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Interviewee: **Lee Raines**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Lee Raines
June 8, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: So just start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

LEE RAINES: Okay. My name is Lee Raines. Today is June 8th, 2012. I'm fifty-seven. And we're on Seventh Street in the East Village between C and D at my ex-lover and friend, Jeff Griglak's condo apartment.

SS: Beautiful apartment.

LR: Beautiful apartment.

SS: Right, exactly. Where were you born?

LR: I was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C.

SS: And were your parents working for the government?

LR: My father worked for the government, for the Corps of Engineers. My mother was a homemaker, there were five kids, but she was also a part-time bookkeeper as we started going to school. But both my mother and father are from south Georgia, central and south Georgia.

SS: And is your family long-term south Georgians?

LR: Yes. My father was the rebel, the Yankee, of the family. He moved, despite great pressure from both of their families to stay there. He was the only one who moved. They're all still there.

SS: What made him escape, do you think?

LR: Well, I knew he had a job for the government, and it was through his passing — he passed three and a half years ago — that it was really revealed to me, and I always had the sense that he was sort of — he couldn't put up with a lot of the racism. He was much more — for a man of where he came from, took people at face value and

was remarkable in that way. He wouldn't tolerate any of the kids using racist terminology. We grew up in a Jewish neighborhood, and, yeah, he would call his brothers and sisters out on it as well, if we were down there. He wouldn't stand for it. His father was unusual, the same way. He never went to church, and he was a leading businessman in the town. So I come from a long line of —

SS: Troublemakers.

LR: — the rebels of the family, of a very conventional —.

SS: So were your raised with overt justice values?

LR: Yes, within — both my parents were heavily involved with the church, the Baptist Church, which was the American Baptist Church, separate from the Southern Baptist. But, yes, it was a very strict conservative — both of them. We went to church three or four times. My mother was a choir director. My father was a deacon.

SS: Which church?

LR: Baptist. You had the American Baptist and the Southern Baptist split over the issue of slavery, a rift that has never healed. In fact, I got married at Riverside Church, which is American Baptist and sort of a crusading, affiliated with the American Baptist Church. So the American Baptist has a history of sort of being a crusading liberal side of the Baptist Church.

SS: Was Maryland segregated when you were younger?

LR: Well, I grew up in Montgomery County, which was a very liberal — it was the Jimmy Carter era when I was in high school and college. So I think it was a liberal pocket of Maryland. If you go towards Baltimore, the Eastern Shore, it's Virginia, basically.

SS: So what messages did you get about gay people as you were growing up?

LR: I was terribly closeted, even though, thinking back with the benefit of hindsight, I think my father always knew and always had the door open to a conversation about it, and he was very — when I finally came out to him, I wrote him a letter, and he responded within a week with a three-page letter effusively welcoming me and praising Jeff, who was my lover at the time, and it was full of love and acceptance. It took my mother a little longer, but she got there.

SS: How old were you when that happened?

00:05:00 LR: I was out to everybody — I worked in the theater — except my family, and I remember I had — my first lover in New York died of AIDS, and he had to tell his his family. He was terribly closeted to his family, estranged.

SS: What was his name?

LR: Ricky Veretta. And he had to tell his family from the hospital bed that he was gay and had AIDS. And I said to myself, “I’m not going to let that happen to me. I’ve got to come out to my family.” And it was rough. It wasn’t easy.

SS: And you told them your lover had died?

LR: They knew about Ricky. They knew I had a friend who died, who was close, and that it was taking an emotional toll on me.

SS: What do you think are the long-term consequences for you or for any of us for having to have hidden something that traumatic?

LR: I’ve read somewhere that all gay people are mangled. I felt then that’s a good word for it, because, yes, even though people sometimes wax romantic

about the little community and how exciting that was to be part of that hidden society, I remember going to my first gay bar and thinking — in Washington, D.C., the Georgetown Bar and Grill, and thinking, “This is the most depressing, horrible place I’ve ever been in,” and I just wanted to get out.

SS: So you put yourself in the theater world which is the gay—.

LR: Well, which was a little haven, sort of like my family. I grew up with the Hollywood Palace and variety shows, and the minute the dancers hit the stage, I was all around the living room in that safe zone. But I didn’t — in school or outside of that safety zone, I didn’t — I felt like — both my brothers were married, butch, and I felt like I had to kind of be like them. It wasn’t till I moved — we moved high schools in my senior year, which was liberating in a lot of ways, and the first thing I did was auditioned for the school musical, because I felt —

SS: Which was what?

LR: Which was *Hello, Dolly!*, and it was a big deal because the Dolly was black and a sophomore, and then Horace Vandergelder was white. So it was a lot of — even in that liberal pocket of Montgomery County, there were people who had a lot of feelings about that. But she was so talented, she shut them all up.

SS: What year did you move to New York?

LR: I moved to New York on 7/7/77.

SS: Oh, wow.

LR: It was easy because I could come up from Washington for the day and see a show and come for the weekend and come for a week and stay in a friend’s apartment. So I could slowly acclimate myself, but I actually moved in ’77.

SS: And you were an actor?

LR: Yes. Once I did that musical, I found my passion, and I studied at the University of Maryland and Montgomery College, and that was all I wanted to do.

SS: So what shows were you in, in New York?

LR: The show I wanted to do more than anything was *Chicago*. It was the first musical I saw. The one with Chita Rivera I saw. It was the first musical I saw. I said, "I have to work with that woman, I have to do this show, and I have to get my ass out of Rockville, Maryland." And I did all three. But ten years later, we did it at Harrah's Casino with the original sets and the original costumes and [Bob] Fosse and [Gwen] Verdon and [John] Kander, and they all came, and it was the thrill of my life. But I worked. I had a good career. I was a chorus boy.

SS: Right. You had a blast.

LR: I had a blast.

SS: So when did you first become aware of AIDS?

LR: In hindsight, I remember even in a dinner theater in Washington, D.C., someone being out of the show, one of the chorus boys, and this was '77. And he had been out of the show and nobody knew why. He pulled up his shirt and he had shingles.

And I also remember in New York, a dance class, one of the best dancers in the class had pneumonia, and he was in the hospital and he came back. It was the kind of pneumonia they couldn't figure out what was going on. He was back and forth in the hospital. So even before *The New York Times* article came out, in hindsight, I remember

indications that were very vivid, that I remember that something weird is going on, because these people were in robust health. They were dancers.

00:10:00

SS: So when did you start to understand?

LR: Well, and I also remember vividly *The New York Times* article. It was on a penthouse on Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue. A friend of mine, Danny, had a job cleaning an apartment of this film director. So when the film director was out of town, we would all hang out there and smoke pot. It was the perfect arrangement. These views of Lower Manhattan, which were spectacular, and Marvin Feldman.

SS: I know who Marvin was. He was Cleve Jones' boyfriend.

LR: He was Cleve Jones' friend, yes. And he was always — we knew him through Danny, and Marvin was all the time, “Cleve. My friend, Cleve. You guys have got to come out to San Francisco and meet Cleve. You'll love Cleve.” And Marvin was our first close friend who died. What did we know? But he came in — he was much more political than we — we were chorus boys. What do we know? But he came in that day and said, “Have you guys read this?” And he showed us the article, which was a buzz kill. Of the five of us at that table, Jeff and I are the only two still alive. And Marvin was the inspiration for the National AIDS Quilt, we found out later, and then starred in a documentary, reading about Cleve Jones and his friend Marvin, and being inspired.

SS: Yes. My friend Erica Van Horn made his square for the quilt in my apartment.

LR: Really?

SS: Yes, actually.

LR: It's funny, because his quilt panel has pink triangles linked in Stars of David, and Marvin had come over to our apartment, and on the landings, each landing there are mosaics of Stars of David. When Marvin was very sick, we tried to talk him out of coming up. It was a fifth-floor walk-up. And Marvin was the type of guy who just — he was just feeling healthy, it was a great day. He was — there was no convincing him to go around the corner and just get a cup of coffee, so he made it up all those flights of steps. But it took forty-five minutes, and he would stop, and I remember him staring at the Stars of David and saying, "This is an echo of the Jewish history of the Lower East Side." It was very emotional for him and for all of us standing there watching him.

SS: So what did you do when you realized this thing was happening?

LR: Well, the first — I was in theater, so Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS started up, and I started volunteering for all kinds of things. A lot of it was going to memorial services. And as my sexual history, all my ex-boyfriends started dying, a lot of the key relationships in my life, and I would either go back down to Maryland and see them and care for them.

So I was very involved in that way, but I was very — Jeff and I were in a relationship, so I was able to tell myself that I had dodged the bullet, because we'd been together. When I got tested, it had been eight years, so I convinced myself, "We've been together eight years. If I was infected eight years ago, I'd be sick by now." So it really helped me build a very secure wall of denial.

SS: So once you tested positive, how did that change things?

LR: Everything changed because Jeff and I were sero-discordant. "Discordant" is a terrible word to use to describe a relationship, especially a long-term

relationship you've been in eight years. I remember he went in first and he was negative, so I assumed — I waltzed into that room thinking I'm going to waltz right back out. And I had to stop the counselor and say, "Are you saying positive?" because I was hearing the word "negative."

00:15:00 In a way, it's all I focused on. I thought how can that be true? It's not logical. It doesn't make any sense. So that's where I went into a zone of trying to figure out the logic of that, of how that happened, but — and this will segue into ACT UP because it was the night before the City Hall demonstration, which was my first arrest. I know a lot of people are probably telling you about your first arrest, but mine was very dramatic, because I thought — well, first I thought, "Well, should I go through with it? I can't back out at the last minute. This is my first arrest." We'd been planning it for months. We decided what to wear and where we were going to be.

Our group was Seeing Red, this affinity group, and we had decided we weren't going to block traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, because irritating commuters was not good. We were going to take our demands to the steps of City Hall. So we were way on the other side of City Hall where the fence was jumpable, and we were going to go across as far as we got and just read our list of demands, which was very symbolic, but there was no press there. It's like if an action happens in a forest and nobody hears it.

So god bless us, we did it, but it was brutal. The cops formed a line in front of us with machine guns, so we sat down in a circle and we started reading our — each of us had a demand to read about hospital beds and whatever. And they handcuffed us one by one, very professional, very easy.

As soon as every one of us was handcuffed, the cops, they went from zero to 100 miles an hour, red in the face, screaming, “You fuckin’ faggots. You’re all going to die. You cocksuckers. You have AIDS. You’re going to die.” Oh, I mean, dragged us across that line and threw us across the fence and into the paddy wagon on our back. We were scrambling to protect the other people being thrown in. I’d never witnessed such homophobic rage in my life, and there it was going.

Well, and after all that dithering about should I go through with it, because I had a friend — I think it was Patrick Moore, and I said, “What do I do? I can’t back out.”

He said, “Darling, it doesn’t matter if you get arrested tomorrow morning or not, but eventually you’re going to have go on living your life.” It could have been any number of my friends, but it was probably Patrick.

SS: What was the experience of being humiliated and abused and insulted because you were trying to stay alive?

LR: It happened so fast, and we were in such disbelief and immediately trying to help each other through whatever. We didn’t know how badly we were going to be hurt. I remember as soon as the paddy wagon door slammed, everyone was in such rage and was hot, and people were banging and screaming on the doors of the paddy — incorrect. The wagon. But as a result, once we were in the jail, it was sort of a party. We were singing show tunes, our —

SS: Back to the show tunes.

LR: Yes. It was really — there were five cells in a row. We could all hear each other, and everyone was cracking jokes. The guy who processed us, even the cop,

he was retiring in two weeks, and he was this chucklehead, making wisecracks, and didn't care. So it was a completely different vibe.

SS: And who was in Seeing Red?

LR: In Seeing Red, there was — I just found the list of it — Steve Nesselroth, Patrick Moore, Wayne Kawadler. I remember being in the jail — he really kind of calmed me down through it because I'm confessing to him that, okay, I'm freaked out because this has just happened. The last twenty-four hours have gone this way. He's a fantastic person. We formed a bond like —

SS: Wasn't he a schoolteacher or something?

LR: Wayne? I don't know if he's — he's had several things that he did, yeah, but I think he was with the Gay and Lesbian School.

SS: That's right.

LR: I don't know if he was a teacher, but I think he was an administrator for a while there, but yeah, he —

SS: So what happened to you guys? Did you have to go to court?

LR: I think we were given a desk appearance ticket and that was expunged eventually.

SS: Now, did your affinity group stay together after that?

00:20:00 LR: Seeing Red, we did several. I don't know if it was the same people, because I'm looking at the list and I think maybe they were. I remember we formed for that action and we were at the NIH together. We wore white lab coats with the bloody handprints on it, so those were very vivid. I remember Patrick had access to Dixon Place

and the costume department, and so we were making them there, and, it was — all of that was —

SS: So you were still putting on a show, basically.

LR: I knew it was a show, and I thought it was weird, without a set and lines to learn. Everyone's adlibbing everything. But I appreciated the theatricality of it, and I understood because I was a chorus boy. I don't think I ever spoke at an ACT UP meeting. I was even camera-shy in a lot of ways. My innate nature is shy. So the idea that people could stand up and speak off the cuff so passionately and articulately overwhelmed me every Monday night. I couldn't believe I was in a room with people that could do that, because I could never imagine myself doing that.

SS: Now, once you got arrested, I guess that makes it easier the next time, doesn't it?

LR: It makes it easier, and Jeff and I would sort of spell each other off, because one would be the observer of the group. There was always an observer in the affinity group. So if one of us was getting arrested, the other one wasn't. I was arrested at Grand Central, and Jeff got arrested at the NIH, and so there were several actions that we participated in.

SS: So where did you situate yourself after that? Were you on any committees?

LR: I was on the Outreach Committee.

SS: Let's talk about that.

LR: Okay. But, again, I think the great thing was it was a place for someone who just wanted to be a grunt. I worked in an office. I could do guerilla

Xeroxing. I could sell t-shirts with the best of them. I could wheat-paste. I could — we took over — we were both working at American Ballet Theatre, which is where we held an art auction. I think it was the second art auction in those studios.

SS: Oh, that's what the space was. Okay.

LR: And that's what the space was. They were ballet studios. When the company was out of town, the space was rented for Broadway shows, so Jeff and I, that was our job, to manage those rehearsal studios, and that was the guerilla action, because the executive directors had no idea that there was an art auction. They read about it in the paper the next Monday morning after it had happened.

SS: That's amazing.

LR: Yeah, it was — I couldn't believe. Now I think back and I think, how could we have done that? The general manager knew, we had talked to him about it, but, yeah, they would never have allowed it. It made over \$300,000. It was well run. We had tables and sets and we had microphones and we really put it together.

SS: Did Fundraising stand up and say, "We need a place for this auction," and then you raise your hand?

LR: I think they had had one art auction that was sort of success — they knew that another art auction, a little more professionally put together, would raise even more money, so, yeah, we raised our hands.

SS: Oh, so you're the second auction.

LR: Yeah.

SS: What was the address?

LR: The address? It was 890 Broadway.

SS: Okay. So this was the big one.

LR: Yeah, this was the big one, and the, there were about five or six ballet studios that they had. They were perfect art gallery spaces.

SS: Let's go back to Outreach. So what was the goal of the Outreach Committee?

LR: Well, I remember the leaders were Vincent Gagliostro and Victor Mendolia, and they kind of ran the show. Everybody voted if they liked the 'Know Your Scumbags' graphic and the text. And we all had input, but we provided the space. We had the offices of American Ballet Theatre at our disposal anytime during the week or on the weekend, so we used that. That's where Seeing Red met. What we could do, we did.

SS: Now, did your affinity group also function as a support group, like if someone got sick?

LR: I don't remember participating in that, and I don't remember anyone in our support group getting sick. I remember Mark Carson, who was in our group for a time, I remember when he died, and I attended his memorial service. But he had so many friends. He was a beloved, beloved member of ACT UP.

SS: I don't know who he was.

00:25:00 LR: He was, first of all, beautiful. He was a copy editor for *Seven Days*, fantastic magazine, and he was the guy — if you remember there was a Wigstock where a guy was gay-bashed?

SS: I thought that was Karl Soehnlein. Oh, there were two.

LR: Yes, right, there were two. So Mark Carson was one of them. We all went to the ninth — Seventh Precinct, whatever precinct it was, but Mark Carson was that guy.

SS: Okay. So what was an ACT UP memorial service like? Can you describe his memorial service?

LR: I remember a lot of memorial services, but Mark Carson's was at the Players Club right off Gramercy Park, and I remember someone telling a fantastic story that really says who Mark is.

SS: Tell us.

LR: He would talk about his notes, would be like dangling question mark. If there was a problem with grammar, it was just really well put and leavened and not hard to take that he was correcting you. And somebody said he was very organized. He said he had Post-It Notes everywhere, and it looked like a shambles, but he knew where every Post-It was and what it said. So he thought he'd play a joke on Mark, so he wrote down a phone number at random on a Post-It Note and stuck it in the middle of it. And he watched him and saw Mark notice it right away, pick it up, look at the number, and try and figure it out. And he picked up the phone and dialed the number, and the person on the other end knew him. I don't know what the guy's name. He said, "Johnny, oh, my god, your number was on my desk. I can't believe this. I don't know how this happened." So he knew a random number. I mean, he was a terrific guy. His father was a preacher. He told us one time in a car, who knows, coming back from some action or — about being gay-bashed and how horrified he was.

SS: What happened to him? Do you remember the story about him getting gay-bashed?

LR: No, but I remember he was jumped by three people. He was alone, and they had some kind of bat or metal pipe, and that he was hospitalized for a while. And I never really heard of anyone being gay-bashed that brutally.

SS: So would you say that most of your friendships and relationships were in ACT UP at some point?

LR: When Jeff and I were in ACT UP, and I talk about us as a dyad, because we were always together, yeah, it was our whole life. We were at every action and every meeting and every — on the committees, and we really threw ourselves into it with great gusto. I was still working in the theater, so I would go out and do a show for a few weeks and come back, but it was right back into ACT UP.

SS: Now, were there other couples like where one was positive and one was negative? Like, were you talking to other people about your situation?

LR: We weren't really. There were a few other couples, and couples kind of stood out in ACT UP, you know. It was kind of an unusual thing. One of the first things I noticed about ACT UP meetings that drew me to ACT UP — and I walked in by mistake, like a lot of people — the guys, people hugged, heartfelt, not sexual but hugging, and I'd never been in a gay atmosphere that wasn't loaded with sexual tension and friction and heat. Not that there wasn't plenty of that in ACT UP also, but it was very — amidst all the shouting and the cynicism and the tough-guy kind of stance, it was — the subtext was this is a support group and we love each other.

SS: Who were the other couples that you remember?

LR: Oh, my god. I have to remember. I'm terrible at names. One of the reasons I don't speak out in public is I can't remember anyone's name. But there were two guys and they live in the East Village, so I see them all the time, and I have no idea what their names are. But I think Jason Heffner was in that. I think he was in a couple also. Again, that's a name —

SS: It wasn't really like a couple kind of place, no.

LR: No, it wasn't. It wasn't.

SS: That's interesting.

LR: It was too sexy for that. Everybody was having sex with each other.

00:30:00

SS: So in terms of your treatment decisions at that point, were you looking to ACT UP for treatment decisions?

LR: Yes. I read the treatment and data bulletins like the Holy Grail. That's why — and I knew — and it wasn't — part of the reason I decided to get tested wasn't because ACT UP. They adamantly didn't take a stance on whether to get tested or not, but you couldn't be in a room where people are saying "Knowledge is power" over and over and "The personal is political" and, without that sinking in on some level.

And Martin Delaney from Project Inform came one time, and I remember the flyer he handed out, and I remember him giving a teach-in about testing. And he's this square-looking guy from California in a sweater. I thought, "Who's this guy come to ACT UP looking all square?" And he just looked like a nice guy, he looked like a rational guy, which is a drop of rain in the desert some nights.

SS: Right.

LR: We went to the teach-in, and he just laid it out. He said, “You want to find out when you’re healthy. You can buy yourself a year or two or three, and that could make all the difference.” And I needed to go to ACT UP to see, after I tested positive, to be in a room with people who were HIV-positive and as tough as nails and describing themselves as HIV-positive, being the toughest fighters I ever saw, and I would be — it was the same way I felt about Chita Rivera. She’s was a light for us, and I just wanted to absorb whatever I could from that.

SS: Who were some of the HIV-positive people who really stood out?

LR: Well, Peter Staley. And I had such an ACT UP crush on Peter Staley, I could not speak in front of him. And the funny thing is he lived across the street and his phone number was similar to ours, so we would often get phone calls and people would leave messages, long messages for Peter Staley, which gave me an excuse to call Peter Staley and give him a message, leave a message on his machine and say something. But, yes, we would take pictures of him, make photo books of him. It was insane.

SS: True fandom.

LR: Yeah. An ACT UP crush like a schoolgirl.

SS: He was the Chita Rivera of ACT UP.

LR: I’m turning red now.

SS: So what treatment decisions did you make?

LR: Well, I also — and this was — there was always a learning experience. My friends who were HIV-positive and had gone through it, I knew that I was going to care for them, but on some level I must have known that they were teaching me, from Marvin to Danny, because Danny would say, “My doctor, he has an open slot.

Take him. Call him right away. The slots are going.” This was Dan William, who was the best AIDS doctor in the world.

SS: Who was your doctor?

LR: Dan William. He’s no longer practicing, but, yes. And, being in New York, being in ACT UP, having access to all the treatment and data information, all the information which I just read over and over trying to save myself, but I knew I could never — there was pressure for me to go home, and I knew that meant — and my mother was saying, “Come home. We’ll take care of you.” And I knew she thought being HIV-positive meant I was going to get sick fast. It was a nine-month — I remember someone saying that the average time is nine months, which is human gestation period. So I said, “No, I’m going to give birth to myself.” And I kept giving birth to myself and surprising myself with that.

SS: So how did you make a decision about AZT?

LR: That was tough, and I think that it was a tough decision in a lot of ways, first of all, because at every ACT UP meeting somebody was standing up saying, “It’s poison. It’s toxic. People are dying from AZT.” But it was the only choice, and I trusted Dr. William, and he laid it out for me. But it was like swallowing a cement doorstep. And my doctor said, “To avoid any gastrointestinal problems, eat a little, then
00:35:00 take the pills and it was three times a day, and then eat a little more.” So I was eating an entire meal, taking the pills, and then eating another entire meal, three times a day. So I was so nauseous and bloated in two weeks. And I was a dancer. Putting on ten or fifteen pounds is like cutting off your foot in terms of a career strategy, and it just made me feel terrible.

And it was difficult because it opened — it blasted a hole into my relationship with Jeff, because he didn't want me to take AZT, and I understood why he didn't, but I put — well, I listened to Jim Eigo. I knew I had to do something that — there was a virus in my body, and it wasn't sitting around waiting for something better to come along.

SS: What was your dosage at the time?

LR: Well, there were two pills, whatever it was. Two pills three times a day.

SS: And what were your side effects?

LR: Dr. William also said a lot of people feel euphoria, mild euphoria, because it's the first step you're taking. He says it's a very psychologically weighted decision, because it means there's something serious and I'm taking serious measures against it. So I tried to dismiss all the anxiety, but it was tough because — it was toughest on my relationship. Jeff and I had a great relationship. We're still great friends. And it exposed — you don't think about when you're starting a relationship, how do you feel about Western medicine? How do you feel about the pharmaceutical industry. And I was on the other side of that pill bottle. It's easy to be anti-AZT until you're faced with a decision, and my T-cells, which were high, like 700, slowly declining to 500, and that's when we had decided, okay, that's when I'm going to take steps, and that's when I did.

SS: So when you started taking it, did your T-cells go up?

LR: Yes, they bounced back up to 750. I'm very fortunate. My T-cells have been pretty high all along, and I've had great doctors. The thing about the pull to

New York and to be in ACT UP and to be in the middle of it is you're getting the information hot off the press.

SS: But, I mean, it was confusing information because ACT UP was fighting for drugs like Dextran Sulfate and things that didn't pan out.

LR: Right.

SS: And we all remember the famous Larry Kramer Compound Q speech. I mean, did you go through those drugs?

LR: Yes, I went to every — I went to every teach-in about every one of those drugs, and, luckily, I wasn't faced with those decisions, but I knew the ins and outs of it. I would sit up till two a.m. reading them over and over and over again, because, yes, you had to — I had to sift through a lot of conflicting information.

SS: What did you decide to do after AZT? Did you do the whole DDI

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LR: Yes. I was on three — I was taking twenty-one pills a day, and they had to be refrigerated at one point, and some you had to eat and some you had to not eat. I was carrying it around with me on the road, and I was working for a while at Time, Inc. I had a little mini refrigerator that I had to — but I was very disciplined. I don't know how people do it, because I also realized I had to get healthcare, so I was temping at Time, Incorporated, which has terrific healthcare, and the minute a job opened up, I was there lickety-split, and it worked out well.

SS: What was happening in the theater community? Were people hiding? Obviously, some famous people died of AIDS who were lying, I mean.

LR: The theater community is — if New York on the East Coast was ground zero, you go to the theater community and it's a deeper dive. I would go to memorial services, and you would find about two or three other people you would find out who were either dead or HIV-positive.

There was overwhelming — the memorial services were beautiful. Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, which I did a lot of volunteering for, too, opened their hearts. It's a very generous, open, loving community in that arena, and everyone, everyone was dying, and the potential, all these talented people were just — and there was a point in my life where I stopped going to shows, because I would see a show and I would just see ghosts. It would just remind me of all the people that I'd worked with, and I'd watch the show and just think about —

00:40:00

SS: But all these people died in the closet. I mean, Michael Bennett and Raul Julia.

LR: Right. So there was that, too, because on one level when you're in the dressing room, when you're a chorus boy, and I was one of the people — my first lover was like an ad, was ACT UP in a bottle. He was this wunderkind, super talented director, choreographer, performer, and he was always — he took me to the March on Washington in 1977. He would broke no quarter.

SS: Who was this?

LR: His name was Jeff Moreland. He died of AIDS, tragically, and had terrible authority issues. He could speak out at an ACT UP meeting like — and we were crazy in love. He'd take me to New York for the weekend and steer me to Christopher Street and grab my hand and not let go, and send me into a state of shock, but—.

So in those terms, I was pulled out and I was not going to go back, but, yeah, I knew that on the outside, outside the dressing room was a very conservative business, because people were trying to get commercial work. Not everybody was happy being a chorus boy. They wanted their career to advance, and that meant going into a realm that was very conservative. You had to — they would say, “Butch it up,” over and over and over again.

That’s one of the reasons my career was going, I could say lines and I could — pretending to look like my brothers. I knew how to be straight, and most dancers, you couldn’t give them a script, really. I was a comedian, and a lot of it was just getting a laugh, too. But, yeah, there were two extremes of the giddy joy of being a chorus boy without a care in the world, and seeing people terrified, super talented. The more talented they were, the more likely they were to be confronted more directly with the issue of being gay.

I mean, Mark Fotopoulos was one of — I had known him when he was in the closet. He was one of these actors, and he would do this thing that I could not stand, and I liked Mark, and he was amazingly talented, but actors after a show or at an audition, they see you, and they stick out their hand, so you’ll shake their hand, so you can’t hug or kiss them. I’d be like, “I don’t want to kiss you.” It would just — you know. It would really irritate me.

Then I was watching Gay Pride, and he had that sign “Living with AIDS.” Once you turn the corner on that, there was no going back, and it was so — we became very close, because I was openly HIV-positive, and we did benefits for Broadway Cares together. We’d be singing together and rehearsing together.

SS: I want to ask you a few things about Mark, because we have a lot of footage of him. What shows was he in, do you know?

LR: He was — the first show I knew of him being in was *West Side Story* on Broadway. He has a lot of Broadway credits. He was also in a production of *Pal Joey*, which he played Joey, which a couple of my friends were in and we went to see. He was in — I think he was in a production of *Harrigan 'n Hart* at Goodspeed, or he auditioned. I remember being at the audition with him, and he'd be so supportive, you know. Be at a callback, and he'd be going, "That's great, you got a callback." He was really a wonderful, wonderful guy.

SS: Because, you know, in the footage of him, he's always alone with his sign, right?

LR: Yes.

SS: And the years and months keep changing, and then one day he just disappears, and it's like I never associate him with other people in ACT UP. He was doing his own action or his own performance.

LR: Yes. He was very close with Vito Russo.

SS: Okay.

LR: And, yes, there was a remoteness to him. You had to — I feel fortunate that we were in positions where we were rehearsing together, rehearsing together. But I don't know. Yes, that sticking the arm out wasn't just being in the closet; it was he walled himself off. And I don't know. His mother was a nurse. He died horribly.

00:45:00

SS: What happened to him?

LR: I don't want to betray any confidence.

SS: Okay.

LR: But it was described to me of him being — they didn't know what to give him, and he was so strong. He would be this guy with such dignity who I don't think I ever heard him use foul language, had to be strapped to the hospital bed, screaming obscenities at anyone who came near him, "Why are you letting them do this to me?" Even his closest friends, if they called, he would just let forth a volley of — It was antipsychotic medication, everything they gave him. These dancers, if it was gastrointestinal, it's harder to operate on muscle, and so it would be really the operations themselves would be difficult, and the healing.

SS: Because one day he just stopped coming.

LR: Well, he moved to San Francisco.

SS: Oh.

LR: And his mother was there. That's where she was a nurse. And I remember I was doing a show in L.A., and I drove up to San Francisco to hope to see him in the hospital, and only family members were ever allowed in. So it was kind of a bust.

SS: Yes. What about Aldyn? Did you know him as an actor, Aldyn McKean?

LR: Yes. I didn't know him as an actor, but, yes, I remember him. I remember him from the art auction, because we put the stage together and we had to tape these cables together and get his microphone set up and everything. He was a fantastic performer, just from him doing those ACT UP auctions.

SS: So did ACT UP ever do an action that you disagreed with or had trouble with or that you thought was a bad idea?

LR: Yeah. I guess I was conflicted, like most everybody, about the St. Patrick's Cathedral action. It's funny, in the theater it's easy to be an opinionated liberal. In ACT UP, I was thrust into a situation where people were arguing passionately and believing they're right or wrong. And there were, yes — confidentiality is important, but so is everything else. People were arguing points that were right, and some would take precedence over the other.

My feelings about the church were intense, and, yeah, I felt like the cardinal then, like the cardinal now, is doing horrible things, but I was on the outside. Jeff was actually on the inside on the — he didn't get arrested, but he was — I forget what his role was, but he got in this suit, and all the cops were talking to him as if he was another undercover cop, because he looked just like — It was kind of a funny thing.

But, yeah, I remember being on the outside, and I remember cops — a cop coming up to me, who was undercover, talking about looting. And he passed by two or three times, like we were going loot Saks, like trying to instigate and instill. I kept saying, "What are you talking about, looting Saks Fifth Avenue?" But you could tell that he was a plant, trying to do that.

I remember at Grand Central, some guy who was like a commuter at the top of one of the stairs just jumping down and being passed down to try to get — but the same guy went up two or three times, and he was like kicking everybody in these hard-soled shoes. So I realized this is an undercover cop who's just kicking people. I have a lot of feelings about policemen.

SS: That's okay.

LR: I hated cops for a long time after that.

SS: Fair enough. I mean, one of the things that is so prevalent in ACT UP experience is that here we are, we have these very rational requests, right, basic research, all this kind of human compassion, and we're so violently opposed by the government, by our own government. How did you process that, or how did you experience that?

00:50:00

LR: I grew up believing essentially in authority and believing essentially in the — I was upper-middle-class life where I thought the state was good. And it was after my arrest that I realized the state isn't going to offer me any compassion. That's how my world view kind of changed dramatically, because of the arrest. But I also realized that it's like America. We want security, we want freedom, we want a lot of — there are a lot of ideals that are all good, and they're going to be in competition with each another. During times in our history, some are going to take precedence. There are some people — and there are times when people's confidentiality is going to be paramount, and there are times when pulling people out of the closet is going to be more important.

So I think what I started to understand in ACT UP, that it wasn't that one person was absolutely right and one person was absolutely wrong. It's that they are all right in certain ways, and that's the organism that America is, that's the organism that ACT UP was, that's the organism that we all are, that the world is, and, yeah, it wised me up politically because I'd never been thrust into that. I went to Gay Pride and I thought it was one big happy family. It's easy to think we're all one big happy family being in the theater, and I realized very quickly, but no. The whites don't like the blacks. The

women don't like the men. The rich don't like the poor. The young don't like the — we're like the rest of America, and we were in that room, and we were putting that on the back burner only because fighting AIDS was more important.

I think that happened right after Stonewall and it started to split right away. You realized that there were people who — we are racist and sexist and shallow like everybody else, and if you put it us in a tight box, those things are going to create friction. It's the same as World War II. There was an era of great feeling, and it fell apart. It was worse in the fifties after everyone came back. It was one of the most repressive times in our country's history.

SS: Well, when did you leave ACT UP?

LR: I guess — I guess I started drifting out. I think I got a show in Chicago, so I kind of — and then that went on for a long time. I think I was in Chicago for a year. As it was starting to dissolve, this nasty book was going around. I don't remember. People were just saying horrible things.

SS: What book?

LR: It was a book where people would say anything they wanted to about people personally.

SS: Oh, *Tell it to ACT UP*.

LR: *Tell it to ACT UP*. And we had them in seventh grade. They were called slam books.

SS: Right.

LR: Because you would write them, and then you had to slam them before another teacher came in. And people — it just reminded me because there were people

that I loved in seventh grade, and I was entertaining, and then I would turn to a page of someone that I really thought was the greatest girl in the world, and read horrible — the nastiest, horrible things. And it pushed those buttons to see that book being passed around, and it just made me — it turned my stomach, and I would just — it was — I shouldn't say this. I think ACT UP on a certain level — and I know you're going to be giving me backlash — we were trying to rewrite our high school history. I think we all had damaged high schools. We could be the cool kids. So they were — And we were all — every group was cool in its own way, and that was exciting. You know what I mean? Going out and being a juvenile delinquent and wheat-pasting and yelling at cops and all that kind of stuff, it was an opportunity for me, anyway, and it seemed like I wasn't the only one to do that.

00:55:00 But it also was the bad part of high school, you know. It became cliquish and it became all those — all this fighting AIDS is more paramount, which is in the beginning, and maybe it was just too hot not to cool down eventually. Maybe that's what its purpose was, but I really thought we can be a beacon for the world. This is fantastic. I'm in the middle of the universe, in the eye of a hurricane, and it's the most exciting place I could possibly be. It was straight across Thirteenth Street. I lived on Thirteenth Street, so it was just ten blocks. So, yes, it was — it was sad —

SS: So like what year did you stop going?

LR: — to see that go. And I guess that was, what, around '92, '93, somewhere in there.

SS: Right. So I only have one question left. Is there anything that you think we need to talk about that I haven't brought up?

LR: No. But after suppressing it, I think for fifteen years, I really walked away from it and I couldn't think about it. And then when my father died, luckily, I could be there for three months, I had a sabbatical from work, watching his organs shut down one by one, hearing the words Bactrim and Septra, hearing his death rattle. And he was ninety-four, he had five kids, he had a fantastic life. I have nothing but respect for him. But going through that process of him dying unearthed all those poor, sad, unfortunate boys bursting with life. So I had buried it, but nothing is ever buried. It's all just under the surface.

SS: Do you think that people understand what you went through, people who you meet?

LR: I don't think there's any way to describe it, and I think that's why, getting on Facebook and seeing you guys and all the ACT UP people again, it opens my heart in a lot of ways, because I can't walk away from that experience. It was the pivotal experience of my life, really.

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

LR: I think the greatest achievement was creating something that moved us forward in a place that was all memorial services and just kind of dealing with grief, into a place that was pushing things, actually fighting, using the word "fight" as a metaphor in a place where it was all desolation and desperation and sadness. I wish it could have lasted forever. I wished it could have held the promise. I wish we didn't have to have our backs against the wall to both to pull together as a community.

SS: Okay. Thank you, Lee.