

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

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Interviewee: **Karen Moulding**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Interview of Karen Moulding

January 16, 2004

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Hi, Karen**

KAREN MOULDING: Hi, Sarah

**SS: So can we start with you just saying your name, today's date, how old you are, and where we are?**

KM: Do I have to say how old I am?

**SS: Yes.**

KM: Can I lie?

**SS: No.**

KM: I really don't want to.

**SS: Well, tell us the last age you're willing to admit to.**

KM: Okay. My name is Karen Moulding. Today is January 16, 2004, and I'm over 30.

**SS: And where are we?**

KM: We're in my apartment on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, between [Avenues] A and B.

**SS: I'm seeing that there's little pictures of you as a child over there, can you show them to us and tell us what they are?**

KM: This is me and my brother in LA.

**SS: You grew up in LA?**

KM: Well, this is my dad and my mom. This is my dad – he was like, a trust fund baby – and my mom, who grew up here on 10<sup>th</sup> and A, who was sort of a Red Diaper baby. That lasted about four years.

**SS: So, you father was Moulding?**

KM: Yes.

**SS: And what was your mother's name?**

KM: Locker. In fact, my uncle Mike Locker lives here. He was one of the founders of SDS – one of the reasons I decided to move to New York. I love both my parents, but they got divorced when I was four. I was born in New York, lived in Iowa, then LA, then went back and forth for awhile, then moved in with my dad in Montana, and went to college in Montana. This is me and my dad. This is me and my brother. I love my brother more than anybody in the world. This is me and my brother, this is me and my brother.

**SS: Where is your brother now?**

KM: He is in Brooklyn. He's in a halfway house in Brooklyn, actually.

**SS: So, you're both in New York, and you get to see each other?**

KM: Yes, I actually flew him out here a few years ago. He's a really good guy. He's a good musician – great musician.

**SS: Good. So, your mother was a Red Diaper baby – that's interesting.**

KM: Yeah. She's sort of not that political now, but at least, genetically I have – my dad's very, very nice – he's a writer, but that was his background. It was like, suburban Chicago. My mother was – my grandfather was a high school teacher at Stuyvesant. She grew up just a few blocks from here.

**SS: And he was really in the Communist party?**

KM: Probably. I'm actually not sure. I guess I used that term sort of loosely. They were very left, very activist, very political. My uncle is still very political. He does worker buyouts for labor unions. My aunt is working on the Kucinich campaign.

**SS: So, I guess from the beginning, you were exposed to political ideas.**

KM: Yeah, I was, and I have always been very political. I was Class President when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and I've always been rooting for the underdog, and everything was about fairness. But I have another side of me which is an artist side and a writer side. And even in my work for ACT UP, I have to say that it was partly about the politics, but it was also, for me, about community and about love. I definitely have a big sense of humor side. I go out a lot. I have a lot of fun. So it's not, for me – my relationship to politics is probably lighter than my uncle's or my aunt's, for example – though they have fun, too.

**SS: What was the first thing in your life that you did that was community involved or politically involved?**

KM: In college, I organized a slate of candidates – the sort of pro-education – not pro-sorority/fraternity, feminist, pro-environmental slate of candidates to run for the Student Council. And we lost because the sororities and the fraternities gave a free keg of beer to the house that voted the most, and I was just incensed.

**SS: Where was this? What school?**

KM: University of Montana. And we rallied and got together a big, huge campaign and we lost. We got all these faculty members to come to our support, and even the most conservative faculty member – this economics professor, who was the student advisor to the Student Council – he was so upset by how we were treated that he resigned. I still remember him with his crew cut. He was just all red in the face and upset. Then I got very involved in the anti-nuclear movement. I lived in a teepee one summer in Montana – peace camp, we called it.

**SS: What was the organization?**

KM: Hippies for Peace – I don't remember. We weren't hippies. I was too young to be a hippie, but it was that sort of a thing. I don't remember. And then I came to law school. I went to Columbia Law School and it was – I really thought it was about justice and proving that nuclear weapons were illegal in Central America. And really, Columbia Law School is about money, and I didn't know. I never took one of those courses where you pay the money and then you get a high LSAT score. They weren't even necessarily brilliant people around me. They were money people. Some of them were perfectly nice, but that was their background, and I felt very out of place. But, I'd taken out a huge amount of loans, and I had this idea that it was important to do something outward, before just being a writer – that to just start off as a writer was studying myself. Sometimes I wish someone had stopped me, because I got really in debt, and I did nothing but public interest law. I worked at the Center for Constitutional Rights my second summer, and then I volunteered there afterwards. I did a big anti-nuclear case at the Staten Island Home Port, helping to stop the building of a Staten Island Home Port. I think that was – it was right when I graduated, so it was 1989 or '90. And then I was married for a little while, and then I started getting attracted to women.

**SS: This was when you were working as a lawyer. You had graduated from law school and gotten married?**

KM: Yes. I clerked for the New Jersey Supreme Court. I did really well in law school, but I always only wanted to be a public interest lawyer.

**SS: Was your husband a lawyer?**

KM: Yes. I also always knew that it was temporary – that the main thing for me is writing, but that I had to do this for awhile – I had to be outward for awhile. And,

it was a lot of tension, because I would be trying to write and being a lawyer at the same time, and not making money as a lawyer, because I was always doing this public interest stuff. And, I came back to New York and separated. We moved away for awhile, I came back, and I started working at the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project. Then, I worked a Legal Services – a job, in East Brooklyn – not for very long. It didn't work out that well. And then, that's when I really got into ACT UP. I had studied for the bar, I passed the bar and it was around Campaign '92. And I guess it really did feel like my community. I was a lesbian and I was – although, I was still attracted to men – gay men, fey men, as opposed to beefy, muscle-y men. And ACT UP was very much about love, more than it was about identity politics for me. It was too serious to be about identity politics, because people were sick. So, that's how it broke down. It was the people that were sick, and the people that wanted to help them. Not like, what team are you on, sort of a thing. And, I really liked that.

**SS: Can we back up a little bit? I just want to ask you a couple of things. So you got divorced, and you started going out with women. How did you enter into the gay community? Did you do it as a lawyer?**

KM: Oh, very good. Right away, I was in the National Lawyer's Guild, which is, sort of a left-wing Bar Association that does a lot of public interest work, and I decided to start the Lesbian/Gay Committee, that was sort of doing nothing.

**SS: But, were you already having sex with women at that time?**

KM: Yeah.

**SS: Well then, back up even before then – how did you start to meet women? Where did you go and how did you negotiate it?**

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KM: When I was first married, we moved to Idaho, and he was clerking for the Idaho Supreme Court. I wanted to be back in the northwest because I had loved Montana so much. And, I was getting attracted to women, and we had other problems – it wasn't just that. I was getting attracted to women, and it was a young marriage and we separated, and he was doing his thing. We were trying to be friends. And I came out in Idaho, and it was great because they were so sweet. They were like, "Oh, you're getting separated? You can sleep on my couch." It was very unthreatening and very friendly. There were like, two bars and I remember the coming out support group, which was very important because I was not that young, and I had been attracted to men, I had liked having sex with men. And they had little charts about coming out, and the phases and – is it because you fall in love with women? Is it because you are attracted to women? They had all these different, very safe theories that made anyone feel comfortable. And coming back to New York, then – I ultimately belonged in New York – it was a little harder, and I guess, really, my whole life I'd gotten to know people through organizing and political activism. And, I did do the Lesbian/Gay Committee for the National Lawyer's Guild, and I made it really big.

**SS: So, it had never existed before?**

KM: It was really quiet. There was a law book, which I ended up taking over, which I still edit, called *Sexual Orientation and the Law* – which gets updated every year. And they would sort of – it was quiet. The Mass Defense Committee of the National Lawyer's Guild did a lot of demonstrations work, but I decided that there needed to be a Lesbian/Gay Committee doing demonstrations work for groups like ACT UP, and then later the Lesbian Avengers, and that we could have trainings, and we could train legal

observers and that we could have a team of people and parties – I like to have parties as well.

**SS: What year is this, about?**

KM: '91, I guess. So, by the time Campaign '92 rolled around in ACT UP, I had this little team of legal observers. We had little armbands. We had trainings in my apartment, which at that time was on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and I was like, the head little legal observer and we'd go around to all the demonstrations and it went like that. I was also very involved in ACT UP, and learned a lot about the medical stuff and made good friends in ACT UP.

**SS: Let's go back a little bit. Before you came to ACT UP, had you had any experience with people with AIDS?**

KM: No.

**SS: You had no friends who had AIDS? You didn't know anyone who died of AIDS?**

KM: No. I was really sexually active, and I remember being afraid, and I remember a lot of my boyfriends being afraid. And I remember thinking about, when did I use condoms? When did I not use condoms? But, no – and I remember boyfriends crying and telling me – oh my God, I sleep with men, I sleep with women, what's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to you? But personally, no I didn't know anyone with AIDS until ACT UP.

**SS: So, of all the organization movements – just personally – why do you think you chose ACT UP?**

KM: I think, maybe, subconsciously, I, maybe, was more aware of my bisexuality. I mean, I thought I was just a lesbian, but, I guess subconsciously, maybe I was shying away from strict identity politics – that I wanted something that was about something less cheap – less, sort of, artificial like that. And what could be more real? These were people who had a life threatening illness, that were up against the government – several branches of the government – and I was always very, very drawn to direct action. In Montana, we would stop the nuclear train coming through town. I loved Gandhi. It always made the most sense to me, sort of, emotionally and intellectually, as a way to create change, because it's more about love. Yeah, I think that that's what it was. It wasn't about a political party, it wasn't about identity politics. It was about something really big and really human, and I think that was probably what drew me to ACT UP.

**SS: So, what was the first thing that you did in ACT UP, do you remember?**

KM: Oh, my God – this is like a test. It was only yesterday, because we're all so young –

**SS: Since you're only 30, let's say you're about eight.**

KM: It's only 30 and six months! I don't remember the first demonstration I did. What I do remember is, during the Dinkins administration, becoming very involved in Campaign '92.

**SS: What was Campaign '92?**

KM: Campaign '92 was – Clinton was running for President, and there were all these other Democratic candidates running for President. We were trying to defeat Bush, and we would go around and stage – they would go around – I'm just the lawyer, I'm not

involved – they would go around and stage demonstrations. Often, just designed to ask questions of these candidates or to expose anti-AIDS policies. This was right after Reagan refused to say the word “AIDS” for the first half of the epidemic, in the late ’80s and the early ’90s. So it was a lot about exposure, about forcing the candidates to talk about AIDS and to think about AIDS and to state what their platform was going to be and to push the issue. And also, I think about deciding who we liked – who we liked and who we didn’t like.

Tape I  
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**SS: Before we get into what they did, was there any discussion inside ACT UP about criticizing or attacking Democrats? Was that, in any way, controversial?**

KM: I don’t remember. And again, I’m probably not the best person to ask about the various stands of ACT UP, because I try to keep a little bit of a remove – like, I am in support of ACT UP, and my job is to provide you with services for the First Amendment, basically – to go there and to support you and to be sure you’re safe, and to run interference with the police. In the Dinkins administration, I actually got to know a lot of the police, and they were, actually – some of them were even helpful – you know, worked with them, as opposed to what happened later on with Giuliani. But, a lot of my job was keeping people safe, and protecting their legal right to demonstrate. And it was a little fuzzy, at times, but I tried to make that my main involvement. And that was a lot of work – training the people, knowing when the demonstrations were going to be, being there early, coordinating the legal observers and the other lawyers that were on site, going to the precinct, to make sure that the processing was going well, that people got their medication, that the processing was going quickly, that nobody was held up for lack of ID. Then, coordinating all the desk appearance tickets, or the summonses, and then

meeting people in court, on the various court dates. And I often ended up doing a lot of that personally. But, if I couldn't I would assign other attorneys to be in court to do these arraignments, and, on several occasions, actually even going to trial. So, because of that, I'm probably not the best person to ask about –

**SS: That's okay, you just tell me what you know. Let me ask you a few things – how many lawyers were working with you, for ACT UP?**

KM: I was the main one. I was the one on the contact sheet, under legal support. Before Campaign '92 – and there was some overlap – Jill Harris was like – I had heard, it was actually before my time – but, she was a big lawyer in ACT UP, and she was toning it down by the time I came on the scene. And then, I was the chair of the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Committee of the National Lawyers Guild. And I was the main one, so there were a lot of law students that I coordinated, and Bill Dobbs was around, but he didn't work in a demonstrations capacity, like I did. Paul O'Dwyer was around, but he was very involved with ILGO – the Irish Lesbian and Gay demonstration stuff. But certainly, a lot of people would help out at various times. My relationship with the National Lawyers Guild became a little more problematic. It was more like the Lesbian/Gay Committee or other lesbian gay lawyers who would be interested in helping out, and I had a lot of people to call. Susan Tipograph was helpful often, at times.

**SS: Can you really, specifically, tell me the difference between working with the police under Dinkins and working with the police under Giuliani, for ACT UP?**

KM: Yeah. Working with the police under Dinkins – I would be sort of in the front, running interference. Say we were walking on Fifth Avenue, and we want to block

traffic on Fifth Avenue – we, meaning, ACT UP. John Kelly was often a marshal, Amy Bauer would be up there. And the way we would work it was, somebody to be with the demonstration and somebody to be with the police. And, the police knew this – the more seasoned – like, Captain Fry, I remember him, a friendly guy, very Irish looking. He'd say, "Hey, Karen, how are you doing? Long time, no see." And they sort of knew what we were doing and often would even turn the other way. We would pretend like we weren't going to turn down this avenue and take this street, but they sort of knew it, and Alexis and Amy were excellent at the whole marshal training thing and blocking off traffic. I think that they thought that if they cooperated with us, there would be the least amount of disruption, the least amount of traffic problems, because we would just sit down, if we didn't get what we wanted – or ACT UP people – I keep saying we. And, we would often take an avenue for a certain amount of time. If people were being arrested, they would tell me where people were going, and they seemed to understand the difference between non-violence, going limp resistance and active resistance. And, I don't remember them – I'm sure it happened – but when I was there, I never saw anyone get hurt or brutalized. And if that did happen, it was usually by an inexperienced cop, as opposed to the people that were higher up in the police force.

Tape I  
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When Dinkins was no longer mayor and it was Giuliani, the first demonstration I remember was walking over the Brooklyn Bridge – about homeless services for people with AIDS. So, there's a lot of elderly people, a lot of really poor people, a lot of grandmothers, a lot of people with foster kids. Often, at AIDS demonstrations, it's not your most hearty group of people. We were met by a phalanx of motorcycle cops, and cops with billy clubs held out with these plastic shield kinds of things. I mean, you're

talking about old ladies in wheelchairs, and then these brutal-looking cops with these helmets, and they just bullied us out of doing what we wanted to do. And the demonstrations after that a lot of times involved – “Okay, you want to demonstrate in front of this congressman’s office? You want to demonstrate in front of this building? Here’s your pen.” And there would be those barricade things set up, and you could walk in a circle, in your pen. And – I don’t remember his name – but one of the higher up police in the Giuliani administration, I swear, is obsessed with traffic – everything is about how to keep traffic smooth. And, this is not an ACT UP thing, but even the Matthew Sheppard demonstration – just like, brutality and people being held for 24 hours. It was just a different flavor, and as is the way with most policies, I don’t think they realize that the fact that they were mean, made it worse for them. There was probably more disruption, a lot more taxpayers’ dollars spent on people getting processed really slowly. When I didn’t know what precinct people were sent to, that made it harder to even help out. Say, if someone didn’t have the right ID or needed medication, it made processing slower for the police. It made it harder on the demonstrators. It made it harder on the pedestrians, if there was more chaos. It’s sort of like, its meanness is stupider. And the Giuliani administration was a lot harder to work with.

**SS: Now, do you think that they sat down and said, we’re going to change the way we do this?**

KM: I think they might have just been – maybe not so much like that, but it’s more like, our priority is traffic, as opposed to our priority is civilian safety, that kind of thing. The switch in priorities made it that way.

**SS: Was it same personnel? Was it still Captain Fry?**

KM: No, a lot of the police changed. And I just remember Mr. Traffic, and that I would get there and expect, “Hey, Karen, long time no see,” and instead they were like, who are you? These police were like, “Who are you?” “I’m Karen, the lawyer. We had donuts together! Don’t you remember?” But they were all different cops.

**SS: So in a way, you and the cops put on the show together, under Dinkins?**

KM: Well, no – I mean, you know, it’s still direct action, it’s still civil disobedience. But, those cops – they seemed to have less fragile egos. They didn’t have to make it seem like it was their show. They let it be our show and sort of recognized that there was a lot of experience. There was a lot of experience, and that was the way I felt about my favorite people in ACT UP, too. This was not about hating the cops. This was about the FDA and the CDC and people running for president and the drug companies. This was not about like, we hate cops – at least, if you were more of a sophisticated ACT UP activist. And, I think that those cops recognized that more too, in the Dinkins administration. It wasn’t that they were working with us, but they were facilitating what we were doing – trying to keep the peace and yes, arresting people if they broke the law, but also understanding that we weren’t after them, and that we had – we had different interests, but not necessarily competing interests. They wanted to keep disruption down, and keep traffic flowing and keep safety going. But we were going to do our thing and locking heads with us wasn’t going to be the best thing for anybody.

**SS: What about the role of the police liaison to the gay community? Did you ever deal with those people? Like, Vanessa Farrow and those types?**

KM: Oh, yeah, yeah. She was all right. Was she under Dinkins? My biggest involvement with her was when I was the legal coordinator for the Gay Games, Stonewall – what year was that? 1994. Was that still Dinkins in '94? No, it was Giuliani. Yeah – was that her? I just remember her standing there with her black curly hair, holding her coffee. She didn't have a lot of power. She wasn't actually a cop, in terms of like, "Okay arrest these people now, okay, stop this traffic here, okay do that" – so it was sort of a talky, artificial position – perfectly fine, perfectly nice, but I don't remember. My involvement was actually more with the police actually on the force, actually there to arrest people, actually there to protect our safety and the safety of others.

Tape I  
00:25:00

**SS: Can you take us through a typical demonstration, and just tell us sort of precisely, what happened? Just give us an emblematic example.**

KM: That's going to be really hard. I don't know if I can pick one specific action.

**SS: It's all one blur?**

KM: In '92, '93, I was often doing three demonstrations a week, and the ones I remember the most were the Campaign '92.

SS: So you did this 3 times a week. Do you remember any particular actions from that campaign? What people would do. Who were the candidates then? Clinton.

**JIM HUBBARD: And bush.**

**SS: No, no in the primary.**

**JAMES WENTZY: Governor –**

KM: Dukakis

**SS: No, no that was '88. Gephardt.**

**JH: Jerry Brown.**

**JW: How about the Democratic National Convention, when it was here?**

KM: I don't remember that. And it would be like, going into the demonstration, handing out the armbands for the legal observers, assigning legal observers to be in the back, on the sides, in the front. I would be usually the one running interference with the police, and then walking ahead, say, of the mass that was blocking the street, talking to the police – not giving them information, but letting them know that we're there and we want everyone to be safe and things will run smoothly. And they knew we weren't give them information – they wouldn't even really try, to some extent. We were going to take Fifth Avenue, and then maybe another street, but not like, you know – we were doing the work. They were there, doing their job. Then, when people were getting arrested – having somebody there to collect the summonses and the desk appearance tickets, and seeing what precinct people were going to, and then going down to the precinct and waiting and waiting and waiting, and drinking coffee. Usually, you would have by then – you would have, even before the demonstration – the names and addresses of all the people that were planning to get arrested, and a contact that the police could call, if they were arrested.

**SS: So, people would tell you beforehand if they intended to get arrested?**

KM: Yes, because there would be – and often, I would help with this – there would be non-violence civil disobedience training. There would be legal training for them to understand what was going to happen when they were processed, when they were arrested, the information that they should give the police if they didn't want to be put

through the system. Certain people that maybe should avoid arrest, like juveniles or people with substantial records or undocumented immigrants.

**SS: Let's go through that. Let's say, ACT UP plans a demonstration. So, you're going to hold a civil disobedience training?**

KM: Right, and my part would usually be the legal training.

**SS: So, what would you say and do in that training?**

KM: I would say, this is what will happen, if you get arrested.

**SS: What would happen?**

KM: They don't have to read you your rights. People watch a lot of TV, so everyone is always, "What about reading me my rights?" Unless they plan to take a confession from you, that's probably not going to come up, and they're probably not going to take a confession from you for sitting down in the middle of the street. What you can expect when you're getting arrested, the questions that you should answer if you want to be processed.

**SS: What were they?**

KM: Your name and your address, basically.

**SS: And what should you not answer?**

KM: Are you a member of the Communist party? What's your HIV status? What kind of job you have? How much money do you make? It usually didn't come up, not under Dinkins, anyway. Under Giuliani, more – they sometimes do try to get like, what group are you involved in? And, what are your political affiliations? But I think that some people thought that they shouldn't tell their name, or shouldn't tell their address, and I think it was important to let people now that that was probably a mistake,

unless you wanted to live in jail for a few weeks, and like that. But also to let us know if you had medication that you were going to need access to, after a certain amount of time.

**SS: So, you guys would literally carry people's medication?**

KM: Yeah, support people would do that. But often – at least under Dinkins – the processing would happen fairly quickly, because it's in everybody's interests. It's in the taxpayers' interest, it's in the police's interest, if it can happen quickly.

**SS: What would you tell the legal observers?**

KM: The legal observers? Write things down. If you see any brutality, get badge numbers, and just as a back-up, get the names of people as they're getting arrested. Even though we have it, and we have all the contact sheets with all the information – “What's your name?” – and the, once people are in the vans – the police vans – find out what precinct they're going to.

Tape I  
00:30:00

**SS: I have memories of you – now that you're saying this. I have memories of sitting in a police van and you going, “Sarah, who else is in there?” And you'd be writing the names down.**

KM: Yeah, that was a big part of it. It also, frankly, just helps to have the legal armband that says “Legal” – even when the law students are running around. It helps safety, it helps the police be on their best behavior, and it helps the demonstrators feel that they're being watched and protected to some extent.

**SS: So, how many people would get arrested at a time?**

KM: Sometimes I was the coordinator for demonstrations in which 100 people were arrested – which, there were would be three vans of 33 people. No, it would be more like five vans of 15 people going – usually, down to Pitt Street. But, 30 was

common. Sometimes it was just 10. I remember a demonstration at the INS and it's just 10 people. Especially in Campaign '92, there was a lot of small actions. I think that's one reason I was so busy back then, because there were a lot of sub-groups targeting different candidates would get arrested at different times. So, it would be, like, Jerry Brown, one day, and a Clinton the next day and a Democratic fundraising committee event the next day, and a Fifth Avenue this day. And, there was also started to be a lot of political funerals – which, you can't time them, necessarily. And then, they would be happening.

**SS: Did people get arrested at political funerals?**

KM: Yes. But often, that wasn't the plan. Often it was just, we're going to carry this coffin up Fifth Avenue, and we're going to take the street.

**SS: Who's funeral are you thinking of?**

KM: I definitely can talk about D.C. – that I remember really well. But, I was thinking maybe of Aldyn [McKean], you know. And this is really, really sad, but it does kind of blur. Okay, D.C. – that was Shane Butler and he became a really good friend of mine – really young, Classics Ph.D. student at Columbia. He met his boyfriend at this demonstration, James Thacker, and they became really good friends of mine. But my friend Alexis, who's still a really, really good friend of mine – her father had died of AIDS, and there were two other people who had ashes that they had wanted thrown on the White House lawn. Who were the two other people? Why am I drawing a blank on that?

**SS: Was one of them David Robinson?**

KM: Maybe, yeah, and then one more. Those – and Bob Rafsky was still alive, and Andrea was getting involved in ACT UP.

**SS: Who's Andrea?**

KM: Now she's girlfriends with Barb, I guess.

**SS: Dailey?**

KM: Yes, Andrea Dailey – she has that long black hair. And, I was a lawyer for that. Actually, that was one of the things at that time where I wasn't the main lawyer, because I didn't have a lot of federal experience. I had a lot of New York, lower level, criminal experience. I could get a Ph.D. in demonstrations law, which is a completely useless way to make a dime. But, other people that were older than me had more like, federal/criminal defense experience. Jill was more involved in the legal stuff with that. But, I was still very involved.

**SS: What was the actual action?**

KM: The actual action was, we went down in a van – I would love to talk about that van ride because it was really funny.

**SS: Go ahead, talk start with the van ride.**

KM: It was me, Andrea, and Bob Rafsky and Shane and James, and I think David Falcone, who was really wild. And, I had my little short blonde hair, and I was really young. And I had just taken the Bar, and I was just doing all this ACT UP stuff, trying to make friends, and I was on the over-sensitive side. And there's Bob Rafsky, and he's this big star. And we're going down there to do this really serious thing – really serious thing of throwing people's ashes on the White House lawn. And we start playing this game in the van – "I Have" – do you know that game?

**SS: No, how does it go?**

Tape I  
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KM: You hold up 10 fingers and you say something that you did in bed, and if someone hasn't done it, they have to put a finger down. I was really sexually active with men, and then I was going to the Clit Club every Friday, and really sexually active with women. And there was like, all these experienced – very sexually active, HIV-positive, really older people than me in this van, and I won! [LAUGHS] Bob Rafsky and I were going head-to-head. And I was like – I don't know if I should say it on the tape – threesomes and in the train and on the beach. And this bisexuality – multi-gendered threesomes and this and that. I still remember – I was almost a martyr in ACT UP, because I gave so much and I was running around, trying to prove myself. I was a little hyperactive and young and new on the gay scene. And I remember at the end of this game, Bob Rafsky – there's a silence, and he goes, "Karen, you've just found yourself some newfound respect. We'll never look at you the same way again." [LAUGHS] It was really fun. And, he's so serious, and he's got that deep voice all the time. And even when he talked on the floor of ACT UP, it was this baritone, and he was lecturing at us, and he was on *60 Minutes*, and he had his little girl and his Harvard degree – and that was fun. We all found out some things about each other. And that cemented a lot of my friendships – like, with Shane and James, I became really close to them after that, and they started cuddling in the back seat, and they started going out after that.

But then, we got to D.C. and met on the Promenade area, and we were going to go to the White House, and it was drizzly, and then things got really, really serious and I just remember being really sad, because you bond with people. It becomes less – the more involved I got, the less abstract it became. And I was getting closer to Alexis, and this is

her father. It was very serious. Everything you did in ACT UP was serious, but you know, when people are under fire for something that grave – as either themselves or their friends losing their lives, you have to have a sense of humor. And it's sort of like – I can't remember who said this – but, "never take anyone seriously who doesn't have a sense of humor." Those people are usually in some ways fake. And that was not ACT UP. ACT UP was – there was a life in those demonstrations, and this because people were dying. But this – once we got there – this was really grave, because it wasn't our turf. You know, there were other ACT UP groups there. There was ACT UP D.C. – there were other groups there, but this wasn't our turf. This was federal charges, which was going to be a lot more serious. It was a huge crowd. There were police on horses, trying to – after we threw the ashes over the fence –

**SS: On the White House lawn?**

KM: On the White House lawn – trying to intimidate people away. And, you know, just the talent of Alexis and Amy – making everybody sit down during that time.

**SS: So, Alexis had her father's ashes, and she was marshalling?**

KM: I don't remember if she was marshalling, but I always remember all the trainings, in which she would talk about what to do if the horses come, because horses don't step on people sitting down. And, make everyone sit down, and how it worked. And it was hard. I remember a lot of tension. I felt a lot of tension with Jill. In general, I had a lot of tension with her, which was really, really painful, because I was trying to break into the community. I was like, a new baby dyke.

**SS: What do you think was the problem?**

KM: I was probably crushed out on her. There was a problem with power, and I think that I – and this is a very personal thing to say – but that I am uncomfortable having power sometimes, and that I was uncomfortable stepping into her role. She was fading away, and I was sort of becoming the main ACT UP lawyer. I was the one on the contact sheet. I was coordinating the legal observers. And, I think I thought that people wouldn't like me if I was too powerful. And that – since I had a crush on her – I did that with her. I gave her a lot of power, and I think it made her really uncomfortable, but she also took advantage of it. And it made me uncomfortable. It didn't serve me well. I've had a lot of therapy since then and I've changed. I've gone to Al-Anon, you know. I'm sort of a different person. I was young and I was new, and I had just gotten divorced. I don't want to blame it all on myself, either. I'm sure you'd have to ask her how she changed.

**SS: And she'd say, "I was a bitch to Karen."**

KM: She might. None of us are perfect.

**SS: You wanted to show us a picture.**

KM: This is actually a picture from the political funeral in D.C. That's the tension that I felt.

**SS: Oh, yeah.**

KM: This was in a photo show. Gail Goodman took this. This is the pre-action meeting, in which we're – I was like, helping out, training legal observers. Jill's giving the whole big spiel, whatever. But yeah, I was really distraught.

**SS: I want to ask you a few more legal questions. Would ACT UP decide beforehand that people were going to get arrested? Or, did it ever happen as**

**accidentally – that on the spot, people decided – or, did they just get arrested against their will?**

KM: Often it would be contingent – we're willing to risk arrest if we can't take the avenue, and often, it would be a planned civil disobedience. We're going to sit down, and then the police are going to arrest us. And, sometimes, even the police would want to know, do you plan arrest or not? And, sometimes we would tell them, sometimes we wouldn't.

**SS: What would determine whether or not you would tell them?**

KM: Maybe, if there was a secondary goal. For example, we're trying to get into a building – or, they're trying to get into a building – say, the plan is, for people to get arrested here, so that other people can sneak into the building, there. This is what happened, like, if we wanted to leaflet a Congress person's office. They know you wouldn't tell them. Then there would be this big distraction, and then people would sneak in.

**SS: So, how would you find out what the secret plan was? When would you know?**

KM: It would depend on the action. A lot of times I would know – almost always, I would know. But, I would also know whether or not this was something that we wanted to tell the police.

**SS: But, how would you know?**

KM: The pre-action meeting.

**SS: So, things would be discussed openly in a pre-action meeting and the police wouldn't know about it?**

KM: They might know about it. You know that thing they always say in ACT UP meetings – “Any number of the NYPD or FBI should identify yourself now.” Of course, they never did. But, I don't know how much they cared about people that were going to sit down in the middle of the street on a Tuesday afternoon, during the Dinkins administration. I don't know – sometimes they would know, sometimes not. And then, the affinity groups maybe would have their own, quieter plan – depending on what was going on.

**SS: And would they tell you?**

KM: Sometimes yes, and sometimes no – just depending on what the goal was. But again, as a lawyer it's almost better to know less. Just know – okay, there might be some arrests here. This the street we plan to take. Legally, in terms of the ethics of being a lawyer. It's your job, more, to go there because there's a demonstration, and at a demonstration, there's always a risk of arrest. Even with planned non-violent civil disobedience, I think it's okay, if you know people plan to get arrested. It's not like you know people are going to rob a bank. You know, the ethics of that is really dubious. Oh, you plan to murder your wife? I'll be over, with my legal armband. It's not like that. It's, we plan to break a really low law in order to promote a higher, moral cause. And in that case, I think planned civil disobedience like that, that even the police know about – that that's kind of different, in terms of the ethics – someone should write an article about this – but, in terms of the ethics of being a lawyer, then I think it's okay that sometimes I did know that people planned to get arrested.

**SS: Did you ever have a situation where people got arrested unexpectedly?**

KM: Oh yeah.

**SS: Can you think of any examples?**

KM: Let me think. Yeah, I can. James Baggett and James Learned and – oh, what was that? That was like, a really big thing, and I ended up writing motions for them, and going to court for them – we almost went to trial. And I can't for the life of me remember. I think it might have been like, inside Democratic National Headquarters or something – I don't remember – throwing leaflets and being picked out and not intending to be arrested. I remember that Shraga's tape was taken and that we never get it back.

Tape II  
00:05:00

**SS: Who's Shraga?**

KM: He was a filmmaker back then.

**SS: What was his name?**

KM: Shraga Lev. I don't remember, do you remember?

**JW: It was a drug company luncheon at some hotel that he was filming, and Larry Kramer dumped some tables.**

KM: Right, right. And, it was James Learned and Jim Baggett, right? Wasn't it those two? It was a big deal.

**SS: What do you mean? They were just standing there and they got arrested?**

KM: You know what? I wrote about it in *Sexual Orientation and the Law*, and I can look at the motion papers.

**SS: And anyone who watches this can look there too, because they know that your article is there.**

KM: Should I grab that?

**SS: No, that's OK. Let's keep talking.**

KM: I have the motion papers.

**SS: It's in that volume and if people want to look at it, at the case.**

KM: It says the facts and then it would refresh my recollection.

**SS: OK, get it.**

KM: This is the law book that I edit every year.

**SS: This is the thing that you've been doing since 1993?**

KM: Right. After my first year in ACT UP, and I update it every year. And, how law books work is, you take the pages out and you put the new pages in every year, when it gets updated. So, this – let's see if it's in this volume. Yeah – criminal justice, I wrote this chapter. And, as samples of motion papers, I included the motions that I wrote for James Baggett and Shraga Lev. And we won, I won. I made a motion to dismiss for the inadequacy of the instrument, and in the interest of justice:

“Defendants were arrested at a hotel, following a demonstration at a community advisory board meeting of a pharmaceutical company – Hoffman-La Roche. Present at the meeting were numerous other members of the community, concerned about AIDS, and the failure of Hoffman-La Roche to responsibly research, test, and distribute drugs potentially important for people with HIV or AIDS. The accusatory instruments and alleged facts indicating that defendants themselves took part in any demonstration – in any part of the demonstration – that they didn't cause harm. The meeting itself was an event of grave, social concern, and the demonstration was conducted by responsible members of the community, deeply concerned about the AIDS crisis in this country and the world. This is evident from the fact, *inter alia*, that following the demonstration, 11

members of a 12-member community advisory board formerly suspended relations with Hoffman-La Roche until such a time as the company takes its role in ending the AIDS epidemic, as seriously as it must. Not only was there no real harm caused by this demonstration, but in fact a substantial amount of good may result from the attention drawn to the company's irresponsibility in the face of an extreme emergency. Thousands of lives a year in this country alone are lost to the AIDS crisis. And yet, for the sake of profit, Hoffman-La Roche chooses to stall or withhold the release of crucial tools to combat the virus. That is the real crime – not the important and successful attempts of the demonstrators to draw attention to the immoral practice of the company.”

**SS: And you won with that argument?**

KM: Yeah.

**SS: That's phenomenal.**

KM: I often won with this sort of argument – not often, but once in awhile, in court – depending on the judge – you could win with that argument, orally. But, I was always ready to give papers if I had to. Usually you didn't have to. This was substantial. This was three or four court appearances and meeting these guys and drawing up these motions, as well as all the other technical motions. But this is CPL 170-40, Motion to Dismiss in the Interest of Justice. Actually – I honestly can't say – this is what I wrote, this is what they had. There were other grounds for dismissal, too, so it might have been something more technical that it was actually dismissed on, but those were the motion papers.

**SS: If someone in ACT UP broke the law, you would defend them. Was there ever a discussion in ACT UP about whether or not this particular breaking of**

**the law was okay? Or was it just accepted that anyone who broke the law in the name of ACT UP?**

KM: That's a very interesting question. The law that was broken the most in ACT UP was trespass, and I know everything there is to know about trespass.

[LAUGHS] And again, I don't think I'm ever going to be rich from my law degree. The other one is disorderly conduct. And trespass is actually – there's a lot of First Amendment implications in trespass – what's a public area, what's a private area – things people don't know – that you can't really stand on a sidewalk. After awhile you're blocking traffic, and that's disorderly conduct. You can't go uninvited and sit in someone's dentist office for a long period of time – things like that. But, you know, as with Gandhi, as with all direct action – let me go back a little bit. Rosa Parks, for example. She goes and she sits down on the bus, because she wants to change that law. I'm going to change the “black people can't sit on the bus” law. So, I am breaking the law that I want to change. Civil disobedience becomes more and more popular. There's a Central American movement, there's the anti-nuclear movement, there's the AIDS epidemic. It's no longer about breaking the law you want to have changed. I don't ever remember a discussion in ACT UP about the unfair trespass laws, or the unfair disorderly conduct laws. They're just silly little laws. But the demonstration is meant to promote a greater idea, as the thing I just read there. The demonstration is meant to further a greater good, and the law is just sort of this thing in the way and breaking it serves the purpose of getting attention drawn to the issue. So, yeah, I don't think people thought twice about breaking the trespass law or breaking the disorderly conduct law. There was discussion about, like, remember, that the police aren't are enemy. This isn't about battling police.

Tape II  
00:10:00

This is about press and attention to this greater issue. Once in a while – like, disrupting someone’s office, or a candidate when they’re talking – it gets a little bit more direct than say, holding signs on Fifth Avenue, because Fifth Avenue has nothing to do with AIDS or whatever. It gets more attenuated. But, no – I think it’s a very non-violent, effective way of getting ideas across, and of changing public opinion, and of getting press.

**SS: Was there ever a time when people in ACT UP broke the law and ACT UP was upset that they had done it, or didn’t support the particular thing that they had done?**

KM: I have a vague memory of something like that happening. The thing about ACT UP is it’s non-violent. So, it’s possible – yeah, that somebody broke something – including, against property. ACT UP was very disciplined in terms of pre-action meetings, non-violent training, affinity groups that knew each other and trusted each other – like, you don’t – non-violence is like, if someone shouts at you, you don’t shout back. You don’t call someone a pig if they call you a fag. That’s on them. That’s adult behavior anyway, basically. So, I’m sure there were times – I can’t remember the exact ones.

**SS: What was the most severe charge that was brought while you were acting in ACT UP?**

KM: When Scott – was that his name? It wasn’t in New York, but he was accused –

**SS: Scott Sawyer?**

KM: Yeah, he was accused of biting somebody and transmitting HIV, I believe?

**SS: A civilian or a police officer?**

KM: I think it was police, and I think it was dropped. But, that's a very severe charge.

**SS: Did you ever have people that were charged with more than disorderly conduct and trespass?**

KM: What were these guys [James Baggett, Shraga Lev] charged with? A trespass breaks down – there's violation trespass, which is sort of like a traffic violation. Then there's misdemeanor trespass, which becomes more serious. So, sometimes people are charged with misdemeanor trespass. What are these people charged with? Criminal trespass.

**SS: So, you didn't handle any of the needle exchange, or the harassment charges?**

KM: Needle exchange was a little bit before my time. Jill worked on the needle exchange.

**SS: And things like the Steve Quester, Stephen Joseph thing – that was before your time?**

KM: What was that? They were my – I remember defending them, but I don't – is there something you have in mind?

**SS: No. Tell us about the trials.**

KM: It might be – you have to ask them. I can't remember everything.

**SS: Don't worry. It's not your responsibility, everybody just contributes what they know. So, what would a trial be like?**

KM: Usually you don't go to trial, because there's your first court appearance. And, say you didn't plan to get arrested, which happened. And the police would surround you and arrest you, just for standing there. And you go to the first court appearance – say, in the summons part – and they offer you one day of community service or time served. You say no, because you know you didn't do it. Then, you get sent to the judge – so, that's the next court appearance, and then –

Tape II  
00:15:00

**SS: You know you didn't do it, or you know that it was a necessity to do it?**

KM: Sometimes, it's you know that you weren't really trespassing. You didn't break the law. A lot of times – the more seasoned activists – it was, I plan to break this law, and I know I broke this law, and I'm happy to take my ACD [Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal]. Amy Bauer has a huge rap sheet – just a huge number of ACDs. So, that was no big deal – even a day of community service. You could work for a group like Housing Works your day of community service, and it was no big deal. But once in a while, people were picked off, they didn't plan to get arrested, or for whatever reason, they were going to fight the charge. So then, you go to the summons part. Then, you go to the – you can try to make a motion to dismiss. And often, I would win on that – in front of a judge, depending on the judge, in criminal court. If not, you would have to draw up motion papers, as the ones I just read – writing the reasons that these charges should be dismissed. And then the clock starts running, and the prosecutor has a certain amount of time to bring their information and then you can get, maybe, dismissed on what's called 30/30 time – they're not moving quickly enough. In terms of trial, I don't remember ever going to trial with ACT UP. It almost never happened. It's a lot to go to

trial. I was ready to go to trial on James Baggett and Shraga Lev, but we got it dismissed before then.

**SS: So, what was the typical sentence?**

KM: The typical sentence is an ACD, which is just an Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal. After six months it's erased, basically. It's totally sealed. Or, a Conditional Discharge, which is after a year it's erased, with or without a day of community service. Those are the typical. Once in awhile, someone would take a fine instead – say, they couldn't do the community service, for whatever reason – then, they would take a fine. Those were the typical. Sometimes, it's just time served. They were processed, it took X number of hours. But, yeah usually an ACD – especially during the Dinkins era, that was a more common thing.

**SS: Did you have any notable victories that you felt especially proud of, or defeats that really bothered you, in retrospect?**

KM: I felt really proud of the James Baggett, Shraga Lev thing. Defeats? No. I remember the anniversary action – was that '97? And, I remember being at City Hall, and I remember the pens, and feeling really uncomfortable that people were penned off like that, and feeling a little bit sad that the flavor of the city had changed to that extent. And frankly, I can remember feeling helpless when people were held too long for processing, during the Giuliani administration, and I can remember feeling a little bit like a scapegoat, like people yelling at me, and here I am doing all this stuff for free over and over again – like, “Karen, why is it taking so long?” That was sometimes hard. A lot of people were under a lot of stress.

**SS: What was the relationship between the lawyer and your clients?**

KM: It's interesting. I'm kind of glad you asked about that. I did this whole thing for love. About two months ago I was at a nightclub. I was at Cabaret Magique – this nightclub – and this guy's like, "Is your name Karen? You were a lawyer for ACT UP, I know you, I know you." And, it was Vincent Gagliostro, and he said this – and I cried when I got home. He said, "You were my lawyer, you my lawyer over and over again, and I watched you do that for years." And he says, "And I knew you were doing that for love, and I never thanked you." He said that he didn't know what to say – that was the thing – that he knew – and it was so weird, because I guess I didn't know that was why – why people didn't thank me sometimes. He did then, and it meant a lot to me. He gave me this big hug. He said, "I'm not just this creepy guy trying to pick you up in a club. I remember you. I watched you for years, and I knew you were doing that for love – and that a lot of the rest of us had to be there, and you didn't have to be there." And he said that he was floored, but that he never knew what to say, like that.

**SS: So, how did you feel when people weren't thanking you at the time?**

KM: You know, I had to think a lot about – you don't do things like that to get thanked. People were dying. I did it for – because I thought that was my community, and because I was, sort of, in a way, looking for love. And, that's problematic, because are people under stress. But as I said, I was in my 20s. I wasn't one of these people that was a lesbian in high school. I was sort of new and looking for community and too mature, really, to just do straight identity politics kind of a thing for a community. So this is where I belonged. But it was a little bit – it was complicated. It was a complicated relationship for me. Alexis is one of my best friends, and she's really there for me. I was there for her when Naomi – her mother – was dying. Her mother helped me move, I

remember, when I moved from 14<sup>th</sup> Street to Brooklyn, back when. And I know Alexis's little boy. But, those are the other people that were also – I mean, Alexis's father died of AIDS. She had maybe more of personal stake than me, but we're also really doing it for love, as opposed to the people I was doing it more directly for. I don't know if I have a theory of why some of those relationships really lasted and others didn't, but she's there for me. Amy came to my birthday party at Drag Queen Bingo earlier this year. She never stays out that late, but she did it for me. And, Donna came – her girlfriend – Donna Gould – she's like, 70. They're playing Drag Queen Bingo with me, and those people are my friends. But, it meant a lot for me when Vinny thanked me like that, looking back. Because I didn't do it to get thanked, I did it because it's what I had to do, and I was really proud that I did it. And when I think about my law degree, that's what I think about – I think ACT UP. You know, I don't practice anymore. I try to write. I'm trying to write novels, and I gave it up, but that's what I did the most – and I have an Ivy League law degree. I could have been working at a big fancy law firm, and making a lot of money.

**SS: Let me ask you a couple of things. You said you were doing three actions a week, all the paper work, plus going to Monday night meetings. How much of your life was ACT UP?**

KM: I would say 75% of my life was ACT UP. A lot of my life was ACT UP. I was also really involved in the Lesbian/Gay Committee at the National Lawyer's Guild, and then I started editing this book. And for a lot of the time, I was underemployed. It was a recession. I was divorced. I came back to New York without employment. A lot of the people that went to Columbia Law School were on a certain track, and that track

was you worked for a firm, and it was the firm that you worked for the summer, and you got a job there. Or, you got a legal services job right out of law school. But, I had moved away to be married and came back, and I hadn't taken the New York Bar yet, and I had a contract job with at ACLU for awhile. But I was really sort of looking for work. So, for a lot of '92, and '93, and '94, this is a lot of what I did. I was scraping by. I was happy, but I was scraping by. And then, I did the Stonewall Gay Games. I was the legal coordinator for that. Ann Northrop was the person that hired me to do that, but they didn't really end up paying me, and I had thought it was going to be a paid thing. And, I think sometimes people think, oh, a lawyer, she must have money, you know? And, I am kind of an unusual personality – and I take responsibility for this – I could have made more money, probably, if I had done a different path. But after that, I ended up getting a job at Legal Aid for about a year.

**SS: When 75% of your life was ACT UP – aside from the Lawyer's Guild, what was the other 25%?**

KM: Going out. [LAUGHS] I went to the Clit Club every Friday. And then, I started sleeping with men again – gay men – and I was going to Squeeze Box every Friday.

**SS: While you were still in ACT UP?**

KM: Yeah, in 1997, during the anniversary action. I remember seeing John Winkelman at the Squeeze Box, and him introducing me to Michael Schmidt, who's the promoter of Squeeze Box. And, I started getting more and more involved in that. And I became sort of obsessed with fluid sexuality, as a thing to write about. It became really interesting to me. I remember this thing from ACT UP – "A lesbian and a gay man

Tape II  
00:25:00

sleeping together is still queer sex.” That was the thing about ACT UP, it was a little bit different. It was ahead of its time.

**SS: Did you have sex with people in ACT UP?**

KM: Yeah – women, I think.

**SS: What was the social sexual scene in ACT UP for women? What was it like?**

KM: What was it like? I was new and I was nervous, and I wasn’t fully aware of my own bisexuality then. In a way it was like, I was very comfortable straight, and I’m very comfortable bisexual. But just as a pure lesbian I was a little bit awkward, I think, during that brief period when that’s what I tried to be. I think I even tried to be butch for awhile, which totally I’m not. What was it like? I remember Suzanne, you know? And, I remember I had a date with Suzanne –

**SS: Who’s Suzanne?**

KM: Suzanne Huber, and everybody thought she was so hot. She married John Kelly and they have a baby. And I remember sort of having a crush on Jill, but she was aloof, not very cuddly. And, who else? What else was it like? There was love. There was a lot of love. A lot of the guys were really close –

**SS: What was the lesbian sexual scene like inside ACT UP? Where did the women socialize? Did you go to parties? Did you go to people’s houses? Explain it to people, historically.**

KM: We would go to a meeting and then, afterwards – I don’t know if I’m a good person to ask this – we would all go out to a restaurant – me and Amy and B.C., and Alexis and Ron Goldberg and Joe [Chiplock].

**SS: Who's Joe?**

KM: Ron's boyfriend. And, B.C. and Alexis – first, it was Alexis and John, and then they broke up, and then it was Alexis and B.C., and then B.C. started dating somebody else, and Suzanne – I remember first she had this little boyfriend with the shaved head. And then she was women, and then she was with John. It was like that. There was a lot of shifting around and a lot of romance. I had parties. I remember a lot of parties. I remember one party people taking a picture of my brother off the wall – they're like, "He looks like you, but he's a boy! Who is he? Why don't you bring him to a meeting?" It was a lot of guys in ACT UP, so it was friends. I don't know if the bulk of my sex life was in ACT UP.

**SS: Okay, so you went out to the Clit Club, and that was Julie Tolentino and what's her name? First, there was Lola Flash –**

KM: Catherine was – Shiggy was at the door.

**SS: But, the counterculture around ACT UP included the Clit Club, so you would go, and would you see people from ACT UP there?**

KM: No, and I think people didn't even really know I was a lawyer. And it was like, who's this girl, coming and playing pool every week, who looks kind of new and green and is hanging out? Shiggy tells me that now, when she see me. She's like, "You were such a piece of work. I was going to say to you, it's not like men – you can't just come in here and stand here and think something's going to happen. It's not the same." Squeeze Box worked a lot better that way – even the gay guys, all you had to really do is stand there. It's true. It's a whole different thing.

**SS: Did you ever have an affinity group yourself? Were you ever in an affinity group?**

KM: Yeah, I was with Ed Ball, and we went to Greenwich, Connecticut, and we hung a sign from one of the overpasses. I don't remember what the sign said. And then we got a prize when we got back to the meeting, for having gone the furthest distance to do a civil disobedience, and I don't remember what the name of our affinity group was – I just don't.

**SS: So, besides being a lawyer, was there other stuff that you did in ACT UP?**

KM: Oh yeah, I got arrested then. I think I did an action at the INS, because I had this tool that I was able to offer. So, I mostly concentrated on that. I had parties sometimes. I went to eat with people, but mostly, I did that. Mostly, I was the legal coordinator.

**SS: I just want to talk a little bit about illness and death inside ACT UP, because it was such a big part of the experience. Are there particular people who stand out in your mind, where their illness and death was particularly, personally affective to you?**

KM: Yeah – I'm sure I'm not alone, but Bob Rafsky, because he was sort of a distant hero. He was not easy to warm up to, and he was very foreboding, and he would talk on the floor and – I don't remember him being particularly warm. And then we had that van ride, and we got close, and it was really humorous and there was this humanity that came up. And I remember, at his funeral – at the friend's – at his memorial, I should

say, with his little girl running in the hall and stuff – I just became hysterical. And I remember just losing it. And, I don't know, for some reason it really hit me.

**SS: What was it like to be around people who were so sick, on a daily basis?**

KM: It was – sometimes, it was little bit numbing, because we all had something to do. And, you see people getting thinner and you see KS coming on their face, and stuff. But when you see people every day, it's not dramatic. It's not like, you see them and go, "Whoa, you've really changed" – although, there was some of that. Again, it put things in perspective. It was hard. People weren't always at their best when they were dying. So, you know, the myths of saintliness and romance to do with death – that maybe younger people have – that went away. There was a lot of, sometimes, not knowing – not knowing who was sick and who wasn't sick sometimes, would be a little bit awkward. I remember feeling some awkwardness.

**SS: Did you have conversations directly with people who were sick about their illness and their coming death?**

KM: Not that I remember.

**SS: So, you never talked to any of these people about – you never talked to people directly about their illness?**

KM: I wouldn't say that I never talked to anybody directly about their illness, but that's not something – I can't highlight a big conversation about that, because my role was, like – I was so busy. It was about getting this thing done, and it was all about death. It was everywhere. It was all about, this is why we're doing it.

**SS: If you can pull back a little bit, and just try to remember that room at the Center – what was the role of illness and death in the dynamics of the organization? How was it handled? Did people talk about it openly on the floor? What did people do when somebody died?**

KM: When somebody died, there was sadness, and there was talk on the floor and there was sharing, and people would cry. I remember crying on the floor, at least once. There would be – usually sometimes a memorial, and that would be – there would be a lot of emotion, and that would be really difficult. Then, there would often be a political funeral. It's hard, because again, it's like – you're carrying the coffin up Fifth Avenue, and it's raining, and you're holding the umbrellas over the coffin, but it's not about the police, and it's not about the rain, and it's not about the street, it's about this much bigger thing. The seriousness is inescapable and it shrinks everything else, it shrinks everything else. So, I don't know – it was a grave situation, it was a really grave situation, and it was kind of like we were racing against the clock in a lot of ways. There was a lot of talk about what drugs were working, what drugs weren't working, how people could get into certain trials and disappointments when things didn't work for people. There was a lot of confusion and mystery over why some people were long term survivors, and why some people weren't. You know, like that. Who seroconverted, you know? People would almost even joke about – “Oh, I remember when you seroconverted.” And again, I think it's because it's so grave, you can't have a fake – it's so grave that you almost have to be cheerful.

**SS: But, how would you know someone that seroconverted?**

KM: They would tell you.

**SS: One on one, or would they say it on the floor?**

KM: Maybe when we were out, eating afterwards.

**SS: Karen, when did you leave ACT UP?**

KM: I remember doing the anniversary action in 1997. Let's see – ACT UP started to kind of fade by '98, '99. I stopped going to meetings by, maybe '96, '95. I would just go once in awhile. It shrunk, it did. It changed.

**SS: Can you characterize that change a little bit?**

Tape II  
00:35:00

KM: Less people. Alexis moved to California. Amy, maybe, doing something else. I think it still exists, but it's smaller. There's a lot more – AIDS organizations are sort of all over the place now. It's become more part of the mainstream. It's more spoken about by the candidates. I'm not saying things are necessarily better, but things have changed and evolved, and it's been to some extent, co-opted. Times got more difficult for direct action after Dinkins was no longer the Mayor, and after Clinton was no longer the President, too.

**SS: I just have one more question for you. Why do you think ACT UP was able to be as successful as it was?**

KM: That's a really big question. I don't know. I'm so proud of me and of those people from that time, because we rose to the occasion. It was the most serious thing that had happened to – if I think of myself – you know, you're young – a lot of your causes are abstract. Yes, Central America is a real place, and there's real people getting hurt. But, I'm not Central American, and I have a relatively privileged upbringing, as did a lot of people in ACT UP – relatively. Nuclear weapons are a big future threat and fear, but this was something that was real and that hit us at home. And, especially I guess for

the women in ACT UP – it wasn't even necessarily us. It was our friends, our people, and we grew up. I think that grew up the movement. It gave us more of a perspective on the role of sex and identity, on where to have a sense of humor, on what life is all about. And, direct action is the most effective way to make change. So it was not even like, anything you could think about for more than a minute. It's like, what's the most effective thing that we can do, and we just have to do it. There was no time to stall. You're faced with mortality, and you have to be the best person you can possibly be if you're going to die, or if your friends are going to die. And this was what ACT UP was for me. It was like, love – you have to find love on earth if you're going to die. And you have to act on it, and you have to put it in other people's faces, like that.

**SS:** Thank you.

**KM:** Thank you, that was fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]