

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

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Interviewee: **George Plagianos**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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

GEORGE PLAGIANOS: Okay. Oh.

SS: Go ahead.

GP: Name, age; date? Oh, what is the date? Ah. Oh yeah.

SS: October 7th.

GP: Ten, seven, 10.

SS: And where we are.

GP: Age? Eh, and uh, where we are. Oh, Jim Wentzy's.

SS: Okay. You're on.

GP: Um, hello, I'm, my name is George Plagianos. My age is 59, and holding. Heh. The date, today is October 7th, two thousand, 2010. And we're at the home of Jim Wentzy's.

SS: Okay. And look at me, George.

GP: Yeah.

SS: Don't look at the camera.

GP: Hm.

SS: Okay. So –

GP: Want to do it again?

SS: No, we're fine. Where were you born?

GP: Oh, Brooklyn.

SS: Oh, you're a Brooklyn boy?

GP: Yeah.

SS: I didn't know that. What neighborhood?

GP: Yeah. Where – downtown, Boerum Hill.

SS: Oh.

GP: We grew up there, and then Garfield Place, near Park Slope. Then we moved out to Bay Ridge.

SS: What high school did you go to?

GP: For-, Fort Hamilton.

SS: All right.

GP: Yeah.

SS: How was that?

GP: Um – very, you know. Yeah, you could say – yeah, pretty preppy; pretty white, right? Yeah. I don't know, it reminds me of those – what's his name – Bobby Rydell days or something. That's what it was back in the '60s. Yeah, about '66 is when I went to c-, started to go to, uh, to high school.

SS: Where were your parents from?

GP: Uh. Well, Massachusetts. Lynn. Their folks, ances-, grand folks are – their folks are from Greece, from Kalamata, where the olives come from.

SS: So when you were growing up, what were your parents doing for a living?

GP: He worked at the VA Administration on 27th Street and Seventh Avenue as a electrician and a printer. And my mom worked as a seamstress. She worked those machines.

SS: Where?

GP: Where – down – uh, well – usually in Bush Terminal, down in Brooklyn; 50th St-, 50th Street and Zero Avenue, or First Avenue. Around there. She was working down there those years. Back in the late '50s.

SS: So when you were growing up, what were the messages you got about gay people?

GP: Oh. Well, something, something to laugh at, I suppose, right? The only gay people we saw – or I noticed, or other noticed, were those who were like stereotypically, I suppose, right? Those who move their hands a lot, or talked in a funny way. Or looked very skinny; and walked funny, right? They were always being laughed at, and stuff. So – you never thought any – types who would be like football types or basketball types could be gay.

So it was pretty much – sometimes the kids would rank out on, rank out on the teachers. Saying, you know, he's a queer? Look at Mr. Callahan. You know, he's got such a short haircut, he looks like – he looks like somebody from the Boys in the Band. Or you know, the main character.

SS: Right.

GP: Yeah. But you know, there are – there were very smart, they knew how to – how should I say? – keep the classroom interested in what he was saying and stuff. So – and – but the, but all the average kids and stuff, they would get, of course, bullied over the years. So –

SS: You were –

GP: I was.

SS: Were you afraid?

GP: Afraid? No, I was just in the closet, or just – pretty much like taking it all in, and stuff. You don't have to say anything? People would assume I was gay or a little sissy or something like that, and they would knock you, knock you around and stuff. You know?

But – usually there weren't gangs who would really bully you. That's where the real cowards are like you'd been hearing out in the streets, and the newspapers lately, right? People gang up on people, like they've always been.

No, it's just like one or two individuals over the years.

SS: So when you first found other queer people, where did you find them?

GP: Where? Well, not in high school. And then, I liked some of the guys there, but I never knew they would be gay or anything, until after I met them. You know, when I used to, I used to, well, I came out to my mom in '69. And I didn't start going to the Firehouse until 1974. So that took a few years of saying, what, should I do it, should I come out? Should I do something? Because I was starting to listen to WBAI during that time, and Charles Pitts, and Gary Fried; all those other folks. And I went to the, I used to tell my mom I was going to the church youth group. But I was going Saturday afternoons to Gay Youth back in '74.

SS: Where was the youth meeting? At the Firehouse?

GP: At the Firehouse. Wooster Street. A few blocks from here.

SS: So what was Gay Youth like in '74?

GP: Oh. Well – everybody was pretty much – well of course – in their late teens and twenties. That's right, I was – I always feel like I was older than

everybody, because I was just above the acceptable age of being part of Gay Youth. But since I just started to come out, they let me on. And of course, a lot of hippie, everybody was dressed – more relaxed and stuff, right? There was no pretenses, everybody has to dress up very smart and stuff.

No. I mean, people were more easygoing then. My mom appreciated those people better than the corporate types. Because they're so stiff. They don't know how to relax and enjoy themselves. It seems like they don't. But maybe they have the money to do that. The hippies usually don't.

SS: What did you –

GP: But they know how to do it.

SS: What kind of things did you do in Gay Youth?

GP: Oh. Well. Well they were having demonstrations. And some of us – well, Gay Youth, we would just read from like books like *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask* by that Reuben guy? And read some of those outstand-, outrageous-sounding – paragraphs that he wrote, right? About people going to the emergency room that got things stuck up their rectum and stuff?

SS: Light bulbs. I remember –

GP: Yeah! Oh. Did they crack? I don't know. And some other weird things they just couldn't get out. So I was saying, is this what's gay life all about? And also I felt like everybody had to be initiated into gay life by doing drag and stuff. I never got there, but I thought I was going to be put on the spot and say, let's, you gotta do it. You gotta, you gotta get arrested, like with ACT UP. That's the initiation process.

So I felt like – Because I saw people, my friends, doing it and stuff. And I said, oh boy, what am I going to do? Where I'm going to get dressed up? Because I didn't have too many friends I knew where I can doll up, right?

SS: How come you come out into politics and not into the bars?

GP: Uh, wait, wait, I did start going to Uncle Charlie's and of course these Saturday-night Firehouse was pretty steaming, with all the horrible sound system. And oh boy, the sweaty floors and everything in the basement. Everything was like a swamp down there.

But it was exciting. We didn't think about having to do gay liberation, because it had just hap-, it just started. And we didn't know we had some – it came with responsibilities. We didn't realize until later. But I started going – I was only at the Firehouse for one year.

Then they had this alleged fire, or some burglary around October. I came out in January. And it closed down in October. And used to go to some of the demonstrations with this *Marcus Welby* and other shows on WCBS which was saying that homosexuality leads into alcoholism. And Robert Young would try to talk this guy out of being gay. Talk him out of it. Just a regular M.D. Saying it's leading you to alcoholism.

SS: Who organized those demos against *Marcus Welby*?

GP: Hm? Did I work on them?

SS: Who organized them?

GP: Morty Manford – Dave Thorstad, I think. Some names I just forget, just – but I remember they were just organizing it, and Morty Manford was the guy in

charge at that time. And even when the Firehouse closed, they continued in some unknown location, I just – just couldn't find. So I just fell out of the loop.

SS: When did you first hear about AIDS?

GP: Oh, back – back in nin-, well – I didn't read up on it in the *New York Times* or anything. But I knew some friends who were having some problems with diarrhea and giardia. And some other tropical diseases. And I would go with him to the Board of Health on 28th Street, in Chelsea, to wait his appointment. I'd get his results. Or wait for them another time. And he would just – said, you know, I got this thing. I just can't cure it and stuff.

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And then maybe many months later, or a year – we're talking about '83. Or, no, '82, '83. And then it started to become – it was called the gay cancer – nonspecific – or in that – that's that hepatitis thing. I was on that vaccine program back in the '70s. So people think maybe that might have sparked the AIDS crisis. I wouldn't be surprised. I mean, doctors and scientists do so many things they don't tell us. Whether it's the Tuskegee experiments, or the thing in Colombia last week, we heard that they were experiment, U.S. doctors were experimenting on –

SS: Guatamala.

GP: – Guatamala, to see how much –

SS: Well, what happened to your friend? Did he get a diagnosis?

GP: Yeah, he got GRID. That's what they called it.

SS: They gave him a diagnosis?

GP: They give it him, yeah, they gave him that in '83, so he was up at what hospital was this? North – not North – West, somewhere in Westchester. So we

would go up there every week or every two weeks. His mom would pick us up from the train station at Bedford Park. And drive up Central Park Avenue – Parkway – to the hospital. Forgot which, what it was.

But we would see him, and we all wearing masks and gowns. It's like quarantine, pretty much. And it was just – it was quiet. It was just mysterious.

And then what was I? I was just hitting 30, I think, at that time. And, as Mom would say, the government did it. She said they did all these experiments, they don't care about gay people. They're – the least of their worries. So why not use them as guinea pigs?

So she would talk about this in her – grief before he died – and stuff. She would drill this in, because what else could you suspect?

SS: Were you afraid?

GP: Well – yeah, I was. But I don't know, I just maybe felt like it was his situation, and of course, I remember when we got out of the hospital, it was – you were glad you're in another world. He's not. So he's stuck there, so he kept saying, if I ever get out of this disease, to live, I'm going to go straight. My friend Michael. So – I'm going to go straight, he said.

But he was getting weaker and weaker and couldn't go to the bathroom, and couldn't walk, and his mom would have to lift him up. He was probably maybe 90 pounds or something. She was a strong woman. Let me see. It happened too fast back in the '80s. He had passed away, they had services, and they buried him right away, and I wasn't invited to the – well, maybe she was stressed out. She maybe couldn't find who I, where I was. So.

At that time, I wasn't living with my family. As soon as I came out, I said, I got three thousand dollars in the bank, let me look for an apartment. So that's when I moved to Chelsea, in '76. And then did all this gay liberation things, with Andy Humm, when he would hold demonstrations and stuff. And the AIDS crisis was just slowly coming along, after people doing all the partying and having fun and stuff like that. Then they started to look at each other and say, we gotta start being scared. You gotta – not change our ways, but do it more secretive. Not go to the sex room clubs, and play around and stuff.

So pretty much, people kept their lives privately. They didn't really explain it. So well, we were just thinking that anal sex is one way to get it. So that's like off limits, our butts, right?

And the thing is, I would work part-time in these sex clubs, like Wally [Walter Wallace] would have – who was the forerunner of the Mineshaft, the manager of it. And I used to clean up, and I would get cuts and stuff like that. And I didn't think anything of it. This was right before AIDS was blooming.

SS: The Mineshaft?

GP: Not – once in a while. But no – Wally would have these sex parties before the Mineshaft.

SS: Okay.

GP: The Mineshaft opened up – about seventy-s... '78. Right? Three years before AIDS. And I would, before that, he would have parties in his house. And the Triangle building, on 9th Avenue and 14th Street. And I would clean up. Because I was looking for work, I was – work at May's Department Store as a salesperson. And

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assistant manager, they called it, right? That's someone who folds lingerie and stuff at the end of the day, and does shipping.

But I was working in those clubs. Didn't really, thought of using gloves at that time. Just – just was very careful, very rarely I used it.

But I would get cuts there, and stuff, and I would always clean up as much as I can. So. Just don't know – it just happens – that I didn't get sick. But you saw other people getting sick, and I was looking to see how our community was responding; and how ethnic communities were responding, too. I didn't see any programs that the Greek community was doing, or the Eastern European communities or Middle Eastern. Because the Greek Orthodox community just was pretty quiet about it.

I told another – I asked another, another friend got sick, in '83, '84. And I told my priest, who was George Stephanopoulos's father, Robert Stephanopoulos, to go – ask him to go see him in the hospital – back in '84. And I said, don't worry; he's not having sex. He's probably in good standings with the church, I told them. So he gave me a funny look, Father Stephanopoulos, and just end up not going to see him. I kept going to bible study and said, did you see him yet? Did you see Rene Alvarez, and stuff?

He says – no, no. I've been too busy, or something. Always push, pushing it off. So I said, I said he's not responding. He's supposed to have been the most liberal or very American of all the, all, most of the priests in the New York Greek Orthodox, in the Orthodox community, and stuff.

But no, he wasn't. And he fucked up. And organization called AIDS Resource Center had this interfaith committee, so I was trying to go to those groups every week or every two weeks, run by Dan Shanken in the Bailey – Reverend [Mead Miner]

Bailey. And they're trying to find housing for people who were recently evicted because of AIDS.

And they were initiating the property negotiation down at Bailey House. For years, it hadn't been opened. People – some sort of negotiations fall through. Maybe the neighborhood didn't want it, or something. But they eventually got it opened. But they had the off-site housing programs, where – scattered-site housing, where they would put people up.

I didn't know it was such a big issue, because this was before ACT UP, before AIDS education, of people were losing their homes and people were committing suicide, too. We heard back in the – the mid-'80s. People jumping off, right?

I just said it's happening to them, it's not happening to me. And I say, if I stay a good boy, I'll see through it. But you can't live in that type of illusion and stuff, and not – and go blindly living your life, and not know too much. The city really had these stupid little maybe leaflets, on how gay men can get sex diseases, or homosexual men, back in the late '70s, about how to stop getting VD and stuff, and the AIDS booklets didn't start coming out, or we didn't notice them – until maybe the late '80s, or the middle '80s.

Of course, a president, the government really didn't give a damn about it.

SS: Where was the AIDS Resource Center meeting?

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GP: At a church – either at the Unitarian Church – Judson Memorial, I thought. They always do good things there, right? And the Marble Collegiate Church. They met there too, over the years. So they've had about 15 different organizations there – rabbis, Protestant ministers, Catholic priests. And I was the only Orthodox

representative, and they had a big convention about how the religious community should deal with AIDS, back in '83, '84, in February.

And they just didn't do any outreach to the Orthodox community. So I grabbed my pen and paper on my horrible typewriter – I started typing with misspellings and everything. And I told my, I'd send it out. I sent it out to about 28 churches. None of them got back to me. Maybe they looked at the penmanship. They're like, shoot the messenger – and not read the goddamned message.

I mean, they're not, they probably say, oh, our community is safe, we look after our own. And they don't. When – it's hard in a strict ethnic community. Maybe in a white middle-class community, too. They're just not – it all depends how the family is on how they deal with AIDS. They just don't dare to come out. And to have your family realize you're sick, and something you hear about this strange disease on the radio and television. Then the focus would be on whether maybe my son's gay or something.

SS: When did you first hear about ACT UP?

GP: Oh – well – well, the Community Center opened up in '83. And there'd been all sorts of meetings, and was holding – helped start the organization AXIOS, the Eastern Orthodox LGBT group. Gay and lesbian group, we called it back then. And we used to meet there, and – on Fridays. And then the Center puts out calendars of what organizations they had. And they had a few organizations, like Body Positive and some – GMHC, I think, met here. And of course, you heard of the organization that Larry Kramer was starting before ACT UP, right? Which started at the Colonial House. They had the meetings –

SS: What was that? Pre-GHMC?

GP: Pre-GMHC. Where he got all these benefactors — Larry Kramer — and said, there's a crisis coming; we gotta learn how to deal with it. We should — maybe I think he was doing maybe doing an educational process or something. So they had meetings at this bed and breakfast on 21st Street. And he'd gotten enough people to raise money to start something, and I don't remember what he started. But eventually it started into — it was a precursor for GMHC.

I don't know where they met when they first started getting their organization together. But I heard that in my — well, then I — you get the papers and you read things from the papers about an organization, ACT UP, being started. And they said it was at the Center. And it was on Monday. And I — ACT UP started around, what, March of '87. They had their first demonstration. I didn't start coming until maybe January of '88.

And said, let me go and see — hundreds of people. And — they were all pretty tense, because there were so many unknowns in this crisis. And even though AIDS is like, what, '87, '88, it's five, six years old; there was just one drug to help people, they said, right? Which was an overdose of AZT. They were just O.D.'ing. Just to kill it, and they were killing everything else in the body. So that's what my other friends were getting too, but — Michael Corkman was the first guy I knew from AIDS, but there was like Richard Horn — I'm just gone blank. But there were a few other very close friends.

SS: When you started coming to ACT UP, where did you first plug in? How did you —

GP: Oh. Well – I did say to myself; well, just want to see where my calling is or something, or my fitting? Just go to the meetings. So – let me see. At that time – well I didn't have a video camera. I had a Super 8, but I never used it. It was too expensive. So I said: let me start going to the Housing Committee. I started going there. Because on the AIDS Resource Center, it started with housing, and all those issues and all the discrimination, and easy evictions.

Under Mayor Koch, you didn't have any protections of how to protect people who were being evicted. He let the landlords do what they wanted. He allowed 80% of the SROs to go under and go – get condemned, so developers would take over. Everybody praises Mayor Koch now, but he was this guy who left people out in the street because he didn't put a moratorium. He did it out of almost 85% of the SRO apartments that went condemned. Then he said, oh, we'll put a moratorium. But people were living with AIDS, was living there. People who were poor who had no places to live end up living in this horrible bug-filled places and stuff. So where did they go? So we were talking about it at the Housing with – Gedali Braverman, and Ed – Eric Sawyer; Charles Wells; a few other people. And Lee Chou, I remember him, yeah. And we were discussing how – and Rick Jackman, and we're discussing how they should start AIDS housing and stuff.

It was like at odds, in a way, because I was saying: here, they're looking – they had a few designers that the Housing Committee, saying, oh, we should have these types of rooms; with a bathroom for every two rooms where people would live, and stuff like that. And have these amenities and those amenities – those amenities.

I said, goddamn, folks: these people are living out on the street! And you're going to wait for a goddamned building to be built? The city's going to build it? Who's going to build it?

And I said: people putting – well, this Partnership for the Homeless has started their own little – shelters, sections for AIDS, where they would have all these drapes separating little bed-, little beds for people. I said, those people – that organization seemed to be wanting to sweep people off the streets as immediately as they can. The problem is the churches and the synagogues – I don't think the mosques were involved at that time, right? Churches, mostly Protestant churches; almost all of them were. Maybe about 15 would let them in. And weren't less – the Roman Catholics would allow people with AIDS in in their little – there are about 15 rooms or draped rooms created for each church, religious institution. So they would take in about 300, 400 people at that time in all the institutions.

SS: What did you want the ACT UP Housing Committee to do?

GP: Well, I said, we can't just let, we can't wait for buildings to be built. We kept hearing Bailey House, Bailey House. That shows promise, because that was a hotel; now we can turn it into a 50-room place. And I said, here, we, winter's coming. By the time a house is built, there'd be a few winters. Those people would freeze to death. I said, let's take them in.

And they just – no, they just wanted to think that we'll have to build housing, we have to build housing.

Okay, but for emergency, you gotta build tents. Like after an earthquake, you don't wait to build housing. You build tents.

SS: So you were –

GP: I'm sorry. Yeah, that philosophy, just to get them off the street immediately. The problem is, there wasn't enough who would take them in. No offense, religious congregations that will take in people with AIDS. So they're at a standstill.

SS: You were working at the Partnership if I remember.

GP: Well, I was a super.

SS: – weren't you? You dated a guy –

GP: No no, Peter Smith.

SS: No.

GP: No, I didn't date him.

SS: Oh.

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GP: No no. He had a boyfriend who was a dentist. They both passed away from AIDS. But he – no, he was telling me, he came to the ACT UP meetings a couple of times, the Housing Committee, to tell us how the – Mayor Koch and his housing programs for AIDS is flawed, and stuff.

I was pissed off with Peter, because I said, Peter — Peter Smith — who was a campaign manager for Robert F. Kennedy back in the – when did he – '60s! I was going to say, yeah; '68.

SS: But so you – you said – wait a second – so you worked in their offices, or you worked –

GP: Oh, no. I was a super.

SS: You were a super.

GP: I was a super!

SS: In their building?

GP: Yeah, in only, only his building. In his – he had a place on 10th Street. So I was working part-time.

SS: So did you see the services that they were providing?

GP: The Partnership?

SS: Yeah.

GP: Well, I went to some of the churches, and saw how everything was sectioned off. Yeah. But I said, it's better than nothing. Better than being out on the street. So I was like pushing for that a little. And I said, we can wait, but – when you build a building, it only takes about maybe 30 – rooms, or – or 50. But that takes time. And the thing is, trying to get the city.

So when I joined the Housing Committee, I eventually got my first video camera. And we would go to these warehoused buildings that the landlords had faltered and the buildings closed, and went bankrupt. And they pretty much foreclosed, and the city took them over. So the city had all these buildings. The East Side, the West Side, the East Village. And we would go – and hang up banners, maybe 10 feet by 20 feet.

One guy who worked in the Israeli army knew how to get up on the fire escapes. We did it in broad daylight. And he would unhurl this whole banner that says, AIDS Housing Now, or something like that. Or Tell Koch – people are dying, or people are homeless. AIDS, people with HIV are homeless.

So we would do that around – five or six places we did that.

Nobody complained, nobody called the cops or anything. We did this in broad, three, four o'clock in the afternoon.

SS: Did any of those places become AIDS housing?

GP: Probably luxury housing. Oh, b-, I hate that sign – the word “luxury” in a way. Because developers took it in, and did what they want with it. It never became any housing available for people with AIDS.

But that went on for about two, three years. And I still attended the meetings, and they eventually got Bailey House opened. They said through the efforts of Mike Petrelis. They said he tied himself, chained himself to the door, to let them – to make a point. But then word got out, they said that the thing was going to be opened the next week, or – so he timed it right. So he can get credit. You heard that?

SS: No, never heard that.

GP: Oh. But yeah, it looked like it was timed right. That’s the rumor that was going around. Yeah.

SS: So what was it like going to ACT UP? I mean –

GP: Oh – well – you heard people, like Bob Rafsky, and a lot of folks – like Vince, Vito – what’s his name?

SS: Russo?

GP: Russo. Vito Russo — yeah — giving these passionate speeches, and angry speeches, and – they would go on and on saying how we shouldn’t give up the fight. We gotta get these pharmaceutical companies to open up their – how should I say? – to speed up the approval process for drugs that are not really – went through the full – what do they call, fast track. They wanted to do a fast track, to push the drugs that seemed, they had promise, and it was just taking too long, like a year and a half, to – to

test everything. So – people were saying, we gotta get these drugs, we gotta get down to the FDA. We gotta do these – street theater, and get attention stuff, and we did, we –

Just too much excitement at that time, where it was like – a lot of things – we knew we can do. We had the anger, we had the focus. We weren't loose cannons going everywhere. We focus, we would do this, we would plan that. We had like 37 at one time.

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Now we're, now, 2010, for the past five years, we're lucky to get 10 people at the meeting. That's a big jump. For a lot of different reasons. But it was so much energy, so much focus now.

SS: What other –

GP: Back then.

SS: – what other projects did you work on?

GP: Oh. Well, pretty much I stayed with the Housing Committee and the – DIVA TV.

SS: Diva TV.

GP: Yeah. The video group.

SS: How did that get started?

GP: Well, it was a, they call it a video collective. DIVA TV means Damned Interfering Video Activists. Those – who created that? Ellen Spiro? I think so. Yeah. She was a doll. She ha-, she and it was a group that didn't seem to have all this anger. But they knew that they had a media means to reach out to people and educate them on AIDS and activism. Pretty much it was a tool for activism.

But when I first got my video camera, I said, knowing how the police were, I just wanted to keep the – thing recording of how the police were treating people in arresting them. And later it caught on to me that documentation for the future years is very important to do.

But first I just thought, knowing how the police were, and how these arrests – charges – sometimes could be fabricated. So I thought maybe this would be able to be – to prove them wrong, and stuff.

SS: Was that footage ever used?

GP: Was it – only once.

SS: What was it? What happened?

GP: Do I remember? {LAUGHS} It's a long time ago. No, but I remember Jim Wentzy's videotape mentioned – the woman said if it wasn't for George being there at a certain time, we wouldn't have evidence of this mistreatment by an activist at ACT UP.

JW: NIH.

GP: At NIH. There, there are like hundreds of people, so – well, of course, I held my camera with one eye, looking through the viewfinder because we didn't have, I, well the simple camera I had didn't have a fold-out LED. So with one eye – go there – and the other eye, look around, like a — what do you call those lizards — to see what action there was, or any police problems there were. Or – focus.

So I would like move my camera away, because I did my thing in front of it. And then I would probably go to the – the hot, pressing issue at the time. You know what I'm saying? Because there were waves, they call them. There would come out of

nowhere; waves I mean. Groups of, affinity groups, affinity – I think people know by now without videotape what affinity groups are. A group of five or six or eight, 10 people, who decide to focus on one project during a demonstration. And there would be maybe four or five, I think, people at a demonstra-, four or five different groups at a demonstration. We would call them waves, right?

So every 20 minutes, there would be a constant group of people going here. Either at the NIH, or going to this door to be chained, or get up a ladder and go up on the roof, the mezzanine, the marquee of a building and do those, all that stuff was, boy, a three-ring circus, a multi-ring circus.

I didn't think of it as a circus, but that's why you had to keep your eye open, because there were things happening that you want to record – and see how the police would react.

They would like drag people out, like they were bags of – like sandbags, pretty much, right? The way they would – the people would just go in front of the gates, in front of the glass doors, and just chain themselves. And the cops, well at the NIH, would just like drag people away – I think after they gave them a warning, but not too much.

But then they hurled people away. And I think during that time, there was a – a footage that they used – to vindicate –

JW: Can you hold that thought?

GP: Yeah, somebody explain further –

GP: Is the sound okay?

SS: Okay, so how was DIVA TV organized? So you would to a demo and shoot and then what would happen?

GP: Oh, we would – well, there's a group, a collective of about eight or 12 different people. And everybody had different types of cameras. The main thing was Hi-8, was 8 millimeter tape; and Hi-8, right? I only had VHS-C. I could afford that. And there were second-hand – not second-hand, returns. At The Wiz I would buy them, or Crazy Eddie – the little camera — which only did recordings. It didn't play back. So you have to put it in a little converter box, it's not DVD. It was VHS-C. That's what it is, yeah. So I put it in there, and we played it that way.

But, well, we would have meetings every week or every two weeks, I think it was, at the, at somebody's house. Maybe it was Jimmy's house? No. And we would discuss what we would do with the videotape, and make a – well, we've done a few tapes. God, it's been awhile. I just – all I remember is wing and a prayer. We had something like that, when we had the Stop the Church action.

So we'd plan where we would be. But, well, a few people, like Bill Bahlman, who really didn't come to the meetings, but he had his own camera. He managed to get in, right; and had that infamous scene with the host being refused by Tom Keane? Oh, boy. Yeah. Ha ha. Sacrilege.

SS: And who would edit it?

GP: Who would edit? The thing is – Ellen Spiro, I think, would help do some of the editing. And was it [Gerry] Albarelli? And Jean Ma-, Musto? I forget her name –

SS: Jean Carlomusto?

GP: Yeah. I forget. We would just give our tapes, but – they only took a few seconds here and a few seconds there to make a tape. They took it from everybody.

SS: And then what would they do with the tapes?

GP: Oh. Well – that's – god, I'm trying to remember. Well, we would play it at the ACT UP meetings. We would have benefits with them, and well, the types of tapes we had were not made for AIDS education. We really didn't do anything that, with AIDS education, but AIDS activism, pretty much. We gave it to like a – we showed it to – at film festivals, where they – where people would appreciate the activism, because back then – ACT UP pretty much led the way on civil disobedience and stuff, right? Following the traditions of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi? Yeah.

And they, people said that they was always in the – everybody knew what ACT UP was, pretty much, right? Or educated people would know. The other people would say, ah, a bunch of queers protesting. They gotta deal with it themselves.

But you know – but the activism was to show how the government was very indifferent. And we were trying to – get the government to move on their drugs, move on, maybe, education; and start prevention, and – it really didn't take place with the, the government doing it, but we just helped move the pharmaceuticals, move and create new drugs.

Because of course, they get a drug. Why should they spend money – researching new drugs where they could just have an old product, which they can keep pushing and pushing and pushing; and not really care about the results?

So, but – I didn't have a list of the videos that we took, but, that we made, and – it's so long ago. We're talking about –

SS: You said that –

GP: – '88 and '89.

SS: You would film people being arrested but –

GP: Yeah.

SS: -- did you ever do civil disobedience?

GP: Did I what?

SS: Did you do civil disobedience?

GP: No, but I came close to it, but I never got arrested, I think my little camera prevented me. And we had our phony press passes, which said, Community Television, or something like that, that Ellen Spiro helped design. And that was great. And it warded off the cops. It was almost like wearing an amulet. {LAUGHS}

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But never got initiated. I think I'd get panic attacks, getting handcuffed. You see how people were. They were very comfortable in getting handcuffed. I never saw anybody get panicked. But I felt like I would. I get panic attacks in elevators or subways, sometimes. Coming down here was like very nervous in taking the train.

Since 9/11, I don't think the MTA knows how to deal with an emergency, even up to this date. So – me getting caught, confined like that, behind your back – I said, I'm going to try to stay away from that. So I managed to stay away. It doesn't mean it won't happen. But it's just not – just never happened.

SS: Let's get back to housing.

GP: Yeah.

SS: So as the Housing Committee progressed, how did it become Housing Works?

GP: Oh – that’s – well – we saw that the city was not doing its job, or not becoming very responsible in housing people. They took a long time, the, the process at the welfare office, which at that time was, what, DAS, Department of AIDS Services?

And just took – just too long, and at that time, I think they were cutting back, or there were maybe too many people applying for housing for AIDS, so Lee Chou, I kept remembering him saying, the city doesn’t know what they’re doing with AIDS. We’re, we are the experts, he says at a meeting. We gotta create AIDS housing ourselves. So –

A few people – with ideas on how to – concrete ideas on how to do it, how to get funding for it, how to find buildings and I don’t know if they did scattered site. I forgot if they started with that. Because AIDS Resource had just started with that.

But they pretty much started building their offices on, I think it was Crosby Street down on Hudson – down on – off Houston Street, and Crosby, right there, near Broadway, they had built their offices there. Eric Sawyer – I remember going to their – they had some meetings there. And Eric’s like tapping away, building up the posts to build the rooms and stuff. I said, man – man, how do you few people start doing that?

So they managed to get the money to do that, and they morphed into the – the Housing Committee still kept going. But more attention was focused on Housing Works and building the offices, and Charles King, of course, was there. And his buddy Keith Cylar, yeah. Bless his soul. He was just going to make sure this thing was going to work. Eric, I mean, Charles was very savvy, very smart. He knew how to influence people. He was a minister. Right? A Baptist minister, or Unitarian? He knew how to,

to move people's hearts, and that's what you need to do, man. You gotta make sure that it gets done, and he had the experience, and the people behind him to make sure that Housing Works started getting going, and it did. And, boy.

SS: What was it like to be surrounded by dying people all the time?

GP: Oh, it's strange, isn't it? I just – well – we kept dealing with people getting sick, weeks after weeks, and getting skinnier, and thinner. And there weren't any special medications, except for Botox, to fill out some of the, some of the gaunt cheeks and stuff like that, this is before the cocktails, back in '92 or '93. And just yeah, well, we're looking around – and my friends outside of ACT UP also were saying, who's next, who's next? Because a lot of people were getting, it was a big – wave of incidences of people getting sick, and dying very quickly and we're saying –

They said the disease could be dormant in your body for years, and not do anything. Until something sparks it. Different ways.

SS: How did it affect you?

GP: Me? Well – just got me, of course, angrier, because I don't know what to do, except to, to visit, or do errands for people who are dying.

And I don't know, just mature, I would do a little advocacy through organizations, to make sure they would get some fund-, not funding, but some food.

SS: But it's not a normal way to live around the sick and dying, and –

GP: Normal way. You're saying at an age when we were in our twenties, or early thirties – and this cannot be. How could we think about death and dying at that age, right?

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I just – you're worried, because, it's funny; because the government kept saying gay men between the ages of 18 to 31 are most likely to get HIV. Then the next you know, I was in that age group. I was like that, 31. And the next year kept saying, those between the ages of 19 and 32 would get AIDS, and here they kept saying the 33, 34, 49. And I'm saying, I'm in that age, I'm in that last age group. I said, I haven't gotten sick, but – they're saying it so many times, I feel like I am going to get sick.

Just – was that supposed to scare people into being, having safe sex, or not having any sex? I didn't know what the, the media was trying to tell us at that time. But it was scaring me.

SS: What do you think the long-range impact on your life has been, that you went through that?

GP: Well – got me. Well, it was – knowing my – my mother had just passed away about eight months ago. And Brendan Fay's father died a few weeks ago. Robert Pinter and some other folks I know in the past few years — three years — their father and mothers have passed away, too. And I said, it's almost like AIDS all over again. All these people so close to you, that you grew up with – you knew their every emo-, you knew what would spark them to get angry; what you would do to piss them off. You would know what you can do for them that'll make them happy, or what you can say.

And you're so involved with them, and you just – they're just gone.

And all you've got is just a void, because – well, some of the people you've tried, you can't help everybody. But the people you did help – left a void, because you kept going to the meetings; you kept going to some of the hospitals where

they're in – daily or weekly, and stuff like that. And it – well – almost a release when they did pass away, because of all the tension of going back and forth, back and forth. Because you spent time concentrating.

And now – with my mom passing away, it was like that also, with her being sick in the hospital for four years. Going back and forth. So it was a sort of release. But the how's the impact for the – for me as a person?

I don't know, I'm just saying that well, the impact is, for me, in a way – maybe other activists are – a lot of our friends are gone. And other, new generations, or people we don't know, have AIDS. And we're just – we don't know them enough, that well, the new people. People that are going to Housing Works. I don't know them at all. But I still go to the ACT UP meetings, and I said, how else could I help these people? But they're pretty much, Housing Works has developed their own little ACT UP there. Because they had the Obama demonstration back in April, and they had two, three, or 400 people out there, protesting, a block in front of the Peninsula Hotel.

So I said, there's activism there, and with ACT UP now, I just said; we're such a small group, but we're – we're trying to find different ways to be influential. And it's – well –

Well, we're diminishing. It's scary, I'm saying there's gotta be – excuse me, other, well, just – how it impacts me is saying that as you get older, you're seeing how life is getting shorter. Because something pisses you off, you gotta, or something on your mind, you shouldn't wait till the last minute to write a letter. Just sound off, and get your opinion out, and bounce it off people, and get some ideas on what you want to do.

Because I worked in the safe sex clubs, and people were worried about getting AIDS, getting AIDS, but people were still having unsafe sex. I was there, picking them up like that, when they were giving blowjobs. And say, guy, how many times you going to do this? You haven't heard about AIDS? And when I would clean up at the end of the night, I would find very few condoms left on the ground. I don't know if they were very careful, and whether they put it in their pocket. How do they do that? They just didn't use them.

SS: You worked as a monitor in a sex club?

GP: Yeah. Well –

SS: Well, what was that like?

GP: Back –

SS: Which club did you work at?

GP: Oh, the Locker Room.

SS: Oh, okay.

GP: Yeah. I would go there, work, every Saturday or Sun- Friday or Saturday nights. Very steamy back then.

SS: When?

GP: Back in '89, '90. The city was starting to close them down again. Another wave of – sex establishments. Because the Mineshaft and places like that, and the Anvil, closed in '84. AIDS Den, as the Post said back on front covers, back in '84. And enough of the wave under Dinkins started closing down, back in ninety, in '91. And people were, of course, continuing to have unsafe sex. They didn't – well – they didn't

have too much – they had plenty of condoms; they just didn't have any information, useful information, on how people can use them.

So I worked there for about a year and a half, doing some – outreach. I would bring the condoms and some of the literature from ACT UP, if they had demonstrations. And I raised money to buy my first video camera through the benefits of porn. Ha, or not porn! Is that what they call it? No, through a safe-sex club. So I managed to raise \$400 or something.

SS: Is there something you feel like we haven't covered that we should

–

GP: Well, cover, I suppose a lot of communities – AIDS community or just in the regular, general community, maybe just are still not reached – well, back – back in the '80s we weren't talking about – AIDS was just confined to the gay community, and we were saying, no, it's reaching out to everybody else. And Gary Null was saying, back in the late '80s and the '90s, saying — no, the '90s, he was saying that AIDS was just pretty much confined to the gay community. Why is the gay community pushing the government to reach more AIDS information outside the gay community, Because they're diminishing the money that should be focused on the gay community to the straight community.

But I said, you know –

JW: Asshole!

GP: – I said, Asshole! I said, we – you may have a point there, because there's not enough money, they're just trying to reduce as much services and education as possible. But I think they have to educate people, because there's a lot of people who

experiment, that are gay and they go with men and women too, and they don't want to tell their wives or their girlfriends that they've played around, and we have to reach those people, we have to get them – to speak freely to their – to their women, that they're playing around, to be protective.

And I feel like – still, we're not – I don't know how many people now, straight people, are using condoms if they want to have sex. And I don't believe the statistics that more and more young people are using condoms. Well, they may use it – but if you're turning it inside out and get two uses out of condoms, that's not safe sex.

But I mean – I said, at an ACT UP meeting a few weeks ago, in the heat of passion: how do people know how to be responsible through, by using condoms completely? I said, they – I feel like people may be getting sick, we're not knowing about it, or it's not being recorded and we're not being told. But I just feel like a lot of people who don't speak English – they're outreach in the black and Hispanic communities, but I said, what happens to the people in the Middle East, a lot of people, immigrants, from Asia or Eastern Europe, who don't speak English? And I said, this AIDS, this is not in my community. In those the faggots. But they don't think that men play around. I think the responsibility is on the men — maybe not on the women as much — and they're the ones infecting women and other men, because they refuse, they call that down low or something?

They're not, I feel like it's not – they say it's, in the black community, it's, that's a taboo word. But I said – it's in, like that in a lot of communities, a lot of ethnic communities; communities that don't speak English, and I feel like maybe we're not reaching out to them, and I just don't know how the community leaders in those

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communities — like maybe in India, they might be doing it, but in the Indian community here, the Asian Indian community, or the Syrian community, or the Palestinian community; how are they talking about AIDS?

I say that maybe I shouldn't worry about it, or — maybe I — maybe just too tired to bring it up, or educate them. But they need to know this to be careful, but they just, I just, I feel like the future of AIDS — we might have another wave of people, people are saying because a lot of gay people think that, oh, there's cures, there's some — yeah, there's remedies for AIDS now. I can go have unsafe sex, and if I get a little sick, just take those cocktails.

But it's a — it's not a one-time cure. Right? And I don't know if we're going to get a second wave. I'm thinking maybe we're not, we're just — maybe being more careful. I just don't know. And — statistics, I hear statistics, statistic. But reality is you just hear people just don't use condoms as much, and those things get me scared, and just people, and folks — like what we've been talking about, well, we're thinking like — people in Eastern Europe, too, right? An outbreak of AIDS there, because of IV drug use or something, they say. Right? And there's so many orphans in Rumania that are homeless because they've lost their folks through HIV, or they're, the babies are HIV-positive, right?

And I don't know they address those issues. But if you've got them in Rumania, what about — Rumanians here, and the other ethnic communities that aren't being outreached with AIDS? I don't know how we're going to reach them. Do we have to reach them? That's the question. Do we need to reach all these people? That means that we'll have to have literature in so many different languages.

JW: Quick question?

GP: Quick question.

JW: You said you were working related to sex clubs –

GP: Oh yeah.

JW: – in the early '80s?

GP: Well, '89, '90, to '91. That's when they started to close again.

JW: Yeah, but before that, you were working in them? Did you see any change in behavior with other people in the mid-'80s, as you started to become aware?

GP: The mid-eighty- I just said I felt they were careful. Maybe they, they would bring towels and stuff like that, and I just didn't see a lot of carefulness. That's what I'm – you can see, in the heat of passion. When you're getting it on, people aren't thinking about being careful, I think – maybe not always.

You can – I don't know. I mean – how much sperm do you need to get infected? How many do you need to get pregnant? Is it the same philosophy? Just – a few, or maybe repeated use.

That's why I'm thinking: maybe some people are immune, no matter how much sex or unsafe sex they have, that they maybe will never get AIDS. So – that's why I'm starting to worry, what Gary Null is saying. Is he saying – it's not a blood-borne disease, or a bodily-fluid disease? It makes me so, oh, maybe I'm safe, maybe other people are safe because of that. But this misinformation, which is dangerous, because on this program for years he talks about HIV is not the cause of AIDS. And he says bodily fluids doesn't do it.

The thing is, he doesn't want to get contested or bring guests on that will question him so he can bring up a scientific debate. He does not want to have that. And I've been listening to him since the '80s. And not now, lately, but he's been saying the same thing John Riley says. So I said people are doing what they want. He's like saying, go ahead. Have that type of sex, because you're not going to get sick that way.

That's why I hear people getting, that's why I didn't see too many condoms back in the safe sex clubs. Well, I can't tell if they're being used or not, but I certainly didn't see them on the floor to get picked up.

So I said, maybe people, there's a lot of oral sex. And – and people are not sick, I know. So – I'm at a loss. And see how much we can educate people who are not going to control their habits, or something. I don't know.

SS: Okay. Well, I just have two very quick questions –

GP: Quick. Okay, I won't keep you.

JH: Can I just ask what's it like going to an ACT UP meeting now?

GP: Um – boy. Well, it's like going to a home of friends, to see what you can do. I feel like – we had 37 committees at that time, when we met at Cooper Union, back in '90, '91 or '92. And the anger was still there; the excitement was still there; and the sense of purpose was still there.

Now I feel like we're at a stage where too many guys are getting older. Our memories are not – we're forgetting what to do, and we have to cancel meetings. Because we canceled a meeting last Monday. And all we did was send e-mails out. But I don't use the computer for my work. I do building repairs at times, so I don't use a computer for that.

So I said, maybe I gotta call John Riley to say, do we have a meeting this week?

So I said, we're getting older, I think it's time, we gotta keep sparking new generation of activists. I don't see it now, and – I see – we're – trying to get things done, or work with other communities dealing with the national healthcare issue. ACT UP is pretty much focused on doing that in our committees now.

But even though we got – the plan that Obama helped start – but it pretty much was written up by HMOs anyway. You know what I'm saying? So it makes me think that these people are really not shaking that, oh, the HMOs are going to fall. Because they're still going to be in power. But the public option is not there.

And we don't know when we can, like, force the government's hand to start that process again. Because it just went under, because the pharmaceuticals and the HMOs pretty much are in control of this new healthcare plan, and I don't, who's going to read that thousand-page, or 800-page description? I just don't see it's going to be helpful yet, because it's going to be too hard to implement.

But it's just not a simple plan. I just wish maybe people would say, oh, it's socialism to have a government plan.

But you want to help a strong nation; you have to help all the people, not just people who could really afford it, and people who are barely struggling; but people who don't have it. You know what I'm saying? People who don't even have homes, need health. How are they going to find work? Let them find a job. How could they find a job if they don't have housing; if they're not healthy enough?

So HIV people are on the street; regular homeless, or veterans are out in the street. They get sick. Mentally they're sick, and they're never going to rise up. And if the government doesn't reach out to them –

What's wrong with a little socialism? It's going to help. People think, oh, the new world order is going to take over. A lot of people – I've been involved with the 9/11 Truth people. And I said, I see a lot of energy with them; but sometimes their leaders are homophobic; they're AIDS-phobic; and they're collective phob-, they like to be individuals. They don't really want to see the government working together for the people. They think the government is working against the people. So they're a little, they're so paranoid that way.

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They don't want the government to have any influence. But the healthcare issue is so out of hand. If the healthcare issue was doing – the HMOs and the other companies involved were doing the right thing from the beginning, the government wouldn't have to stop up and say, hey man, you can't reject people who have preconditions.

SS: Right.

GP: So we got – ACT UP is pushing to see if we can get a second push for the — what do they call it? — the public option again. Because it's so important to make sure it gets done. But – it's got a lot.

SS: So here's my last two questions. So looking back on ACT UP, in your view, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its biggest disappointment?

GP: Oh. Oh. The achievements – were, I see – well, with a lot of influence with – well – with the sacrifice of all the ACT UPpers getting arrested; doing constant demonstrations, and getting people to hear the news on the radio and television about AIDS. It was making people more aware. Which was so important then. But it made people – hey, even if three people – oh, Joe the Plumber doesn't know what AIDS is all about. People like that maybe would know to be more careful, to start using condoms. That's one message ACT UP was saying: safe sex, safe sex, safe sex. And talk heart to heart with the person you're playing with.

And the push for AIDS drugs was so important, to get – them. But they just didn't happen to go fast enough, because so many people passed away. So many loved ones. And we couldn't keep the pace for – well, a lot of people we knew just didn't make it in time for those drug cocktails to help them a little bit. And all these other diseases – they say AIDS is a combination of so many, combinations of so many diseases together. So you had to take drugs to stop diarrhea; you had to take drugs to stop the gout. Drugs to stop – maybe gout — the other issues of wasting and stuff like that. So people were overwhelmed by all these drugs, but –

ACT UP just said, let's put it out there, and hopefully the doctors knew what they were doing. If there is a god, they would be inspired to look at each individual and say, your individual case requires certain things that not one drug will cure all.

Maybe a lot of doctors do that. They do that with a lot of seniors, I've noticed, in the hospitals, when my mom was there. One drug will cure all the Alzheimer's like that. No, the doctors have to really focus on the people, and I think –

maybe ACT UP has helped people, the doctors to realize, you gotta look at these people as individuals, and not as a community.

And the – well – just – I don't know – ACT UP started falling apart pretty much back after we couldn't afford the Cooper Union, and a lot of people were passing away, back in the '90s – the mid-'90s, right? There's like another wave of AIDS back in that early years. And we just – people burning out. We were just not sure. And it's not our fault, it's – we're physically human, and we just can't move; we can't constantly be at it. You can only do so much. And a lot of the energy – I think maybe ACT UP is saying, we gotta try to spark a new generation of activists. I don't think maybe we've done that enough, or well enough. But I've seen activists in other organizations, like Housing Works, that keep the fire going. And just a lot of people of color. It's hit home. And they're learning to talk to their churches, which is important. They're trying to say, get your act together, and we gotta erase that homophobia even, to start the conversation on AIDS. Because if they think of AIDS, they think of homosexuality, and they – they gotta move beyond that.

The things I just see. It's happening in a lot of the communities outside the black and Hispanic communities, that need education and they're – I don't see it out there.

And I don't know if ACT UP can do that. But it's not on the agenda right now. But the national healthcare issue is, and I just think we need a new generation of younger people to start spearheading ideas.

SS: Thank you, George.

GP: Thank you.