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Interviewee: **Paul O’Dwyer**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Paul O'Dwyer
February 9, 2015

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

PAUL O'DWYER: Okay. So I'm Paul O'Dwyer. I am fifty-one years old. Today is February 9, 2015, and we're in my office on West 26th Street in Manhattan.

SS: Your fabulous law office.

PO: My very fabulous law office.

SS: And where were you born, Paul?

PO: I was born in Ireland.

SS: Where?

PO: I was born in Clonmel, which is not where I grew up, which I grew up kind of—well, it's all—Ireland's a really small place. So I grew up in Kilkenny, which is a county in the southeast corner of Kilkenny.

SS: In a small town, village?

PO: I grew up in the middle of the countryside. We lived in a small town called Carrick-on-Suir until I was five, and then we moved out into the country because my father had bought a farm out there. So we moved out into the countryside. So we really didn't live near anything. We just lived, like, way out in the countryside.

SS: What was your first exposure to politics?

PO: My first exposure to politics is kind of interesting because I'm from—which is very not unusual in Ireland, is not my parents, but my grandparents had been very involved in politics. Now, by "politics" I mean the war, the Irish Civil War and all kinds of stuff like that, and both on my father's side and on my mother's side, and

perhaps more so—my mother's side had a lot of kind of like very luminary kind of political figures and stuff, and guerrilla figures.

SS: Who was the most famous?

PO: My grandfather, Michael Burke, holds—you would not think this to look at me, but he holds the Guinness World Record for the world's longest hunger strike, that he survived, which is ninety-one days.

SS: Wow.

PO: And then my parents, kind of strangely enough, were completely, not apolitical, but they frowned completely on any sort of political involvement whatsoever, and I still don't understand why that is, but they kind of—any sort of activism, any sort of political involvement, except the most bland thing in the whole world, they were completely freaked out by and horrified by and really frowned upon it. So possibly for that reason, when I went to university, I started to ferret out what things they might be appalled by and joined them.

SS: Like what?

PO: There was the, I guess, the sort of—there were a lot of people living in Ireland—Irish people were very involved and very vocal and active around the Irish Antiapartheid Movement, and this was in the very early eighties. And then when I started to come out, there were more kind of—the context in which I came out really was—there was kind of the gay community at that time and in that place, tended to be very politicized. There were either people who just kind of like would kind of meet each other socially and that was it or people who were very involved in every single

progressive cause, and kind of our community was part of that. And so then kind of the one spilled over into the other.

SS: So were they out in the left?

PO: Yes.

SS: So they were openly gay in all these left movements?

PO: Yeah.

SS: And was it normal in your family to go to university or was that unusual?

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PO: We were the first generation in our family to go to university, and that was because, basically, I think a combination of factors, some upward mobility, some government funding for people to be able to afford to go to university, a little bit of everything. And my parents were kind of ambitious for all of us, so we all—I mean, it was just decided that we would all go to university.

SS: So when you came out, who were the big important, influential figures in Irish gay politics?

PO: There really weren't any. I came out in a strange sort of way, which is I—so I had gone to university in Galway, which is on the west coast of Ireland, which was kind of the other side of the country from where my family lived, and there weren't any openly—I mean, there was one or two people who were kind of rumored to be gay, and then there was one or two people, like, in the town who were known as being gay, but almost in the same way as one might be known as, I don't know, like just there being something about you that set you apart from everybody else, in that sort of semi-harmless way where it didn't make you a bad person. It just made you a kind of—there was that

thing about you. And I remember when I—I had told a couple of my friends that I was gay, but I still hadn't met any gay people, and I was kind of involved in, like, the debating society and lots of stuff in college, so I had to meet a lot of people in that.

There was a debate. I think it was towards the end of my second year in university, and there was a debate about decriminalization of homosexuality. And it was kind of weird, because I was there and I was in this auditorium with, like, four hundred straight people all debating whether or not it should be decriminalized. It was a little weird, because there was, like, people who I knew didn't agree with it arguing for it, and vice versa, and it was just kind of faky thing that happens with debate where it's really only important that you win the debate and your arguing power and stuff like that. But it being something so close to home, well, it just kind of like, "This is so weird," and I just found myself out of the blue, like when the debate was over and people were saying things from the floor, I kind of just stood up and said, "As a gay guy," or words to that effect, blah, blah, blah.

Then I sat down, and I was kind of freaked out that I had done it, and then could kind of feel people saying, "Is that what he said?"

Then, like, the next couple days in college, like, people kept coming up to me, "My god. I heard this—you won't believe what somebody said you said at this debate. Can you imagine that somebody would say that about you?"

I said, "Well, yeah." And then I – so that was kind of my coming out.

And then after that, I started to meet a couple of other gay people in the town I lived in, in Galway, but it was all very—I mean, we weren't particularly friends, or at that point, anyway. We did over time. Then I was kind of desperate, of course,

having put my nose out the door of the closet, to kind of meet other people. So I started a Lesbian and Gay Society on campus with me and this lesbian Maura Henderson.

Then I contacted the universities, because the Student Unions in each of the universities in Ireland—there were four universities at the time, and the Student Unions were where anything remotely like this would kind of be found and go through and kind of sprout and find a fairly sympathetic place to be. So I contacted the Student Unions in the universities in Dublin and Trinity College and University College Dublin and said, “Hey, my name is Paul O’Dwyer, and I’m in Galway and I just started a Lesbian and Gay Society on the campus, and I’m sure you guys have one, too, and if you do, I’d love to meet you.” So through that, I started to meet a whole bunch of people in Dublin, and all those people were all very politically involved in various different campaigns, and a lot of people—it was around that time that there was a lot of support for lesbians and gays, support the miners, so there was a lot of kind of like mutual benefits and stuff like that around the place for that stuff.

SS: And how did the rest of the left respond to those kinds of things?

00:10:00 PO: I think they thought that it was—I mean, I’m sure that there was, like, a number of different perspectives. I don’t remember anybody being overtly homophobic, which they may have been, but I just don’t remember that. I think people may have been kind of somewhat dismissive of people. I think we were possibly regarded as sort of a constituency that should be included in order to give them street credibility, but not necessarily that we would ever assume leadership positions.

SS: So, far more advanced than what you were about to find in the United States.

PO: When I came here, yeah. I mean, I just think that things were very different here.

SS: Can you describe that a little bit? What surprised you?

PO: I'm going to put my glasses on. Now I can see you. What surprised me here was—well, first of all, New York was bigger. I mean, I'd lived in London before, but even so, I had been more—I don't know. For whatever reason, I kind of felt New York, like the entire city I could sort of experience and explore, whereas London was not so much like that. When I came here, I think one of the things I was so surprised by was there was a fair amount of what you would probably call—I don't know. Like people seemed hedonistic. Do you know what I mean?

SS: What year was this?

PO: I think this is in, like, the late eighties, 1987. But I think I would have the same reaction if I came here now, like among sort of gay men of the age I was when I got here, you know, people kind of wanted to go out, they wanted to look good, they wanted to go to the gym, they wanted to get laid, they wanted to have nice vacation homes, and blah, blah, blah, blah. I had come from a place where I was like, "Well, we really need to find some people who are even more oppressed than we are and identify with them, because that's the right thing to do." So it kind of took—and then there's the fact that Americans are just different to other people, so that it took a while kind of acclimatizing myself to that.

SS: So the status of gay Irish people in New York must have been a little shocking.

PO: In what sense?

SS: I mean, you didn't have to look far to find out who was more oppressed, in the sense of all the exclusion that was going on.

PO: You mean within the Irish community?

SS: Well, yes.

PO: Well, within the Irish community when I came here, my, and still, I think, sort of my relationship to the Irish community was really limited. And I had some Irish friends, and, I mean, looking back now, I kind of think, god, we were kind of naive. But we never viewed ourselves as being Irish émigrés, and we were possibly a little bit, I don't know, kind of elitist in one sense, not—I think not in a terribly serious way, but I think we thought that we were not like all of the other Irish émigrés who had come here, who lived in a group together someplace and were easily identified as Irish émigrés. We were kind of much more interesting than they were.

SS: Because of your education or because you were gay?

PO: A bit of both. Probably a bit of both, and because we weren't part of, like, the wave of illegal immigration, that we had kind of come here because we wanted to, or we had come here because we were bored and we were exploring. I don't think even if it were the case that we had come here because we needed to or needed money or needed a job, we probably wouldn't have admitted that. We would just kind of been a bit more sort of like louche.

SS: So if the left was so embracing of gay people in Ireland, what about Irish politics? Was there a role for openly gay people?

PO: There was, so –

SS: In your grandfather's kind of politics.

PO: Well, yes, and I think that there were—so there was the—David Norris was this figure who had been—he was the first kind of well-known openly gay person in Ireland who acknowledged that, right? There had been people in Ireland who had, like, worked in the entertainment industry before, like, kind of fairly famous actors, and there's kind of this very, very well-known gay couple, Micheál Mac Liammóir and his partner, who founded theater in Ireland and all that stuff, and kind of everybody knew they were a couple. They were acknowledged as a couple. But they were in the theater, so it kind of really didn't matter.

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But then David Norris popped up, and he was this professor of Joycean studies at Trinity College, but also he was kind of what Irish people call a West Brit. You know, he had a vaguely British accent. He was from this somewhat interesting thing. I think he had been born in whatever it was when it was called Rhodesia, and then his parents moved back to Ireland and all this. So he had this sort of not typical Irish upbringing, and his parents had died and he didn't have siblings, and so people used to say, "Well, it's easy for him," you know, and also because he's an English professor and he wears a bowtie and stuff like that. But he took the Irish government to the European Court of Justice on the decriminalization of homosexuality, and he won.

And just to tie back a little bit into my university, so I went to law school in Galway, which was run by—it was a relatively new faculty, and the dean was Kevin Boyle, who had represented Jeff Dudgeon, who was the Northern Ireland gay activist who took the Northern Ireland government to the European Court of Justice on the decriminalization issue. So Kevin Boyle had represented Jeff Dudgeon, and my law school had this very political, very human-rights-oriented syllabus and perspective.

And I remember being—starting this Gay Society in college, and when I look back on it, I was like, my god, I was like barely nineteen years old, and I just didn't even know gay people. And there was a—what do you call them, like when you have, like, a religious person in the school?

SS: Chaplain?

PO: A chaplain, right. So there was a Catholic priest and some other thing who were chaplains there, and they had asked to meet me one day to talk about this, because I was going around with my, like, posters and my Scotch tape, like, putting up these things and going to—I got the Student Union to kind of give me the use of, like, a telephone for like an hour a week where people could call and stuff like that. They were kind of appalled, and they met me. They were kind of trying to be nice. They didn't want to be *really* offensive, but they were saying, like, “Well, we think you should call it something else. We kind of realize that you're here, but we think that this is really not a good idea, and you're rushing into it, and really you should kind of find a different name for it,” and blah, blah, blah.

And then the university refused to recognize it, and it was still kind of me. And I kind of thought—and I'm sure at the time I kind of thought, “Well, this can't hurt me academically if I do this.” So I went to see Kevin Boyle, my dean, and I said, “Look, this is what's going on. So I've started this thing and this is what's happened. Now the university, like the Board of Governors or whatever they are, don't recognize us,” and blah, blah, blah, blah.

And he was appalled, and he said, “Okay, we'll organize a meeting,” and dah, dah, dah.

And I thought, "Oh, my god, he loves me. This is fantastic." I really wasn't that concerned with what happened. I just wanted my professor to, like, think highly of me.

And then this is—like the first time I kind of felt like, god, I am such a—I kind of felt like I had completely compromised myself, was when I just had this massive amount of pressure from these chaplains who kept contacting me, and then other people, like friends of mine, who kept saying, like, "You should not be doing this. This is going to destroy you academically," blah, blah, blah.

So my dean had prepared this huge presentation and documented everything and this whole thing and made sure for this legalization of this society in university, and the morning of this hearing that was supposed to happen, I told him, like, "I can't do it."

SS: Oh, wow.

PO: "I can't do it. I just cannot do it."

And he flipped out and was like, "You don't understand. This is not just about you. This is about other people, and it affects other people."

And I'm like, "Where are the other people?" Like I just, I'm like, "This is too much for me, and I can't handle it." And then I felt like complete crap afterwards. I felt like a loser.

SS: And what was your relationship like with him after that?

PO: After that it was fine. I mean, I was never a great student academically, but he liked me. He respected me. I had taken—like every year every class would have a ball, like a formal dinner dance, and the Law Society, because we

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were kind of snobs, all of us kind of had the best one, and the medical students. So the Law Society, we would always rent a castle someplace and go out there and have their dates and blah, blah, and it would be like all-night shindig in a castle someplace. And I decided, well, I'm not taking a girl. That would be weird. So I had my friend, this guy Roy Murray that I knew in Dublin, so I invited him. So we were like the first same-sex couple that went there, and my professor loved us and he wanted to dance with us, and the whole nine yards, and invited us to sit at his table, and so there was that. I mean, people could not have been kind of more kind of encouraging and comforting and nice, but, you know, there were limits to that.

SS: So when did you go to London?

PO: I went to London in 1985, and I was there for about six months, and then I went back to Dublin and I studied there for six months and went back to London for six months, and went back to Dublin for six months and then I came here.

SS: So you were in Ireland when AIDS started, basically.

PO: Yes.

SS: And how did you first become aware of it?

PO: I remember—the first conversation that I remember about it was it was, I think, it was the summer of 1983, and I was sharing a house with some students, and one of them was this guy who had just qualified as a lawyer, and he was very tall, very good-looking, blond haired, rugby-playing athlete, and he had just come back from spending a chunk of time in New York, I think maybe at the end of that summer, and he had been here all summer and he came back, and he was telling us—I mean, I'd been hearing about it from other places, I was sure. I don't think that was the first person I

heard about it, but he was the first person I remember having a conversation about it with. And I don't remember what the conversation was. I remember him talking about how—in a way, he was just saying, “Well, it's because, you know, all the gay people in New York, you have no idea, they're just like everybody is having sex with each other constantly, nonstop. And how do people expect this disease to not be spreading like that if they are all just constantly having sex with each other incessantly?”

And I'm like, “They are? What do you know.”

Then I think that it was—I think that AIDS had not become as political an issue there in Dublin. I think in London it was, or certainly it became very much a part of the infrastructure of the LGBT community in London at that point or was becoming that way.

SS: But they had healthcare, so they didn't have that battle, right?

PO: They had healthcare, but it becomes kind of a little bit sort of contextual. So like when you're there, right—so when I lived in England or even when I lived in Ireland, where we had healthcare, we didn't think we had healthcare. I mean, now when I think about that, I say, well, of course we have healthcare. But by our standards then, we didn't have healthcare, because the quality of the healthcare available was not so great. It was constantly being defunded, underfunded. I mean, by comparison, it was *wonderfully* funded, but it wasn't this like, you know, something was wrong with you, you had no insurance, and you could go to a very nice clinic and not have to wait forever, and go into a nice waiting room and then be in a nice surgery, whatever, and be treated really nice. It wasn't like that at all.

SS: So who was the first person that you knew who was HIV-positive?

PO: Who was the first person who—I don't know. That's a good question.

SS: What is your memory of how AIDS came into your own life?

Were you aware of someone you knew dying or being sick at some point?

00:25:00 PO: I think I knew—before I came here, I didn't have any close friends that I knew of who were HIV-positive. I think there were people I knew in Dublin. And in London, I mean, I wasn't—I was kind of dipping my finger in various things there without being overly involved in things. But I think even at that point, and this is like the mid to late eighties, people were not all open about their HIV status. So it's not like somebody would—I mean, in a way, if somebody was HIV-positive, you knew that the person was HIV-positive quite possibly well before you ever met them.

SS: When you came here, were you afraid?

PO: No, no, no, I didn't have that—I didn't have any sense of fear, but I think that kind of across, like, several fronts, not just in terms of HIV issues, just like in general, I was just kind of like—I wouldn't say fearless, but I just didn't have a sense of fear about things.

SS: So how did you first get politically involved with AIDS?

PO: I first got politically involved in AIDS when I was here, and it was at the time where it was becoming, like, the dominant discourse around LGBT rights, and it was kind of impossible to not be involved and not have that be the full involvement. I don't remember—I was trying to remember, and I don't remember when was the first time I went to an ACT UP meeting, like a date, but I remember, because I'd been hearing

about it and reading about it, and I just all—it kind of seemed like—this kind of seems to me like the obvious place that I should be.

And I remember going to my first meeting, and I remember just kind of having, number one, this kind of sense of reassurance, that I had basically kind of found kind of the group of people that I kind of identified with and belonged to, and also in a way it gave me this—and it might sound kind of corny now, but kind of this sense that there was an identity that we had as gay men and lesbians that kind of went across, that was kind of common to all of us, regardless of where we were from.

SS: Can you articulate what that was?

PO: Probably not. It was maybe kind of a shared set of core values or perspective on the world or way of looking at things. I guess that there were just certain assumptions you could make, certain kind of things you would say or ways you would behave or whatever that would be understood and you didn't need to explain or—it's kind of hard to be really precise about it.

SS: Can you think of one example?

PO: I mean, I guess it was just like people had the—and it's not the—and I think it was bigger than that, but if I were try to start boiling it down to concrete things, we wore the same kind of clothes, we listened to the same kind of music, we watched the same kinds of movies. We may not have necessarily liked them, but they were the movies that spoke to us. The same kind of literature, the same — God, this is hard.

SS: Tell me a movie that you're thinking of.

PO: Tell you a movie? People liked Derek Jarman movies, or people at least knew who Derek Jarman was and they knew what the movies were about, and we

knew about, like, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, that little movie, things like that, that you knew that when people had seen that, that had gone to the trouble of finding that and seeing it, and either liking it, not liking it didn't really matter, but the fact that it had come into their sphere of orbit kind of meant that you had—to a certain extent, we kind of spoke the same language.

SS: So where did you plug in in ACT UP?

00:30:00 PO: I went there, and I don't remember exactly when I plugged into where I plugged in, but I eventually—I remember Allan Clear, who now is with the Harm Reduction Coalition and who's from Cornwall, and I remember I guess it was not long after I had started attending ACT UP on a regular basis, and he made some announcements about a meeting for people who were not U.S. citizens. And then, of course, we became, like, super close friends as well as that, and he was very much involved in harm reduction and needle exchange, as well as just kind of issues that were affecting us as non-U.S. citizens. Then there was a bunch of people who—so then we kind of evolved into the Foreign Nationals Caucus.

SS: Who was in it, do you remember?

PO: There was Allan, there was myself, Michael Holterman. There was a French guy whose name I cannot remember, which I know is not—

JW: Gilbert.

PO: Yes, thank you. Gilbert. There was Gay Wachmann, an English woman. There was Elise [Illith Rosenblum], who is Israeli, and there was a guy, Elias, who was Israeli, also who was a doctor.

SS: Elias Guerrero?

PO: I've been having that conversation with Allan, and he was saying, "I think it's Elias Guerrero and he's not Israeli."

SS: No. He's Latino.

PO: I know, and I'm thinking but there was a guy I remember very clearly, who was Israeli, who was a doctor, who was part of our caucus also. Then there were—so we were kind of like, I think, the kind of core group. People would kind of like wander in and wander out. And then there was this kind of strange thing where kind of one of like the—sort of like slightly disappointing realization that there were like these little hierarchies of, like, we were a caucus, which meant we weren't a fully fledged committee, and we were different from a working group, blah, blah, blah, and I thought, my god. I felt like we were trying to get voting rights or something. It was all very kind of odd.

And then, I think, there were a bunch of Latino guys who were in our caucus and then who—I don't want to say formed, but kind of who went over to the Latino Caucus, but we kind of worked together a lot and we had a lot of kind of overlapping issues.

SS: What were your issues?

PO: Our issues were the HIV ban on HIV-positive people coming into the country, or HIV-positive non-citizens coming into the country, and a very—so that was one big issue. Then another one was access to healthcare and treatment for people who are non-nationals. Then there was the very practical one of what type of civil disobediences can people who are non-citizens get involved in, and what can they do without jeopardizing their status.

SS: And what was the answer to that?

PO: I tended to be somewhat conservative on those fronts, and I generally advised people to not get arrested, just because who knows what—first of all, what can go wrong in the arrest process, even if it's kind of like a prearranged, very kind of just going-through-the-motions kind of thing where you end up being charged with something that you hadn't anticipated being charged with, and then it becomes a problem later on, and blah, blah, blah, and there was always a big need for people to do a lot of logistical support who are not being arrested, and that that was kind of what I did, and that was what I was suggesting to other people to do. But then for people who were getting arrested, make sure that when you're getting arrested you don't have any drugs on you, make more sure than everybody else is making sure that you don't have any drugs on you.

SS: Right, right.

PO: There was always this whole thing about you don't have to tell the police what your nationality is. They shouldn't be asking you your nationality, blah, blah, blah, which, of course, unless absolutely everybody is answering or refusing to answer that question, the fact that one person is refusing to say it and they have an accent answers that question. There was a lot of concern at the time about whether or not people who were being arrested, if they had HIV medication with them, if that would jeopardize their immigration status.

SS: Did it?

PO: No. No. I don't think that there was—I don't think that the NYPD or any PD that was involved, police department that was arresting people, I don't think they

00:35:00 had an awareness of that there was any issue with immigration and HIV status and stuff like that. So I don't think there was—they certainly didn't have a policy like, "We will not tell the immigration people that we found you with HIV medication." I just think it was something they would never have made a connection about or a link with.

SS: But I do remember Alexis Danzig standing up and telling people, "Don't tell the police your nationality," as a solidarity thing for people who were undocumented. It wasn't a term at the time, but—

PO: Yeah. But I don't know. At that time immigration enforcement was not at all what it is now, so, I mean, there were people who had no papers whatsoever, who were completely undocumented, who went and got arrested and went to court, and blah, blah, blah, and nothing ever happened to them. At the time, unless it was, and I think even if it had been a serious felony conviction, but even still, at that time there was really no conversation between a local police department and the enforcement branch of the Immigration Service.

SS: Interesting.

PO: That all happened much later on.

SS: Right. So then at what point did you become a citizen?

PO: I didn't become a citizen.

SS: Oh. So at what point were you able to be arrested?

PO: Oh, I was resident shortly after I came here.

SS: No. So at what point were you able to be arrested?

PO: Oh, arrested. I never got arrested.

SS: Even on St. Patrick's Day?

PO: Even on St. Patrick's Day. I always represented people.

SS: Oh, okay. So basically you can practice law and pass the bar here and be a resident.

PO: Yeah, yeah. You don't even have to be a resident to practice law.

SS: Oh, that's interesting. So then how did you move into the legal wing of ACT UP?

PO: Well, I guess because what I was doing, which was like most of the stuff which was around the HIV ban, and I had passed the bar and been admitted to practice here in 1989, so even though kind of part of me, like, I really don't want to practice law, I don't really know what I want to do, but I kind of think, like, that's what I really don't want to do, but then the other part of me, kind of like the slightly nervous, neurotic part of me said, "Well, you've got to do something, and you don't know how to do anything else, so you should just do that," so I did it.

There was an ad hoc working group on HIV immigration which was to meet at GMHC at that time, and there were—I don't remember all of the people who were there, but David Barr was on it, Judy Rabinovitz from the ACLU was on it, who's still at Human Rights Project, and she's kind of an icon there. Me, some other people who I don't remember.

SS: Mostly lawyers.

PO: Mostly lawyers or people with some legal background or involved in, like, legal service provisions.

It was after the HIV ban had gone into effect, and then ways to deal with that and what to do with people who are HIV-positive, who need to access government

services, and then not have the government find out that they're accessing government services for HIV treatment and all that sort of stuff, and kind of how to find a firm sort of footing that we know that people who are getting, like, city—like money is being provided to them through the city for their health treatment, but making sure that that's not subsequently going to come up in the immigration context and deny them immigration benefits. And there was a lot of that that was kind of tricky.

Some of the people there were kind of very formal and were like, "Well, sometimes it's just going to happen," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and then there were other people, which included me, who were saying, "Well, I have a list of doctors, like these civil surgeons who were the ones who did the medical tests for immigration purposes, and these doctors don't ask to see ID, so I think we should be circulating that."

Then people saying like, "I think that's a very—you should not say that out loud. That's just done."

So there were very practical, I think, kind of shortcut ways to resolve those problems as well as other kind of longer-term ways to resolve it. Then I think people on that group kind of became sort of institutionalized in the places in which they worked, and the work we were doing became institutionalized in that group that sort of dissolved one way or another.

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SS: So when was the first time you represented inside ACT UP?

PO: I don't remember that. I remember I had started to represent people, I think maybe probably around 1990, '91, but I don't remember very many specifics.

SS: Well, tell us one of your favorite cases that you were involved in.

PO: I remember the—I represented people from an action at Macy's where a guy who used to work as a Santa at Macy's had been fired for being HIV-positive, and Macy's even kind of refused—as I remember, anyway, Macy's were kind of like refusing to even debate it. They didn't want to talk to people about it. They were just like, "Whatever. It's done. He's really not an employee. Our Santa Clauses are not employees, so it's not covered by the New York City health law." That's my recollection. So there was an action at Macy's where a bunch of people from an affinity group, and I don't remember which one—I think it may have been just set up for that purpose.

JW: Action Tours?

PO: It could have been Action Tours dressed up as Santa Clauses and went into Macy's, and then at like the busiest point in the main floor, all kind of lay down on the floor and chained themselves together and to the furniture. Then we started kind of giving out leaflets to people talking about what was going on, and then the security guards came along—I guess because Macy's had been targeted before for an action, but for whatever reason, the security guards had these huge big giant shears that could cut chains, right? So the only reason you would have one of those handy is if you were expecting someone to chain themselves in the store.

So they came along, and then as they came along—so it was shortly before Christmas. The store was packed, like millions of children. Then as they went over with the shears to cut the things on the Santa Clauses, people kind of freaked out, and then the people on the floors are screaming, "Nooooooo! You're murdering Santa!" Then all these little kids started screaming, "No! They're killing Santa!" They had to—I think they had

to sort of like evacuate part of the store while everybody got processed and the whole thing.

I remember going to court for that, and I'm pretty sure it was this. It could have been a different incident involving people chaining themselves to furniture in someone's office while dressed up as something. I remember the judges saying, "They dressed up as *what?*"

And I was saying, "Well, the allegation is that they were dressed up as a Santa Claus, and they were in Macy's and they chained themselves to the furniture, and I'm not sure what's illegal about that."

And the judge said, "Well, why were they dressed up as Santa Claus in Macy's?"

And I was like, "Well, because that Macy's hires people to dress up as Santa Claus and go there and meet the people."

And the judge was like, "Well, were they working for Macy's?"

And I'm like, "Well, I think you should ask the DA's Office if they worked for Macy's or if they didn't, because really that's for them to prove, not for me."

SS: Did you win?

PO: Yeah.

SS: Oh, good move.

PO: I'm pretty sure all of those cases got kicked out. But, I mean, in New York I think there were exceptions to this, but I think for the judges who heard a lot of these cases were just very eager to throw them all out on whatever technicalities you could come up with.

SS: Why?

00:45:00 PO: I think it's because of where these judges came from, that for the most part, because becoming a judge in New York is such a politicized process, and in criminal court, the people who are doing these arraignments in criminal court in the arraignment part or in the summons part are generally fairly new judges. They've just been appointed. And, you know, to get appointed as a judge, you have to go to like all the local political clubs in New York, which are mostly Democratic, and then you get put on a party line, and you got nominated for a judgeship and, blah, blah, and you kind of pull all these strings and get all these political people, blah, blah. And in New York, that's mostly like Democratic organizations that do it. So a large—and I don't know if these people were necessarily Democrats or whatever or what their politics were, but they would have had to go, a lot of them, anyway, would have had to go through this process to kind of schmooze kind of the Democratic Party establishment, a lot of which was kind of somewhat liberal and progressive, in order to become judges. And also maybe I think because of the fact that the people that ACT UP represented, in a way a cross-section of a particular demographic that may have appealed to the people who were sitting on the bench.

SS: I remember the five years that you represented me on St.

Patrick's Day. If we had a judge who was Jewish or black, we would win, and if they were Italian or Irish, we would lose, basically.

PO: Pretty much, yeah. Also these arraignment parts—and this is pure speculation, but I imagine that the judges who were there are just really bored out of their minds, because it's people coming in, they're drinking from an open container, they're

peeing on the street, blah, blah, blah. "Okay. Fifty-dollar fine. Next," blah, blah, blah. And then people come in and they had chained themselves to the furniture thing in Macy's dressed up as Santa Claus, giving out literature about HIV and discrimination, and blah, blah, blah, and then there was somebody with a legal argument being made about whether or not the summons were jurisdictionally defective or not, and I think they were just—sometimes they were just interested.

SS: Right. So how did it work for the lawyers in ACT UP? How was it decided who was going to do what case and all of that?

PO: I think we would just volunteer. We would just kind of volunteer to do stuff. There were people who were doing—when I joined and when I started, Lori Cohen, we were doing a lot of representation. Mary Dorman, my officemate here, was doing a lot of representation of people. There were a lot of lawyers in ACT UP, but not a lot of them were doing representation of people.

SS: So were you involved in any of the big cases?

PO: I don't believe so. I may have done some of the people from the church demonstration, St. Patrick's. I know that the two incidents that I really remember were the two cases that I did with people who had kind of—the Macy's one and then another one with people who had chained themselves in an office. Then the other big demonstrations, they were all very—I think that was kind of newish to ACT UP when they were happening, and they were kind of super duper well organized, and the legal representation was organized kind of like well in advance, and I was possibly a little bit intimidated by it.

SS: So just as regular ACT UPper, do you have like a favorite experience or action?

PO: I think the City Hall action was one of my favorites. The St. Patrick's was one of my favorites.

SS: Were you inside St. Patrick's?

PO: No, no. But I was kind of shocked that people had such a reaction to people going inside St. Patrick's and that people had such a reaction to throwing the host on the floor, blah, blah, blah, and whatever, and that, I think, was kind of a sense of—I think maybe my first initial sense of like Americans are really kind of conservative behind it all. Like I was thinking, wow, when they go into the church, I hope they don't, like, assault people, because I would want to.

SS: Well, I want to use this opportunity to talk a little bit about the St. Patrick stuff because it does parallel your time in ACT UP.

PO: Yeah, because I kind of morphed from one to the other.

SS: Yeah. So when did your participation in that start?

00:50:00

PO: So I had been involved in the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization since from the start, and I don't remember exactly when that was, but it was, again, like maybe around 1990 or at the very end of the eighties.

SS: And who were the founders?

PO: There was – the people who were at kind of our initial meeting or meetings was me, Anne Maguire, Marie Honan, Brendan Fay, Tarlach MacNiallais, Catch Keeley, and then other people, I'm sure, John Francis Mulligan, and then at various

times there was other people. But those are the people I remember as kind of—Eileen Clancy as well. That kind of waxed and waned over time.

The St. Patrick's Day Parade thing happened when we—so we were meeting. Basically it's like a bunch of people with no special agenda other than what we would come up with at a meeting was going to be our agenda. Like, "Well, maybe we should do this."

"Fantastic. Let's do that."

"We should do outreach for Irish people in Woodside who might not have health insurance and have HIV and are —"

"That's a great idea." So it was kind of whatever we kind of—it was a fairly vague, loose—and at a certain point, we said, "Well, let's put in an application to march as a contingent in the St. Patrick's Day Parade," and so we did.

SS: What year was that?

PO: Oh, my god. Was it maybe—I really don't remember.

SS: Dinkins was mayor.

PO: Dinkins was mayor, right. When was he mayor?

JH: From January 1st, 1990 to December 31st 1993.

PO: So it would have been at some point probably in 1990, I think, maybe. And, you know, we really thought nothing of it. I mean, we didn't think that—we surely didn't think we would be accepted. We didn't think we would be rejected. We just didn't really think. We were just like, "Do it. Why not? Of course we should," and kind of in a way thought no more about it other than this will be sort of like an interesting pot to stir, sort of.

Then, you know, we got these kind of conflicting messages. Really, as is so often the case in these kind of scenarios, they really—they could have avoided the whole thing happening in the first place if they had just kind of given us one consistent refusal and stuck with that. But instead they said, “Oh, you know, you’re on a waiting list, and then we won’t accept you because we’re a Christian parade or a Catholic parade,” and then something else and something else and something else.

And then we were like, “Wow. But you can’t do this.” Then the media got a hold of it or whatever. It became a really big media event and a very big political event, and it kind of took off, and that—

SS: But that first year, you did march.

PO: Yes. So the first year we did march. That, I believe, would have been 1991, though it could have been 1992, but I think it was ’91. I mean, the whole thing leading up to it was really bizarre, and the day itself was just really—that was like a moment of, like, never forgetting that day. It was just—it was wild.

SS: What happened?

PO: Well, it was just because we showed up in the morning to—there had been all this thing like the mayor kind of got involved and was trying to sort it out, and dah, dah, dah, and sort of like come up with this compromise between us and the parade organizers to have us march, and then the parade organizers were getting more and more extreme, and then the mayor was getting more and more pissed. Then the Hibernian, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who were the people who ran and organized the parade, they had these little kind of splinter groups within themselves, and then there was this one division in there that invited the mayor and us to march with them. And I think that may

have been partly because they thought it was the right thing to do, but I think also it was partly because it was like an internal power thing, and they were like, “Well, let’s find the biggest, most humiliating thing we can do in order to kind of make a name for ourselves,” and they certainly did make a name for themselves.

00:55:00 So we met the morning of the parade to march, and there was all of us from ILGO. There was a lot of us. There was hundreds of people. And, you know, the organizers had consistently been saying, even before this, was, “Those crazy people from ACT UP are going to be there,” blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Duh.

SS: Because really it was all the same community.

PO: It was the same community. Absolutely. But then we marched, and I remember being at the front of the parade. It was me and Ann and Marie, and I think maybe John and the mayor, Marjorie Hill.

SS: The mayor’s liaison.

PO: The mayor’s then-liaison, Marjorie Hill, Ph.D., and there was, I think, Pat Lynch, not from the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, but this guy who was kind of a big—I think he worked for Joe Hynes at the time, when Joe Hynes was a respectable politician and not what he turned into, or respectable-ish, anyway.

And we were all just like in shock at how incredibly vicious people were, like how—I was, like, I could not believe it, like walking, and people screaming these tirades of abuse, like tirades of abuse, like horrible things. I remember just—it was like I had never experienced anything like that in my life. And I remember thinking to myself afterwards, like, my god, I came out in, like, this small town in the west of Ireland in the 1980s, and, I mean, possibly because I was harmless, because I was the only one there,

the only out one in one context, so I didn't inspire that kind of reaction. But still, like even so, here I am in New York City in the 1990s on Fifth Avenue, and this is people's reaction to openly gay people walking around the place. Like, what on earth.

And the year after that, I—and I thought I could not have experienced anything worse than that. The year after that, I marched with the ILGO equivalent contingent of the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Boston, and that made the New York parade the previous year look like Disneyland. It was the most bizarre thing. So there had been all these threats of bomb scares, blah, blah, blah, against us participating in Boston.

And I went there and I stayed with people the night before, people I knew who were marching in it. We had to meet at a secret location the next morning, and then we were picked up, bundled into the back of like an armored police car. We were driven to the starting point that we were going to meet, which had been kept secret. There were these plainclothes cops walking on either side of our contingent. There were anti-sniper guys on the roofs. It was unreal. It was the most—and so we walked. The parade in Boston is very different to New York, because New York has, like, a long Fifth Avenue, right, so everybody who wants to go there kind of like makes it a point of going there for a purpose, and it's not like a residential place, whereas in Boston, it was like through a neighborhood, through the heart of South Boston, very conservative working-class white Irish kind of Catholic, and, I mean, as bad as New York was, this was ten times worse. I was never—at that time, as I said, like, I really didn't get scared of things, but that was the time I was physically terrified. People were throwing things at us. People were throwing bits of pizza at us. There were people who had been camping out in their garden with kegs of beer, throwing stuff at us.

At least in New York, every so often, like every block there had been a couple of people saying that they supported us and they thought we were great. In Boston, it wasn't. It was just like—I don't know how long the parade was, but it was just—it seemed endless, and it was the most insane, crazy—I could not believe that there was that much hate in the world. It was just like—it was astounding.

01:00:00 And we got to the end—and I remember the whole time there was this lesbian, I think she was from Dublin, and we kind of made eye contact at the start, and she was running along beside us videotaping the whole thing, and for some reason, she kind of became my little lifeline, my safety net, and for some odd reason, I just kept thinking, “As long as I keep looking at her, I will be okay,” and I just couldn't take my eyes off of her. I was like, “If she goes out of my sight, I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm going to freak out.”

SS: Do you have a copy of that video?

PO: I don't. And then afterwards, we were bundled into the back of an armored police car and taken off to some secret place, and then we were kind of taken off to where we could kind of begin to make our way home again, and blah, blah, blah. It was completely, completely unreal.

Then we had a meeting that night in a church, which I also found to be really unreal, where, of all the people who had marched and people who kept talking—I don't know what it was that people were saying. People kept talking about how we really needed to kind of understand what this rage was about and why people were so angry, and help us kind of like sort of decompress our own feelings and stuff like that. And I was like, “Really? I want to go out and I want to throw hand grenades at those people. I

want to blow up their houses. I don't get this, like, peace and love shit at this point.” You know? And after that, I started to think – but I sort of think after that like if somebody wants to call in a bomb scare to the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York, I'm down with that. I don't think they should blow it up, but I think that people should understand the level of danger that it is that we live with, and if it's not safe for me to walk up Fifth Avenue or through South Boston, then it shouldn't be safe for anybody.

SS: Well, then in the next five years we did civil disobedience.

PO: Yes.

SS: Now, that civil disobedience training was all from ACT UP people.

PO: Yes.

SS: So in a sense, these next five years of actions really were staffed by ACT UP.

PO: Yeah, they were. There wasn't in terms of that part of it, right? So in terms of, like, the strategic things and that kind of stuff, it was—that's why I really don't have, like, a firm distinction in my mind between what I did in ACT UP and what I did with ILGO, but, yeah, and then I think where a disconnect started to happen was where the people, at a certain point, there was kind of like a debate within ILGO as to whether or not, okay, so some people in ILGO felt that we had basically become an adjunct of ACT UP, and then some of us felt, “And what is wrong with that?” And then other people felt, “Well, because that's not where we want to be. It's fine if that's where you want to be, but that's not what I want to be.” And I think ultimately what it was was just

like a huge amount of kind of stress and demands placed on a relatively small group of people who, whatever reason, it just became hard for people to deal with it.

SS: So here we are twenty-five years later and nothing has changed.

PO: Nothing has changed.

SS: Why is that? Why is this the last bastion of shit in New York City?

PO: I think in a way it's managed to continue, and this is kind of all maybe like with hindsight, sort of over-intellectualized, rationalization, all that, but I think in a way it has existed precisely because it is the last sole outpost of it. I think everybody knows it's an anachronism. It's kind of become—what it is, it's become that and it's kind of popular for that, and it stands out for the fact that it's—and because it's become such an anachronism, no one really cares about it that much anymore, because it is such an anachronism.

SS: Do you care?

01:05:00 PO: Yeah. I mean, I have no desire to ever even pee on the St. Patrick's Day Parade, but I think I do care on a very fundamental level, that people, yeah, homos should be able to march in the St. Patrick's Day Parade. It's kind of astounding that it doesn't happen. What has happened is that it's become a very clear, distinct, overtly open, proud presence in so many other St. Patrick's Day Parades all around the world, just not here. So I think in that sense, that's why it's kind of ceased to become so important as to what happens in New York.

SS: Yeah, but even Christine Quinn wouldn't march in it. I mean, it still has symbolic meaning.

PO: It totally does. It totally does. And I think it has more symbolic meaning than it does practical meaning.

SS: So if you could march under the ILGO banner, would you do it?

PO: I would do it for nostalgia sake.

SS: Yeah, so would I.

PO: Yeah. I mean, I would feel kind of like I should do it. I would feel that it's kind of you should do it, in the same way as I—yeah, yeah, I would feel like I should do it. I mean, it's something that I fought for. It was a huge amount of my life, I think, and for those of who were heavily involved in it, it was a huge amount of our lives, and it became a battleground in which so many things were fought out, that it's impossible to shake it off as just having been an argument over a parade, because it was much more than that.

SS: So when that ended was 1995 or '96.

PO: Yeah.

SS: And you were long out of ACT UP by that point.

PO: Pretty much. I don't remember when I stopped going to ACT UP. You had asked me about things that I remember from ACT UP, and now there's a few things. I remember there was a demonstration that we organized around the opening of Ellis Island, which doesn't seem to show up much anywhere in any of the ACT UP things.

SS: I've never heard it mentioned.

PO: Yeah, there was.

SS: So tell us about that.

PO: Yeah, there was. We had a big—there are these awful photographs of me, which of course is what I really remember, because I kind of had longish hair at the time, and I remember Allan took all these pictures of me, and I was all dressed in black and I had these black glasses and I had, like, this kind of very dark hair, and my fists in the air like this, and I think, my god, I look completely insane.

But I think it was a Sunday morning. It was at Battery Park City at the entrance to the ferry for Ellis Island, and it was the opening of Ellis Island as a museum. There was some controversy around that anyway, and it may have also been a reopening of the Statue of Liberty. I don't remember exactly. But there was a fair, not a huge amount, but there certainly was some dialogue about the sanitization of what Ellis Island had become or what it had been, and that people should remember that Ellis Island was why people on this side of it look at is as this sort of like, "Great. Oh, my god. It's so fantastic. It's for all these immigrants that came to America."

The people who came through it had very, very, very different perspectives. I had a great-aunt who used to live in New Jersey who had come through Ellis Island, and I had asked her at one point if she wanted to go there to the museum and see it, and she said that it was the most horrendous experience of her life, that she had been left there like a piece of luggage — I think she was twenty-one—for two or three days while someone came to collect her, that people prodded her, did physical examinations of her. She just said it was the most awful, awful experience anyone could go through. But anyway, that was long—I didn't know that at the time. That was long after the fact that we had that conversation.

01:10:00

So, yeah, we had this big demonstration. Even though there were these conversations going on about it, it was kind of hard to kind of get people, I think, to connect the messages of you're opening up Ellis Island as this kind of tribute to this wonderful history of immigration into the U.S., but this is what you're doing to people at the moment, right? You're not allowing people with HIV into the country, and that includes people who came here, were HIV-negative, got infected with HIV when they were here, and now you don't allow them to stay here. Not that it should boil down to this, like, "Who's the culprit that infected you?" sort of question, but, I mean, it's just like whatever angle you approached it from, from a public health angle, from a common sense angle, from a morality angle, it just didn't make any sense. But I remember thinking that it was hard to get people engaged around that issue about linking the HIV ban to the opening of Ellis Island.

SS: Well, what's interesting, because we interviewed Betty Williams, right? So there was a part of ACT UP that was working a lot with Haitians. But it seems like all of the immigrant issues were divided by race or somehow separated.

PO: Yes. Yes, there was. I remember there were conversations between—like certainly within us as the Foreign Nationals Caucus, where it became apparent that basically we were kind of like the white Western European Caucus, and then should we try to have something that represents all noncitizens? But now we've kind of become a little balkanized in a way. There's like the Latino Caucus, and then there's the Foreign Nationals Caucus, and, like, different ethnicities with different caucuses, even though we were all, for the most part, noncitizens.

Then it just seemed like, okay, but why? Unless it's interfering with what we're doing, the Latino Caucus should have a caucus because they want to have a caucus. We should have a caucus because we want to have a caucus. Whoever wants to have a caucus should have a caucus or a working group or a whatever, because it wasn't just limited to these are the four issues that we will work on that seem appropriate for us to work on, but also seemed more like—also, I mean, which a lot of what ACT UP was, was just kind of like a place to be.

SS: Was there any big debate in ACT UP that really stood out for you, that you were engaged in or disturbed by or interested in?

PO: There was the debate about the—I'm sure there were a lot of debates that came up and that I was disturbed by. There were periodic debates about race and gender that I was just constantly mystified that, like, we have not gone past this. And, of course, that's relatively easy for me to say as somebody who came from a country which was 98 percent white, and so we didn't have that history of race, so it was kind of easy for me to say, "Well, I don't know why people —" blah, blah, blah. But, yeah, I mean, I remember being regularly frustrated by the fact that as time went by, that increasingly became seemingly an issue that became so divisive and hard for people to get past, and that things began to kind of break down along kind of very predictable lines, and people began to take positions that were very predictable.

Then there was the debate about the St. Patrick's action, Stop the Church, and that I was kind of disappointed by. I kind of thought that there would be—because so many people gave these, like, denunciations for people who had gone into the church and what they had done inside the church, and blah, blah, blah, blah, and, "This is

not exactly what we had agreed upon beforehand,” and blah, blah, blah, and I was like, “Queens, get a sense of perspective. Like in the scheme of the things that have happened and what had been done to us, and now you want to hang somebody out to dry over the fact that they took an action that had not been completely ratified by the membership?” And a little bit like people, when he threw the host on the ground, I was like, “Jesus, it’s not really the body of Christ, all right? Stop it.” Like, “Why are we having this conversation?”

SS: And even in that case, there would be okay.

PO: Yeah, yeah. That kind of made me start to think like, god, there’s an underlying conservatism to things here, and those I found kind of disappointing and disturbing.

SS: Let’s discuss that, because as you’re talking, I can think of a lot of different things that could have been behind that. Yes, you’re saying a conservatism, but, I mean, there were a lot of Jews in ACT UP, and I don’t think anybody cared about what we did to the Catholic Church. But there are also a lot of Catholics in ACT UP who had a lot of anger about what they had experienced, and I think the confusion was an expression of that.

01:15:00

PO: I mean, I guess so, but that I guess I had a hard time understanding why people who had this very—first of all, I just have to say I really—I didn’t and I don’t understand people who still had a personal relationship with the church, you know, with any church, but particularly because I was raised Catholic and I was raised in a really, really conservative Catholic household. I was packed off to be a priest when I was young and all this kind of stuff, very typical traditional for an Irish person. And now I’m here,

right, and so I'm in my late twenties and then I'm around. I'm in the middle of, like, kind of this super radical organization in New York City in the middle of, like, the most vibrant gay and lesbian community in the whole world, and then there's all these people standing up having these really emotional conversations about the church and what it meant to them, and I'm like—and I just didn't—and that's a reflection on—I mean, that's certainly my limitation or my lack of ability, perhaps, to empathize more with people—

SS: But could it be this American fetishism with, quote, “religious freedom,” that that issue is so, so important here?

PO: I—

SS: Forget that. You said they packed you off to be a priest. Do you think that they knew you were gay and that's why they selected you to be the priest?

PO: Yeah, they didn't pack me off to be a priest, but there was—but, yes, I was an effeminate. I was a sissy, right? And I was the oldest boy. I liked to sit inside by the radiator and read books about girls who were in boarding school. So I went to boarding school when I was really young, when I was ten, to an all Gaelic-speaking school for a year, and then I went off to another boarding school, a different one for a couple of years after that and the first couple of years of high school. And that was a school that my uncle had gone to, and he had become a priest. Then my father's brother had also become a priest, which, again, was very typical in Irish families, that somebody became a priest, and—

SS: But you think there was an unconscious recognition?

PO: Yeah, because I think that's where most of the Irish priests came from. I think Irish priests—and I don't want to talk about priests from other countries

because I really don't know, but I would speculate that it's possibly the same. But typically that was where gay guys in Ireland went, was they became priests. So I don't think that—my parents didn't pack me up and say, "Now you will be a priest," but certainly I think that they had some sort of hope or slight expectation that I was going to become a priest. But then when it became kind of very clear that I wasn't, then they were cool with that too.

SS: That's good.

PO: They didn't try to kind of—they were just like, "Okay. Well, you'll find a profession." "Something respectable."

SS: Like defending gay Santas.

PO: Defending gay Santas at Macy's.

SS: I just want to ask you a little bit about the culture of ACT UP. So being in ACT UP meant being with sick people, dying people, people dying all the time, all the time. Was there any particular person who passed away who you were particularly close to or involved with their care?

PO: There was a friend who was kind of strange, who had gotten sick when I was in ACT UP and didn't want to tell anybody about it, and he was the boyfriend of one of my best friends at the time. And it was just kind of strange, because we saw him getting sick, and it was kind of—

SS: He was in ACT UP?

PO: No. But, I mean, my friends who were in ACT UP and who were not in ACT UP, I mean, we were all kind of like the same types of people in a way. So it was kind of astounding that he didn't want to tell us. Then he told his boyfriend, who told

01:20:00

me, but had instructed him to not tell anybody. And it was kind of strange, because I'm like, "Well, but he's in the hospital. He looks ill. I mean, you can tell." So, first of all, there's kind of no point in him not talking about it, and then secondly, like, I don't understand why he would not want to talk about it, which also, of course, goes back, as I said, to my lack of empathy and understanding of other people. So that was kind of the person I—we were sort of like fairly close and tight together, and that was a long process, a long process of kind of being supportive to my friend and kind of taking care of him while he was taking care of Mark.

Then there were and then there was—and I was thinking about this trying to prepare for today, and it bothers me so much, kind of sets me slightly to think of. So there was this couple that I knew. One of them was American and one was Australian, and I was friends with the Australian guy. We were friends for a couple of months, and his boyfriend died, and they we were both in ACT UP. Then we kind of became closer friends after that, and I even know where he lived. He lived on 10th Street between Avenue B and C. I can picture his apartment. Then he got sick and he died really quickly also.

SS: And you can't remember their names?

PO: And I cannot—and I remember speaking at an ACT UP meeting, because I remember I talked about when his boyfriend died, and then when he died, and I remember saying that there's like a family who's been obliterated, and it's not even acknowledged. It's just like two disparate people who died, and nobody has acknowledged that they were a family. And if they had died of some non-AIDS-related cause and they were legally married, then there would be a really long piece about them

in *The New York Times* and try to be sympathetic. But here, it's just they're written out of history.

And it really upsets me that I cannot remember his name. I've been trying and trying and trying to remember his name. And partly because an awful lot of people talked to me afterwards and said that what I said kind of rang so true of, like, the amount of kind of couples who had died and their coupledness, if you like, was never—like the death of their kind of—not to consider the relationship having been—you know what I mean, that it was sort of a—

SS: But that goes back a little bit to what you started with when you were saying that being in ACT UP was being with like-minded people, because one of the things that united people in ACT UP was that they said what was actually going on.

PO: Yeah.

SS: There was an ethic of naming things what they really were—

PO: Right, right.

SS: —and that was contrary to many people outside of ACT UP.

PO: Yes, yeah. And that was, I mean, there was a lot of kind of sadness with stuff that happened in ACT UP, but I remember that being just so profoundly sad for me, just really, really, really so profoundly sad.

SS: Do you remember why you left ACT UP?

PO: I think that the St. Patrick's Day Parade thing had begun to occupy so much more of my time, and then I think at the same time ACT UP was kind of imploding, exploding, ploding, or just kind of changing in a different way or in a

different direction, that it wasn't—well, I guess I just wasn't feeling it, and I know it wasn't doing the same thing for me, and I was kind of thinking that where I feel I belong is just kind of not there.

SS: It's interesting, because most of the activism that you've done has been around immigration or for people who were—

PO: Yes, which is interesting, because I never wanted to do immigration law. I was always very kind of snobbish about it, and I thought it's really not really law, and, of course, that's where I've ended up.

You asked me also—back to—can I bounce a round a little bit?

SS: Go, go. Yeah.

PO: Another action that I was in—and this his just a snippet, right? I can't even remember what the action was, but I remember we hung banners over the BQE
01:25:00 really early one morning, and like I say, I cannot remember—I think it may have been—
what was the Grand Central action?

SS: Day of Desperation.

PO: I think it may have been around that, that we had these big banners and we hung them over the bridge, maybe on Smith Street that goes over the BQE, and this was, like, super early in the morning. We tied it up there. Then I think the first time we tied it up, we realized we had done it, I think, on the wrong side, so that you couldn't see it, so we had to take it off and tie it up again. We put it on the right side, and then we thought we'd traipse off and get coffee, and then we got completely paranoid, or I got completely paranoid in the action before other people that the banner was going to blow off, even though we had little holes cut in it, so the wind—and it was, like, incredibly

securely fastened, but that it was going to blow off and wrap itself around a truck, and the truck was going to cause a huge thing, and hundreds of people were going to die, and— But I also didn't want to go back, and I was more concerned about myself, because if I didn't want to go back and take it off either in case I would get caught. I remember kind of all this other stuff happening that day, but I remember constantly looking at the paper or listened to the news to try and find out if there had been a huge giant car accident on the BQE.

SS: Do you have anything else that you want to bring up?

PO: Not really. I guess the—you have to ask me things. I'm really bad at—

SS: Well, I'm sort of at the end. I only have one more question.

PO: Okay. I know what it's going to be.

SS: Right.

PO: Go on.

SS: Okay. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

PO: I think its biggest achievement was existing, and I think then it did so many great things that I wouldn't try to say this was a better achievement than this was, because I think all of the things it did were great, and they all did achieve different things. But for me, its biggest achievement was that it was there and it existed and it did the things it did.

SS: And its biggest disappointment?

PO: I don't know that I can look at it like that, because I have a hard time seeing it as a—and even though it was, I don't see it as being—like from this vantage point, like from this distance, I don't see it as having been a goal-oriented thing, and it very much was. But afterwards, I think—so I don't see it in terms of, like, it achieved this and it failed to do this, because I think that if you were to say, well, it should have been a little bit different in order to achieve this, then it would have been a whole different thing. And I know it's kind of a meaningless thing to say, but it was what it was.

SS: Okay. Thank you.

JW: I have a quick one.

JW: Does the name Robert Rygor —

PO: Yes.

JW: Can you say something about him?

PO: I knew Robert. I knew I knew him through ACT UP, but then he was also—I knew him through the St. Patrick's Day Parade also, and his father, who was kind of very involved. I remember there being—I don't remember all of the details of Robert. I just remember, like, around him being very ill and then him dying and then it being such a—I think within the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization, he was a little bit—there was a before and after, I think, that had an effect and a change on people.

SS: Also he was one of the few people who brought relatives with him.

PO: Yes.

SS: I mean, like Ray Navarro and he had parents who were involved, but it was very few people.

01:30:00

PO: Yeah. But there was something very, I found very kind of—and it's such a patronizing thing to say, but something really humbling about, like, Robert being there with his parents and stuff like that, because we thought we were the most important thing in the whole world, the most important people, and that really there was no perspective other than ours, and there really couldn't be, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and then that we were out here on our own in the city changing everything. And then Robert, who was kind of in certain ways kind of low-key and unassuming, was there with his parents, and it had such an effect of—in a way I can't necessarily articulate, but I felt that things had been put in perspective.

SS: Okay. Thank you, Paul. See? It wasn't so bad.

PO: No, it wasn't at all.