

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

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Interviewee: **Ron Medley**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Ron Medley

December 28, 2003

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

RON MEDLEY: My name is Ron Medley. I'm 52 years old, and we're in my apartment in downtown Brooklyn, New York. Today's date is December 28th, 2003.

SS: So, you were born here in Brooklyn – the People's Republic of Brooklyn.

RM: People's Republic of Brooklyn, with some time spent in Queens.

SS: You said you were born in Brownsville. Where did you move to in Queens?

RM: We moved from Brownsville to Bushwick, and we were in Bushwick for about six years, and from Bushwick to Jamaica, Queens.

SS: And then you went to high school in Queens.

RM: I went to high school in Queens. I went to Martin Van Buren High School in Queens Village. It's about seven miles away from my house. It took me about an hour and half to get there by bus. I remember there was a transit strike, and it took about three hours one way to walk. Don't ask me why I did that.

SS: When you were growing up, was your family politically involved at all?

RM: Not at all. We came from a long line – my parents came from North Carolina, and it's said that there's some Indian lineage, background. And one of the characteristics of the family is that they basically are very quiet and very reticent and pretty much keep to themselves, and that's sort of what they did, once they moved to

New York. They basically joined a church with other people from Virginia and North Carolina, and that is where they did most of the socializing, and expected you to do most of your socializing.

SS: What church was that?

RM: St. Paul's Community Baptist Church, where Johnny Youngblood is now, and he's getting lots of play. But, when I was there, it was Adolphus S. Smith, who was also from Virginia – he was also from North Carolina, and the whole relationship was very much like a small town in North Carolina that was transplanted to Brooklyn. And I think even during the Civil Rights Movement, the family's attitude was one of quiet support, and I think they probably took most of their cues from the clergy, who were supportive, but not enthusiastic of Martin Luther King. As an aside, they were quietly jealous of him, too.

SS: Were they in the same Baptist conventions?

RM: I'm pretty sure they were. My brother went to the March on Washington, and that was just considered a very exciting thing to do – a risky thing to do, because no one quite was sure what was going to happen that day. And once it was over, my brother's stature in the family rose because he'd taken that risk, he'd stuck his neck out, and it ended fairly successfully. I think Vietnam radicalized us, in certain ways, more than the Civil Rights Movement did, because there are cousins of mine who actually served in Vietnam and had been wounded. And I think that that affected my generation more than Civil Rights did. Segregation was not a big deal, because most of our connections were with other black people, and we didn't really see that changing very much, as a result. And my cousins all had college educations and most of them got good

jobs – fairly happy with their lives and their status in life. So, I think the people who moved north probably saw bigger changes – because of the Civil Rights Movement – than the people who stayed back home.

SS: What about the school strike?

RM: I remember the school strike.

SS: That was Brownsville.

RM: It involved Ocean Hill-Brownsville. We'd been living in Queens. I don't think it was my senior year, it might have been my junior year, when the teachers just left school. And most of them were Jewish, and I was close to several of them. It was quite a turning point. I never quite looked at them the same way, afterward. It taught me a couple of things – that even the most altruistic white people had their own agenda, and when it comes down to it they will adhere to that agenda if they feel that their backs are against the wall. And, I guess –

SS: What did your family do with you during the school strike?

RM: I don't remember. I remember seeing the picket lines, so I must have gone to school at some point, and realized that there weren't classes. I don't know if I kept going to school or what. I think there might have been a study hall they had for us. I don't remember. I just realized that from that point onward, it wasn't quite the big happy family atmosphere. Because the school that I went to, you have to realize, was in a primarily Jewish neighborhood. The people of color were not being bussed in, so much as we were taking public transportation. But we were clearly an outside element. I think it was sort at the crest of the whole – we, at that point, and it's hard to remember what that was like, but we were really the model minorities – meaning, black people, African-

Americans. We were perhaps the same place in society that Asians are now – everyone wanted to be your friend – and I had lots of Jewish friends. I don't think I would have graduated on time, if it hadn't been for a Jewish friend tutoring me in math. And that continued for quite awhile. But, I think the teachers' strike did change things a little bit. Thanks for asking. I hadn't thought about that in awhile.

SS: It's one of the most important events in the history of New York City.

So what were your family's messages to you about sexuality?

RM: It's funny, it was a mixed message. I think there might have been a history of – Harvey Jackins would put it as, it was a history of sexual distress in our family. Both my parents were brought up on farms. Both had very extended families. Obviously they knew what sex was from a very early age, but the kids from our generation never got any sexual instruction whatsoever – not from my mother or father. My sense is that there were some moments – when I say growing up, still a toddler, if I had been in school, it probably wouldn't have been in school, I wasn't in school for very long – where the message was, “Don't play with your sister like that,” that kind of thing. And the message was fairly harsh. I mean, I was never allowed to have female playmates in the apartment behind a closed door. And there always had to be some sort of supervision within sight of whatever we were doing.

So, I basically – I don't know if it was because I was picking it up, or whether it was innate, or what, but I just avoided any sexual contact with women for the rest of my life. And I think that that probably left men, as places where you go to be yourself, and to be comfortable around and to have intimate relationships with. I don't think I would have applied the word gay to any of my relationships probably until quite late. I was a

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late bloomer, as far as identifying as gay was concerned. But, I think, looking back on it, I probably realized, from a fairly early age. I don't think I had sex, per se, with anybody before the age of 30, but there was certainly a lot of very close relationships that probably bordered on crushes, before any of that happened. And of course, I didn't share any of that with my parents. That was out of the question.

SS: Was there any role for single people in your parents' world?

RM: Well that was what I was getting to, in terms of sexual distress. My understanding is that there always were single men in virtually every generation, going back to my great grandparents. There was always some guy who never got married and either lived and took care of their mother until they basically died or moved away and nobody ever heard of them again. There was that model. I was always aware of that model, and I think I've sort of set that aside as my own model, in some sort of unconscious way. I would be like Uncle Sherman – I'd get married when I was 50 to someone and figure out what my sexuality was, then. All I know is that getting married – I wasn't pushed towards it. I think there were probably some hints around when I got to be around 21 – do I have a girlfriend, or something like that. But they never pushed it. Once I told them no a couple of times, they never made a big deal out of it.

SS: So you were at Van Buren. You didn't have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and you decided to go to college. Where did you go to school?

RM: I went to Wesleyan.

SS: So that must have been a big difference.

RM: Well, yeah. It was still all-male at the time. In fact, my class was the last all-male class. There was some discussion about it. My brother thought it was a bad

idea, because, of course, if you were going to meet a woman, the chances were fairly nil that they're going to go to an all-male college. I think in the back of my mind, I thought it was a great idea because again, I was thinking well, if I go to an all-male college, that sort of puts everybody in the same plane. I'll be meeting lots of people who don't have girlfriends, and I won't be sticking out like a sore thumb. Even though I hadn't quite accepted the mantle of gay, I think, at that point, I was beginning to think there was a sort of morbid shyness around women. And the idea of not being around women while I was studying appealed to me.

SS: Were there guys who were openly gay, when you were at school?

RM: There were a handful. I think, at that particular point – my first year was 1969. So that was maybe, the fall after Stonewall. Was that the summer of '69? There was no clear gay liberation movement. It was all sort of just beginning. And the guys who were gay, who were out, tended to be freaks. I mean, you could tell they were gay from a mile away. They dressed flamboyantly, they talked flamboyantly, if they saw any kind of sexual ambivalence in you at all, they flirted with you openly. They tended to be scary people. And of course the people who years later you realized were gay – because they were now out of the closet – they tended to be very scholarly and quite capable of rationalizing closeness to guys, or having intense male friendships in ways that made it all look like it was just one very gradual continuum along the line of gay to straight, and that they were sort of somewhere in the middle. Not close enough to gay to actually be gay, but not straight enough to actually foreclose having the same roommate for four years, and these dramatic fits when they finally had to graduate, and one guy went to law school and the other guy didn't. There were a couple of places at Wesleyan where you

could sort of have your cake and eat it, too. And I think that's sort of where I located myself – particularly since I'd made the decision to continue my studies and go on to law school. That sort of gave me – again, it was a convenient excuse not to go after women, and not to get – I'm not even sure what outlets were available at that time, in terms of gay sexuality. I was still pursuing a kind of – I'd latch on to the first friendly male that I would find in any situation, and academia had lots of those situations – people who were studious, were away from home and were just as lonely as you were. They didn't think it was unusual to spend all their time with another guy. That's the one thing that I remember about being in college and being in law school – that it still had the old, tweedy, sort of Ivy League Oxford kind of model of fast male relationships, or women-less relationships. Of course, all of that eventually came to a close once I actually stopped studying and had to look for work and came back to New York.

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SS: After law school?

RM: After law school. I have a few old buddies from school, but there's a place after you leave school, where people actually do start getting married, and having girlfriends, and that's when the shit hit the fan. People do start eventually spending more time with their spouses and finding that available male figure got harder and harder, and that's when I discovered Greenwich Village. And after awhile, just out of pure pragmatism, it dawned on me that if you're going to find male friendship, you go to where the men are, and those tended to be bars.

SS: So, which bars did you go to?

RM: I think my first bar was probably Julius's, because that was the one everyone knew. I think from there I sort of branched out to whatever the place was that

proceeded Pieces and Reed's, and whatever else was on that block before. There was another –

SS: Pieces and Reed's? I don't know what that is.

RM: Before it was Pieces it was Reed's, and before it was Reed's it was –

SS: I don't know where that is.

JAMES WENTZY: Across from the Ninth Circle.

RM: Across from the Ninth Circle. But mainly, it was Julius's. It had a nice kind of ambience. I liked the sawdust on the floor and the old pictures around the room. I don't know, there's something safe about it. I don't know when Uncle Charlie's opened, for some reason I stumbled into – but at that point I'd pretty much decided that I was gay and I got involved with the old Gay Switchboard. The Switchboard had print-outs of all the bars all over the city, with little capsule descriptions, and I think Uncle Charlie's was one of them – I know it was. And I think the description was: “businessman's bar.” So I had to find out what that was about. And I went there, and despite the description – the one that was on 39th Street and Third Avenue – the front bar was pretty much a businessman's bar, but there was a pool room in the back, which was populated almost entirely by people under the age of 30. And that was where I really got this – it was my first real glimpse at the diversity of the gay community. Very few of them acted gay on the outside. In fact, by playing pool all the time there was this sort of patina of macho going on all the time – and these were very competitive pool games, generally. But you had accountants, you had teachers, you had electricians, mail men, people who worked for the telephone company. It was the first time I had ever been among a group of men where I didn't feel like I was gay. It was basically just guys. And

I think that was my home for years. I think I stumbled in for the first time around 1982. Somewhere around there. I think Reagan was still President. And I think within a couple of years I must have had about 20 friends, and it was just wonderful.

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SS: Did you stay at the Gay Switchboard?

RM: I think I stayed there a couple of years.

SS: Where were they?

RM: Where was the Gay Switchboard? It was someplace in Chelsea, because I remember being able to walk out and go right across town to a place called the Last Call. I think it was on East 4th Street, or something like that. Then, there was another place called The Bar, which is also on East 4th Street. And I remember being able to walk to those places. I think the Gay Switchboard was on the West Side someplace in Chelsea, and then I would walk across town to all these East Side bars.

SS: Now, was the Gay Switchboard part of the same world as the bars? Or is it part of the gay movement? Was it in a separate kind of social sphere?

RM: Once you got to the Switchboard, they were working out of the same suite of offices as a couple of psychiatrists whose clientele were almost exclusively gay men. I think they were gay, and my sense was that it was not connected with the bars. That was a service that they offered, but they were coming out of the whole therapy movement, because one of their main functions was to prevent people from committing suicide. There were a lot of suicide calls. That's what you were trained for. You were trained to handle somebody calling up saying that they don't feel good about being gay and that they want to commit suicide or something like that. I'm recalling this as you're asking

me the questions, but, I think they were coming out of a different place than the bars were.

SS: And you were working for the city at this time?

RM: I was working for the state, and then later on for the city, just around that time.

SS: As a lawyer. Now, were you out on your job?

RM: Yeah, I think I was. I think just around that time, I started getting comfortable around telling people that I was gay, because one of my first jobs out of college was with a place called Bellmarc Realty, and their initial job site was in the Village, on the old Montgomery Ward building – not far from Astor Place. And I met a guy there – one of the brokers there – named Gil Neary, who was about as out as you could get. And their specialty was of course co-op apartments basically in the Village. And then later on, they branched out to other places. And I became fast friends with Gil because basically, we were both so oppressed by the partners who ran the company. We both got out of there as soon as we could. Gil went on to have his own real estate company and also, in his other life, he was Becky Sue [Bambi Sue] for a long time in *HX* magazine – one of the bar magazines. He loves to do drag. But that's where I met him, and I think most of the guys who were brokers were gay guys and they kind of blazed the trail for me. It was very easy to be out of the closet at that point. And, once I did it there, I pretty much was out wherever I worked. Most people didn't bother asking because most people didn't care.

SS: Was this around the time that you got involved with co-counseling?

RM: I've been in co-counseling – I took my first class in law school, and I continued it once I got back to New York.

SS: Where were you in law school?

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RM: At the University of Pennsylvania, and there was co-counseling in Philadelphia. It was real big co-counseling town – Philadelphia. Seattle was the other big place. New York was up and coming around that time too, but Philadelphia was definitely a big place. Co-counseling was interesting. One of the reasons I got into it was because one of these fellows that I knew at Wesleyan – there were a whole bunch of people from Wesleyan, who were involved – and they were all guys, with a history of ambivalence around gay sexuality. But you would never know it from looking at them. And, I think what happened for them – and I think it happened to me, to a certain extent – is that co-counseling served as a way of channeling them into whatever place they were going sexually. Some people went into co-counseling and became straight, and some people went into co-counseling and became gay. And I think what it did – because there's so much emphasis on examining your early feelings around sexuality and being open and being intimate with other co-counselors, that it was very hard not to be gay if you were gay – which made the choices much starker, and much more clear-cut. And, I think that's what happened to me, to a certain extent, because most of my co-counselors were other guys and you spend a couple of hours with a guy, crying your heart out about some early hurt. It's very difficult not to form a crush, and there were lots of crushes going on in RC – as they used to call it back then.

SS: What does RC stand for?

RM: Re-evaluation co-counseling – or, co-counseling, for short.

SS: So, what was the co-counseling ACT UP connection? You mentioned that before.

RM: Well, what happened was, when my doctor told me that I had some lymph nodes under my armpits and that they looked suspicious and that I should get an HIV test – this would have been around 1989, after I had been much more active sexually. I probably had about six partners over a six year period, but probably no more than a dozen actual sexual experiences. So by 1989, when my doctor told me this, the last thing I was expecting was to be seropositive. And I went down to I guess it was Bellevue, took the blood-test, and a week or two later my doctor calls me up at work and says, “Your test came back, you’re positive.” And I think he may have gone on a couple of minutes more about setting up appointments for different things. I don’t think I heard anything after that. Everybody’s got their own story – how they found out and what happened and stuff like that. I went into a profound depression. I hated my doctor. He was a GP, basically. His approach to AIDS and HIV was basically to refer everybody to an oncologist. And, it didn’t take me very long to realize that the reason he was doing that was because oncologists had experience with people who had terminal diseases. I don’t know what I was more frustrated with – the idea that he didn’t know what he was doing, or the idea that I had to pay him and the oncologist every time I made an appointment for something. So, a couple of things happened. I quit co-counseling because number one, they had a hard time with gay issues, anyway. I can go into that in some detail, if you want. And the other thing is they have a hard time with sick people. I noticed how badly they treat their own leaders who had gotten cancer and other life-threatening diseases. Their attitude was basically, you can’t work for us any longer, and basically we feel sorry for

you, but your sole purpose now is that you provide an occasion for us to cry some more. Their sick people basically dropped off the face of the earth, once they became sick. So I knew, there were very limited resources there.

What happened was one of the people I was co-counseling with regularly at that time was a guy named Matthew Lyons, who was a graduate of Cornell. I don't think he was more than 25 at the time, radical. He'd written quite a few articles around anti-fascism and anti-Semitism. He used to give lectures – I think he still does – at Brecht Forum – a really smart guy. But also a virgin, which made him very safe to be around. In his circle of friends he had found out that there was this place called ACT UP, and I was counseling with him about my seropositivity and my test results. And he said, “You know what? You should really check out this place, ACT UP. I'd went by there once, at the Gay Center,” and I had never been to the Gay Center, but Matthew had. “It's a great place. You should really check it out. There are men kissing each other there.” And I said all right, all right. And I think he must have given me David Robinson's phone number. I called up David Robinson and he couldn't have been nicer. He was just the sweetest guy. He said, “Yeah, yeah, we meet on Monday nights,” – and I forget what the time was, it must have been seven o'clock in those days – “and you should really check out the Treatment and Data Committee.” And he gave me a couple of phone numbers to call there, and I went to the Treatment and Data Committee meeting. They were still in SoHo, I think. It was a loft – somebody's business, and they were meeting in one of the rooms.

And I walk in, and the first thing you notice is that there are all these gorgeous guys. Peter Staley, [Mark] Harrington was there, Ken Fornataro was there, and a bunch

of other people, and they all looked the picture of health, which was very encouraging to me. They were interviewing some guy from a pharmaceutical [company], and it was all very cloak and dagger, because this guy was – whatever the product is that they now use to get people's red blood cells up to par – they don't use it as an AIDS drug now, but at the time, it was thought that it would have some therapeutic value. They were trying to figure out number one, what did it do? And number two, if there's any way they could get it on to – I guess I didn't know it at the time – what would have been a phase I clinical trial. And the guy was in a business suit, and he had a valise and the whole thing was like something out of James Bond. He opened this valise and had all these files and folders, and everything he said was sort of in a whispered tone, like he wasn't supposed to be there. And people were taking notes furiously about what this drug's attributes were and it just looked, it was very fascinating. Here was this middle-aged old guy in a suit, obviously used to giving slide shows someplace, giving what was in essence a presentation to a bunch of guys in jeans, in their twenties, asking really, really astute questions of the guy. And I'm going, this is the place to be. Any one of these guys probably knows more about HIV than my doctor does. So that's how I joined ACT UP, and I think probably for the first six months, I was sort of just a lurker. It was in the winter of '89 – I'm sure we were still at the Gay Center, and it was still standing room only. I would always stand at the back. It was very over-heated.

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SS: Just for the record, the medicine is called EPO [erythropoietin], right?

RM: Right.

SS: So you would go to the Monday night meetings, and go to T&D – is that how you did it?

RM: For a while. What happened with T&D was – and this was a problem I had for a few years and no longer have – is that when people would ask you what your T-cells were, I would always tell them well, between 800 and 900 – which is extremely high for an HIV person. And the conventional wisdom was when your T-cells were that high, there was really nothing available in terms of a medicine that would make a difference for you. I think the strategy at that point was to wait until your T-cells went down. And I don't even think AZT had been approved quite yet. I think that within the year it did, and that was sort of the standard treatment – was to wait until your T-cells went down. I think it depended on how quickly they were going down, but certainly by 300 they thought you should be on some kind of drug. I think AZT was the only thing available at that point.

So for a couple of years, while my T-cells were still fairly healthy, I may have stopped going to T&D and basically focused on the Monday night meetings. And within a few months of my going to the Monday night meetings and lurking in the background, I encountered a woman by the name of Emily Gordon. Emily was this amazingly energetic woman, who basically never took no for an answer. She just took me by the hand and practically led me to the Majority Action Committee, which was a wonderful committee. It was one of the last organizations I remember where blacks and whites cooperated with each other on a very high plane. It was basically gay black men and straight white women – some of whom were social workers – basically designing direct actions and doing a lot of outreach in the minority communities, and just hanging in there

through thick and through thin – with all the ups and downs that were going on in ACT UP.

SS: How many people in Majority Action were you –

RM: I can't remember the names, now. There was Marvin Williams. There was Marvin Palmer. There was a Michael Wiggins, Emily, Sharon Tramutola. There are a few others that I'm blanking out on. But I think those were the core people.

SS: Is Marvin Williams a different person than Dan Williams?

RM: Did I say Marvin? I should have said Dan Williams – Dan Williams and Marvin Palmer – that's what it was. And that was just a great way to get started, mainly because Emily herself was just so energetic. I don't remember her ever getting arrested, but she would do everything possible for an action – to make it work – from leafleting to wheat-pasting. That's where I learned to do wheat-pasting – what little I did.

SS: Can you tell us some specific actions or projects that Majority Action did?

RM: I'm thinking that one of the things Majority Action did was they were very good at getting their members to – what did we call those scientific conventions? There was the international one –

SS: Berlin and Montreal and – the conferences.

RM: They were very good at getting people of color into conferences, and that's where I got my first initiation of going to a conference. I think it was something called – a conference on antiretroviral something, in Washington. And that was my first experience of going overnight, checking into a hotel, and going to as many presentations as possible – taking notes and coming back and reporting what I knew. It's difficult to

imagine that now, but back then – this was before the mid-'90s – ACT UP really was the place you had to go if you wanted solid, cutting edge information about HIV. There was no internet. There were no websites. If you were to find out what was going on in the scientific community, you either had to have a subscription to a very, very difficult to read journal, or you had to go to ACT UP and pick up some of the summaries that people go to. T&D was very good at doing that, and I think – Majority Action, what they did was – they were very good at getting the minority point of view, the minority community point of view on scientific activity. And I sort of made that my specialty – to kind of go to these things and write my own summary up in language that I thought people could understand, and put it on the table. But other than that, the other thing that Majority Action did was that they provided manpower. They may not have thought it up themselves, it might not have been their idea, but they made sure that people got there. And, a lot of them took busts. I was not one of them, because I was still at this stage where – as an attorney – I shouldn't really be getting arrested, but I know Dan did. I know Sharon did, many times. And they really stepped up to the plate, when it got to doing civil disobedience. It was that whole tradition in the African-American community.

SS: What were the specific people of color issues, regarding treatment at the time?

RM: I think just getting the information out. There was a feeling abroad – this is bringing back very painful memories – that ACT UP was a white organization. It was always described as a white organization whenever they got any publicity. I think there were so many class issues within the gay community at that point that for a person of

color to walk into a T&D meeting was to walk into a very tense situation. I was at a T&D meeting – this is not all that early, but fairly late, this is just about the time when TAG [Treatment Action Group] was being formed. I was at a T&D meeting where a black mother walked in off the street, found her way to the Gay Center, found a way up those stairs to where T&D was meeting, and she listened very patiently while all this old business was being taken care of. And then, when the questions and answers were open to the floor, she raised her hand and she explained her situation. It was a situation we'd all heard many times before – my son is HIV, he's a drug user, he's got this, that and every other kind of opportunistic disease. Where can he go? And, I swear to God, Larry Kramer interrupted her mid-sentence and told her there was nothing that they could do for her, and that there are other places that she should take her problem. And the really sad part is that nobody else criticized Larry for doing that. That was pretty much the consensus of the room – was that this woman, this poor woman was speaking out of order, basically.

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So Majority Action was basically – one of the issues that they saw was just access within the black community. Access to the information and getting the word to the black community that AIDS was a problem. We were sort of caught between a rock and a hard place. The gay white men who were basically running the treatment actions really didn't have a high tolerance for black issues. And yet, the black community didn't have a high tolerance for AIDS issues.

SS: How did that get communicated?

RM: I think we probably tried at some point to go to churches. You're reminding me of something else – what was that woman's name, who was head of

something called the Minority Council on AIDS? [Debra Fraser-Howe of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS] For a long time, she was a very outspoken black woman who basically just alienated any gay person who came within speaking distance of her. And I think a couple of us tried to approach her directly, and were given the runaround.

SS: You personally?

RM: Not me, but I can visualize Dan giving a presentation about a conversation that he had with her.

JW: Was it Marjorie Hill?

SS: No, Marjorie Hill was a – is a lesbian.

RM: One thing that I was directly involved with myself was – there was some discrete inquiries made by the Haitian community as to what we could send them in terms of information. And I'm trying to remember, they were located – there was some gentleman that was head of a Haitian community organization. And I think they were in Brooklyn – they were in downtown Brooklyn, someplace. And, I remember carrying a bunch of literature over to them and having them look at it and they were very courteous, but one of the concerns was, "Do you have anything that you can give us that's less gay-oriented?" And, that always seemed to be the gap. We had good stuff, we had lots of information, but the black community was unwilling to come downtown, basically, and downtown was unwilling to go uptown. And that always seemed to be the fissure between the two groups. Here we had Majority Action trying to play sides against each other, and it wasn't long before the frustration level got very high and within Majority

Action, I started going to another committee called the Outreach Committee, which seemed to be a little more apropos to what we needed to do.

SS: Who was on that committee?

RM: That was Michael Longacre – a bunch of people. For a long time, I even had their – used to carry their phone numbers with me. Here it is – who's on here? Tony Ortiz, David Levine, Mark Tyner, Andy Valentine, Charlie Welch, Mary Grace Farley – there's about two dozen names here, not all of them are legible anymore – Rick Mount. That was another good committee. Michael Longacre knew how to run a committee. He was with Microsoft for a long time, and he was just very good organizationally. And, that's where I became friends with him. I'm still friends with Michael, I'm happy to say.

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00:15:00

SS: So, what did Outreach do?

RM: Outreach did everything they knew how to do to just communicate things. They did wheat-pasting. For a long time, they would put out a tabloid called *ACT UP Reports*, and I think Michael paid for a lot of that himself, out of his own pocket. That's where I started writing for – initially, it was for *ACT UP Reports*. I think the wheat-pasting and putting up, and writing, and asking people to write articles for *ACT UP Reports* was their primary function. But it was also getting me out of Majority Action, which was sort of falling apart by that point.

SS: Why was it falling apart?

RM: Well, I think there was frustration over not making greater in-roads within the establishment black community, frustration with being ignored by the gay establishment and, I think what actually really did it in was Dan being accused of taking money.

SS: Can you tell us about that? We've heard about that from other people too, but can you just sort of tell us for the historical record?

RM: My understanding is that there was something called the Coordinating Committee which basically would give people cash for anything that they had to pay for out of their own pockets, if they would provide them with receipts. And it wasn't that well organized, and it was perfectly possible for people to hand in the same receipts over and over again. I don't know why or how that happened, but apparently that was what Dan was accused of doing. At some point, he admitted that it was true and under threat of – that was one of the few Coordinating Committee meetings I remember attending myself, was sort of to be there, in support of Dan. I felt a little bit of responsibility as an attorney, that he should have somebody in his corner. And basically, under threat of them seeking an indictment – which I don't think they could have gotten, frankly – he agreed to enter into a stipulation with them, where he would pay them back. I'm not sure if he ever did. But he basically left ACT UP under a cloud.

SS: How much money did he take?

RM: For some reason I don't think it was that much more than \$1,000. It wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was enough money that people were astounded by it. And, when you consider all the things it could have gone to – in terms of actions it could have paid for, it was not a small amount of money.

SS: Was there ever any other incident of people stealing money from ACT UP?

RM: Oh sure. It was very easy to steal money from ACT UP. ACT UP was a sieve, financially. One of the – what did we call it at that point? The people that were

put in charge of running ACT UP, basically – the Chief Executive Officer – I don't know what we called it – he also left under a cloud. I think he was accused of more money than Dan. I think it was like more than \$4,000.

SS: Who was that?

JW: Are you talking about Scott?

RM: Scott Sawyer.

SS: He was the Treasurer.

RM: Treasurer, OK. Wasn't there something else called the Coordinator? No? Okay. We'll never know about that – but he left also under a cloud.

SS: Let me just get back to treatment. So because your T-cells were so high that there was no medication for you, you took a vacation from TAG, and were working in these other – now, when you did start treatment, did you make your treatment decisions with information that was provided by ACT UP? Or did you make it outside of ACT UP?

RM: It was both. I finally was able to become one of Sheree Starrett's patients. She was the sister of Barbara Starrett. She was connected with clinical trials at some point. Compound Q, I think, was one of her trials, and she got into some trouble with that at some point. So, I was able to find a doctor who didn't mind taking direction from their patient.

SS: And you got her through ACT UP?

RM: I didn't get her through ACT UP. I actually saw her on television. She was doing an interview. I think it was because of the Compound Q incident. I said, if she's willing to take those kinds of chances, than that's the kind of doctor I want. And I

actually lied and told her that I didn't know my status, and I got tested all over again. She was so sweet. She was completely different from my first experience. She invited me into her office, and she looked at me balefully and she said "I have bad news for you." I said, "What is it?" And she told me that I was seropositive. The reason I had to do that was because she wasn't accepting new patients, and for some reason I was just able to get in under the gun. She wasn't accepting any other doctor's patients. So, I went through that little charade with her. But I could read things from the ACT UP table that looked like they might pertain to me, and I could take the information to her, and she would take it seriously, and tell me whether or not she thought it was for me or not. And I was constantly bouncing ideas off of her. I think at that point most of the AIDS doctors – doctors who chose to specialize in AIDS – came in with a fairly radical understanding of doctor/patient relationships. I think AIDS changed that whole thing. We had a real effect on just about every other advocacy group – from breast cancer to lupus – you name it. People became much more aggressive, in terms of asking questions and seeking out treatments, and I think ACT UP had a real impact on that, a real effect on that.

SS: So when you started treatments, what did you start with?

RM: I started with AZT. I forget what the trigger was. There was precipitous decline in my T-cells at some point, and Sherri put me on AZT and there was a rebound. One of the things about AZT is that it did work for a while. And I think after it rebounded, my T-cells started coming down again, and it was obvious that AZT didn't have the punch they thought it did. And, I think a lot of people were experiencing the same thing. And this pall was cast over what we thought of at the time as the treatment community. We had won this terrific victory, in terms of getting accelerated approval

and getting drugs into people's bodies, only to realize that not only did the virus have this amazing ability to mutate, but that the more choices we had in terms of drugs, the less we actually knew how they worked. And at some point – probably in 1993 – after I had been in ACT UP for a while, it was obvious that the Treatment and Data people were looking for something else to do. They basically had gotten to – I forget what the phrase was – they'd gotten to the table to find out that there was nothing there.

An interesting thing happened – I think a lot of the energy in ACT UP shifted from treatment, into some of the more social work aspects of AIDS. There was much more efforts at doing demonstrations uptown, and there was a major action to prevent the pre-natal ward from being closed at St. Luke's. A lot of work, in terms of pre-natal treatment and preventing people who had just given birth from having to take the HIV test, a lot of work on confidentiality issues. But less on treatment. I think one of the things that happened with Mark Harrington was that in searching around for something else – a second act, in terms of treatment issues – he fell onto this idea of the large, simple trial, which was basically – the whole idea of that was to, instead of doing all of the screens – there were all these compounds out there that were in the pipeline. Some of them were already being used for other diseases. Some of them were abandoned drugs. They weren't sure what kind of efficacy they had. If someone did the arithmetic – that if you did all the different combinations of things that were out there that were sort of in the pipeline, you could come up with a thousand different combinations of drug therapy. The real problem, in terms of – I think how Mark saw the problem – was, how do screen these things? Do you continue screening these things? Mark stumbled onto this idea of the large, simple trial as a way of screening all of these different possible combinations – of

which there could be a thousand or more – getting away from using the Petri dish as a way of finding out what works against HIV, and using actual human beings. The only problem with that idea is that a lot of people questioned whether it made sense to use human beings as a screening device, after you had already won major victories, in terms of accelerating the approval process. Why slow it down, by recruiting actual human beings? That could delay things for years also.

SS: I don't understand what a large simple trial is.

RM: A large, simple trial was a way of getting enough people on different combinations of drugs so that at the end of it, you would have a statically significant outcome.

SS: So, all the people in the trial – each one was on a different combo?

RM: Right. And of course each one had to be recruited.

SS: But, they would be observed on their combo? Or would they be given something in addition?

RM: I think there were different variations of it. People would be observed on what they were already on. There was some variation that included people switching to whatever was the drug of the month, at that point – of whatever the combination of the month was. All these things would somehow be plotted and kept track of. I'm not even sure for how long, but it was clearly something that would take longer than simply testing it in-vitro. And, there was a lot of disagreement about it. It really cleaved the treatment community in half.

SS: And it was an ethical conflict? About whether or not it was ethical?

RM: There were some ethical questions about, first of all, how many people do you want involved in an experiment that may not work out? And, that might leave them vulnerable to – for that treatment no longer being –

SS: So, in other words, you would watch everyone on their different combos, and see who lived and who died, and that's how you would determine –

RM: That's one way of looking at it.

SS: Were T&D guys, themselves, volunteering for this trial?

RM: I don't think it ever got that far –

SS: Oh, it didn't happen.

RM: Because what happened was combination therapy sort of made all of that moot. But this is already after TAG had been formed and divisions within the community had already happened and there was just a lot of drama over it.

SS: Okay, before we get into the TAG split, I just want to get back to this question of your treatment. You started with AZT, and then where did you go to after that?

RM: I think after my T-cells started fluctuating, I stayed on AZT for years. I think at some point, I'd picked up the idea from someone – it might have been somebody in ACT UP who said, "Why don't you try pulsing AZT?" And I took that back to Barbara, and she didn't think it was a bad idea.

SS: What is pulsing?

RM: Pulsing was taking AZT for a couple of months, and then stopping for a couple of months, and seeing if that would have an affect on – I'm vegging out on the word for what happens when a drug is no longer efficacious.

JW: Resistance

RM: Resistance – that’s what it is. That was the ethical question that launched large-scale trials. It was how do you justify having all those people meeting resistance on drugs that may not work for them, and that they might need later on? So it was clear that I was resistant to AZT, but that somehow the theory was that if you pulse it, it might somehow extend its life. And, I don’t know – I think it seemed to work for a while. I think at some point my T-cells plateau-ed around 500 or 600, something like that. It was enough to get me to the point where when combination therapy came down, that I wasn’t too far gone in terms of my T-cells. My T-cells really never dipped below 250 on more than a couple of occasions. I was very lucky.

SS: Everyone that we’ve interviewed who’s HIV – we’ve just asked them for the record, if you’re willing to say what medications you’re on now.

RM: What now? This is my second year – I just completed my second year of a drug holiday. I was on a triple combination – it was AZT and Saquinovir. What’s the other big retroviral?

JH: Were you on Viracept?

RM: I think I was on Viracept as a replacement for Saquinovir. I don’t remember what I was on, it was so long ago.

SS: So you’ve been on no meds for two years?

RM: For two years.

SS: Wow, congratulations.

RM: And I just got tested, and my viral load is only 31,000. I think what happened to me was, being on combination therapy for a couple of years was enough to

give my immune system a rest, and I think that's what it really needed. My viral load went down to undetectable. It remained undetectable for a couple of years. This is not my first drug holiday. The first drug holiday I went on I stayed on a year, and went back on when my viral load went up to 100,000. So I went back on for another couple of years, went back down to undetectable. And then, it got harder and harder to get to undetectable. I think it would go down to 1,000 or 10,000, and just stay there and my T-cells would get up to maybe the high 500s, and they would get stuck there. And so we just tried going on a drug holiday, and so far my T-cells have stayed above 300 and the viral load is not going above 30,000 – which is not bad, in terms of how bad it could be. We're knocking on wood here.

SS: How did your family react when you got diagnosed?

RM: I never actually told them. The way my brother found out was that he saw me at an ACT UP demonstration.

SS: On the street or on TV?

RM: On TV. I think it was the St. Luke's demonstration in fact, the pre-natal clinic. And he called me up. It wasn't even right after the demonstration. He called me up months later, and we were talking about something else and he said, "Are you gay?" He didn't even know I was gay. And I said yes. He said, "Are you HIV-positive?" And I paused for a bit, and I said you know, anytime I'm going to tell him, now is the time. So, I said, "Yes." And he said, "I have to hang up now, I'll call you right back." He told me later he actually cried at that point. And he called me up about ten minutes later and he said, "Well, are you HIV or do you have AIDS?" And I told him I have HIV, and somehow that made it a little bit better for him. And I asked him, "Why are you asking?"

And he explained to me that he saw me at an ACT UP demonstration. He's basically the only member of the family I've talked to about it. I don't know if anybody else knows, or they've just sort of decided to not make it an issue.

SS: This is kind of a complicated question that I want to ask you, but I feel like it's an important one. What do you think is the consequence on your life, that that is the nature of your family's knowledge of you – that there's so much restriction on it?

RM: That is a complicated question.

SS: Let's change the tape and you think it over.

Tape III
00:00:00

RM: That's a complicated question in that it's almost inseparable from the whole being out to my family. How that's affected me being the only person at Thanksgiving who doesn't have a significant other. Not being able to invite close personal friends to my own birthday party – and, we're very big on birthday parties in my family. I can't remember the last time I invited anybody. It's strictly the family and whoever my brother is going out with at that point, and my sister's husband – it's just been understood that I wouldn't put a boyfriend of mine – even if I had one – in that situation.

SS: If you came out to your family, would you still be invited to Thanksgiving?

RM: I probably would, yeah.

SS: What do you think the consequence would be?

RM: I think that what would happen is, they would put it in a bottle – the idea that I was gay – stuffed into a bottle and put it onto a shelf, and they would never refer to

it again. It's a little bit like growing these braids. The first time my mother saw it, it was a shock. She didn't like it. She wanted me to get them cut off. And after that, she never mentioned it again.

SS: Do you feel it as a kind of oppression?

RM: Oh sure, sure. The word oppression is almost too small a word to describe it.

SS: What would be a better word?

RM: Wow. It's almost like a pathology. In my case, I have a difficult time separating it from my own family's dysfunction, because we never talk about anything. And as an aside, I might as well tell you I'm an adult child of an alcoholic parent, and we never talked about that either, except very, very rare occasions – my sister and brother will mention it. But, that's just the way it is.

SS: One of the things that I know from being gay myself, but also from being in ACT UP is that so many people with AIDS in ACT UP, and yet there was almost no participation by people's families on their behalf. Ray Navarro's mother – whenever it happened, it was so rare. Can you talk about that a little bit?

RM: Well, I think that being gay is so much part and parcel with separating from your family somehow. Somehow, this is your life. It's bound up with sexuality and privacy. So many of us – not myself, particularly – but so many of us identify as gay basically at the same time we start discovering sex – that sharing that information with your parents is sort of problematic. And even if they know that we're gay, the idea of sharing information about who you're having sex with is sort of anathema. I'll give you an example. A good friend of us on the Outreach Committee was a young guy whose

name was Matt. He was from someplace in the Midwest. He was cute as a button, came to ACT UP – I'm not sure what drew him to ACT UP. He came – I don't think he knew his status, his sero status. He linked up with a boyfriend – Mark Tyner's boyfriend. They were both cute; they made a good couple.

I would say maybe six months into their relationship, Matt discovered that he was positive, and the question came up as to whether he should go back home or not. And, it was just this terrible, terrible tug of war. What happened with Matt is that he got sick suddenly, and that's how he found out. He turned from this picture of health to a very sick man with AIDS, almost overnight. And, I think we all wanted him to stay in New York. New York had the best doctors, the best medical facilities, the best ACT UP chapter. His family wanted very much for him to come back. I think it was Missouri someplace, that he was from. And we all looked at each other and I think the ACT UPpers that were in that hospital room – listening to Matt, as he was having this conversation with some brother, I think it was – we all figured if Matt goes back to Missouri, he's going to die. And in some metaphorical sense – I guess I'm speaking for myself now – that sharing my gay life with my parents is a form of death. It's like the death of my sexuality, somehow, letting them in on that. I don't mean to trivialize what Matt went through, but it was almost the same thing.

SS: Did he go home?

RM: He did go home and he did die within, I think, about a year.

SS: Why do you think that the families of people with AIDS did not get involved in saving their lives?

RM: I can only guess that they were sort of outcasts to begin with. Mark [Tyner] was the other example. Mark was from Florida. I think he ran out of Florida to get away from his family. I think that might have been the story with a lot of people in ACT UP. They were the bad sheep, the black sheep of their families. There's just a veil of woe connected with the families of people in ACT UP.

SS: Did you ever talk about that with other people, or was it just a given?

RM: I don't think I did, actually. I probably remember something afterward, but I don't remember any one conversation. Other than what happened with Matt, I don't remember any one conversation about people's attitudes towards their parents. I think the assumption was everybody was on the outs with their parents.

SS: Just out of curiosity, did you watch "Angels in America" when it was on TV?

Tape III
00:10:00

RM: I didn't watch it. I saw it on Broadway, though.

SS: Having been in an organization like ACT UP – in which gay people stood by each other and united together and in which their families abandon them – how did you feel watching something in which a gay man abandons his boyfriend, and the boyfriend is taken to the hospital by the Mormon mother?

RM: I think it probably reminded me a little bit of Matt. That there are good people out there who given half a chance will make the effort. But that –

SS: Do you know anyone who abandoned their boyfriend when they had AIDS?

RM: I'm sure I did – not in ACT UP, though. I think part of my extended family of bar-buddies – that probably happened. I know people who got kicked out by roommates once they were diagnosed.

SS: I guess I'll ask you something a little different. You've said that most people in ACT UP were outcasts and that their families were not there for them, and that it wasn't even discussed and since we lived through and created an historical movement and historical event of transforming the AIDS crisis, and we see it represented – that when you watch movies about AIDS or this type of thing, and see plays – you never see the political movement and the community. So I guess I'm talking about the gap about what we've all really lived and the way it's being represented.

RM: I will say this – I have yet to see the definitive movie or play about the movement. Even Larry's stuff is more autobiographical than anything else. You hear rumors that so-and-so is writing a book and so-and-so is doing this and that – but, I haven't seen anything that accurately reflects what I went through the late '80s and early '90s of ACT UP. It's almost as though we were sort of sandwiched between two different crises – the World Trade tower going down, and whatever crisis of the year was before that. I guess Vietnam would be the other one. It seems as though we were there for an awfully long time. The media was very slow, in terms of even talking about AIDS, and when they finally did, that was sort of when ACT UP was on its way down. And that no one captured the moment when it had its greatest impact.

SS: Thank you. Let's go back to some ACT UP questions. I want you to talk about ACT UP culture. You were going to the Monday night meeting, you were in all these various committees. How much of your week was spent with ACT UP?

RM: At least two days. There was the Monday night meeting, and whatever committee I was going to. I missed the entire run of *Northern Exposure* because that was on Monday nights. I'm still waiting for that to come out on DVD.

SS: Were you still going to Uncle Charlie's when you were in ACT UP, or did you stop going?

RM: I gradually stopped going. When you talk about, "They're killing that old gang of mine" – that was literally true by the early nineties. It just wasn't the same. It wasn't fun anymore to go to the same bars and learn that so-and-so had tested positive, or so-and-so was in the hospital. Bars were basically about a certain kind of alcoholism – binge drinking. And it didn't take rocket science to realize that that's how I got into the situation that I was in, and that's how a lot of other people were getting into the situation. It felt wrong for me to preach one thing to people at a Monday night meeting, and then go out and live the opposite.

SS: You think that you got infected because you were drinking?

RM: I think I had unprotected sex under the influence of alcohol. I'm pretty sure about that.

SS: So, you went to different bars? Because ACT UP had its own bars – like, The Bar was an ACT UP bar and Crow Bar.

RM: I stopped being a night person. I had a few friends left over – and it might have just been the age that I was at, because I had a few friends left over from the Uncle

Charlie's days who quit drinking. Quite literally, they became teetotalers. And, after having reached several bottoms – and one did not become HIV-positive, but he nevertheless stopped drinking because his life was such a mess. A lot of people did turn seropositive – thankfully, they're still alive – and I'm in contact with them off and on. But the idea of all of us getting together and having drinks after work just sort of stopped.

SS: Did you socialize in ACT UP? Did you go out after the meetings?

RM: I tried to. I had a crush on at least half a dozen people.

SS: Did you ever date people inside ACT UP?

RM: I can remember very clearly one date that I went on. It wasn't a great date. It was hard, it was difficult to date in ACT UP. People were so serious that you risked never leaving ACT UP, if you really got into a serious relationship with somebody, and I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready to be an ACT UP wife. I was willing to flirt. I had quite a few flirtations.

SS: Was there any kind of division inside ACT UP around sex, between people who were HIV-positive and people who were negative?

RM: You know, there probably was looking back on it, but I never got that close for it to become an issue. I dated somebody who was seronegative, but it never became a serious relationship. I wonder if the reason it didn't become a serious relationship was because of the difference. He had one excuse, but I wonder if the real excuse wasn't the difference in positivity. I've heard both. There are clearly examples of people who were different – who had relationships. But something tells me they were the exceptions.

SS: What about care groups? Were you ever in a care group for someone in ACT UP?

RM: No. In fact, that's a new terminology to me. I'm not sure what that is.

SS: Because you said when Matt got sick, you were in the hospital room. Were there people in ACT UP who when they got sick, you were one of the people responsible for taking care of them?

RM: No. That was probably the last time I actually visited an ACT UPper in a hospital.

SS: Did you go to memorial services or funerals?

RM: I went to a few. I remember going to Ray Navarro's. I remember marching in Aldyn's memorial service.

SS: What was that – where was the march?

RM: I forget where it started. I know it wound up at Union Square, and we marched – it must have been close to a quarter of a mile I guess, through the streets. It was at nighttime and they had torches – which was dramatic. And the last thing I remember was people singing "Danny Boy" up the steps, where they had the cobblestones. And somebody setting fire to his leather jacket. And the police intervened at that point but somehow or another, we were able to talk them down from actually having to put out the fire. We continued singing "Danny Boy" – the people who knew the words. The fire gradually went out, and I just remember being able to mark that spot for months and months afterward – the black stain on the cobblestones.

SS: Where was this?

RM: This was at the foot of Union Square – right on 14th Street. There was a platform as you go up the steps, and there was just a dark, sort of charcoal spot there – it might have been there a year later. And there was never a point that I would see that and not think of Aldyn.

SS: Were you friends with Aldyn?

RM: I wasn't friends with Aldyn, but he was one of those people that you secretly wanted to be like, and wanted to be liked by. I remember being at a demonstration – I think it was a City Hall demonstration – specifically when Dinkins appointed that Health Commissioner.

SS: Stephen Josephs?

RM: No, Woody Myers. The Woody Myers demonstration. And we had jumped across the barricades to form a march, right in front of the steps. And the police were pushing us back. It looked like it could have been close to 100 people. My imagination sees a crowd of people walking in a very long circle in front of the City Hall steps, and then gradually, part of our purpose of being there was to stay there as long as possible, until the six o'clock news came on. And, Ann Northrop was very good at delay tactics. She had us pose for pictures and all sorts of things. And then finally six o'clock came, and I forget whose idea it was for the police to finally start pushing us back – whether it was the police who had thought of it, or whether it was ACT UP – but they started pushing us back against the barricades, and I remember Aldyn being in front of me. And, I was just trying to watch my back, to make sure that I didn't get too squashed. And I remember just feeling Aldyn's back on the back of me as he faced the cops. And he had the most ferocious look on his face – you wouldn't think a musical comedy actor

could look that way, but he did – and it was a steely stare. It still sends chills up my spine – that little bit of human contact of his back, of our shoulder blades touching, and him sort of guarding the rear as we retreated.

SS: And what about Ray? What made you go to Ray's funeral?

RM: I was still in Majority Action, and I think Ray may have been a member of Majority Action, and I wasn't close to him, but he was a familiar figure and everybody admired him. It just felt like it was the right thing to do.

SS: Let's get into the TAG split. Can you tell us how you understand that, and what you think happened?

RM: I'm sure everyone has their own take on it. My take is that there had always been class and race fissures within ACT UP, but that somehow all that kind of got covered up as long as there had been some glimmer of hope that a cure was around the corner. And I think by the early '90s – I think that was sort of a low point in terms of morale. The fact that AZT didn't work, the fact that it didn't seem as though there was anything else coming down the pipe that would work. I think the Berlin conference – which I went to with James Wentzy – all the reports that were coming out were negative reports. I think what happened was that that allowed a lot of the tensions to come up to the surface, since nobody could claim that they had an answer as to what to do next. And TAG had the most money; they had the most professional people with the most money. They attracted the most attractive people. Wherever you have middle-aged, wealthy people, you're going to have young, good-looking guys. And I think they looked askance at a lot of the fiscal irregularities and they started making noises very early on. I think

from 1992 on they were talking about, if you don't stop spending money on this, stop spending on that, we're going leave.

SS: Spending money on what?

RM: My own opinion is that they objected to us spending so much money, in terms of social welfare. Anybody who came to the floor of ACT UP who had a halfway decent proposal for giving money to a group that did good work – particularly in the black community – we'd do it.

SS: ACT UP gave money to other organizations?

RM: I'm sure they did. There was a group up in Harlem called Emmaus House, I think it was? They made several very good presentations to the floor. There was a very well spoken, good-looking, black gentleman, who's name I can't remember – who was an ex-offender, I think he was an ex-drug user. But made a very strong case for funding some initiatives up in Harlem. They were one of the groups that co-sponsored the St. Luke's demonstration. I remember going up there with Steven Keith handing out flyers, and just how respectful, how appreciative they were just having any kind of literature from ACT UP. And they were one of the few groups that did not make us tone down the gay references. Not that we ever did, but they overlooked it. They respected it; they honored it. And there were other groups. A lot of the pre-natal groups, the woman's groups – just about any group that was doing good work – if they asked us for money for some reason, we'd have given it to them. And this got a lot of people on the fundraising end of it angry, because they felt that they'd worked hard getting the money – just to see it trickle out like that, got them upset. And then you had Mark [Harrington], who I think up until that point was accustomed to seeing ACT UP as his primary platform to speak to

the world. And, the fact that there were now competing voices – I really think that got to him to a certain extent, too. He wanted a clear base that was his own, and that articulated his concerns, without any kind of filtering. And the only way they could do that was to form their own organization and not only that, make it very difficult for people to join – to become actual “members.” You were permitted to sit in on the meetings. I’m sure you could participate, but you couldn’t vote on anything.

SS: Did you go to TAG?

Tape III
00:30:00

RM: I went to a few. I found it frustrating to go on a regular basis, because as tendentious as the old T&D used to be, TAG just represented something altogether different. It was basically a lot of people speaking the party line. And if you didn’t agree with that party line, you basically were made to feel very unwelcome. Or you found yourself having to defend your position against 12 different people. I don’t know if you’ve ever been in that situation, but it’s not productive. You finally begin to think that it’s not productive.

SS: What was their party line? What was their agenda?

RM: Their party line was large simple trials and moving everything that had to do with AIDS into the Office of AIDS Research.

SS: Which was what?

RM: Which was this sort of offspring of the –

SS: It’s OK. You can think on camera.

RM: What is Fauci’s group?

JIM HUBBARD: NIAID [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases] or the NIH?

RM: No, the NIH [National Institute of Health]. It was basically an umbrella group that I think had input or members from each of the constituencies within the NIH, if they had anything to do with AIDS. And the TAG proposition was that, basically because they had allies within the structure at OAR.

SS: What's OAR?

RM: The Office of AIDS Research. And they felt that by shifting the funding to them, and giving them a bigger say, in terms of budget, would give them a bigger say, in terms of AIDS policy. And, all of this was supposed to basically come at the expense of Dr. Fauci, who, for some reason or other pissed them off. And they no longer wanted him to have as much power. And basically if you disagreed with that, you really weren't taken seriously as a treatment activist.

SS: So they had one point of view? They operated as a block?

RM: Oh sure. They put out a very well produced journal. Had a lot of good articles in it, but you could always tell there was a certain editorial gloss, which was that Fauci's the enemy and that there's a Congressman – I think it was Congressman Porter, from Ohio [John Porter, R-IL], who they were very tight with – and of course, any kind of drug that was – looking back on it, it was all very petty because they would suddenly decide that some drug that was in the pipeline wasn't good, and they would all lobby against it being approved. Even after they spent enormous amounts of time and energy in the pre-TAG years in oiling the wheels for things to be approved more quickly, they always played favorites. Some drugs were better than the other one. This one should be accelerated; this one should be slowed down. It was all very controlling.

SS: And what do you think was the thing behind it? What was at the core of this?

RM: I think that they wanted to be players. A lot of them at that point were becoming – they had gotten their seats at the table. Some of them were on the payroll of some of the bigger organizations – I'm thinking AmFAR.

SS: Who was on the payroll at AmFAR?

RM: I'm pretty sure [Peter] Staley was. Kevin Frost had a gig someplace else. I forget what that was – I think it was in Washington, someplace. A lot of people were joining GMHC. From what I understand, the benefits were pretty good. They were becoming AIDS professionals at that point, and I think the way they saw fit to hold on to that was to claim superior knowledge.

SS: What got lost by doing that? What fell by the wayside, when people professionalized?

RM: Number one, it lost any sense of comity between grassroots organizations.

SS: Comedy?

RM: Comity – any real sense of cooperation was lost, between ACT UP and TAG. The other thing it lost was a sense of democracy. This was no longer a grassroots organization we're talking about. We really were talking about something else entirely. I personally didn't think it was healthy – having a second tier, so to speak, of activist groups sort of competing for the media.

SS: How did this impact on the question of access?

RM: Well, I don't think there was any – with a few exceptions – I think Moises Agosto was very tight with TAG. I think there were a few other people that were tight

with TAG for a while. But by and large, the idea of a person of color – or black people, in particular – feeling comfortable in a wealthy gay white male’s living room in Chelsea – that just wasn’t going to happen. That constituency was lost. In terms of real access – access to drugs – I don’t know, because I stopped following the story once the combination therapies – once the protease inhibitors came down.

SS: You left ACT UP at that point?

RM: That’s when I left ACT UP.

SS: Was this before or after the 076 debate? Were you involved in the 076 debate?

RM: Was that convergent therapy?

SS: That was when mothers had HIV and they were giving pregnant women AZT to – that was the argument right around the split.

RM: I think I do remember that. Stephen Shapiro was also involved with that. That was when the women got ACT UP to pass a resolution requiring – forbidding T&D from having any discussions with the NIH for a period of time, because it felt like they were basically running away with the agenda.

SS: Which women?

RM: It was a women’s group. I don’t think there was any women’s group per se, but I think it might have been the same people who were involved with the pre-natal issues. I’m thinking Maxine Wolfe was leading the charge on that.

SS: So, Maxine got something passed on the floor, saying that TAG could not meet with the NIH?

RM: Saying that T&D could not meet – this was when they were still T&D.

SS: And what was the point of that?

RM: The point was – I wasn't really in favor of the resolution, but I take it that part of their rationale was these guys are getting funding from the floor to run down to Washington D.C., and have all these meetings with NIH officials – not always coming back to the floor and describing what they had talked about, and basically holding information very tightly. And that somehow if we could prevent them from doing that, they would become more open with the rest of the floor. I think really the only thing that happened as a result of that was that they made their resolve to leave ACT UP that much greater.

Tape III
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SS: Was that really the point of that resolution?

RM: To make them leave?

SS: Mm hmm.

RM: No, that wasn't the point. I think the point was accountability, really. Because I think nobody really imagined that they would leave. I think a lot of us thought that ACT UP was the only game in town, and that the way you made them accountable was to tell them that this is how the floor feels, and your behavior has to change or else.

Tape IV
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SS: You have a whole file there, stuff about ACT UP. Do you want to tell us what you've got in there?

RM: Well, one of the things that I think propelled ACT UP's demise – we talked about TAG – not that ACT UP is out of business completely, but I think that sort of contributed to its ceasing to be a mass movement, a mass phenomenon, was the advent of the internet. I think beginning around 1994 you had things like Sci.Med.AIDS, which was a newsgroup. That was really my first experience with a messaging board around

AIDS. What was remarkable looking back on it, is how many of us used our real names when signing posts to that newsgroup. I don't think that's the case now. The other thing that was remarkable is that that was one place, other than ACT UP, that you could go to get cutting edge information about treatment. We still had those tables at the back of the room with flyers and things on it, but I think the line got shorter and shorter. And, the other thing that happened is I got my first laptop and learned how to e-mail. And for some reason I was so enamored of it, I held on to hard copies of most of my e-mail for about an eight month period between Christmas – when I got the computer – of 1994 until around August of 1995. And this in a way really coincided with – I think TAG had already left at that point. And one of the things that happened because TAG left is that a lot of people of color stepped up to the plate to sort of fill the gap, in terms of treatment issues. And I started going back to T&D meetings. I think a lot of people tried to step up to the plate.

SS: Who were some of the people of color? Who are you thinking of?

RM: I'm thinking of Tony Ortiz. I'm thinking, Eric [Sawyer]'s boyfriend – Tony Burns. I almost count Sharon Tramutola as a person of color – people like that. And I include a lot of women also, who sort of stepped up and tried to keep it going. Karin Timour was working for *Body Positive* and she invited me to become one of the editorial contributors to *Body Positive*. So I started writing a monthly column, and I would have to use – I relied very heavily on stuff that was on the table to fill my column. And of course I started e-mailing with anybody I could who had an e-mail address also. And Stephen Shapiro happened to be one of those people. I like to think of Stephen as being that second generation or second wave of ACT UP that kind of came in after I did

Tape IV
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and was sort of vaguely Generation X. In other words, I think of myself as a boomer.

Those people came in and added a second shot of energy into the organization, and at that point I think my first post starts with the 8th anniversary action, which was a Pataki fundraiser at the Sheraton at 53rd Street. That was really my first direct action where I felt I had a decisive role in it. I wasn't just an onlooker. I was there, I was on the inside. I saw a lot of things I probably wouldn't have.

SS: What was your role? What did you do?

RM: Well I got there – it was 53rd and Lex[ington Avenue], I guess –

SS: Who was organizing this? Was it a committee?

RM: I guess it was basically organized by the Actions Committee, and it was in honor of ACT UP's anniversary. Usually, we have anniversary actions around December. And I remember arriving after work, so I was still dressed in a tie and a suit and the police had pretty effectively put everybody into a corral. People were marching around in a circle. And I kind of kept separate from that. I wanted to figure out a way of getting inside the hotel. And I went inside and just playing it by ear. By that point, I'd been to enough actions to figure out, the first thing you do is figure out where the exits and entrances are. I just systematically went from door to door, from ballroom to ballroom, to see if there was any other way of getting into the main ballroom. And there wasn't. I didn't find anyplace. And for some reason, I went up an escalator to a mezzanine level and I went down. And for some reason the down escalator put me more or less in front of and on the other side of the kitchen. And there was nobody guarding the entrance to the kitchen. They were all on other side of the kitchen, making sure

nobody else got into the ballroom. So, I was able to just go through the kitchen and into the ballroom.

I met Ellen Bay, and there was a Lesbian Avenger whose name I can't remember. And as far as we all knew, we were the only activists who'd gotten inside the ballroom. And, the feeling of exhilaration and responsibility – what do we do now that we're here? I'd never taken a bust and I didn't want to take a bust, and I don't think Ellen was particularly anxious to, either. I think the Lesbian Avenger would have, but for some reason we chose to work by consensus and there was one opportunity where she probably could have grabbed the microphone and shouted something in the microphone, but because we were working in tandem, we didn't quite do that. But Pataki did come through. We did get close enough to – Ellen actually shook his hand, and asked him what's he going to do about AIDS and he said, "Oh, we'll take care of that." He kept walking, and then we started shouting. We started shouting, "What about AIDS?" And you would be surprised how muffled a big ballroom like that – with people all over the place – can make even shouting at your full strength, and I don't think we carried more than a couple of people away. But it was enough to get the security guards after us. They were asking to see our credentials and invitations and stuff like that. We just started walking to the exits and we just kept walking. One of the beautiful things about demonstrations in New York is that no sooner do you hit the sidewalk than basically, you're part of the crowd. Basically that's what happened. It gave us something to talk about afterwards, and it made us feel good. The other big thing was at that point I think that people had come to realize the potential of the Internet. And so, there was a big

drive to create a website for ACT UP, and Stephen was very involved with that. A lot of our correspondence involves computer issues and funding.

There was another demonstration – which was probably my last one – which was done in conjunction with City University [of New York] students, because there were some cuts in – the tuition was being raised, and there were some cuts in the Department of AIDS Services which coincided with that. A lot of people who were aggrieved by Giuliani's budget decided to do an action together, and they went to different sites around the city. I think ACT UP's site – there may have been another one, but ACT UP's main site was the Queens Midtown Tunnel. I have a description of it here somewhere. Oh, here's me describing an action that Sharon Tramutola brought to the floor, involving one of her friends who was treated badly by the emergency room staff. This is dated February of '95:

“The St. Vincent's action was to protest the emergency room treatment, or lack of it, given to Sharon's roommate Roberto Richardson, who died some 12 hours after being admitted, in pretty horrendous condition. In what seemed like a pretty blatant case of insensitivity, if not outright neglect, Sharon wound up administering oxygen to the guy in the middle of the corridor, because no one would take the time to notice that he was slowly choking on his own vomit. One should add that Sharon barely knew one end of an oxygen tank from the other and probably would have poisoned the guy if some nurse hadn't intervened and given her some tips on where to hold and set the gauge. The point is, no matter what his prospects were he could have been made a lot more comfortable. And this seems to be happening a lot, especially to Medicaid patients.”

SS: So was there an action at St. Vincent's?

Tape IV
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RM: So we went back after Sharon came to the floor and, gosh, it was one of the better attended meetings, because I remember after she made the proposal and we approved it, we basically just got up en masse and left the meeting, and walked over to St. Vincent's. The first time we went, we basically occupied the waiting room and pinned up slogans around the waiting room. I think there was a crucifix there. We may have put something behind the crucifix. We read a list of demands and left. I think there was a follow up visit several months later, where they knew we were coming and they locked the door to the waiting room and we were sort of in an alcove area between the street and the actual waiting room. And we just stayed there until somebody came down and spoke to us, and basically wouldn't leave until they promised that they would look into the incident. But even that late – I still think it's incredible that we were still able to have that degree of anger and resolution to just set aside our ordinary business and do an action.

SS: Well it's also remarkable that here's this ACT UP member and her roommate dies, and her response is to come to ACT UP.

RM: Exactly. I'm still looking for that [description of the Queens Midtown Tunnel action] – well I know it was in June, so I should flip ahead. Well here's a little something about the financial situation – I was starting to facilitate at that point.

SS: What's the date?

RM: This was May 9, 1995:

“The other thing you should be aware of is that Scott Sawyer scared the bejesus out of everyone tonight with a special segment of the Treasurer's report, during which he pointed out that there is \$40,000 in the kitty, but that at current expenditure rates it is only

enough to keep us afloat through August. We have heard this sort of thing before, but in the past there were always people willing to go out and sell a few more t-shirts. I don't get that sense this time around. What's more surprising is that even at this late date, very few people outside of the treasurers know what our \$8,000-\$9,000 monthly overhead is all about. Apparently, rent is only a small part of the problem. At \$2,500 a month, the workspace is still a bargain. But surely things like the phone bill can be looked at. Scott didn't break it down, but my guess is that we are incurring a couple grand a month in long distance calls. The maintenance fees alone" – for the copier and things like that – "were about \$750 a month. In the age of cyberspace, is there any excuse for using long distance to leave a message with somebody? Also – and I hope this doesn't become an access issue – but we have all assumed all along that by having our own Xerox machine and supplies, that we were saving money. I wonder how much of what gets put on the back table would be deemed absolutely necessary if people did not have to front the money and get reimbursed? The same thing goes for phone calls."

SS: But actually, he was taking money.

RM: Scott was accused later of taking money, and a good size of what he was accused of taking was about half of our monthly budget.

SS: So your instincts were right. Well I want to ask you a few last questions, unless there's anything you want to talk about. This is kind of a big question and we're sort of at the end here. In today's AIDS landscape, access is the key question globally, because there are people who are on combo therapy or who have been able to use – who have low virus levels now. But globally, there's no access levels to any kind of adequate treatment. Can you trace any of that to

debates within ACT UP, and within AIDS activism about access? How did it get to this level?

Tape IV
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RM: Well, it's not that there weren't warning signs. One of the spats that we had – I can sort of include myself personally in that – there was a series of articles by Mark Schoofs – he wrote for the *Village Voice*, and he'd been to a few ACT UP meetings and wrote about us in a couple of *Village Voice* pieces. But at some point, for whatever reason, he decided that the reason that there was not more money available for third world AIDS treatment was because of activists and he blamed American activists, specifically. I just felt that that was such an unfair accusation that I wrote a couple of letters to the editor saying so. At that point, ACT UP had taken the heat for so many things and was coming under attack from so many different places. TAG was out there. Mark [Harrington] was making references to ACT UP whenever he had a chance. It just seemed very unfair and an example of piling on, to have the *Village Voice's* main AIDS expert blaming activists – who basically had their hands full just getting access for people in this country – for the fact that more wasn't being done for Africa and the Caribbean. I don't know whether there was a reaction to that that caused people to abandon the efforts. I do know that there was a real effort to hold the international conferences in third world countries. I think Durban, being the outstanding example of that. I don't know of anybody who wouldn't have preferred that more be done. I just don't think that they had the answers. That's my take on it.

SS: I guess my last question is, looking back – you were in ACT UP for six years, right? What do you see as ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you see as its most disappointing un-achievement – I don't want to say failure?

RM: I think it was probably, for a long while, the last best nesting place for the New York left. I think it provided a rallying point for a lot of right-thinking individuals – not all of whom were necessarily HIV-positive, but had been involved in political activism all their lives and saw fighting AIDS as part and parcel of that struggle. I think it changed relationships between doctors and patients. I think the fact that we see ads on the television now from pharmaceutical companies directing the viewer directly, is an outcome from that. And getting back to Mark Schoofs's point, I don't think you would have had a George Bush targeting a paltry \$15 billion for AIDS treatment in Africa, if there hadn't been an ACT UP first. Without ACT UP, obviously we would be 20 years behind.

Tape IV
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Its major failing or major non-success? I don't think it ever really mastered the Quaker consensus. Every decision was a battle. Everybody who disagreed with you was an enemy, and it made it very, very difficult for it to remain a phenomenon of mass movement over the long haul. Because I think people would just go in for as long as they could, and they'd wind up just too battered and bruised. I'm not sure if it could have ever mastered the Quaker consensus, but I find it kind of sad when I read in the paper that there's a resurgence of people getting positive results now, among young gay men – of all races, basically is the last report that I saw. And, I just think that's kind of sad that we have to learn that all over again – we have to fight those education battles all over again – that there wasn't more continuity.

SS: Wait, I have one final thing. Why did you change your name to “Raan,” R-A-A-N? Inquiring minds want to know.

RM: There was a point in Majority Action that we were convinced that different people's phones were being tapped by the FBI.

SS: Oh, tell me about this. I have to know about this.

RM: This is part of Dan Williams's overall sense of paranoia. He was constantly moving around, and I think he was involved in a few things. At one point I think his apartment was robbed, and that kind of sent him over the edge a little bit. And one by one, people began detecting clicks on their phone – or imagining that they had clicks on their phone. So for some reason or other, we thought that by changing the spelling of our names it would throw them off. Marvin Palmer became “Marvyn,” M-A-R-V-Y-N. Michael Wiggins became “michael wiggins” – all in small letters, like e.e. cummings. And Ron Medley became “Raam,” R-A-A-N. It was the fashion to change your name. It was silly, but a lot of people prefer Raam, R-Double-A-N.

SS: Well now we know. And now, the FBI has everything. Thank you Ron.

RM: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]