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Interviewee: **Samuel Lurie**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Samuel Lurie
May 3, 2015

SARAH SCHULMAN: So we start every interview, you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

JAMES WENTZY: Wait a second. I was hearing – oh, yes.

SAMUEL LURIE: Do you need to test me out? Test, test, test.

JW: No, it fell.

SL: I might need you to speak a little louder.

SS: Okay.

JW: We started rolling.

SL: Okay. My name is Samuel Lurie. I'm fifty-two years old. Today's date is May 3rd, 2015, and we are in Sarah Schulman's apartment on East Ninth Street.

SS: And you were once here, like, twenty-five years ago.

SL: I was definitely here twenty-five years ago. There was a desk with a very tall stack of manuscripts.

SS: That's right.

SL: And you used to always retype your manuscripts, and as a typesetter, I was always struck by that, that you know your technique. It's like, "Oh, Sarah always used to type her manuscripts, retype."

SS: So where did you grow up, Sam?

SL: I grew up in Washington Heights here in New York.

SS: Were your parents refugees? I don't remember.

SL: No, my parents were not. My mother's family grew up in Detroit. My father's family came to Great Neck, so family came earlier at the turn of the century, immigrants, Jewish immigrants.

And my mother's family, well, there's an interesting component about my mother's activism in New York when I was growing up, so my mother was a political activist in New York. And as I was getting ready for this interview, I was thinking about the influence that that had on me and reading what I'd written in the book, *Women, AIDS, and Activism*, and what I wrote was, like, very similar to some stuff that she had written.

SS: What did she do?

SL: She was an activist around community organizing, and a big thing that she worked on was community control of the schools, so in the 1970s.

SS: Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

SL: Ocean Hill-Brownsville was a big thing for her. She wrote a book called *How to Change the Schools: A Parents' Action Handbook on How to Fight the System*. It's really an amazing book, and her archives are at CUNY. So there's a whole archive of her stuff. And my sister just got a job at the Murphy Institute at CUNY. So it's a lot of ways that I feel really connected to New York and still connected to different types of political activism and leadership in New York.

SS: Now, was she one of the few Jews who crossed the line?

SL: Yeah. We had neighbors who would cross the street when they saw us coming. She was involved—she was one of the founders of the People's Board of Education, which happened during that time. And so since a lot of that stuff was sort of Jewish-black conflict, and she was definitely working in the black community and had a

lot of personal tension with Albert Shanker, who was the head of the AFT, whose grandson is gay, who I met at Creating Change, and that was really fun to just meet him. He had a nametag that said “Shanker,” and I was like, “Are you related to Albert Shanker?”

And he’s like, “Thanks my grandfather,” he said, very proudly as a union organizer. And I didn’t really talk to him about some of the alternate history that wasn’t just Albert Shanker as a union organizer but as a real kind of problem, oppressive force in the community around race.

SS: Now, did your mother have a communist background?

SL: No, but a lot of her friends did. So she came to her politics, I’m really not completely sure how, because it wasn’t from her family directly, but it was definitely her peers who were activists still in the city.

SS: So where did you go to school?

SL: Well, I grew up in Washington Heights. I went to PS 187, and then went to Junior High School 143, Eleanor Roosevelt. But then after junior high school, we moved out of New York.

And I was the youngest in my family, the youngest of five. My mother got sick. She worked for the Community Service Society downtown, and she got breast cancer and was very sick, and we ended up moving out of New York. We couldn’t afford to have our apartment in New York. We had like a summer home that was in rural New Jersey, and I was the only one in my family still living at home, and we moved out there. And I went to West Milford High School in West Milford, New Jersey.

SS: Wow.

SL: A very, very big shift. And the only other Jew in my school was the assistant, the vice principal. So it was very, very different. It was very working-class Irish, German, Italian.

SS: So at this point were you evolving your own politics?

00:05:00 SL: Yeah. So I went to high school in New Jersey, and my sister was coming out. I was not quite yet, but certainly I look back and I was in love with someone of the same gender, and that's where I was coming out. My politics, I was—because my mother was an activist and the type of activism she did, so because of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and a lot of that stuff, I remember times my father coming, “Oh, your mother was arrested again.” And she taught a lot about activism for me from a young age. We did a petition in the fifth grade to try to get a rule changed at school.

One of the gender things was when I was in the first grade, my sister was in the sixth grade, and that was when the rules changed so girls didn't have to wear a dress and a skirt. And I'm a trans man, at the time I was a girl, and it changed my life the day that I no longer had to wear a dress or a skirt to school.

So we had a lot of activism in the family: how do you fight back, how do you question authority, all of this, don't trust what people tell you. When I was in the fifth grade, I remember my mother teaching me the definition of the word co-opt, cooptation, and what does that mean to be co-opted. She was writing her book. I think it came out when I was about ten, so that was something for the longest time in my life the sound of a Selectric IBM typewriter was a triggering sound for me, because it was the sound of my mother not being available, because she was working, you know, would be

working in her study typing. And still to this day when I hear an IBM Selectric typewriter, I have a reaction.

SS: Well, you never hear it anymore.

SL: You hear it once in a while, but that's true, probably not anymore. But ten years ago when I would hear it, I would have a reaction.

So then when I was in high school, my mother died, and her funeral was here in New York. She had the New York City flag was over her casket. There were over a thousand people at her service. It was an evening service. She had requested to have an evening service so people wouldn't have to take off work to come to her funeral. And Ruth Messinger acknowledged my mother when she became Manhattan Borough president. Fifteen years later, David Dinkins acknowledged my mother. I mean, she's still someone people talk about.

SS: What was her name?

SL: Ellen Lurie. So her book, *How to Change the Schools*, and when I look at the book, the *Women, AIDS, and Activism* book, and I have a section in the book about action and sort of rules for engagement as collaboration and risk-taking, and it's very much a similar tone about not being co-opted, about understanding people have different risks and take different risks for different reasons.

But I do remember when my mother was getting arrested during those times when I was growing up, she would also talk about it would only take two cars to shut down the West Side Highway. You could shut down West Side Highway with two cars to do an action. So, really interesting lessons about civil disobedience and action and being heard.

SS: So when did you first get involved with organized politics? Was it queer politics or was it Left politics?

SL: I think a little bit of both, because it was probably—I was at the Women's Pentagon action. I went to Rutgers. I went to Douglass College at Rutgers University. The Women's Pentagon action might have been one of the first things I did. So, involved in the Peace Movement and the Women's Peace Movement in particular.

SS: Now, the Women's Pentagon action, I was there too. It's the opposite of ACT UP, because we stood outside around the Pentagon, but we never tried to go in.

SL: Right.

SS: Do you have any thoughts about—

SL: Well, I watched *United in Anger* recently, in preparation for coming down, and I saw one of the—I was thinking of the Women's Pentagon action because there was some theatrical thing around a building, whichever building—I mean, there were a lot of them. You've worked on that. So there was something. I don't think we ever went to the Pentagon. There was something, the CDC or some building, with blood on its hands and things like that. I remember blood being something that was part of that ritual, and we didn't go in. But I do just remember there was something so, like, very spiritual about that approach to surround the Pentagon, and that's what we did, we surrounded it, holding hands, and couldn't quite reach, so there was like thread or fabric.

So I didn't do direct action at peace encampments when people would go over the fence or do things like that. I did something in California, so I might have been—I did some stuff in California around nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants

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and things like that. So those were all really connected to me, because even though the Peace Movement that I would be working in the Peace Movement in mixed gender or things, there were a lot of, like, women's peace activists that influenced that in a really profound way, or who were my people who I was hanging out with or who would tell these stories of when in California, you know, eighty women were jailed and what that was like for them. That was when I first was really learning about that. Even though my mother would get arrested, I didn't really know what any of that meant. I was definitely younger than being able to politically understand what was happening. All I knew was it was a good thing to fight the system and that was of value.

SS: Now, did you join any organizations at that point?

SL: No. When I was in college, I got really involved in journalism, and so a lot of my stuff was around journalism and being involved in the newspaper, just sitting on a hill at UC Santa Cruz with this sort of radical weekly newspaper. That was my group and that's what I did, and we would write about all this stuff.

SS: Oh, so you changed to Santa Cruz.

SL: I changed from Rutgers to UC Santa Cruz, which is where I graduated from, yeah.

SS: So did you study with those famous people, Teresa De Lauretis and the whole Santa Cruz—

SL: Well, Bettina Aptheker was one of the famous people who I studied with, who I just saw in California two weeks ago, giving a speech at seventy years old. It was great. And Teresa was a graduate student when I was there. So I didn't study that. I was an undergrad, and it were really separated.

SS: And then you came back to New York.

SL: Then I came back to New York. So I came back to New York in 1987. I remember writing about AIDS stuff, Lyndon LaRouche and all the AIDS quarantine things.

SS: So you came back in '87. Let's just wait a second. So AIDS starts in '81. So you're young and you're in college. Did it ever come into your own personal life?

SL: Yeah, absolutely, came in a couple of different ways. When I was in—1984 is when I moved to California. In 1985, '86, '87, I was in both Santa Cruz and San Francisco, had a partner who was living in San Francisco. And San Francisco was changing so rapidly, and one of the ways it was really changing was housing was available because gay men were dying. Like, that was the first thing, was like why are all these apartments available? It's like everybody's dying.

So I wasn't part of that community, I didn't know people, but I knew that the community—that things were really changing and people were just shell-shocked. I mean, all that was happening at that point were people were dying, and it was just shock and shame. And I had friends from that time who became HIV-positive, but didn't die early. But that was how I remember it, because I was a little too young, but just watching it kind of starting to devastate San Francisco. And that was just this really interesting way, this material way, that it was obvious, housing would shift, just—and gloomy, you know, just gloomy.

SS: So when you moved here, you were moving to a place where it was less obvious. That's a very particular trajectory. You didn't see people dying in the

streets in the way you did in San Francisco, maybe because people were more out in San Francisco.

SL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So when I came here in 1987, I was staying on the Lower East Side with my sister. I was twenty-four, and I was coming home. I mean, I didn't like it in California that much. I never really fit in. I never really—I was too much of like a New Yorker, and that's why I was the editor of the newspaper. I liked deadlines. I liked to move fast. So California was often slower, oops.

JW: I'll make it so it won't happen again.

SL: We hope. Do your best.

JW: I'll nail it to your chest.

SL: I can take it. Okay. Talk, talk, talk. Can you hear it? Oh, you don't have the headphones on.

JW: I can hear it fine. Okay, fine, thank you. Sorry about that.

SL: So I came back to New York because California was culturally odd for me. I didn't really ever quite fit in.

And so here's an interesting thing. I started to attend Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings around New York. I was dealing with my relationship with my father. My mother had died in 1978, so before I finished high school. I was a sophomore in high school. But my father was an alcoholic, and his drinking was a big part of my life, and so I come back to New York and I'm dealing with that. I'm twenty-four, and that whole kind of issues around who we are, as who we are and how it relates to our parents, and I was dealing with my father's alcoholism and I was going to these ACOA meetings, and there was one that was on Monday nights at the Center—on Monday

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afternoons at the Center, and I would go at, like, five o'clock to this meeting, and I would come out at six-thirty or, you know, maybe it was at six and it ended at seven-thirty. I just remember going through that big room and being like, "What is going on?" like just throngs of people.

And after just, you know, a couple of weeks, I went to a meeting, and I went with Marion Banzhaf, who at the time, who was my sister's partner, and we were very good friends.

SS: Now, was your sister in the same political formation that Marion was in?

SL: At that point, yes. She had done work, like, on a lot of Central American stuff, doing things in Nicaragua, so a little bit earlier.

SS: So, like, with May 19th and all of that?

SL: I don't really know, because I wasn't involved in what she was doing, but John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, they were doing that work.

SS: John Brown Anti-Klan. And were you part of that?

SL: No, I wasn't here, nuh-uh.

So, yeah, that was how I went to my first ACT UP meeting. I kind of like stumbled upon it, as a lot of people did, and just started going. And very, very exciting time. And I was working at an organization that did—it is called Community Resource Exchange. They do technical assistance for nonprofits in New York. And one of the very first projects we did around the same time was about funders and AIDS funders, one of the very early AIDS funders projects, with Suki Ports. Brought AIDS funders together in my work life and then I'm going to these ACT UP meetings and being this, like, young

queer in New York. It was so early. God, it was just so early. And, I mean, there was no funding for AIDS yet. There was nothing.

SS: So how did you first plug into ACT UP?

SL: Well, I probably got involved in the Women's Committee pretty early, just to kind of find where I fit.

SS: Can you just explain what the Women's Committee was and what it was like, who was in it, and what it did?

SL: Well, ACT UP was very male, you know, predominantly guys and gay men, so people would find their niches in whatever it might be. So it was pretty obvious the Women's Committee was sort of women who were here and realizing, you know, how do we kind of fit together. We often sat in the front, which was interesting, to sit in the front, because that's not really where all the cruising is going on. There's like there's a whole—there were so many layers of things that were happening, and a lot of us would sit in the front to really engage with the meeting and the material of the meeting and not necessarily engage in all of the secondary and tertiary things that were going on, just in terms of all these people with all this energy being in this room. So a lot of people you interviewed, Maxine Wolfe, Marion Banzhaf, Maria Maggenti.

I was involved in that, but I was also involved in another group called La Cocina, The Kitchen, with other folks who were sort of more Left—people, our study group or affinity group was doing some other things with Bob—

JH: Lederer?

SL: Yes, Bob Lederer.

SS: Okay, who's also from that, because we've been sort of following that group as well, through the interviews, who's also from that May 19th cadre.

SL: So that was nice.

SS: So what did this group do?

SL: You know, I don't—I was really trying to figure out all the different actions and kind of do a little bit of a chronology. Some of the really exciting things were some of the women's actions, like, you know, going to Shea Stadium and having those—interacting with communities in particular ways. I think probably I was with La Cocina at the City Hall action, which I have a photo. Can I show you this photo?

SS: Sure. Great.

SL: So Target City Hall was in October of 1989, and I was—the AP photo was of me getting arrested.

SS: Oh, that's a famous photo of you. That's a great picture.

SL: And it was the AP photo. You can take it out of that thing if it's glare.

JW: You want to hold it up perpendicular to me too.

SL: So that was the AP photo that, like, went around the world. People were calling me up from California. They're like, "Is this you on the cover of the *Chronicle*?"

And I'm like, "Yes!" And then I, like, I called up AP to get a copy of it, you know. I was like, "How do I get a copy of that photo?" Like seven dollars, I got a copy of the photo.

SS: Wow. I remember that. That was a classic.

SL: Yeah, yeah, that was quite—so that was that group, I believe. I wasn't wearing a belt, because it was, like, "Don't wear a belt. We're going to get arrested, and they'll take your belt away and they won't let you get it back."

SS: What do you think you were expressing by being in ACT UP at that time?

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SL: I was expressing a lot about community connection, how are we bigger than any one of us. So much that was happening was that the grief that people were experiencing, the grief and the fear and the terror of, like, what was happening all around us was really isolating, and I think people coming together and being together, so like those Monday night meetings, even if that's all you did, you weren't alone. You obviously were not alone. And I think that that was a lot of what I needed and was looking for, was how do I express this fear. The world is completely out of control, and it's out of control in these ways that are really intimate and close. How do I not be alone in that? However, I did feel pretty alone, still. I still felt kind of lonely, and I felt lonely as a dyke in ACT UP, and then I felt lonely now, you know. I'm a trans guy who transitioned much later, so I don't have connections to ACT UP now. Like when there's been the reunions and things like that, my current name is not the name that people know me as, and it's not an easy connection to bring up to date. And I have with some individuals, but it's not with the organization, and that's hard. And that's partly about me, you know, how do I do that or navigate that, and it's been a long time. Now, this is going way back, twenty-five years, twenty-six years.

SS: You know, there's a lot of different ways of understanding that, obviously, because I have to tell you that almost every single person we've—no, I

would say 70 percent of the people we've interviewed felt alienated from ACT UP. So it was like a typical ACT UP experience to feel alienated. On the other hand, there was only one out trans person in ACT UP, Kathy Otter, who've we been unable to locate.

SL: She might not be alive.

SS: Yeah. So when we take the film around, young people or young trans people or just young queer people are always like, "Where are the trans people in this film?" And they believe that they were there but we didn't include them in the film because we were prejudiced or we have this—and I keep saying, well, the trans revolution hadn't really happened yet, and they don't really understand that. So how do you understand that kind of like—

SL: Yeah, that's a really interesting question, because—I mean, that's a nice way of putting it too. So much has happened in trans politics now. So I am involved in trans politics now, and the reason—the way I got involved in trans politics very early was through HIV work. In 1996, I lived in Vermont. I moved to Vermont in 1992, so I was only here in New York from '87 to '91, and then I moved to Vermont. And I worked for the Department of Health in the HIV program, and I got that job because of having been involved in ACT UP and having worked in the Community Research Exchange nonprofit technical assistance. I got a job as a technical assistance person for the health department in the AIDS program that was run by Terry Anderson, who later became the executive director of NAPWA, National Association of People With AIDS. He's back in Vermont now.

But, anyway, there's a lot of these connections that were common then, less common now, with activists taking on these positions as AIDS, Inc. was beginning to develop. So that was the director who hired me, was this gay man living with AIDS who was very radical, and I then started doing trans awareness work at AIDS conferences around the country, and that's where I met, like, the few of us. I was doing the very first workshops at NMAC, the National Minority AIDS Coalition's national AIDS conferences or the CDC HIV-prevention conferences that happened.

Like, there was nothing on the agenda. Now there's whole tracks. I was at a conference two weeks ago in San Francisco of the Transgender Health Summit, and there was 750 people there, including, like, lunchtime plenaries from the White House Office on AIDS. It was opened by Barbara Lee, the congresswoman for Oakland, who gave these big plaques to the organizers. And that's only really in five years that that has happened. The work started—I mean, I started doing the work in 1998. So I watched a lot of that progress.

SS: So how did ACT UP relate to gender? How was gender dealt with in ACT UP?

SL: Well, there's how ACT UP dealt with gender and how I dealt with gender in ACT UP, which are two different things to talk about. Well, the way that ACT UP dealt with gender was there were—these women were a lot of, like, older women from the Peace Movement, from the Women's Health Movement, from the Feminist Health Movement, who, from the Civil Rights Movement, who were trained in doing a certain type of political action that involved consensus decision-making, that involved a lot of processing, and some of that was coming from the Civil Rights Movement and

00:25:00 would be then part of the Women's Peace Movement, but it was something that I thought came into ACT UP that wasn't really acknowledged by men in ACT UP, as where this history came.

Now, I work now with a lot of young folks doing transgender organizing, and you said these young people are saying, "Why don't you have the trans people?" When you're twenty-five, twenty-four, you don't think that all this has already been done before, you know. That's not a part of how we grow up and become activists, is not always just by thinking, "Oh, yeah, other people have done this before." It's this fresh energy, which is, "No one's *ever* done this before. This is *totally* new. No one has ever done this."

So one of the ways that gender came up was there almost in some ways there was, like, a lot of maternal nurturing happening from some of the women in this way that also could probably be perceived as patronizing. There also was sexism. I had this thing happen one time organizing something in some small group, and I was, like, the facilitator. I remember this guy grabbed, like, the clipboard or whatever I was writing, grabbed it out of my hand, and then he had this whole other way he wanted to do it, very fast. There was just no self-awareness at all of, like, I called the meeting, I'm organizing this meeting. He just like grabbed it out of my hand and took over in this way that was—I just don't think he would have necessarily done that with another man. So that was things that were around.

The sexual energy, obviously something that was really gendered, so that was one of the reasons why women probably stuck together too. If you were a straight woman in ACT UP, like, you weren't going to be getting any sexual attention. So that's

where it had sort of like this gay ring to it, again, in terms of people looking for things they're looking for, which is relationships, which is connections, which is dating and sex, as well as comrades. So that was one way that gender really just stuck out.

And I was very struck—I have another thing to show you about a book that I drew when we went to Montreal. I'd draw these little like cartoon travelogues, going up to Montreal, sort of like writing about this experience and how sexual it was to be going on this trip. You know, someone talking to people about body smells and you don't want to use deodorant because you go in for a lick in an armpit, you don't want to be licking deodorant. You're just like, wow, like, what a powerful thought and image and sensory connection to another person that is very gay male. And getting exposed to that, and, I mean, I identify as a gay man now and I would have loved to have been a gay man then, and I wasn't. I also totally see how terrifying it was. And I may have been a really nerdy one who never got laid, I don't know. Nerdy, as in you said everybody has this alienation experience and feeling I didn't fit in. I mean, it definitely was high school, too, with the cliques and the A List and the B List and the C List.

SS: But there also was, like, David Robinson in earrings and a skirt.

There were the—the guys from Tennessee—

SL: Oh, the Radical Faeries.

SS: The Radical Faeries.

SL: Right. So I'm actually very involved with them. I'm kind of involved with Radical Faeries now. There's a really nice Radical Faerie land in Vermont, and that is a place where there's actually a lot of trans energy there.

Yes, so if you're thinking about that, David Robinson with the earrings and that, I remember—I was thinking about David because when I saw the *United in Anger* and remember him at one of the actions having these different shirts his partner had made for him, like butch one day, femme one day, you know, like these different ways he was very visibly playing with gender and very powerfully, and also but he still was desired by, like, everybody there, you know, in some way. So for him to play with that was really, really great. He occupied such a heroic space, in a way, this worship. He was on, like, the cover of *Time* magazine and things like that. Like, there was a way and his charisma really stood out, and I really appreciate that there was that gendered element to it. I always appreciated it then, and that was—

SS: What about Kathy [Otter]? She was a facilitator.

SL: Yeah.

SS: And she was a defendant in the needle exchange case.

SL: So I remember Kathy and I've been thinking about her recently. And I don't know—I don't think she was treated that well in the Women's Committee. Now, I mean, she would feel very familiar to me now, and at the time, Kathy probably was someone who was I a little bit like, "I'm afraid to get too close to you."

00:30:00 Leslie Feinberg, who was in New York at the same time, I remember being, like, terrified of, like, connections with Leslie Feinberg because I saw myself there. I saw myself in both Kathy and Leslie, and I wasn't ready for that at all. That was, you know—think about changes of stage. I was, like, way pre-contemplative and in a stage of change, like I—but on a subconscious level it was coming out.

SS: And did you date women in ACT UP?

SL: I did, and I was connected to some folks who had visible disabilities and so connecting around disability, and now I'm very involved in disability community. My partner now is a disabled person who's very active in terms of disability politics. And that's a place where I find total home, in disability community. There are people who have been lifelong activists, and a lament among all of us about how the AIDS Movement and the Disability Rights Movement missed the opportunity to really link and build such a powerful movement. Even just the hemophiliac community and AIDS, you know, gay men with AIDS, like, there was no coalition.

SS: That's interesting, because Karen Timor actually had that vision, working on insurance, and she's the only person who did that, who made those coalitions. But you're right, it was not a normative vision inside the group. Absolutely.

SL: Yeah. And I was reading someone's memoir recently about what was happening in California and how the Centers for Independent Living and a lot of the social service organizations for people with disabilities refused to deal with people with AIDS, out of pure homophobia. And so that's why gay men started their own organizations that then served many more than just gay men, but even though they still—Gay Men's Health Crisis is probably way majority of not gay men being served.

But that coalition around disability, because then if you had that coalition around disability, you would also have a lot of coalition around race and class. You would have all this opportunity to really bring a lot of the intersexual issues together, and there was a lot of resistance too. The resistance may not have been conscious. The resistance may have been because this is how we're going to have impact immediately,

and we always also talked about there were people as white gay men, who were, like, “My expectation is I’m going to have victory fast and soon, and this will slow it all down. This will dilute the message.”

SS: Okay, so I want to ask you just from another angle, as a Leftist, so you’re working on this Left group inside ACT UP and you’re working in this feminist group inside ACT UP, but a lot of people in ACT UP were not feminist or Left, and there was a certain kind of idea, I think, by those of us who were more politically evolved, to try to move ACT UP in certain directions. Did you ever have those discussions overtly?

SL: Well, I wouldn’t want to call myself as someone who was more politically evolved, just because that—I’m, like, snickering as I hear that word, like makes me feel a little—I wouldn’t necessarily say that because I—while I have some Left experience and Left history and things like that, I don’t always have such an articulate political perspective. I definitely deal a lot on individual change levels and energy of people and situations, and not necessarily policy, which that’s just a personal thing. I’m involved in a lot of policy work, but I don’t strategically think about it always naturally. I have to really work at it. So I think there was a way that that was getting played out too. I mean, I hung out more with the Leftist crowd, the people who were not just cruising but, like, trying to figure out how do we build a coalition, how do we make this action not actually undermine other people.

The St. Patrick’s Cathedral action, I think, was a good example for me. I remember—and there was something in the film about it for you, but I don’t think I went to that action. I think I was like “I don’t feel comfortable as a Jew going to this action.”

I might have been outside doing support work outside, but I know I didn't want to go inside.

And then there was just these ideas of who has a right to do what where, in what community, because how powerful it is to do something from within the community, to say, "I belong here and I'm part of this and this is affecting me, and I'm one of you in a way." How do we make that happen? So I do remember when we'd have conflicts about that, so that one was a big one.

00:35:00 And I also remember another religious spiritual conflict that happened where I think I had raised a question about not having a meeting on, like, Rosh Hashanah or something because it fell on a Monday. Maybe it was even Yom Kippur. It was some Jewish holiday that fell on a Monday. And it was, like, shot down in this really vicious way, and that was like, "We're against all religion, and all religions are after us as gays and lesbians, and they'll all turn on us." I'm under – I'm minimizing how vicious the quotes were, because—

SS: But ACT UP was almost practically a Jewish organization, Jewish and Italian.

SL: Well, okay. So maybe people were speaking from their own sense of being alienated from their own—from the Jewish world then. But it was vicious. It was vicious. It was like, "How dare you even bring it up? Like, how could we give —"

And I said, "Well, you know, the Center's not open on Christmas, and it wouldn't even be an issue if it were Christmas." So I just remember being—

SS: So you thought that was a problem, that it was Jewish, it was not Christian, that's why it was shot down?

SL: No, you're telling me that it was more of a Jewish organization, but that wasn't my sense of who was responding to it. My response was it might have been some Jewish men who were saying, "Oh, my religion has abandoned me as a gay man."

SS: I see. I see.

SL: "So we don't need to be thinking about Jewishness in our movement." But that wasn't who I remember talking. I just remember it was in general, just this, like, vicious, like, "There's no way we're going to do that."

I also remember having a really intense time when I talked about—it might have been the Women's Committee that had an image of women in, like, burqas with guns.

SS: Yes, that was one of the proposals for the Stop The Church poster, and it was knocked down.

SL: But I challenged it when it was still being—it was wheat-pasted around. It was, because—and I was, like, "We can't use this image." And I was really shot down.

SS: Really?

SL: Yes. I remember it was not shot down that night, because I brought it up on the floor, and it was, like, this big thing, like, I was shaking and trying to be articulate and explain why this image was so problematic on so many levels, and I was not really supported. And it was shut down. So if that happened, it happened later. But that's shocking to me.

But it also showed how people were pushing boundaries. And when I said this thing, it was like a high school, it was like that kind of creative energy that, like,

sometimes will push over what is—well, push over. And sometimes that pushing over is what got things to work and got things to happen. And also my mother, not only did she talk about shutting down the West Side Highway with two cars, but they pulled the emergency cord on subway cars. Now, that's pushing. I'm sure a lot of people don't want—you know. That's pushing. And that's pushing—maybe that isn't going to fix it. Maybe that's not going to be the action that does it, but one of them will. You know, a lot of things that we pushed were amazing also. Now – arrests would be totally different now, you know, post-9/11, taking over the Stock Exchange, people would get a hundred years in jail.

SS: Let's go back to the Women's Committee, because I want to talk about it a little more. You said there were some hardcore people on the Women's Committee, who had real political experience and very articulated political perspectives. I mean, it was not just wanting to be with other women. There was a political agenda there. How do you remember that being articulated or developed?

SL: Well, are you talking about Maxine Wolfe in particular as someone who was a very strong person?

SS: I'm talking about you also.

SL: Me also?

SS: Yeah, everyone in there.

SL: Our agenda—well, I think because a lot of us came out of the Peace Movement or the Women's Peace Movement and also Women's Health Movement, so talking about reproductive rights, talking about poverty, talking about intersections of access to healthcare and sexism. Part of the agenda was to bring that intersectionality to

this movement, like don't just narrow it to one thing. We can't. And AIDS certainly was about so much more than white gay men. It was like, "Don't you see this? This is our moment to really make these connections." So I think that was part of the agenda.

SS: Yeah, because the decision to do *Women, AIDS, and Activism* or the decision to move the organization towards women with AIDS was a political decision, because very few people connected to the Women's Committee were HIV-positive.

SL: Yes. And I have certainly talked to HIV-positive women who felt really alienated from ACT UP and from the women from the Women's Committee.

SS: What did they – are they still living?

00:40:00 SL: The one person who I've had this conversation with is still living, and said, "You know, yeah, I felt like there's some women—and also from ACT UP, like on the West Coast as well, but some, I felt like the way I was mistreated the most as a woman with HIV is by some of the ACT UP activists."

SS: Can you give examples without revealing anything?

SL: Well, just an idea of, like, would it be appropriate to have a conference on perinatal HIV transmission, perinatal issues, or satellite conference of a women's conference that would include perinatal issues. And have it be shot down because we don't want to think of women just as, you know, a womb that reproduces.

SS: Right. Vectors of infection.

SL: Right. Not just vector of infection but, like, that the whole role of women is to produce, is to reproduce a child, and then we could think about women as that's your role is to reproduce a child, and then vectors of infection, but not really

recognizing that women with HIV are mothers and want to be mothers, or, you know, that's being a mother is a really big, important part of who they are and just, like, not feeling like that was the place where some of that agenda was welcoming them and really making space for them.

SS: Okay. But, I mean, on one hand we're saying the women in the Women's Committee had this political vision that went beyond their own immediate experience. On the other hand, we're saying that there were limits to it, which is normal, because they were human, right?

SL: Mm-hmm.

SS: But, I mean, the decision to do *Women, AIDS, and Activism* was a really radical decision, in my view. I don't know if you still feel that way.

SL: The book?

SS: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, I mean, I thought—but it was part of the momentum, and I don't know if it was such a radical thing as another way of the creativity that was so vibrant, you know. There was so much creation, so much artwork, so much theater, so much press strategy, and so a lot of these folks were involved in publishing, editing, writing, South End press, radical press, you know. It didn't feel like it was such a radical thing to do. It felt like it really fit.

I got involved in the book. I had been a journalist. I had done both—I was a typesetter in New York and I worked as a journalist. So it was a way that that particular group had skills. I mean, a number of librarians were involved. I mean, I

reread it, and it's like it's not the greatest book in the world. It's a very—the way I described was it's like a combination of a textbook and a leaflet.

SS: Do you have it with you?

SL: I do have it with me. So it felt like this combination of a textbook and a leaflet, you know. So it's like it doesn't really have an arc as a book. And it has some really good stuff in it, a lot of these—it has some really good stuff in it, but—

SS: What's good in it?

SL: Well, there's a thing in here from Kim Christensen about disability, which I think is really great still to this day, about intersectionality and disability, and there's a lot of, like, the introductory things. It was very earnest, as well, but then it feels like where are the—there weren't enough women with AIDS writing this book or, you know, interviewed for the book or somehow brought together for this book.

I remember doing this project up at Bedford Hills. I was involved in that, going up to Bedford Hills, and so there were later some women who came out of Bedford Hills who were released from prison and then involved in some AIDS stuff and who are not living any longer, and that was so important, you know. That was just giving those women space, even at Bedford Hills, just visiting them so they would have space, that they were doing peer HIV training. That must have been how we were able to go to be on their visiting list.

SS: Who did you work with, Debbie Levine and—

SL: Debbie Levine and Catherine Gund, now, is who I remember going up there with.

SS: And who were your inside partners?

SL: I'm not remembering the names.

SS: Was it Katrina? Marina Alvarez or—

SL: Katrina. What's Katrina's last name?

JW: Haslip.

SL: Yes, Katrina Haslip. Yeah, she was one of them.

SS: And Judy Clarke and Kathy Boudin.

SL: I did not work with them on this particular project, but they did that, yeah. Right. So that might have been part of how it was connected too.

SS: So what is your piece in here?

SL: I have a piece in here. This is interesting, because as I was just looking at it, it's about translating issues into action, so it's really talking about this—there's a thing in here about, like, logistics and considerations for actions and how to be aware of who's involved and what it means to do coalition-building and things like that. So I like that. But I was like, "Okay, I can stand by this. This feels okay."

SS: Great

00:45:00 I also remember there's a paragraph in here, the opening to it, I remember writing it when someone had just died, and there's some of these ways that we had to defend as women feeling this urgency around AIDS, and this is our life, we're fighting for our lives too, this whole idea of being kind of—you know, "You're not at the same urgent risk, but we are." How do you define that? What does that mean? So I remember writing some things about that.

SS: I'm interested in that. How do you remember the feeling?

SL: How do I remember feeling?

SS: Mm-hmm. I mean, there was practically a fight in ACT UP about whether or not lesbians were at risk for HIV, and I remember feeling at the time that they wanted to be a risk for HIV, even though they really weren't, because there was so much proximity to this experience.

SL: Right. Right. And that's where when I said earlier about some of the nurturing or like a maternal feeling in some ways, like some women as caretakers becoming very, like, what seemed to me to be sort of like over-intimate with people quickly as a caretaker for someone who was at an advanced stage of illness, suddenly becoming like a primary person in their lives and having this, like, close intimacy till death. And that's something that happens. That's something that's a nursing kind of caretaking type of pattern that sometimes happens.

SS: Right. Also because the families weren't present so often.

SL: Right. Exactly, exactly. And who steps forward for that? Who steps forward for that and who steps back from that, and who has the annihilation anxiety of—like, what level is the annihilation anxiety, you know? “Is this me who's going to get dead or I'm far enough away, I smell and feel and fear and hold this death or this impending death, but it's not a virus in my body.” And that's one experience around—it's still a very close experience, but it's a mourning as opposed to just a total abject fear of, “This is going to happen to me.” But that also is something that is all around, in terms of disability politics, of people saying to a disabled person, “If I were you, I'd kill myself.” What does that mean? Like, what does that mean about living with bodily difference, “If I were you, I'd kill myself”?

SS: Were you in any care groups at ACT UP?

SL: No, nuh-uh.

SS: Who was your closest friend who died in ACT UP, or one of your close friends?

SL: Well, there was a friend from college, a guy named Gary Reynolds who died, who was a close friend. He came to New York a few times, but he didn't live here. Another friend from high school, who was a closest friend, and he was married, he had two kids. He would come to New York and stay at my house. He'd go out at night, you know, and kind of like have this party when he'd come to New York, and died somewhat quickly. He came and visited me in Vermont. And I think a lot about his kids, you know.

SS: Are you in touch with them?

SL: No, because his ex-wife kind of—I didn't have an independent-enough relationship with her. So that's going a little bit further back.

I don't know. There's others –

SS: What was it like for you to have people dying in front of you at the time in ACT UP?

SL: Yeah, who were, like, my age. So, I mean, this friend from high school, you know, same exact age. What was it like? It sucked, you know. I mean, I just think now, you know, I'm fifty-two, and twenty—like that just, I mean, even now, peers of mine who are dying, that's young. And so something about—I'm tongue-tied on it. Just this unfairness, this is wrong, something's not supposed—this is not supposed to be happening. And, yeah, I think that that would be something.

SS: One of the things I've been trying to figure out for the last fifteen years of interviewing all these people is what it is that everyone had in common, because, I mean, most people didn't join ACT UP. ACT UP was a small vanguard organization. What kind of personality joined ACT UP? Especially women who were not at risk personally, many of whom were not really that involved with gay men before. So this group of, like, whatever, 100 women or whoever it was, probably less, what was it?

00:50:00

SL: Well, you know, it's funny, because last night we ran into each other at Veselka's, and I remember being at Veselka's in, like, 1989 and doing an interview with someone from my school who was doing a dissertation or doing a book, Nancy Shaw. I'm not sure what her last name is now. She was doing these interviews. I remember sitting in Veselka's and talking to her about this very same thing, but it was during the times, you know, '89, '90. And she was somebody who wrote a lot about women in prison, and so she had this – a lot of her perspective was thinking about what are women doing in ACT UP and things like that.

And I think, for me, it was where there was a Queer Social Justice Movement as well as—so setting aside the urgency of a healthcare crisis and illness, there also was a Queer Social Justice Movement. That's where you were, is this queer social justice scene. As I was, like, writing the little chronology for myself around where I was in New York when, and when I first moved to New York, I remember going to an anti-Bork—when Bork was nominated for the Supreme Court, and there was this demonstration, and going to this demonstration and not knowing anybody there because I had just moved back to New York. And I was like, “Oh, I never come to a demonstration

and not know people.” It’s like a social scene, right, to go to these demos. And then later, it was. Then I knew people. Then I did know people. So it is where’s your social justice work happening, and who’s going to be there with you? And then ACT UP just because it was so theatrical and it had this whole, like, you know, uniforms and how good we all looked in our uniforms and our shirts and our hats and our chants.

It was all very empowering and, like, there’s just a lot of power in that, and it was harnessed in a particular way that propelled it forward. So it could also not be, and then you have something else, but – I think, that there was both that belonging, I think also in terms of sort of the more Left and the women who were trying to, like, bring it around or have it have a little bit more of an intersectional social justice framework, that’s what they do in the world. They fight with comrades, colleagues, whoever, to think like them. And so they saw this movement that had all this power. How do we turn it in a direction that’s going to serve these other political needs or these other social justice needs? So people were, like, starting to, like, steer this giant ship a little bit.

SS: You want to show us the drawings?

SL: Oh, yeah. I’d like to show you the drawings. Yes. Thanks for asking.

SS: So this was going to the Montreal conference?

SL: Yeah. So ACT UP goes to Montreal. ACT UP goes to Montreal, and it was the fifth International AIDS Conference in 1989. And I have this—a friend of mine taught me—I do a lot of these little journals, so I’ll just give you—the first scene is where we’re all meeting each other at the Saratoga Spa City Diner, these little drawings. And then there’s like where we’re all practicing our French on the bus, and then the

French that I have on here is “Give me a blowjob,” how you say it in French. There was a lot about crossing the border.

SS: What is it? *Un pipe*, right? Is that—

SL: Yeah, *tailleur un pipe*. Not now.

So we were meeting there because we were all figuring out how we would cross the border into Canada and really worried about what it was going to mean to cross the border where you’re coming and you have all these truckloads, buses, vans. It was a couple of buses and a couple of vans.

It’s funny, there’s this picture here of people waiting for each other. Oh, yeah, we’re waiting for each other. Some van was missing, and so people were dancing on top of the van. And I have this, like, Madonna music, “When You Call My Name,” so like that’s what they were dancing to. It’s, like, talk about placing it in the eighties.

SS: Wow.

SL: It was talking about action around us. So a really nice guy in the local news depot kept offering us help and kindness, so I gave him one of our t-shirts, and he was really grateful. This idea of, like, who do we encounter, you know, just some rural guy in Saratoga Springs who was like really into our group and connecting. And that was a lot of what we did, especially traveling, was like how do we bring this message to different, to people?

And then when we crossed the border, nothing happened, and we were really prepared for a big dramatic border crossing. So, finally got here, and there was absolutely no hassle at the border. It was like going through a toll booth, actually. All of our elaborate preparations were thwarted by disinterest.

And just some stuff about Quebec, French and English, what it was like to be there, where we stayed in these dorms, bright lights, broken showers, and six beds to a room. Talking about how I really wasn't quite prepared to go to Montreal. I hadn't done any preparation. Like, I don't have a good map and I didn't even glance at a guidebook. Just where am I exactly? I was just so unprepared. "Maybe the Middle East is a bad idea." I was going to the Middle East a couple months later, and I was, like, I didn't even read the guidebook.

The Tiananmen Square happened the same week that we were all there in Montreal, and the conference space was right next to Chinatown, and so that was like really this enormous thing that was happening. Because, you know, one of the things to remember, too, is this was an era there wasn't Internet, there wasn't—you know. Remember we'd have, like, these walkie-talkies at actions. But at Tiananmen Square and Chinatown, I remember everything just being, like, newspapers up on the walls, and going to Jerusalem where people would talk about Palestinians and say, "The walls are our newspapers." Graffiti was out, and the information was disseminated. And it felt like that there in Chinatown there was just all this—everybody, like, just trying to read things on the wall, trying to get information.

So all these things that were happening, there's something there about all these things that were happening that day that we were there. So Tiananmen Square happened; something, eight hundred people in the Soviet Union died when two trains collided and erupted in a fireball; Ayatollah Khomeini died; Poland supposedly held the first free elections in forty years. And somehow ACT UP still managed to get on the national news in both Canada and the U.S. So that kind of had this thing about—makes

me think about the media and what was happening with the media then, versus what was on the media now.

And then there was stuff where we actually overtook the AIDS conference, and there were these pictures where we were picketing outside, picketing outside, and then people started to go up the escalators. And they would go up and down, up and down, and then suddenly we all started going up. Were you there? Do you remember?

SS: No.

SL: So then we were, like, all going up the escalators, and we all have these signs, and that was part of it. Like, we all looked really good, and we had these signs in French and English and these t-shirts in French and English, and we're, you know, probably "Silence = Death" in French, you know, the saying "Silence = Death" thing, and then going up.

And then we took over the stage the opening day of the International AIDS Conference, and all the delegates were cheering. And I don't remember who spoke, but, like, we were there, and, like, everybody was cheering. The delegates were not like, "You're interrupting our conference." They were like, "This is amazing." And then they allowed all the ACT UP people to sit in all these—there were, like, "Oh, please, have these seats," and they were like the VIP seats at the front. But then there was this tension, because people didn't want to go.

[reading] "The folks went inside and marched around chanting, conferencees seemed supportive, clapping along. Throngs of folks were riding up the tall escalators to go to the opening plenary. ACT UP and AIDS Action Now went up there

too. It was beautiful.” So there’s this little drawing of the escalator. But it was, like, so vibrant, just going up the escalator, chanting.

And then everyone was taking “Silence = Death” stickers. I had to run out to get more, and by the time I got back, those folks had taken over the stage, and then there’s a picture of, like, how the stage looked in French and English. [reading] “A Canadian PWA [Tim McCaskell] took the microphone, ‘Oh behalf of people living with AIDS in Canada and around the world, I welcome you and open this conference.’” So that had not been planned by the conference people, to have a Canadian PWA open the conference, but that’s what activists took the stage and did it.

So then folks stayed there a while. They read the manifesto, which got pretty enthusiastic applause from the crowd, which was clearly hoping to get unstaidd. There was a delay when ACT UP New York folks wouldn’t leave and took the VIP seats instead, perhaps a bit much, but not at all bad in the end. Speakers joked a bit but welcomed the additions of the newer participants.

Then Brian Mulroney, the prime minister of Canada, and as bad as AIDS as our own leaders spoke and got appropriately booed. It was the first time he uttered SIDA, AIDS in French, yet, which was noted by the news and anchorpersons who also committed us to doing demos every day. It was like, “Oh, we did?”

They said, “Oh, ACT UP said they’re going to do demos every day.”

“We did? Oh, I guess we have to do demos every day.”

So talk about a really interesting thing about how the media—this dance between us and the media, and it’s like, “We’ll cover your demos if you do them.” So we probably did them.

So that's just a little bit about that opening, which was really pretty—

SS: That's a great document that you have that. It's incredible.

01:00:00

SL: Thanks. I'd be happy to make a copy for you guys. There's more about it. And then also just coming back. Coming back on the bus was also really funny. Here we go. We stopped off at—what was the name of that place—Lake George, and someone was like, “God, you can't tell the bikers from the gayolas,” because all the bikers were there in leather. It was just a funny comment. You can imagine going to Lake George, it was like bikers' weekend. It was like, “You can't tell the bikers from the gayolas.”

So that was a great event and very powerful to also just be part, you know, living with men in ACT UP, riding the bus, riding the bus down, talking about blowjobs, talking about deodorant, talking about, like, our bodies, our lives.

SS: And when did you leave ACT UP?

SL: I moved from New York—well, I got a little bit less involved in ACT UP in, like, eighty—well, I was still involved but I also was doing other things. I was doing Middle East stuff, so—

SS: What were you doing?

SL: Some Women in Black stuff that was happening, like on the Upper West Side. And I went to Palestine, the Palestine Solidarity Committee. So I got really involved in that stuff. So I was doing a little bit less ACT UP stuff. But I was still doing some Women's Committee organizing. There's one story I want to share because—is Amy Beth in one of your interviews?

SS: Have we interviewed Amy Beth?

SL: She wasn't that involved in ACT UP, but we were dating. We actually met at a Women in Black demo.

SS: That's right. That was your girlfriend. I remember now.

SL: Right. We met. It was in front of Zabar's, a Women in Black demo, and we met there, and we dated for a while, and she was involved in ACT UP. The women's action, the Invisible Women action, which was—I think it was done at NIH, AIDS kills women, and recognize women, so everybody, again, pushing, trying to do things a little bit more.

One of the slogans was, you know, "AIDS Drugs are Going to Get Into Mice Faster Than Into Women," and we were going to do this action with mice and try—we were going to, like, release these mice, like, get out of actions. This is an example of pushing a little too far. And Amy had called this place to get mice, and she said she was a summer camp or something. And they packed up the mice, and then there was, like, enough—the committee was like, "No, this is, like, too much to like really—there's going to be horses. We don't want the mice are going to do to the horses."

And then someone was like, "Oh, can you imagine if people got more worried about the horses than they are about people dying of AIDS?" So, like, there were just these interesting conversations, but it also was we decided to not get the mice and bring the mice to the NIH. It's like hundreds of mice were going to be packaged in these boxes. And Amy called and said, "No, we have to cancel the order."

And he's like, "No, you don't understand. They're all packed up. They're ready to go."

And she, like, made up some whole long story. She's like, "No, we're a summer camp. We got flooded. We're not going to open. We're not going to be able to—." It's like some whole way of, like, "We can't get them. No, no," because it was so right at that moment these mice were going to get delivered to us. I don't know what we would have done with them. But that was, you know, people coming up with wild ideas.

SS: Oh, yeah. I remember when we started the Lesbian Avengers, the first idea was to parachute into Whitney Houston's wedding.

SL: Into whose wedding?

SS: Whitney Houston. But, you know, these are the ideas that don't happen.

SL: Well, now you can use a drone.

SS: Right. So you left because you—so you moved to Vermont.

SL: I moved, actually, to Indiana for a year, and then I moved to Vermont. My partner got a job at Earlham College, and I went out there for a little while. I really wasn't really very happy in New York. I wasn't. I grew up in New York but then had left and lived in the country, and I was having a very difficult time in New York. And it was difficult because it was, like, gloomy. I mean, it was very gloomy. I mean, it was just Ed Koch New York and—New York was a rough place. It was hard for me emotionally from a lot of sort of AIDS stuff and queer community stuff, from my own sort of sense of isolation, some of that as a trans person. I'm like, "Where do I fit? Where do I belong?" And also as I didn't want to be in the city, and I was able to move out of the city. But that was temporary, and then I moved to Vermont, and I stayed involved in AIDS stuff in Vermont. But I had a friend from the Women's Pentagon

action who had moved to Vermont to go to law school and who I always used to go and visit in Vermont, and then I said, “I want to live here.”

SS: So you missed the split.

SL: Yes.

SS: But looking back, since you were not involved in the split, as an observer, can you see the roots of it early on during your time?

01:05:00 SL: Is this the TAG split or which split? The TAG split? Oh, yeah. And I actually—I came around. I would see things. I’d come back to New York and go to meetings when they moved to Cooper Union. What about the split? Inevitable, I guess. I think they felt like there was a lot of splits.

SS: What were the other ones?

SL: I think in some ways, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* was a split; the book was a split. There was a split because of the strip-search money. I don’t know if people have talked about the strip-search money.

SS: No, tell us. Tell us about that.

SL: So at Target City Hall there were many arrests. I think about a hundred people. Well, according to the AP caption on my AP photo, a hundred people arrested. I’m sure it was more. The women were strip-searched, and so the women who were arrested, twenty-five or so, were strip-searched. Maybe it was less, I don’t know. Somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five.

SS: Were you one of those women?

SL: I was one of them. And so we were arrested, we were held, we were—it was not a cavity search. It was not when we think of strip search. It was like

pull up your shirt and let me see. It was not super invasive, nor were we—I was not there that long, and it was not that super invasive in my experience. I'm not sure what everybody experienced.

It was frightening. It was uncomfortable. It was hard as a gender queer person to be in a jail. But it wasn't very long, and at first I was in my own cell, and then I was in a group cell, and then we were released. And there were lots of people out there. All of our friends were out there waiting for us. So it was daylight, it was, you know, like just a heroic kind of coming out into the daylight from the jail.

And then there was all this stuff that we were going to sue for the strip searches. The strip searches are illegal and we're going to sue for the strip searches. And it was fairly quick. I don't know who was all involved, who the attorneys were, but the city settled all that stuff, and they still settled millions and millions and millions of dollars of stuff around problems with arrests. And we're hearing about a lot of it now, and who gets that and who doesn't. So each of the people who had been strip-searched were getting, like, money, like, five or six thousand dollars.

SS: And you did also?

SL: And I did also. And then there was a lot of conflict about whose money was it. Who should get that money? Should it go back to ACT UP? Should it go to something else? So anybody who needed that money to live off of—I was unemployed at the time. I don't remember. I split the money. I gave some to ACT UP and kept some, because I was living off of it. And somebody bought a motorcycle, and that was like, "Oh, my god, how could you do that?" And some people gave all the money back. You know, there was a lot of tension and a lot of righteousness about, "This

isn't our money. This has to go back." And that was a split. That was a big split. That was a really big deal, because it also is about money, and large amounts of money for all of us.

SS: So, thinking back, what do you think was actually right thing to do?

SL: I think it depends how people may have been harmed by what happened. I think it also depends a lot on what people's circumstances were. Some people did not have to worry about rent money in the ways that other people did. I know for me, because I wasn't working at the time, I was able to pay my rent, and that's activism.

So I don't know what the right thing would be. I don't think—I don't know. It's a good thing, a good question. Did that money belong to ACT UP? Did that money belong to a fund? Should it have gone to a fund that could always be used for something, like supporting people in daily survival needs? That would have been a really great thing to do with it. Could it have been used to help women, in particular, access drugs and daily survival needs? Should it have just been a fund for women to access survival needs? But they never got that specific about it, in my memory.

SS: Okay. But these are not really splits, because they're not permanent.

SL: Okay.

SS: You know, this is people having great disagreements that maybe harmed personal relationships, but they remained within the organization. But the big blow around 076 and around the inside-outside strategy and TAG leaving ACT

UP, you had the advantage of having seen the earlier years but not having been implicated in the split. So do you see anything there that can be illuminating for us about the early roots of that?

SL: Well, also Housing Works, I think, you know. Housing Works kind of directly came out of the Housing Committee, so it's a huge agency, huge.

SS: Right. But that's because they wanted to apply for funding.

JW: So did TAG.

SL: Right. TAG was about access to funding, jobs creation, and change, all of that.

SS: But also they felt that they were being held back.

01:10:00 SL: Sure. And they were, because people have different ideas of decision-making and urgency, so TAG, from my understanding, is they wanted to—they didn't want to be held back by this huge consensus of 350 people who didn't understand what they were trying to do and having to, like, explain everything they were trying to do, and sort of AIDS Science, Inc., you know, like how do we want to—I feel it was inevitable that that would have happened, because there were people who were doing it as activism and there were people who were doing it as their total, like, live jobs, and there were also people who were sick and couldn't do it at all.

I remember actually something that I really appreciated that Peter Staley did was, you know, distributing drugs, like collecting drugs from people who had died and then redistributing them. I mean, that is brilliant activism, community-building, response to a need. Did he get a whole consensus from everybody to do that? I don't know. It was a project that he did, and that may have been how he worked, you know.

It's like I get these ideas, I do them, I don't want to have to have everybody say yes, yea, or nay. Is it bad? Is it wrong? I mean, I don't—

SS: Okay. You just think it's inevitable.

SL: I kind of do. I do. I do think it's inevitable for there to be splits like that.

SS: Well, I mean, ACT UP lasted an intact way longer than most organizations do.

SL: Mm-hmm, yeah, and had this lasting impact, for sure. But, anyway, so that's my thought about that. It may not be as helpful as you had wanted.

SS: That's okay. Do you have anything you want to ask, Jim, or James? Because I only have one more question.

JH: I'm trying – have you seen “Target City Hall” recently, the tape?

SL: No.

JH: Oh, okay, because, you know, there's that sequence where you're being filmed after the release from jail.

SL: Me?

JH: Yeah, you among with Catherine and Lola [Flash], and I just wondered if you had.

SL: So I haven't seen it. I don't know if I've ever seen it, or not in many years, so am I very celebratory in it or happy?

JH: Yeah. All of you are.

SL: Yeah, it was like—I mean, it was definitely like this victorious victory dance. I mean, we were in jail. We got out of jail. We were okay. We were safe, and

out and our friends were there. We took and put our bodies on the line, and got hauled in and it was—and people were there. I think one of the things, if you talk about like Prison Abolition Movement, in terms of what's happening now in terms of prison abolition and this idea that nobody should walk out of prison alone, nobody who's released should be—if you want to do some work of, like, help men when people walk out, there should be people there greeting them. And people are released, and if people have maxed out a sentence, they're just released. There's nothing, you know. They don't have any resources at all, and what would it mean, like, to be there for people? Because that's a big part of it. We were not alone and there was so much legal organizing and so much, like, support. Yeah, it was—I mean, I remember being really happy that we got out.

SS: So I only have one more question. Is there anything we haven't covered that you—I see that you have a little thing under there.

SL: Oh, my little—I did my little notes. Okay. So let me see.

JW: When you were talking about disability, I was thinking that Harry Weider was always an active member of ACT UP, sitting right up front.

SL: Crutch user.

JW: So it was always a part. We did those two big demonstrations on national healthcare.

SL: Right, but that's not necessarily the Disability Rights Movement and having a visible disabled person. I mean, AIDS is disabling. There's something in the disability community called TAB for people who are nondisabled, which stands for temporarily able-bodied, so that everybody was—we're all temporarily able-bodied kind

of concept. You know, here I am, walking up to the sixth floor of your apartment, and what would it mean if that was not something that was not possible for you to do.

01:15:00 And it's not about individuals. That's the thing. It's not about just one person who is there who's disabled who is able to, like, make it up the steps to the Center before the ramp was there. It's where's the homophobia in the Disability Rights Movement, where's able-ism and this idea of normal, the idea of pretty, the idea of beauty, the idea of youthfulness, the able-bodiedness is so present, and certainly present still in all popular culture, but certainly something that's been in gay culture. And what does it mean, you know, if you don't have all your limbs, if you—whatever it might be, this idea of scars and beauty. And there was such a clone beauty, you know, it was a different one in the eighties than it was in the seventies, but it was this clone beauty, the leather jackets and the cigarettes. Oh, my god, like, everybody smoked. It was like we're all sitting there smoking in a Healthcare Movement. And then now, like, people with AIDS are dying of cancers. I mean, that's what happening, right? We have all these other things that are going on.

So I think that you asked about the Disability Rights Movement. So there's ways in which just the connections weren't really made that would have made both movements stronger, and I think homophobia within the Disability Rights Movement was present, and AIDS phobia within the Disability Rights Movement. But, you know, all these fights for people to be diagnosed to count for SSDI, that's about things that the Disability Rights Movement fought for, you know.

The American with Disabilities Act, that didn't just happen either. It was you when you talked about how just people said, "Oh, it just happened, and suddenly

came around.” That’s not how it happened, and that’s not how the Americans With Disabilities Act happened, so we don’t know kind of part of that history where it came from and we didn’t link, and this was really a missed opportunity.

And I think also people with hemophilia, like, that was another place around a missed link, and, you know, Ryan White was a kid with hemophilia. And so Ryan White is the name for the funding still to this day that is the federal funding around HIV services, and Ryan White was someone with hemophilia, and hemophilia was all about pharmaceutical industry profits, because the plasma and the blood was all about pharmaceutical industries taking—basically going into poor communities to get people to donate blood and plasma, knowing for, you know, \$50, and then they mix, like, millions of people’s blood and plasma for an injection for someone with hemophilia. And so that’s why, like, 90 percent of people with hemophilia were infected at a certain point in time, and how were they connecting? That movement was definitely—their leadership was not connecting with the AIDS Movement.

So that’s one example, but I just think there’s many that are about able-ism and about able-bodied people fearing disability and fearing bodily difference and fearing using a cane and fearing using crutches and fearing having a body that is not well in a way that says to somebody who uses crutches or uses a cane or has a body that is not well, “If I were you, I’d kill myself.”

SS: But also they wouldn’t.

JW: That’s why we smoke.

SL: They wouldn’t kill themselves?

SS: Yeah.

SL: But as an expression of invalidation, that is wrapped up with, like, they wouldn't, and they would fucking want somebody to have changed the laws and the policies and the ramps so that they could get around and that they could get into places and they could get a job and they could have food and they could have healthcare. They would want that. And so that's one of the struggles with the larger AIDS Movement. But when I think about something like TAG that stayed very focused, very focused and very effective, and, okay, they're scientists doing what you want to do. So that's one thing.

And then there was a thing about the March for Women's Lives. So here's a thing. One year—this was a way that ACT UP—actually, March for Women's Lives—I wrote “Crown Heights,” but I'm not sure if it was Crown Heights riots or it was some other event that happened where some, you know, police killing of a person of color in the outer boroughs. There's just so many of them. Or something, some racialized, racist event that happened in the outer boroughs and that ACT UP was able to mobilize the next day and have fifty people there or a hundred people there. There was something about we had this ability to mobilize, all of this pre-Internet, all of this pre-smartphones and cell phones and that our phone trees and, you know, how we could mobilize people because we were a community that activated.

So the March for Women's Lives was also in 1989, I believe, and it was—maybe it was '90, but in Washington, D.C., big demonstration about, choice, rights to choice, and I was involved. I was organizing the buses. And it was, again, no computers, stuff, you know, like everybody had to come and sign up for the bus and pay the money for the bus, and I would then know how many buses we needed. It's a sign, you know.

00:20:00 You've got to have space for everybody. And I remember how people were so into it, and I was so excited that I was involved in bringing all these men to this March for Women's Lives. And I spent so much time on, like, the math of, like, enough seats and stuff.

And then we get there and we're this force, because ACT UP was so theatrical and so good-looking. Like, we looked good as a unit, and I felt really proud to have ACT UP at the March for Women's Lives, like that just felt—and that's something that I helped to bring by organizing that.

SS: That's great.

SL: Yeah, I don't know. Yeah, those were a couple of my—those were my notes.

SS: So our final question is, looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you feel was its biggest disappointment?

SL: I guess I didn't get to all the ends of all your interviews to have practiced that one and being able to—greatest achievement and greatest disappointment. Oh, man. Well, I think that one thing about its greatest achievement was—when I was in California just two weeks ago and I saw Bettina Aptheker speak, and she was involved in founding the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s at UC Berkeley, and she talked about the start of the Free Speech Movement. What the Free Speech Movement was, was the president of the University of California wasn't allowing any of the students to speak on campus and to speak about peace, Peace Movement on campus, like you couldn't cross this property line and speak. And so they did all this stuff to say, "No, that's bullshit. This is public property. This is a state university, and we are going to do that," and ways

in which they did and how she was followed around by the FBI and all these different, like, really intense sort of threats around repression and fighting back against that. And she talked about how that movement moved chapter by chapter all across the country to all these different colleges, because it was a student movement, and it moved all across the country. And she said, “And that was the end of McCarthyism.” That was the beginning of the end of McCarthyism.

And so I feel like ACT UP was—I wonder what it was the end or the beginning of was, but it also marked the transition. There’s something that it marked in the end of—I’ve watched *Mad Men*, and *Mad Men* is now moving into the seventies more, and it’s, like, what was happening this—I guess it was—well, in 1980, it’s Reagan. So in 1980 we have, like, capitalism be the religion of the United States, and it was like a way to start fighting capitalism in a way and really recognizing Big Pharma and the Stock Exchange, and the government is all complicit in this one sort of way that I think that ACT UP was one of many things that sort of shed light on that, like held up a mirror to that in really in a lot of ways was, like, this is what kills. Greed kills. Greed, indifference, capitalism kills. So that, I think, was, I would like to say, is a really great accomplishment as being part of that movement.

I don’t know. They’re hard questions, to have to say the greatest and the—

SS: Or one of them.

SL: Yeah. So anyway, I really think about an era, like, it really changed, when we think about the mid eighties and what is happening now, what was happening in the eighties and how we were all so devastated by just Reagan, Reaganism, like, just this

notion of what was considered valuable was not people and us, and certainly not queer people and gay people or trans people or poor people or artists. So that was an accomplishment that I feel really powerful about.

And I think one of the disappointments might have been we didn't heal enough trauma in our own community. That would have sustained us. If there was a way, again, in some stuff around disability and some stuff around love, like, the trauma that we—there was a trauma of war, this real trauma of wartime that people have not healed from. And so, like, the PTSD of that era, the trauma that now it comes out in anger, it comes out in isolation, it comes out in depression, and it comes out in hopelessness, and that's trauma that we didn't intentionally say, "We are going to help each other heal beyond just getting a medication that will stop the virus."

SS: So if we wanted to do that now, what would we do?

01:25:00

SL: I want to say we'd slow things down a little bit. We would slow down. We would not just have—you know, I think social media is really great, but it's fast, it's quick, it's not nuanced, it's not live, you know. You don't want to do this over Skype. You'll, like, be and sit in the same room with me, and we need to sit in the same spaces with people. This is why I'm into individual interventions. I like sitting with people. And how do we make space to be sat with? And I think the need is just really, really great.

I was talking to some people out in California. They've been talking about the anniversary of ACT UP, the twenty-fifth anniversary or whatever these different anniversary events, and what we do we want to fight? What healthcare issue do we want to bring up now? I said, "Well, what is still our healthcare issue?" And

certainly there is still HIV and AIDS, but what else is our healthcare issue? Is trauma our healthcare issue? Is surviving trauma our health—because that's something that we all have the same type of thing. Is trauma, grief, loss, is that one of our issues, along with poverty and racism and this police state that is now, like, just so powerful and that people don't even question it, and young people today who say, "You didn't have trans people in your thing," but they also don't think twice about having GPS on their phone, and they don't think twice about all this privacy stuff, and they don't—you know. Just that we are provocateurs, how we had provocateurs in our movement, and how there's people out there doing that now, still. Cops in Baltimore are dressed as protestors. And just making some linkages for that with room and space for really recognizing trauma.

JH: Do you think it would have been possible to deal with the trauma then?

SL: No, because you're in it. You're right in it. And so, I mean, some people perhaps did. But even just, you know, that's where some spiritual leadership comes in, or some grounded leadership comes in, just a way to—I mean, it is providing some space and compassion for ourselves and others. I mean, that's really what this is. But really for ourselves, like, you know, you're so mission-driven, urgency, with lives, lives, lives, this urgent, urgent, urgent, and then that's all in your body. That's all still here. That's with you, unless you do some healing work around it. And I believe that that absolutely can happen.

SS: We've noticed that—or Jim realized—we started interviewing fifteen years ago, the trauma hadn't really kicked in yet. Now we're getting people who are really in trouble.

SL: Yup.

SS: ACT UP people.

SL: And I've love to see that, you know. I mean, GMHC probably is targeting much younger people now. How do we target folks who are talking about the trauma?

SS: This generation, yeah.

SL: Yeah, exactly. I'd love to talk about that as a next project. I want to thank you for doing this. This is amazing.

SS: Sure. Thank you so much. Thanks, Sam. We're done.