

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

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

Interviewee: **Ming-Yuen S. Ma**

Interview Number: **007**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **January 16, 2003**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Ming-Yuen S. Ma Interview
January 15, 2003

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

MING-YUEN S. MA: Okay. My name is Ming Ma. I am 35. Today's date is the 15th of January, 2003, and we are at my house at xxxx xxxxxx xxxxx, in Los Angeles, Silver Lake.

SS: Ming, do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS?

MM: I don't, but I suspect it was probably when I was probably – you know I would say, high school – maybe junior or senior year. Probably before I entered college, I would say, because I entered college somewhere in the mid-'80s.

SS: Where did you go to high school?

MM: I went to – I went to two high schools. I went to a semi-private religious school in Hong Kong, which is probably not where I heard the word AIDS. And then, I went three years to a boarding school in Connecticut.

SS: And, was there an open, gay conversation in that school?

MM: Not at all. In fact, there was some pretty bad stuff happening there. But, in one particular case – I'll just give you the abbreviated version, but in one particular case, I was actually singled out – me and another boy – was actually singled out, and essentially, pulled out of classes and interrogated for the whole day, separately – which, I came out of it relatively unscathed. I mean, I basically just – I was pretty uncooperative, I put up a pretty strong front. They couldn't get a whole lot out of me, but – essentially what happened was that it completely destroyed my relationship with this other boy which, at the time, was pretty undefined, right? You know, it's one of those things. He

was younger – one year younger, and troubled already. So, he was already in trouble for drugs and stuff like that. So, what happened was that A) he – after that interrogation, he would not talk to me, has not talked to me since; and B) he tried to commit suicide twice, so his family pulled him out of the school, and that’s the last I saw of him. So no, I wouldn’t say my school is very –

SS: So, what were they asking you?

MM: “What’s your relationship? Are you gay?” They [did] this whole thing where they were trying to be your friend, but actually, you know – and it’s like different people, too, right? It’s kind of like – I was watching “24” last night – it’s kind of like one of those. Like, we’re your friend, we just want to know what’s going on. But in actuality, I think their intentions were not friendly at all.

SS: Do you think you could have been expelled or something?

MM: No, I don’t think so. But they can make, they could make my life difficult, which they did. But then it kind of became a game. It’s sort of like – I guess it’s sort of what my personality is like – in a situation like that it would be, okay, let’s play this game. So I had good grades. I got into the university that I wanted to get into – life wasn’t great the last two years I was there, but, shit happens – you just deal with it. So, yeah.

SS: So, then you went to college, and was there an open conversation about AIDS at your university?

MM: A little bit, because I went to college in New York. I went to Columbia. I would say, by osmosis – yes, right? Because you’re in New York City, you’re in this area where this is very much affected, and I did, eventually end up becoming involved in

ACT UP through something that happened at my school. But, I wouldn't say that – I mean, it probably ended at something like, your freshman year orientation someone comes in one evening, and you're supposed to sit in this common room – which no one ever goes to – and talk about sex. Which I don't think that's very effective, right? But, in my last – well, a couple of things, I think – my first two years in college, I didn't really go to classes that much. I was mostly hanging out in the East Village in the clubs. So – it was sort of that environment.

SS: Which clubs did you go to?

MM: Oh, God – the Pyramid was probably the first one. The World – you mean when I was in college?

SS: Yeah.

MM: Area – all those places. I don't remember.

SS: And, were you having sex with people that you met?

MM: No, no – too busy hanging out with drag queens, being fabulous – no time for sex. There's also part of that mentality, too. It was much more about kind of like being fabulous and that kind of nightclub scenario – so, no.

SS: So, when did AIDS become a reality in your life?

MM: Well I think the most direct contact I had with it was probably when I met – I was at an artist colony in New England. My last two years of college, I – that's kind of how I did my work, because you can't really be – there was no art major, undergraduate art major at Columbia, so I kind of wormed my way into the graduate program, and one of the professors there kind of took me under her wing, so I was kind of – a bit of a prodigy, sort of situation. And I was hanging out with these graduate MFA

students and kind of making work that way. But in the summer I would go to these artist colonies – junior artist colonies, in New England, and I remember at Skowhegan I actually met someone who was working there – this guy named John Tucker, who used to be the manager at the Pyramid.

And, we became friends, and then he told me that his lover had died of AIDS. And then through him, I met a whole group of queer, gay men, gay women, artists and some of them were people with AIDS. And I would say the most important person I met in this group was David Wojnarowicz. And you know, in a lot of different ways, I think David – both as a person and as an artist – had a very deep impact on me and sort of how I've developed.

SS: So, when you started talking – friends who had AIDS – how did that impact on you, personally? Did you feel threatened?

MM: No, no, not really. I mean, I think, it made it more real, to be able to attach a person to something as opposed to like, statistics. Because we all knew, at that time, that this was a problem, and that it's not a problem that is going to be resolved quickly. So, I think that my introduction to AIDS was personal one, in a sense that I knew people that had AIDS or had been affected by it, and that's – no, I don't think I was threatened by it, no. I don't think I, maybe – I don't think I ever felt that threatened by it. I think it was more of a reality – because it was a reality in my day to day life that I didn't – I suppose I didn't have that sort of paranoia phase, or something. Anyway, maybe we can clarify that later.

SS: Okay. So, how did you get to ACT UP?

MM: Well, let's see. I actually – I'd known about ACT UP for a long time, before I was actually involved. I would say, the last two years of college – and this was concurrent with me through John knowing these gay artists who – some of them are PWAs. So, it really sort of became more and more of an issue in my life. And the sort of most concrete connection was through a group called Art Positive. My last year at Columbia, I got involved with this group of students who wanted to do this display. They wanted to do a show, basically, but there was a show that was kind of in a public space. There were these big windows. They're very – it was like 15 feet by five or six feet – kind of windows in the hallway, sort of in a public hallway, and these students wanted to do something either for World AIDS Day or maybe – it was probably for World AIDS Day – that would be my guess.

Tape I
00:10:00

SS: What year is this, about?

MM: '88, '87? Something like that. And they invited outside people. So, Art Positive was one of those groups. They also – the group, itself, did something. So I was involved with making the display with the group. They're all – you know – they're all students. I would say the majority of them were queer identified. And well of course at that time, the word "queer" wasn't really used in the way we're using – I'm using it. And so, when the show happened, I met the guys from Art Positive, and that was sort of the direct connection.

But thinking back now, before that time, I had spent – I'd studied abroad in London, and when I was in London, I had also met some artists there who were involved in ACT UP London. So it was kind of like a – I guess it was sort of like a progressive – I met this group of artists in New York. And then when I was in London, I met some other

people – artists, cultural theorist type people that were involved. And then – so I got involved through this exhibition. And it was – I decided [that] when I graduate, I want to work with Art Positive. That was my last semester. So, maybe it was 1990. And I started going to their meetings. Then through that, I started going to the larger ACT UP meetings.

SS: Now, what was Art Positive?

MM: Art Positive was an affinity group that basically did very similar things to Gran Fury. They do graphics, art related activities, that complement – basically I suppose the propaganda wing of ACT UP – the different propaganda groups.

SS: Who were some of the people?

MM: Aldo Hernandez, Ken Chu, who I became close friends with – we were roommates. We were talking earlier – he's one of the few people from ACT UP New York that I still talk to and have a relationship with, now. And who else? There were a couple of guys. It was mostly guys. Oh – who are the two girls who are in – Lola ... Lola?

SS: Lola Flasch.

MM: Lola Flasch and Julie [Tolentino] – yes, they were involved as well, yeah. And a couple of other guys – I don't remember their names.

SS: And what were some of your projects?

MM: You know, I don't think we actually did – I don't think I actually ended up doing anything with Art Positive. They were sort of my conduit, and once I'd joined ACT UP New York – the larger group – then my activities really changed, because most of my activities with ACT UP New York were not art-related.

SS: So first you went to a meeting of Art Positive, and then you came to the large ACT UP meeting?

MM: Through that, yes.

SS: So, what was it like to come to your first ACT UP meeting?

MM: I don't remember.

SS: Okay. Well, what made you come back?

MM: Come back?

SS: Once you came to ACT UP, what made you stay?

MM: Different things. I think that, I think a sort of important progression was really being aware of it, and being aware of the injustices, and being aware of the kind of – being aware of how AIDS and HIV was affecting this community of people that I was a part of. Like, the kind of things that David talks about in his art and his writing – that kind of anger, that kind of sense of injustice.

But, I think going to ACT UP allowed me to transform that personal anger into something that was collective, into something that – to actually, get off your ass and do something about it. I think that was really the impulse. And I think at that time, I felt that that was the right thing to do – that that was something I needed to do. In fact, when I got out of college, I was supposed to come here to Los Angeles, to go to graduate school. I had gotten into Cal Arts and I wanted to go to art school, even though I wasn't an art major. But, I'd pretty much committed to wanting to become an artist. And, I actually delayed that. I got into Cal Arts. I was supposed to come here. I actually delayed that. I stayed in New York. I worked in the art world. I worked for artists. I worked for some alternative spaces, and to do activism. So that was a very important

thing for me, at the time – to really get involved, and really sort of do something. I don't know if that would have been possible when I was still at school. Part of it might have been geography – being on the Upper West Side versus being in the East Village, versus being in Brooklyn.

Because, about – how long did I stay? I stayed for about a year – a year and a half after. And in that year, year and a half, my circle had really sort of changed. So, the first sort of group of people that I know outside of the college environment were activists – were AIDS activists, queer activists, Asian Pacific Islander activists. So, that really sort of became my first community, since I got out of college.

SS: So, what were some of the activities you participated in?

MM: Most of what I did with ACT UP New York was through the Asian Pacific Islander AIDS activists' caucus.

SS: And how did that start?

MM: I don't know if I'm saying it right [LAUGHS]. It's like all these acronyms, you know, I don't remember anymore. I think it started more or less spontaneously. I think that there were very few Asian Pacific Islanders in ACT UP at the time. And, given the size of ACT UP – really, you're talking about a handful. But some of them were very visible – people like Lei Chou, people like – I'm trying to remember. I mean, a couple of things happened at the same time. I joined ACT UP. So, we were sort of thinking about these issues. It's kind of – it's one of those things where I think something just – there wasn't a really a master plan, but it kind of just came up, sort of very – sort of organic, I suppose. 'Cause at the same time, when the API caucus was active, we also were seeing a resurgence of activism in – amongst the lesbian, gay Asian

Pacific Islander community in New York. So, we have groups like GAPIMNY – Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York, that essentially was – it might have existed before, but it was essentially organized – there was a lot of activity happening at that time. There was sort of a revitalization of ALOEC – Asian Lesbians of East Coast – there was really sort of this energy that was happening in the community. I think that the AIDS activism was a part of that. I mean, some of the results of that – of those activities was the formation of the first agency that catered to APIs in the tri-state area.

SS: What was that?

MM: APICHA – Asian Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS. And so, I worked on setting up the agency.

SS: Let's just go back a little bit.

MM: Right.

SS: Why do you think there was suddenly all this energy for Asian gay people to organize?

MM: I don't know. I think it was time. I mean, I think there was stuff that was happening. It's one of those things. I think that – on the sort of art theory end, this was also the time when Richard Fung was doing very, very influential work in both production and theory and sort of talk about sexuality. I think that there was a generational thing. I think that queer APIs of my generation – we are probably more privileged. We have examples, like ACT UP and Queer Nation – even though these are predominantly white organizations, in terms of just how the energy and the tactics of these organizations was very markedly different from what was available, which was set up by older generations at the time – which are more subdued and more, sort of social –

things like Asians & Friends and stuff like that. So I think that you know, in that sense, the sort of – the energy, the stance, the tactics of ACT UP – the image of ACT UP was influential in that sense, but it's complicated, because I think also one of the things I remember about us being involved in ACT UP is race politics, which was a very – especially towards the end – was a very divisive issue. I mean, there's always a problem there, but I think as more people of color decided to join and as the pandemic itself transformed, that it really became a very big problem and so part of being in API Caucus was also negotiating those issues – sometimes on a personal level, and sometimes on an organizational level.

SS: Okay, let's try to go through some of them.

MM: Okay.

SS: Okay, so you ran an API Caucus of ACT UP – were you also in any Asian gay groups – separate from ACT UP?

MM: At different times, I was involved with GAPIMNY. I was involved with setting up APICHA, which – when APICHA became its own organization, I was on its first board of directors. So I was involved in setting up that agency.

SS: So, a group like GAPIMNY – what were their issues?

MM: They were pretty basic. They were basically about creating a safe space for both the gay and Asian communities for gay men – gay and bi-sexual men.

SS: So if some people decided to join a group exclusively that would be creating safe space, but you were willing to be in an unsafe space – and yet, you were one of the people who was willing to work in a large organization.

MM: Well, GAPIMNY was not political in the direct action sense. And I was very focused on direct action, politically. I mean, there are times when that met, right? Like one of the times was when – the whole *Miss Saigon* protest, which was very late in, sort of my short, in my – how do you say? That was right before I left New York.

The *Miss Saigon* movement – basically, *Miss Saigon* is a musical brought – that was coming to Broadway from England. It's produced by a very high powered musical producer, Cameron Macintosh – who's British – you're talking about someone with a lot of capital, a lot of power behind him, right? He produced *Cats* – all those big Broadway musicals. So it was supposed to be a big thing for it to come to Broadway. In fact, I think it ended up being the most profitable musical in history. So, it's certainly – it was something that made a lot of money. And it coming to New York – to Broadway – from I think, the West End in London, [it] had a lot fanfare, had a lot of – it was really a big event.

But, what happened was Lambda Legal – is it Education and Legal Defense? I forgot the full name. Lambda, which is a lesbian gay civil rights organization, they decided to use – actually Lambda and the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York, both – decided to use *Miss Saigon* as a fund-raiser, which means that they will have a performance before the show opens for their donors – and so on and so forth. And, this was basically done without a whole lot of thought to the Asian Pacific Islander members of the community because – two things – there were two main controversies, and they're connected and related – in relationship to *Miss Saigon*.

The first controversy – which was actually not something that, sort of the first wave of protest was not something that I worked on – was the use of Jonathan Pryce as

Tape I
00:25:00

one of the main actors who's supposed to be a Eurasian pimp. And since Jonathan Pryce is pretty much just, you know, [a] white guy, right? He's not part-Asian. They had put prosthetic make-up on him to make him look more "Asian." And in the history of representation, this is definitely like going back to the – what we call yellow face, right? It's a very derogatory, distorted representation of Asians in the media. So that was the first controversy. And that was primarily spearheaded by Asian American actors and Asian American theater professionals who actually wanted the roles in *Miss Saigon*. That was huge employment for Asian and Asian American actors. I think they ended up importing a lot people from Asia itself, so there was that kind of dynamic there, too. So, the Asian American theater people actually wanted the jobs. They were sort of protesting using – that there are so few roles for Asian American actors. Now that there's this big role, why are you casting a white man in this role? And why is he – why are you putting him in yellow face? And that really didn't happen – other than bringing awareness in the media, that really didn't have a whole lot of effect because essentially, what Cameron Macintosh said was, okay fine – we won't come. Fuck you. Which means like a lot of money, a lot of revenue – the sort of capital machine behind the musical – was pulled from Broadway. And so essentially, what happened was the larger theater organizations – like Actors Equity, for instance – they basically backed down. So it's like – this is the big picture, and here are these small – again – group of Asian American actors. We have to see the big picture, we need the revenue.

And that didn't really – he basically just threw his weight around and not a whole lot came out of it, other than reporting in the media about these issues. So, I think that's valuable. But what was the problem – actually, what was the main problem for those of

us who ended up organizing the second wave of protest, was the fact that here you have an organization like Lambda, who's supposed to be fighting for our civil rights as being gay men, using *Miss Saigon* – which essentially, is a re-hashing of the *Madame Butterfly* story – with all its problematic politics. And on top of that, a glorification and romanticization of the Vietnam war. Very problematic in terms of how it deals with representations of Asians – very overtly, in the sort of Jonathan Pryce, yellow face debacle – but also in terms of what the piece is about – all that kind of stuff.

That a civil rights organization would use something like that as a fundraiser – that was really the problem. And that problem goes much deeper than the acting, the job/make-up thing – even though – okay, if you're an actor, you have to work and it's very hard for Asian American actors to get work. It still is. So when that was brought to Lambda, they essentially said, “Yeah, we see your point, but were going to do it anyway. We need the money, and we'll use the money to do really good things.” So, it sort of became this – two things. The protest wasn't – it wasn't like they said no, and then we decided we were protesting. It was a whole process. There was a lot of negotiation. A lot more people joined the debate. It sort of ended up becoming this – I mean, demonstrating in front of the theater was sort of a last resort. And then really, it was the result of negotiating with Lambda over and over again, and them refusing to budge.

The Center, to their credit, did back down. But this was after those concerns were raised. But Lambda refused to back down. I think some of it was personality issues of [the] people who were running these organizations. And a lot of stuff happened. I mean, I remember – my memory's a little fuzzy. I forget whether Audre Lorde refused – she was supposed to get an award from Lambda and she refused because of this. I don't

know if it was before or after the protest. Some of the women – women of color – who were working at Lambda resigned, you know. They were trying to work from within to get the organization to back down, but they didn't, so they resigned. So, a lot of stuff happened. This whole thing just kind of built.

What was really amazing was that this was really one of the first grassroots protest movements that was spearheaded by lesbian and gay Asian Pacific Islanders. And it was a really wide coalition. It was everybody from Queer Nation to Youth for Philippine Action. It's a very, very wide – a lot of different people of color groups; queer activists groups. So there's that sort of – we like to joke that that's our Stonewall. And so as a result, what happened was that there were two protests – one, the night of the fundraiser, and then one – both on Broadway – a couple of days later at the official opening of the musical – which of course, I don't think realistically it actually made a dent on their sales or whatnot. But it went on to become one of the top – the top grossing musical in history. I think [that protest] was very important for the people that were involved in the movement because it really was a first, in terms of pulling together this kind of coalition. It was the first in terms of visibility and leadership.

SS: How did the API Caucus of ACT UP get started?

MM: Yeah that's a good question, too. I think one of things was that when we were doing organizing, we'd get drunk a lot. You know, the killing of the brain cells, really. I don't remember.

SS: You mean, after meetings?

MM: Oh yeah.

SS: Where did you used to go?

MM: We'd go to El Sombrero a lot, and you [could] have these huge margaritas, which I swear they put drugs in. And they're five bucks – [drink] two and you're like – you don't remember how you get home.

SS: And then who did you hang out with? Who was your posse?

MM: API caucus. We worked together, but we hang out together, too. So, it was a very tight – that kind of group. It was a small group. People who were active were Lei Chou, Yukari Yanagino, Lisa Stur, Kathy [Chou]. It was a very small group. We had a couple of people like – some people would come and go. I mean, it's kind of terrible because like, whenever we see a new Asian at ACT UP meetings – and we spot them, too. You're in this huge Cooper Union, like 500 people, and you're just like – we try to involve them, but not with a whole lot of success. I think A) because we're a very tight group and B) so there was that kind of dynamics, but B) I think also that a lot of the Asians weren't coming through. There weren't people who were coming – like there were sort of people coming in to check it out, and I think we kind of scared them.

SS: Why?

MM: Well, I think it has to do with – most of these were men, they were Asian gay men. And, they probably came to ACT UP meetings – I think a lot of them probably came because hey, ACT UP had sexy gay white men in little cut-off denim shorts and combat boots, getting arrested. That's probably the main draw. That was probably part of the draw for me, too. I mean, you know. And to then – to go to the meeting, you're completely nervous. You're a person of color in this huge room full of angry white people, right? And then to be approached by these crazy Asian activists – I think that

might be a little much. I mean, part of it has to do with the larger dynamics of race and the gay community, as well.

SS: Were there people – were there Asian people in ACT UP who stayed in ACT UP, but didn't join the caucus?

MM: Very few. No, not really. No. There might have been one or two people in the Treatment – people who were very serious about treatment issues, because we didn't really deal with treatment issues. I mean at the time there was no culturally specific education targeting Asian Pacific Islanders in the tri-state area. And so a lot of our work as a caucus was no so much like, demonstrations. And we weren't even there. That's kind of one of the things about – I think it was interesting about ACT UP as a group, because you have these – the majority that's of a certain place, they're pressuring drug companies, they're dealing with the media. I think a lot of the groundwork, the education was already done with GMHC – with sort of the first wave of community-based organizing in the gay community which – the gay white community essentially is what we're talking about.

But for a lot of people of color groups, [and] for women, that wasn't the case. So, there was this sort of tension, right? Because the epidemic at that time was very – affected different groups in different ways. I think that for us, the important thing to do was to have an agency. There was no agency. Some agencies claimed to be – to service Asian Pacific Islanders, but they don't. And to get the word out. Education was an activist strategy – it was a key activist strategy.

SS: How did you know that the Asian gay community was not doing –

MM: Because there was nothing out there.

SS: Okay, so can you be specific?

MM: There was, there's no educational material out there. Well, I think it's a complex situation. Obviously, a lot of them speak English and they can read the brochures that GMHC put out. But – I mean, the most superficial, the most basic level of that discussion was language, right? We want – I mean, just as the same – you want English and Spanish and information, you wanted other languages. But then you start coming up against this wall saying, “Oh, when are we going to stop?” And now it has to be like, English, Spanish, Tagalog, Chinese, you know. Then, people just –

SS: Who did you go to?

SS: The first stage being getting things in other languages.

MM: Well, raising awareness – right?

SS: But, who – tell me a name of a person that you would go to with this argument?

MM: We went to, like everyone – we went to GMHC, we went to – I forgot – you know, the Board of Health.

SS: Now wait, how did GMHC – how did the meeting go?

MM: I don't know if there was a meeting. I think essentially it was that they really don't have – I mean, we were looking at the materials that were available that – again, sort of backtracking a little bit, I think the issue first obviously is language. But I think language, really, is just sort of the scratching of the surface. It's not so much – I think a large, pretty large portion of the Asian Pacific Islander community in New York, probably can read English to a certain degree. Maybe, you're talking about very, very

recent immigrants, who are not so fluent in English. But really, I think the case is how you're talking to your intended audience, right? The mode of address, the manner in which – I mean, is someone going – is the brochure the effective way of approaching some Chinese grandmother? I'm just being facetious, you know what I'm saying. So, it really is – cultural specificity is a much larger – it's much more about approach, it's much more about mode of address, it's much more about who is doing the educating.

I mean none of this stuff was being addressed. I mean, the most basic level you have is language. I think the whole of New York AIDS Hotline had one Asian language speaker, and she was Chinese I remember [LAUGHS]. We had this silly little – I mean, I don't know if it was – if it could be called an action, but we did this silly little action, where we had people call and ask for information in Asian languages. But, they had this one person – this lady – she was very nice. I think she speaks Cantonese, Mandarin – that's it. Right? So, you really start talking – so basically, what we're talking about is that there is this assumption that AIDS and HIV was not an issue in Asian Pacific Islander communities. Part of it was because of – this is something that is so ingrained – the degree that one of the things we were dealing, was – under the CDC definition, you're talking about black, white, Hispanic and other. And “other” is like Asians, Native Americans – we also work with Native American AIDS activists on this, Middle Eastern peoples, peoples of mixed race – we're all lumped in this same group. The bias is on the level of gathering the statistics. So of course, there's no statistics. So, you don't even know, right? It's one of those things – probably like very, very early in the gay community, it's also word of mouth, right? But, with Asian Pacific Islander communities, you have the added barriers of culture, added barriers of a lot of Asian

Pacific Islander – I mean, let's just talk about Asian Pacific Islander gay men – a lot of them are closeted, a lot of them don't feel comfortable talking about their status, you know? What if their families find out? That kind of stuff, right? And it's not like the gay community is that – and it's still not as – friendly to non-white people. So, there's that sort of very specific dynamic. So, I think all this stuff played into this absence of attention, right? Which, the most basic form was manifested in the fact that there was no education targeted towards Asian Pacific Islanders.

SS: So the API Caucus of ACT UP was the only advocacy group trying to transform the situation of AIDS education?

MM: No, we weren't, no.

SS: Who else was?

MM: We – there are a couple of things. There were groups that were claiming that they were doing the work, but they were either doing it on a very superficial level – translating their brochures into different languages, but not really questioning whether the methodology of the brochure is going to be effective in the community. And we were also – like I was saying before – the API Caucus also was working with some other groups, such as GAPIMNY, such as ALOEC, such as – what was Suki Ports's organization called? Family Health Project? Suki Ports was really important in terms of setting up APICHA, but she was not in API Caucus. So, we were working with other activists in the community on this. We weren't the only ones, but we were part of a larger group of people that realized that this was really important, and that group's efforts eventually led to APICHA.

SS: Okay so I want to ask you – you mentioned three things, and I want to go through them sort of specifically. The language, the cultural specificity and who was doing the counseling. Let’s just start with the language issues – who were the main people producing AIDS education information at the time?

MM: Generally? Or, just targeting Asian Pacific Islanders?

SS: Generally.

MM: Probably GMHC, the government – the city, like the Health Department.

SS: And, were there any –

MM: Wait, there were also some of the more alternative types of information – I’m thinking – Needle Exchange was giving out information the government was not giving out. None of the – again, this is a very similar situation, isn’t it? It’s not that similar, actually. I take that back. But yet, here you have another group that is completely underserved in terms of just giving out lifesaving information, right? Sort of like, education as activism. So yeah, there were quite a number of – also GMHC was doing it in different ways and they were trying things like video and stuff like that. So, that would be – I would say like non-profit/community-based grassroots groups, and the Health Department.

SS: So did the API caucus actually go to groups and say, “We want you to produce material in other languages”?

MM: We might have gone to some groups. We talked – I think we talked mainly – what we did first was we looked, we researched, we just basically [were] trying to see if there was anything, and there was nothing. I think we talked to a couple of groups that said that they were doing this and said hey, this is not working, and here are

the reasons why. Oh, gosh. I don't remember talking to GMHC, but I suspect that we probably talked to them a little bit. There was this one organization, I think they're – either the Chinatown Health Clinic or something like that – I forgot. Yeah, I don't really remember. That's pretty much what I remember.

SS: Okay, so you weren't involved in any kind of translation or creating –

MM: Yeah, we did that, because there was no – basically there was no material out there. The material that was out there was very typical. A lot of it was very – how do you say? Stuff that was really – the information wasn't very good, accurate – it's old information. Some of it was very moralistic: "Don't have sex." That kind of stuff. So we did – we developed our own. So it was kind of interesting, because we're working within ACT UP, where we're doing this – it's just so not what a casual observer thinks ACT UP does, in terms of like, we weren't really organizing demonstrations or hanging banners from the Statue of Liberty. We were writing brochures.

But the thing is, I think, that we also were – in the sort of best of ACT UP tradition – we were doing it in a very creative way. We devised all these – I mean, some of them might have not worked as well, but we were doing stuff that was pretty fun and sexy, trying to get information out that way. And we went out to like bars and clubs where – one of the things we did was we worked with one of the bars where – rice bars, that supposedly catered to gay Asian men. It's one of those places where gay Asian men congregate.

SS: Which bar?

MM: Club 52 – we worked with them. I don't know if they're still around, but

–

SS: So, what would you do there?

MM: We did a lot of different things. Okay, a little bit of background information. A lot of these kinds of institutions – like so-called rice bars or Asian bars, you would think that they would be places where Asian gay men feel comfortable, and that's why they exist, right? But in reality, what actually happens in these places a lot of times is sort of a miniature, or a transposed version of what happens in say, Thailand or the Philippines. It's essentially – it's sexual tourism. Non-Asian gay men – predominantly white – who are interested or who have a sexual fetish for Asian men – for sort of the typical orientalist reasons – go to these places to pick up guys. And so essentially it's sort of like – macho dancer in New York – it's that kind of a situation. So, these places are very often not owned by Asian owners. And are not necessarily friendly towards any kind of activist activity, right? But, this place actually was. I mean, 52 was kind of unique I think, at the time, in the sense that it was owned by Asian – I think the owners were gay. It was owned by – it was Asian owned, and they were pretty open to us, doing some work there. So, we started out handing out information, but towards the end, we actually did these club event type things there. I remember, one time, we did this whole drag show kind of club thing, and we used it to hand out information. So it was kind of fun for us, too.

SS: And, how was it received?

MM: It was, actually – in terms of getting people there, it was packed and it was very good, and it was kind of like a good mixture I would say of both people that would go there normally, but also we were probably bringing in some of the ACT UP crowd. So yeah, it was pretty good.

SS: So, the Asian guys that would go to the 52 Club – how would they relate to people like you?

MM: Well it's not just one type of guys that would go there, right? So, there's – there would be definitely – from my previous description – I mean, that would definitely be the people that were only into white guys, who – again, this was – at the time you might not necessarily think that this is complex, but it is. It's a very complex thing. So – and again, you're talking about this community that really is just starting to come up. So, there's just really, just starting to be this critique. Well, maybe for this generation, let's put it that way, because I'm sure the older generation knows the dynamics and react to it in their own way.

But nonetheless, at the time, with this community, with this particular time in history, our examples – our reference was ACT UP and Queer Nation. So it was very in your face – very, sort of direct action, not apologetic – which, actually might not necessarily, in hindsight, be the best way. But nonetheless, that was the way at the time. And, so yeah, right. So, you definitely have that kind of – I'm going to call them old school, the ones who negotiate themselves within this power structure. For whatever reason. There would be a lot of different – we could all make nationality, immigration type status – [get those] kinds of factors involved, right? Like i.e.: if you're an undocumented immigrant, you are probably going to stay away from the activism that is going to get you arrested, right? Just as an example. You're going to keep pretty quiet for the most part, right? Try to get by.

So, there was some hostility. But, for the most part, I think because we didn't come in with – well, part of it might have been the appeal of ACT UP, as a group that

was seen in the media as this very sort of sexy group. Part of it was that we worked with drag performers. We worked with other groups like GAPIMNY, and stuff like that. So, that also has its own membership. So, those people also went. It really kind of was a very – it's a pretty mixed group, in terms of how people reacted. Some of them were our friends, some of them became our friends. Some of them were friendly. Some of them were sort of there, anyway. It's like, they're doing something new. Some of them might have been slightly hostile. But, I'd say it's a pretty –

SS: And what was their AIDS awareness?

MM: There was sort of a stratum of reactions. Again, I think you are talking about a spectrum. I think you're talking about – I mean, these are mostly gay men, right. I think people know about it, but you go from the very unaware – like, they haven't really seen any sort of information. They know, they hear about stuff. We were hearing stories, we were hearing some pretty scary stories. We were hearing stories, people who – illegal immigrants who contract AIDS, HIV, and basically are not getting any care at all. And either sort of dying alone, or they go home to die, and when they return they have to go – when their health fails, they go home to their own countries and essentially the families either don't take care of them, or don't know how to take care of them or there are no resources – that they go home and die – people who were disowned by their families.

We hear stuff. I mean, this is not stuff that's documented, but we hear this stuff, and we know that there's a problem. So there's that, and there are also people who are college educated, quite aware informationally. But, as we found out later – having the information doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to practice what we call “safer

sex.” And of course, safer sex is different things to different things for different people, too. So I think, when we were just beginning to realize that AIDS education was not just getting the information out there in the most culturally specific, aware way possible. I mean, that was already sophisticated, right? Because the most basic – it’s like, getting the information out there – brochures in a gazillion different languages. But all in the same format. That’s the most basic – well actually, the most basic is English. And then you have the brochures. And then you have these other kind of strategies. And then I think people are still talking about that now are the more environmental, psychological, cultural issues that people know that they – when they do this, it’s a very risky activity, but they still do it. Why? They’re aware, but they still choose to do it – so, how do you deal with that? We weren’t even there, at that time. We were just trying to get this information out there, to have it be available.

SS: So, back in the ACT UP era, what were some culturally specific points that you were trying to get across to the larger AIDS education community?

Tape II
00:20:00

MM: That culturally specific AIDS education is not just about translating the brochures. That it’s about approaches – it’s about mode of address, who is doing the education.

SS: But what were some specific approaches that you felt would be more appropriate?

MM: I think we did – we were trying to develop – for instance, even in our written – there were a couple things, I think, in terms of how you package the material. I remember one of the things that we started doing that got picked up by a lot of API AIDS organizations was, we would – I’ll just give you an example. We would put the

information – instead of giving them a brochure, we put the information in these red packets, which were sort of lucky money that you get during Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year. That’s one example, right? It’s kind of cute, it’s kind of – it’s disarming, right? So it could be something like that. It could be just identifying – how do you talk about things like sex and death and disease? There are very difficult, controversial subject matter. Talking about it directly might not be the best way. So developing a language that sort of talks – not around it, because we still get the information out, but a more circumspect, a more or less in-your-face type of address. In terms of in the literature. People that actually are doing the educating. We – we’re not the most diverse group, but – and, we realize that. So, I think our success was probably – in terms of getting the information out there, was probably with younger – like college kids, like the guys in the club, stuff like that. So, I think – I would say those would be probably the three things that comes to mind.

SS: Now, what was the relationship between the Caucus and the larger ACT UP?

MM: Well, I would say that our closest allies were probably the other people of color groups. So the Latino/Latina Caucus, the Black Caucus. You know, as I was explaining to you earlier, we also worked with other people of color, AIDS organizations – like the Native American [?] outside – who are not involved in ACT UP. I think there was a general perception in the community that ACT UP was a white organization [and] some people of color groups (and there are different degrees, right?) are quite wary of ACT UP, and I think – well, I suppose one of the things that we can claim credit for is

that we did build some of those bridges in the communities. And, there were individuals, also.

SS: Were there things that you brought to the floor that were rejected, or that you faced opposition to?

MM: I don't think it's so much of rejection, but I think it's that – again, because where we're at, the kind of work that we're doing is not the same as what the larger group is doing. We're not planning – we try sometimes to hook, to relate the larger actions to [our] specific interest. So that's one way we could participate in the larger – integration, that could be something.

SS: Do you know what specific action your Caucus raised?

MM: Oh God, I don't remember. There was one, but I don't remember what action it was. It was in Washington, too.

SS: And when you would try to come up with a theme relating to a larger action that would bring out the issues of your Caucus, was that well received by the larger group? Or, did they not understand the importance?

MM: Basically, what we were doing – it's one of those things where I think that – no, there was no opposition, but there was no enthusiasm, either. We were really sort of left to do our own thing, but I don't think there was any hindrance. But because what we were doing was not necessarily in sync with the larger image of the larger interest – the focus of ACT UP – that yeah, we were left pretty much to our own devices.

SS: What about with non-gay Asian organizations? What happened when you guys met with them?

MM: We – again, our strongest allies were probably the non-gay identified, but sort of politically radical, like Youth for Philippine Action, we worked with – Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, and other grassroots, you know. It's kind of interesting though, I remember when we doing the *Miss Saigon* – the sort of organizing the 10,000 meetings that you would go to, to do something like that. Coming from ACT UP, and sort of – I was very briefly involved in Queer Nation – that definitely comes with – people, they kind of like you and hate you sort of thing. Because on one hand, there's this, "Wow, you're demonstrating, getting arrested" and da-da-da. And that's kind of like – you come with a certain kind of, not so much cache, but you have these – you have your battle scars or whatnot. But then on the other hand, there's the wariness about, ah, they're just whitewash – it's a white organization.

So it's interesting. Sometimes it's a problem, and sometimes not. I think the *Miss Saigon* campaign was a good example of how it worked, when everything worked – that there were, we were – there was old school coalition building, massaging the issue in the community, but there was also at the time sort of like street action demonstrations. So I think that was sort of a good – I don't know, a good graduation, if you will.

SS: One more question on this, and then we'll go on to something else. Some of the "straight" Asian organizations, actually had gay people inside them. So like, you brought up Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence – that was Milyoung Chow, who was a lesbian. So, were you – is your contact with these groups, through the gay people in the groups, or was it –

MM: Yes, for the most part, yes.

SS: So it was a coalition built by gay Asian people, but some were inside straight groups, and some were inside –

MM: In the *Miss Saigon* definitely yes, yes. Some other cases, you know – it's interesting too, because – not Milyoung, because Milyoung is basically my generation – but there are some of the older generation – then it becomes some of this tension, because some of them are not necessarily – I wouldn't say they're closeted, but they're very – they don't play up their sexuality within these groups. They could be out, but they're definitely not ACT UP-wearing-stickers, out.

SS: What about pioneer gay Asian activists, like Don Kao and people like that?

MM: Yeah that's basically how Don is, I think. He's very discrete in that sense. So for him, we're probably like these crazy kids. I mean, like I said, sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. We were also probably erring on the side of being too rash – handcuff yourselves to things on the drop of a hat. You know what I'm saying. I think that most of the people in the API Caucus were in their twenties.

SS: Did anyone in the API Caucus have AIDS?

MM: No, not that I know of.

SS: Now, you were in a lot of other things in ACT UP, too – like you mentioned getting arrested. Do you remember the first time you got arrested?

MM: I never got arrested. The only time I got arrested was about South African divestments. So that doesn't count. I did a lot of legal support.

SS: Did you work on Needle Exchange?

MM: No, no.

SS: You used to hang out with Rod.

MM: Yeah, we went out.

SS: Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

MM: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Rod Sorge.

MM: Yeah, Rod Sorge. Well, we went out for awhile. And, actually – this is kind of an interesting sort of a personal iteration, I suppose, of the larger ACT UP politics. So yeah, basically we went out right around the time when – what was it? Was it six people? They were in court – the people that were arrested at St. Patrick's for Stop the Church. Rod was one of them. Yeah, so I remember that. I remember him going to court. I remember all the prison jokes. That was fun. And then of course, they didn't end up going to court. A couple of things – we were both quite young at the time, and I think that – ultimately what happened was that – it was after a particularly nasty fight in ACT UP, at an ACT UP meeting about – I forgot what the specific issue was, but it was something around like, people of color and women and – it was sort of towards the end. That was a really divisive argument I remember, and of course I don't remember the specific issue. But what happened was, after the meeting we went out to dinner. We had been going out for – I don't know – a couple of months, by then. And, essentially we staged the fight – one on one, and that was our fight. And that broke us up.

SS: You had a fight about race?

MM: We had a fight about race, about what happened in ACT UP. It's like one of those things – after the meeting you go to dinner and you talk about the meeting, and then the next thing you know, you find yourself re-staging the same arguments. And, he

got up and left, and I was just pissed off sitting there. Then he called afterwards. And then, I didn't call him back. I mean, I regret not – especially – I was doing some research myself recently. So I logged onto the ACT UP website [and] I found out that he passed away. And I do regret not looking him up later.

SS: Did you know he was using heroin at the time?

MM: Not, not when he was with me. I think he started using probably later – that would be my guess.

SS: What was the discourse in ACT UP about drugs, and needle drugs?

MM: I think the discourse was that – I don't think there was a whole lot of discussion about the members, unless they're out about it, unless they are – there were some ACT UPers who were former drug users, who are in rehab, who are needle exchange. But, I think that's kind of the same – I would say they're probably seen in the same way as a PWA that got it through unprotected sex.

I mean, it was sort of – I wouldn't say it's a badge of honor, but it's – certainly, no one is going to criticize them – it's not a taboo, right? They're out. That's a part of their identity, right? I'm a former drug user who is now a PWA. So, there's that. But in terms of someone like Rod and what happened to him later, I don't think – there was definitely no – I don't think there was any discussion about drug use within ACT UP, within the members.

SS: So, former drug user was acceptable, but active drug user –

MM: Or in rehab, right? But, of course this – for the most part, people who are in that group are from – are persons of color. A lot of them are women, a lot of them from working class backgrounds. So, it's definitely not the majority of ACT UP.

Sometimes people – the “others” – are in a way – especially the others who are PWA, are sometimes held up on this pedestal, in the sense of, “Oh wow, you have so many marginalities in you.” There’s that kind of – a little bit of that happening there. Frankly, I’m not surprised. It’s such a high stress environment. Some of the other things I remember about when I was with Rod was like – that was also the time when there was all this police – well, we don’t know what exactly it was, but the infiltration activity – was also happening at that time. And I remember he was living with Heidi at the time.

SS: Heidi Dorow?

MM: I don’t remember Heidi’s last name.

SS: Yeah, Dorow.

MM: Yeah, and Heidi was going out with Tracy.

SS: Morgan.

MM: Right. And there was all this drama about the police tapping our phones. And when you’re in your early 20s, it’s kind of like -- it’s kind of fun, but it’s like completely – it’s totally sinister, right? You know, with all the stuff that’s happening with infiltration at the time.

Tape II
00:35:00

SS: Do you think that there was infiltration?

MM: Yes, I do. I do. If there was no physical infiltration, there was a deliberate spreading of the rumor. It does the same job, right? Basically, it’s an FBI/CIA tactic. They do that all the time. They did it in the civil rights movement. I don’t see why they’re not doing it with ACT UP. I mean ACT UP was a very powerful group at the time. We were changing federal policy. We were changing how people released drugs. Of course, they’re going to infiltrate. I’m not surprised. I think there was, yeah. But –

SS: Why do you think that Heidi and Tracy were targeted?

MM: I don't know. I don't know the background, but I think that – and I don't have a very well thought out analysis for it, so a lot of it is kind of like thinking back, and trying [to] make sense of it. Well, I think in terms of how – let's say if it's the FBI, or an organization on that level. Given what we know about – for instance, how they infiltrated civil rights groups. They're going to go at – they're going to try and break up the group. They're going to try to create strife. They're going to create paranoia. And they're probably there to gather information. If you want to break up a group, what do you do? You go at already existing fissures, and make them big – into giant gaping holes, right? So I think that – I don't know, I guess I'm really paranoid – but I think that to a certain degree, this sort of like more frequency of blowing up of issues around race, issues around gender, between the men and the women, for the most part – why do I think Heidi and Tracy were targeted? Maybe because they were women, maybe because they were outspoken feminists. They were working also with reproductive rights. Weighing, with WHAM. Maybe that's why. I don't know.

SS: So what other campaigns did you work on in ACT UP, outside of the API Caucus?

MM: That was really my main focus – API Caucus. I did some stuff. You know, I did some sort of general demo logistic stuff. Like I said, I wasn't really in an affinity group that – the API Caucus, we didn't do direct action that involves getting arrested. And I don't know if that's playing up to the stereotype or not, but also the thing too – I think it would have been good for visibility reasons, but in terms of what we're trying to raise – the issues – that really doesn't – it's not in sync with what we're doing.

But, I do a lot of legal support. I've done that kind of stuff with the demos. I've never sort of been – I'm trying to think. When I was with Rod, I might have helped once or twice with Needle Exchange.

SS: Actually doing needle exchange?

MM: I don't remember. I went out with him, once or twice.

SS: Well then, let's get to the –

Tape III
00:00:00

MM: ... that there weren't more people - I mean, there probably was quite a bit of drug use going on. I don't know. It wasn't open.

SS: So you were instrumental in the creation of the first agency to address AIDS in the Asian community. Can you talk about how that got started?

MM: I wouldn't say I am instrumental. I worked on it. Well, basically, how that got started was that there was a need, and there was – basically the need was recognized by pretty much everybody who was concerned about AIDS/HIV in Asian-Pacific Islander communities in the New York/Tri-State areas. So obviously, those of us who were in the API Caucus in ACT UP, someone like Suki Ports, who was a long time AIDS activist with Family Health Project.

So again, it was a coming together of people in GAPIMNY, it was a coming together of all these different groups that we realized that we need something like this and we - well, basically we went and did it. It took a while, and it probably involved much more bureaucracy than I was interested in and – a lot of it has to do with this sort of professionalization of AIDS activism. That at a certain point you – see, I was never really interested in having a career in AIDS, in the AIDS industry, which is why I was on

the Board. I was on the interim Board until the organization was officially set up and then that's when I decided – that was one of the reasons, but at that time I left New York and I went to LA. I went to graduate school, and I kind of left a lot of that behind me. And I know some of the people in the API Caucus had – took jobs in the new APICHA at the time, and they didn't end up working very well in that context.

SS: Why is that?

MM: I think it's this tension between grassroots activism and institutionalized non-profit organization. The tension's always there. Even when I was involved, there was tension. But I think for us, there really – there was a very clear goal. The goal was to set up this organization, so we were able to pull that through. But once that started, once you are there, you have this job – this paid job – working in this organization dealing with like, government funding, dealing with bureaucracy, all that kind of stuff – I know I wouldn't have been able to – or interested. I am not interested in that. So for me, when I left was the right time to go. And obviously the organization is still around, and they are doing really important work and I am really glad I was a part of it, but I think that that was the right thing for me to do at the time. And on a theoretical level, I see the importance of that, but I think it's – it ended up being a personal choice. I mean like is this something that – do I want to become a health care professional? No, I don't. I always knew I was going to – I wanted to be an artist, so – so, yeah.

SS: And you are. You are a visual artist, you teach video, here in California, and you are showing all over the place. You have a show in New York right now. Were you involved at all in the production of images?

MM: No.

SS: Nothing?

MM: Other than the educational materials.

SS: For education – so what did you do for the educational materials?

MM: Oh, a lot of – it's typical ACT UP, like everybody did everything.

Translation, some layout – actually, that's kind of – ACT UP is how I learned how to use PageMaker and stuff like that. It's kind of interesting. Skills you acquire in ACT UP. You know, you can lay out a flyer like that.

Tape III
00:05:00

SS: Did you put your face on everything?

MM: I was on the Queer Nation poster, but that wasn't – I think they just needed an Asian. You know, it's one of those things.

SS: Did the API Caucus advocate for specific kinds of images?

MM: Well, it's interesting. We did some kind of interesting things. For instance, in our brochures – the illustrations. I mean, I don't know, it's cute and I wouldn't put too much weight on it, but I think it is sort of maybe a good example. So instead of the – what you would see in GMHC brochures which I learned things like how do you put on condom, how do you clean your works – instead of drawn or photographs, ours were like, paper cutouts. It was kind of cute, it's kind of disarming. It's kind of – it kind of worked. We did – we were invited, actually, coming back – that was one interesting connection. We were invited – the API Caucus – we were invited – I think it was for World AIDS Day one year. And we did this window installation for Art in General, that I also used to work for.

SS: Where was that?

MM: It's a non-profit alternative art space, and they are also located smack in Chinatown. They're on 79 Walker Street, in Chinatown/Tribeca. They are really more Chinatown than Tribeca, and it's the General Hardware building. And so, on the street level they have this window that they have artists do projects in. So we actually did a project that utilized a lot of these elements, basically addressing the community, talking about AIDS and HIV and stuff like that. So, that was one sort of thing that connected a lot of these interests.

SS: Do you know what the reaction was?

MM: Well, it's hard to gauge, right? Because it's very - it's obviously very visible. It's on the street. People see it. People do look at it. But I don't think that at the time Art In General necessarily had that much connection to the local community. That there was really not - I mean, we get - our reactions would be from like, other AIDS activist people, other arts people, people that we work with. That would be how we would get our connection and that was generally good. But that's not necessarily our audience. Our audience is people on the street, which [we] do not have a conduit to get their reaction - other than the fact that we know that they do look at it. Which, I think that's important. That in itself is important. Just to see that image. We were - it was like, I remember, it was three windows on two sides. There were these scrawls like a scrawl painting and on it were written these information in Chinese, but sort of in calligraphy. And then in the center, it's this light box that half of it was an image of the Gwan Yin, which is a Buddhist goddess of mercy. Basically it's - Gwan Yin is very much invoked in relationship to hardship, disease, like that. It's a goddess of mercy. And then below her are these - some of these paper cutout images. So that we were

actually using some of the paper cutout format to show images of like how you put on a condom, how do you clean works, in a public space. So that kind of worked pretty well, I think.

Oh, and then we also have like – behind the scrolls, we also have these little shadow puppets that are kind of done in the same way that - that were also showing the same kind of activity. So we are kind of playing a little bit with public/private – how these things are in the community but they are hidden and sort of doing it in sort of – doing it in a culturally specific manner in the sort of the folk art type of manner.

SS: When you were on the preliminary board for the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS, did you have direct contact with the patient group, with the clients?

Tape III
00:10:00

MM: At that time, there weren't really any clients. There were a couple of individuals I remember, so yes, but like –

SS: Was that a different constituency than you had been exposed to before?

MM: Well, A) at that time, since the agency was just getting set up, there wasn't a client base. There were a couple people who were really – I really consider them more activists than anything. They were Asian people with AIDS who are out, who can speak in public about it.

SS: Do you remember the names of any of those people?

MM: No, I don't. I remember there was an Asian woman, but no, I don't. Most of the people I knew that were Asian Pacific Islander PWAs were outside of New York. They were people in San Francisco where there was an agency already established, there

was already a client base, and some of the staff were themselves PWAs. So, the West Coast was much more ahead of the East Coast in this sense.

SS: And did you travel to San Francisco?

MM: We – one of the things we did as a Caucus was we helped organize a national conference on People of Color, AIDS, and HIV. And so through that we made a lot of connections.

SS: Where was that?

MM: Hunter College.

SS: Oh. And who came?

MM: A lot of people. Do you want me to go through everyone?

SS: Well, anyone you remember.

MM: Well, basically everyone, essentially. I remember – of course I remember the APIs. It's a lot of people from – at that time it was Gap HIV Project, so like Steve Loo, Paul Shimasaki, Martin Hiraga from Washington, Kyoshi [Kuromiya] – I forgot Kyoshi's last name.

SS: From Philadelphia?

MM: Yeah, yeah. Because the community was really small, everybody was there, essentially. We did a good job, too. I mean we really did a good job. The group that put that together was basically the – we worked on it, I think the Black Caucus, Latino Caucus worked on it, so it was kind of like a people of color group.

SS: Do you remember what year that was?

MM: Yeah, it was 1990.

SS: So how did the Caucus fund your activities?

MM: Hmm. That's good question. I don't remember. I can look through my files, but –

SS: Did the money come from ACT UP at large, or –

MM: Yeah, I think so. I think so, yeah. I think the money came from ACT UP. I mean, we didn't really do – we did get money to produce the material, but we worked – like everybody else – we worked very cheaply and – yeah, that would be our main expense was to get money to produce some of these materials. And they were done – getting those – those red packets don't cost that much. It was like Xeroxing we could do at ACT UP, and so it wasn't – money wasn't really like that much of a – I think it was from ACT UP at large. That would be my guess.

SS: Okay. So what was the socializing in terms of racial dynamics inside ACT UP?

MM: Hmm. Is this okay? If I lean back? Well, I mean – obviously I think mostly we – are you talking about ACT UP at large? Or are you talking about just people that I knew?

SS: ACT UP at large.

MM: Well, I think that there was –

SS: For you, for you.

MM: Oh. Thinking back to it I think it's really important – again, like I was saying – that's sort of my first community, first circle outside of college. And by the time I left college I was ready to be out of there – I was very happy to not be in school at the time. And what can I say? It was really great. It's diverse, it's queer, it's politicized,

it's young. We drank a lot. That's a very specific group. You know, this is basically the people of color groups, the women, and not that many of the white men.

SS: Did you try to socialize with the white men?

MM: The ones that gravitate toward – no. The ones that gravitated towards us were – I mean [we were] friendly, right? I guess because there really aren't that many people of color within ACT UP that most people are very friendly – they are friendly to you, there's a camaraderie definitely, but actually socializing? No. It's pretty – it's like the boys and the – everybody else. I mean, there are some boys that cross over. The ones who are PC, or the ones – the politically adventurous or progressive. The ones who feel like they need to hang out with the people of color and so – Rod and people that were doing needle exchange and stuff like that.

SS: So you're – are you saying that people who would socialize with women or interracially would be people who would tend to have a certain political view inside the group?

MM: Yup. Definitely. Or, very few cases, sometimes they are people who are into people of color for other reasons – there are like, one or two “rice queens,” but they really don't – just because it was so political, ACT UP, they didn't fare very well within that environment. But I thought it was great, actually. I mean, that's really – it was – what better introduction to the queer community can you – even though I know ACT UP has an uneasiness in terms of its public image about identifying itself as a gay or lesbian group – nonetheless the majority of members were queer identified, and what better introduction to the community than this? I look at the kids who are coming out now, and

I just – they don't have that. And I think that that's – that's something that I wish they could have.

SS: So, what year did you leave ACT UP?

MM: September of '91, when I moved here.

SS: And what was really the thing that –

MM: I mean I didn't leave – I left as I wasn't really attending meetings, obviously. I wasn't really – I might have attended one or two when I went back to visit. A lot of the connections I kept up, and a lot of the – when I came to LA, I did go to – I did check out Queer Nation and ACT UP here, and I did ended up going back to – I did sort of rejoin the group in a really weird way, which was when I was at Cal Arts. There were two other students who somehow were able to get a lot of money from the school to do this documentary – that never materialized – about AIDS activism. And they actually flew to Washington for Target Bush, a national health care demo. And they brought me along, basically because by that time, I knew a lot of people in ACT UP and stuff like that. And I was, "Sure, I'll go help you." They needed someone to shoot video for them and stuff like that. So I actually went back and that was pretty soon – I mean, that was in December, right? That was pretty soon after I left New York, so I had a sort of a regrouping but I was already in Los Angeles and doing different things.

But I think – so I would say like, officially I left in September – August/September '91. But there were a lot of connections that continued for a while. And some still continue today. But obviously they are not – they are more personal, and sometimes people resurface in other contexts. But the history is there and the connection is there, so –

SS: So this is my last question. Looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's biggest disappointment, and what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement?

MM: The biggest disappointment for me, personally?

SS: Mm hmm.

MM: Well, I would say the biggest disappointment for me was that even a group like ACT UP was not able to – that it ended up being these issues around gender and race that, in my view contributed to the downfall of ACT UP. But then at the same time, I don't necessarily – it was a disappointment, but I don't necessarily fault the group for it because I think that it's unrealistic to expect a group of this composition to deal with those issues.

SS: Can you be specific about what those issues were?

MM: Well, issues about race and gender. This is a group of predominantly gay white men. Middle class, gay white men, right? So I do not expect it –

SS: But specifically, how did that play out? What were the actual conflicts?

MM: I think the actual conflicts – like I was saying – I don't remember what that big argument was about, but generally speaking, I don't think that issues about women and AIDS, issues about AIDS and HIV in people of color groups are really on people's minds, other than as a – the sort of litany of PC: oh, of course we have to care about women, or of course we care about people of color. But are they actually committed to it? Are they actually passionate about it? No, they are not. And, to a certain degree, well I don't expect them to be. Maybe I am cynical, but – but I think

that's why I say I don't fault the group for that, but it is certainly in the rhetoric, right? And I think it's important for it to have been in the rhetoric, but I think there was a discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality.

SS: Has that had long range consequences, for people with AIDS?

MM: Sure – look at who is being infected now. Globally. Right? There you go.

SS: Do you see that as a consequence of ...?

MM: I don't think – no, I don't – of course not. I can't – I think it is a much larger issue than ACT UP. I think ACT UP is a reflection of that issue. I think ACT UP is a historical phenomenon. I think ACT UP was needed at that time in history, and it served its purpose historically. So, I don't – I miss it, but I don't miss it. You know what I am saying? I am glad I was a part of it, and I don't think ACT UP would have been as effective now, in its form. In terms of its tactics, in terms of its composition, almost 20 years later. No, I don't think – I don't think that we are at a stage where we need another ACT UP. But I think we needed it, in terms of the history of the pandemic and it certainly – it did a lot.

SS: So what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement?

MM: I think that it just completely transformed how we look at sexuality, how we look at disease, how we look at treatment. I think for my generation – it's funny. I mean, I know you are going to interview Alex Juhasz, but I was talking to her the other day and we were sort of talking about how each generation has its transformative moments, and I think for our generation, ACT UP was that transformative moment. That we realized that we could change the world, and we did.

SS: And how did – in what way?

MM: Like what I was saying before, I think it –

SS: What changed?

MM: What changed?

SS: Mm hmm.

MM: Oh, God. That's a tough one. I think, on sort of a – if one wants to be academic about it, then I think it changed the medical establishment and the sort of – at least in this country, it changed the model of treatment, it changed how drugs are – like how pharmaceutical companies operate, how they – mechanical things like how drugs are released, and the position of the patient, quote unquote “the patient” versus the doctor, how do we see treatment.

I mean a lot of these things, the sort of traditional power relationship has definitely been challenged, right? And I would extend that to the larger power structure of people with AIDS versus the government. That ACT UP – I wouldn't give ACT UP all the credit, but I think ACT UP deserves a lot of the credit. Like 80 percent of the credit. I mean, ACT UP really turned that around. But I think looking back to it, one also realizes – I realize – that ACT UP has the access to do it because it is this group of very privileged people. That it can do that – I mean, if ACT UP was a predominantly black working class group at that time in history, I don't think that the – I don't think the outcome would have been the same. So, I think that that for me would be the biggest achievements of ACT UP. And at the same time, also – it also comes – it's also the biggest disappointment, that because of what the group was that it wasn't able to deal with these issues and – I think as we look at what AIDS and HIV is now, we do see a

Tape III
00:25:00

legacy of both the good and the bad. You know – the positive and the not-so-positive aspects of it. And on a personal level, what can I say? It is that transformative moment for me, and I think for a lot of people in my generation as well.

SS: Okay, thank you Ming.

MM: Thanks.