

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

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Interviewee: **Michael Nesline**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Michael Nesline  
March 24, 2003

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

MICHAEL NESLINE: We have to stop. Okay, my name is Michael Nesline, and I live at 171 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Apartment 6, in New York City, and I'm 51 years old. And, what else did you need to know from me?

**SS: Today's date.**

MN: Today's date is the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 2003.

**SS: Okay. Michael, do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS.**

MN: Not the very first time, no. I don't recall the first time I heard AIDS.

**SS: Do you remember when it first came close to your life?**

MN: Oh yeah, definitely, clearly. In 1985, in March of 1985, a man that I had a long love affair with became ill with what was then diagnosed as pneumocystis pneumonia. That occurred and that was the first person who was most close to me. I had known a couple of individuals, prior to that who – one fellow, in particular, about a year earlier, had died from what I guess was being called AIDS at that time. I'm not sure. I mean, I remember someone was diagnosed with Cat Scratch Fever, and that must have been, like, 1982, maybe. And, thinking back on it later, we realized that that must have been -- that he had AIDS, and nobody knew what it was. And, I do remember that there was something called GRID, for awhile, but exactly when it became AIDS is not clear to me anymore.

**SS: So, at that moment, Michael, who were you? What kind of life were you looking forward to?**

MN: Well, I'm not – I was not the sort of person who, particularly had any ambitions, so I was looking forward to – I don't know – just getting by. I was living in the East Village, I was driving a taxicab, some friends of mine and I were running a nightclub in the East Village.

**SS: What club was that?**

MN: It was called Limbo Lounge. And, I was trying to keep up with people who were 10 years younger than me, basically. I'm still doing that, but other – I was, sort of a frustrated artist.

**SS: Were you making art?**

MN: No. That was what was frustrating about it, I guess.

**SS: So, where did you grow up?**

MN: I grew up in the suburbs of Washington, DC.

**SS: So, did you move to New York to be an artist?**

MN: Sort of. I left Washington, after high school and went to Austin, Texas, because I'd heard there were hippies there. And there were. They were in sundresses, shopping for avocados in the middle of the day at the Piggly Wiggly and that made me very happy. And some friends and I there started a theatrical troupe called Esther's Follies, which still exists, if you're interested. So, after nine years in Austin, I decided I needed to get out of the fire and into the frying pan. The other way around, actually. So, I moved to New York – sort of with aspirations to get involved in theater.

**SS: So, how did Limbo come about?**

MN: Because, it seemed like a way that I might be able to get involved in theater. We had performances, and served food and showed art and it was sort of like a prototypical East Village – you know – happening.

**SS: Who were some of the other people involved?**

MN: No one that is germane to our discussion about ACT UP, but a fellow named Michael Gormley, who goes by the name, Michael Limbo, today, and, I believe, still lives upstairs from Maria Maggenti; Stephen Evasew, and a man named Tri Garraty. The four of us were sort of a gang, and we started this place together.

**SS: So, when your friend got sick, how did you proceed?**

MN: Well, Joe [Hollis] was hospitalized at St. Vincent's. He contacted his family in Georgia and they told him that he could not come home, which is, really, all he wanted to do. But they were very upset that he turned out to be gay, much less to have AIDS. And so, they didn't want to ever see him again. And, he and I had lived here in this apartment at different times, together. And, though, at that point, he was living in Hoboken, and I just said he was in St. Vincent's and that's inaccurate. He was, actually, in a hospital in New Jersey. He was in St. Mary's Hospital in New Jersey. And I actually believed that his parents' refusing to have him come home was a momentary aberration on their part, and believing that that was the case, I said, well, Joe, you can come stay with me, for as long as you need to, because I assumed that in 24 hours, they were going to change their mind, and everything would work out the way that he wanted. They never did change their mind, and when Joe was discharged from the hospital, he did come here, and we just proceeded to live together. And, Joe was well. He was taking Bactrim everyday, as PCP prophylaxis. There were no medications for HIV, at that time.

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He began taking AZT as an experimental drug, sometime in the late summer of '85, and there were fistfuls of hair falling out of his head.

And, in the late summer, he and I began to have discussion about actually finding a larger place to live, having decided that this was a good thing that was happening between the two of us, and he needed the, sort of the emotional and psychological support of having someone care about him, and I felt capable and motivated to be that person. But, before we could actually put that plan into action to look for a place, Joe became ill. He began to develop what I now know is called petichiae – it's little, small broken blood vessels on the tops of his feet – his capillaries were bursting, and he was hospitalized and his platelet count was very low and they'd began giving him platelets, but no sooner would they give him platelets but that his platelet count would drop even lower, and they offered to do a splenectomy on him. They had never seen this before, or, at least, Barbara Starrett, who was his MD had not seen this. And, so, she recommended – they had stopped his Bactrim and he was on – they recommended that he have his spleen removed. But, Joe was a very vain person, and the idea of having an operation and having a surgical scar, having the integrity of his body interfered with was anathema to him. So, he chose not to do that, and he said, no, I prefer to just let nature take its course. And, now, I'm a nurse, and so now I understand better, the implications of what he was saying. But, at the time, I didn't really understand, except that I could see that his doctor was very alarmed, and so, I asked her, well, what does that mean, then? If he says that he's going to let nature take its course – the three of us were standing in the room together – he's in the bed, and Barbara and I are standing, and she said, well, then, it's just a matter of time before Joe will die.

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And I said, well, are we talking days or weeks or months? And she said, well, no, we're talking probably days or weeks. And, as a matter of fact, we were talking 24 hours. And so, I spent, essentially, that last 24 hours with Joe, and the next morning, Joe passed away. And, parenthetically, it was the exact 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my mother's death when Joe died and that had great emotional resonance for me, and it had a real transformative effect on my life. Losing Joe, made me realize that I needed to do something more constructive than just what I was doing – driving a taxi cab and being a frustrated artist. And so, I enrolled in nursing school, in the fall of 1985 or January of 1986.

**SS: Did you have any support from any of your other family members when Joe was sick?**

MN: No, but only because I didn't share that information with any of my family members.

**SS: Why not?**

MN: Well, because I didn't share much of my life with my family, period.

**SS: So, were you in the closet to them, at the time?**

MN: Essentially, yeah.

**SS: So, what do you think is the impact of not having any family support for you or Joe, on your situation?**

MN: I have no idea, Sarah. I cannot answer that question. I know what the – having family support now, in some form, and realizing now that I'm very grateful and happy that I have family that I feel loved by – that matters so much to me, and I feel so grateful that I've managed to transform my life and make that part of my life. With some

leap of imagination, I could think about what it might have been like then, but it just wasn't there. It just was not part of my modus operandi to, like, reach out to my family.

**SS: Okay. So, when you went to nursing school, was there any acknowledgement of AIDS in school?**

MN: Oh yeah.

**SS: How was it presented?**

MN: As a scourge that we needed to understand. It was presented factually. It was presented as a disease that is incurable, that is passed on through unprotected sexual activity and the sharing of needles and that nurses and other medical personnel need to practice, you know – I can't even think of what they call it – it's not reversed isolation, but you have to presume that anybody could be HIV-positive and so, you have to wear gloves, but you don't have to put the food out in the hallway, which is what was happening in hospitals at that time.

**SS: What school were you at?**

MN: I went to BMCC – Borough of Manhattan Community College.

**SS: Okay – so there – was that the first place that you were thinking about AIDS conceptually, with other people?**

MN: I'm not sure. No. No, because I think that the circle of friends that Joe and I had – we did sit around and conceptualize, without really thinking that that's what we were doing about AIDS as a phenomenon. Joe and I went to see Larry Kramer's play, *The Normal Heart*, and Joe said to me, I don't know who this Larry Kramer guy is, but you should go do something with that guy, that guy knows what he's doing.

**SS: Did you think at that time that you might be infected?**

MN: I don't know if I thought about that or not. I don't remember if there was a test for HIV. I don't remember the first time I got tested for HIV. That's a good question, and it's interesting to me that I don't know the answer, but I don't.

**SS: Okay. So, how did you first find out about ACT UP?**

MN: A fellow named Chris Leone, who was a member of the support group that later came to be known as the Silence Equals Death Group, told me that he had attended the talk at the Center that Larry Kramer gave, and that there was going to be a follow-up meeting to that, and invited me to go along. So, I was at the second meeting, I guess.

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**SS: And what happened there? When was that, by the way?**

MN: That was at the [Lesbian and Gay] Center?

**SS: When?**

MN: When was that? I don't know – 1987 – it was the spring of 1987 – March or April of 1987, I guess. And, there were about 60 people there, and the meeting was being facilitated by a fellow from GMHC, who's first name is Tim, who's last name I can't remember. I believe he was the Executive Director.

**SS: Tim Sweeney?**

MN: Tim Sweeney. Tim was facilitating the meeting. He made it – it was clear to me, from the very beginning, from that meeting, that he didn't really want to be facilitating this meeting, but that he felt under some obligation to do so.

And, there was a large discussion on the floor that Tim facilitated and tried to keep rein over and, as I remember it, the thrust of the conversation was, what are we going to do? It seemed to me what was established was that we're all really upset that this is happening to us, and it feels like it's happening in a vacuum, and we're being

ignored, and we're middle class white guys and we're not used to being ignored and so what can we do to get what we want? And what we want is for other people to know what's going on, and we want the *New York Times* to write about it, even inaccurately. So, we needed to draw attention to ourselves and to our problem. So, we probably should have some kind of demonstration.

And, I don't know if it was at that first meeting or the meeting right after that, the next Monday, but it very quickly, I mean, I started attending every Monday, after that first meeting. And, very quickly it was determined that we were going – we took suggestions. Tim solicited suggestions for where would be a good place to have demonstration. And, I guess, you know, majority rule decided that City Hall – Wall Street would be a really good place to have a demonstration. So, we began to make plans for that.

**SS: Now, had you ever been involved in a political organization before?**

MN: Not a political organization per se. When I was in college – I graduated from high school in 1969 – the Vietnam war was going on. There were in the spring of 1970, there was political actions that took place all over the country, where students shut down their campuses and I participated in some of that. But, on the small community college that I participated, that I attended, it was all being organized by anarchists. So, there was no organization.

**SS: So, who were some of the people at that first meeting? Do you remember?**

MN: Avram [Finklestein], Chris, Mark Simpson – those were the people that I knew best. I know that Eric Sawyer was there and, what was the name of the guy that

Eric Sawyer dated then? It will come to me. Michael Petrelis was there, Marty Robinson was there, Larry Kramer was there. Probably, Maxine was there. I bet Rebecca Cole was there. Jump – Frank Jump was who Eric Sawyer was involved with then. Barry Gingell was there, who was the medical information officer at GMHC. Steven Webb. I'm not so sure that Steven Webb was actually at those first meetings. Steven came on a little tiny bit later.

**SS: Was that Avram's boyfriend?**

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MN: He became Avram's boyfriend, yeah. In preparation – Michael Savino was there. In preparation for the first demonstration, it was decided that we needed to organize into working groups and I agreed to participate with a group of people that was going to put together a fact sheet, and we met at Barry Gingell's apartment. And Steven Webb was Barry Gingell's roommate. And Steven stood in the corner sort of scowling and skulking at us, as five people tried to write one document and ended up sort of commandeering the process to make it more efficient. And then, after that, began attending the meetings.

Somewhere around that same time, we decided that – somebody stood up – well, we said, we need to name this organization. If we're going to have a demonstration, we need to be able to tell people who we are. So, does anybody have any idea of what we should call ourselves? And, different suggestions were made. And someone stood up, and I sure wish I knew who it was. What I remember is somebody who looked like a flasher – someone who was in, like, a trench coat – stood up and said, I've been sitting in my room for the last three years thinking that something like this should happen, and I've been trying to think of names for an organization that would do something like what

we're talking about doing and I think a really good name for an organization that did this would be the AIDS Coalition to Upset Power – Unleash Power – and that would be ACT UP. And everyone was, like, ACT UP, ACT UP – that sounds pretty good. And then, sort by acclimation, then, it became ACT UP.

**SS: So you worked on the fact sheets?**

MN: Yes.

**SS: And how did the action go?**

MN: You know what? I didn't attend, because I had school. So, what I did do instead was work on support, whatever we called it. I arranged, prior to the event, to have people be responsible for following who all got arrested, etc., etc., and –

**SS: So, people knew they were going to get arrested?**

MN: People intended, as I remember, people intended to disrupt traffic and lay down in the street and expected that they would probably be arrested, and we probably had some kind of civil disobedience kind of presentation given to us by, I don't know, Amy Bauer. Jean Elizabeth Glass was at those first meetings.

So, yeah, I think there probably was an expectation that people were going to be arrested. Anthony Vitti was at those first meetings. There was a great picture of Anthony Vitti in the paper being dragged away by the police, which I have here, someplace.

**SS: So, after the first action, how involved were you? You said you were going every Monday?**

MN: Well, we came back, and everybody talked about how great it was. And, we started talking about what to do next. Somewhere soon, right around this time,

Michael Savino, who – Michael Savino, made his living at time as James Levine’s personal assistant, and so, Michael had real organization skills. So, he sort of – he always had – I don’t know – he came up to me, he stuck his head across a row and looked at me and said, “Tim Sweeney’s not going to be here tonight, can you facilitate the meeting?” And, I was, like, sure I can do that. So, I got up and started facilitating the meeting, and then, for the next nine months, was one of the main facilitators for ACT UP meetings.

**SS: How did you learn how to facilitate?**

MN: It’s just a skill, a talent that I was born with.

**SS: What does it require?**

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MN: Confidence [laughs], the ability to listen to what people are saying and connect it to what other people are saying and look for the common thread and have an idea of what is the main conversation and what are, sort of, the sub-conversations that come under that and how to connect all those things together, without becoming too distracted. And, how to cut off a distraction without making people feel alienated, sort of, I guess.

**SS: So, how did the organization learn how to think together? How did they start to decide what the procedure was going to be? May I have a cigarette please?**

MN: What happened was, the experience was, is that every week we got together and we would re-invent the wheel, and we would have to sort of go through the whole thing, all over again, right from the very beginning. And, it was getting really annoying. And Stephen Gendin, who was one of the original 60 – Steve Gendin got up

with a proposal for how to organize the organization and proposed that there be committees.

**SS: How old was he? He was very young.**

MN: He was, like, 20 or 21. He had just graduated from Brown or whatever. I don't even know if he graduated yet. So, there should be a Finance Committee, because we need to raise money, and nobody else wanted to do for the Finance Committee and so I said, I can't balance my own checkbook, but I'll do that. And, there was an Outreach Committee. And there was an Issues Committee or something. I don't remember what all – it seems to me there were five of them, but I can't recall what all five of them were anymore. And then there would be the Coordinating Committee, which would be made up of whoever chaired each of the other committees. And so, the coordinating committee was supposed to – as I recall – made up of the Chair of each of the other standing committees, plus two representatives from the floor. And the floor voted on who those were, and then the committees voted on who their chairs were and everybody just, you know, it was, like, if you want to be on the finance committee, meet me over at the corner on the end or whatever. And, I think the largest committee was probably the Outreach Committee, because that's where most people felt – it was, like, the vaguest thing, and it sort of felt safest – especially if you felt like you were an outsider, which almost everybody did. I think anybody who came to the meetings felt like everybody else knew what they were doing there, but me. All these other people had been doing something and it's a cohesive group, and I'm not part of that group, so I'll go to the outreach committee, I think, was what was motivating people.

So, as a member of the Finance Committee – as the chair, and sole member of the Finance Committee – I was participating the Coordinating Committees.

**SS: So, as the facilitator, how did you get the agenda? Did somebody else draw it up, or did you draw it up?**

MN: There was no agenda.

**SS: So, how was the meeting structured?**

MN: That's a good question, I don't know. I don't remember. Before the committees got formed, we would have to re-invent the wheel every week. And so, the whole meeting would start at the very beginning and we would have to listen to everybody talk about how awful their anxiety has been, and what a drag it's been to have people dying and nobody cares and nobody does anything and our anger is just so horrible, and we have to do something and what are we going to do. So, now, can we talk about what we're going to do? And, it would just all, like, muddle along. Somebody stood up at one – and so, the committees changed that, because we started getting reports from the committees. So, each committee would get up and give a report of what they had talked about during the week in their own meetings.

**SS: And how did fundraising start? What did you do?**

MN: Fundraising started with Peter Staley walking up to me at the end of a meeting and saying, so, you're the treasurer, right? And, I said, sure. And was, like, well, then I want to give a contribution and he handed me a check for \$1,000. And that was really the first money that ACT UP had in the bank, and I decided I was going to marry Peter Staley.

**SS: Did you?**

MN: Briefly. Right around this same time, somebody stood up and asked about the Silence = Death posters that had been appearing around town. And, some of us knew that the people that had made those posters were in the room, but nobody said anything that night. The next week, Avram stood up and said, I'm one of the people that made those posters. Most of us are in the room. We talked about it after last week's ACT UP meeting, and we decided that we want you all to know that we made those posters and we want ACT UP to be able to use that poster and that image for whatever purposes ACT UP deems appropriate. So, it's yours. And, I don't know if he said it right at this moment, but soon after that, we began to have a discussion about whether or not we should make buttons, because the AIDS march was coming, which is May, the end of May.

**SS: What was the AIDS march?**

MN: GMHC every year organized an AIDS march. [AIDS Walk New York]

**SS: Was that the candlelight vigil thing?**

MN: No, it was a daytime thing, and, I guess, it started at Lincoln Center and proceeded to where, I don't know. Maybe they walk around the park, I don't know, I've never gone. But, we knew that it was going to be an event where there were going to be a lot of people, whose interest was, they would be there for the purposes of doing something about AIDS, so, we could take buttons there and sell them. So, the finance committee financed the manufacturer of, I believe, 600 buttons. And, we took the 600 buttons to the march and they flew out of our hands at a dollar apiece, and we came back to the meeting feeling very smug that we had so easily made 600 bucks. So, didn't we want to make more? And, didn't we want to make T-shirts for the upcoming Gay Pride Day Parade. Oh, and we're going to be in the Gay Pride Parade, right? So, what does

ACT UP want to do in the Gay Pride Parade? So, we started talking about that. In the midst of that conversation, we're talking about whether or not to make T-shirts, and of course, the floor had to talk about everything to death, you know. Like, all of the nuances, whether or not they had anything to do with the discussion, were all given their five minutes or more on the floor. So, in the middle of this painful conversation about whether or not it's appropriate to make T-shirts, Larry Kramer jumps up and screams, you sissies – people are dying, and you're talking about T-shirts. So, we just tabled that conversation and we took it on ourselves to make T-shirts. The Coordinating Committee just decided that we should make T-shirts. I actually believe that that's the only independent decision that the coordinating committee ever took. But, we took that decision and we made the T-shirts, and we had a table at Gay Pride, where Karl Soehnlein and Alan Klein tabled, while the rest of us marched. And then, afterwards, people took turns selling T-shirts from the table, until, by the end of the day, Larry Kramer had elbowed everyone out of the way and was thrusting T-shirts in people's faces and demanding that they buy them and was just thrilled that he's making so much money. And, I was thinking, Larry, you big sissy, you're selling T-shirts and people are dying. I don't remember if there was – we did the demonstration at Wall Street. We got amazing coverage for that in the *New York Times* and on the local press.

Of course, what they were impressed by – what the media was impressed by was the uniformity of our presentation. I mean, all of the posters are black posters with big pink triangles. It looked really organized. That was not a completely conscious strategy at that point. It quickly became a conscious strategy, because we realized that it worked, for the media.

The next demonstration after that was the night of April 14<sup>th</sup>, at the 34<sup>th</sup> Street post office. That was not a good demonstration. It was not a successful demonstration. It was not a sensible place to have a demonstration. The story that the press was there to cover was tax day, and we were stepping on their story, and they don't really know how to change gears really quickly. And so, it was sort of a frustrating learning experience, for those of us who were interested in planning actions. So, we then began to plan what we were going to do for Gay Pride. Of course, the floor had many, many presentations. I remember coffins was a big bone of contention. There was a serious rump group of people who seriously thought that coffins was the most effective thing that we could possibly do. But, instead, what we did was a concentration camp theme, and we rented a truck and we built a concentration camp on the back of this flatbed truck, and Mark Simpson and I drove the truck and we built it, actually, at Mark Simpson's in Brooklyn – the studio that he had, where there was a big parking lot.

**SS: Wasn't that partially in response to the quarantine threat?**

MN: Probably, yeah, because somebody – I don't remember if it was Jesse Helms, or someone, had said something stupid about quarantining homosexuals for the good of the rest of the nation or something. I guess somebody took that seriously. I never did, but it was certainly provocative enough that we could leap on top of it.

ACT UP made a big impact on the Gay Pride Parade that year – a huge impact. And, if we started off with, like, 60 or 100 people behind the quarantine truck, we ended up with I don't know how many hundreds and hundreds of people who joined the parade behind us. And so, by the time we got down to the village, we were huge. And we were really motivated and we were chanting our chants – ACT UP, Step Back, whatever –

Fight Back, Fight AIDS, right? And, the next meeting after that – the next Monday meeting after that, the whole nature of ACT UP had changed. Hundreds of people were in the room, and what had been a sort of insular and a familial kind of thing, became a lot more complicated, a lot more complicated. Good, but complicated. That's really – I sort of mark, like, before the Gay Pride thing and after the Gay Pride thing.

**SS: So, what were the changes?**

MN: Well, it became a dating scene for one thing. It was a much more social event. There was – it seemed like the stakes were higher for people to be visible or what their participation was going to be. And so, there was a lot of – again, we were, like, reinventing the wheel, and the Coordinating Committee had been meeting on a regular basis. We began to not be sure what the role of the Coordinating Committee was, because our experience was, is that we would go to the floor and want to say to the floor, okay, we've talked about it and as your representatives, who've been meeting in between, we've reached the conclusion that the most effective thing that this group of people could do next, that ACT UP could do next, is to do A or B, and the group, the floor would say, huh? Wait a minute. And then they would want to have the whole conversation that we had spent two hours having three nights prior. And after that happened two or three or maybe four times, we met and said, why are we doing this? The floor, obviously needs to have this discussion. They don't trust us – you know, some people took it personally, whatever. There's no sense us having this discussion, if we're going to have the discussion later and we can't – and, even though they end up coming to our conclusion, because they did, every time – at the end of the discussion at ACT UP, they'd be, like, okay, B it is. Well, we had already decided that. But, they had wasted their time,

because our time had already been spent. So, instead of us wasting our time, let's just take it – let's let the floor do everything. So, we didn't know what the role of the Coordinating Committee was. Steven Webb took it on himself to try and articulate what was happening in, what came to be known as, "The Document." And he created this document that basically said, there are – these are the committees – there's the Coordinating Committee. The Coordinating Committee meets to chew over what the floor has already chewed over, but the floor makes all decisions and the Coordinating Committee merely, sort of, you know, fine tunes those decisions and then takes that fine-tuning back to the floor, so that can be chewed over, and it's sort of, like, this feed-back kind of system.

And, we had a meeting –

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**SS: Okay, so you were going to the Monday night meetings, you're going to coordinating meetings; you're going to the finance committee meetings.**

MN: Well, there was no Finance Committee but me, so, yeah. I had meetings with myself, yes.

**SS: Right, and you were dating? Peter and others.**

MN: Sort of, yeah, and driving a cab.

**SS: How many night were you at ACT UP?**

MN: You mean, ACT UP related stuff? I don't know, probably seven. It pretty much took over my life, which was okay with me, because I didn't really have – it was nice – I would have made a great Chinese communist, because, you tell me something to do, I'll do it. So, you know, external order limits from the outside is a good thing for me.

**SS: What happened to your friends who weren't in ACT UP?**

MN: I didn't see them. And, they were, like, oh, you're with your new friends now.

**SS: So, like, a wall came down on the old life and new life.**

MN: Yeah, very much.

**SS: Okay, so now we're at Gay Pride, and – I just wanted to ask you, before that, I believe, there was the demonstration at Sloan-Kettering – the silent picket?**

MN: I don't know if that was before or after that. There was, definitely before that, a demonstration in Washington, D.C.

**SS: What was that?**

MN: We went down to Washington. It was ACT UP's first road trip. See, I don't remember if this is after Gay Pride or before Gay Pride?

**SS: Is that the march – the big march on Washington?**

MN: No, this was a demonstration that we held in front of the Hilton Hotel, right there on Connecticut Avenue – the place where Ronald Reagan – they tried to assassinate him. They. And there was a meeting – a medical conference, and it was – I don't remember who it was, it was concerned physicians, and they were having a medical conference on AIDS, and we went down there to picket.

And, we had a picket line in front of the Hilton – right there in the driveway. And, it was a lot of fun. I just remember, it was a whole lot of fun. I had the megaphone, so, of course, I feel like I'm in charge of the whole thing. And, it was very spirited, and the doctors – a lot of the doctors left the meeting and came out and joined the picket line.

Our issue was really, just that we need drugs. We need medications. We need medical research. We need answers.

**SS: What was the relationship between ACT UP and doctors? Like, you mentioned Barbara Starrett – there were certain doctors who had a lot of AIDS patients.**

MN: Well, you know – I don't know. I mean, Barry Gingell was the medical director of GMHC and was the medical editor of GMHC's – whatever that publication is that they put out – and he was like the spokesperson for all doctors. He'd get up and say, well, here's what doctors know and here's what doctors don't know.

I remember ACT UP articulated three goals for itself, and our goals were to bring publicity and attention, to publicize the crisis, to get medications into bodies, and to end the AIDS crisis. And we very quickly accomplished the first goal, so that, I stopped attending ACT UP meetings, got dis-involved with ACT UP meetings around the time of the action at St. Patrick's.

**SS: So, as you're getting all this publicity for ACT UP, and more and more people are joining – is more money coming in?**

MN: We didn't need more money.

**SS: Why is that?**

MN: We didn't have anything to spend money on. All we spent money on was flyers. I mean, we had enough – I don't remember, I don't remember. I know we organized a fund-raiser at The Saint, and we sent out, you know, a mailing list. We got the original list – the original mailing list from ACT UP came from a –

**SS: We just had a little blackout because of the East Village. Because this wiring is from 1880 or something.**

MN: It is. That's exactly right.

**SS: So, as some of the people you've named are people who've have AIDS or had AIDS and some of the people you named are people who didn't. What was the relationship between the people who had AIDS and people who didn't have AIDS inside of ACT UP?**

MN: It was subliminal. It seems to me that we strove to not differentiate and I don't remember if it was articulated so succinctly, but we all had AIDS – was sort of the operating fiction. There was no difference.

**SS: So, would anyone on the floor ever say, well I have AIDS –**

MN: Oh yes, and when somebody stood up and said, I have AIDS, everyone would, like, bow down to them and, by virtue of the fact that they had AIDS, everything that they said had extra weight.

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

MN: Michael Callen is a great example.

**SS: What was his relationship to ACT UP?**

MN: He was just a member, but he was a member who was given great respect, because everything he said he was saying as a person who had AIDS, and so, it was given extra weight.

**SS: But, also, he opposed AZT. Was that a big debate in ACT UP?**

MN: I don't remember. What I do remember is – now, exactly when this was, I don't know. Somewhere along the line, we decided to go down to the NIH [FDA] in

Rockville, Maryland, and when we did that, I remember Peter Staley was very upset with ACT UP, because he thought – Peter was a good little capitalist, probably still is. And, he had no problem with the profit motive. And he thought that ACT UP was unrealistic in expecting that pharmaceutical companies could do whatever it was that we wanted them to do, if we were going to deny them the profit motive as their underlying *raison d’etre* for doing anything.

So, I don’t recall conversations about specific medications. I know that Mark Harrington, at some point, differentiated himself on the floor as someone who spoke with a great deal of clarity about those issues. And so – whatever Mark said, went, as far as I was concerned. It was like, well, what does Mark think? And then, that’s what we should do. My impression is that Mark was given that allowance. ACT UP’s medication policy was whatever Mark Harrington said it should be. And, as I remember it, Mark eventually came up with a blueprint for how the FDA should re-organize themselves around the issues of testing and distributing medications. And, whatever it was that he thought they should do, they eventually did. They stopped using placebo tests and started testing one medication against another. By that time, though, obviously, AZT was a treatment, because 3TC was tested against it, for efficacy. So, we’re talking a little bit later in time, by the time you get to them.

Tape II  
00:10:00

**SS: What was the culture around HIV testing? Did most people in ACT UP get tested?**

MN: I don’t remember. I really don’t remember.

**SS: Do you remember when you got tested?**

MN: For the first time? No, I don’t, actually.

**SS: Right. So, that's not something that people encouraged each other or discouraged each other?**

MN: No, everybody encouraged each other just to use condoms.

**SS: So, in the sexual culture of ACT UP, since people were not differentiating between HIV positive and negative, would you say that safe sex was part of the ACT UP culture, or just officially?**

MN: I don't know the answer to your question. I was a little bit like a nun in heat in ACT UP, and was kind of – I remember the first time I stood in the back of the room and realized, my God, it's like a major cruising scene back here, and this has, obviously, been going on for months, and I've been completely oblivious to it, because I've been up at the front of the room, shooting my mouth off. And, so, I was a little bit taken aback.

Certainly, officially, everybody uses condoms all the time, and then there's just no discussion about it. You don't have to talk about your status. You don't have to know who's positive and who's negative, because everybody uses a condom, everyone behaves as if they are HIV-positive, and then, there's no problem, and there's not differentiation. And, I do remember – I can't tell you when historically it began to occur, but there was a differentiation made between people who had AIDS and people who had HIV and people who did not. And, it did not feel safe to identify yourself as someone who was HIV-negative. And it did not feel safe to talk about how negative people could remain negative.

You could talk about not passing the virus on, and you wore condoms – if you were HIV-positive, you wore condoms to protect yourself from getting anything else

from anybody else – any other STDs, etc. But, if there was any talk about, you know, developing a vaccine – my impression was, is that everyone conceived of a vaccine as something that would be given to people who were negative that would protect them, should they ever be exposed to HIV, and that was enormously problematic because it excluded those people who were already HIV-positive. So, there was very little interest in pursuing any research that would protect people who were negative.

**SS: So, when you say that it was unsafe, or that there was a tension between discussion about prevention versus cure – was that on the floor, or was that, privately, in the counter-culture of ACT UP?**

MN: It was on the floor. It was on the floor, and how it played itself out on the floor, I can't really tell you. I don't recall anymore. I know that emotions would run really high around this issue, and it felt like a discussion that should be avoided.

**SS: So, when people who were prominent in ACT UP were involved in ACT UP would then sero-convert – how was that received by the other people?**

MN: I don't know that that ever happened. I mean, obviously, it did. That all happened off the floor, and it was – my experience of that was in the realm of gossip – like, did you hear? Or, I have some news, or have you told anyone? That kind of thing. It was not something where someone would stand up and say, well last week, I was negative and this week I found out I'm positive, so I've changed – I don't remember that ever occurring.

**SS: I remember Steve Quester doing that.**

Tape II  
00:15:00

MN: That may well be. Yes, I do remember that. That was much later on in time. By that point, I was practically not involved with ACT UP anymore.

**SS: Were ACT UP guys socializing at the same clubs and bars?**

MN: Well, you know – New York's a big city, so people didn't travel a whole lot out of their neighborhood. I know as an East Village denizen, as a downtown denizen, The Bar, on the corner of Second Avenue and Fourth Street became our hangout, for a period of time.

**SS: So, was there discomfort in the sexual realm, of people who were doing politics together? Would there then be a different kind of dynamic?**

MN: I don't know. I only know about my own sexual discomfort. And, my own sexual discomfort was enormous. And, I was not using condoms, and I remember trying to use a condom for oral sex and just thought it was the most disgusting thing in the world. And I remember conversations about dental dams, and thinking that this is pathetic. And, I remember conversations about lesbian sex, and just thinking that this is, like, ridiculous. And, whether or not that was correct of me – but, I had not been the bottom in a sexual relationship since my early 20s – thanks to hemorrhoids – and so, perforce, I was a top, and as a top, I didn't use condoms. And, I knew that I was not following the party line, regardless of what risks I might be taking in my life, so that was like a dirty little secret of my own that I didn't share with anybody.

**SS: So, how was it to have people suddenly discussing sex and sexual practices in an open way?**

MN: That never happened to my knowledge.

**SS: It never happened.**

MN: I don't remember people talking about sex and sexual practices in an open way.

**SS: Okay, that's an assumption. Okay – so, then, did you move onto other committees after you stopped facilitating?**

MN: Let's see, what happened? Well, after the fund-raiser at The Saint – that was, actually, when Peter Staley and I began dating – whenever that was. That must have been, like, 1988 – the summer of '88. Peter certainly could handle finances, and people became, I think, the next treasurer of ACT UP. I just sort of told him, he could do it – as far as I was concerned.

There was some discussion at that point about, how come the facilitator gets to be the facilitator? How does the facilitator get to be the facilitator? And how appropriate is it that the facilitator also participates in the coordinating committee meetings. Because, then, as the facilitator, I could get up and represent what happened at the coordinating committees. And I had too many hats on for the floor to keep straight. So, it was decided that there should be elections. It was also – maybe there had always been two facilitators – but, if there hadn't always been, it pretty quickly became – somehow or another, we developed this culture that you had to have two facilitators because you could never – I perceived that it was felt, you couldn't have one facilitator, because one facilitator would be too efficient, and you didn't want there to be the appearance that one person had so much power, so you had to dilute the power into two people. So, I used to really like to facilitate with Steve Gendin because he wouldn't do anything or say anything, and we wouldn't interfere with my own ability to handle the whole thing easily. Maria Maggenti became a facilitator. David Robinson became a facilitator. Anyway, there were elections, and I lost.

**SS: Who did you lose to?**

Tape II  
00:20:00

MN: Maria Maggenti and David Robinson. And, Ann Northrop. And, I don't remember who she facilitated with. Anyway, there were four of them, and they sort of – they went back and forth. It was a blow to my ego, definitely, but I was finishing up in nursing school. I kind of didn't have time to do as much as I'd been doing. The Coordinating Committee was plenty, and it felt more like the nitty-gritty anyway, whether or not what we did was of any import at all. It was a good place to be able to meet in a smaller group of people and have a conversation that was just less complicated, because there were fewer of us. And, I knew what was going on then, as a result. And, that's sort of my own personal purposes. Sometimes I feel like I know what's going on, then I feel like I'm involved, you know? If I read the reviews in the *New York Times*, then I've seen the show.

**SS: So, when did you get involved with Gran Fury?**

MN: Whenever that was – I guess, in the fall of '88 – an offer was made to ACT UP from the New Museum – that the New Museum wanted to make the window on south Broadway available to ACT UP, for some kind of display – whatever ACT UP wanted to do. So, anybody who was interested in working on that, met in the corner, at the end of the meeting. And so, a rather large group of people met, and out of that, came the first Gran Fury – came this display that ACT UP did and that came to be known as “Let the Record Show.” And, really, it was sort of coordinated by Mark Simpson, more than anybody else, because Mark had a yellow legal pad, where he wrote everything down. And, almost anything that anybody wanted to see in the window, ended up being in the window. Very quickly, we thought, well we need to address, like, all the hideous things that people are saying right now. Jesse Helms, he wants to tattoo people, and

Cardinal O'Connor has something nasty to say. So, who are the really bad guys who've said bad things and let's put them on trial, and let's cast their words in stone. So, we'll make stone tablets that have their words cast in them. And so, people had, with exacto knives, cut out little rubber letters that then we could put into concrete. And, what skills do we have in the room? And Don Ruddy knows how to cast concrete. So, good, we can do that. And somebody else knows how to make neon, so we can get a neon pink triangle. And, Tom Kalin has access to a big photo equipment that he can make a photo mural of the Nuremberg trials as a backdrop – since there's historical resonance. So, all of these different component parts. I don't remember anything in particular being rejected, but everything just sort of – it was, like, how can we fit all these disparate parts together into one coherent thing? And, how big is the window and how much can we squeeze in there? And we did that.

**SS: But, did they just come to the floor and say, we have this opportunity, anybody here want to be in Gran Fury?**

MN: No. Someone stood up and said – I can't think of what the man's name was – but, so and so from the New Museum called me up and wants ACT UP to know that the window is available. So, if ACT UP wants to do anything with the window, anybody who wants to meet about that afterwards, can meet about that.

We all met about that, and then, over the course of a few weeks, we decided what was going to be in the window. We did the window. The window opened. And then, the group – by the time the window display was built, the people who had built it decided that they wanted to continue working, and it was a changeable cast of characters for awhile, but we weren't known as Gran Fury, when the window went up. It wasn't until

the window was up, that we named ourselves Gran Fury, and it was only because we were going to continue to do further work, we decided – that we needed to give ourselves a name. And somebody – I think, Tom said, well, you know, undercover police cars in New York City are Plymouth Gran Furys – so why don't we call ourselves Gran Fury, and – Tom had a lot of weight. Anything that Tom said was given extra weight.

**SS: Why is that?**

MN: Oh, I don't know, because, you know, he just presumes a lot of privilege, I guess. It's just a fact. So, it was called Gran Fury.

Tape II  
00:25:00

**SS: And who was in it?**

MN: Well, eventually – for a while, almost anybody could be in it. But, it got to be disturbing, because anybody would just show up at a Gran Fury meeting. And, again, we'd have to reinvent the wheel every time, and it was too – it was not productive. And so, the group of people who eventually coalesced as Gran Fury, permanently, were myself, Avram Finklestein, Tom Kalin, Mark Simpson, Loring McAlpin, Marlene McCarty, John Lindell, Donald Moffett – I'm forgetting somebody – Robert Vasquez, Richard Elovich.

**SS: So, some of these people had very vibrant, serious art careers.**

MN: Oh yeah.

**SS: So, how was it for someone like you to come to –**

MN: Fascinating.

**SS: Why?**

MN: Well, because, first off – I aspired to an artistic career without making art anyway, so, this was like a ready made art career for me. And, it was stimulating. What

happened was is that Douglas Crimp edited an issue of *October* magazine – and I didn't know who Douglas Crimp was from a hole in a wall, but he wrote an artistic justification for ACT UP's, Gran Fury's display in the window. And, he gave it his imprimatur, and his imprimatur made the art world comfortable with Gran Fury as an art entity. The art world wanted to do something about AIDS. Artists were dropping dead left and right, and the art world – which is, basically, a conservative world – didn't know what to do. So, now they knew what to do. Here's this little Cinderella group that makes art that can't be sold, because it doesn't exist, and they'll give us money so that we can produce our art projects, which are actions, and the art world can feel really good about themselves, because they've now contributed to the AIDS crisis – to ending the AIDS crisis – and we can feel really good that we've taken their money. So, we've used them, and we're not going to give them anything in return, because there's not going to be any art product at the end of it that can be re-sold and could accumulate in value. So, our status as Cinderella was preserved.

That strategy actually was comprehended and articulated very quickly. Mark Simpson sort of understood. He was, like, look, do you see what we can do here? Mark was a frustrated artist. Mark painted all the time and no one ever saw his artwork. He was painting realistic landscapes at a time when that was not what anybody wanted to look at, and he was a very, very unhappy artist, but he had a lot of energy to make something happen and, you're right, there were active – people who had active art careers. And, there was some tension in the group, whether or not people had an ulterior motive in promoting their own career, with Gran Fury as the vehicle. But, as a matter of fact, that didn't occur. We met every week. We would consider what issues were

topical, and how could be boil something down into a succinct little slogan that then could be turned into a billboard or a poster. We coordinated our work with ACT UP. ACT UP did seven days of outrage or something, and each day had to be something different, and one of the days was the giant kiss-in, and I was in charge of organizing the kiss-in, and I had no fucking idea what I was going to do, but Tom Kalin came up with – no, not kissing doesn't kill – Read My Lips – the two guys kissing.

**SS: Reagan had said, Read My Lips.**

Tape II  
00:30:00

MN: No, it was Bush. He said, read my lips, no new taxes. And, Tom came up with Read My Lips. And, Mark Harrington had this amazing piece of pornographic material – these two sailors that were making out with their hands on each other's dicks, and we just lopped off the bottom of the picture and made t-shirts and flyers that said, Kissing Doesn't Kill. And, it was a hot item.

We did the New York Crimes – in coordination, which was a fake front page of the New York Times, that we then stuck into the New York Times vending machines. We did several different projects in coordination with ACT UP actions.

**SS: Who paid for the projects?**

MN: ACT UP initially paid for some projects. The art world was giving us some money for particular projects.

**SS: Like which groups?**

MN: Creative Time financed the Kissing Doesn't Kill project, which was sort of a gloss on Benneton ads – sort of a multi-cultural couples kissing. And the text said, Kissing Doesn't Kill – I don't remember what it said, anymore, but, discrimination –

**SS: Greed and indifference.**

MN: Greed and indifference do, or something. And, it was made to appear on the sides of buses. We were prevented from having it appear on the sides of buses, which became the story. Very few people actually saw it. It was on buses very briefly. We sent out thousands of postcards of a picture of a bus with it on it and got an award from David Dinkins for it – who was not Mayor, yet. He was the Borough President of Manhattan, at the time.

And, each thing just attracted more attention to us as – and so, we sort of became the official, unofficial art arm of ACT UP. What began to happen was is that we would take our projects to ACT UP, and we would have to, like, listen to ACT UP do a declension of our work, and it became so tedious. And we resented it. And, we wanted to differentiate ourselves from ACT UP, and so we –

**SS: What was the conflict? Was it because you guys were more sophisticated, in terms of art issues?**

MN: No, it was just that we didn't want to have to listen to ACT UP's – why is it blue? Why shouldn't it be green? We don't want to have to listen to a conversation for 45 minutes about which is better, blue or green. We've already had that discussion, and we've decided it's blue, and we're not going to have the discussion again. And, we don't really need to justify it, too. If you don't like it, you don't like it. So, tell you what – we'll just do what we're going to do, and if ACT UP is doing something, and we feel like piggy-backing onto that, we'll piggy back onto that. And, if we feel like doing something on our own, we'll do it on our own. Now, the fact is, is we are generating product – T-shirts. Kissing Doesn't Kill T-shirts, Killing Doesn't Kill key chains – whatever – there was a lot of paraphernalia that ACT UP was selling at that time in the ACT UP gift shop,

and a lot of it was Gran Fury based stuff. So, Gran Fury came to the floor with a proposal that we get 10% – or some percent – of the proceeds, and the floor grudgingly agreed to that. That was the source of the tension. We never really got much money. Every once in awhile, Peter Staley would cut us a check, if I could dog him long enough, because we weren't dating anymore.

So, we never really took ACT UP seriously, as a source of income. The source of income became whatever art organization, like Creative Time or The Drawing Center or whoever wanted to give us money to produce a billboard, or post stickers or whatever it was that we decided we wanted to do. We piggy-backed onto Gay Pride, or whatever. And so, I guess Gran Fury started, probably in – I want to say that that window was in the fall of '88. It might of been in the fall of '89. So, it was in the very late 80s, and the very early 90s, that Gran Fury was producing stuff.

Tape II  
00:35:00

**SS: So, consistently, from the day you joined ACT UP, you were always in these small groups of people who were actually in leadership and conceptualizing, and always having to deal with the large floor and always being frustrated by them.**

MN: True. It's the story of my life.

**SS: Okay. So, what happened with Gran Fury?**

MN: Well, eventually, Gran Fury reached a dead end, strategically. The issues became so complicated that they didn't lend themselves to snappy one-liners anymore.

**SS: Can you give an example?**

MN: Well, the issue of treatment and the efficacy of one treatment over another. I just know that we felt like that the strategy of coming up with another snappy one-liner to try to summarize every single issue, with all of its nuances and roll it all up into a tight

little ball that was completely packed, but packed so well, that each word meant something that you could, like, understand what each single word meant – the challenge became too difficult to constantly reach to. And, so, we started to have conversations about how we could re-strategize. We tried working with other groups.

**SS: Like who?**

MN: We did a project with the Guerrilla Girls, who would not take their masks off.

**SS: What was the project that you did?**

MN: I don't remember. It was not a good experience. We didn't play well with others, apparently. We did a project with PONY at the window, at the New Museum, that was a garish – it was like a whore house.

**SS: And who were the people from PONY? Was it Carol Queen or Annie Sprinkle?**

MN: Annie Sprinkle – I can't remember the names.

**SS: So, you chose these women's groups, really, to try to –**

MN: Well, PONY actually had men and women in it. Whether or not that was representative of whoever their membership was. I don't even know that PONY represented anybody but themselves, actually. And, I don't even know how we made those decisions, particularly. I don't remember that we made a list of possible people to collaborate with and then decided which ones. It's like, well, what about PONY? I don't know, we would try anything once.

We eventually reached an impasse, where we felt like we couldn't do anymore work, and we needed to change strategies, and we didn't know how to do that. The same

conversation would begin to happen every time, and everybody was sort of in their same place, and we needed fresh blood, but if everybody brought in one member, then there'd be, like, the old members and the new members, and so, everybody should bring in two members so that the new people would outnumber the old people, so that the new people would feel safe, but that would make too many people in the room. And, so, we just sort of stopped.

**SS: Okay, this is a big leap, and you tell me if you think I'm completely off. What it sounds like to me is that there was an aesthetic crisis – that you had a minimalist aesthetic, and that the issues became something that couldn't be represented through minimalism.**

MN: I think that's true. I don't know if minimalism is the right terminology, but I wouldn't know what the right terminology is. But, yeah –

**SS: Because you said that you needed everything to be succinct and that was no longer, and you decided not to try a completely other way.**

MN: We didn't know what that was. We couldn't think of what that was. We were in a rut, kind of, I think. And, we ground that rut right down. So, what we decided instead was is that we would be an example of a group of people who came together with an agenda. We practiced our agenda until we felt like we had worked that to its completion and then ended.

**SS: So, what was your final project?**

MN: You know, that's interesting, because I don't remember. Well, the final project – I would have said, until a month ago, that the final project was the Women Don't Get AIDS poster, which was a billboard that went up at bus stops.

**SS: Oh, Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It, that one?**

MN: Yes. That was the last snappy line that we came up with. Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It. The issue that we were trying to highlight at the time was the FDA's refusal to include those lists of opportunistic infections, which are particular to women, who are HIV-positive, as AIDS-related infections, and the impact of the FDA's refusal to recognize this list of infections, meant that those women were ineligible for the kinds of medical assistance and material assistance and Medicaid, ADAP, etc., that men had available to them. And, it's not because we made that poster. But, as a matter of fact, at the same time that we were making that poster, that that poster went up, the list of opportunistic infections did change to begin to include those infections which are particular to women.

Tape III  
00:00:00

**SS: Okay, so the women with AIDS campaign was the final campaign of Gran Fury?**

MN: That I recall, but there was actually, at least, one more thing that came after that, which a smaller group of Gran Fury members made, which was a list of four questions. And, they were very personal questions, and I don't remember all of them, but it was, like, are you unhappy? Do you have AIDS? I don't remember. You will know what those four questions are when *Artforum* comes out in a month and a half with its article, with its interview of Gran Fury.

**SS: But, of course, at this moment in ACT UP, people were just dying and so many people were dying –**

MN: Lots of funerals.

**SS: And so many people were sick. Do you remember how that – what your life was like at that time?**

MN: Well, my own personal life had changed considerably. I was now working as a nurse, working at Bellevue Hospital on the floor of the AIDS unit, and so, there were people dying every day on the floor. Of the hospital, I should say.

So, it just seemed like routine. So, if someone else died – if someone from ACT UP died, it was just one more death. It was just a question of did I want to attend that funeral or not?

**SS: Did you have people coming from ACT UP coming into Bellevue, as your patients?**

MN: Not that I recall, particularly.

**SS: Since you were working as a caregiver professionally, were you involved, personally, with any of your friends or colleagues in ACT UP who were sick and dying?**

MN: Not as much as you would have thought, no. I had real problems. Personally, I had problems with trying to establish clear limits around all of that. Sort of parenthetically, I can tell you that Mark Simpson and I had an enormously disappointing falling out, around that very issue. And, Mark and I had been, ostensibly, very good friends. We'd been very, very close friends before ACT UP ever even existed and worked together with Gran Fury. And, when Mark learned that he was HIV-positive, all of the underlying tensions in our relationship and the kind of caretaking that I'd already resented in my relationship with Mark came to a head, and I was unable to rise to the challenge and Mark felt rejected and we had a very ugly falling out. And it marked a big

change in my personal life – that I was no longer part of Mark’s life, and he was no longer part of mine, and I didn’t miss him for a long time, and by the time I did miss him, too much time had passed, I suppose, to heal the breach, and it had been assumed, initially, by Mark and myself, that I would be his primary caretaker and then – because my initial – because I bobbed it so badly at the beginning, Mark refused me any access to his life at all, and I was relieved. And, I’m still relieved that I didn’t actually serve that role in his life. I don’t know if it’s indiscreet of me to say – Tom Kalin took my role up and Tom and Mark and I – by virtue of the fact that Tom had become Tom’s roommate – the three of us had a sort of triangulated relationship anyway, and Tom, I think, understood that he was assuming a responsibility that would have been mine, except that I was unable to assume it for whatever reason. And so, he did, and that I owed him, and that he was going to do what he could for Mark. And he did. And he knew that I was grateful to him for that. But, all of this was in the realm of the personal. None of this was public.

Tape III  
00:05:00

**SS: But, isn’t it inevitable that when people who are negative are surrounded by people who are sick and dying that there are going to be personal conflicts and tensions and fights.**

MN: It’s easy enough to draw that conclusion. I can’t tell you that it is, but, certainly in my personal life, it played out that way at times.

**SS: Because, I mean, there were certain people whose deaths in ACT UP, just caused incredible amount of conflict.**

MN: Conflict, like how?

**SS: I’m thinking, for example, David Feinberg.**

MN: Who I don't even remember.

**SS: Or Steve Webb.**

MN: Well, Steven Webb didn't die of AIDS. Steve Webb committed suicide.

**SS: But, he didn't have AIDS?**

MN: No one knows.

**SS: It wasn't related to that?**

MN: No, Steven Webb committed suicide. Steven Webb's death was an enormously disturbing event in the life of ACT UP. Everyone was in love with Steven Webb. I think this is why Steven killed himself. He didn't love himself, obviously, and he believed himself beyond redemption or help, sadly.

Steven had – by virtue of the fact that Steven would sit so quietly in the back of the room emanating all of this kind of gravitas and power and then could stand up and very succinctly say something that everyone would agree with, he was accorded a great deal of privilege in the structure of early ACT UP and then he killed himself. His act was personal and the impact of it was – it was very sad. Everybody had – it was just a huge thing, but then, life goes on.

One of the last things that I did in ACT UP was a road trip to South Carolina – Columbia, South Carolina. I think a letter arrived, and somebody in South Carolina said, we're down here, and we don't know what to do, and we want to have an AIDS demonstration, and we need help. What can you do for us? And so – I want to say four – vanloads of people drove down – it may have only been two vanloads of people drove down. And we drove night and day or day and night, and got there late in the evening and arrived to tumultuous applause, where we were greeted like the United States Army

at the gate of Baghdad, hopefully. And we helped them strategize how they were going to have a demonstration the next day, in front of the capital building.

**SS: Who was they?**

MN: This little group of people.

**SS: Like 10 people.**

MN: Maybe 50 people, maybe 25 people – a nurse, a social worker, local homosexuals. I don't know – just some characters who had nerve enough to, like, come out at night and all band together, and they wanted to have a demonstration. But, they wanted us to have the demonstration for them, and we were, sort of, like, no, this is your demonstration. What ideas do you have? And they said, well, our idea is that you would have a demonstration. And, we're, like, okay. And so, we had a demonstration and we kind of lead them in having a demonstration. And I remember, apparently gay guys darting from palmetto tree to palmetto tree, as we go down the street, stopping traffic. And we had a die-in, in front of the capital, and we were all arrested and the police all had on rubber gloves and we're all being fingerprinted, and all the policemen's wives are – they're, like, at one side taking our fingerprints and stuff and their officer husbands are searching us and licking their rubber gloves and we're having conversations with the wives about how stupid their husbands are. And, they're, like, oh, don't tell us. And, then that night, we were conquering heroes and everybody in the gay community of Columbia, South Carolina came out to the gay bars and everybody had sex that night and the next day there was an ACT UP in Columbia, South Carolina. And this was, kind of, one of the wonderful things about ACT UP – is, that wherever we went, we left behind a new ACT UP chapter. So, there were ACT UPs in San Francisco, and there was ACT UP

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in South Carolina, and there was ACT UP in Washington, D.C., and there was an ACT UP, in I don't know where – in Paris, and wherever we went. The end result would be that after we left town, behind was some local chapter of ACT UP. And it was all uncoordinated.

But, it was really kind of exciting, that it was something that was so powerful and rich that people could get on board and do what they needed to do. It became apparent to me that it was a rite of passage. ACT UP became something that younger people could get involved with and sort of get their feet wet in some form of political activism. And, you know, young people are terribly idealistic and so, just apt to have their hearts broken. And so, this was a way for young people to act out their rage and their anger. Of course, those are very powerful emotions. And so, it almost became – I began to think that it's not really so much what the issues are, it's really more what the action is, that people are allowed to experience for themselves, that they can feel like they have some impact on whatever issue is of importance to them.

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

MN: Well, I was working as a nurse full-time. And, so I really felt like, I'm doing what I need to do, in terms of AIDS activism. I'm taking care of people who are suffering with AIDS. And so, that – my own personal goal was met. I need to do something that feels relatively concrete, because otherwise I'm going to stick my head through a brick wall, and the whole point of going to nursing school, was that I would be a nurse who worked with people with HIV, so I met my goal. So, there was that. It wasn't so clear to me what ACT UP was accomplishing at this point.

**SS: When is this?**

MN: Well, if you can tell me when the action at St. Patrick's was.

**SS: When was it?**

JAMES WENTZY: '90.

MN: Then, in 1990 – whenever that was – the summer of 1990 – that was the last of my participation in ACT UP. When ACT UP chose to go to St. Patrick's Cathedral, I didn't want anything to do with that action.

**SS: Why?**

MN: Because it didn't feel like it was about AIDS, it felt like it was about lapsed Catholics, like myself, acting out their disappointment and rage at the Catholic church. And, I remember one particular one member of ACT UP, who's name I won't mention, but she got up and she began to give ACT UP a very fractured history of the Catholic church, and all of the pernicious impact that the Catholic Church has had on the world since 33 AD, and it seemed stupid to me. It was historically inaccurate, it was immature and ill-conceived, and I could see that this demonstration was not something I wanted to participate in. It's goals were muddy, it wasn't –

**SS: Did you speak against it on the floor?**

MN: I don't remember. I probably didn't.

**SS: Was this the first time that ACT UP did a major action that you didn't agree with?**

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MN: I think so, probably. I think so, probably. I mean, I remember – you know, I don't think I can give you any examples. I know there were some actions that I was more enthusiastic about, and others that I had more doubt about whether it would be efficacious or not. I remember – one of the last actions that I participated in was the

demonstration in Rockville where we laid siege to the FDA, and that was a great action. It didn't play out at all the way that I think people planned, because there really was no plan, particularly, except that everybody was going to break up into affinity groups, and each affinity group was responsible for coming up with their own strategy. And, the idea was to actually bring business to a halt for the day, at the FDA. And, of course, I remember there was some discussion about whether or not that was a good thing, because we don't want the FDA to stop working, we want them to work doubly hard. And, so, isn't it really counter-productive to interfere with their working or not, and this seems like a really tortured argument to me. But, whatever, okay – so, those of you who want to make people work, you make them work. And those of you who want to make people not work, you'll make them not work.

**SS: Did you have an affinity group for the FDA?**

MN: No, I was support. And, what I did all day long was drive back and forth from the little hotel room that we had rented on the other side of the railroad tracks, that was, like, ACT UP central, where we had a phone bank. And, I would drive to the FDA and sort of drive around and get a bird's eye view of what each different affinity group was doing. And, it looked like some sort of little medieval war, where all of these different little bands of peasants were storming the gates of the FDA. And, I remember Peter Staley was up on the roof of the FDA, dressed up like Ralph Macchio in *The Karate Kid* and somebody broke a window, and people are stepping up to sit down to be arrested and it was – there was just so much going on. It was like real organized chaos, and it was really fun. I mean, it was really fun. And, then we all gathered in the room afterwards and watched ourselves on TV. That was always part of the payback, too. And, I think – I

don't know if that was where the idea of affinity groups were born. Affinity groups became a big part of ACT UP. I was never in an affinity group.

**SS: But, did you attend St. Patrick's Cathedral or –**

MN: No.

**SS: You refused. And, that was the end? You didn't go back?**

MN: I don't remember ever attending an ACT UP meeting after that.

**SS: So, what happened when you left? Were people angry at you? No?**

MN: No. I mean, the people that – my social life was pretty limited anyway, and I didn't really – I continued to see the same people that I saw. I just didn't see them on Monday nights. I'd see them on weekends, and I'd see them at other times of the week. And, if I got into a discussion about the issues, it's because those issues were interesting to me. I could go to The Bar, and I could have a four hour discussion with Mark Harrington, and that was just as satisfying as a four-hour meeting at ACT UP.

**SS: So, I only have one last question for you. Is there anything that you think we've missed, that you want to go into?**

MN: I can't think of what that is.

**SS: Okay. My final question is, just looking back now – what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its biggest disappointment for you?**

MN: Well, like I said, the three goals of ACT UP that were articulated at the very beginning were to publicize the crisis, to get medications into bodies, and to end the crisis. We very quickly accomplished the first, so that by a year later, if you picked up the *New York Times*, the *New York Times* was writing about ACT UP – I mean, it was

writing about AIDS, as of that day. Whether or not you liked what they wrote was a whole other thing, but they were writing about it. So, we accomplished that.

We got medicine into bodies. Mark Harrington took care of that. And, that, actually is the biggest contribution that ACT UP made to the AIDS crisis or the biggest impact the ACT UP had was to actually force the FDA to re-consider and to re-vamp how they approved of and got medication available.

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Ending the AIDS crisis – that was presumptuous of us, anyway, and it still hasn't been accomplished. So, I think the medication issue is probably the most important thing that ACT UP did officially. Unofficially, I think what ACT UP did was, as I said – it became a vehicle for younger people to get a sense of what it means to be politically active and to presume some privilege and assumptions – I mean, some power that they can impact on the political life of our culture. And, I guess that's still true. I don't really know.