

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

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Interviewee: **Russell Pritchard**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Russell Pritchard

April 23, 2003

SARAH SCHULMAN: We usually start with: If you could say your name, today's date, how old you are and where we are?

RUSSELL PRITCHARD: My name is Russell Pritchard. Today's date is April the 23rd, 2003. We're in San Francisco and I'm 51, soon to be 52.

SS: Where were you born, Russell?

RP: In Tisdale, Saskatchewan, in Canada.

SS: And when did you come to New York?

RP: I moved to New York in 1979.

SS: Why did you come there?

RP: Thrill of adventure. I was living in Canada. I actually went to school in Calgary, Alberta and there, there was, like, this is what exists. And, I wanted that.

SS: Did you already know that you were gay, when you moved to New York?

RP: Yes.

SS: And, were you living as a gay man? Were you out?

RP: In New York?

SS: Yeah.

RP: Always. I was totally out when I lived in Canada, as well. I came out on or around my 21st birthday – 20 years old, thereabouts.

SS: And how was that received?

RP: It was sort of a little bit rocky, but my family accepted it well, fortunately. And, when I lived in Canada and when I went to school in Calgary, I was very active

with the gay community there in forming gay alliances, a gay drop-in center. I was very active, interviewed on TV, newspapers, so, I had to be out, because I was.

SS: Right.

RP: Everybody – family, friends, co-workers – anybody that knew me, knew that I was out.

SS: So, you were really an activist from the beginning, if you were giving interviews, and that kind of thing.

RP: Yeah, because back there, the community was so small that it took a select few people to put themselves in the public and get it known that there were actually gay people living in this small city in Canada and we were sort of, basically, normal people and normal lives – that sort of thing.

SS: What were some of the issues that made you go forward, in front of the camera in those days?

RP: I basically just wanted to show people that gay people are just sort of regular folk.

SS: So, there was no sort of event or anything that –

RP: No, back there, there –

SS: No events.

RP: Other than the need for exposure and wanting to try to develop a gay community, when there really was not one in existence. So, start a drop-in center with a handful of friends and create a social environment for other people who are gay, who are struggling with their identity, to actually have a place to go and come out. It was really more just to form a social network.

SS: So, were most of the out people your age? Or, were there older people as well?

RP: Gosh, we're going back a few decades for this. I think it was fairly – we were probably all similar aged. I sort of recall a couple of older people, but I think they're all sort of early 20s – that kind of – which is what I was, mid-20s and thirtyish – within that range.

SS: So, what were your career goals, when you came to New York?

RP: Actually, I had just gotten out of school. I was a journalism major, focusing on advertising and public relations, and that's pretty much what I went into. I started doing photo assistant work, then art direction, fashion casting, prop styling, food styling and pretty much did that for my whole stint in New York.

SS: And did you get involved with any organizations in New York, before ACT UP?

RP: I think ACT UP was the first and only. It was the consuming one.

SS: Do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS?

RP: Let's see – I actually remember more of the – what was the term before AIDS? Help my memory.

SS: GRID?

RP: GRID. Conversations on that, because I was living with a friend of mine in an apartment in Chelsea and we were started to hear friends that were having friends who were coming down with this weird thing. But, I don't remember the transition from that, to actually the whole AIDS thing – other than, perhaps, when I first encountered ACT UP, after it had formed. I remember being out on Fire Island and David Robinson

and a couple of other people came out to do outreach, and that's where I got introduced to ACT UP. So, I think it was probably on or around the same time. It was like the disease had gone from becoming this unknown thing, to be named AIDS and then, ACT UP sort of exploded onto the scene.

SS: What year was that? What would you say –

RP: What year did ACT UP start?

SS: '87.

RP: '87? And, it was early in the year, because I sort of remember seeing the people – the ACT UP people out on the Island in the summer time, and then getting sort of fully involved late summer, fall or whatever that year it was formed. So, if that was '87.

SS: So, you used to go to the Pines, regularly?

RP: Yeah.

SS: How was AIDS infiltrating the Pines? What was the culture there around AIDS?

RP: I think it was ignored.

SS: Did you see people with KS on the beach and that kind of thing?

RP: I had friends with KS, so –

SS: And, did you talk to them about it?

RP: Oh yeah, because my whole community – there were those of us who were, perhaps positive and well, and those who were progressing and we all hung out together. It was one of those situations where it's the unknown and you don't know, really, how to deal with this disease. You think you're all going to die in the next five

years. So, it was really just a matter of being supportive and trying to figure out what sort of treatment or course of action they should take. And, I remember early on – I had been positive since, I don't know, maybe on or around '85, something like that. So, early on, doing the frozen egg lipids and shakes and Chinese herbs and all this sort of things. So, we were all just trying to figure out what we could do to stay alive, essentially.

SS: Were you getting that information from your doctor, or just from other guys?

RP: Sort of, very limited from that. I think there was already started the *AIDS Treatment News*. That had started back then. I remember going to the Center in the low 20s, to buy the egg lipids, and all the underground drugs that were starting to show up. So, that goes more from the AIDS publications. My doctor sort of like, didn't have a clue.

SS: Who was your doctor at the time?

RP: Dr. Stanley Roman.

SS: What was the name of the guy who published that *AIDS Treatment Newsletter*? It was John something. Or, his initials were, like, J.J., [John S. James] or something like that. Do you remember his name?

RP: I don't remember his name. I'm so bad with names.

SS: And, on 20th Street – what was that? The PWA Coalition, or was that the first –

RP: It was called something else when it first opened up, but it was just the underground storefront, where you would go and buy all these weird concoctions?

SS: Do you remember who ran that?

RP: I don't.

SS: No. So, you were doing AL-721?

RP: Mm hmm.

SS: And what other things were you trying at the time?

RP: I tried to do more like Chinese herbs and acupuncture. I didn't do any Western medicine until actually after I was living here. Then, I moved here in '90, so probably not until about '92, '93, somewhere around then.

SS: So, you avoided AZT?

RP: Yeah.

SS: And, how did you make that decision?

RP: The decision to avoid it?

SS: Yeah.

RP: Oh, because it was just with friends who were taking it and finding all of this stuff so toxic that I didn't think it was helping and I was fortunate that all of my numbers – CD-4 numbers and T-cells were all strong enough that I thought, I'm not going to mess with a good thing here, I'm just going to wait until it gets to a point where it seems like intervention is necessary, and just leave it alone and do stuff that's going to be non-toxic.

SS: How do you think you were able to avoid that panic? Of running for whatever was out there?

Tape I
00:10:00

RP: Well, I would like to attribute it to my level-headed Canadian roots.

We're very – we're not prone to like, drama. We sort of take things easy.

SS: Was there someone who you'd really listen to, or whose advice you thought was very sound?

RP: I don't think there was any one person. I think it was just a group of friends that were all sort of struggling with the same decisions. And certainly, I remember friends who were taking various medicines – AZT and whatever, and they were just running into complications and for some people it worked, for some it didn't, and there's always battling these things. Some passed away. Some lived. So, it was just – things that you got little bits of information from a variety of sources.

SS: Okay, so let's go back to that moment when David Robinson brought ACT UP into your life? What was the event?

RP: The ever life changing moment.

SS: Right.

RP: Well, I remember it was David Robinson and probably two or three other people. I think there was this other guy that might have been David's boyfriend at the time. I sort of remember – tall –

SS: Right, he died. I can't remember his name.

RP: So, it was probably the combination of the awareness starting to creep up, that this was going on and nobody was really doing anything about it and here's a grassroots organization that's starting to fight for our lives, essentially, which was what was necessary. So, it's a culmination of all of those things. And then, I sort of paid attention to David, because I thought he was really great looking, which really helped. And then, a friend, one of my friends who I was housemates with – when we came back into the city, we went to one of the weekly meetings. He came to a couple and then

dropped out, and I just stuck with it, because I just saw that it was a group of like-minded people that were ready for action.

SS: So, can you describe walking into that first meeting and what it was like? What you saw?

RP: Well, the first thing I remember – being a little bit on the small side – I was more impressed with – after I had been there for about six months, when the meetings were jam-packed in the Community Center, but I was certainly impressed with the intensity of the people who were there. Even though it was a very small and newly formed group, they were very focused, and seemed very directed on what they were wanting to do. They didn't know, certainly, all the of avenues to take to get results and get the government to respond and all this sort of stuff, but they were, like – we've got to do something, because nobody else is.

SS: Do you remember any particular personalities who you first noticed when you came into the room?

RP: Well certainly, David Robinson was always my radar. And, probably at the same time – I'm so challenged for names. The woman who lived in Berkeley – not Berkeley – Brooklyn – long hair?

SS: Maxine [Wolfe] .

RP: Maxine. Thank you. She was one I remember from the beginning. I don't know if Larry Kramer was still around. I think he sort of like popped in and out at that point, because he was doing his thing or whatever. But, I think it was more – it was the collective nature of it, as opposed to individuals.

SS: Okay, so what was the first action that you participated in? Do you remember?

RP: The first action was Wall Street II and that was the – what was so great about ACT UP for me was when they formed our affinity groups, and I was a part of Wave III – Mark Harrington and others. We formed our group, and we were the third wave to go into the streets and take over the intersections, block traffic, that sort of thing.

SS: How did you hook up with those guys?

RP: It was a random thing. I think we were mostly a part of the same civil disobedience training, and then they just did random sign-ups, and we were lumped into this group that became – they just kept calling it the Third Wave, and then we adopted that as our affinity group name – Wave III.

SS: Can you describe a civil disobedience training? What that was like?

RP: Gosh, it's been so long. It's actually pretty amusing. It's the whole concept of going through a training session to put yourself into the street and deal with the police and get arrested. It seemed pretty foreign, because I had never done – although, I'd been politically active, I'd never been involved with an organization that needed to do that level of action. So, I was totally unknowing what does civil disobedience mean, and how do you train for it? But, it was certainly amusing, just figuring out who would do the handcuffing and going limp, and dragging each other from side to side in a room. It was very amusing.

SS: Who ran the training?

RP: Goodness. Names. Actually, I think it was Peter Staley and Gregg – black-haired Gregg –

SS: Bordowitz?

RP: Bordowitz. Thank you.

SS: So, by the time you went in, knowing that you were going to be arrested – was this the first time you had ever been arrested?

RP: Yes. And at that point, I was actually extremely – well, I wasn't extremely terrified. I was certainly nervous about the whole scenario – but, during our civil disobedience, and leading up to the action, they said that there would generally be, or mostly likely be, sort of an arrest. You would get cited sort of quick – in and out of the police station type of thing. And, in this one, they actually held us in the cells for upwards of 6 hours, 8 hours, something like that. And, at that point, I was still, technically, an illegal alien. And, I felt for sure I was going to get like busted or deported.

SS: What happened?

RP: Nothing. They just fingerprinted, and I guess essentially they were just screening to see if you're in their system – which, of course, I wasn't.

SS: So, you just randomly fall into this affinity group with Mark Harrington and all these guys?

RP: Mm hmm.

SS: And how did you guys decide what you were going to do?

RP: Well, I think the group had essentially just laid out, sort of, the ground rules, that each of the groups would go take over an intersection and then, within that group, each person could decide whether or not they were going to stay and be arrested or take the police advice – to leave before you get arrested. I would say, I think, probably,

half of our affinity group got arrested. There was also Jim Eigo, Mark Fisher, a couple people I remember.

SS: What was the purpose of Wall Street II?

RP: Mainly for public awareness – just to get the message out to people; disrupt them, inconvenience them, so that they would pay attention. Annoy people, sometimes you have to be aggressive and annoying to get a message across.

SS: Was that hard for you?

RP: Oh, no. I had no problem with that! Just ask my fellow merchants. I'm always annoying them.

SS: So, what about sitting in a jail cell with these other people for six hours – do you remember what that was like?

RP: Yeah, I do, sort of vaguely. One of the things that's so interesting, that always just went back to our affinity group – whenever we would be, either coming from or going to a meeting, there would be a group of us walking down the street, which just seemed like such a random group of people. We'd always remark that anybody looking at the group – how could you figure out what the common denominator was with this group of people? And it was the same sort of thing in a jail cell, because we were just sort of a random group. And, I remember being mostly impressed with Jim Eigo, because he seemed so quiet and studious. And, I sort of recall him keeping a little note thing, and writing all of the time. And he just seemed like such a character and so different from most of the people who were in the meetings who were a little bit more vocal and out there and demonstrative. He was just sort of a really odd person.

SS: Did you guys stay together as an affinity group? Wave III?

RP: Mm hmm.

SS: For how long?

RP: Oh gosh. We were probably – let's see I moved here in '90. I guess probably three years or so – three or four years.

SS: And how often would you meet?

RP: We probably met, maybe once a month.

SS: So, what kind of bond formed? I mean, what was the relationship over time?

RP: It was an extremely close bond, and there's one person – Pamela Earing, who was in our affinity group, we're still best friends. She lives here. Mark Fisher, who was in our affinity group, unfortunately passed away, was one of my best friends. We traveled together.

SS: How do you spell Pamela's last name?

RP: Earing. E-A-one R or Two Rs?-I-N-G. What was interesting with Pam – when she showed up for one of her first meetings she was – she spoke on a couple of issues that came up during the course of the meeting. And I remember Mark and I sitting behind her and just looking at each other and saying, we want that person for our affinity group, because she just had a degree of intensity and intelligence that was a driving force. And her brother had just recently passed away from AIDS. So, as a straight woman coming to the ACT UP meetings, she was sort of the oddity in the room, and it was just someone we had latched onto.

SS: How many people were in Wave III?

RP: We had around a dozen – 12 or 16.

SS: Do you remember who the other people were?

RP: Oh gosh. There was Deborah.

SS: Levine?

RP: Deborah Levine was in Wave III. Marvin Shulman was in Wave III.

There was a psychologist from New Jersey – I can't recall. Jim Eigo. The rest of them are sort of a blur – Richard Deagle was in Wave III.

SS: Would you say that that was your most important social group inside ACT UP, or was it just one of them?

RP: No, within the group of ours, that was the most important group, because we were a very tight-knit little group.

SS: And, did you all know inside the group, who was HIV and who wasn't?

RP: I think most of the time we talked about it. Yeah, because we would always, just sort of check in with people and where their health was, and how the blood work was doing.

SS: So, it was also like a support group in some ways.

RP: Yeah. It was good, because within that group, as I've always been appreciative being part of a group that's not all of one mind – like hanging out with just a group of gay men – this one was gay men, straight women, gay women. It was a nice mix.

SS: So, what other actions did you guys do together – Wave III?

RP: Oh gosh. I think we participated in virtually all of the ACT UP actions, from Wall Street II, on. FDA actions.

SS: What did you do for the FDA – Wave III?

RP: Wave III were lab technicians that took over an office in some random building and held a press conference.

SS: Wait, what did you do? Tell us the whole thing.

RP: Gosh. My memory is so bad. I think with this one – it was one of those actions that got a little bit chaotic, because there were just so many people there. So, we as an affinity group just decided that we would essentially get into any building that we could. And, I don't recall at the moment what building we ended up in. It was just somebody's conference room, and we just got on the phone and started calling press and said, this is where we were.

SS: How did you get in?

RP: Through an open door.

SS: And were you dressed as lab technicians?

RP: Yes. We'd all made long white lab coats and stenciled with "Bio-Hazard" and various other slogans. And, there were all these numerous stickers that ACT UP produced and we had those all over our coats.

SS: Who did you call from the conference room?

RP: I think we had a sheet of press contacts and just called up a press person and said that we were there and that, of course, then the police knew and we were sort of chased out.

SS: Did they arrest you?

RP: No, I think we all chose to leave and just took it back outside to be with the main group.

SS: And what did Wave III do at the NIH action?

RP: I don't recall that one.

SS: How about Day of Desperation, do you remember that?

RP: Day of Desperation.

SS: The Grand Central.

RP: I don't remember that one.

SS: No. Did you guys do anything at the Trump Tower?

RP: I remember being there. I don't think we did anything other than just leafleting, chanting, getting in people's faces type of thing.

SS: What about St. Patrick's? Were you guys part of that?

RP: Again – let's see, I remember being there. I think at that one we had – most of us were fairly quiet and didn't do anything terribly disruptive, other than, maybe holding up signs and placards.

But, I think Mark, as I recall, had a nice little outburst at one point – Mark Fisher. But, I don't think we participated in any arrest situation. We just did the disruptive part and left.

SS: Okay, well we'll get back to that later. So, what committees did you work on?

RP: I remember being on the Action Committee.

SS: What was that? Can you explain a little bit?

RP: I think it was just a group that we planned sort of where and what we should take on as actions – like, deciding if we were going to do a Wall Street action, taking over the Health Commissioner's office.

SS: Were you involved in that?

RP: Yeah, that was as I recall, primarily a Wave III group – although, David Robinson was part of the group that did the civil disobedience. We actually did it twice.

SS: Okay, well tell the whole story. Who was the Health Commissioner and why were you taking over his office?

RP: I should have started doing my own oral history a few weeks ago. Stephen Joseph is the Health Commissioner who didn't want to be the Health Commissioner, I don't think. He was always essentially cooking the numbers just to undervalue the severity of the AIDS crisis.

SS: How did you know he was cooking the numbers?

RP: Well, I think we probably had very good people like Mark Harrington figuring that out, and I just believed him. That was one of the great things with ACT UP. We had all of these people, like Mark Harrington – people like that – who would immediately sort of know everything. And Mark is the best example, because he just became one of those people that just could read through all of these numbers and figure that sort of stuff out. So, essentially, I would just sort of realize that the group was coming up with the right information. The Health Commissioner was coming up with just whatever information he wanted to, to not push for more funding for any programs, that sort of thing.

SS: Why would he not want more funding?

RP: That's a very good question, why would he not want?

SS: Did you guys have a take on why he was being so obstructive?

RP: Well, as I recall, he was probably just a Republican who didn't really care about AIDS, because it was affecting primarily gay men and HIV drug users and it was a segment of the population that he didn't care about.

SS: So, what did you guys do?

RP: We stormed in and took over his office and wouldn't leave, and got arrested for trespassing.

SS: And what was the demand?

RP: Probably more funding for programs, more public awareness, health clinics, needle exchange – which is all something that Wave III did fairly regularly. We'd go down and participate in the needle exchange on the Lower East Side.

SS: Okay, we'll get to that in a second, I just want to focus – because, I remember Stephen Joseph – his name was in every ACT UP meeting. He was hated by ACT UP.

RP: Oh yeah, he was hated intensely.

SS: Yeah, so when you took over his –

RP: He was hated essentially because he wasn't doing anything. He was supposed to be the Health Commissioner of New York City and he was ignoring a population that needed a Health Commissioner.

SS: Was he there?

RP: Was he at the meeting?

SS: No, was he there when you took over his office?

RP: Oh yes. He was having a meeting, actually, and we just stormed in and took our place at the board table with him. And, I think, as we pretty much always did,

we had our list of demands, which would include the needle exchange and more programs and funding. I can't remember the specific – all the points now, but we'd present them and ask for him to take action and, of course, they would just get – we're not going to do anything and get up and you're trespassing, and they'd call the police and have us arrested.

SS: How did he respond when you came smashing into his office?

RP: He was extremely annoyed, because he was just not a very nice person to begin with, and he was not at all thrilled that this group of activists would have the gall to come in and take over his office – and then, to do it twice, which we did.

SS: How did other gay people in the community, who are not in ACT UP react when you would do something like storm the office of a Commissioner?

RP: I think probably most of them thought we were just this fringe group that was stirring up too much trouble.

SS: And did you embrace that identity or, was that –

Tape I
00:30:00

RP: Well, sure, because I knew then we were doing good. It always takes – with any social thing, it needs a group of people to be the agitative force and you will always piss people off – whether they're in your community or not.

SS: What do you think it is about you that let you be one of those people? One of the agitative forces?

RP: Well, essentially, I've always just been a doer – right from grade school, high school, I've always been countless committees, involved in sports, clubs, activities, after school. I just liked to be involved. Just rather than sitting back and watching other people do something – from the early years, when I came out and creating a safe Gay

environment back in Canada, to ACT UP, to here, being involved with the business community, I've always taken my need for action and participation.

SS: Okay. So, can you describe a little bit about needle exchange? How that got started, and what your role was?

RP: I can't remember now if needle exchange actually started within ACT UP, or if there was another group that started it, and we became involved with them. But, we would get – and I wonder if it's – with the group in ACT UP, I think we got clean needles from health care professionals and/or might have ordered them from some pharmaceutical supply house? I sort of remember them arriving at ACT UP in boxes. And then, we would go to appointed places on the Lower East Side, primarily, and just set up our bio-hazard containers so that the IV drug users kind of dropped their dirty needles into that, and we would give them out two or three clean sets of works.

SS: How did they respond to you?

RP: The IV drug users? They were pleased because they wanted a fresh set of works. It's much easier than using a dull needle that's been used countless times. And, I think they were probably concerned with their health and well being. So, a clean set of works is better than one that's been shared numerous times.

SS: Had you had experience with that community before?

RP: Only to sort of – to a small degree. I hung out with a group of friends in the early '80s, and we did actually do some IV drug use. So, from time to time, we would pop down to the Lower East Side to score some drugs.

SS: So, you were returning to a place that you had been before, in a different capacity?

RP: Yeah. And, I was – sort of had the advantages that I was a little bit more affluent in using IV drugs, so I could afford to, we could get clean works. We did share our works back then, because who knew, type of thing.

SS: So, what was the attitude inside ACT UP, about this project?

RP: Well, I would like to think that everybody was supportive of it. Again, it was a community that was being affected almost as much as gay people, and the course of infection was irrelevant, at that point. And, if there was something you could do to eliminate how these people were being affected and it was something we needed to do.

SS: So, you're saying, ACT UP supported it, pretty much across the board?

RP: Yeah, I would imagine there were probably some people that had some reservations about it, but it was just something that needed to be done. It was like getting out and promoting safe sex and passing out condoms. It's the same level of activity.

SS: Did you get arrested during needle exchange?

RP: No, actually the police were pretty cool about it. I don't know how we decided – I think we had, perhaps a couple of times a week, a weekend – maybe an evening a week that we would do it, at a couple of specific points. And, the police would always come around and they, pretty much, just sort of ignored the situation.

SS: Do you remember what corners you were on?

RP: I don't.

SS: Okay. So, you were doing needle exchange, you had an affinity group, you were in the Actions Committee, you were pretty involved – that's a lot, already – plus the Monday night meeting.

RP: Right, because it seemed like, very soon after I joined – which was the one night a week meeting, it became a point where ACT UP was like five nights a week.

SS: Why do you think that happened?

RP: Well, again, it's just back to me wanting to be extremely involved with – anything that I do, I generally do to the max type of thing. And, at that point, because I was also HIV-positive, it was something that really was fighting for my life. So, anything that I could do and any committee I could be on that might make some headway into getting toward finding new treatments, more education, whatever – because I wanted to live.

SS: And, what happened to your friends who weren't in ACT UP? Were you able to maintain friendships with them?

RP: Oh yes. Most of them were very supportive. Because again, it's the people who will sit back and watch other people do what needs to be done, and that's just the type of people they are.

SS: Okay. Let's go back to the Actions Committee, because that was such an important part of ACT UP – do you remember some of the actions that you were involved in, through Actions Committee? Could you explain, just a little bit, for people who weren't there, how structurally it would work?

RP: Well, with the Action Committee – I mean, with the whole – the group at large, and then there were various committees that sort of proposed and planned various things that we needed to do as a group. The Action Committee being one, where, if there were, perhaps eight or 10 of us, on this committee, we would essentially do brainstorming sessions to try to plan, after we had done an event, what we should do

next. That if we had done enough, perhaps gone through Wall Street II action, then next we should think about going to Times Square and doing, staging a sit-in there, a public demonstration, leafleting campaign – that sort of thing – which is coming up with the specific actions that we would then propose to the group at large – these were several things that we were thinking about, because the group always did. It was the majority rule type of thing.

SS: So, who was on Actions Committee with you? Do you remember anybody?

RP: I think committee members sort of came and went.

SS: Well, where would you brainstorm? Would it be at somebody's house?

RP: No, the meetings were usually at the Community Center on 13th Street.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: Okay so Jim's question is how do you get on the Action Committee?

RP: As I recall, most of the committees were volunteer.

SS: So, anybody could be on the Actions Committee?

RP: Yes. I think within ACT UP we had positions that were elected – like facilitators, co-facilitator and perhaps a handful of others. And then, most of the committees were volunteer.

SS: Okay, so you'd meet at the Community Center and people start thinking – trying to think up proposals. Would other people come to the Actions Committee with an idea for an action? Or, was it your responsibility to come up with it?

RP: I think, as I recall, our Action Committees were open to anyone that wanted to come and propose something. And, I think, oftentimes, there were people who were not specifically involved with a committee on a weekly basis sort of thing.

SS: So, there was a lot of trust, in a sense – things were not closed.

RP: Oh no. The whole group was founded on trust and camaraderie.

SS: Do you remember any particular actions that came out of the Actions Committee when you were there?

RP: Specific actions. Not specifically. We may have been the starting point for the Stephen Joseph actions, calling for the sit-in at the Health Commissioner office.

SS: Wasn't there something that happened with Steve Quester and Stephen Joseph – this is coming back to me now. Do you remember this? Okay. Was there ever a time that actions would bring a proposal to the floor, and the floor would say no?

RP: Oh, I'm sure there were. I don't know if I could remember any specific ones.

SS: So, if you guys came to the floor and said, okay, here's our proposal, did you feel nervous about doing that, presenting that?

RP: No, because I think, generally we would talk over in the group that if we were prepared to propose it to the group at large, we were probably fairly confident that they would go for it, because the Action Committee's were always a pretty good sampling across the board of the membership whole. If they didn't like the idea then they didn't like the idea.

SS: Let's get back to needle exchange for a second. You know, there were, at the time there was a false division in the public discourse about AIDS that gay men and IV drug users were two different groups. And, I think that there was a lot of discussion in ACT UP about breaking down that false division. Do you remember any of that? People talking about that?

RP: I don't really, because in my mind, they were always one group.

SS: Okay. Do you remember straight people who came to ACT UP, who had become infected through drugs?

RP: I don't.

SS: Okay, so at what point did you get involved with treatment activism?

RP: I was actually never really heavily involved with treatment action, other than being involved with anything that could be supportive, because I think I relied, again, on people in our organization, like Mark Harrington, who became so well informed with drugs and how they worked and all of the medical stuff that was necessary to really be knowledgeable in treatment issues. I just sort of said, okay, your head's good for that, mine's not. I'll support and help on any action that will further that cause, but the treatment part was just sort of beyond me.

SS: Well, did you get treatment information for your own treatment at ACT UP?

RP: Oh yeah, I think there were always people letting us know what was coming up drug treatment. And, also the *AIDS Treatment News* became a fairly informative publication. And I think, by that time, my doctor was getting pretty up to speed with things. It was just early on. It took him awhile to get in the groove.

Certainly, within the group – with people like Mark Harrington being so well informed, then it gave us the information – and me personally, gave me the information to take to my doctor and say, hey, what about this direction?

SS: Did you get into any trials?

RP: No, because I didn't do any western medicine treatment until after I'd moved here. I probably could have. I don't recall at that point. The various trials would have certain markers for your T-cell level and whether or not you'd had any opportunistic infections. At that point, my levels were still very good. I had not had, and still have never had any opportunistic infections, and it was not really in the mind to really do any treatment.

SS: Was there a sub-culture in ACT UP around alternative treatments?

Were there particular people who really emphasized that?

RP: Yeah, it seems to me that there were. It's just sort of this vague memory. I sort of remember a couple of people being extremely full-blown on alternative medicine, as opposed to western medicine. They just thought all of the western medicines were just too toxic and, in themselves, life threatening.

SS: And did they have credibility with the rest of the group?

RP: I think to a certain degree. The person we were trying to remember the name of – the guy who ran the AIDS treatment thing? I think he used to come to the meetings pretty regularly, and was always very informative on alternative stuff that was going on. And, I think everything was fairly well accepted.

SS: So, you never remember any kind of contentious arguments about treatment between people?

RP: I don't remember any specific contentious arguments, but there were always contentious arguments at the meetings. Most issues have people who are very pro and very con, and it's just –

SS: Do you remember anything that you were involved with that – do you remember any kind of debate that you felt strongly about?

RP: No, nothing specific. I don't remember anything.

SS: Okay, let's talk about the fun side of ACT UP.

RP: The road trips.

SS: The road trips. Tell us. Tell us about a road trip.

RP: Like piling 30 or so ACT UP members in a variety of vans and driving down to Columbia, South Carolina, for instance.

SS: Why were you going there?

RP: Let's see. It was anti-sodomy laws. I don't remember if there were separate road trips, or if it was all lumped into the same one. I know we went to Atlanta once or twice and then Columbia. The Columbia one was, like, half a dozen vans with each holding seven people, so there were around 35 people.

SS: And what happened when you got there?

RP: I think we went to support, probably, a local gay activist group who were trying to get their sodomy law struck down. So, we went and supported them and it just became – just participated in a civil disobedience, which they had organized.

SS: And what was that like? To go and see a small town gay community? How was it, when you guys met them?

RP: Well, I think we probably met at the first night at a check-in to our hotel and went to a small dance club/bar, and it seemed a very small town. I mean, coming from Manhattan, where we're all sort of jaded and used to Manhattan pace, South Carolina was pretty slow.

Tape II
00:10:00

SS: Had they contacted you, and asked you to come?

RP: I guess they must have, because at that point, other ACT UPs were starting to form throughout the U.S. And I don't know if Columbia, South Carolina actually had one, or if it was another – maybe it was Atlanta that organized – I don't know how we went in there, but they had planned the civil disobedience somewhere downtown, around the state capital, and we took part in the blocking traffic, sitting in the streets type of thing.

SS: And what was Atlanta?

RP: And we did a kiss-in.

SS: You did a kiss-in in Columbia, South Carolina? Do you remember who you kissed?

RP: I'm trying to remember his name. I have a picture, actually. I don't remember the names, but I can remember after we kissed, there were two cops on either side of us, arresting us and taking us away.

SS: You went to jail in South Carolina?

RP: Yeah. It was essentially sort of a cite-and-release thing. I think they bussed us all to a school auditorium or something and we had pre-planned that a certain number of people would get arrested and we just paid the fine and left.

SS: And what happened in Atlanta?

RP: What was the Atlanta action? I don't recall.

SS: So, if you were spending every night of the week at a meeting, and you were going on road trips with ACT UP, and ACT UP was what you were doing with your life, basically, were you also partying at ACT UP? And, were you finding boyfriends at ACT UP? Was that also your social and sexual life at ACT UP?

RP: It became pretty much the social and sexual life.

SS: So, what was it like?

RP: Yes, we ACT UP boys slept around.

SS: So, what was that like? Did you all get together? Did people get together after the meetings? How did that all work? I mean, people describe the meetings as being these big cruising sites. Take me through it a little bit, so people can understand what it was like?

RP: Well, at the meeting, certainly there would be people who would come more for the cruising element, because you would see people – rather than sort of sitting in their seat, paying attention – they'd be, like, working the crowd. I was a pretty focused person when I went to the meetings. I was there for the meeting itself, but certainly check out any new members and that sort of thing. But, afterwards, there were generally small groups that would go off to restaurants or bars afterward. We'd do that. So, the social part, for me, came a little more after the meeting, as opposed to during.

SS: Were there particular bars or sex clubs or places that ACT UP would hang out? Where ACT UP guys would go?

RP: I actually remember most of us going to a restaurant on Seventh Avenue – whose name would have now escaped me.

SS: Woody's?

RP: Woody's. Yeah. Woody's. Grilled cheese quesadilla and a couple of beers. So, that sort of thing, because I was never – I think, from time to time, I would perhaps go to a bar, but I'm not really a bar person, so I would sort of hang out at a restaurant or someplace for a while.

SS: Did people in ACT UP have safe sex?

RP: I would imagine some did and some didn't.

SS: So, it was just like the rest of the world.

RP: Yes, I think.

SS: Was there a divide between people who were HIV positive and negative, in terms of sex and socializing?

RP: I don't think so. I think it was something – because of our level of awareness and, I think, I would say that I would like to think that at least 90 percent of the people were participating in safe sex, irregardless of your HIV status. Certainly for me, anybody that I dated, it was not an issue – whether they were also positive or negative, and safe sex was just a given.

SS: So, when you were in ACT UP, how were you viewed by the rest of the gay community? What was your – do you think that it changed the way people looked at you?

RP: It's hard to say. I think within the gay community back then, it was just the party crowd that would care less what anybody else was doing. All they really cared about were their drugs and disco. When I was involved with ACT UP that was

principally my social environment. So, not being really a bar person, I was not – I don't know what the rest of them were thinking.

SS: Okay. Let's see, what year did you leave?

RP: I left New York in 1990. December.

SS: And, how was it to leave ACT UP? Had you already sort of absented yourself from there?

RP: Well, certain – it seemed like ACT UP was – I don't remember, really, what it was like when I left. I guess I was probably as involved, but not quite as much. Maybe I started to step away a bit because I moved here in November and I had decided in June that I was going to move, so I was already starting to be bi-coastal – there part-time, here part-time, and started to make the split. It was certainly hard to leave a lot of the friends that had developed during ACT UP – Debbie Levine, Richard Deagle, Mark Harrington.

SS: And when you came out here, did you get involved out here?

RP: Only very briefly, because here, when I moved here, it was sort of on or around the time that ACT UP/San Francisco and ACT UP/Golden Gate – there were two of them that were sort of butting heads. And, they seemed very counter-productive and not focused and back to square one, where'd we been in New York, four or five years ago, and I just didn't have the energy to start at square one. I was here re-establishing my life. But, that was back – I remember Gedali [Braverman] was involved, early on in the meetings. I would see him regularly.

SS: So, when you look back, what were some of the things that you're most proud of, that you contributed to ACT UP?

RP: Well, it was first and foremost – just proud of being involved with the group as a whole, and then just anything that we did – whether it was little action or a large action that gave one person a little bit more knowledge about the AIDS crisis.

SS: Are you taking any meds now that ACT UP was involved in getting released?

RP: Oh, goodness. I don't know. I am taking a triple combination of AIDS drugs. I don't know – they've only been around for a few years, so it may or may not have –

SS: Looking back, were there any kinds of errors that you think that ACT UP made?

RP: We made no errors.

SS: We made no errors. We were perfect.

RP: No, it's like any political movement group. No, there were no errors.

SS: So, why do you think it came to an end?

RP: Because it was successful in getting people to pay attention to the AIDS crisis – health companies, FDA. Stephen Joseph probably left. We probably got a new Health Commissioner that actually did something. Our voices were heard.

SS: Now, there are these lingering issues, and there's not that kind of movement anymore. There's global access problems, and the drugs are very expensive. Why do you think that the movement dissipated – even though so many things are still pressing?

RP: Well, our movement – a combination of, a lot of people died, and the rest of us just got older. And as you get older, your focus and attention has to change. It's

life, jobs, career – that sort of thing. And, I think it would take a segment of the population that is now the age that we were, when ACT UP was at its peak, to take on the issues. And, why there is not that group of people, stepping forth and doing that, beats me.

SS: Okay. So, you were there during the years when there was a lot of death – very rapid, and there were a lot of memorial services, funerals. Were you involved in people’s care groups inside the organization?

Tape II
00:20:00

RP: Yes, because we had – both in ACT UP and outside of ACT UP – I had a lot of friends who passed away, and I was involved with their care on various levels. We had one Wave III member – I’ve been trying to remember his name. He was an artist who had lived in a little storefront on the Lower East Side – and when he really became unwell, we were taking turns, going to his home and caring for him. But that became too hard, so he actually had to move in with me, and we made that the center of his care.

SS: Was that Brian [Damage]?

RP: Brian, yeah.

SS: How come you were responsible for Brian? What would happen to his family?

RP: I don’t think I ever met any of his family. I think that they were probably not living within anywhere close, or maybe they had no – they might have severed their ties with him, and we’d become his family.

SS: Was that typical? Were there a lot of people who had been abandoned by their families?

RP: I don't think it was typical. A lot of people's families were not actively involved, because they were – depending on where they came from – if they were Midwest families, they just didn't have the level of understanding of what the disease was all about, what the care involved, what the medications were. And we, as activists did, so we assumed the caregiver roles, because they'd become our family.

SS: And what was the consequence on you, of taking care of Brian or having so many people around you who needed your care?

RP: Well, it was something – it was a shared responsibility, so, it was just like looking after a member of your family. It was just something we did, so they were – individual was being loved and cared for.

SS: Do you think there was a cumulative impact on you or on other people?

RP: I think the only impact personally is the attempt to – what would be the best way to describe this? Made me a little bit harder. Because after countless people die, you just become numb to it. And, one of the last people I lost that had the most effect was Mark Fisher, and I think from that point, there was an emotional shut-down for quite awhile.

SS: Did you participate in any of the public funerals?

RP: Yeah, Mark Fisher's, we did. I did.

SS: Can you describe what that was like?

RP: Yeah, well, Mark's death was extremely painful for me, because not only had we been extremely close friends, inside ACT UP and outside of ACT UP, and part of Wave III, I was already living in San Francisco for a couple of years. And then, Mark

and I decided to take a trip to Italy together, and he actually got sick on our trip. He got an infection in a Hickman catheter that had been installed, prior to our leaving. And, that sort of aggravated his situation, and he went into toxic shock, and actually died on our flight home. So, I was reeling from about a week of dealing with all of that – being in a foreign country – these hospitals in Southern Italy that were just deplorable. You’d walk in, there would be dogs walking around inside the emergency rooms, and just so having to decompress from all of that and he actually died beside me on the flight home. I remember sitting at the actual service that we had in a church, somewhere on the Lower East Side – somewhere near Tompkins Square Park. I don’t remember specifically where it was, but still being pretty numb. But then, being part of the procession that carried Mark’s casket up to the Republican National Center – up in the East 50s? I just remember it being dark, sort of rainy, cold September. And just emotions from anger to severe sadness and just sort of going through the motions at the thing.

SS: And what happened when you got to this Republican place?

RP: I think we just did a sort of media thing. We didn’t try to get into the office. It was just sort of presenting to these people who were not doing anything. Here is a loved member of our family who has died; we want to show you. This is his body – and you killed him.

SS: So you showed his body, and then what did you do with the coffin and with him, after that?

RP: I think it had been arranged that a car from the funeral home met us up there and his body was put in the hearse and taken away for cremation.

SS: Was this his wish?

RP: Yes. Mark wanted to have a political funeral.

SS: And did his family participate?

RP: I sort of vaguely remember his brother being around, but I think, more after the service and the funeral. I don't know if he was actually there. We don't think his parents – I think they were pretty uninvolved.

SS: And what do you think was the function of a political funeral? Do you think it served the people who are part of it?

RP: Yeah, I think it served both the people who were part of it, and those who weren't, because, again, it was an issue where we had to do something as aggressive as presenting a body to the public, saying, this is actually the face of AIDS. These are people who are dying – just to get the message across that this is your situation, and for those of us involved it helped the whole healing process.

SS: Looking back, why do you think those people didn't care?

RP: It's a combination of ignorance, not understanding. I don't know – religious upbringings. Just narrow-mindedness.

SS: In all the confrontational work that you did, did you ever have an experience of somebody, before your eyes, understanding or coming around?

RP: I don't think in of any of the actions we did, because they were all too confrontational. Perhaps in smaller one-on-one conversation, but I don't remember anyone seeing the light before my eyes.

SS: Because, I mean ACT UP did change – we changed the culture and, do you think that people changed because they were persuaded? Why do think they changed?

RP: Well, yeah, at ACT UP, we were certainly persuasive in what we were doing. And, I guess, as I think of it, the friends that I associated with, who were not involved with ACT UP – they, through a course of time, understood more why we were doing what we were doing, and the purpose it was serving and the good it was serving and the information that was getting out – that seemed like more of a slow process.

SS: Do you feel that you've saved your own life?

RP: Yes and no. I may – I certainly do, just from the point of being active and involved in educating myself and deciding more for myself, as opposed to having a doctor decide for me when and how I should take medication. Why I've survived this long and as well as I have is one of those unknown things. Why do people like Mark Fisher die, and I'm still here? I have no idea.

SS: Okay. I just have one last question for you, Russell. What do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement?

RP: Single most?

SS: Or, what were some of them?

RP: Well, I just think that just the overall, of just making our society – whether it was the caregivers, drug companies, presidents – whatever – just making them pay attention.

[END OF INTERVIEW]