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Interviewee: **David Robinson**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of David Robinson
July 16, 2007

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

DAVID ROBINSON: Okay. So my name is David Robinson. I'm 42 years old. Where we are: Los Angeles, California; my home as of a few years. And today's date is July 16th, 2007.

SS: Okay. Before we get into all the background and everything else, I would just like to know how you started wearing dresses as facilitator of ACT UP.

DR: That's a great question. Probably something you'll find throughout the interview is, I'm weak on first occasions, but –

I was in dance school at the time — or taking dance classes at the time — and exploring the relationship between movement and gender; gesture and the way you hold your body. So I'd started thinking through some of that stuff.

You know what? I can't remember how I started the first time. What I remember is, after the first or second time, Michael Nesline and Avram Finkelstein pulling me aside, and giving me lessons in how to walk: how to walk in heels; how to wear drag better, is what I remember. I started doing, earrings is actually where it started. Because I had had my ears pierced, and the initial trajectory before I was really out, just doing the left one because that didn't say anything; and then getting the right one. So I started wearing the earrings, and it got really good response. People really liked, they got very elaborate; eventually those great clusters, and I had chandeliers at one point. You name it. Jewish stars a number of times. And I just wanted to take genderfuck further.

So I didn't often do full drag, but I did skirts, or carrying a purse.

SS: But were you already wearing dresses before you were facilitator?

Like when they voted for you, did they know that you were wearing dresses?

DR: No, no. Definitely not. It happened during that year.

SS: And did you wear them to the Center, or did you put them on when you got there?

DR: At first, I put them on when I got there. I was living in Hoboken.

SS: Oh, okay.

DR: So I would take the PATH train. I'd have to walk to the PATH train, then I'd take the PATH train, and then walk from there to the Center. And so initially, I was really worried about that. And so I would bring whatever the outfit was for the evening.

But then I started experimenting with wearing it out in public. And I discovered I'd have to do that only when I was in a good mood. Because I attracted a lot of hostility if I wasn't projecting, I'm totally cool, and there's no problem.

And once, actually, the way that my parents found out that I was wearing dresses was my dad showed up unannounced at my apartment once, to drop something off — because they lived not too far away, in New Jersey — and I open the door, and I'm wearing the one that Avram always called the dirndl.

DR: The long, gray — I wasn't all that stylish all the time — in fact, most of the time — but there I was, in that.

SS: And what did he say?

DR: He just kind of looked, and he, he sort of laughed, and he was fine with it until he went back home and talked with my mom, and she was freaked, she was really afraid.

SS: Do you still wear dresses?

DR: No, I haven't in years. I miss the occasion – I was never good at putting on my own makeup. So I lack that gene. Michael Perelman did it for me a few times, particularly around Wigstock and some other times. I never knew how to do my own wig or my own hair. So to do full-on drag, I usually didn't think I did it well enough. But I wasn't, you know what I say about being happy. The stuff with my later years with ACT UP were so unhappy that I didn't have that kind of –

SS: You let it go.

DR: – yeah, energy to do it.

SS: Isn't there a famous painting of you in drag, that Michael Perelman did?

DR: Michael Perelman did. I don't have it here, it's still in Arizona, where I was teaching. He did an almost-life-size portrait of me, wearing a big green dress, putting on this tulle wrap, with cluster of faux pearl earrings and white gloves.

SS: Because I remember, I know you danced with Doug Varone at one point, or he did something at NYU.

DR: He came to, oh that's right, he came to NYU and set a piece on our company.

SS: Because I mean, that was a moment. It's interesting, because the way I remember about the way you did drag was it was never about passing, ever.

DR: Right, right.

SS: And that was a very special moment in avant garde dance, and in downtown arts; where there was this kind of new category being created, about how people presented gender in their artwork. And I'm wondering if that came out of working with specific choreographers.

DR: No. It didn't come out of working with particular choreographers, but one place where I got to work out some of it was the two years I was in school at NYU, at Tisch, we had to do a, for the masters program in dance, we had to choreograph something. And I discovered pretty quickly that I was a dancer; I was a pretty good director. I could work with other people's stuff and help shape it. But I was not good at making up movement.

So choreography was just agonizing. And actually, the only thing, I discovered I really wanted to, I wanted to choreograph something with meaning, not just abstract dance. So I ended up doing a solo about this issue of – gender and movement, in which I attempted to move back and forth between masculine and feminine movement, with some autobiographical words; spoken text mixed in.

The one, I'd say the one influence that was pretty big on me was Mark Morris.

SS: Right.

DR: So –

SS: Because he was having men with lipstick. Yeah.

DR: And he was – it was really, though, for me, more, what I was more aware of as constricting in the dance world was that even though it was filled with gay

men — and obviously some lesbians, but the gay male thing was pervasive — it still wasn't on stage most of the time. So you could still count on one hand — I ended up doing a piece on same-sex partnering in modern dance for, I think, the *Windy City Times*. And you could, I was able to count on almost one hand the number of pieces in which there would be some sort of same-sex partnering. And Mark Morris's company was, at that time, unique for anyone on the stage could be partnering anyone.

So that really struck me. But the gender — there was one piece by Joe — San Francisco choreographer; I can't remember. And the piece was called something like, *Twenty One Effeminate Gestures*, or something like that. And that was really — for me, that was very powerful. But I didn't see that till later.

It partially came out of, for me, there I was, this completely openly gay man, by that point, in the dance world, in dance school; all these people around me were gay. I was in ACT UP; blah blah blah. And I was constantly lifting and catching women, on stage. So working through some of that, and working through the pressure that there was in dance training not to appear effeminate.

Because I was a sissy, growing up. I was, that was the formative, for me, the formative gay identity was sissy, even before I knew what gay was. And to be in a world that was so filled with gay men, and yet to feel that subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle pressure not to be effeminate. Even though my first ballet teacher in New York was *the* most stereotypical ballet queen; down to, he was French; he had the most outrageous French sissy accent; he lived in the Village, and I saw him on the street a couple times, walking his poodle. It was just over the top. And he would — may he rest in peace — he would manage to touch the men quite a lot in class, and he just treated the

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women like, forget it; you shouldn't even be here. And yet, he would criticize you if you seemed to be effeminate.

So I think that's where some of it came from.

But in ACT UP, there I was with – it was from doing the facilitating. It really was from, I think, the responses I got with the earrings. And then knowing that I was something I had wanted to try, and here was a place I really could.

SS: But when you were growing up – and I know your town was Livingston, New Jersey, but I don't know if it was a suburb or a small town.

DR: It was a suburb.

SS: So what do you think came first; dance or gay, for you, as a boy?

DR: To tell you the truth, they actually, I can go back really early to both. Very young age, attracted to men, without quite realizing what that was. But my first sexual experiences, for me, were really at age nine and 10 in summer camp, with — I wonder if I should say his name. He's probably not — this boy named Robbie. Who, he and I fooled around way, and we were prepubescent, but got tiny little hard-ons, and were very aware that this was something, I was very aware this was something really exciting and special, and of course also had to be kept completely quiet, it was something secret. And that was before any awareness of the word “gay” or anything like that. But at that same time, I used to, my parents'll talk about me sch-pringing around the house.

My brother and I would do little performances to *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* or *The William Tell Overture* or *Nutcracker Suite*. And I loved doing dance to those things.

SS: Well what did your parents think when you were like, Mom and Dad, I want to be a dancer.

DR: Well, I didn't say that for a very long time. And when I made my first move; when I first started considering it, I was really, as I hit the early teen years, I went – this is one of those things where you look back, you think, how could everyone not have known?

I went to my parents. My parents had a record rack down in the living room, with all their records. And what were the things that I completely independently, with no guidance, pulled off there? Barbra Streisand was first. Broadway albums. Bette Midler. I'm sure Judy [Garland] would have been there if they had had any Judy. They didn't have any Judy.

And also, the local library did a film series, of Hollywood musicals. And so my friend Louanne Ambrosino and I went. We were the only people under 50, in the basement of the library, watching these musicals. And in particular, I loved the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers musicals. And I decided I want to take tap dancing lessons.

So in seventh grade, I took a year of tap. I was the only youth in a class that was for adults. Absolutely loved it. But then became aware of homophobia.

There was a boy in school who had been doing ballet for years. Doug Something-Italian — who used to be in the Nutcracker every year when that was performed in town. And then when he hit junior high school, he took up smoking and just became as much of a hood as he could be, because he got all this flack for it. And I got the message, I think also from my family — I think, really, from my mom — that maybe this wasn't the greatest idea.

And I'm not even sure if they really said it; if I just imagined that that would be the reaction, or if they really did try to steer me away from it.

So I went more into doing, like at the Y, doing musicals. But not dance. That seemed even gayer than doing musicals.

SS: Well, weren't they concerned that you wouldn't be able to earn a living?

DR: Oh, well when I came out of college and I said I wanted to dance, they were, in fact, yes, very concerned.

SS: Oh, because you were a dancer as a graduate student.

DR: Yeah. I started dance in college.

SS: At Berkeley.

DR: For, for real. No, undergrad was at Princeton. And just before Princeton started, I took, during the summer, I did, I took a ballet class at the New Jersey School of Ballet. And then when I enrolled at Princeton, they had a gym requirement, a phys ed requirement, and you could take ballet.

So my roommate and I took ballet. And he was a very sweet straight guy who had no rhythm and was short and stocky. So he lasted whatever; a month or two. I really loved it. And then, there was a teacher, Ze'eva Cohen — this Israeli modern dancer — who was so inspiring; who just, there I was, I was caught. I loved it. Modern dance was — I took my, I had AP credits, I had advanced placement credits, so that I was able to take off a whole semester sophomore year, and do whatever I want, because I had already satisfied those requirements. So I went and moved back in with my parents, and I took dance classes in New York.

And I'd have to come down — I had gotten into a student dance group, on campus at that time, called Expressions. And had been very nervous about auditioning. And I'd gotten in; was so happy; but I'd been with them for a semester, and when I took that semester off, they had a rule that you had to be, you couldn't take any time off before having done two semesters in a row, like a solid year with them. Otherwise, you'd have to re-audition. So I was desperately afraid they'd make me re-audition, and I wouldn't get in. So I would come down every weekend. And also was visiting my girlfriend at the time. We can, whatever, get to that.

So I would go to the Expressions rehearsals on the weekends, and then the rest of the week, I'd be in New York. But little did I know: if you were a man, and you could walk across a stage and not fall down —

SS: You could get past.

DR: — you could get, heh heh, that was, it was ridiculous of me, but —

SS: So you didn't come out until you were in graduate school.

DR: I came out — it was all torturous; all crazy. I ended up coming out in high school to my group of friends, senior year, because one of the friends in the group had come out to everyone in 11th grade. And our little group of — we weren't quite nerd — we were called Brains. So we did Model UN and Model Congress and we were in all the AP classes. We were a nice little multireligious mix; not multiracial, but multireligious. It was a very white town. But it was Jews and Catholics and Protestants. And we were, really, I guess, a little progressive — we weren't politically active, but we were clearly, in some way, accepting. So my friend [C]arl, uh, [Wickert] came out to everyone. Six months after he came out, I got the nerve to come out to the bunch of them.

But my parents found out that summer, after I graduated. My mom said that she, that I had left my journal open on the desk or something, which was totally not true. She said, no, the cleaning woman. The cleaning woman had left it open. So I came home one day from summer camp, where I was a day camp counselor. And suddenly, the house was like a tomb. And she had already known. She, she had had my dad ask me, somewhere around January of senior year, if I was gay. And at that point, I wasn't, I had not come out to anyone, so I just said, no, I'm not. And then in June, she had him ask me again. And you can already see the dynamics of the family, right? Not very direct, or – indirect.

But she had him ask me. And by that point, I had already come out to people. I didn't want to lie. So I said, I already told you, no, which was technically true. And I was working up to coming out. And then instead, the response I got was, we, of course we love you — right? — but we're just really sad that your life is going to be so hard, and then how do you know that you're gay?

P.S., they kind of guilt-tripped me. I was a very good boy. So they guilt-tripped me into seeing a psychiatrist. And so I saw a Freudian psychiatrist throughout all four years of college. Who had me, like –

SS: While you were –

DR: While I was at Princeton – he was located there. He had me dating women. Because we already knew that I was attracted to men, and the question was whether that was genuine — really, my genuine orientation — or whether it was actually a response to fear of women, or anger at my mother.

SS: So he specialized in making the heterosexual –

DR: No, he just took this case on.

SS: Oh, okay.

DR: Years later, I ran into him. Okay, the great thing was, he did at least – the way he got me hooked, the way he got me to cooperate, was we spent the first half-year exploring my anger at my parents. So, that was great. And then he had me, essentially, okay, so don't see men; because we already know you're attracted to them, and that will muddy things. You should just try to see women.

And I was aware that it was cold-hearted. It was like, so I'm dating – the first woman I dated at Princeton, when she actually, after we had dated for a couple months when she wasn't willing to have sex, I broke up with her. Because I was supposed to be having sex with a woman and then coming and telling him; having a whole relationship; he gussied it up, he prettied it up. But then I ended up getting involved with a woman at school. We fell in love with each other. But we eventually saw a sex therapist on campus, who was this minister. He was one of those hip, guitar – he probably didn't play the guitar, but he seemed like, he ran the peer-to-peer counseling program, and he was also a sex therapist, and – it was, we tried really hard.

So I saw, that was going on all through college, until she graduated. She was a year older. And I spent senior year in those, in my psychiatry sessions – it wasn't, I guess, it was only once a week, so it wasn't the full-on psychoanalysis. But I told him, at the beginning of senior year; I'm gay. I don't care if I could be bi or not. Because that's what I, that was the deal at the beginning. I said, I don't want to not be gay. At most, I'm maybe willing to explore if maybe I'm really bi. But I, I was adamant; I didn't want to be straight.

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And so that last year, I said, I don't care; it doesn't matter if I could be bi. I'm gay, and I want to feel good about that, and not be afraid of what people think.

So then I came out, senior year.

I had already come out a little – so it was like out, and in, and out.

But that psychiatrist, so I ran into him – when I was with Warren, with my first, really, long-term partner. I brought him down to Princeton, to see where I'd gone to college. It wasn't far from New York. And we ran into the psychiatrist. We were walking down the main street in Princeton, Nassau. And I was wearing – one of us was wearing a Silence Equals Death — oh, because it was reunions. We came for reunions. Which is a big deal at Princeton.

I was wearing a Silence Equals Death T-shirt, and he was wearing a Big Fag T-shirt, or vice versa, we're holding hands, walking down Nassau Street, and there is this psychiatrist, whose name, to this day, I block. And he was all, oh, hello, isn't it nice? And I was so angry at him. I ended up writing him this eight-page letter about how he was guilty of professional misconduct, and he would never have done this with a straight person who had been sent in there by their parents. Ooh, I once got slightly hard, or wet, looking at someone of the same sex. Oh, well maybe you're homo! So, because that was the thing. I had once kissed a girl – at Cornell, in the summer program, I kissed this one girl, and got a slight tingle. And so this was a sign that I could actually – and that was really the level of –

SS: Did he answer your letter?

DR: He just said, well, I disagree with you, but I wish you well. It was that, the extent of that.

SS: That's an annoying response.

DR: Yeah, it was totally annoying, it was totally annoying.

SS: By the time you got to dance school, you were gay.

DR: Totally. Because, so I ended up having this – because I was really ready to come out, in high school; and then had, ended up back in the closet for most of college; through what was then, really a long, painful period; especially being involved with a woman that I really cared about. I came out to her – after we were together for whatever it was — about eight months or so — things weren't; I had always said, if things go really well or things go really poorly, I'll tell her. So when they were going poorly I told her; she broke up with me; and then several months later, we were back together, because we really cared about each other and blah blah.

So I was so ready to be completely out – it felt like I had just, it was four years after I had been ready for that — that the minute I got out of college, I was raring to go –

Can I say one thing about – if I – to give this doctor a credit for doing something that he did not actually intend to do. It's actually because all that, that I am convinced that I'm HIV negative.

SS: Because –

DR: Because, like most of the gay men that I subsequently met who were at Princeton, I wasn't going into New York to have sex. Because that's what most of these – there was one – some of the guys who were in ACT UP, and I'm blanking on their names. But there was one group of guys; four of them were roommates. And I think three were gay; and they weren't out to each other. And they were all separately

going off, usually to New York. And one of the dancers, one of the student dancers from Princeton — Jason Jones, I think, was his name; he was a great dancer — he died of AIDS not too long after all that, and it was the same pattern. Just, that was where you could be gay; off campus.

SS: So you knew about AIDS while you were at Princeton?

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DR: I did know about AIDS, but I didn't — I didn't know, had no idea how serious it was; how fast it was spreading, how — my friend [C]arl, the one from high school, tells me he remembers when we, we went to New York one year — it must have been one summer, when I was still in college — and we went to the Gay Pride parade. And someone came up to us with some flyer or something about GRID. And [C]arl remembers it really clearly. I don't, at all. I know that the psychiatrist raised it as an issue for me. And I was like, I'm not doing anything that — forget it. I had sex with men during that one period in college, in sophomore year, when my girlfriend and I were broken up. So — her name is Janice. When Janice and I were not together, I had sex with, I think, three guys. No, four; because the second one was actually a threesome; a couple. And I got fucked without a condom in that encounter. And so that's how little I actually knew about safe sex.

So I'm just convinced, if I had, at that point, I just didn't know, I didn't have a sense of really the enormity of it, or the risk. So if I had been going into New York to have sex —

SS: Right.

DR: — it would have taken me a while to learn.

SS: But once you were living in New York, and you were dancing, and you were out, when did you start having personal contact with AIDS?

DR: It was really ACT UP. Because I wanted to find gay liberation. I looked for a gay liberation group. So I graduate in June of 1986, from Princeton; moved to Hoboken; was taking dance classes, because I had decided I was going to be a dancer, give that a try. So I was taking dance classes. And then, the second half of that year, I actually got into a company. I did a season as a guest artist with Senta Driver. So I was with her company for a season. And then I decided I wanted more training.

During that year, when I was taking dance classes, working as a waiter and a bartender in Hoboken, I looked around for gay liberation. And I guess I arrived in the city, it must have been the end of the summer, because it was after the Bowers versus Hardwick demonstrations that all happened. I missed all of that. And instead, I got there – visited CLGR, the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights — and I remember, it was Andy Humm; an older woman named Eleanor something?

SS: Cooper. Yeah.

DR: Eleanor Cooper; and maybe two other people. And it was the most depressing – it was just moribund. It was like four or five people with, there was no life in that room. And I won't say there, Andy ended up getting involved in subsequent things. So clearly, he's someone who has energy and drive and whatever. But that group at that time was just – so I remember being thoroughly depressed after that. GLAAD was, the leadership or the board, or they were denouncing each other on the front page of the *Native* every week, because I had heard about GLAAD, so I thought, okay –

So I went to a number of these things, and they were awful. And then what kept me going – I didn't know gay people. My straight roommate from college — the one I had taken the ballet class with, and who I'd come out to that year — we moved in together in Hoboken, and then we developed a lot of tension. Because he took a job with an investment bank; and was going kind of that route. I was, gay, gay, gay, except for I had no outlet for it. And in the dance world, I was this nothing baby fag, intimidated by everyone.

I used to hang out at A Different Light. Mark Owen worked there; Maria Maggenti worked there. That cute little boy James something worked there. So I would go to the bookstore. And I watched *Eyes on the Prize*, on PBS. And *Eyes on the Prize* kept me going.

I remember seeing that, and thinking, okay; people have fought against things much worse than I have experienced. Right? And they've created this change, and they've – so I know it can, it can happen. I just have to, literally, keep my eyes on the prize, I have to – keep looking, and something'll happen. And it just happened that I was in the subway, getting off the subway, in March of '87. I saw a flyer announcing a massive AIDS demonstration on Wall Street. And it was the flyer for the first ACT UP demo.

I thought, AIDS? I don't know. I really want, I wanted to find a gay liberation group. AIDS is a narrow, specific issue. I want the – but I went to the demonstration. I stood on the sidelines. I didn't, I didn't know anyone, and I had never been to a demonstration. I kind of watched what happened. And went to the next Monday-night meeting.

SS: What was the demonstration like?

DR: Very noisy; very hard to get a s-, even a clear picture of. I remember, I couldn't even really see the arrests clearly. There were just bullhorns and I remember whistles and – a lot of noise. But – I didn't – something about it clearly attracted me, even though I was – I don't even think I chanted. But the energy definitely got me to at least go to the meeting. As I said, sort of thinking, well, AIDS is not really the issue I wanted to work on; I wanted gay lib. But – it took only a meeting or two before I – Immediately I saw how enormous AIDS was; that this was, if you were going to be gay and politically active, how could you not be doing something AIDS.

SS: What was the meeting like?

DR: The meeting was really, really interesting. Tim Sweeney was facilitating. And for the first, like, several meetings, it was Tim and this woman – I think it was Vivian – I keep wanting to say Vivian Shapiro, but someone's told me that's the wrong name or something. But it was a woman who had also, like Tim, a woman who had been, she was a lesbian, she had been active in the community for a while, and the two of them facilitated. And – the first thing that impressed me was that they were immediately – there was all that action. They were immediately planning more actions. It seemed like anyone could speak.

And I had done – so this is how I became really involved. Because again, I knew no one.

Mark Owen came with me to the second demonstration, the post office demonstration. And just to show you how ready – I had so much longing for this — I

was immediately in the street at the post office one, being, I got dragged by the police.

That was it; I was full-on, let's go.

And the way I got into facilitating was –

SS: Wait, wait. Can we just go back to the post office?

DR: Yeah.

SS: Can you explain what that demonstration was for?

DR: It was tax day. So – what is that? — April 15th? So we had an enormous, an enormous envelope, like a letter, addressed to Reagan, at the White House. And the idea was that tax money, our tax money should be going for AIDS. Because at that point, still, the amount the government was spending was pitifully little. And of course, Reagan hadn't even spoken the word "AIDS" yet. And so the idea was, there's always — this is again, how smart — I love this — how smart ACT UP was about the media. There was this ready-made opportunity. There were always these, the night your taxes are due stories. There are always those canned, stupid things where the media there is at the post office. And this was the main post office in Manhattan, the one on Eighth Avenue and Thirty-whatever; right opposite Penn Station. So people figured out, yeah; okay; this is the perfect place and time to have a demonstration that will, at that point, the demand is so, in some ways, so nebulous, or "more money for AIDS." We were still at that stage, where it was about putting AIDS on the national agenda; making sure people thought of it.

SS: So what did it feel like to get dragged away by a police officer?

DR: I was so angry. Because they were so gratuitously – nasty and – they obviously weren't, again, I had been watching *Eyes on the Prize*. I knew – okay, I didn't

get clubbed over the head; they didn't treat me like Fannie Lou Hamer, right? But what they did do was show us that they thought we were shit. And this cop grabbed me by the jacket, and just yanked me across the street. And I remember, it just tore the whole back of the jacket. I wasn't arrested. They cleared the street that way. They just sort of like manhandled us out of the street. And that pattern – I had been – you know that book, *The Best Little Boy in the World*?

SS: Yeah.

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DR: That was one of the early gay books I read, and that was one of those ones. At the time, it hit me, like, this is me. Years later I went back and I read it, and it was a lot of stuff, I thought, oh god, this guy's politics are awful! But I remember, so much of it struck a chord: that I had been this – perfect child. At one point, years later — post-therapy, talking to my dad — I mentioned, brought this up. He said, oh yes, you were! I only remember you getting angry – he remembered these two times where my brother would say, I dare you to hit me! And we weren't allowed to fight, so I wouldn't hit my brother, and that's how good I was. We weren't allowed to fight, so I didn't – fight. I didn't drink until college. I didn't smoke until god knows when. I didn't try pot until ACT UP. Maybe Max, Mark Owen, or Maxine; those are the two possibilities.

So I had been this totally, totally good kid, living in suburbia. My dad's a doctor. And we started out, my parents were both working class. And so when I was younger, my dad worked at three different hospitals. He worked nights and weekends. But by the time I was in high school, he had a practice with a few other doctors. We were professional class. And the police had never been anything but – okay, fine, no problem. And then I saw something like *Eyes on the Prize*, and okay, I saw what the

police did to black protesters in the South. But my very first interactions with police really were like that demonstration.

And you gotta hand it to them; they remained consistent throughout my entire – any time, at every demo I have been to, the police have chosen to escalate. When offered the chance to sort of let something happen, and minimize the confrontation, or else to escalate because they wanted to boss you around, they always chose, someone.

Now of course there were always some individual police who were nice. Right? But overall – and they would lie about what they did.

So that was like {SNAP}. These lessons, I just kind of, I had been so primed, without realizing it, that one after another.

Also, Bowers versus Hardwick had hit me really hard. I remember having this big — it wasn't all that big, it was quick — but intense argument with my father when that decision happened. I remember saying, I feel like going out and blowing up a building. Remember, this is before I'm part of any activist organiz-, I feel like going out and blowing a building.

How could you, how could do that? That's terrible!

I didn't know at this time also that they had voted for Reagan the first time.

SS: Oh.

DR: They were lifelong Democrats. And they voted, in 1980, for Reagan. By '86, something had shifted. So they didn't that time. They went back to being Democrats. And they have remained staunchly Democrat ever since. But – he said, my god, I could never, how could say – I said – don't you get what the Supreme Court just

said? That, that – I, I could be arrested for having sex the way – I probably even said, making love the way is natural for me?

Don't – how could you even think that my relationship to this whole government, this whole country, is the same as yours now?

And I remember to his credit just kind of went; oh, I never thought of that.

SS: So it's like your major dialog was with your parents.

DR: Initially.

SS: Yeah.

DR: Initially it – Maria Maggenti proved to be transformative for this. Because my father – my parents never said anything homophobic throughout my entire growing up. My father, though – I remember, this is like one of those things where you pick up what their assumptions are. We were once watching the Miss America Pageant. We'd always root for Miss New Jersey. Because it always seemed like Miss New Jersey never won, and she was never really all that attractive, and whatever.

So my dad, I remember him pointing out some, one of the women, and said, oh, isn't she beautiful? Wouldn't you love to have a date with her? And my parents also were, they would never have said something crude. So, just wouldn't you love to have a date with her?

And I remember, it was so crystal clear: it had never occurred to him; it had never occurred to him that I might be gay. So that's where things were with my dad.

With my mom, we were best friends. I was the one she confided in. And sometimes, she was actually the one I confided in. And so she – she was not, this whole thing about when they found out I was gay, it was my mom crying and, da-da-da-da-da.

And then, when I decided, okay, I'm gay, and that's it, with that senior year of college, so I told them: there's no discussion over it anymore. I'm gay, and – I can also add there was a little satisfaction. They paid for that therapy all those years, which –

SS: I was going to say, it's quite an investment.

DR: You know it. And then, for like the next, until I was solidly in ACT UP, our relationship, there was very little to talk about. Because there was this just silence. They avoided — again, it was my mom who'd be the one I'd talk to more. She just got really uncomfortable and wanted to avoid the subject. And when I told this to Maria – when I had been in ACT UP probably several months, half a year, and my whole life was ACT UP, so it was ludicrous to say that – you couldn't talk to me about anything that didn't touch about gay something. And Maria said she had cured her mother of that problem by shoving it down her mother's throat. So every time she'd talk with her mother, Maria would say, dyke this, and dyke that, and, until her mother said, why, why do you have to? Well, until you can talk about it normally –

Well, I was nicer, so I didn't do that. What I said, I just said, flat out to my parents — it was really to my mom — I just said, I'm giving you an ultimatum. You're going to lose me. I would rather have no relationship with you than have this empty relationship. So either you start dealing with the fact that I am gay, and it's my, thorough – it's thoroughly part of every aspect of my life; or we have no more relationship.

And she turned on a dime. It was like, it just took her being told, that's it. Either you have a gay son, whom you love and accept, or you lose me.

SS: Do you think you would have been able to carry that out?

DR: It would have taken me, oh yeah. I would have carried it out for quite a while. That I know. Because it was just too painful. It was too, it was surreal, talking to them during that year, with what was going on. And just the change – within a year, the next year, they were marching with me in Pride. And my mom's chatting with Harvey Fierstein, offering him a piece of fruit, literally.

SS: So when you started facilitating; you have the inside view on how those meetings ran. Can you just tell us the whole thing? Like how the agenda got set, and yeah – how a meeting was run.

DR: Well first, how I got to be a facilitator –

SS: Okay.

DR: – was, it was really early on. It was – with Tim, Tim Sweeney and the other woman facilitating, initially, every week. They asked for volunteers to do this. It was just too tiring. And I had done Model Congress and Model UN, and I knew Robert's Rules of Order. And I had already gotten through my fear of public speaking through those sort of things. The first time I spoke in front of a big group in high school, my leg was shaking. And someone in the front row said {WHISPERING} look at him his leg's sh- --

I remembered speaking and not know what was coming out of my mouth, what words, and then somebody's pointing out my leg's – being terrified. And so I just sat down, and – but I worked through that, through doing those things. So I at least knew I could get up in front of a room, and I knew Robert's Rules, and so I felt, otherwise I felt like I, what can I contribute to ACT UP, because I didn't know anything about AIDS yet;

and I didn't know anyone there; and I was so young. And these people seemed to me so much older, most of them. So I volunteered to do that.

And – they didn't really give, there wasn't really any training. They just said – I don't think that even the Coordinating Committee really was fully formed yet. They may or may not have been. But basically, what I remember most clear about how that happened was, you would have some sort of — certainly once the Coordinating Committee had been formed — you would have the agenda that they had made up, that had been brought to them by the representatives of each of the standing committees. But then you'd arrive there early, so that people could come up to you and also ask to put other things on the agenda.

And already, this was one of these moments where – some people in the group perceive the facilitators as having a lot of power. And you did actually have power—

SS: Because you decided the order in which things were discussed.

DR: You did decide the order. On the other hand, you had been given, you were told what really had to be dealt with, and it was really – figuring out how, what needed what amount of time, and what was going to be contentious and what might not be. And between the two facilitators, sitting there and conferring about, could we find something that would bring people, maybe, into a better mood after this particular item, which was probably going to be really contentious. And really trying to balance all those things on the agenda, and looking at the time. We were supposed to be doing – initially, people didn't want a two-hour meeting. I think by the end, by the time I moved out of New York, they were usually about four-hour meetings.

SS: How many people at a meeting?

DR: By the end? I left, I moved to the West Coast in 1990, in the summer, early summer of 1990, and wasn't back again until, like, '93. So when I left, it was the height, still. FDA had happened; NIH hadn't. So they were still building to that. If I remember, I think NIH may have been that fall. They were still in the midst of having – usually, four or five hundred people at each meeting. Before a big action, it might even be more like, I remember somewhere, I think it was more like seven hundred and, yeah.

SS: So how did you decide who to call on, if there are seven hundred people there?

DR: By that point, that was incredibly difficult, when it got to that number – so we would, some of the guiding principles for that were, you try to balance sides of the room, obviously; we weren't favoring any particular side of the room. Try to shift – if there had been a number of people speaking in favor of something, would solicit, even, okay, is there anyone who feels differently. Because one of the values was, you knew that not everyone felt comfortable speaking out, and especially with – some people will talk about the groupthink in ACT UP. And I actually disagree. I think it had an ethos that worked against that, for quite a long time, where all the facilitators I worked with – that was one of the things we articulated very clearly; that you had to make sure that people who felt differently were encouraged to speak. And then trying to see if it had been all men speaking; see if, do any of the women want to say something? And particularly once we had a really active Majority Actions Committee working on, quote unquote, minority issues — but obviously majority issues, hence their name — trying to look for any silenced group was one of the criteria. But then you also had the thing about

if someone felt really passionate about something; you knew that part of the reason for speaking was to express what you were feeling, so you really tried to also let people who were feeling very passionate speak, and then figure out, how do you cut them off and shut them up.

SS: How did you do that? How did you make people stop talking?

DR: Sometimes by – initially, it would be like – jumping in, and saying – something like – I’m trying to, it sounds fake now; it usually didn’t sounds therapy-ish. We managed to be, remember, for quite a while, when I was doing it, so I’m wearing earrings or a skirt or something like that, and you have someone like Maria –

SS: Who was your cofacilitator, right?

DR: Maria was often my cofacilitator. We worked really well together. Sometimes it was Nesline. It was a number of people who had kind of – performance backgrounds, or something. So with some sort of humor; or sometimes just kind of – initially it would be with humor. I can’t believe I have to cut you off, but we have to let other people speak. And then you would try to tur-, and – if someone wouldn’t, you had to sometimes say, I know you feel strongly about this, but you have to let someone else speak now. Your time is up. And you would turn to someone else. Obviously — and I know this has come up in other interviews — Larry [Kramer] would be one to abuse this.

SS: Right.

DR: Larry would stand up on his chair, and launch into something. And – the thing about, the reason I stayed – so my really heavy involvement with ACT UP before moving away, it was from that, from the meeting after the first demonstration up until early summer of 1990, when I moved; I was facilitator a lot of that time. And the

reason I stayed with it was because it was so clear that it was a contribution that I could make. I was certainly not – I was not the only really good facilitator. But I saw the difference that really good facilitation made, and I saw what happened when you had bad facilitation.

And we learned really early on that, like, Robert's Rules of Order was just a jumping-off place. Maria is the one, I actually think, said, joked one time; we would explain to you the little spiel at the beginning, welcome to ACT UP, and we had the thing about AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, and you'd give the tag phrase; it was a diverse — I can't remember — group of individuals united in anger, whatever, committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. You had this series of standard things you went through. One was, if there are any on-duty members of any law enforcement agency, you are required by law to identify yourself now. No one ever did. And actually, I don't even know that that was true, they were required by law to do that. But we said it, and then we would say; of course, just because they don't say they're here doesn't mean they're not here, so keep that in mind. And there would be some other ground rules if there was going to be filming that night. You might say, listen, part of this meeting may be filmed. If you don't want to be on camera for any reason, we reserve this side of the room for that.

You'd go through the whole series of things. We would explain, we operate on a loose version of Robert's Rules of Order, which we called Roberta's Rules of Order. And I think the first time it was just, we were saying, I remember, I do remember saying: we operate on a loose version of Robert's Rules of Order. And Maria just going, yes, Roberta's Rules of Order!

And what it meant was – Robert’s Rules of Order are designed to create – the idea behind them is it’s supposed to make things totally fair. Because everyone knows the rules, and there’s this, it’s been fought through for any possible conflict and this is how – the only thing is, it’s only totally fair if everyone in the room is a master of Robert’s Rules of Order. Otherwise the people who know it well totally dominate.

So periodically, there would be tension where there’d be someone in the group who wasn’t getting their way; or was just a stickler for Robert’s Rules, and who would get annoyed that we would depart from it. There was even a period of time where I actually did some facilitator training for people who try to get other people involved, and teach them. And one of it was, your job is, your major job is, there you are, in the midst of these things –

Two major jobs. One is morale. You’re really just trying to, in the midst of things where periodically people are standing up and shouting: People are dying, I can’t believe you’re – blah blah blah; or someone who’s getting really hostile or whatever. You’re trying to keep people – I discovered I was able to make them laugh sometimes. Which really – that mattered. That really, that really helped.

SS: Do you remember a specific debate that was really, sticks in your mind?

DR: It was later on, with one of the – with one of the guys from TAG, and I block his name, because he was really pretty mean – it wasn’t one of the people I’d, he came in a little later. It wasn’t Mark Harrington or Peter Staley, whatever. He was tall and – he may have been named Kevin Something. But they wanted something approved. They brought something. And it was very contentious. And I had to do the sort of stuff

that you would do. You'd stop in the midst of the substantive debate, and say, hey wait; there's a process issue.

Oh, and I had learned about process, just the concept, from a feminist professor in college. Right? I had a bunch of feminist professors in college who introduced me to that notion; that the process might actually –

SS: Who was your professor?

DR: Elaine Showalter.

SS: Okay.

DR: And so we'd stop and say; we need, wait; it's sounding like there are actually two things going on here. We need to separate them. Would it be okay if we – or this is what I suggest. Sometimes we'd actually say, we need a three-minute break for the facilitators to confer, and to actually just stop and figure out a process to make whatever it was happening. So sometimes it was dividing two issues; sometimes it was saying, okay, look; we can take 10 more minutes on this. And since it's so hot, we'll have, we'll switch off. Positive, negative, positive, negative. Or say, we're looking at the time, and there's no – it really seems like there's no way we're going to get through this now, and maybe this needs another – going back to committee, and coming back.

And you would offer to the group some process alternatives, and have them vote. Because the idea was that – it wasn't as if once the agenda was set, you couldn't cha-, you had to change it. And I remember what this guy accused me of, he was like, I was in favor of that other side, and that I was railroading this through, or I was blocking whatever they wanted, or something like that. And he wrote this scathing letter

on the back table, where there would be those letters back and forth sometimes. And then I wrote one the next week, explaining exactly what we had done.

And I don't remember the substance of the issue. I remember that it was just that that particular proposal, they didn't get what they wanted, and there was creative facilitating at the moment. And they were not happy with that. We also –

SS: Do you remember a specific debate?

DR: Where those became – well, I remember one early on, which was a little – my – I think it was my first time facilitating. It was either my first or my second. The New Alliance Party came to ACT UP to, it must have been that AIDS Bill of Rights, or whatever, that they wanted ACT UP to adopt. No one knew who they were. We literally had no idea. But there was one white guy who had, he may have been dreads, or big, big curly, messy hair. And they definitely had some – one or more black people who came with them. They presented this as if, oh – it was just, ACT UP should endorse this, whatever. And literally, the room did not know who they were.

And so, bless their hearts, we're not willing to just immediately endorse it. And they began to abuse everyone, to, got more and more hostile, and you know how people in ACT UP, their response to that then was, who are you, what are you doing? Why are you, why don't you get out of here?! And they finally just brought it to a vote. And the group, at that point, voted against it. They subsequently, it was brought back, and the group voted for it, and then I know that they revisited it later on, but initially voted against it; or voted not even to discuss it, because they didn't have enough information.

SS: Right.

DR: And that one guy, that one white guy with the big hair; as he left, and he pulled me aside, and he's like: This is exactly what, what happened in South Africa! This is – I was 21, and my first meeting.

SS: Well, let me ask you a bigger question, then. Because I guess what I'm trying to find out is: ACT UP had a progression, a political progression. And there were a lot of drugs-into-body issues; there were advocating for certain kinds of drugs to be researched.

DR: Right.

SS: I mean, Garance had Countdown 18 Months, and it was all the preventative medications were addressing OIs, and all that kind of – Were any of these choices or steps forward debated? Or was it just on the step by step? Would you have discussions about, do we want, yes, okay.

DR: Definitely.

Tracy Warez: I've gotta change tapes.

SS: Okay.

DR: I'm going to get a little –

SS: Think about that. Okay, think about that.

We're going to change tapes. But try to think about specific discussions about policy, and stuff like that. Because you have–

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: Okay, so let me re-ask that. Were there total vision discussions, or trajectory discussions that you facilitated about where ACT UP was going?

DR: I'm trying to remember if there were ones that I actually facilitated. I tend to have, unfortunately, a better memory of meetings, of the substance of discussion where I was not facilitating.

SS: Okay, then tell us one of those.

DR: So one was about our approach to, so we had the drugs into bodies discussion. We started to get into lowering the price of AZT. And that precipitated really intense discussions about, did we have any business – some people were adamantly opposed to AZT. Some people, even early on, thought it was poison. So the idea that we would be advocating to lower the price seemed to some people totally, totally the wrong approach.

And then even when we agreed – it took us a while to, I remember that it took more than one discussion to really solidly get to consensus that what we were supposed to do was to advocate for individuals' right to make choices with the most options and the most information possible. So that it was not ACT UP's place ever to recommend any particular treatment. But that if any PWA wanted to take AZT, then, the price of it should never be a barrier.

But then we even got to the sort of discussion that becomes partly about your tactics. So when we were talking about lowering the price of AZT, we had a discussion on the floor about, well, should we, what should the actual demand be? And

some people felt very strongly, well, you should, the price of AZT should be cut, 25 percent –

SS: Right.

DR: – or 50 percent. And part of it was there were some people there whose approach was, you have to go for what's realistic, what's really achievable. Because one thing that made ACT UP different from a lot of left-wing political groups was, we weren't about symbolic demonstrations. You weren't going to go and – I don't want to – and circle the Pentagon and attempt to levitate it, as actually looking back, it's actually pretty funny and kind of amazing that people thought of doing something like that. But that wasn't our approach, that we're going to do something where you knew that actually the Pentagon was not going to capitulate to you. We actually went into most of the demonstrations we were doing believing that we could actually get our demands met. It just might take a while, but we could get them met.

So that some people then translated that into, oh, should you really figure out what is a realistic amount that the price of AZT will be dropped.

And I remember that it was something Maxine said that shifted it in the room. Where she said, why don't we demand free AZT for those who want it? The point is, we should put out there what it should be, and know that we're going to get less. But that it's, it's like haggling.

And then I thought, I am such a terrible Jew. I, haggling was so – my parents had assimilated enou-, gone up enough in class that they would not have bargained in that way. So to this day, I'm not somebody who negotiates well that way.

But I got that politically. Yeah, why don't we demand that, and maybe we'll get a 50-percent reduction. Right.

So that was like one of the ones where people had to figure out; oh, part of the ethos of the group is, we can actually expand the, we can expand the realm of possibility by pushing for things that at this point people are telling us are not possible. And most of the professional AIDS organizations operated much more on the, if you demand too much, you'll fuck everything up.

Tape II
00:05:00

And this later on, with the AIDS Cure Project; that became one of the key things, where everything had shifted.

But we also had fights, and there were fights for a while over whether to have an office; whether to get a Xerox machine.

SS: What were the arguments?

DR: Well, so – initially – that we did so many actions, particularly those first few years. I think the first year there was an action every two weeks, really; some sort of action, big or small. And that involved intense volunteer coordination, and people just pitching in in all sorts of ways. But as we got into the bigger campaigns — like against the FDA; against the NIH — the whole long series of CDC, changing the definition — things that stretched on quite a long time, that were much more ambitious — some people felt it became, it was too much of a struggle to have to go through all this organizing just to get your xeroxes made, and that you needed things done more quickly, and that this could really make us more efficient, if we had an office. And maybe even paid staff. And that was e-, then that became —

Other people argued — and this is, I agreed with this side — that one of the most amazing things about ACT UP early on was that it didn't matter who you were; there was going to be something you could do to contribute. And there were some people who were not comfortable speaking in front of the whole room, or getting arrested, or whatever. But they could stuff envelopes. They could come to a poster party and make posters. They could do guerilla xeroxing. And that was really valuable; to make it possible for people to contribute in those variety of ways, rather than there is this one office staff now.

And when they did get an office. Other people could volunteer. But again, that meant you had to be able to have the time to over there, to do it there. And then it became this standing expense. And for the first time in ACT UP, one of the things that was extraordinary was we were spending money as fast as we raised it. I know that eventually we had money in the bank account, especially after some of the big — my sense is that the big auction, the art auction, was a real turning point. But for quite a while, it was just, we have to go down to D.C. We need to raise the money. And you would just, you'd pass the hat.

For a while, when Keith Haring was alive, he was one of a group of anonymous donors; people in the back who sometimes, I remem-, so clearly remember that feeling of — I don't remember which of the actions it was, but we were discussing, we had to send buses down. And at that point we had no money in the bank. And this is, we had just done whatever demonstration, that depleted our resources. And, and people began to get really upset about, what are we going to do about money? And then they would start to talk about all, this issue, that who could afford to go and who couldn't, and

– and a note; somebody brought me a note, and just said: the cost of the buses has just been donated.

And then I heard through back channels that that time it was Keith Haring.

SS: Because he was in the back of the room?

DR: He sometimes was there. He was sometimes in the back of the room, early on.

SS: So you're saying that there was a lot of money and privilege in the room.

DR: Mm. Something that – I mentioned when you arrived today. I'm suddenly in a new career. I've been a professor of English literature and lesbian and gay studies for whatev-, seven years, and I'm trying a new career. And I'm working with people who, it's economic justice for people here in L.A. who are especially facing displacement; threatened by gentrification. So it's a real poverty-based movement. And from the first moment I – met a lot of the people who I'm helping to organize and work with, I was just struck with – how far away from power they are. In ACT UP, we had people who ranged from – there were some people who actually were either on the street or one step away from it; people who slept, were living in different people's apartments; people who were living in, basically, you were temping or working a job that was just paying enough to get by. And then there were people who were living that life, but had, like my parents' backgrounds so I, I always knew that if, god forbid, I lost my job, whatever, I would always have a place to go. So I always knew, that was clear, that I was never going to be out on the street.

Then there were people who had some of the, the people who still were living the kind of Boho, East Village life, who had trust funds. Right? So we had some Rockefeller money and some other money, and right; in the background.

Tape II
00:10:00

And then we had people who had just, middle-class jobs; very successful jobs, and then real wealth. And it meant that – there was something really important – I actually think it was a lesson for some of the feminists. Some of the women who had experience in feminist movements, where you didn't have those resources. And sometimes money was like, that means – ew, you must be a kind of sellout group. Was that there, for a while, was this real share-the-wealth ethos. That the lesbian feminists in particular brought to a higher level of consciousness. The pay as you, more if you can, less if you can't, was totally because of lesbians in the group. Who would say, if you were doing an event; if someone can't afford, they should be able to come in free. But if someone could afford more, you encourage them to give more. But the idea that money was not something to be ashamed of; it was something, share these o-, some people have access to this; great. Other people have this artistic talent; great, use it. Other people can do guerilla xeroxing. Great.

And the thing was, initially, donating that money, and the fact that a lot of those early donations were just anonymous – meant that those people didn't get to control what the money got spent on.

SS: Why was it anonymous?

DR: Because some people really had, clearly had that kind of, I think of it as being a real mensch.

SS: Oh, I see.

DR: That, there's – I always remember, from synagogue, noticing there are all these, always honoring people in the back, so and so, for giving. But then there were some people who would give anonymously, and that always struck me. And that was, I remember even once being told in Hebrew school, that was actually supposed to be an even bigger mitzvah.

And so there were some people in the group who – didn't want to, it really wasn't about taking credit.

Anyway, that also made me think of something that also struck me. At one point, that first year, us, particularly getting to know Maria; I got like a crash course in feminism and reading stuff left and right, and at one point, I read about the Jane Collective, and that the women had been anonymous. And that something that was so –

SS: But that was for legal reasons.

DR: Yeah, but even – maybe it was. Maybe —

SS: Yeah.

DR: But it felt like the fact, I couldn't imagine a group of men being willing to – forego the, the attention.

SS: Okay.

DR: So maybe, Maybe I'm a little wrong. {LAUGHING} The last illusion shattered.

SS: Shattered. So you said that your whole life became ACT UP. Is that literally true?

DR: Well, ACT UP and dance. And the thing was – I ended up on academic probation at Tisch School of the Arts. So my first year, right, I'm taking

classes, and then I'm dancing with that one company, and still taking classes. And then, like '88 and '89, I was in this masters program, this MFA program, in dance. And I'm still going to ACT UP things all the time, and I ended up missing so many classes that they said I would be expelled if I didn't go to more dance classes. So I couldn't go to the FDA because I had been, I couldn't do the Montreal AIDS Conference because I'd just missed too many classes.

But dance – dance was the most uncomplicated joyful thing that I did. But unfortunately – I came to realize that I couldn't be a full-time dancer, because I had a brain; and that was not actually valued all that much in the dance world. Dancers, unlike actors and a lot of other people, were just encouraged to be sheep. There's this experience of, this choreographer just moves you around the stage. And so the dancers, by and large that I met were very passive, even about their working conditions: people wouldn't get paid; you weren't unionized. And that was still a period of time where – as I said, people were – there was still a heavy formalist influence in dance. So making more overtly political dance was still not seen as something – it took a while. Like the year that the Bessies was like all ACT UP, all the time –

SS: That's right. ACT UP won a Bessie. I forgot that, yeah.

DR: That, that marked a change. And actually, I think ACT UP had an effect on the dance world in that way, that it stopped being so –

SS: Who were the other dancers in ACT UP? There was that guy Jason. What was his last name? There was Jennifer Munson.

DR: Yeah, Jim Provenzano –

SS: Right.

DR: – was a dancer. I'm trying to think of who else. There weren't a lot. Sometimes they would come through – Rob Besser came though. I had the biggest crush on Rob Besser. One of those famous modern dancers. And I used to, my first, before ACT UP started, I was in these ballet classes for modern dancers, and he was in them. And I had such a huge crush on him. So I couldn't — this is the only person this has ever happened with — I couldn't put two words together. Like I couldn't string a sentence together.

So I think he thought I was cute initially, but then it was like, really boring.

SS: Aw.

DR: But I just thought, a year later, he came to an ACT UP meeting, and I was facilitating. I didn't know he was there. And I was in my element by that time. And came up to me afterwards. He called, and he called afterwards, and asked me out on a date, and – unfortunately, the nervousness and crush kicked right back in.

SS: Oh, that's too bad.

DR: So we had a couple of dates, but – but –

SS: Where did Jim –

DR: But –

SS: Oh, go ahead.

DR: – yeah. But there weren't a lot of dancers.

SS: There was this guy Jason Childers, I think was his name. No?

Okay.

DR: I don't – yeah, it doesn't ring a bell.

SS: There were a bunch of people. Where did you meet Warren?

DR: Warren? – Warren [Krause]; I guess he would have – in 1989, he was living in Atlanta. He came up to Gay Pride, in New York. And – I saw him marching; and thought he was really cute. But didn't get to meet him. It's really, really packed and crazy, and I think I was, I may have been marshaling, part of Act U-, I was like doing something with ACT UP so I couldn't just join. So I saw him. And then he came to the ACT UP meeting the next Monday night, that I was facilitating. And he managed to wangle his way into, people went out to dinner afterwards. So he managed to get himself, not just at the table with me, but sitting next to me. And we hung out that night. And then he played hard to get. Which was just – he didn't go home. I invited, I invited him home with me. But I was living in Hoboken. And so, he didn't know, he didn't know New York, much less Hoboken, and he thought, oh my god, what if I go home with this guy and then he like kicks me out after we have sex, and I'm stranded in Hoboken.

So we arranged to have lunch the next day, before he flew back to Atlanta. And so, and I met up with him, and we didn't have lunch. And we exchanged numbers, and he invited me down to Atlanta. And I – just took him up on it. And – fell for him pretty quickly.

SS: Did you know that he was positive?

DR: He didn't tell me that first time, though we, it was totally safe sex. But when I went down there, to see him for a few days, yeah. He took me for a walk in the park, and told me about it, and –

SS: And what was your feeling about that?

DR: Well, the thing was that I, my very first boyfriend in ACT UP was Oliver Johnston. And Oliver was —

Oliver, um — was such a sweetheart. And — at that point, I was — and that was early on in ACT UP. There was this NGLTF volleyball tournament benefit on Fire Island. And Oliver got up in the back of the room one meeting and said we should field a team! Who wants to go? And so ACT UP had a team.

And so a bunch of us went out, and we lost every game. And we had the most fun.

SS: Great.

DR: And we also had, we, I think Sue Hyde and another woman from Boston didn't have a team, and they joined us, and all these other gay men took volleyball so ser-, it turns out there was a whole league, and they were so serious about it.

SS: Oh, the gay volleyball league?

DR: Oh, totally!

SS: Oh, my god!

DR: But they were, you think volleyball's the faggiest thing. No! They were power! They wanted to win, and — and we just, we had the most fun; we lost every game. And then some people stayed over. And Oliver was with a group of men who had a house for the summer. And he, so he invited me to stay over. And it was magical. There was a screening of, it was either *Another Country* or *Maurice*. So it was one of those beautifully iconic Merchant Ivory-gay movies. And we're all around some pool, watching this, and — and then that night, the men in the house were, that Oliver was part of; they made dinner; right. And it must have been, like, 10 o'clock when they fi- they

had, people had been cooking for hours, and the table was gorgeous. And I remember, it was a big – there were candles, and these big glass whatever. And things were luminous. And it was just – I thought, this is – the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And they all seemed s-, again, I was 22.

SS: Right.

DR: And they just, they were very nice to me. And they just – and afterwards, Oliver invited me up onto the roof to talk. And we ended up making out. And Oliver told me he had a sore throat. So could we just – would it be okay if we just kissed with our mouths closed?

And it turned out he had thrush.

SS: Thrush, yeah.

DR: And the kissing was wonderful. It was, it was – so I ended up working through a bunch of that with Oliver – the truth was, I wasn't in love with him. We dated for four months. And the thing was, when he told me – the next time we were together, Oliver told me that he had AIDS, not even just that he was HIV, he had AIDS, and – and my first response was, well, wanting to take care of him. I wasn't going to abandon him or something like that.

And it took him breaking up with me; realizing, okay; this kid isn't really in love with me. We're friends. And so he was the one who kind of said, let me go. And, but we, we remained very close friends.

But then I was with Ray. It turns out he was seeing someone else at the time, but whatever. I was with Ray, who also had AIDS. And certainly a lot of the men I had had sex with were open about being positive, and then lots, you just assumed. And –

we were, everyone I had sex with then, it was safe sex. That just seemed to be taken for granted.

SS: But by the time you got involved with Warren, had you been through anyone dying?

DR: Uh, yeah.

SS: Who was that, in ACT UP?

SS: Was it Ray?

DR: No, I hadn't been close. I'm trying to remember if Ray was before. I seem to, no, because I got to know Patricia, so Ray must have been before. Yeah.

SS: Um hm.

DR: So Ray had died.

SS: But you weren't in his care group.

DR: No, I was not in his care group.

SS: Right.

DR: I did a lot of visiting there. Because he and I had just been dating, and then it turns out, I guess, like his – boyfriend, who –

SS: Anthony.

DR: – had been living somewhere else – Anthony came back. And then I was, well, Ray didn't actually treat me all that hot. It was a little like a s-, but – um – I would visit, and he was so, he wanted to be present right to the end. So – so I had been through that. And – I had not been through the whole process with people. There were people who, at that point, I had really cared about, or who somehow, like Barry Gingell;

who was just one of those, Dr. Barry Gingell, one of the early people in ACT UP, who was very, just, vocal and present. I think Ortez had already died.

SS: Um hm.

DR: So there were a number of people that I'd had some connection with

—

SS: When you started to connect to Warren, were you thinking, he's going to die? Or you —

DR: No. And the thing was, when he and I got together — and maybe this is the time, if you don't mind — just — this is Warren.

SS: Warren was very different from you. I remember him.

DR: Oh, my god.

SS: Yeah.

DR: Warren was — okay, you want to know something spooky. So my great-grandmother — not my great-grandmother, my grandmother —

SS: Did you get it? Okay.

DR: Yeah. So my grandmother — my grandmother — she, we didn't know this for years — her first husband, my grandfather — we didn't even know there was an issue of first versus. My grandfather was not Jewish. He was German-American. And years — I never saw a picture of him — whatever. When my mother met Warren for the first time, her first response; my god, he looks just like my father.

SS: Oh.

DR: And when my grandmother later had some pictures and showed me, it really was. It was just — and he, Warren was really cute. And so was my grandfather.

SS: But he was not a good boy.

DR: No, no. Warren was totally, totally different from me.

SS: Yeah.

DR: He was, so he had grown up on a dairy farm, in Connecticut. His parents were Jehovah's Witness – especially his mother. His father was a shit. His father was an evil Germanic pater-, paterfamilias. He was like this brute of a man. He, it turns out was dyslexic, which I didn't know until after he died. I just knew that he had had a lot of trouble getting through school, and that he didn't read a lot very well. It had to be things that were short, short little bits. Like affirmations, a lot of those.

He didn't know from Jews. But he won, partially won my heart, after that first visit, when I was down there; when I flew back, he made this, he got himself a children's book of the Jewish holidays. And he made me something for, I don't remember which holiday. But he sent me some, and it was just – he found a way to, instead of reading a book on Jewish history, which he couldn't have done, he found the way that was more like him.

He had been a bartender, for years. Because even though he was from Connecticut, he eventually – he left home; his parents were awful. I think he was actually pretty much kicked out. And he also had been a little sissy. He ended up in Atlanta; he was bartending; there were, it was part of the whole – drugs, whatever; lots of sex, this, that and the other. And so by the time I meet him, almost everyone he knew had died. He had about three surviving gay male friends.

SS: Oh, so he was older than you.

DR: He was 10 years older than I was.

SS: Okay, yeah.

DR: But he looked fantastic. He had had a stroke when he was 33 or 34. Nobody knows if it was AIDS-related or not, whatever. But he had, half his body was paralyzed, and he had had to try to, he had to learn to walk again, and all these sort of things. And it spurred him to change everything in his life.

He had already been having safe sex for a while, because he just sort of had figured – out; there’s something going on, and – and he became a massage therapist, he broke up with his abusive partner of many years, he moved into his little studio, and he, he, on the one hand, he went towards spiritual things, like New Agey sort of things. There was someone who took him to something called the Science of Mind, or –

SS: What, Louise Hay or something?

DR: Well, it was some like Louise Hay and this other stuff, where you create your whole reality? Which was just so evil.

SS: Right.

DR: I, I got him out of that –

SS: Right.

DR: – pretty quickly. But the other thing was that he – he also went to, when ACT UP Atlanta started, he started going to those things as well. And he was not an organizer. He just would go to the demos and things.

So he was so different from me. And he also had been, he had really explored his sexuality. That, the fact that he was, so, or the thing that you asked me — did I think he was going to die — so he wasn’t symptomatic.

SS: Right.

DR: And he was convinced that he was going to fight; that he was going to beat this. And my, here I am, with this logical mind. I said, well, yeah, there is, even though most people with the disease seem to dro-, just die; there are some people who are these long-term survivors. He could be one of them.

SS: Right.

DR: So I just committed to – to that.

SS: That's something I'm really interested in, and I've asked a lot of people this. So you're a central figure in ACT UP, and your boyfriend has AIDS. Are you looking to the experts in ACT UP for advice about treatments?

DR: Oh yeah.

SS: Can you talk about that? Do you remember discussions you had with specific people? Can you fill us in on that?

DR: Oh yeah, definitely.

So the thing that made everything much harder than it otherwise would be: Warren was not made for New York. And the fact, even the way you said, like he was so different; he really was like – he didn't fit in with my friends. The people that you and I know in particular in common; these hyper-articulate, hyper-political; you have a discussion, and people are talking over each other and all that. And he couldn't hold his own in that. And the people we know were actually – he, one of the things he taught me was, I realized how dismissive everyone I knew was of people who – didn't have the same intellectual gifts, or weren't as educated, or he had gotten called stupid, one of the things he revealed at one point; he had gotten called stupid all through school. And so he

learned how to fake his knowledge. So he, he passed as someone who knew so much more than he did.

So our group of people, they would just sort of make mincemeat out of him. A few people I know were sweet to him. Maxine was really sweet to him, and a few other people. But he didn't fit in there, and New York was not where he wanted to be. But I wasn't going to move down to Atlanta. There is no question.

So I had fallen in love with San Francisco. And I asked if he would visit, and I knew Adrian Card, an early ACT UP member from New Jersey, had moved out there, and I'd visited him, and suddenly it all seemed like *Tales of the City*. And I got into grad school there and in New York. So we decided I'd go there.

But the spring before we were going to move — so the spring of 1990; this was just before the, one of the ACT UP talent shows — I was going to perform “Broadway Baby.” I had rewritten it. I was going to do “ACT UP Baby.” And I had it all prepared. And then he, it ended up his appendix burst, and he ended up in the hospital down at Grady Memorial Hospital.

He had lost his health insurance because the company that his, whose policy he had had a gay man who was their major seller in Georgia. And so he had sold to a lot of gay men, and they just canceled — it was totally illegal — but they cancelled all the policies, because they figured there were all these AIDS policies.

SS: Oh, this is before —

DR: So he ended up in —

And he didn't have, the only money he had was what he'd earned from bartending. But he ended up without — he hadn't been an idiot. He had had health

insurance, and it was canceled. So he had to be in this public hospital, and it was awful, and they left him for 14 hours, writhing in pain. And it was just – so I flew down to be with him. And he – he recovered, but not fully. And although we thought for a while he was fine, it was soon after that that the first, actually a KS lesion appeared on his foot. But we still thought, okay, we'll handle it.

We were in San Franci-, we moved that summer. We were in San Francisco, I don't know if it was like four months, five; enough that we just got his healthcare in place. He was still vibrant and things were going fine, and we thought we'd get this — and Gedalia Braverman had moved out, and. So I joined ACT UP San Francisco, Golden Gate.

SS: Right.

DR: Golden Gate.

SS: Right!

DR: Definitely. And Queer Nation started that summer. Which, if you ever do a thing about Queer Nation, there are plenty of – that was — San Franciscos are insa-, they're insane. But we, so I was all involved, and Warren was doing stuff, and doing, we were drag, and all. And then – we, we got him into a good – a smaller clinic, using MediCal was the insur- —

Into a clinic that had research attached to it. So his doctor – whoops.

Sure.

SS: Just hold on one second.

DR: Is that thing actually the mic itself?

TW: It is. The silver is actually a tie clip, so to speak.

DR: Oh, so I remember exactly when.

SS: Um hm. Go ahead.

DR: So, so we got him into that clinic. We had his alternative care set up, blah blah blah. And then he got really, really sick. And he ended up, it turns out he had – ah, I remember what it does – it wasn't toxo–

SS: MAC?

DR: It's the one for which –

SS: DHPG –

DR: Amphoterrible, Amphotericin was the prescribed drug. I can't believe how I've blocked on – it was a meningitis one, it was in your spine. And – so I knew that term, Amphoterrible, for the drug. And so, there I was, I didn't know anyone. And his doctors, even though this was a clinic that was doing good work and whatever, they were just going to put him, that was first-line treatment. So I immediately got on the phone. I called up, I called up Avram; I called up a number of people. And I think Avram was the person I called first. And he said, you should talk to Nesline. Because Michael –

SS: Was a nurse.

DR: – was a nurse. And Michael said – oh, I can remember it so clearly — him telling me well, people are having — immediately you heard the tone, where it just switched into the no-nonsense, here's the thing you need to know; that — what is it called? It started with an "F" — flora, whate–

SS: Fluconazole?

DR: Fluconazole — was being, some people had used it, and people who had failed on Amphotericin, you could use Fluconazole. And then some people then decided, well, Fluconazole had a lot fewer side effects. So you could use that as first-line treatment, and they were having success with it.

So I then went back to Warren's doctor. I was the full-time care, I became the full-time caregiver. I was, even though I was in grad school at that point for English, I'd go and I'd take my classes — I was on a scholarship, so that's partially how I was surviving, and I would copy edit, like temp. But basically, I was just doing full-time medical stuff with him. And I talked with his doctor, and said, this is what we want to try. And the guy just fought me. And finally said, well — okay. I'll allow it, I'll approve it. But you have to accept responsibility. If it doesn't work, it's, this is your choice.

I was like, well, hello? Warren is here, and he's telling you this is what he wants. So we went with that.

And from that point on, it was just this regular thing. I would talk to Gedalia. He had started getting more and more knowledge about treatments.

SS: So there was a real gap between, ACT UP was so far ahead of the medical practitioners about treatment.

DR: Oh my god. Again, this was the sort of clinic this guy was totally — he was straight; everyone thought he was gay, hoped he was gay; he was very cute. Jewish. And he was definitely — he was liberal; he was open to the idea that there was activism. He really, this was some — this was a guy who was one of the ones you would be happy to get. And on the whole, Warren got very good treatment from him. But constantly, they were not — I was bringing the latest research —

SS: So what did you guys –

DR: – and I was getting that from friends.

SS: What was your treatment, what did you choose ultimately, after this?

DR: Oh. Warren did rebound then, from that. And I don't know if you remember – so Warren felt very strongly about, he had kept, he had tried for many years not to go on – he just thought AZT was bad news, so he tried not to go on that. And he had done all the really healthy-living stuff and the affirmations, and – I have to say the hardest thing – and the thing that totally got him, I think, out of – aside from my politics – that got him out of the whole New Agey thing was, you had all these people for whom AIDS had been this wake-up call? Warren had had the wake-up call when he had a stroke. And he had changed everything in his life, and he had learned to love himself, and he had all that, blah blah blah. And he had been having safe sex for the longest time. And he still got sick.

And it was – the people who had the same experience are the ones who had been IV drug users, who had already gotten clean; and who had done the thing you're supposed to do, and then they still got sick. And that sense of, fuck you for telling me this is a wake-up call. I didn't need this. And Warren didn't – didn't need it to have changed his whole life.

SS: Right.

DR: So he was looking for other things beyond what was offered medically. And your friend Bo Houston, the writer, had this seemingly miraculous turnaround.

SS: Oh no. The Swiss –

DR: The Swiss doctor.

SS: Oh god. What was that called? The o–

DR: I've blocked his name also, because I –

SS: But the thing; they put oxygen in your blood. What was the treatment called?

DR: I cannot remember.

SS: Something “O”–

DR: It was something with an “o”. And he – the thing was that, so Bo met with us, and just gave us the bare facts of how had been before. He couldn't even get out of bed, right? And then he went to see this doctor, because he had heard about it, and – he came back, and there he was, out and about in the world again. And he just gave us the facts. And we waited; and decided it was worth the risk.

And so I wrote to everyone I knew; every acquaintance, every, anyone, and asked if they could just contribute. Because you know, cost, right? You had to fly there, and then it cost several thousand dollars, and all that stuff.

SS: Right. But a lot of people were doing it. George Stambolian did it, and –

DR: I didn't know that. Wow.

SS: Yeah. Anyway –

DR: And in the end, it didn't work at all for Warren; not a bit. But the thing was, I think what it was was, Bo had been on AZT. And this doctor actually made you stop AZT.

SS: Oh, okay.

DR: And you had to stop any of the major meds you were on. And I think actually stopping AZT was probably really good for Bo, and good for a lot of people, because it was so toxic for so many people. Warren didn't have anything dangerous in his system. So –

SS: That's really smart, David. That really explains why people had a positive reaction.

DR: Oh, yeah. They –

SS: Because what was it? They took your blood out, and they oxygenated it, or something?

DR: No, his wasn't an oxygenating one. It was they, he had a – I remember the test tube, these vials, and he was, it was an herbal mixture of –

SS: Yeah yeah.

DR: – and he was, he was injected intravenously. But it was something that – again, I suddenly was a reasonable – I feel we were taken in. I think this guy was a total crook. But it was quite reasonable, based on what someone had seen, to give this a try. So I don't regret that.

But then it was soon after that that Warren went really downhill.

Probably time — In terms of time, I don't know where you guys are, but – we – by the end, Warren had dementia. It was like Gidali – a couple of my friends from graduate school who were pe- sweet, wonderful straight women who – knew no one who was in this situation, but who came for caregiving. Warren's family were evil; his

mother – wouldn't even – they had no contact. They were offered the choice, and they had no contact.

My parents hadn't been good on this one. They hadn't been good on the relationship. The stuff about him being really poor, and this person is so different; they sort of freaked. It turns out they freak out – if they ever see this, they're not going to be very happy about – so they were very wonderful before and afterwards. At this moment, they got into their, the spouses of your children are never good enough for their children. And so it wasn't helpful. So I couldn't have them around.

So friends from New York flew out. Especially after he died; Avram and Max and a few other people just came out. But I had been totally isolated. And most of his friends were dead. So I stayed in – in California for a year. He had said – he made me promise that I would stay there. Because he felt he needed to transition. He needed to stay put and not run away, just sort of let the grieving happen in a real, whatever way. Just be there for, be there through four seasons, four of the seasons, he said.

Can I tell you one other thing that was, it was amazing?

SS: Sure.

DR: So he wanted to be cremated. And he wanted his body to be left untouched for 24 hours. He believed that your spirit kind of hung around. And – and he wanted to die at home. And he had gotten to the point where, in the hospital – he didn't recognize anyone. There had been some points where he'd come in a little bit, but at this point he was delirious, or sleeping most of the time.

So I brought him home. And then his, his systems started failing. But one of the things was he stopped being able to pee. And it seemed like he was in pain. And the doctors offered me the – the choice of putting in a catheter.

SS: Um hm, um hm.

DR: I didn't know what to do.

SS: Yeah.

DR: Because I didn't know what was going to cause him more pain. And this – and this woman he had been seeing for like New Age – sort of New Age therapy, but she was also a sex radical. Because we finally got into a circle in San Francisco. Yeah, they were New Agey, but they were wild polymorphously everything sex radicals. So she was really cool.

SS: Um hm.

DR: She had, she was away when he was dying. So she had asked to – speak to him on the phone. And we just held up the phone by his ear. And then she put me on, and she said, look: If he seems agitated – just – she called it toning. Just make a clear tone. Just go nnnnnnnn. And then just do a different tone, make it really slow and – and so I did that. And his breathing calmed. And he actually, it was clear he wasn't in distress anymore, just calm. And then I could talk to him in the way you want. Even though – and then I knew he could hear something.

SS: Um hm, yeah. You were communicating.

DR: Yeah. So I made my goodbyes, and he eventually, during the night – you heard the death rattle, and things I'd heard described; okay, that all happened. And

we kept his body there for 24 hours, and – I had nightmares. But I had friends who would be next to me, so it was okay. And then they took him away.

And I stayed there for a year, right, and friends came out and visited. But when I moved back, I thought I was going to rejoin ACT UP.

SS: Yeah.

DR: And the splits had happened.

SS: They'd already happened.

DR: At the time I got back, it was on, Warren died in April of '92.

SS: Um hm, right.

DR: So we did the ashes action in October of '92. I said, around that time of the year, I, people, yeah, I was in contact with friends back there, and they were talking about wanting to do some action. I had been wanting to – Warren, that idea of a political funeral really hit a chord with Warren. And actually, if he hadn't die-, if hadn't gotten dementia, we would have changed his will, and arranged for his body, actually, to be brought, but things progressed too quickly. So I was going to send his ashes to the White House — privately — but that really bothered me that it would just be this ind-, no one would know. And I talked with friends in New York, and they immediately said; oh, well, yeah, we've been, some people have been talking about it, yeah; we'll organize an action.

And they did. And you know, Shane Butler; tiny little newby; who's out here, by the way. I just realized, he's out here now.

SS: Alexis Danzig's father had died.

DR: Alex-, he had died.

SS: Of AIDS, yeah.

DR: So Alexis did it. And Mark Schoofs.

SS: Oh, that's right.

DR: Mark Schoofs was there. Eric Sawyer, I think he had Larry Kert's ashes. A number of people. And some people I didn't even know. People came from other places. And that was the weekend of the, the Quilt was being shown. And I had gotten to the point where I felt the Quilt was being used mostly in a really dangerous way. It was being used – now George Bush Senior would read names. That sort of stuff. It was a way to actually give the ring wing cover, because it was so beautiful, and everyone could come. And I don't mean to sound s-, I made a, a panel for Warren, that was very confront—. It's really t-, it's kind of terrible now. When I think about, oh my god, I was so angry. But it's the Silence Equals Death logo, but it's his name and his dates, and, dead because of your inaction.

SS: That's true.

DR: It was – it was the angriest panel I had seen. But a lot of us agreed that – we wanted to show the truth of, the unvarnished truth; don't pretty this up in any way. What has come out of this epidemic? It's ashes, it's bone chips, it's – and so with ACT UP New York doing, really, almost all the logistics — and my providing just feedback and input from San Francisco — we arranged this action. I flew out there. And although it didn't get a lot of press, it was this – extremely important moment for a lot of people who had be-, particularly people who had been in ACT UP for quite a while. That – it was the way we dealt with our grief that time, in a way that we hadn't in a lot of other demonstrations.

SS: So can you describe the action?

DR: Oh, yeah. So – we started from the Quilt. And it was, at that point, not a large group. I think the people who actually had ashes — some had little urns; some just had a little plastic bag, a little baggie, literally. I had what I had been given from the funeral home, this – cardboard box, a cube, in a kind of, it had a gold lame-ish paper. It was – almost just like wrapping paper; with this plastic bag of his ashes inside. So there were about, I think, 15 of us with ashes. Some had pictures of the people.

And then we had lots of ACT UP supporters; people who had come down, who were going to march with us. The word we had put out, the ground rule was, you were not supposed to bring, this was not going to be a fake-blood action. The idea was, you don't need anything fake. This is really, we want to show what have really been the consequences of this administration's, and the previous ones' action. As it turned out, there was someone, though, who did bring fake blood, and – whatever. You can't be a control queen. I actually haven't let go of that one, heh. But, whatever.

So we marched, starting there — I guess the Quilt is on the Mall, it was displayed on the Mall. And we marched from there, past the Quilt, chanting and carrying signs and people, people joined us, from the Quilt. It was kind of amazing. So where we started out, I think we numbered in the hundreds. By the end, we had thousands of people.

And we – we marched up to, the White House lawn, I think, is really actually the back of the White House. We were going to march up there. And the police tried to stop us, and they actually were on horses; a whole bunch of them were on horses.

And so we had — again, and this is really; when I mention Shane Butler, he was, this was a new generation of ACT UPers who'd just suddenly come into their own. So he was this young kid. And I was already a veteran. I guess I was 27. And Shane was probably maybe 22, or something like that. And he had been the leader organizer. They organized so well that our marshals, our people, being all linked, they kept these horses at bay long enough for us to get up to this fence, this black, wrought-iron fence. And we half-scaled it, and stand there. And we threw the ashes, dumped the ashes, threw the urns, whatever. People say depo-, it wasn't depositing the ashes.

Tape II
00:50:00

It was — people were screaming — and crying, and — some people were screaming because the horses were there, and it was, they were frightened by that. Others were just — and then we turned around, and we were hemmed in. There were crowds. I could just see — I had no idea there had been that many people who had gathered. Because while we were marching, I would look periodically — and I remember I grew so hoarse from the chanting, from — but — by the end, when I turned around, it was just unbelievable how many people were there. And the police decided to really move in and try to, try to just get us out of there. I don't think they wanted to arrest us. I think they actually, I think — I suspect there may have been an order just to try to avoid arrest, because I don't think they wanted it to get news coverage. Truthfully, that's what I suspect. But they did charge us with the horses. And we had been prepped. The marshals had — to this day, I've repeated this when I do marshal training — if the horses are coming at you, sit down. The horses, they will change into people who are standing. But whatever; 99 perc-, there's no guarantee of anything in life, but 99 percent of the

time, they actually won't trample on you if you're sitting down. And so we sat down, and sure enough, the horses stopped.

And they eventually cleared us from the area. When we realized that we had made our point, we moved up to another area, and we just kind of did some wrap up. And some woman – some woman who had been at the Quilt, I remember speaking — and I think was there for her son — who just thanked us. Who said that she actually had been, the Quilt was getting to her. There was something – because all of us who were there in ACT UP from the very beginning, who went down to the March on Washington in '87, that first display of the Quilt; we were all totally bowled over by the Quilt. We were all walking — Oliver [Johnston] was there, others — we were weeping, weeping. The next time it was there, it was a little like – and by this point, you knew it was totally, I felt it was totally coopted. I know for some people it was still meaningful, but.

You see why I was a facilitator? Because I always try to, still recognize people might have another side, and it was out in the, at the demonstration, that I could – not have to – okay, but you know the other thing? I started doing a lot of marshaling. Because I grew so angry, over the course of those three years. For a while, we talk about, and there's a lot of great things about, ACT UP was my first gay community, and I can't believe how lucky I was. I went from having no gay community; to this gay community that was galvanized around a purpose. I didn't have to go to bars to meet people. I was, I had, most of my first gay sex was in ACT UP; my first dating. I learned all of these job skills. This is how I got into this new career. My transferable job skills were almost entirely from ACT UP. I learned all of this stuff, and I grew up there, and then I learned how to take care of s-, all, you name it.

But, looking back; a lot of us started expressing something. I remember conversations where; I kind of feel – this is by maybe the third year — I feel like I only have two emotions anymore. I have grief or rage. And I actually, I've got one of those – I got so burnt out that I got one of those courier flights you get a really cheap ticket where you don't have to bring any baggage; they use it for –

package. So I went to Amsterdam. I was going to – I'll have a fling; I'll have – and I ended up meeting up with some cute boy, and we had sex, and then he didn't want to see me the next morning. And I got literally depressed for the first time in my life. I woke up unable to get out of bed. And I realized, it was like I had skated further and further out on thinner and thinner ice, and I had no idea. And it just crashed.

Tape II
00:55:00

So that there was a lot of – and now, in retrospect, I understand partly why I left – I think I didn't know how to be there and remain healthy. But I still thought it was going to be there when I got back. And instead, it, these bitter, bitter divides had erupted, and TAG had broken off, and it was, not even just broken off, but they were actively campaigning against ACT UP, telling people, the days of demonstrating are over, and ACT UP is dead. And then people in ACT UP, some of them were, they are the devil incarnate, and – and I ended up getting invol-, I still wanted to be involved, so I got involved in the AIDS Cure Project. And I have to say – I had not been in on all those fights. And I'd had some good experiences with some of the guys in TAG. Like Mark Harrington and I were on trial for the Steven Joseph sit-ins. We had been through all of that; we'd been in jail together. And Peter Staley and I had always gotten along. He actually lived on my block in the East Village. One on one I had gotten along with a lot of them. Not all, but a lot. But – the fact they actually went out and campaigned against

the AIDS Cure Project — met with all these other AIDS groups and told them not to support it — was just, broke my heart.

SS: What was the AIDS Cure Project?

DR: It was like the Manhattan Project for AIDS. So it was, it had been the McClintock Project. Because people — people did want it, not the people in the group, who formed it. Originally the idea was, okay, a Manhattan Project for AIDS, the idea being — people actually went to look; how did the atomic bomb get, how did something that — what scientifically happened, what made it possible to make so much scientific advance, even though it was for a bad end; how did it happen so quickly?

So that this working group got together, and they read and studied it. And based on, at this point, people had already thoroughly studied the FDA, thoroughly studied the NIH; the CDC. And what they isolated — one of the things they isolated — was that — there were these systematic constraints on research; these pressures that pushed research towards whatever was the majority thing being done at the time. If you were a university researcher, you needed to get grants. And not only just personally, for your own work, but your whole lab, your staff, your university was counting on you getting the matching funds that came with whatever — the grant was always two parts; it's partly for your, the project itself. But then it's for, to pay for the lab.

SS: Um hm.

DR: Right. So there's all this pressure on you to get the grant. Now if you go and apply for a grant on whether vitamin C, high-dose vitamin C actually does have antiviral properties; forget it. Vitamin C isn't patentable. And it's too weird and wiggly. So you get steered towards whatever the mainstream thing is. The drug

companies are looking for profits, so any of those things that don't have a high profit potential, they move much more towards the highest-tech thing. It's not as if retroviruses were the only thing that needed to be studied. But that was *the* cutting edge, meaning the most expensive – right. So there were those pressures.

And then you had – the ways in which scientists were – the jargon now is – they're in silos. So the virologists are all talking to virologists, and the immunologists, immunologists, and the people who do, oncologists, oncologists. And they often did not have very much interaction. And yet, when we were reading the accounts of the Manhattan Project, a lot of breakthroughs happened because they were sitting over lunch, because they were together so much of the time. And we'd already known that at conferences — and this is a truism, but it's not therefore fake — that a lot of the most important traction happened in the hallways in between sessions. And one of the things we just realized was – if you had these scientists from all these different backgrounds, who had all the money and facilities they needed; they weren't going to have to hustle to get the grant; they knew it was all there; and they're all interacting so much of the time, right, from across all the disciplinary boundaries; when one of them spins out the idea, oh I've been really looking to do X, Y and Z, da da. And someone from another discipline says – are you nuts? Don't you know that such —? Or, they say, now wait a second! See, I've been looking at – it's you just exponentially speed up the cross-fertilization, the possibility for changing the way science is done.

And of course you would put a lot more money into it, because it's a national effort. You recognize, yeah, we put a man on the moon; we built a bomb, and then we put a man on the moon. So why can't you do this for AIDS?

The problem is, Manhattan Project had been something to create this weapon. So some people said you shouldn't call it that, it's really; it's just – and that was one where I thought, oh, please. The Manhattan Project; people recognize what it means; you'll actually be able to sell this more. But whatever. We gave in. And they went with the McClinton Project, because Barbara McClintock — eventually, Nobel Prize–winning geneticist — had been iced out by the men a lot.

Tape II
01:00:00

But the thing that inspired us was that – one of the quotes that we foregrounded was, so she was studying corn. She was studying the genetics of corn. And you're trying to figure out how genes are passed from whatever, one generation of corn to another. And one of the things she said was, if you find on this ear of corn, there's one, there's one that's discolored.

You don't ignore that because it's an exception, and just construct your theory based on the ones that all fit the mold. No you try to figure out that one. Because if you can figure out the exceptions, you get the rest. You actually –

SS: Huh.

DR: And so our whole thing was that we had to create a system that would allow people to study the exception, to study long-term nonprogressors; to study people who ever appear to be, have seroconverted back to any of these things.

TW: I've got to change tapes.

SS: Okay.

DR: Sure.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: I also want to ask you: who in ACT UP was working on the Barbara McClintock Project?

DR: Maxine Wolfe; Mark Milano; and, the names now, I can't – I can see a number of the faces. This is actually something — I'd be interested if anyone else has said anything like this — I actually, I lost a lot of my memory, because of what happened with Warren, and the whole – I moved back to New York in '93, and then I – I would meet people on the street that I knew from ACT UP, that I had been seeing weekly or every other week for years. And I couldn't, almost all those names, except for closest friends; as if my brain had just jettisoned whatever was unnecessary. And I've actually never recovered that type of – my short-term memory is pretty short. Things don't go into long-term memory the way they used to. I just, something happened.

SS: Well then let me ask you this: looking back, considering who the personnel were, do you believe that you guys could have actually achieved that goal?

DR: Well, I'll say two things. One is, having had time to think in the years since, I do believe that the – the TAG boys, as it were – I think they genuinely believed they were doing what's right. I think they thought we were making a mistake, and that their approach to research was genuinely right. I think they lost sight of, I think there was an arrogance to, they were so sure they were right that they were willing to, to be really underhanded about it, or to be really – not to let the two ideas actually, the two ideas just to be out there, but to play hardball with another group of activists, who also thought they were right, and had the approach that worked.

So I think it was arrogance, that type of, and finally, I'm sure, because of the bitterness of what had happened that I wasn't around for; the fact that Maxine was part of this group; or Mark Milano, who is an extraordinarily committed activist, who has been, he's one of the few people who's stuck with it all these years, and has had quite a lot of achievements he's done, but he's also a very abrasive person. But I don't think – I don't think TAG – could have not, in a way, opposed us because of some of the intensity of the –

SS: I understand that the individuals involved in both groups had this history. But the people who were in the AIDS Cure Project were not people with relationships with scientists, who had been focused primarily on treatment, or were involved in the intricate details of research. So do you honestly think that you and Mark and Maxine and whoever else was in the group were the people who had the ability to create this vision? In other words, looking back — forget the animosity — if you were a funder, was that the appropriate, were those the appropriate people to fund to achieve that goal?

DR: Oh, it couldn't have remained with that group.

SS: I see.

DR: Definitely not. But the approach that was taken was they said this had become an ACT UP project. And they were looking for congressional sponsors. And had gotten Jerrold Nadler was really lovely. If we had succeeded in getting some of the other AIDS groups to support it; and/or getting enough ACT UP to create enough pressure for something like a Manhattan Project for AIDS; we could have gotten something that was – I don't know that we would ever have gotten actually the ideal

Tape III
00:05:00

project. But that we could have gotten something that was much more, much – the thing that I wish we could have been able to achieve — and I think if we had convinced more people, including some who had more of the scientific credibility — that there were these systematic constraints in the AIDS res-, the drug research, the AIDS treatment research system, in the institutions; that you needed to try something that stepped outside of all that; that that could have happened.

SS: Why –

DR: And that hasn't happened since, and that's been a big problem.

SS: That's true. Now why do you think TAG people were unable to conceptualize outside of their relationship with Pharma?

DR: Because they had, they had been so – my feeling is, because they had been so intensely involved in the design of individual drug trials. When you go from creating parallel track and compassionate use — right — to being on all of these institutional review boards, and being on various committees, and then critiquing trial after trial after trial; that to be – and then knowing all the scientists; and knowing that lots of them are very good people — I think it was extraordinarily difficult to step outside of it and say, we may have been putting this intense effort into – something that is, in a sense, almost certain to give us more of the same.

SS: I see.

DR: I just think when you've been working that intensely on something, to be, it had to have felt, I assume, like an indictment of their work.

SS: Um hm. Was it?

DR: I would say personally for me, no; and in the document, no. I don't think it was.

SS: Okay.

DR: I think it was more trying to say, we've got to try something really radically new. And again, we also had that basic difference of — and I remember clearly the conversation, though not the people who were in it — in one of those offices, whether it was GMHC or whether it was, with somebody from Project Inform, or something. After they had spoken with some folks from TAG — so here we are, with the AIDS Cure Project in there — and they kept saying, well, what's realistic. That's pie in the sky, what you're talking about, it's pie in the sky. But this is re- -- what, what can be done with this Congress and this this, and —

And we went back and made that argument — that had been so key early on in ACT UP, that, no, if you actually can get enough people — in the streets again, in the, doing all these different things — you can expand the bounds of what's possible. But I don't think I'm being unfair to say, what one of TAG's founding strategies was to turn around and say, the time for the street demonstrations is over. You guys go home now. And in fact to say, ACT UP is dead, and this is the way to do it. And kind of, when you forget that it needs to be that inside-outside thing —

SS: Why do you think they did that?

DR: I'm sure different people had different, not all of them did. I think some — got carried away with being, there you are, you're talking to Tony Fauci whenever you want. You're doing — it's a very hard thing to remember that getting a seat at the table means, really, almost nothing. That you get a seat at a table in order to

accomplish the goal that you wanted to accomplish, right, and that's supposed to be a means to an end. But the reason you're given a seat at the table is get you to stop pushing so hard.

SS: Well, however, looking back now, I can see that at that time, I totally see what you're saying. But in a way, those, most of those guys are still alive.

DR: Some people have said they thought that these guys did this because they were getting what they needed.

I don't know; I don't think – the ones, when you talk to someone like Peter Staley or Mark Harrington; I wouldn't believe that actually, for a second.

SS: But I mean, their plan worked.

DR: Oh, well that, yeah, so they got –

SS: That's what I mean.

DR: Yeah. So that enough happened that we got the cocktail; we got something where a lot of people live a lot longer; we got what, what is, they, a chronic, manageable disease. So, yeah; give them credit. By pushing that hard to – I am sure they had a – a big effect on – making AIDS research really something that lots of people wanted to work with, and to see people with AIDS as partners. And I'm sure that with the whole momentum of what had happened with ACT UP up to that point, that that helped propel us into a period where there were enough drugs out there, enough treatments out there, that people keep going for quite a while.

I'm just, I'm sad that we – we didn't find the way to work together, to keep the other sort of stuff going, so –

SS: Yeah.

DR: – we're not stuck where we are.

SS: So I'm down to my last question. Unless there's something that you think that's important.

DR: Well, did anyone – just as long as it's in the oral history somewhere — did anyone, did “A Spoonful of Sugar” come up?

SS: No.

Jim Hubbard: No. Go ahead.

DR: Okay. So let me just tell this one, and then, and it's not long.

SS: Okay.

DR: And then you ask the last question.

So the, early on in ACT UP, we participated in that big civil disobedience at the Supreme Court, right down in Washington. That was around the first March on Washington, okay. So ACT UP sent, the planning for the civil disobedience at the Supreme Court happened up in Boston. And so ACT UP sent a group of people up to Boston to start working with this planning. And we, we took a van up, or something like that. We got up there, and there was so much tension. And their group — I don't even remember what the name of the group was —

SS: It wasn't ACT UP Boston, or something –

DR: It might have been ACT UP Boston.

SS: Oh.

DR: But it was, women were most prominent.

SS: Oh, uh huh.

DR: So they had a majority of women, and a minority of men. We had a majority of men and minority of women. And we were not, we just were not jelling, and it just was really tense. And so they suggested — this is probably, this is one of the reasons why I found ACT UP New York so extraordinary — so they suggested we take, okay, take a break. And what we should do; we'll break into our separate groups, and just decide on a song that you'll sing to the other group. That's going to break the tension, and that'll — whatever. Fine.

So we're like — what the fuck? Just to us — We had so much fun in New York, but it was never the sort of, "Kumbaya" right? So the idea that — we don't have a group song. And they had some lefty, peace, love, s-

It wasn't "We are a gentle, angry" —

SS: Right.

DR: Whatever that one is, right?

SS: Yeah.

DR: There wasn't that. But it was, it was that sort of feeling. So we're all caucusing, we're figuring this out. And we really had no idea what to do. And Ron Goldberg says, how about "A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down." So everyone suddenly; YES! That is it, that is it!

And so we went back, and they sing their lefty song. And we're, oh, wow, great. And then we do ours. And Ron takes the lead. And they just looked at us like we were insane. Like we — and I knew; I knew in that second — oh my god; this isn't — oh, because we thought the tension was men/women. That's what, and that's, and somebody had even said that at one point. We, this is, I think this is what's going on. It just, no,

this is New York/Boston. This is so completely about two completely different approaches to politics. And ours – “A Spoonful of Sugar.” That was it. As long as it was, campy and funny. Because we had women in our group who were totally — and this was, in a second — that was like one of those moments for me that just said, yeah; this is why we’re a thoroughly gay group, and we’re, in a way, thoroughly New York.

SS: Okay, good. Thank you for that. That was Cindy Patton and all of that?

DR: I don’t know if Cindy Patton – was there. I wonder.

SS: Okay. I’ll have to find out. So here’s my last question. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP’s greatest achievement, and what would you say was its biggest disappointment?

DR: I think we got to the biggest disappointment. And it really was that – we weren’t able to – sustain – movements end. Right? And that’s clear, right? And they have their periods of rising and falling. But that we didn’t find our way through that split, to a place where we could actually see – the fight wasn’t over. And there was going to need to be more than one approach. And we had said it for so many years. We knew we needed more than one approach, and na na na. And that we didn’t, we didn’t get beyond that. And instead, if you look where, so treatment activism became something very separate; we lost that integration. And also, a lot of the main focus in ACT UP New York and some of the other ACT UPs in years after that became like, AIDS in Africa. Or should I put the emphasis the other way: AIDS in Africa. Which was incredibly important, and the pharmaceutical, the cost of drugs in the rest of the world — which

again, incredibly important, and is really amazing. They turned Gore around a hundred and eighty degrees. Really amazing.

But what got lost was there are areas in U.S. cities that have HIV rates that are as high as anywhere in Africa. And it became this either/or, that we were able to sustain a mass movement here that could adapt to the changing demographics, and the non-changing demographics.

Here in L.A., the majority of transmission is still male to male. Now of course that includes lots and lots of men of color. But you still, we're still working to do things that we tried to express 20 years ago; that it was not either racism or homophobia.

To think that that's, we just had, what was it, the 25th anniversary. What are all those horrible, ghastly celebrations or commemorations that happened, or they did a lot of them in L.A., about 25 years since the discovery of HIV. And everyone's patting themselves on their back. And they were doing the exact same thing: AIDS is now a disease of women and children, and women of color.

Yes. And lots of gay men. And lots of them are gay men of color. And da-da-da.

And I think it's because we lost a mass movement, that we weren't able to sustain the things that we had learned.

So that's the greatest disappointment for me.

SS: So what's the greatest achievement?

DR: We created, okay. The greatest achievement, for me, really, is we created – let me preface this by saying the world is a sad place. Right? Everything is flawed; we eventually die. Right?

We created one of those examples of the best people can be. I just – there was so much beauty in that room.

Week after week, people – we created, okay. Wow. I never actually thought of it this way.

We created something that can be – for someone living now, what, the civil rights movement – watching *Eyes on the Prize* was for me. The civil rights movement didn't succeed in everything it wanted to do, by a long shot. Right? Lots of people died. There was lots of suffering, lots of unhappiness. But it was this example of what you can do in the face of just the worst odds. And – we created another one of those that – other people are going to be able to look to and recognize. Because I actually, I was thinking the other day, '87. That was 20 years after, it wasn't even 20 years after 1968. It was 20 years after 1967. The '60s had only been, right, the height of the, of the late '60s had only been 20 years before. So now we're 20 years after. And we're another link in that chain. That's the achievement, for me.

SS: Okay. Thank you, David. That's great. Thank you.

DR: Thank you, Sarah. And Tracy.

SS: And you did it in two and a half hours.

DR: And Jim.

SS: {LAUGHS} Good! Thank you. Great.

DR: Can I tell you, I'm so grateful.

SS: Oh, good. I'm glad.

DR: I actually, okay, to even tell you how nervous I've been, just because it's like – so – so fraught, right? I have shingles outbreak. That was what the beeping was, to take acyclovir. Because just, those – it's all so intense.

SS: It's intense, but it's like we were all there together. We all know what you're talking about. It's – it's, yeah.

DR: I am so happy you guys are doing this project. I just can't tell you. It's so – as at heart, a nerdy, library – someone who thinks libraries are so important; the fact that this will be there; the fact people can actually use it and access it.

SS: Well if you ever run into a very rich person, who you think would write us a check, we could really use it. Serious.

Tape III
00:20:00

DR: Yeah, I run into rich people now, in this –

SS: Just keep it in the back of your mind.

DR: – in this new buttoned-down life.

SS: Yeah.

DR: If you — truthfully — send me whatever you think are the best — the best materials, or package of pictures that have worked or been used.

SS: Do you have anything with you?

JH: Yeah –

SS: We'll give you the –

JH: It's in the car. But I can –

SS: Do you want to come downstairs with us? We'll give you a DVD.

DR: Oh yeah, definitely.