

A C T U P
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P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: **Michael Perelman**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Michael Perelman
July 18, 2007

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so we start, if you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

MICHAEL PERELMAN: I'm Michael Perelman. I'm 44. It is the 18th of July. And we are in downtown Los Angeles.

SS: 2007.

MP: 2007, right.

SS: And you can look at me. You don't have to look at the camera.

MP: Okay, good. That will be much easier, yeah.

SS: So you were born in Southern California?

MP: I was, yes, I was born in the Valley, San Fernando Valley.

SS: What town?

MP: I was born in Chatsworth. But I really grew up in Encino, on the north side of the boulevard, flat part.

SS: So for those of us who are from New York, can you sort of explain what they were like when you were a child; those towns?

MP: The town that I remember, we lived in Tarzana briefly, and then we moved to Encino. And they were, I think – pretty typical suburbs; although Encino was probably 65 percent Jewish at that time, and mostly Reform Jews. And it was upper middle class to very wealthy people depending on whether you live on the hills, or – and I don't know, it was also, had a little bit of th– you know the movie *Boogie Nights*. It had a little bit of a seedy side because it was the Valley. There was something, there was that part that I recognized when I saw that movie, and a lot of drug culture, even though

people were aspiring to be sort of perfect families. You could find cocaine or marijuana or Quaaludes in most parents' bedside tables.

SS: So there was a little swinging, kind of?

MP: There was a little swinging. And in fact, my father did once tell me that they were, they were invited to many of those parties, those key parties.

SS: Really?!

MP: Yeah.

SS: That's interesting.

MP: I don't think they participated; in fact, I'd rather think that they didn't. But, yeah.

SS: And what was that, I know nothing about that culture. This is mid-'60s, or –

MP: Well, I think we moved to – Tarzana to Encino in, when I was five. So about '68, '69, yeah.

SS: So what was happening, what was suburban swinging like in the late '60s? How did it happen?

MP: Well, I, I, what I know is that my father had a friend who was in the porn industry; was, was producing porn, and was always trying to get my father involved. And was arrested, and I think served time in jail, and I wish I could remember his name. Well; it's probably good that I don't. So there was always this, this part of it, that I'd hear about it. But I don't know much more than the, with regards to the keys in the dish that I only know because I, when I saw the movie, I spoke to my parents about it, and they said, oh yeah, that was sort of like that.

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But I, I do think that drug use was pretty – people seemed to be comfortable with it. I remember going home from school, and my mother asking me, you ever smoke marijuana? — and this was ninth grade — and saying, yeah. And it was fine. There was something sort of permissive about that time.

SS: So, that's interesting, because I don't associate Jewish suburbia with that world. But maybe it's cause I'm not familiar with that culture.

So your father was socializing with people who were making porn movies.

MP: It, oh, well, he was, da—. That wasn't all he was doing, but he, yeah, I think he –

SS: It was part of his –

MP: Yeah –

SS: – world.

MP: – he had a friend that did that, yeah.

SS: And what was the official part of his world?

MP: He sold municipal bonds. And he, in the '80s, worked for Drexel Burnham, and got a little – I don't know how caught up in the insider trading scandal, but that was the end of his career there. And he worked for three or four different companies that sold bonds and stocks.

SS: But he didn't have to serve time.

MP: He didn't have to serve time, and he was never indicted.

SS: Okay.

MP: But he had quite a, owed quite a bit of money to the government in taxes, back taxes. And that was – an ongoing problem.

SS: And what about your mother? Was she –

MP: She never worked. She – yeah, she was a, I guess, a housewife. She went and had her hair done twice a week. She's never done her own hair.

SS: So they had a certain facade and a certain kind of instability behind it, and some secrets.

MP: Yeah, they lived – if you were an outsider, it looked like they were really living a life, a perfect life. They were Jewish without looking too Jewish; they appeared to have money – they drove a Mercedes, we lived in a nice place. But I would say most of the energy was around maintaining that image, and the burden of that certainly for me, was a lot about that.

SS: Did you ever get any messages about being community-oriented or politically involved, when you were growing up?

MP: No. I think that was not, neither of my parents are concerned, particularly. And my father had a little bit of a, a fancy about being a high school teacher. And was actually going to do that, and then he got offered this job selling bonds, and it made so much money that that, that went away. But I had a hippie uncle — my dad's half-brother — who would visit in his red Bug, VW Bug; and had long hair, and he was a Jungian – well, he became a Jungian analyst. But he had been in the Peace Corps. And when he visited, it was just a revelation, because he was, his values were so different. So he was a bit of a hero for me. He didn't come enough, but that was the only

person in my family that seemed to care about anything other – God what am I saying – other than their own well-being.

SS: So which came first for you; the awareness that you were an artist, or an interest in politics and power, or your gay identity?

MP: Artist was last – and that was quite late, actually. Not really ‘til I was an adult, I think. I think the gay thing became, was apparent, to me, at four? So that seems like a really – I have very early memories of that. And I was certainly called the names, and identified as that at that age. So that seems like part of my life I guess, first. And the political part – until I really met my uncle – sort of ridiculous – I, my father voted, they were Jewish, but they voted for Nixon. I think we were the only Jews in Encino – they were the only Jews that voted for Nixon. He voted for Reagan.

So I didn’t really, I was so, had such a hard time separating from them that it was a very abrupt thing when I did. Up until I did that, I just – I kind of went along with how they thought; really, until I started coming out. So I guess it was coming out that made me start to question their belief system.

SS: And so when you were in high school, and you knew you were gay since you were four –

MP: Yeah.

SS: – but you’re living in a family with a lot of conflicts, and you’re having a lot of conflicts –

MP: Right.

SS: – are you plotting your escape –

MP: Well, I didn’t –

SS: – from Encino?

Tape I
00:10:00

MP: – yeah. I didn't know, yeah, I knew, I knew something was wrong; I didn't quite know what to do about it or what, I didn't understand it. I remember – I think a lot of us had these experiences of somebody calling you, I remember somebody telling me, do you know what gay is? And I think, I was in fourth grade. And it means you're happy. And then they told me, no; it's that you, you want to have sex with guys, or you want to – something like that. And I still – I didn't even understand, I think, at that point, what sex was. But I knew that, something I knew; that was me.

So by, I guess around, around puberty, I started to recognize that there's something here, I don't know what to do about it. I kept thinking I'll change it.

And I stayed kind of thinking that way until my best friend from high school moved away, who I had a big crush on. And – to New Jersey. Anyway, it's not worth talking about. But I got a letter from him — a kind of, in a pa-, it was kind of a panic letter — that the girlfriend that he had in high school, whose name was Terri — wrote him a letter saying that she was a lesbian. And in the letter, he's reading me the letter on the phone, and the letter says she is going to the Gay and Lesbian Center in Hollywood, to these rap groups. And when he read me this, I, of course, I'm trying to figure out what I should say to him. But as soon as I hung up, the next day, I'm plotting how to talk to her. And I went up to her and told her I'd heard about the letter, and that I thought I might be bisexual; and could she tell me about the group. And so she did, and we became friends pretty quickly.

And I went on a, there was a bus from the Valley to Hollywood, and it takes about two hours. The group's on a Friday night. And I went – the first time I went,

I was afraid to go in. I saw the sign; and I walked around the block, and I went home.

And the second time, I went in.

SS: What year was that?

MP: That would have been, I was 16? Math – it must have been seventy-, was it seventy-s-, eight?

SS: So what were the, that's great. So what was the rap group like?

MP: It was so thrilling. I still, I think, there are few things that have given me that kind of jolt since. It was just – so thrilling. It was – it's also an entirely different group of people than I had ever encountered. So there were – supposedly everybody was supposed to be under a certain age. There were actually, unfortunately, some older men there that, the sad part of the story, that – but there were the drag queens and hustlers and, people – different races. Even though my high school was, we had people bussed in, it was very segregated. It wasn't, it was not an effective integration at that school. So this was a very different experience, where you actually were really talking to people and getting to know them, and it was great.

SS: What were some of the topics of conversation?

MP: Every week they'd have a different, some different political thing. And I remember, it was – I believe it was the first group of men, young men who had to register for the draft. So one of the things there was, what are we going to do? And they, in fact, well, somebody there was organizing us around that. And so I signed a slip. I registered as a conscientious objector, and that was through that, those discussions. And yeah, sometimes it was coming out to your parents. And it was – it was really great, because it also was, I think at that age, I so wanted to just talk about personal things.

There was no place to be gay and talk about personal things. And to feel relevant. Because if you do talk about, I felt like if I talked about personal things with my best friend — who was always inevitably a girl, usually a girl — it was more about her, whose, her crushes, who her crushes were. I don't know, it was — it was a very different experience. So that was wonderful.

SS: Did you get a boyfriend out of it?

MP: I, well, I —

SS: Boyfriend in quotes. Of course.

MP: Yeah, I, I, there were, there were a couple guys there that were — thirty-, in their thirties. One of them was just this nut, and so I went out with this older guy. I shouldn't say names, right?

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SS: If you want to, why not?

MP: Yeah.

SS: Is he still —

MP: I think his name is Ron Horowitz.

SS: Juan Hora—

MP: Ron, Ron —

SS: - Ron Horowitz —

MP: Yeah, a Jewish guy. And he's, I slept with him, I guess. And he became, he wouldn't go away. Something about him told, I didn't feel good about it, and he started calling my house, and I wasn't out, and I, it became messy, and I had to lie to my parents about it, and eventually he stopped calling. And he disappeared from the group. And then there was another older guy. So there was a problem with older men

going to the group. And eventually, what I believe happened is that one of the facilitators was later arrested as a pedophile.

SS: Oh.

MP: I don't know if in the group, but, yeah. And then the group, I think, got – a little bit more careful about the age issue, and –

SS: What was the name of the center?

MP: It was the Gay and Lesbian Center, in Hollywood.

SS: Oh, okay.

MP: Yeah. It was on Hollywood Boulevard – no, I'm sorry. Yeah, it was at Hollywood Boulevard – before Santa Monica. It's no longer there; it was a shack, essentially.

SS: So you were having a secret life.

MP: Secret life. I'd go every Friday night, and I would, and then we would go out to Canter's Deli afterwards, and talk. And eventually, I did have a date with a peer; this really – and it's interesting, because I, in my mind, I still think of that as my first gay kiss, even though I had slept with these two older men. But it didn't feel real.

But there was this guy named John Huckabee was his name. And he asked me out, and we actually made a date to go to the beach. And I cut school, which I, had al-, I'd been cutting school for years, but I did it in a way where I used to just go to one class, so I wouldn't get into trouble, and I – cut the whole day. And we went to the beach, I had a great date, and it was the first sort of romantic experience. And then I came home, and my parents asked me how my day was, and essentially, they had been

called because I wasn't in school. So out of that, I came out to them. They wanted to know where I was, and I don't know what possessed me, but I, you know, told them that I had had a date, and I came out to them.

SS: And what happened?

MP: I have to say, I was in so much trouble from the school angle that, and – the whole thing about forging report cards and all kinds of stuff, that it was partly to distract from the other stuff. And I also think I wanted to see a therapist. I felt like I needed to talk to somebody.

So it kind of worked. They took the attention off of the trouble I was in. But they sent me to a psychiatrist to change my sexual orientation. It was a Freudian psychoanalyst named James P. Rosenblum.

SS: Did he specialize in transitioning gay people?

MP: I don't think he did. And you know, it's interesting that as the years go on, I'm not even as sure as I used to be about how much he was really invested in my changing. Because I think at that age, it is really hard to know if what you're thinking is accurate?

Because you're so emotional. So I don't know. But my sense is that he, my memory of it is that he was really encouraging me to date girls, and a lot of the talk was about how successful I was in losing my virginity to girls, and so I did try to change. Yeah.

SS: Did you go to college?

MP: I went to San Diego State for a year. And –

SS: And you lived at home?

MP: No, I went away to school, my first year. I wanted to go to art school. The first year, my parents weren't supportive of that at that time. So I went to San Diego State. And as far as they knew, I was in the closet, still, and I fell in love with my roommate; and told him. So, at the break, in between semesters. And then he told me he thought he might be gay, and then we had a relationship, and moved the beds together at night, and then separated them the next day. So that was a kind of nice experience. And then I came out. Not to my parents, until I moved to New York.

So I transferred to Parsons the second year. And that's how I ended up in New York.

SS: And what year was that, when you came to New York?

MP: 1983.

SS: Okay. So by the time you came to New York, AIDS had already been around for a little while, but it wasn't high-high profile. Were you aware of it when you were in San Diego?

MP: Yeah, yes. Actually, that is one of the – one of the things I'm really grateful to about the Gay and Lesbian Center in Hollywood. And I still, it's one of, it's a memory that I wish I could really confirm more. But I remember seeing a flyer there. And I don't know why I was back there, but it was probably 1982, if that's possible? It said GRID, and had question marks. And so I remember reading that. And it already was suggesting that you would be careful. So –

SS: What did "be careful" mean?

MP: That you, they believed it was sexually transmitted. And – and I was already so neurotic about, at that time, about herpes. I don't know, you probably

remember; there was a big article on the cover of *Time*, and I think at that, the age I was at, and being Jewish, and got a little bit of –

SS: Little Portnoy.

MP: Yeah, yeah. So when I read it, it did actually wake me up, I think, earlier than a lot of my peers. I feel really lucky that way. Although, I still – did, had unprotected sex and I'm just lucky, in the end. But I do think that that woke me up earlier. Anyway, so I had heard about it quite early.

SS: So when you came to New York, was it apparent?

MP: When I went to Parsons, I, pretty early on there, was upset by it. Because I thought, nobody else seems to be responding. And that's actually where I started to want to do activist stuff around it. I just wanted to educate people about it, and I was irritated that the school wasn't, at that time. And I remember going around the dorm, trying to get people to talk about it. And it was a mostly fashion school, so – I remember feeling kind of bad, like there was something wrong with me that I wanted to do something. But the experience I had at that Center, in Hollywood, there was a kind of community feeling there. And I didn't get that in New York, initially.

SS: So did you meet people who had AIDS? Were people doing safe sex who you were having sex with? How would AIDS express itself?

MP: My first boyfriend in New York — Larry Ionadi I have pictures of him — had swollen lymph nodes. And he was my age. And we were 19? And I, he does have AIDS, and – I think he's out about it. And he's, I believe, still healthy. But, so I didn't know that he was sick then, or that he had, you know, there was something wrong. But I had a belief, like a lot of peop-, I think, gay men my age, that, I would look at the

statistics of who had HIV and who didn't. And I thought, well, I'm too young, I wouldn't. There'd be no way to be exposed to it. And of course, Larry, I think, was coming into New York and having sex, when he was 16, and – anyway, I don't know. So – the first experience was with a friend of mine who was a head bartender at Marie's Crisis.

SS: Okay. Is that where you used to go; Marie's Crisis?

MP: Yeah, I worked there.

SS: Oh, you're kidding.

MP: Yeah. I –

SS: Are you a show queen?

MP: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: {GIGGLE}

MP: The shows I like, yes, yes.

SS: Okay.

MP: I really, that place was magic, for me. It was – there's nothing like it here, and – yeah, I really liked it, and I ended up working there, and becoming friends with, with people who worked there. And I was always drawn to, I always liked the older gay men, like the culture around it? I liked the, something about it seemed really great, and safe, and – there was a lot of drinking.

But anyway, Rob Davies was the head bartender there. And we became friends, and I – I have a drag picture of him. And I did a portrait of him, in drag.

SS: Is that when you started doing drag portraits, or had you already been doing them?

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MP: That was my fir-, no, I'd never done one. He commissioned me to do a portrait of him as himself. And then I asked him if I could do a painting of him in drag, because he loved drag. Anyway, he's the first person I knew that had AIDS and died of it, and fairly quickly, once that became apparent.

SS: You want to hold it? We can zoom in.

TRACY WARES: Yeah, just hold it, yeah, okay.

SS: Aw.

MP: Yeah, I, too bad I don't have a picture of him, not with a wig, but I think he was very proud of this picture, actually.

SS: It's a beautiful picture.

MP: He was really – just a really funny –

SS: He didn't bartend in drag. I mean, Marie's Crisis wasn't that kind of place, right?

MP: Yeah –

SS: No.

MP: No. He just, he likes drag. In fact, he is – responsible for getting me in drag for the first time. He loved it. But no, it was not part of his identity.

SS: Okay. Thank you.

MP: The painting that I did of him, drag – do you know Mark Owen?

SS: Yeah, of course. That's how I met you.

MP: That's, oh, oh yeah. So Mark has this study. But there was a painting of it.

SS: I know that painting. Yeah.

MP: Well no, there's the study of it, that –

SS: There's the one he had in that other apartment on 17th Street?

MP: Right.

SS: Painting by you?

MP: Of that photograph, it's drag.

SS: I think so.

MP: Yeah. That was a study for a painting on canvas.

SS: Okay.

MP: That I gave, I didn't give it to him. I let him keep it in his apartment, because he liked it. But it wasn't given to him. And then when he developed dementia –

SS: Not Mark; Larry.

MP: Yeah, that wasn't Larry; that was Rob Davies is his name.

SS: Rob Davies, yeah.

MP: Yeah. I went to take the painting back. And the family got really upset – that I'd done that. Actually, they had never seen it. Somebody else told them that I had taken this painting back. And they threatened to sue me, or something. It's so idiotic now, I realize. What could they have done? I gave it back.

SS: Don't you think it's true that especially in those days, whenever somebody died, there was always some kind of acting out among the survivors; some kind of cruelty or fight or something?

MP: I never, in a way, I never experienced it quite as harsh as that episode. But I think what is odd about it, it's really his gay friends that were awful. There was

another set that were, I guess, more connected to the family, and I believe that's actually who has the painting now.

Yeah, so it wasn't just the family that was strange. It was a terrible experience. But anyway, he was the first person. But I knew a lot of people, because of being, also just being at a piano bar. But then a lot of students I went to Parsons with got sick. So –

SS: What would happen when somebody got sick? Would they call and tell you, or would you hear about it from a third party? Would you visit them?

MP: I think you would hear that they – usually they disappeared. They would just not be, all of a sudden, they would be gone. And then you'd find out they were in the hospital. And – and usually by the time someone gets to the hospital, they were dead so quickly. They just sort of disappeared. That was what I remember.

SS: Who was the first person you visited in the hospital? Do you remember?

MP: Rob Davies.

SS: Okay. And what hospital was he in?

MP: St. Vincent's.

SS: And what was it like to visit him? This was '84, you said, or eighty –

MP: Yeah; '85, I think he died.

SS: Eighty-five?

MP: Yeah. Because I graduated – '85, he died. He had a, he had dementia. So he – they had him in a room, and the nurses would come in, and he would

say to them – it was kind of funny – a lot of his identity was humor – so he would say to them; Show me your tits. Which was his line to men that would walk on the bar. But – they would get so upset. It was like he was –

SS: In this Catholic hospital?

MP: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. I remember that. They had gloves and everybody was very afraid.

SS: What was your reaction to those gloves?

MP: I thought it was absurd. Because I think we knew back then that you're not going to, you can't get it from touching somebody.

SS: I'm listening to you; it's like, I'm thinking, 1985; New York City; and people who work in a hospital are wearing gloves around people with AIDS? It's really kind of amazing. It's really late, for that.

MP: For them to be wearing gloves?

SS: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. Yeah, I know it is. I have to say that they were kind to him.

It wasn't – yeah. There wasn't, I don't remember there being a particular cruelty. There was just a kind of – it was like a gay ward; that's what it was like. I mean it was an AIDS ward, but it was mostly gay people, at that hospital. So – it, I remember feeling like it's a little gay ward. It was a scary time, because people – I remember seeing other people that were – people looked so bad. It was, people were really suffering.

SS: Did you join any organizations before you joined ACT UP?

MP: Yeah. I was in the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights. So I started going to that in 19—, probably around that. — late '85, '86? The demonstration in Lincoln Center was '86, August '86, right?

SS: What demonstration in Lincoln Center?

MP: Against Burger, Chief Justice Burger. Hardwick decision's '86. So I was going to CLGR somewhere around '85, '86.

SS: Now I was in a couple of those demonstrations, but I never knew there was one at Lincoln Center.

MP: Yeah, I have the thing.

JIM HUBBARD: Yeah, I was there.

SS: What was that?

MP: Really?

JH: Yeah, it was a fancy dinner for him.

SS: Ohhhh.

MP: Right! That's it! And we, did you go, I went through the, we crashed—

JH: Get inside?

MP: Yeah, yeah —

JH: Oh no, I was stuck outside.

MP: Yeah. Which is the first time, actually, I ever did any civil disobedience stuff. These are a couple of the article — I had some articles from that.

SS: What's the publication?

MP: This one is the *Advocate*; September 16th, '86. I was in this – so this was already later. This was GLAAD, I think, did this.

SS: So this is pre–ACT UP civil disobedience.

MP: Pre–ACT UP. This was, I think, the first – the first civil disobedience was, that I participated in was, I believe, this demo. Which I think was a GLAAD demo. They were blurred; CLGR and GLAAD were a little bit blurred together for a bit. And actually, I was reading through here before you came, and it is CLGR that's quoted, so –

SS: Okay.

MP: – but what's confusing is I'm in this group — this street theater group — that was part of GLAAD. Which is a picture of me as one of The Supremes.

SS: Oh, so you were already doing drag performance.

MP: Well, we had robes, and we were –

SS: Now who are these other two people?

MP: They were in this street theater group. We just sang “Stop that Kind of Love Before You Break the Law.” We had done all the choreography. And I played Powell.

SS: Right. Peter Freiburg –

MP: And then there was a demo, the demo moved from there to Lincoln Center, and –

SS: Right.

MP: So there was more activity before ACT UP than I feel like – I do remember that there was a lot of stuff. And there was the demonstration at the *New York Post*. That was a GLAAD demo.

SS: Do you remember why, though?

MP: Why they –

SS: Went to the *New York Post*?

MP: Yeah, because of the articles in the paper about closing the St. Marks Baths, wasn't it?

SS: Oh, okay. I don't know I'm asking.

MP: It was – *New York Post* had already been pretty harsh around political issues and gay people. But there was an article with a cover that called the – was it the St. Marks Baths or the Mineshaft they closed? One of them; they called it an AIDS den.

SS: AIDS den. That's right.

MP: AIDS den.

SS: I remember that now, that's right.

MP: So that was a big demonstration, and I believe that was organized by GLAAD; that was the beginning, first thing I remember of GLAAD. And Daryl Yates Rist was the – guy that did that. And so GLAAD kind of, it seemed like that was going to be a big activist group. And I, CLGR was a very small group, and there was something about it that was – not, I guess, when I compare it to what happened. It was just not sexy to young people. That's the only thing I could figure out, is, because there weren't many young people going; I think I was like one of two or three. And I don't know; it wasn't what people were thinking about. And then all of a sudden, that GLAAD demo happened, and there was some momentum and it stopped.

Anyway, I did that. And then I was in the Lavender Hill Mob.

SS: Oh yeah. Now please tell about that.

MP: I have a picture for that.

SS: Oh, that's great, wait –

Can you see this?

TW: Yes.

SS: So, who are these people?

MP: That is Buddy Something –

JH: Buddy Noro.

MP: Buddy Noro, yes.

SS: Yeah.

MP: Elizabeth –

SS: Jean Glass.

MP: Jean Glass.

SS: Jean Elizabeth Glass.

MP: Jean Elizabeth. I forget that guy's name. He was in ACT UP.

SS: The guy on the floor.

MP: Yes.

SS: He looks familiar, yeah.

MP: Oh, he's really good-looking, and I can't remember his name now.

SS: And this guy in the back –

MP: Also, not in that picture, Marty Robinson was there.

SS: Right.

MP: That's in Senator D'Amato's office. Marty Robinson and Michael

Hirsch.

Tape I
00:35:00

SS: And Michael Hirsch was the head of the PWA Coalition.

MP: Yeah. Yeah. And – is that him? It was a really small –

SS: It's very important organization in gay history. Tell us what you did.

MP: Is it? No it's not.

SS: Lavender Hill Mob? It inspired ACT UP.

MP: Did it really?

SS: Oh, sure.

MP: I don't believe that.

SS: You should read Larry's interview, because he tells the whole, or Michael Petrelis's interview. Is that where it is, Jim?

JH: Both of them talk –

SS: Both of them talk about it, yeah.

MP: Really?

SS: Yeah. So tell us.

MP: That's, I don't, I don't remember how, it must have come out of – it must have come out of Coalition for, CLGR, not GLAAD. Because it doesn't seem like something that would have come out of GLAAD, and I don't remember – I don't remember how it started, or – I think it was CLGR. And it came out the Actions meeting? Because I think Michael Hirst was in that, and Buddy Noro were in –

SS: Was it Michael Hirsch or Michael Hirst?

MP: Hirsch.

SS: Hirsch, okay.

MP: Hirsch.

SS: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. They were in CLGR, and came out of that. And we had an Actions Committee; and I was in that Actions Committee. And I believe Elizabeth –

SS: Jean Elizabeth Glass.

MP: Jean Eli-, Jean Elizabeth, was in that group. And they talked about wanting to do civil disobedience, and it seemed like a good thing to do.

SS: So what did you do?

MP: Well, I, I, the only one I remember, I know we did a bunch of things, and the only one I can remember is the taking over D'Amato's office.

SS: Did you go to the CDC?

MP: Yeah, but that was a –

SS: Wearing concentration-camp uniforms?

MP: Yes. That was the Lavender Hill Mob? Oh my god. See, it's hard sometimes for me to remember which group was, what?

SS: Is there any way you could tell us about that action?

MP: That's – I re-, I believe I painted a concentration camp for that, right? There was a – yeah, I remember painting this concentration camp with casement paint. Casein paint. And we did some theater thing with it; some theatrical thing with this fake concentration camp.

SS: What was the venue? Was there a hearing, or did you go inside the building? Because you had to go to the CDC to do this, right?

MP: We went, yeah, and I can't remember. I remember the other two CDC things of ACT UP, but I don't remember that one. I remember a concentration camp demo on Sheridan Square – this is the one I'm thinking of.

SS: Oh, uh huh.

MP: And I didn't think that was the Lavender Hill Mob.

SS: But that's interesting, because that, I haven't heard about that one before. So that would be the second, those were two pre-ACT UP uses of that imagery.

MP: Yes.

SS: And then there's the famous ACT UP float at Gay Pride –

MP: Right.

SS: – which showed people trapped – that's when they, when, when –

MP: And I painted that, didn't I p-, I think I worked on that – float. I might have worked on that.

SS: Now, what was the reason that people chose that imagery for that float? This was to have people in ACT UP look like they were incarcerated.

MP: Right, I did work on that.

SS: That's '87, I think.

MP: Well, because of Silence Equals Death – message we were using; it made sense. And I think there was a lot of fear that – they were going to start – putting – they wanted names, lists of names, and later the whole healthcare worker – people who, the healthcare workers that had HIV had to – remember this? – if you were a doctor and you had AIDS or HIV, you had to go public with it, and –

SS: Really? That was a law?

MP: Well –

SS: Or they were trying to do that?

MP: They were trying to –

SS: Wow, I didn't know that, actually.

MP: – I have a thing for that, actually.

SS: Oh my god, I remember Buckley saying that people should have their asses tattooed.

MP: I can't, the concentration camp thing I remember was on Sheridan Square. And I thought it was before ACT UP. But I don't remember now why we were doing that theme.

Tape I
00:40:00

SS: What is this. Oh, you're right; Stop Forced HIV Testing of Healthcare Workers. There you go. So it must have been on, if they were saying "stop."

MP: Yeah, that was a –

SS: Wow.

MP: – a poster, I did that with Adam Rolston.

SS: You and Adam Rolston did this?

MP: Um hm.

SS: Now was this pre-Gran Fury?

MP: This was later. This was – this was the, I was in that artists collective called Gang. This was a ga-, or the Gang thing we did.

SS: Oh, okay.

MP: Which was a bunch of ACT UP members. So it was like the – it was modeled a little bit after Gran Fury, but – we did – I think we focused more on issues around human rights and –

SS: Who was in Gang?

MP: It was – Zoe Leonard; Suzanne Wright; Peter Bowen; Adam Rolston; Loring McAlpin; Daniel Wolfe; I think that's it.

SS: So it was mostly working artists.

MP: Yeah. Well, Daniel and Martin McElhinney, Adam's lover. But Daniel was not an artist –

SS: Right.

MP: – nor was Peter Bowen. But we did wheat-pasted posters. We did one on immigration. The one we wheat-pasted all over the place that you might have seen was the one of, it was a Bush as the Marlboro Man, and it talked about how many million people don't have health insurance. Then it was 37 million, something. So we did posters, and then some performance art.

SS: Now how was Gang structured? I mean, how would you make a decision?

MP: We – very informally. I think we – really got along. It was a very easy experience, I think, for most of us. We just collectively decided what we wanted to do, and would throw ideas around of what the best way we thought we could do things. And it was – a very cooperative collective experience.

SS: Where did you meet?

MP: We usually met at Loring's apartment – on Great Jones?

SS: And would you make it together? Or would you just discuss the ideas?

MP: The smaller projects and sometimes, a couple of us would get together and do. But most of the things were everybody meeting together. And then we would have tasks that some of us would do, depending on what skill we had or what we brought to that. And we – I think we were together for maybe a year?

SS: So if you were an artists' group inside ACT UP, what was your relationship to the larger group? Did they have to approve your images? Or was there just a trust relationship?

MP: That's a really good question. It's funny, because that poster is a good example. I don't recall ever having to get approval of that poster. That's actually the thing we used. I don't think we did.

We must have. I can't believe we wouldn't have. But I don't remember doing it.

SS: But it was, it sounds like nothing catastrophic ever occurred in that regard.

MP: No, no. But it does seem like there was some control over the graphics in ACT UP, because everything kind of had to have some of the same elements. And it might just be that people that were taking on those jobs – I mean, that was one of the things drew me to doing that stuff in ACT UP, is because people were, understood the power of those messages. That's what brought us a lot, a lot of us to the meetings, was just a visual message. So I think, maybe it is just that people understood how important it was. So things were – I don't know, I don't remember.

SS: But it's interesting, because in your fine art work, you had gay content, either overtly or in a suggestive way.

MP: Yeah.

SS: And then, in your political work, you're making a certain kind of agitprop that's also about gay and AIDS.

MP: Yeah.

SS: But they're esthetically so different.

MP: Yeah.

SS: Not just the medium, but the entire sensibility is different.

MP: Right.

SS: So what was that like for you, to be working in those two different ways?

Tape I
00:45:00

MP: Well, I – I applied to graduate school, actually, partly because of Gran Fury. Because I felt like I had this way of making work that had no-, and I was so interested in political, doing political work, activist work. And felt like, well, I am an artist, I should be able to take that, and do something with it. And so I thought, well, I'll go to graduate school, and I'll learn how to do that. And so I tried, in graduate school, to make my work more message-driven. And I tried to kind of fit into that way of making work, and communicating. And at the time, in graduate school, a lot of the things we were reading reinforced that idea; that some of these, now, I think, ridiculous ideas: your work has to be useful in certain ways, and it's – there's no author, and – that stuff. So that's how that started; why I started to make work like that.

But it was, I found that –

SS: You said, like that. You mean like Barbara Krugeresque? You mean like –

MP: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

SS: – words and, yeah. Okay.

MP: Even the work I did for my graduate show – it's really didactic and difficult for me to look at. But it – I think after that experience, there are so many other, better ways of communicating this information than making art about it? And I think most of the successful work that came out of ACT UP is really graphic design; that's very well-designed, and it's about marketing. And so I finally was able to see that it's about something else, it's – I think people were really good at marketing and understood how necessary it was. And I saw that that's not what I, what I do well.

SS: That's very interesting, what you're saying; that fine art was not, did not come from advertising and marketing –

MP: Right.

SS: – and that – so how did –

MP: I mean, that's my opinion –

SS: That's fine. So how did ACT UP have this level of sophistication in its graphics that it could actually sell our politics in a way that competed with media image, or media graphics?

MP: Right. I think a lot of this was luck. I think the people who put out those, I guess it was Avram [Finkelstein], and that's – whoever was in Gran Fury in the beginning – I think were lucky that they actually had the energy and thought that that would be effective at that time. I think it really – they were kind of, I think they were

kind of sexy; their lives were sort of glamorous and they seemed to understand that New York City, to get young people to be interested, particularly young gay men, to be interested in participating in this, it had to be like a nightclub. You had to really feel like you were doing something new.

SS: Now do you think that that was a deliberate decision? Or do you think that was their natural impulse?

MP: I think that's their natural impulse. I think that they, When I say we're lucky – I think it's great that they had those skills and that they were motivated enough to do it. Because when I think of the other things that were happening before; I've often wondered, why didn't those take off? And my sense is that there wasn't some sort of visual cue or image that young gay men could see as glamorous.

SS: So you're arguing that branding was really crucial to ACT UP being effective.

MP: Yeah.

SS: It's interesting.

MP: Don't you think?

SS: I'm fascinated by what you're saying. I really am.

MP: I do think that, I also think that there was so much anger that something would have happened, and things kept erupting, and so who knows what else could have been? But it was practically overnight, we went from meetings where nobody came, to meetings where all of these cute club kids were coming to meetings. So to me it was sort of obvious. Well, I will say, Larry Kramer – I did go to a talk at NYU where he spoke. And I don't remember that much about it anymore or why I ended up there, but I

was there. And that was, I think, right bef-, do you know about this? I'm sure he will know. But it was right before that first ACT UP meeting. And it was a very typical Larry talk. Really good motivating talk. And so he got a lot of that audience there. And so there were many things. But I do think it was —.

SS: So let's talk about the early days of ACT UP. How did you get there, at first?

MP: I already was going to meetings at the Center, I guess, for the Lavender Hill Mob. I think that was going on then. So I think I already, I was aware that there was going to be a big meeting. And then I went to that Larry Kramer talk. And so I just knew that there was going to be a meeting, whatever night that was. I don't remember; I think there might have been two meetings? There was a — I remember the meeting where they named ACT UP. And I don't remember if that was the first meeting or not.

SS: Where was the meeting where they named ACT UP?

MP: It was, I think it was in the Center. It was either, I thought it was on the ground floor at the Center.

TW: You might want to repeat that, because there was a siren.

SS: Right. Okay. Well —

MP: I'm pretty sure it was on the ground floor of the Center. Because I have a memory of where I was sitting; and all the names com-, being thrown out.

SS: Do you remember the other names that they rejected?

MP: No, but I have to tell you: I really thought ACT UP was terrible. when the guy said it — you know, who said it? — and he said, AIDS Coal-eesh-,

Coalition to Unleash Power — and I thought, oooh, that's terrible. And people loved it.

So what do I know?

SS: Now Michael, can you solve this mystery? Who was the person, who was this guy, who said, suggested ACT UP?

MP: Really, nobody knows?

SS: We have vague hints.

MP: Because I have a vague — if I saw a picture, like a line up I think I would know who it was. Wait a second. I wonder if he is in this picture.

It was somebody who looked like this.

SS: Let's see. This guy?

MP: Yeah.

SS: I have no idea who that is.

MP: I remember he was a kind of medium height —

JH: Which one?

SS: That guy? Do you recognize him, Jim?

JH: No.

SS: I don't recognize any of these people.

JH: Is that Petrelis on the left?

MP: Yeah. Well, probably, I can't see that.

SS: Where?

JH: Holding the No More Business As Usual sign.

SS: No.

JH: No? Okay.

SS: The only person I recognize is Gabriel Rotello. And here's Ortez Alderson. And I don't know anybody else.

MP: That's me in the middle.

SS: That's you.

MP: Yeah.

SS: I see.

MP: I don't know the guy's name, with the moustache, in the middle. But I remember getting arrested with him that day, and a couple times. He was very present in ACT UP. I'm trying to remember his name.

Anyway, I just remember, it was a, somebody with medium brown hair, and –

SS: Okay.

MP: – so I remember that meeting. But it may not have been the first – was that the first meeting?

SS: Was that the first meeting?

JH: Probably. No one's quite sure. The guys name is Stephen and his last name starts with a "B".

SS: And he was wearing a trench coat, apparently. But we can't figure it out.

MP: Yeah, that sounds right.

SS: But we don't know who it was. Well, Maria said there was a meeting, one meeting at NYU, that wasn't at the Center.

MP: So that's the meeting that I went to where Larry –

SS: Okay.

MP: Yeah. So I went to that meeting. And then there was, I guess, the meeting at the Center.

SS: Okay.

MP: Yeah.

SS: So how big was that? How many people were there?

MP: It was – it was by no means, like what the meetings became. But I would say there were 50 people there? Yeah. Were you there?

JH: No, I wasn't.

SS: No.

MP: 50 people? But yeah. I felt like it was something starting.

SS: So did you stick with it from then on?

MP: Um hm. I went to the first – well no; I stuck with it, and then I think after that demo, that was the first Wall Street demo, that I went to.

SS: What was the reason for the first Wall Street demo?

MP: I think it was similar issues. It was – trying to get quicker approval of experimental drugs. What I don't, I don't remember is why we were demonstrating down on Wall Street. That part now doesn't make sense, I'm sure it did then. But I think some of it was just to disrupt – stop traffic. And maybe it was around the expense of drugs — how much they were costing — I seem to remember.

SS: So how did you plug into the group after that?

MP: I had a lot of trouble. I think that – I think I went to one other action after that. And then for me – like I'm sure a lot of gay men — I was never a part of any

club, or any group. Everything I ever did was by myself. All of a sudden, there's this big group. And all the social, all the relationships, and the – all of that part, and I found it really difficult. For me, it was. I don't think it was a good thing, I think it was a shame. But in some ways, the smaller group is easier for me to deal with, and planning things that all of a sudden, there were just so many people that I didn't know how to contribute. It was really strange for me. So – I think I probably stopped going for three or four months, and then went back.

SS: So had it changed a lot by the time you came back?

MP: I stopped going when it really became what it was for a while. So it got really big, and then I stopped. I was intimidated. I was –

SS: If it makes you feel any better –

MP: Yeah.

SS: – most of the people we've interviewed felt alienated.

MP: Oh really?

SS: Apparently that was the most common experience. Wouldn't you say?

JH: Yes.

SS: Yes.

MP: Yeah. It was really tough. Probably for those reasons in watching – it was all these things I'd never experienced before; people, Powerplays, and just –

SS: Can you give any examples?

MP: Well, I think that the individuals that were – talking a lot; sort of getting a lot of their group's attention; were being heard — were often people that were

particularly charismatic and good-looking and – but not always. But there was that. So there was this – and I had seen that in GLAAD; that Daryl Yates Rist was somebody that was very sexy and it seems like that really got people involved for a little while. And so I saw a lot of that in ACT UP, and – I didn't feel like it was about credibility, often. It seemed like, what was his name? Peter – oh – I can't remember. Peter –

SS: Staley?

MP: – Staley.

SS: Uh huh.

MP: Who was, I'm sure he did some really great things. But he also was very cute and – and that seemed to – work. So there was some of that, and it was hard to watch, for me.

SS: So when you – change tapes? Okay.

MP: Yeah.

SS: We're going to change tapes. Do you want to use the bathroom, or anything like that?

MP: No, but do you need anything? Something to eat?

TW: Such a good host.

MP: I also, I have more of these lights. I use them for photographic work.

So if you need another one, I have one.

I think so.

MP: I don't know how much of this stuff –

SS: Are we on? Okay –

MP: I'm sorry. The concentration camp demonstration, remembering, it was not in Sheridan Square, it was in a triangle at Sixth Avenue and, where Greenwich and 10th meet? You know, there's like a little triangle there?

SS: Oh yeah.

MP: And we built a fake concentration camp there. That's, but I don't remember why or what that was for.

SS: Okay.

MP: But I do think I was in the CDC for the Lavender Hill thing. But I don't remember it anymore.

SS: Okay.

MP: We lost that one.

SS: So when you came back to ACT UP, how did you fit in to the organization?

MP: I became at large representative, with Luis Salazar. And that seemed to be a good fit, partially because I realized it was sort of difficult for me to figure out how to participate. So –

SS: What is an at large representative?

MP: You would meet with new members every week, and you give them an orientation and describe all the different groups; answer questions, talk about civil disobedience, talk about different kinds of ways of participating in demonstrations.

SS: So when the meeting would start, would you be at the top of the agenda and say, anyone who's new –

MP: Um hm.

SS: – come and meet me in the Garden? Or was it later on in the meeting?

MP: It was in the beginning. You would take them off the floor.

SS: And is Luis Salazar still alive?

MP: No. He –

SS: Okay.

MP: – died of leukemia. He didn't have HIV. It was a very strange thing to have somebody so young die of something else. But he also was one of the early people in Queer Nation, too.

SS: So you were meeting all the new members.

MP: I was meeting a lot of the new members, yeah.

SS: Who were some of the people that you brought in, in that way?

Do you remember?

MP: Yeah. At that point, it was, it was going so strong that they would just all show up. So I don't remember individuals anymore. I can't –

SS: How many new members would you have at a meeting?

MP: Be like, 20 people; 15, 20 people every week. And that went on, I guess, so I guess I did that a little bit later. I started at the Center and then it went to – that other, on Astor Place.

SS: Cooper Union?

MP: So that was, by '89, right? So that was a little bit later. And I got involved in Costas, and I don't remember – so maybe it was Costas, it was first, before being an at-large rep.

SS: Now can you explain who Costa was, and what the Costas were?

MP: The joke was, I never knew — well, it's not a joke — I never knew him. I knew, I mean, I'd seen him, but he wasn't a friend of mine. But I was boyfriends at that point with Walter Armstrong, and they were friends. So when —

SS: What was his real name? Costa —

SS: Costa, and he had a Greek last, I think, last name.

JH: Pappas

SS: Pappas.

MP: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Okay.

MP: But he was very close to several people. And when he died — and I guess by that point I was involved enough, already knew Heidi, and I knew a few people that decided to make an affinity group, and name it after him. So in that group was — you want the names?

SS: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. I have a photograph of them.

SS: Of the Costas?

MP: Yeah.

SS: Okay, great.

MP: A couple, actually.

SS: Was that Lee Schy in that group? Ah, okay.

MP: There was Lee Schy, and Joey — Ferrari?

SS: Ferrari.

MP: No, I think Lee might be taking the photo.

SS: Okay. And we should say that Lee died.

MP: Here's another one – this was later, this was in Kennebunkport.

SS: Okay, one second.

MP: Yeah.

SS: Oh, I can't really see; this is probably a better –

MP: But I don't think that's everybody.

SS: Okay, so there's Maxine; is that Anne d'Adesky?

MP: Um hm.

SS: Who's that, Jim? Heidi; yeah, just go through the list.

MP: Okay, so that's – oh, my god. The writer – oh, I'll get back to him –

Adam Smith; Phil Montana?

SS: No. That's Phil Montana? Avram's future boyfriend?

MP: No no. Yeah is it?

SS: No. Uh uh.

MP: He was in the group. I don't know who that was. He wasn't in the group.

SS: Okay.

MP: But Phil was in it. Avram was in it, even though he's not in the photograph. So it was Avram, Phil. Karl Soehnlein.

SS: Okay.

Tape II
00:05:00

MP: Maxine [Wolfe]; Anne d'Adesky; that's me; Robbie – oh, my god. I have another picture of him, too. I can't remember his last name. Robbie, Walter, there's Phil.

SS: that's Linda.

MP: There's Phil.

SS: Yeah, there's Phil.

MP: Um hm.

SS: And Avram.

MP: Avram.

SS: And Walter.

MP: And Wa-, Gipps, David Gipps.

SS: David Gipps. And Bill Monahan –

MP: Um hm.

SS: And little Terry McGovern, right there.

MP: That's right.

SS: Okay.

MP: Let me see the other one, if I can, if there's somebody else in there.

Oh, oh, god, um – he died, really – Rob Spears? Is that his name?

SS: I don't know.

MP: I think it's Rob Spears. He – oh. Now that's Rob Spears. He died of AIDS really ear-, really young, I believe. But I may be wrong. Who is that back there? He was in the group, and I can't remember his name now. Maxine will know who that is.

SS: Okay.

MP: But he was in a lot of our actions.

SS: That's Ellen Neipris.

MP: Ellen Neipris, that's David Robinson.

SS: Yeah.

MP: And I don't believe – I don't know who that was.

SS: Marion Banzhaf.

MP: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. Okay, that's Albany, right?

MP: That's Albany, yeah.

SS: Yeah. So what was, what was the structure of being in an affinity group? If you wanted to do something, did you have to get ACT UP to approve it? Or could you just do whatever you wanted?

MP: You could do whatever you wanted. And it was just understood that you were sensible, somehow. I have a lot of mixed feelings about that.

SS: Tell us.

MP: Experience. I mean, I think we did some great things. I also saw how a group of people can go too far. There's something about the, that you're sort of all in it together, and you feel stronger, and – somehow, I could imagine Patty Hearst. There was something about it where I saw how people actually end up bombing things, and how people who were normally rational – people could do things that they really might regret. So there was a part of it that scared me –

SS: Before we get into specifics, I just want to clarify that the Costas never actually did do anything violent, right?

MP: No. No.

SS: So you're saying that there was, it could have gone there.

MP: I, I think that it could have. That's my fear; that I could see how that could happen. Not necessarily with our group, but with any of them. There was something about it.

SS: Now did anyone in ACT UP ever commit violence?

MP: I don't think so. No.

SS: Okay. So tell me what you think that you guys did that went too far.

MP: No, I don't think we ever did.

SS: Oh!

MP: I think some of the discussions might have. That I just felt that I could see how it could happen.

SS: And what kept you from going too far?

MP: I don't know. I think there was a point where someone would die, that you knew; or you'd get so aggravated that there was talk about putting blood in the fountain, or – I just could feel that – that was my, maybe that's my paranoia, but –

SS: No, it's not paranoia, it's real.

MP: Yeah.

SS: Can you tell me, I just want to try to get some specific examples.

MP: I think we talked a lot about disrupting things, and – it's funny, I can't, I don't know how to give you more specific examples. It was more like it was in the air than that anybody said, let's bomb this, or let's do that. It was in the air. And then

you had somebody like Walter, who was a little crazy then. And you could feel how that could happen. But I really don't want to make it seem like there was anybody there that was going to bomb or blow up something.

SS: Well, you're raising a really, really interesting issue, which is that people were very stressed –

MP: Yeah.

SS: – there was a lot of desperation and panic –

MP: Right.

SS: – and anger. But yet, it never did, unless there's an action that you feel ACT UP did that it shouldn't have done –

MP: No.

SS: – but –

MP: Although I – the communion wafer you've heard a lot about.

SS: I have, but tell us what you think.

MP: I think that was painful because it wasn't a group decision. To me, there seemed to be an understanding that an individual did not make a decision; that it was a collective, you had an affinity group because people were upset, or could get upset or irrational – it was like a way of checking. And that, I think, really – that was what was frightening to me about that. Not that I had any problem with somebody, what he did. I don't, I think it's ridiculous, it's a cracker.

SS: It's not the blood of Jesus Christ? You're kidding.

So did you ever find yourself in the middle of an action where you felt like, why am I doing this, this isn't what I really think?

MP: No. No, I didn't. I found myself doing things that sometimes felt like they were more about doing – one of the, I think it was in Albany, where we unfurled the banner that said, New York AIDS statistics are a capital crime? Something like that. In front of capitol building? It was – well, I don't know. It was kind of an amazing thing we pulled off. This was the Costas. And we, I wore a banner underneath my coat, and pretended I was a fat person, and went through the security. And then we got into the bathroom, and – but we had gone, scoped it out before, and planned where we were going to, what bathroom we were going to use. And it was so much fun to try to figure it out that I sometimes thought, I'm enjoying that, we were enjoying the, getting into somewhere we couldn't get into, rather than trying to really change something.

SS: Well, that makes a lot of sense, because that's a metaphor for gay people, anyway; trying to get into places –

MP: Exactly, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

MP: So, anyway.

SS: Did you – this is something that I've been thinking about that I hadn't really asked anyone. Did you ever feel like you were spouting received wisdom; that you were just saying ideas that you hadn't really thought of?

MP: Uh, I, yes. I think that – I often felt that way, and it's actually one reason I really hated demonstrations, I hated going around and around and saying these things; because I thought they were silly, and I'm not somebody who would, it just didn't make sense, it didn't feel, it felt like a show, or a performance –

SS: Do you remember a specific thing?

MP: Oh, god, ev-, all those phrases. I hated saying all of them. I just thought they were idiotic, and – you know, even “We’re here, we’re queer.” I think I’m maybe responsible for, on a banner, but – there’s something about saying it –

SS: Oh, you coined “We’re here, we’re queer”?

MP: I believe I might have done this, yeah. We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it. I think there was a banner for one of the – gay pride things, that I, that we wrote out and I’m pretty sure that came from that thing.

SS: Well Michael, you’re frustrating me now, because you did all these great things, and now you’re saying that – tell me something that you enjoyed.

MP: Oh no, I, I really – I don’t mean to seem like that.

SS: No, I understand, I understand.

MP: But let me ask that question before. Because you asked me, do I feel like I was using, spouting out somebody else’s words; you know, I’m not a scientist. So – this is a, probably a better example. You’d be giving a fact sheet, and you’d be talking about some particular issue or drug that should be distributed, or – and I really had to take it on faith that it should be. And that part I used to get uncomfortable with. And I had to tell myself, well, this is about a bigger issue. But I kept wanting to move towards actions and things that were more about civil rights, because I felt it was something I knew more about, was better able to speak about. So it was, when I’d have to sort of resort to a fact sheet; that’s what I would –

SS: Did you ever have friends who were not in ACT UP ask you for information about treatment?

MP: Yes. I'd say by 1990, I knew quite a bit about treatments. But that's also just because so many friends were taking medications and starting to see what was working and what wasn't. But –

SS: Looking back – so when you joined ACT UP you were like 25, right?

MP: Um hm.

SS: And you stayed until when?

MP: Till after St. Patrick's. I think after St. Patrick's, it started to –

SS: So like 25 to –

MP: In fact, I think that might have been the last demo, was that healthcare worker I think came later. Ninety-one, I think.

SS: So you spent your late twenties in ACT UP. What do you think now, as a grownup, looking back, at the impact of being surrounded by so many sick people and so many dying people; people dying all the time; how do you think that affected you, and what has its consequence been in your later life?

MP: Unh. It's, it's easy – the consequence is pretty, I think, obvious to me. I'm 44, and there aren't any people my age around. And – there are a lot of survivors, but it's – I just know what it would have been like if that didn't occur. I have some idea. And I think – there were – I find that nobody ha-, there is no community to go to, at least for a gay man, at 44. There's not, I don't know if that's true in New York, but in L.A., it's – there's nothing to participate in, nothing, no cultural things to do; nobody has created anything yet. And I have to wonder if that might have just happened

more naturally, there might be something to feel connected to. So I feel incredibly isolated and disconnected at this age.

And I remember, when I first found out I was HIV-negative – feeling terribly disappointed. As ridiculous as it sounds and I don't mean to trivialize the experience of people who've, have been dealing with AIDS. But I never looked forward to being a gay man in my forties. I really, and I'm happy to be here, but I see what I was afraid of. So I think that's –

SS: How did your family react when you were surrounded by so many sick people as a young man?

MP: They, I still get so irritated about it. They just treated, it was like nothing; they didn't – they didn't, they couldn't seem to understand that these were friends, these were people I, the close relationships. They somehow couldn't take their own experience, that they were having with people dying, and imagine it was like this for me, except I'm 25. And I still – it's not like I was that close to my parents. I wouldn't expect a whole lot of compassion in many ways. But yeah, I don't think that they understood.

SS: But in terms of the consequence on your artwork; that you just had this big show about your father's suicide. That must have resonated with this, all the AIDS work that you did.

MP: Uh – no, certainly – yes, I do – heh – it's interesting you say that. Because I had to do a eulogy at my father's funeral. And my mother and brother were sort of figuring that like, this was – it is a big deal, but I didn't even tell them that I had already done eulogy – I think, for a friend of mine, Emile Greco, who died also pretty

early, I think in '88. Yeah. There was – yeah. They – in some ways, I was very prepared to do a eulogy. And I'd been to enough of them, I'd seen enough of them, that I kind of knew what you say. And I also knew what the experience of grief is.

But what I think is hard is, although because my father committed suicide, I don't think I get the kind of attention from coworkers or people that are around me now that I would have if he had died of some natural cause, or something. But people very attentive, and care a great deal, and understand. But nobody outside your circle of friends, with regards to AIDS cared about what was happening. So you'd have to hold your job, and you'd have to do whatever you were doing, as if nothing was wrong. So it was really difficult. Yeah.

SS: What made you leave ACT UP?

MP: I didn't think that ACT UP was effective anymore. I didn't think it, I thought it played out. Somehow, I thought that it served a purpose, and I just didn't see, I didn't feel like it was a solution. I wasn't impressed with who was participating at that point, and –

SS: What was the sign to you that it was no longer effective? What was the event, or –

MP: I guess it – I don't know why – it seems to be around the St. Patrick's thing. I don't know why that is. Because I feel like that was an incredibly important moment for ACT UP and for activism, and I'm very proud that that happened. I thought that was really –

SS: Were you there?

MP: Yeah. I got arrested in church, with our affinity group. And I thought we were very disciplined about what we were doing, and – so I'm very proud of it. But maybe I'd had enough. And I also, at that age – so by this time, I'm about 29, I think, right? So I'm starting to feel that, as I'm about to turn 30, and I'm seeing, oh, that's what 10 years looks like. And I, I have, I wanted to make a body of work, and I felt like I wasn't doing that; that was missing. So I felt like it was time to focus on my own work.

SS: Okay.

MP: Because otherwise, I'd be a really bitter older person or so I thought.

SS: {LAUGHS} Bitter queen.

MP: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Anything, Jim, that you want to ask?

JH: I'm confused about the chronology, though.

MP: Yeah.

JH: Because you said that you were 29.

MP: Is that right?

JH: Stop the Church was '89.

MP: Stop the Church is '89?

JH: Yeah.

MP: Oh, so I was there till 1991.

SS: So was it the split?

MP: Split, split? There were labor demonstrations.

JH: Later demonstrations after that.

SS: The split was when TAG left ACT UP.

MP: Oh, you're right, so I was still going. See, I really, my memory is not so great. All right, so I do remember all of this. Yeah.

SS: And your friends, the Costas, turned into a faction of the split.

MP: Yes, yes. Oh, yeah. See, I was trying to forget –

SS: {LAUGHS}

MP: See, it's hard. It's been really such a long time. You're right, it went on longer than that. So the split.

SS: Um hm.

MP: Well, I will say that the whole left-right side of the room thing — which I'm sure people have been talking about —

SS: Not in those terms, no.

MP: Oh, god. That was true almost from the beginning. There was, the room was split in half, like Democrats and Republicans. And I seem to remember, it might have switched off at different points, from the left to the right. But it was always one side of the room was TAG — what became TAG — and one side became – not just Costas, but Maxine and a lot of us. And I, I just, I found it really irritating. Because I found that there were members of our group that were, felt like political, they felt like political fundamentalists to me. {SIREN} It was –

JH: Wait till after this siren.

MP: We're near a fire station, and a police station.

TW: So you might want to repeat the part about political fundamentalists.

MP: I felt that there were, within our group, and on that side of the room, there were people who I felt like were political fundamentalists. They had belief –

SS: What did they – can you give us an example?

MP: I felt like if their – if TAG actually had a direction, or had some idea that would really have saved lives; I felt the other side of the room would have argued against it, just because they were so used to arguing against it. And I'm not so sure I felt that in reverse, even though I so identified with the focus of our group. I felt a lot of it, it just sometimes felt like a knee-jerk reaction.

SS: Okay.

MP: It was personal; people didn't like this particular person, or felt that they had an agenda.

SS: Okay.

MP: Yeah.

SS: So I only have one more question. Is there something that you want to tell us that I haven't asked you about? Something really fun?

MP: That's really fun.

SS: Or that you enjoyed, or that you remember?

MP: Well, I will say that – I think that feeling like such a sissy; a lot of these things that we did in that organization, I think were sort of, were thrilling, because all of a sudden, I realized, oh, I can – look, I was always afraid to walk on the ledge. There was a area where we had a yard on one side, and the kids in our building would walk on the edge, and I was always afraid I'd fall. Or go on a hike, and I felt really – unable to do certain – incompetent.

And I think there were – I remember that demonstration in Albany, where, when we tried to unfurl this big banner; when we kicked off the banner from the balcony, it didn't fall. And I remember getting up underneath the thing, on a ledge of this building, and kicking it out. And thinking, this is something I never would have done as a child. There was something safe about taking those risks in the context of ACT UP. And I thought that was really good.

So that's a nice memory for me. It gave me some confidence, in many ways. And I think later, when a lot of us did the self-defense stuff; that was an extension of that; realizing I could fight back, in a physical way; that I didn't have to just lie down and take abuse. So some of that is really helpful.

SS: So my last question is, just looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement? And for you, what was its greatest disappointment, in the long run?

MP: That's interesting, that – I – what I think is its greatest achievement may not be, really. But I'm so angry at the Church. And I'm so, it's so rare that I think anybody takes the Church on, and demonstrates, that I feel like that was its best, the best thing it did. And, I wished it had, that that had continued. So I guess that, for me, is what – but when I say that, I don't know if it really changed anything. But what potentially that could do, for me, is really powerful.

SS: Okay.

MP: I guess the FDA probably would be the most obvious change. And what was its greatest disappointment, for me?

Tape II
00:30:00

I think that it – that there wasn't a – it never found a way to bridge some of the division. It seemed like, I think it was really disheartening to see that if this – in the beginning, the group cared so much about what – I felt like in the beginning, there was a understanding that we were all there to save lives, to change the political direction, and there was understanding that it was everybody's position and contribution was necessary. And by the end of that, that was lost. I think that was disappointing. And maybe that's inevitable, but I guess I would say that.

SS: Okay, thank you, Michael.

MP: You're welcome. Thank you.

SS: Thank you.

TW: Could we just set for a minute, a second, for room tone?

SS: Um hm.

TW: Because there is the air-conditioning –

SS: Okay.

TW: Thanks. Room tone.