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P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: **Nettles (Yaron Schweizer)**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Nettles (Yaron Schweizer)
October 17, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So the way we start is if you could say your name, today's date, how old you are, and where we are.

YARON SCHWEIZER: Okay. My name's Yaron Schweizer, also known as Nettles. We are at Short Mountain Sanctuary, sitting in the temple, in the middle of the woods of Tennessee. It's October the 17th, 2004.

SS: And how old are you?

YS: And I'm 39 years old.

SS: Okay. So you were born in Israel.

YS: Um hm.

SS: And were your parents from Europe or were they born in Israel?

YS: My father's family's from Russia originally, but he's the third or fourth generation born in Israel. I think –

SS: Really.

YS: – his grandfather emigrated from Russia to Isr-, to Palestine. And my mother's family's from Bulgaria. And they moved to Israel in '48, when she was five years old.

SS: Now was she born in a DP camp, or was she born in Bulgaria?

YS: She was born in Bulgaria. Bulgaria actually was one of the countries in Europe that was the most protective of the Jews during the Holocaust, so her father — my grandfather — was in a work camp, but they were —they were just — she was just born and raised in a regular city.

SS: In, okay.

YS: Regular life, yeah.

SS: So why did they come to Israel?

YS: I think it was kind of the thing to do in '48 for Jews in Europe.

SS: But they weren't in a displaced persons camp? They were in their home?

YS: They were in their home, but my grandmother came of a lot of, from a lot of money. And they lost all of that during the Holocaust and the war. And I think it just made sense to them to immigrate to Israel and start new, since they didn't have much anymore. I think they figured it's going to be much better in Palestine.

SS: And for your, for the Schweizers –when did your great-grandfather come? Do you know?

YS: Some time shortly after the turn of the century.

SS: So he was recruited by a pioneer group in Europe?

YS: Mm, I don't think it was all that idealistic. But to be honest with you, I really don't know the story. Like my family doesn't keep their history all that alive.

SS: Oh, that's interesting.

YS: Uh huh.

SS: Okay.

YS: Yeah.

SS: So you were born, you said, in Jerusalem?

YS: I was born in Jerusalem, and raised there.

SS: So in the environment in which you were raised, your family, did they talk about issues like justice or commitment to a community or that kind of thing?

YS: No. My family was very typical, middle-class family. You really didn't discuss much stuff. It was. My grandparents on my father's side were religious, in a very moderate way. But most of the siblings on my father's side weren't religious anymore. So I pretty much grew up in a very secular family, where issues of political or social awareness just weren't on the table. But somehow, I had them in me. And I mean, I can kind of trace it back to where I was, to when I was really, really young, but definitely around the time that I was 12 and 13, I started kind of seeing what was going on and beginning to develop my own identity and my own ideas around social and political justice as well.

SS: So how did that express itself?

YS: Well, the first step of it had to do, really, with separation of church and state issues, which isn't really a separation in Israel. I got involved in the Movement for Progressive Judaism, which in this country is the Reform movement, which is huge, and really, I would say most of the Jews are, who are practicing some form of Judaism are probably Reform, maybe Conservative. In Israel, it was a tiny, tiny minority. And I got involved with them when I was 12 or 13 years old. And –

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SS: You were bar mitzvahed in a Reform synagogue?

YS: No. I was bar mitzvahed in an Orthodox way, because that's what we did, and that was what my, it had to do with my grandfather's congregation, my father's father. I was bar mitzvahed at the Western Wall, on the Wailing Wall, did the whole ordeal that way. But already I was involved with the Reform movement, and I started thinking about it in a different way. And actually, we had some fights in my family,

mostly between me and my father, prior to my bar mitzvah, about how to do it. But it was too early for me to actually take big steps about that.

So for the first few years, it really had to do mostly around issues of religious freedom, which I was very involved with through my work in the Movement for Progressive Judaism.

Then it became more issues of socialism. I became a socialist, through people that I met who were involved in the kibbutz movement and were doing work towards connecting religious work, such as the Reform movement, with social work, such as living in a kibbutz. And I got involved in that. And then around the time that I was 16, 17, I was shifting more and more and more to the left politically. I was an exchange student in the United States when I was 17, right around the time that Israel invaded Lebanon. And the massacre in Sabra and Shatila happened. And I was here. I was an exchange student in upstate New York. And all of a sudden, I got this sense of – the picture, my understanding of what’s happening right now would be so different if I were in Israel. And I saw a bigger picture to what was going on. And this was pretty much the marking point of me moving to the very left of the political spectrum. I was –

SS: Which was what organization?

YS: I wasn’t involved with any organization in particular. It really was just my sense of politics and awareness. I definitely had a lot of friends who were in the Zionist left, and I had a couple of friends who were in the non-Zionist left, and I gravitated towards that.

Then, when I was 18, and it was time for me to do my army service, I declared pacifism. And, now that was something that no one does in Israel. It’s a little

bit more common nowadays, even though to call it common is still a joke. But definitely more than it was in '82, '83. So I got involved with the pacifist movement in Israel, which is a very splintered thing that was about three people involved in it. And decided not to join the army, which was as sacrilegious [as] you can get –

SS: Well you're third-generation –

YS: – in Israel.

SS: – Sabra. I mean, your family must have completely freaked out.

YS: I think it would have been the case in any family other than an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic family. It would have been a big freak-out. And they did; they totally did. And eventually, through some combination of luck and whatever else happened, I did serve in the army. But they struck a compromise with me that I felt I could live with. And in some ways, I don't think that emotionally I was really ready to pay the price for my politics at the time. I was only seven-, I was only 18. And ideologically, I wanted to go all the way there. But emotionally, I was a bit relieved that it ended up in a way that I could live with without having to pay the price for it.

SS: So what was the compromise?

YS: The compromise was that instead of being the warrior, the marine, or the paratrooper that they wanted me to be, I end up being a clerk. So I served as a, doing office work for three years. Basically.

SS: Now, were you aware that you were gay, at that time?

YS: In a very splintered kind of way. I really feel that up until my early, mid-twenties, my psyche was composed of different parts that weren't really talking to each other. And definitely, my sexuality was a big part of that. I had girlfriends that I

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thought we were having a relationship. But really wasn't a functional relationship. I had some anonymous sex earlier. When I was a teenager, I played with a couple of boys my age. And it just never jelled that any of that meant anything. Early in my army service, I remember hooking up with a couple of guys through ads in the paper. And still, I didn't consider myself being gay. I was in therapy, and I brought that up, and definitely everyone felt, I mean everyone being my therapist, really, ha ha — my therapist felt that it was just this like weird thing, and as long as I stopped looking at ads in the paper, the issue would just, it would —

SS: It was your latency —

YS: — go away.

SS: — period.

YS: And then I moved to a kibbutz. I moved to a Reform kibbutz, after my military service. I had a couple of girlfriends. I ended up breaking their hearts and, after the second one, I kind of felt like it was just not okay to do that anymore. My life was otherwise very happy. I loved living in a community. I loved finding a way to manifest my religious beliefs, in some form of active spirituality. I loved being in the desert. I loved all the work. We really believed in, you got to do the work, and the work ethic. And, and then I went through a depression that, at, now I know was really about my sexuality trying to manifest itself. I went to another therapist, who tried to cure me of being gay.

SS: What did he do?

YS: Well, we did a lot of dream work, and he really felt that through the dreams, if we can just find some, a deeper cause of my pain around childhood stuff. And

if we heal that, then my homosexuality, which is just a manifestation of some scar tissue, psychic scar tissue, would just go away.

Now the work that we did was fine, and I actually stayed with him, because I just, I think I was strong enough at the time to just be very clear that we're not touching this. Even though I wasn't really ready to come out yet. And the work that we did around that scar tissue and the wounds was good work, that I'm really happy we did, and I don't feel that any psychic damage was done with that work. But around that time — and I wasn't out to any of my friends, or anyone — but around that time, I met a Jewish lesbian woman, who was a student in Barnard, who was visiting the kibbutz, kind of checking out the possibility she might move to it. And —

SS: Who was that?

YS: Her name was Hadar Dubowsky.

SS: That sounds really familiar. Okay.

YS: Okay. That was '89. '88, '89. And she immediately picked up on my story, and we became really good friends. So much so that everyone in the kibbutz thought we were lovers. And she invited me to come and spend a few months with her in New York. And that's when I took a year off from the kibbutz. Figured out that's going to be the time for me to start coming out. I figured, I'll come out in New York — spend a year there. I'm also an actor, so I was going to go to acting school. I felt like all the pieces really worked together. And come back as an out gay man, in Israel, and go back to the kibbutz, that I was really happy with my life there.

And then I moved to New York. Decided to stay in New York. Came out. And I've been here for 14 years.

SS: Okay. So this is 1984?

YS: It's '90 when I move to New York.

SS: Nineteen ninety.

YS: Yeah.

SS: Okay. So you're coming out into the absolute height of the AIDS crisis.

YS: Right.

SS: Now, what did you know about AIDS before you came to New York?

YS: Ahhh. This is almost embarrassing. I knew about AIDS, yeah. I was a person who was keeping abreast of what's going on in the world. But I will say that – at that time – knowing about AIDS, knowing about safe sex, knowing about what's going on in the world, and just starting to come out, the very first person that I had sex with, that I had anal sex with, that was '89 – probably – it was unsafe. So I knew enough about it that a few months later, when I donated blood, and the hospital happened to call me just to check in with me about another blood work that they took, for my B12, but they wouldn't say on the phone what it was for, I knew enough to be completely freaked out that they're calling me about having AIDS. But that was retroactively. At the time, completely didn't cross my mind, the possibility that we need to exercise safe sex. All those things were so splintered from each other. So it was a very intellectual thing. It was a mental thing, knowing what was going on in the world. But it wasn't connected to anything that was really who I am.

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SS: So they told you to come in to the office?

YS: Yeah, just to tell me that my B12 test was totally fine.

SS: Oh.

YS: It had nothing to do with AIDS or HIV. I am HIV-negative. That was the only instance of me having unsafe sex. But I knew enough about to freak out, That's what they're going to tell me. So it's just really interesting to me to look back onto that, and go like, I did it; so I knew enough about it, because I freaked out retroactively, but –

SS: Well it sounds like this really long period of your conscious and your subconscious going in a on different paths.

YS: And it really wasn't until I moved to New York, and started coming out, that they all came together. Now, living in Israel, I also knew about ACT UP, because I had this straight friend who immigrated to Israel from New York a few years prior, who was living in a kibbutz, and he had an ACT UP T-shirt. And he, I asked him what the, and he's the one who taught me about the pink triangle; he is the one who told me what ACT UP stands for –

SS: Was he in ACT UP, or he just had a T-shirt?

YS: I think he was just a very cool, politically active Jewish American, straight American, who knew everything. I don't think he was really active in it. But he knew enough to support it and probably went to all the right demonstrations, and such, and enough to buy a T-shirt. But I don't think he was really active in any way. And he was the first one who told me about ACT UP.

SS: So when you got to New York and decided you were going to stay, where did you end up in the gay community? How did you place yourself?

YS: This is very interesting, actually, because on the first day that I arrived in New York, the first people that I met, through a very coincidental set of circumstances, were three Radical Faeries. So the first people, so I, what I say to people is, I never came out as a gay man. I came out straight as a — straight — I came out straight as a Radical Faerie. So the whole gay scene, whatever that would be in New York, was something that I pretty much avoided. I immediately hooked up with the Faeries. Had our parties, had our rituals, had our social events, had our gatherings in upstate New York, and in other rural places. So that was the main thing that I was involved in. But I also had a sense that I kind of had to be a bit more political about what I was doing.

And I remember going to, within a week or two of arriving in New York, going to the gay and lesbian center on 13th Street, just to kind of check it out. There was some fair that was happening about all those different events that were all those different groups were publicizing their thing, and I kind of walked into the wrong room, and there was a big Queer Nation meeting happening there. And it took me awhile to realize that I'm not in the thing that I thought that I was going to be in. But I was much more interested in the thing that I ended up being in. I think Queer Nation was just in its first year or two, in New York, and I was *really* into that.

So as well as coming out as a Radical Faerie, I think the political activism of ACT UP and Queer Nation really, really spoke to me. The idea that my coming out is not just a personal event, but a political event, hit really, really strong. 'Cause that's the way I, I lived my life in Israel also, with the different forms of activism that I exercised

there, not unlike declaring pacifism. Regardless of how it ended up. But that really spoke to me.

So I can't even tell you, I don't, I really don't remember how I hooked up with ACT UP. But very early on, within let's say two, three months of me moving to New York, I started attending ACT UP meetings on a weekly basis.

SS: So tell us: what was an ACT UP meeting like?

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YS: Well, it was hundreds of people in that big room in Cooper Union. And there was a core of people, a core group of people that obviously knew each other and had a long history of doing work with each other. And for me, it was mostly just sitting there, being fascinated. I didn't really get involved all that much at first. I was just, I was a little bit intimidated by a feeling that there were all those people speaking on that podium, who were, who kept referring to each other, and feeling like there is so much going on underneath the surface of what was really being talked about. And being a mostly shy person, who takes a long time to warm up to new people, and definitely to feel comfortable in new situations, it was very comfortable for me to just sit there and listen and watch and feel like I'm doing my share just by being there. And then if there were events that they, big events that they were planning, participating in those events later.

SS: Can you remember some moments from the meetings that stand out in your mind, as an observer?

YS: {pause} I remember one of the first meetings. Every meeting opened with one of their recruiters-at-large, or whatever the term for that was calling for all the

people for whom it was the first meeting to go backstage there and get their little spiel on what ACT UP's about, and it took me a few weeks before I dared do that.

SS: So what was that like, that little orientation? What did they tell you?

YS: I honestly don't remember. I just remember, I remember being horrified of walking down the aisle, and hooking up with whoever it was who was doing that at-large work. And I just remember the day that I was like, okay, just get over yourself; it's time to go back there and do it. And just getting some information that I don't even remember what it was. But just that sense of okay, I'm doing the next step in this situation, in this new thing that I was doing.

Later on, I hooked up with the Foreign Nationals Caucus of ACT UP/New York.

SS: Do you remember who was in that?

YS: There was a British man called Paul. And if I heard his last name, I'll remember it. Paul O'Dwyer, maybe?

SS: Oh, Irish. Paul –

YS: Irish.

SS: – O'Dwyer.

YS: He was pretty much the one who was that caucus. There were maybe two or three other people who came to the meetings that I attended. But it really felt like he was the one who was carrying this thing.

SS: And what were the issues of your caucus?

YS: The one that I remember the most was – getting health care rights to illegal immigrants. {pause} I don't remember much more. I remember there was, there was a lot of focus on people from Latin America. There was some legislation that was come out on the table in Congress at that point that I think people were really focusing on; how to subvert what they were trying to do. But honestly, I don't remember the specifics of that. I think more than anything else – the experience, for me, was feeling, again, like I'm taking the next step. But also coming to terms with, this is pretty much as far as I can go. I felt like the people that I was, that were doing the work were so entrenched in the, like ACT UP by then had existed for a few years, and people knew so much, and were so refined in how to handle situations; how to process; how to respond to ad hoc situations that I felt so out of my league in so many regards that – it, it really felt like I'm, I'll be best as a pawn in the big events, the big demonstrations, and all that.

SS: Well let's talk about some of the dominant personalities. Can you remember some of the people that you admired or that made an impression on you?

YS: I remember Ann, Ann North-, Northrop?

SS: Northrop?

YS: I remember her. Maybe she was even, she was either doing the media stuff at the time, or maybe she was even one of the, kind of like the at-large representatives. She might have even been the person who did the orientation that I went to. I remember Bill Dobbs, only because he was also involved with the Faeries, so I kind of knew him in another setting also. Steve Quester, who was – he was a really interesting story, because I met him at an antiwar demonstration. I mean, the whole, the first Gulf War was just about to break, three, four months after I moved to Isra-, after I moved from

Israel to New York. And I actually got involved big-time with the, first preventing the war from starting, and then stopping the war movement. And in one of the earlier demonstrations — I think it was in October — I ran into one of my anti-Zionist friends, one of the two anti-Zionist friends that I had in Israel, years ago – a straight boy that I had a big crush on, which never went anywhere, of course, but politically, we were both somewhere between Marxists and anarchists. And I ran into him. He had just moved to New York, just for a few months, on a trip that he was doing. And he heard about the demonstration; of course had to go there. And then – he told me that he ran into this guy that he, this American guy that he met in Israel a few years back, who end up being Steve Quester. So that's when I met Steve Quester, at that demonstration.

Who else? If I had a list of names in front of me, I would be able to point to another five or six people.

SS: So ACT UP did a big campaign about the Gulf War, which was called Day of Desperation. Were you involved with that at all?

YS: Yes I was.

SS: Could you describe that a little bit?

YS: The Faeries had a little contingent within that. So I was mostly involved with like what the Faeries were doing at that time. And again, I'm having a hard time remembering.

SS: Were you part of the thing at Grand Central Station?

YS: Yes I was. And I just remember – I remember the big banners unfolding from the, kind of like the entryway balcony. I remember having a shouting match with some random commuter who was trying to understand what's even the

connection between the two things. And when I said something along the lines of wanting the government to do more, he was like, yeah, and what do you people do? And that just stymied me. I just, I, I just didn't know how to – I didn't know how to respond to a question like that.

SS: What was the connection, in your view, between the Gulf War and AIDS?

YS: I have to say, it was probably more emotional than the, verbally articulate, at the time. I think like as articulate as I could get to explain it, it really, at first, on the most basic level, it had to do with budgets. So it was very clear, what are the priorities? Why is the money going into this, rather than going into AIDS? I also have to say that as an Israeli, as an, soon to be an expatriate Israeli, who was, even in Israel, was outside of the political spectrum, in some way, for being an, a non-Zionist, the war offended me regardless of AIDS. Okay? But obviously, AIDS was something that was close to me also, because I was beginning to see, the first boyfriend that I had in New York had HIV, so it was a very emotional, obviously, thing for me. And like I said, it was mostly emotional than intellectual. I think I was just ince-, just outraged at the priorities. I would have to say that that was the main thing, some, there was another demonstra-, it wasn't the Day of Desperation. There was another rally, where it was a general antiwar rally, and I was marching with ACT UP. And some reporter actually stopped me, and asked me a question, and I was – all I could talk about was, was how we budget our priorities. I would say that was the main thing, the main connection that I made at the time.

YS: I didn't commit civil disobedience.

SS: But you went into Grand Central.

YS: I went into Grand Central, and I was down there on the first fl-, on that, the main floor, just as part of the, of the crowds.

SS: But that was civil disobedience. It was illegal to –

YS: Right, well –

SS: – takeover Grand Central.

YS: I guess so, that in my mind, being, I was always legal in this country. I was never illegal in the country. But I knew, but until I got my citizenship, I wasn't going to do anything that felt like it was jeopardizing my situation here. And so I really didn't feel like what I was doing was civil disobedience, in that it was dangerous to my legal situation. In ways that I think now would be completely dangerous. But back then, I didn't feel like it was that da-, it was an issue.

SS: Did you feel that ACT UP had a Jewish style?

YS: {laughs} Well, there were a lot of Jewish people in ACT UP. And that's actually interesting. I'll have to look at the name list again. But I would say that I felt that some of the – a large percentage, more than the proportion, proportionate share felt like they were Jewish folks in ACT UP. But as far as a Jewish style? I can't say that I thought about it like that at the time, but thinking about it now, from the question – I would say that the culture of debate felt very Jewish to me. Kind of like the sense of here's this group of people who are so connected; call it a family — okay? Who at times felt outrageously angry at each other. And coming from places that, or having ideas that were contradictory to each other, of what needs to happen, strategically, tactically,

ideologically, whatever. And still doing the work together, even as they could totally scream at each other.

SS: Do you remember the specifics of any of the conflicts?

YS: No, like I said at the time, I felt like that, the dynamic was going on for so long, it took me awhile to catch up to everything that was going on. Let me think about this. {pause} I'm afraid I'm going to confuse the timeline here. Because so much stuff has happened since in AIDS activism and all that. So I don't want to,–

SS: Okay.

YS: Yeah, I don't want to say things that I'm not sure that I –

SS: Let me ask you this.

YS: – that I remember.

SS: As an immigrant, did you feel that the issues of immigrants relating to AIDS were taken seriously in the organization?

YS: The Foreign Nationals Caucus was probably the tini-, one of the tiniest caucuses in ACT UP, in terms of what I was seeing people, other groups that were happening.

SS: Did you guys ever bring proposals to the floor, or did you organize actions?

YS: Not really. It's actually interesting, because I don't remember bringing proposals to the floor. And I don't remember, I don't remember it being as discussed publicly like other stuff was discussed. I also don't remember feeling like it wasn't getting its due, that, the respect and the energy it deserved. It seemed like a part of the style of the caucus that I was involved in was more in terms of like, kind of more

behind-the-scenes stuff – letter writing. There was a lot of communicating with ACT UP/San Francisco, or it might have been Golden Gate ACT UP — I don't remember — but one of those ACT UPs in the Bay Area. We did some work between them. And it's interesting, because I don't remember stuff coming to the floor in New York. But I was visiting San Francisco some time in the early '90s — maybe '92 — and I came to an ACT UP meeting there. And they, there was some proposal that had to do with foreign nationals – activity, or something, that came to the floor, and I just remember noticing that it did happen over there. So, I do remember thinking, oh, it happened in San Francisco. But I also can't tell you that I felt like it wasn't getting the respect that it deserved.

SS: Okay. Good. So were there any other actions that you were involved in, or demonstrations that you can recall?

YS: Well, there was an action that I was involved in by mistake. And that is a story that I'm the most interested in telling. Because – I was walking down the East Village one day, with that straight friend, who had just moved to New York at the time. Obviously, I was already a Radical Faerie; I had come out, as much as I was willing to come out at the time. I was still planning on going back to Israel at the end of the year, and being there. I was even starting to fantasizing about having Faerie gatherings there. And – I was walking down the East Village with him, and all of a sudden, there was all this noise coming from some side street. And my first thought was totally like, hide. There's some queer-bashing activity that's, that's happening around the corner. Avoid the crowds, the screaming crowds. And then, all of a sudden, this group showed up around the corner. It was either ACT UP or Queer Nation; I'm not sure what it was. It

was war-related, for sure. And – that was the moment the token dropped for me. And I can't tell you what the activity, what the action was. But that was totally the moment when I realized, when I saw just a bunch of folks, in the street, doing this thing. And it hit me: this would never happen in Israel. And that was the moment, kind of like coming upon that, and kind of joining it for a few seconds or a few blocks, that it hit me that I'm going to stay in the U.S. So I can't tell you what the action was, but that was the action that made me realize that I'm staying in the United States. It was, it was some antiwar event – just the combination of queer people protesting Iraq, protesting the war, in such an outrageous way. There was a combination of elements that I just couldn't foresee ever happening in Israel. And I was like, I'm staying here.

SS: So what made you decide to leave ACT UP?

YS: {sigh} I can't tell you that it was a conscious decision. I think it just kind of withered away, since – for the four years that I lived in New York, I attended just about any major action that happened. I don't remember. Just to answer your previous question, there was also an action by City Hall. And I don't remember what the specifics of that action was, but I definitely remember being in a big action in that, that park in front of City Hall. So I attended every major action.

I think after awhile, just going to the meetings just, without getting more involved and taking the next steps, to participating in more than just sitting there, listening to what's going on; it just kind of got old for me. The feeling that there was something that was going on that I really didn't understand, I think, was just not working for me anymore?

I loved what ACT UP was doing in the public realm; the idea of, the kind of actions that ACT UP did publicly, the kind of civil disobedience, the kind of mass, mass organized chaos, theater, drama really spoke to me. I've been involved with social activism in Israel, and political activism, but I've never seen anything done like that. So it really spoke to me. So I felt that doing tho-, participating in those kind of actions was the outlet that was the most natural to who I was as a person. And going to meetings and caucuses, and thinking strategy and tactics, is not quite where my gifts were. So I think like over time, we just kind of drifted out. It wasn't any particular reason; definitely not anything that I was unhappy about a direction, or something like that.

SS: Okay. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you think is important?

YS: No, I think that's what I can think of.

SS: Okay, thank you.

YS: Thank you.