

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

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Interviewee: **Dolly Meieran**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Dolly Meieran  
April 21, 2015

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

DOLLY MEIERAN: What is today's date?

**JIM HUBBARD:** April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015.

DM: Okay. Today's date is April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. My name is Dolly Meieran, and I am forty-eight.

**SS: And where are we?**

DM: We are in Sarah Schulman's apartment in the East Village.

**SS: That's right. That's right. So where did you grow up, Dolly?**

DM: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**SS: And what did your parents do?**

DM: My father was a robotics nuclear metallurgical engineer who spent more time playing his viola, and my mother was an educator of the blind and visually impaired.

**SS: Oh, wow. Now, were they Pittsburgh natives?**

DM: No, my mum is from London, and my father was from Cleveland. It would be London, England, and Cleveland, Ohio.

**SS: And where were his family from?**

DM: They were from, you know, *shtetls*, but actually his father was from Norway, and most of his father's family died when the Germans invaded and shipped all the Jews off to Auschwitz. And so he actually spent a lot of his more recent years researching a lot of the Norwegian Jews and trying to educate people about that.

**SS: You are the first Norwegian Jew I have ever met.**

DM: No, David [Meieran] you probably met before me.

**SS: David, yes. Oh, I didn't realize that. And so did your parents—  
did your father speak Norwegian?**

DM: No, no. But, I mean, again, it was just sort of—you know, I always thought it was sort of interesting because Norway was just a steppingstone from *shtetl* to Midwest. Well, I mean, I guess, you know, he was there for, he went — my grandfather's father went there from Russia, Poland.

**SS: So were you guys—were you raised with community-oriented  
values or some kind of social justice politic, or what were you taught about that?**

DM: Not so, not in a very activist sense. I think that there was sort of this—even all of that came—I mean, I think that there was this sort of, you know, this kind of a tense relationship to history and the Holocaust, that because it was still so raw and so new, I mean, it's so strange to think, like, you know, the sixties and seventies, World War II was closer in history than ACT UP is to the present day, in a way, like there's this weird elasticity to time. And, you know, Judaism in Pittsburgh at that time was sort of really about, you know, the signs everywhere that said "Save Soviet Jewry." But, yeah, my parents weren't any of, like, the Bund kind of social activist sort of Jews.

**SS: So what kind of message do you think you got from them about  
community responsibility or social change? Or did you not get one? Did it come  
from somewhere else?**

DM: Yeah, I mean, I remember David campaigning against Reagan with a t-shirt that said "Vote for Frankenstein." I think he made it, and he drew this picture of

Frankenstein with Reagan. I mean, that was what they should have actually used for the AIDS Gay t-shirts because it was really—but, no, I mean, I think that there was sort of a sense of, you know, maybe so many post-war Jews that just living was more, like, and community was maybe on a smaller scale, you know. Like, you help people in this way, like, you teach, but it wasn't really—yeah, I wouldn't really cite that as a kind of a historical factor that went back for generations and generations.

00:05:00

**SS: So where did you get your social conscience and when did you get it?**

DM: My brother? No.

**SS: Could be.**

DM: I mean, you know, partially that, partially from just, I think, more from—maybe, okay, the first probably overt, self-aware social conscious, socially conscious activity was after I read *Diet for a Small Planet* and became a vegetarian, you know, after talking with friends and, you know, sharing the book. This was in 1980. It was so obvious that it was irresponsible to eat animals, because eating these animals that were fed took away food from the mouths of people who really could use the food. You know, when you just started looking, using that argument and—although I'd stopped eating, you know, certain things already at that point anyway because I remember first going into a restaurant and seeing, you know, the fishes swimming around, and that was it, I could never eat fish again. I'm like, you can't meet your dinner and then sit down at a plate. Anyway, so that was probably where my social consciousness came from.

**SS: That's interesting. Let me just turn off my phone, because I – so I assume – hold on sorry. So you're still a vegetarian, I assume.**

DM: Yes.

**SS: Okay. So when did you leave Pittsburgh? What happened?**

**JW: The mic.**

**SS: Oh, sorry.**

**JW: How it's fine. It's a miracle.**

DM: I left when I graduated in '83.

**SS: From?**

DM: High school.

**SS: High school, okay. And where did you go to?**

DM: Israel.

**SS: You moved to Israel?**

DM: Yeah, for a year in between high school and college.

**SS: How was that?**

DM: It was interesting, and it was definitely—it was before the, you know, pre-Intifada, so it was definitely a very different time, and, in a way, you know, when I look back, I'm like, god, how could I have been so sheltered from so much of the politics that were going on? And then fast-forward to somewhere going to school in a place like Oberlin, where politics and social activism are a lot more prominent and expected.

**SS: So did you get politically involved while you were in Oberlin?**

DM: Yeah, and I remember trying to bring David and Maria Magenti to Oberlin. We did a screening of "Testing the Limits" at some—it must have '87, maybe, I guess, and, you know, it was just so kind of difficult to make people aware at that time

outside of New York City. It was almost impossible, and that was a primed campus, in a way, because it really was about, you know, activism, except the activism at that time was so much focused around, like, divestment in South Africa and Central and Latin America, and these sort of like—on the one hand, there were these kind of like global political things that were very much outside most people's immediate existence, you know, sphere. And then, you know, there was this sort of this like looming, you know, cloud that nobody seemed to be fully aware or, or wanted, you know, was ready to be aware of at that point.

**SS: So you were exposed to it through David initially.**

DM: Yeah.

**SS: And when did AIDS enter your own life, become a part of your life?**

DM: It's hard to pinpoint. I don't remember. I don't remember, like, oh, yesterday I didn't know about AIDS; today I do. I just don't remember.

**SS: Well, what about like interacting with someone who was positive or—**

DM: I mean, I remember shooting Michael Callen in 1986, but never, you know—'85, '84?

**SS: So you were still at Oberlin when you were—**

00:10:00 DM: Yeah, but I would come here for breaks and for the summer, and I was helping Testing the Limits shoot, so it was already—

**SS: So you were a video AIDS activist before you were even in ACT UP, really.**

DM: Yes.

**SS: So what was Testing the Limits like? I mean, it must have been very exciting.**

DM: “Exciting” makes it sound sort of like, you know, a party. I mean, I think it was more there was this sense that this could actually make a difference. And, you know, when you started to literally take that phrase “Silence = Death” and reverse it so that knowledge, you know, voicing and knowledge equals life and power and information, that’s something like video, and, you know, videos and VCRs at that time were really just presented like an open door to really educate people, and it’s the perfect propaganda tool. I mean, can you imagine if George Orwell lived in that time? It would have been, you know, so amazing. I mean, I am a product of the Marshall McLuhan and academic age and identity politics and all of this stuff kind of synthesized with something like this device.

**SS: So how did Testing the Limits evolve their ideas? Like, did they try certain approaches and discard them or were things discussed or did it just come by whatever—**

DM: Try certain approaches. I mean, there wasn’t any real—yeah.

**SS: Could you tell us a little bit about how it was organized? Let’s put it that way.**

DM: I mean, from my—I mean, again, I was more marginal. Not marginal, but I was, you know, the lackey. I mean, David and Robin and Sandra were really—and Jean [Carlomusto] for a while, and Gregg [Bordowitz]. But, I mean, yeah, I mean, it was just sort of, I think, you know, everything was by the seat of the pants in a

way. The idea was, you know, there wasn't any kind of "Let's sit down, have a strategy, and then let's go out orderly and shoot it," you know. There was a sense of, like, "We're going to amass everything that we have, everything that we can, and then once it sort of—," you know. It was, like, the narrative was evolving. This sort of political narrative was evolving as everything was being shot. So it's not like you have a finite subject that you can plot, plot how you're going to approach it, you know. You're in the middle of it, and so you just kind of shoot what seems to be the most, you know, critical element.

**SS: And then how was the selection made?**

DM: For?

**SS: If you shot all day, was it made as a group or did each person edit their own footage?**

DM: No, I think it was, you know, as a group or whatever, whatever looked good. I mean, because if you're running around and police are sort of elbowing you, you can't really use footage that you can't see anything.

**SS: Right. What were you shooting Michael Callen doing?**

DM: Egg lipids, back from the People with AIDS Health Group, when they first started, you know, like the whole Buyers Club started. And it was like Michael Callen coming out of the closet saying—I think he had yellow rubber gloves on and was, like, holding like a giant jar of mayonnaise, you know. He just, like, came out of a closet. We had it shot. He was like, "I'm coming out of the closet," and he's holding this giant jar of, like, mayonnaise that was—because I think that's what lipids basically were.

And I think that was just, yeah, at that time, too, it was just like, again. So there was, like, educating people about the activism, but then also at that point people

didn't know about the Buyers Club. So that was, like, all—this was a way to get everyone to know about everything, like how do you deal with this, how do you deal with that.

**SS: So how did you guys distribute your tapes?**

DM: I guess mainly through film festivals, just through—I don't remember with them, I think, how Testing the Limits—it just sort of got—I mean, I know, you know, fast-forwarding, like at least with ReproVision, we had Women Make Movies was distributing it, but we had a lot of ourselves. We'd just sit there and, like, stuff them into envelopes and send them off to people and be like, "Okay, you need to let people know about this and you need to watch this."

00:15:00

**SS: Were you initiating your own shoots at any point or were you mostly an assist?**

DM: Well, yeah, no, because then at the same time there was all the ReproVision stuff, and so all the—

**SS: Can you explain with ReproVision was?**

DM: Yeah. ReproVision was a collective that was shooting issues on women's healthcare, which were either—we started primarily shooting all of the Operation Rescue, which was a group of religious fanatics who would go and basically use bicycle locks, kryptonite bicycle locks, and chain themselves to abortion clinics and then stop people from trying to get in to get healthcare. And they would—you know, they would just also, you know, harass people on the streets and still – use that kind of stuff.

So we were documenting that because also the police—you know, we would see the police kind of come and just pull up and just sort of like sit there and just let them do what they're doing and not stop them. So, you know, we realized that, again, like, documenting all of this is a way to let people know, and if people know, they'll get angry and they'll come out and help and help us stop it.

You know, at the same time, too, it was, you know, these political attacks. So it was the same thing with, like—or, you know, all of this was happening sort of in parallel and in tandem, and, you know, when we started talking about reproductive rights in some sort of a group and dealing with people, you know, the first thing that we looked towards was ACT UP. And we even joked at some point, we're like, "Well, let's just call it, you know, KNOCKED UP." Or maybe not. Maybe that was just something that we just pretended that we really wanted to call it.

**SS: Who else was in the collective?**

DM: Of ReproVision? Dana Dickey and Julie Clark and Dina Mermelstein for a while, and a few other people who just sort of breezed in and out. But, you know, our one tape, the main tape that we put out was really the three of us. That was the core.

**SS: It's amazing, because when you look at ACT UP—and we've been doing this for fifteen years—the only non-AIDS issue that there was no controversy about at all was abortion. No one questioned ACT UP being involved in anything having to do with abortion. It was never debated. Why do you think that was so easy for ACT UP?**

DM: Because it was a very—you know, on one level politically and religiously, it was sort of the same enemy. It was Cardinal O'Connor who was the one who was letting Operation Rescue sleep in the church. It was Cardinal O'Connor who was the one who was stopping the distribution of condoms and clean needles and lifesaving information. It was the same political senators and representatives who were opposing abortion who were also opposing anything that would lead towards decriminalizing—I mean, there were still sodomy laws, I mean. It's kind of like ironic that here we are in the day of, you know, gay marriage, and back then people are, like, you even look at somebody of the same sex and you can get arrested in certain states, you know. Those were the same people who were banning abortions. So it was all in very—you know, most people understood that it was like this.

**SS: Yeah, but, I mean, most men don't understand that. But they did.**

**Why?**

DM: Most men don't understand that, but, I think, for the one hand, it was probably drilled into the ACT UP men by certain people that, you know, who came to ACT UP who had come from the Women's Health Movement in the seventies and early eighties, or, yeah, seventies. I mean, at that point, too, abortion had only been legal for, like, 1986. That was like thirteen, fourteen years, you know, *Roe v. Wade*. It was like just a new drop in the historical bucket.

So, you know, and probably that there was a sexiness to associating the two, rather than thinking about housing, you know. Housing isn't a sexy issue, and class and classism are difficult for people to kind of wrap their heads around until something like Occupy or unless you get Bill Dobbs going. But that was kind of an easy thing for

people. And yet they still did it, you know. If they didn't come out in mass droves, then we could have had more people out in full force. It was the same thing again, that it doesn't always seem as—at the end of the day, it was fighting for the quality of life as opposed to fighting for life, and that sometimes makes a huge difference.

And I think that that's also something, especially now in retrospect, having had cancer, when you look back and you're like, there's something about being—staring, staring at doctors and machines and thinking, like, oh, wow, mortality. And then when you start thinking about, like, these people are stopping giving me my treatment, you know—I mean, fortunately, that's not, at least, my story, but that's what it was then, and that's just such—now I can—you know, I was in the hospital with people, caring for people, but at the end of the day, that wasn't me in the hospital bed at that time. And I think that now there's definitely a different attitude, or I can see that, that missing piece of the puzzle now. It's like looking over a wall, and you're like, "Oh, okay." And you can talk about it, you can talk around it, but, you know, once people are—you know, if they haven't actually been there, then they won't get it.

And maybe, too, same thing, too—and this is why something like home, you know, housing and homelessness doesn't always—it's like unless you've been, you know—there's that point where empathy stops, and empathy can't get people onto the street.

**SS: Can you tell us the history of WHAM!? Because no one has actually told us that.**

DM: Yeah. So in 1988—'89, '88? God, I can't even remember. I used to think I'd be able to remember all of these dates, and now I can't. The *Webster* decision

started—you know, that there were all of these Supreme Court—you know, ever since *Roe v. Wade*, there were these state laws, that each state kept trying to, like, make a law that would chip away at *Roe v. Wade*. So when the *Webster* came down, which is the Pennsylvania decision, that was posing one of the most serious threats. It really could completely knock *Roe* out. A lot of people finally, you know, stood up and took notice and got angry.

At that time, too, there was always, you know, there were always the nonprofit groups like the ACLU and New York Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights. So there were all of these, like, official, you know, professional nonprofits and professional issues, social justice people who were working on it, but at the end of the day, they were limited by their 501(c)(3)s and weren't—you know. They were, like, spending their days writing briefs. They didn't have time in the middle of the day to stop writing briefs, stop arguing a court case to go plan a demo.

So we're like, "Oh, well, this is where we can come in," because this is our lives and whatever, our issues and health and whatever. Anyway, so that was basically how all of these random individuals who just were so angry got together and, you know, working with the more established organizations like NARAL and NOW, but then decided to have this kind of—decided to start our own direct action group that would then—again, modeled on ACT UP—would really be able to kind of, you know, take to the streets and—

**SS: What year was that?**

DM: That was '89.

**SS: And who were some of the other people that were in the beginning of WHAM!?**

DM: I mean, there were so many.

**SS: Just say some people.**

DM: Karen Ramsbacher.

**SS: Okay. So there were people who were also in ACT UP?**

DM: There was, yeah. There were some people, yeah, yeah, and even actually before WHAM! Oh, and they did the—I forgot, the oral arguments. There was actually a group of people from ACT UP. I remember Catherine.

**SS: Catherine Saafeld?**

00:25:00

DM: Yeah. Gund, maybe. You know, and there were the t-shirts, like, and people started—you know, again, like the fact that ACT UP had so many artists and was able to present such a visually unified front was really helpful, because just, you know, coming out of the media age that you have 100 people lined up who all have, like, really slick haircuts and, you know, are chiseled and wearing their matching shirts, you know, it's like, okay, let's apply that. So everyone showed up to the Supreme Court oral arguments for *Webster* with their, like, you know, these matching shirts, and got arrested, and it's a great photo op, but it works and it gets the ideas out there, anyway. So it was like "U.S. Out of my Uterus," "Keep Your Laws Off my Body."

So even before that, there were people from ACT UP, but who then didn't ever really—you know, who saw—you know, would come out for these big things, and, you know, were very committed and understood, but weren't necessarily going to WHAM! meetings once a week. Because how many meetings can you go to?

**SS: Well, you were going to both.**

DM: Yeah.

**SS: Okay. So who came up with—how was the idea for Stop the Church, how did that evolve?**

DM: That evolved—so that was December 1989, and that was after a particularly heinous fall with Operation Rescue blocking, doing some of their more—like, that was the fall where I think they were the most active that they had been, and that was probably a lot of ACT UP people came to most of those very different things, I mean, which meant like it was like a whole month of, like, week, Saturday after Saturday. And we would need just bodies, because we had no idea where people were going, and there actually were finally a lot of people were showing up at all of our different meeting points because we were trying to figure out, “Where are they going to go? Let’s try to get there first. Let’s race them to the door.” I don’t know what we were thinking. We were thinking we would do the police’s job because the police weren’t doing it, and at least if we could get them away or even, like, prevent them from getting there, which we actually managed to do a few times, and at least people could go about their business and go in to get their healthcare.

Anyway, so that was that one particular—and then at the same time, I guess it had been earlier in that fall when O’Connor was just really lambasting all of the needle exchange, and even though there was all of these—the data was already starting to pour in, needle exchange works, needle exchange saves lives. And also that the hospitals being so under the thumb of the Catholic Church, even St. Vincent’s, it’s like they’re not going to distribute certain things, they’re not—St. Vincent’s actually wouldn’t even

perform abortions. You know, you kind of forget about all these kind of things. We're like, why is a church—I still don't understand. Why is a church controlling a hospital? I mean, to me, that really just seems wrong. I mean, a hospital should be controlled by medical people, not religious people.

So between that, and then there was all that stuff with the Covenant House. Or was that later? And, you know, just all of these homeless teens who were being deliberately prevented from getting access to all sorts of other sorts of healthcare options. And, anyway, so it was just like everything just kind of like congealed, and it was, like, "Okay, it's him. He's the face. He is – he's a baddie. Let's go tell everyone and let's tell the world." Because I think, you know, people, again, people—"Oh, we can't do that." You know, they don't want to step on people's toes.

**SS: How did WHAM! and ACT UP decide to do it together?**

DM: It was because it was just a no-brainer.

**SS: Did people from WHAM! come to ACT UP, or did ACT UP come to WHAM!?** Like, where did it originate and how did you share the—

DM: I don't know. Can I text Vincent [Gagliostro]? Maybe he'll remember.

**SS: Did you make decisions together?**

DM: Yeah. I mean, all of the—yeah. So it was just sort of like, you know, same enemy, let's just do this. Honestly, I can't remember.

**SS: Okay. That's okay.**

DM: And I can't Google it either.

**SS: So what did WHAM! do after that action?**

00:30:00

DM: That was December '89, so it was, I don't know, more of the same, lots of—I mean, the clinic defense kept WHAM! really busy, the big ones. But also just, you know, there was like the random crackpots who were at the local clinics, and so just people had to be escorted—you know, people were escorting every weekend at every local clinic. There was a lot of that—every time, you know. I mean, in retrospect, I realize, too, it's like, god, it's a lot of that is just really time-consuming and it's exhausting. So it's like at some point it's like there's not enough energy to then go back, you know.

We had all these grand ideas of, like, wow, this is all related and, you know, especially with something like—like here's a good example. It's like RU-486, first, was being talked about in the news, and they were refusing to allow it, and suddenly it had all of these potential benefits. It's like it could help fight Alzheimer's, it could help fight—I can't even remember, but there was like—you know, but we had this whole list of, like, twenty different illnesses and including, I think, even HIV, that it actually had some sort of like antiviral property or some immune system boosting thing. Maybe that part I'm imagining now. But there was this long list of specific diseases. And people were just like, "Oh, we can't use any of it." You know, it was sort of like the same thing with the stem cell research. People were so obsessed with, like, these notions of life beginning at conception, that they were willing to forego any kind of medical advance or quality of life, again, for the people who were already living.

But again, it's like once you start trying to, it was so much more difficult to try to distill all of that into, like, a little capsule that was easy to feed to the media. It's like it was easy to do something like when we went to—you know, I think with ACT UP

we were so smart about, like, “We’re going to go to the FDA. We have one message: ‘It’s a lie. It’s a sham. It won’t work.’” And, you know, everybody said that.

Everybody got it. The government has blood on its hands. It was, okay, next thing, right, you know. Peter Staley can go to Burroughs Wellcome and do that, and that’s just this drug, you know. Everything was just, you know, go to the CDC, you know. Things were very sharply focused, and sort of each action became so singular.

And it’s kind of interesting when I looked—you know, when I was looking at Occupy, Occupy Wall Street, and all the various, and they were like there’s this and there’s that. And I was like, “My god, why can’t they just focus?” But then at the same time, like, they didn’t need to, or that movement didn’t need to, and it actually was able to start to create this—to operate in this kind of constellation, as opposed to—and it was just kind of interesting to watch it more from the outside. Because, going back to WHAM!, I think it was difficult for us to, first of all, get the energy beyond doing all of the clinic defense and the Operation Rescue, because it was also like these people were just really, really vile. And you’re like, “Why are they doing this?” And, like, I remember even at those points where sometimes, you know, they would actually start screaming like, “Jesus killer! Jesus killer!” I’m like, oh, my god, I have never experienced this kind of like—you know, I don’t really—I’m aiming—on the face of it, linguistically it’s anti-Semitic, but I think they were just—they weren’t even—you know, they sort of saw somebody, like, might be Jewish, you know. It wasn’t the same sort of, you know, level of, you know, anti-Semitism like the Nazis, but it’s like what are these people doing? What’s wrong with them? They’re just really stupid.

**SS: Did you ever come up with an answer? Do you think they're stupid, or is there something else there?**

00:35:00 DM: I do think that a lot of it kind of boils down to our education system, and there was a lot of flaws in our education system, and that that would, you know—that fixing of the education system would kind of, by attrition, get rid of a lot of that, that a lot of that—I mean, there's still some people, yes, who are educated and think like that, unfortunately, but a better education system starting from, you know, preschool going up would make a huge difference, you know. Maybe that would be—whether it's—I mean, think about what we have now. We've got, you know, kids who're like, “Of course gay marriage is okay. Of course we have to recycle.” Well, where are they getting that, you know? *Sesame Street* and teachers.

**SS: So did you work on other projects in ACT UP?**

DM: Needle exchange.

**SS: Oh, yeah. What did you do there?**

DM: And, again, being the eighties, the good old days in New York, the basic principle was swapping out clean needles for dirty needles, so that people would have readily available clean needles and not share, therefore reducing the amount of—hopefully reducing transmission, and at the same time, you know, using the opportunity to educate people, like, “Okay, if you're going to, at least try to clean the needle, use a condom,” whatever, and just take as many opportunities as you can to tell people as much information as we could throw at them. And then that was right when the city started to say, “Okay, this is going to be legal,” and then actually set up the whole Lower East Side Harm Reduction, which then became the Harm Reduction Coalition.

**SS: Were you involved in the case?**

DM: I don't think, no, nuh-uh.

**SS: So did you stand on street corners and exchange needles? What did you do?**

DM: We would actually go around to—I think at that point there were just sort of, you know—there were a lot of abandoned—pre-gentrified Lower East Side, a lot of abandoned buildings, and so there were a lot of people who were just, you know, living in either—some of them were deliberately squatting with, like, a political agenda to squat. Others were just like—had been lost and they were just living there because that was the only place to live. And we would, like, go into these places and these sort of—or the camps. There was like empty lots, and people would be sleeping, you know. They actually set up like little tent cities, and we would go there. So not just standing on the corners, we would, you know—deliberately went to where people were and pretty much knew people. Like at some point then, you know, with regularity and familiarity, you know, you build up trust, and that was, I think, the important thing, it worked, because they trusted. They trusted us.

**SS: So what would you do, just walk up to people and say, “Do you want needles?”**

DM: Pretty much.

**SS: Who were you working with?**

DM: Allan. Allan was—I think he was running it at that point.

**SS: Allan Clear?**

DM: Allan Clear was part of the ACT UP committee, and then eventually when it went legit, he became the executive director. God, I can't remember who else now.

**SS: Okay. So let's talk about the culture of ACT UP. So how much of your life did you spend with ACT UP people?**

DM: At that time?

**SS: Mm-hmm.**

DM: It was pretty—I mean, it was so all-consuming in a way because it was—you know, in that time, too, I worked at the People With AIDS Coalition. And at some point, somebody had nicknamed that building on 26<sup>th</sup> Street the Kool-AIDS Building, because it was the Health Group, PWAC, Testing Limits, and CRI. It always helps to have a sense of humor.

**SS: So you were working at the Health Group?**

DM: No, I was working at the Coalition.

**SS: At the Coalition, okay. And what were you doing there?**

DM: I was the editorial assistant, working under Phil Zwickler.

**SS: For *Newsline*?**

DM: Yeah.

**SS: We're friends with Phil, yeah. So that's interesting. So tell us a little bit about *Newsline*.**

DM: So *Newsline* was a very different flavor from ACT UP, in a way. And even Phil, you know, Phil had already been—like, Phil was more of a—not like out in the streets, like – There was something kind of like old-school, like, “Yeah, I'm going

00:40:00 to get the camera and I'm going to go interview them." Like, *Rights and Reactions* came out in—was it '85, '86? And, you know, there's Phil with his, you know, sartorially unexceptional, unremarkable presentation. But just, you know, it's like there's Phil would go out there, be like, "I'm going to go to City Hall to the press conference, and I'm going to ask these questions. I'm going to say the G-word." And he didn't have, like, a slick t-shirt on, and he wasn't sort of coming from that angle, you know. It was much more like the old-school journalism as opposed to then the art world kind of thing.

Anyway, so *Newsline*. But *Newsline*, you know, again predated ACT UP and was really just like—and also it was, like, the digital publishing revolution and printing was sort of a little bit more affordable, you know, was becoming more affordable. It was easier for people to produce. Like, "Great! We can make our own little newsletter zine." It was like a step up from a zine at that point, and it's like, "Wow! It's easy for us to actually produce this and put this information out there," and, again, get people's stories out. Because even before 1986, 1985, you know, people were, you know, highly closeted, closeted about sexuality, but also closeted about their health status, and even if they weren't, if they were living—they didn't even have the access to that information. Or, like, the idea of somebody else had gone through this and would know what to do.

**SS: How many copies did you publish of *Newsline*?**

DM: I don't remember.

**SS: Did you work with Iris De La Cruz?**

DM: Yes. Iris is the one who actually taught me how to put on lipstick, and Iris was amazing, because she was also the one who would go on about, like,

laughter and T-cells. Cigarettes would increase your T-cells and laughter would increase your T-cells. And she just had, like, the most wicked sense of humor. But even then, you know, Iris was always around PWAC. She would come to demonstrations, but she wasn't at meetings all the time.

**SS: And also did you know David Wojnarowicz when he was friends with Phil?**

DM: Yeah, yeah. And David would come out to Clinic Defense a couple of times. He was another one. David was—he was very special, special person.

**SS: So who's surviving from *Newsline* besides you?**

DM: I don't know. I'm not sure.

**SS: Dolly, if you're the only surviving person from *Newsline*, that's intense. Is that really true?**

DM: I don't know. I can't imagine.

**SS: Do you have a complete set of the paper?**

DM: No.

**SS: Do you know who does?**

DM: I wonder if Phil's father saved any of them. But even that, no, I can't remember who was the editor before Phil. But I don't know. I wonder if Michael Callen's—god, what was his name? Michael Callen's main boyfriend.

**SS: Richard Dworkin.**

DM: Richard. Was it Dworkin?

**SS: He worked there?**

DM: No. But I wonder if he would know.

**SS: He's going to transcribe this interview.**

DM: Oh, really?

**SS: Yeah.**

DM: Well, put a note in there. Where's all the *Newslines*? I know, because I forgot and I got Griffin and Bree [Scott-Hartland].

**SS: Right, Griffin Gold and what was Bree's last name?**

DM: Well, there were two Brees. There was beautiful Bree and then there was straight Bree.

**SS: Bree with the long hair.**

DM: Yeah.

**SS: What was his last name? He was, like, a fashion writer or something.**

DM: Yeah. I don't know what happened to all those.

**JH: Who's the other Bree?**

**SS: Who's the straight Bree?**

DM: Straight Bree Salzman? I think he ended up marrying, was it Dr. Suzanne Wright [phonetic]?

**SS: No, Suzanne Phillips. What happened to Suzanne Phillips?**

DM: I don't know.

**SS: We've been trying unable to find her. So you think she's married to Bree Salz—what's his name?**

DM: Salzman, S-a-l-z-m-a-n, maybe two Ns.

**SS: S-a-l-z-m-a-n, and how do you spell Bree, B-r-e-e?**

DM: No, I think he was like the cheese.

**SS: B-r-i-e? We've never been able to find Suzanne Phillips. Okay.**

**That's interesting.**

DM: Doesn't anyone from—

**SS: Nobody knows. There are people who are missing. Cathy Otter, we can't find her.**

**JW: Jane Auerbach.**

00:45:00

**SS: Jane Auerbach, yeah. Okay.**

**So what was the scene at *Newsline* like? Was there people going in and out all the time? Or was it just you guys?**

DM: Joe Walsh, he would go in and out ten times a day.

**SS: Why? To smoke or something?**

DM: Ah, the good old days when you could smoke indoors. When cigarettes were not as bad for you.

**SS: What was *Newsline*'s relationship to ACT UP?**

DM: It was very separate. In fact, I don't think it really—like PWAC, I don't think considered itself to have a relationship with ACT UP so much. I think once Michael and Griffin and Bree were gone, the people who came in were more of like, again, like the nonprofit, "We don't get arrested," like the nondirect-action-type people. They were the nine-to-fivers. So it was just a very different mentality, and they were like, "We need to close ranks around our own and do this," just like this very sort of like cozy sort of information distribution, not the angry activist-type thing, if that makes any sense.

**SS: Sure, that does make sense. Now, how many times did you get arrested in ACT UP?**

DM: I don't remember. I used to remember, but then half the time I would get arrested not intentionally because police didn't want you to shoot them.

**SS: Oh, you got arrested with a camera in your hand?**

DM: Oh, yeah.

**SS: What would happen to your footage in your camera?**

DM: I think there was always someone who would manage to get the camera away. I don't remember ever having issues of getting the camera confiscated. But yeah.

**SS: Were you ever convicted of anything?**

DM: Probably not. I mean, the only thing then, there was the spray paint incident.

**SS: What was that?**

DM: One night after getting very, very angry—oh, we'd just come back from White Plains, and, again, one of these Operation Rescue events. We got really mad at O'Connor and decided to go spray-paint on the sidewalk "O'Connor Spreads Death." Well, unfortunately, some very large cop from Midtown South saw us and chased us, and that was not a fun evening.

**SS: What happened?**

DM: We got chased around, and then, of course, by the time we realized afterwards the cop was telling people we were spray-painting on the doors, which we weren't, it was on the sidewalk, which I think it's public, public property. And suddenly

like twelve, like eight police cars and four unmarked taxis just kind of converged. And it was just kind of, you know, without the 3,000-strong force of ACT UP behind you and you're all alone at three o'clock in the morning, it's really not pleasant.

**SS: Who were you with?**

DM: Scott Sensenig. They just got him down on the ground and was, like, kicking and kicking and beating him and beating him.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

DM: And it was just—yeah. And that was like, “I never want to get arrested again after that.”

And then also afterwards, I think, you know, arrests started to get—you know, as sort of like there was all—then there was the Crown Heights stuff, and all of the race issues around the country were just sort of flaring up in this way. And, you know, I mean, it all sort of, like, memories started flooding back with all of the Ferguson and everything. At least there's now social media that can kind of publicize all of this. But I think, wow, you know, if your skin isn't white, do you want to get arrested? I'm like I really don't want to—you know, I don't want to put my friends at risk for that. So then maybe there's a different—the whole thing of, the police force seemed to change around then and the act of civil disobedience seemed to start to get a little bit more problematic.

**SS: Interesting. So were you in a care group in ACT UP, someone**  
00:50:00 **who was dying?**

DM: A care group? An official group?

**SS: Well, like, were you ever in a group of people who were primarily responsible for somebody?**

DM: With Phil.

**SS: At Co-op Care with his mother?**

DM: It was at NYU.

**SS: Yeah.**

DM: Yeah, the cancer floor. Right. I forgot about that. And before that, yeah, I remember just going to the hospital and visiting with people, but never really—I don't remember it being so organized.

**SS: Was there one particular death that affected you more than the others?**

DM: Maybe not more than the others, no. It was like, I mean, each one had its own thing, you know, and each person—like, you know, Joe Walsh with his wackiness. I recently found—somehow I ended up with this little book of Oscar Wilde from Robert Garcia, you know. So I have these little, little tidbits from everybody. So it was sort of like the whole—the whole gestalt kind of blurs, and I think, like, sometimes as humans there's—as time—you know, when we're in the moment of time, we're like, "I'm never going to forget this," but then as humans you kind of have to move on. Otherwise, we'd all be committing suicide all the time and not going on.

**SS: When did you leave ACT UP?**

DM: Probably—it wasn't like, you know, an act of leaving. I think it was after '92, because it was like the national—then we started the—there was the National Healthcare Committee, and Clinton got in, and things just sort of seemed like they were looking up and more treatments seemed to be presenting themselves. So it just seemed like there was a lot more hope.

It's funny, I always think about this quote from one of the Velvet Revolution, and it was—I can't remember her name, but she was a science fiction writer, and before the Velvet Revolution, you know, like, one of the most popular and beloved science fiction, and then she became like the cultural minister. And she's like, "Well, I can't write now, because, like, now everything is great because we're in power. Everything that we wanted kind of came to pass." And I think there was sort of a very similar thing. Not that Clinton was so wonderful, certainly, but there was definitely, like, a different sensation than from the evil people, the Bush-Reagan era.

**SS: I only have one more question. Do you have anything else?**

**JH: Were you in DIVA TV?**

DM: A little bit, but not as much, only because everything we were too busy doing.

**SS: What was different in the way DIVA TV operated than Testing the Limits?**

DM: They were probably cranking out more things more frequently, like smaller, more targeted, whereas I think at some point Testing the Limits was really trying to—and once Jean and Gregg had sort of peeled off to be like the GMHC TV thing, you know, they were really trying to do this kind of like an overview, like, you know, of the whole thing, and, like, paint it, make a more long narrative—well, I mean, not fictional, but like create a feature-length documentary that presented the narrative of the Movement to people. And I think DIVA TV was much more about "Let's get it on public access. Let's talk about this thing."

00:55:00 Like here was this—you know, again, it was like very much like this whole idea that every time you do an action, you had to have a little video about it, you know. In a way, it was sort of like social—you know, that was the social media at the time. You know, it's like now if you make a film, you've got to make a website, you've got to have a blog, you've got to—you know. There was like this whole sort of attendant media stuff that just kind of is part and parcel. It's like your checklist. Okay, we need a fact sheet, we need a video, *et voilà*.

**SS: James, do you have any questions?**

**JW: Was there a conscious decision at Testing the Limits to stop filming things around ACT UP? Like Day of Desperation, it's my understanding, was kind of like the last thing Testing the Limits filmed deliberately, January '91.**

DM: Yeah. No, because I think there's working on the *Voices from the Front*, then I think they were so kind of consumed. There was this—that, yeah, I mean, I don't think it was really conscious. I don't remember that. I think all of it was just sort of, like, again, there wasn't any sort of real plan, because everything was so intense and of the moment that there—you know, you didn't have—you know, there was no time to plan.

**SS: So my last question, unless there's something that we haven't covered.**

DM: WHAM! Crazy Operation Rescue people.

**JW: Did you have anything to do with WAC?**

DM: No, nuh-uh.

**JW: Was there a reason for that?**

DM: Yeah. There was actually sort of a lot of resentment that WAC kind of came up, and actually we're like, "Hello? We're here. Just because we're not, you know, the big-name artists that you are—." It would be—it was really kind of disappointing because it seemed like they kind of took all of the—you know, it was like a sleight of hand and took all the thunder and had the resources, and like, "We've been trying to get you guys to come and help us and deal with this stuff," and only when it became, you know, sort of like, you know, egos.

**SS: My last question—oh, sorry.**

DM: No, go on.

**SS: Looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?**

DM: I think that there's a lot that as a group and as a movement, as a model, that is so important for—and then, you know, again, as you see it sort of trickle down, at least in the city, to something like Occupy, maybe because there are a few, you know, same people involved, but, you know, and, of course, in between there, yeah, there was all of that war stuff. I forgot about all that.

But there were so many little things, but I think what it really did is—and I was thinking of this a little bit, like it was so — ACT UP New York was just so very—it had an intensity that was possible in New York that wasn't as possible like whenever we went traveling to Atlanta or to Iowa. I mean, it was born out of that emotion that brought everybody to move to New York, or, I guess, by, you know, San Francisco, the same way. I mean, this is why people go to these big cities, and that motivation enabled it as

an entity, mostly in New York—I don't know, you know, I can't speak about San Francisco because I've only been there once.

But, you know, certainly like the primary, the hard changes that happened just because a few people were willing to get arrested were kind of amazing, that, you know, people were willing to change how the clinical trials were handled, you know, that people were willing to change who was let into what hospital, that people were, you know, were willing to change what they thought about needle distribution. I mean, there were some very significant—you know, some significant policy changes that were a direct result of people not just going out, but that people spent hours and were up all night doing the research, you know. They did the research in the background so that when they went into the meetings, that they were able to outtalk the so-called experts, because the experts hadn't read as much of what they should have been reading, especially when they were being in the position.

01:00:00

And I think that that's something that, you know, when you start translating that into these other movements, you're like, why, especially if you look at how come all of this other stuff has never really picked up on that, not that we should be, you know, a nation or a world that's divided into body parts and diseases, but I think that this particular synthesis again of, like, you know, politics and science and art and culture and religion all sort of made ACT UP very successful, and there's no other real issue that really has the same things to the same extent, you know.

And, yeah, still obviously race and class are kind of too much on the periphery. I think that was the biggest disappointment, that those never really kind of were able to, you know, get integrated into the so-called platform as well and just get

people stirred up. And, like, people were—you know, it was exciting to go down to Occupy Wall Street and see people fired up about student loans or something, you know, and that—I mean, maybe they were, like, fired up about almost everything, but, you know. Yeah, the fact that people could get together, and in that same way, you know, whether it was like from, you know, Gandhi to MLK to ACT UP, and there's a lot of other things in between that, you know, and since then, between fracking and anti-nuclear, I mean, all of these sort of different movements kind of had that same—ultimately it's the power of humanity.

You put people together. People are capable of doing amazing things and creating a better world because of it, and that, I think, is probably the best—you know, the largest accomplishment. And people around the world look to—you know, when they can, they look to it, you know, when you look at what's going on in South Africa or around the world, you know, in all of the other parts like Iraq or wherever, Russia, Moscow. And, of course, they've got some great activist people who cut their teeth in ACT UP. It's like a training ground.

**SS: Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much. Wow. You did a lot. You did. You were in a lot of different—**

DM: Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Okay, now can I pee?

**SS: Careful you're plugged in.**