more than my cock, and that makes a lot of people angry. That's a whole other conversation, but that's why I'm ostracized. And that's fine. I can deal with it, but I don't want to be their friend.

SS: I have a couple of other questions, and then I think we're coming to an end.

LK: Oh, I like this.

SS: You're 68 years old and you've been living with HIV for about 20 years. You've survived a liver transplant. Basically, you're having a normal lifespan. That must be shocking on some level.

LK: I never take anything for granted.

SS: Was there a moment when you realized, wow – I'm having a full life?

LK: I don't let myself think that way. I remember coming out of the transplant, out of ICU. You never saw anybody bound into the hospital with so much excitement as when they called me for my liver. And, I was there with my lover David,

and Rodger, and it was Christmas time. And they had both gone back to New York and I was still in Pittsburgh. And I had taken a sleeping pill, and the call came in at eleven o'clock at night: "Get to the hospital, as soon as possible!" Getting a taxi in Pittsburgh is real hard. Somehow they got me there. And I rushed into the hospital and said, "Let's go, let's go, let's go!" And a guy looked at me and said, "Are you crazy? Do you know what's about to happen to you?" And I said, "I've been waiting for this a long time." And when I came out of the fog I was in, you do a lot of thinking – why me? How did I live through all of this? And, everybody else said, you think a lot about that. It's, like, why didn't everybody fight? I don't know. You can think about, and you can make all kinds of promises. And I don't happen to believe in God, so you can't deal with it on that level. And I haven't done since I was like 13. But you wonder, you think. You can't help but do that.

I don't take anything for granted. The drugs for so many years have been uncomfortable, so this is the last six months or so – three months, since I've been on these new drugs – the last time I've actually felt human, without having to deal with side effects like diarrhea or constipation or whatever, and lack of energy. Dr. [John] Fung, my surgeon, said in all seriousness that I should easily have another 20 years. And I also have a liver of a 45-year-old man, and he said with all seriousness, "You are as old as your liver." So I'll take that, too. But there's not a day where I don't worry about something going wrong. We don't know what these medicines do for you that we've unleashed on the world. Every single one of them has been found to have so many different side effects in so many different kinds of people, that you can never take anything for granted. This wonderful regimen that everybody dreamed up for me three

months ago – another doctor has just come forth and discovered something that may be bad for me, particularly. So it's hard, because you have to do different pharmacokinetics between the HIV drug and the anti-rejection drug, and that takes a long time, the balance, the amount of prograph in your blood.

SS: How much does your healthcare cost per year – just out of curiosity?

LK: That's a whole other issue. My liver transplant cost Medicare \$500,000. I saw the bill. I take one medicine a month called – I get an infusion of something called Hepatitis B immunoglobulin that costs \$8,000 a month. And every time you go into the clinic in Pittsburgh, there's always somebody who is either waiting there to way-lay a doctor, to grab his leg and say, please, please, please take me – when they've been rejected for a liver. Or somebody there – the whole town has sold everything, literally, so they could be there. When I was there, I got accepted by Medicare and that Belinda [Mason] – black AIDS activist from Boston who was turned down by Medicare – same situation. And fortunately she raised the money, but unfortunately she didn't survive the transplant.

Tape III
00:15:00

So I have been very lucky, all along the line. I didn't need the AIDS drugs. When I needed a Hep-B drug, it suddenly was there, in an experimental trial. When I needed a liver, it was suddenly there – timing. I'm exceedingly grateful. That's why I worked so hard on the book. If I've been spared, it's been, I think it's because I'm here to tell this story. I'm the only gay writer who was on the front line – that's still alive – who was on the front line from the very beginning. And I know where all the bodies are buried – figuratively and metaphorically, no actually and metaphorically. And that's what propels me, everyday – seven days a week, I write. That's why I'm up here.

SS: One last thing. At the beginning of the interview, you were talking about discovering the level of cruelty and indifference towards gay people. You said they didn't care if you went to Yale. They didn't care if you had money, you were just a faggot. Do you think that that's still true?

LK: Oh God, yes.

SS: That they don't care that you went to Yale and that you had money? You don't think that makes a difference?

LK: It depends who you're talking about – it doesn't make any difference to Gary Bauer or George Bush, who went to Yale too.

SS: But, in those years since you started with GMHC to now, do those two factors – have they changed, in terms of your ability to be seen by other people?

LK: Oh, of course. Things have changed and one should never deny that they haven't. You're either a cup half-full person, or a cup half-empty person – and I'm half-empty, I guess. I spent over 20 years trying to get Yale to teach gay studies – offering them money all along the line and was turned down, and was treated terribly, just terribly.

SS: Why did they turn you down? What is the real story?

LK: “We don't believe in isolating populations by themselves – separating them.” And I said, “All right, but you've got women's studies and you've got black studies and you've got Chinese studies. Why can't we have gay studies?” And they said, “Well, we don't think it's a discipline yet.” We hadn't earned the right to be a discipline, or whatever. Well, give us the chance. It was awful. And of course, --

SS: Was this for gay and lesbian studies, or for gay male studies?

LK: That became a whole issue. In my will, which I had sent to them, I

specified all kinds of courses that could be given for men and for women. And, I separated them – lesbian literature, gay male literature. And for whatever reason, when the *Times* ran the story, they only made the gay male literature. So lesbians got up in arms, quite understandably, especially at Yale, that I was only interested in that, but that wasn't true. Anyway, they didn't want me. They didn't want the money. And of course the only me they knew was this Angriest Gay Man in the World, so that did not go down well, and they didn't treat me well. And it was only, again, with a straight man – my good friend, Calvin Trillin – a straight man who had been on the Yale Corporation Board, and he finally called up the President and said, “You really should do this, and he's really a nice person. Why don't you meet him again?” And then, it went okay from there. And now there is – which I'm exceedingly proud of – the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale – endowed by my brother, a straight man, which is going like gangbusters.

SS: What is it?

LK: It's a Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies. And they have faculty. They give awards. There are more speeches sponsored on campus per year by us than by any other department. Everybody in the world. I'm going up next week to introduce Gore Vidal, who's coming to speak at LKI – we call it. Kendall Thomas is now on our Board, and other big people have been asked. Kendall is so excited about it. Anyway – after all these years, they finally have it. Mind you, there's plenty wrong with it. We're not a department, we still don't have any tenured faculty – all that sort of thing. But it is going like gangbusters, and LKI is in the papers every 10 minutes. And I'm again so very, very proud of that. It took me a long time because I can remember, as I said – I'm a kid who

tried to kill himself freshman year because he was gay, and now there's this. And as you probably know, I started an award in honor of Sarah Pettit, for some kind of lesbian scholarship – and that's going to happen as part of this. And, it's become the Center. An incredible man called Jonathan David Katz runs it.

SS: The art historian?

LK: Is this new to you?

SS: I'm vaguely aware of it.

LK: He's gotten Robert Gober to go up there to talk and he's doing a big exhibition on Lichtenstein – or Rauschenberg. He's totally, totally amazing. A lot of people are involved.

SS: So within your class, your position as a gay man has really been transformed. Now, you're participating in your class more fully than you were able to.

LK: What's my class?

SS: Yale – what you said at the beginning – that regardless of how many resources you had, as a gay man you were not seen. And now they're saying okay.

LK: I don't consider that Yale has welcomed me in with open arms. I'm still having fights with everybody about things. Yes they've let us in the door, but you should never feel like you're welcome forever at the dinner table. And I feel that way. But you talked earlier about people needing people's approval, and that should never be a motivating factor. I threatened to resign only last week, over a fight. So, I am what I am. My brother screamed, "You what? That's your legacy! I'm paying for this –"

SS: What was the fight? Was it anything important, or were you just

threatening?

LK: It's the principle. The provost did something behind my back, and I'm the Chair of the committee and he shouldn't have done it, and I got very mad.

SS: Larry I forgot something that I wanted to ask you, and this is just a personal question. I remember at Vito Russo's funeral, you made this speech where you said, "We killed Vito, don't you know that? Can't you see that?" And I remember feeling as I was sitting there, that I was not the appropriate target of that speech. That was just a personal reaction that I had, sitting there. And I'm wondering if you have had any hindsight on that kind of rhetoric or that sort of approach?

LK: You're too sensitive. I have tried, in my time, many kinds of rhetoric – you read *Reports from the Holocaust* and there are many attempts at different tactics and voices. Sometimes you need one, sometimes you need another. You keep looking. You make it up as you go along. When Vito died, everybody was dying, and there still weren't that many people out there fighting, so we did kill Vito. And yes, you were a target – everybody was a target – as many people that were in that room, it didn't equal the membership of ACT UP. I yell at gay people, still. We're all targets. I still don't do enough. I get angry at myself, because, because, because, I can't do all the things I want to do. Crying at lunch with Anna Oliveira last week because I would still like to work with GMHC, and she's made it possible for me to do that. And I'm going to do it. And that moves me very much, that the people are all new and they want me back.

But I also know that in doing that the book gets short-shrifted, and that's hard. I would much rather work in New York than here, because when David's not here, I get a

little stir crazy. So I think – oh, why can't I go work in New York? I've got a nice apartment and it's quiet. But the minute you go back to New York, you get sucked into the electricity of New York. I want to go see my friend Tony Kushner, I want to go see the play or the movie or whatever – things that I somehow manage to keep at bay. But it happens here too – I've got to go to Yale and introduce Gore Vidal next week, and then I agreed – one of my doctor's nurses is one of the heads of the American Association of Nurses with AIDS, and would I please come and address their convention of 500 nurses next week? So, I'm going to do that. And then Judy Falloon says, "Would you please come to this convention at the NIH because all these scientists have never seen a person like you. All they do is research. They've never seen a person who's been through what you have, and would you talk to them about that?" And of course, great, that's my usefulness. So I have to find a way of dealing with all of this.

Tony and I talk about this a lot, because he would much rather be an activist, he says. There's an essay I wrote at the end of the book *Women in Love* – of my stuff – where he said, "You realize it's not an either/or – you've got to somehow find a way of doing both."

SS: And fortunately, you have 20 more years to do it.

LK: From your mouth to somebody's ears. [LAUGHS]

SS: Thank you, Larry!

[END OF INTERVIEW]