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Interviewee: **Rollerena**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Rollerena
February 8, 2015

SARAH SCHULMAN: So you start with your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

ROLLERENA: My name is Rollerena. We are at 301 Cathedral Parkway in Manhattan. I am sixty-seven. Oh, excuse me, I'm sixty-six years old, and today's date is February 8th, 2014.

SS: Fifteen.

R: Fifteen. Can we do this over?

SS: We don't have to do it over. It's fine.

R: Okay.

SS: I just want to say it's a great honor to be able to interview you, so thank you so much for coming and doing this.

R: Thank you.

SS: So where did you grow up?

R: I grew up in Kentucky. Kentucky is a deeply conservative state, known for mint juleps, horse farms, and southern hospitality.

SS: Were you in a town or a city?

R: I was outside of Louisville.

SS: And had your family been there for a long time?

R: My mama's family moved there from Ireland. Her generations as far back as 1795, and my daddy's family right before the Civil War.

SS: So what kind of business were they in or what did they do?

R: My mama was a nurse, and my daddy worked at a company. He worked at a big factory where he was also a shop steward.

SS: So this was in the postwar years.

R: Yes.

SS: So what was the environment like for you? Was it religious?

R: Southern Baptist. There were a sprinkling of Catholics, but they were in the minority. The State of Kentucky is a very, very Southern Baptist state. It now
00:05:00 today, currently, it's a evangelical Christian fundamentalist state.

SS: Did you grow up going to church?

R: Well, I did go to Catholic school, but it wasn't something that I embraced wholeheartedly.

SS: Because your mother was Irish, so she was Catholic?

R: I don't know what she was before, but she converted to Catholicism around 1940.

SS: Okay. So you were in a religious minority in your town.

R: Well, it wasn't even something that we discussed.

SS: So when did you start to realize that you were not like the other people that you were growing up with?

R: When I was four years old.

SS: What happened?

R: I realized that I was attracted to the same sex, and I lived for years where I wanted to act out these fantasies, but little things happened when I was, like, in

grammar school, but my attraction was always towards the same sex and not towards men. But it wasn't something that—I didn't know how to go about it to make it a reality.

SS: Did you know that homosexuality existed?

R: No.

SS: So you never heard any negative language, or no one was pointed to as the town—

R: Well, when I was a teenager, if you were seen downtown wearing tennis shoes, you were considered to be a queer. I mean, you would never be seen wearing tennis shoes.

SS: Now, was there anyone that you knew who was picked out by the other people in the town as a queer?

R: No, no.

SS: It was an imaginary being. So how did this manifest itself, like, through high school, and did you have friends?

R: Well, did I have, like—well, when I got into high school, there were a couple of guys that I hung out with, but they were all into girls, but I was attracted to men. Now, they chased girls and they bragged about it. They were proud about it. But I was into chasing men and I was discreet about it.

SS: So how did you meet men?

R: Well, I met somebody in 1961.

SS: In Kentucky?

R: In Kentucky. He was a soldier stationed down near the Tennessee border, and he saw me downtown and he said to me that he was lonely and he wanted to go somewhere. First he said a filling station, and I said—right away that sent up a red flag for me, because I thought, well, what if somebody knocked on the door? So I made the suggestion that we go to a hotel. We went to a small hotel, and we made love on a cold concrete floor.

SS: Oh, wow.

R: It was so romantic, so beautiful. And then he said, thirty minutes later, “I have to go somewhere.” So he said, “I’ll be right back.” I didn’t think anything of it, and he left and he never came back.

So I went looking for him, and I asked the old man that rented us the room, I said, “Did you see somebody just recently?”

He said, “He just walked out the door.” I went out and I looked, but that was the end of him. But, he walked out that door, but other doors opened.

SS: So then what happened? How did you proceed—

R: That was the start of me chasing boys. Somehow this feeling, these feelings came bubbling up at the surface, and I started to pay attention. A lot of guys were making goo-goo eyes at me, so I was interested in them and I was discreet, and that was the start of it.

SS: So these were other guys your age?

R: They were like eighteen, nineteen, twenties.

SS: So when did you leave your town?

00:10:00 R: Well, when I was in high school in 1965, I started paying attention to what was going on in Vietnam. I was looking at the nightly news, and they had these broadcasts about what was going on over there, and they had the statistics and the death toll and the injuries, and these reports alarmed me. And this was on the news every single night, and there were stories in the newspapers, and I just decided when I graduated to leave and move up to Chicago.

Now, here's the point. If you didn't have plans for college, if you were low-income, if you didn't have the average to get into college, or you didn't have the connections to stay out of the draft, you were a candidate for Uncle Sam. So in 1967 when I graduated from high school, I packed up lock, stock, and grits and fled the South, because Uncle Sam was hot on my case. And I moved up to Chicago.

SS: He couldn't find you in Chicago?

R: Well, I left no forwarding address. I just left. I figured let me go up there, because my sister was living up there. She was married that time and she was up there, and I figured let me go up there and try to mix in with the big city. That was a big, big city for me. It's like an eight-hour trip from the border of State of Kentucky.

When I went up there, I got this room down near the Chicago River on Clark Street. This was a low-income area where a lot of poor people lived around there. And I went over to this restaurant that I used to work in, because I worked there summers, seasonal work, and I asked for my old job back. I was hoping to work as a busboy in the restaurant on the main floor, and that job was no longer available. So they

said to me, “If you want to work, you’ll have to go upstairs to the cafeteria,” and I knew there was no future there, but I needed the money, so I said I would.

Actually, this building that I was staying in, it was a hotel built in the 1920s. I went there, and the elevator looked like a big gigantic birdcage, and it was old rooms and there were a lot of—you could walk down the hall and hear loud voices arguing with other people behind closed doors. To walk down that long, long hallway to get to the bathroom was like you took your life into your hands.

So I was there and I was very upset because I didn’t get my old job back, so I decided to walk up to the—later in the evening, I went up to the YMCA, hoping I would meet somebody. There was a newspaper, and I was looking at this little free weekly, and then I saw that there was another room for rent. So I took off running, and I had all this renewed energy, and I found this other place, and it was a walk-up, and the difference in rent was one dollar. So my mama had drove me up to Chicago, so I called her, I was all excited, and she met me at the other place and she helped me move into my new place. That was also a rundown SRO that hadn’t seen a paint job since World War I, but I didn’t care.

So I got there and then I went to this place—actually, I worked several jobs. I went back to this other place, the cafeteria, and I stayed there for two weeks, and then I quit. I took a few days off, and then from there I got a job as an elevator operator. Then after three weeks, they laid us all off because of automation. Then from there, I went to this hotdog stand in the neighborhood. I worked seven days a week, twelve hours

a day, plus two extra hours to clean up, because I was there when they closed at four o'clock in the morning. So I didn't get out of there till six o'clock in the morning.

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Then there was an ad in the paper that had these glowing career advancements, and so I answered this ad, and I didn't know what it was it was about. I'm thinking I'm the only one that's going to get this job, but I went to this place—it was walking distance—and I had all these high hopes. It was going to pay me \$100 a week and was career advancement. I was going to meet all these fabulous people, and I said, “Well, this is something that's meant for me.”

I go there and what did it turn out to be? They wanted us to go door-to-door to sell Bibles. So when they started the pitch, it was actually a minister said, “Does anyone have any questions?”

And I raised my hand and I said, “This is not for me.”

And they said, “Would you please take Mr. so-and-so's name off the list?” And I walked. I was the only one that walked out of there.

So from there, I got a job in a factory that was a firetrap, a tragedy waiting to happen. Let me explain. The summer of 1967 was known as the Summer of Love, but there was nothing romantic about my summer. I worked at a whole string of series of dead-end jobs with no benefits, eking a marginal existence. I went to the factory and I stayed there for three weeks. Then from there—by then, we're into early October 1967. Now, I had forgotten—I was still worried about the draft. I didn't hear anything from then. No letter, no nothing. Starting to relax.

Then I got another job in the neighborhood working in a bookstore, walking distance, and what happens? This letter arrives from the Selective Service System, telling me to report to the Chicago Induction Center to take a physical, and it seemed like—I felt like I had just been hit by a ten-ton truck. I was really, really completely flabbergasted. I thought, how did they find out where I was living? I didn't leave a forwarding address. But they get you through your Social Security number.

And I pondered my decision what to do. So I decided that I wasn't going to do anything, so I never answered that letter and I ignored it. So the October months went by. I didn't hear anything. I'm working in the bookstore. By the end of 1967, 200,000 soldiers were in Vietnam, including women, because a lot of the women worked in the hospitals. I don't know the exact figures, but there were a lot of women there as well, around in the six, seven thousand during the whole war.

So 1968 comes, and it was like another day, but something happened. On January 31st, 1968, 80,000 Viet Cong soldiers and the North Vietnamese Army attacked thirty-six of the forty-four provinces in South Vietnam. That became worldwide news, and I saw it and I was scared, was trying to figure out, you know, okay, I'm not there yet.

00:20:00 So then two months later, President Lyndon Johnson was going to deliver his State of the Union Address. Now, where I was living, I didn't have a radio or a TV, and I went over to the YMCA. They had a lounge. And I thought, well, I'll just go over there and see what he has to say. It was packed, so I had to squeeze in to get a little spot along the wall. And when he announced that he was not going to run for president or accept—he would not accept the nomination for his party, the Democratic Party, there

was a stunned silence in the room, and I thought that the war was over and I wasn't going to have to go, and I felt elated. Walking back to my room, I thought, "You worried about all of this stuff, and here, look, you don't even have to go."

But something happened. Shortly afterwards—well, no, Martin Luther King was assassinated, but from early March up until when President Johnson made his speech, I got another letter from the Selective Service System telling me to get my ass down there and take that physical. And I just ignored it. I said, "I'm not going to go there. I'm not going to do it."

Then after Martin Luther King was assassinated—now, this was on a Thursday, April the 4th, 1968. I actually didn't even know about it until the next day, because, again, I didn't have a radio. I went to work and they were talking about it, and then I had a radio downstairs and I was listening to all the reports and everything, all the coverage on the radio. They closed down the whole city because what was happening on the far West Side, there were riots going on actually all over the country. I mean, the whole city was in a panic, and everybody went home at three o'clock.

Then two months later, Robert Kennedy was assassinated after winning the California primary on April the 6th. So I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere staying at this job that I was currently with. It was another dead-end job.

And my aunt, my daddy's sister, was living here in Manhattan, and I was keeping in touch with her and giving her updates, and she kept saying, "Don't worry." She was the one that told me to ignore—she was the one who told me, "Don't go and take that physical." So she said, "Why don't you just move on to New York City."

So my intuition kicked in, and I started making arrangements to leave Chicago. I knew I was never going to live in Chicago again, so I slowly started packing everything, and on the third week of June, I flew back down to Kentucky and I stayed there for two weeks, and my aunt secured me a room at the YMCA, the one that's over—there was a “Y” at 63rd and Central Park West. I had a fabulous room on a half-floor, way in the corner. I loved it. Bathroom down the hall, shower facilities.

So I moved in, and I thought that was—again, I moved again, no forwarding address. So what happens? I got into New York City first week of July 1968. I get a third letter from the Selective Service System, and I decided to go down and take my physical, because I was convinced I was going to flunk it. I only weighed ninety-five pounds. I wasn't physically fit, and I thought they're going to look at me and say, “Go home.”

I went down to 17 Whitehall Street and I took that physical. I went to a whole series of rooms. They had all kinds of tests. This place looked like it was another place that hadn't been painted in 100 years, and we were going through all these rooms, and it went on for hours and hours and hours, and they told me to go home.

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And shortly afterwards, I got a letter and said I passed my physical, and I was going to wound up being drafted. So I got drafted. I had a little few weeks to get my act together to take care of some business. I got drafted and we went to LaGuardia. They put us on this plane. You would think with all the money that we were spending on the war, they could have at least put us on a plane that had seats. They put us on this aircraft and everybody—it was packed like sardines in there, and everybody had to sit where

their legs were out. One man after another was in front of—we had to look at the back of the guy's head. No one was allowed to talk.

So we go. The whole thing shook and rattled all the way down to South Carolina. I went down there. It was brutally hot, and let me tell you, talk about culture shock. Everybody was just—we became a number. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of men from all over the country—well, basically more here on the East Coast, and we had to go through all these rooms to get our clothes. They would just throw stuff at us. And we had to pull KP, and I was scared.

Then one day they said, “Everybody get in formation.” Everywhere we went, we had to run. No walking. You ran. Double time, they called it. So they said, “Everybody in formation. If I call your name, fall out and go over there.” So they started calling names, and there must have been three hundred of us in formation, and they called my name and they say, “Go over there.” I went over there, and they said, “You’re going into Georgia.”

So two busloads of us went into Georgia. Let me tell you, when I got off that bus, I didn’t know what hit me. You had the drill sergeant and his allies. Allies were holdovers from the previous basic training who were waiting for their orders. They were screaming at everybody, “Get your duffle bag!” We had to run every which way. Oh, they would grab our duffle bags and dump everything out and go through all of our personal stuff.

They were looking for somebody who was weak. That was the whole point. If you were overweight or you were underweight or you didn’t have your wits

about you, they would find you. And so they found me. And I remember they were setting the rules very early in the game. “You belong to me. You belong to Uncle Sam.” And it was all about getting you ready to fight in the war, because they needed bodies over there.

So we had to go through—they had us running everywhere. When we went into the mess hall, it was constant pressure. They shaved our heads. We looked like—everybody looked alike, except we were in different body. Some were fat. Some were thin. Some were short. It didn’t matter. You were a number.

So then basic training started, and I remember they told us how to—let me tell you how they woke us up. It gets better. They would come in and either they would scream at top voice or they would take an ax handle and beat on a garbage can lid. That was our alarm clock. And everybody had to fall out. Before you fell out, you had to make your bunk, get dressed, and fall out in fifteen minutes.

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So I learned the tricks of the trade. I would shower the night before and shave. They made us shower in cold water, and it was cold. Well, it was getting colder. Georgia was still warm, but as the months went on, we never had hot water. So I would do that before. We had to fall out at four-thirty in the morning, something like that, four-thirty, quarter to five. Then the first sergeant would read us the riot act and give us a very stern warning, and then the holdovers would be walking back and forth to see if they could see if something was—to pounce on somebody. After we heard his lecture—and he would walk back and forth in front of the formation, very full of himself. He was a

career officer. He told us he knew all the tricks of the trades, and don't anybody try to pull a fast one on him, because you're not going to get out. You are in the army now.

So they would make us run the mile. We had to run the mile. We went around, around this *huge* football field five times. One mile seemed like three miles. Now, if you fell out of that, if you couldn't keep up—and, of course, I fell out because I couldn't keep up, and there were a bunch of us stragglers that were way behind, then we were automatically—that's how they got you. They got you if you fell out of that when you ran that mile. Then they knew that you were weak. That's what they were looking for, someone who was weak.

When we got back at the barracks, they would make us go through the monkey bars. There were so many things that I forgot about, and then it started coming back to me as I was thinking about my interview. We would have to go through these—they had these little steps, like a wooden step. You had to step up, and then you had to jump up and grab these monkey bars, and you had to go down one after another twenty times. Now, they had one, two, three, four. They had like, I think, four rows of monkey bars, but two columns, so you had to go down one, twenty rungs, and then reach over and grab the other monkey bars and come back, and if you couldn't do the bars—like me, I never made the bars. I fell into this big sandpit. Then there were others. A lot of people were falling into the sandpit.

So what did they make us do? They pulled us out and they made us do push-ups to exhaustion, and it was just excruciatingly difficult. I saw guys' hands crack open with blisters and sores as time went on. They still made them do the bars. Guys

who were physically fit, they didn't care. So I think the most I ever did on the bars was maybe halfway down the first rung. I just couldn't do those bars.

Then we were the last ones to get into line to go to have breakfast. Let me tell you about breakfast. It was nothing to write home about. Powdered eggs, toast that was soggy, Tang orange juice. You remember Tang orange juice? Flat coffee. If you got a piece of bacon or a sausage, you were lucky. Then when everybody got into that mess hall and sat down—the stragglers, we all sat down—they would yell out at top voice, “Last four men in the mess hall gets KP!” So everybody's trying to be the first one out the door, so I would gulp down on my food.

00:35:00 But they put me on KP a few times, and I actually liked it. I got to lick the bowl. When they made chocolate cake, I got to lick the bowl. I didn't mind doing the KP after a while. You had to like it, because you had pots and pans, you did the orderly room, and they always found things for us to do. People dreaded doing mess hall work because of the staff that was in there. Some of them were really mean.

So after two weeks, they told me not to fall out. So they took myself and another person, and they transferred me to a special company that they just created to help people who needed additional training. It was basically like the life of Riley. It was very relaxed, and people came from all over. We had one barracks—actually, there was one floor upstairs, and then you had a row here and a row here, and we had an old potbelly stove. We had potbelly stoves. And I was there for a few months. We would have inspections every Saturday. All the lifers would come around, make a big deal about these inspections. They would have medals from their nipples down to their hips,

and everything had to be perfect. They would check how your bunk was done. They would check if you shave right. Your boots was a big issue. Your boots had to be spit-shine.

So the whole thing was trying to get a pass to go off the base camp, and actually I won one of those passes. After I had got out of there, I was recycled into another company, and I stayed there and then I—oh, here's the thing. All people talked about in basic training morning, noon, and night was their school, what they signed up for. They signed up for wiring. They were going to do this, office work, because when they ask you, "What do you want to do now that you're in the army," people had these dreams that they were going to have a soft job, and these guys talked constantly about their school. They were so excited. I didn't buy into any of that stuff. Listen. To me, I didn't want it. I didn't care about any school because I was against the war. A lot of the guys were against the war, but they figured, "Okay, I'm going. I'm going to make the best of it. So I'll sign up for journalism." "I'm going to be an announcer." "I'm going to do—," whatever they wanted to do, but nobody wanted to go be in the jungle.

So when I got out of there and went back into basic training, they just started me on the third week. So the drill sergeant was real tough, but I already knew it. He didn't scare me. I was used to this already.

So when basic training was almost over, someone told me, he tipped me off, "They posted our orders at the orderly room. Go over there and check the names." I took off running before anybody else got over there. They had this computer printout on this wall, and I was shaking so hard. My finger was going down the list, because the

names were all in alphabetical order, and every name, “John Doe, Infantry. Mike Johnson, Infantry,” all the way down the list. Maybe one person, it said “Office.” And my finger was shaking so hard as I was going down that list, and when I got to my name, it said “Artillery Infantry.”

And the guy next to me said, “Man, you’re one of the lucky ones.”

00:40:00 So everybody started to leaving, and we left in bunches and they went different places. I never saw any of these guys again. Some of us went on—those who got artillery infantry—there weren’t just a handful of us—we didn’t go home. We went to our next assignment. So we flew to Oklahoma. So I went there, and let me tell you, we had all of these endless lectures and how to fire the weapons. My heart was not into it, but I said, “I’ll make the best of it.”

This went on—this was two months, and so I didn’t see one person from basic training in my company. No one. I was there all by myself, and people were from all over, and they were there to do artillery infantry. They could change your orders. And I got through that. I remember towards the end of advanced individual training, they called it—everything had a name—someone comes to me and said, “They’re talking about recycling you.”

So I took off running to the lieutenant’s office. We were kind of on friendly terms. He was a cute guy. I walked in. I didn’t even salute him, and I said, “Lieutenant, do *not* recycle me. It costs \$10,000 to train a man to fight in Vietnam, and this will be a waste of the taxpayers’ money if you keep me back.” So he let me go through.

So people left, and I remember I went to the airport. We went to the airport, and I was the next person to get on the plane. We had to walk on the tarmac and then go up the steps. It wasn't like it is today. Someone pushed me out of the way and ran ahead of me and took my spot. So a bunch of us, we rented a car and we went up to Dallas and we just split up.

Then I came back to New York City and I stayed here—no, no, I take—yeah, came back to New York City, and then from there, I went out to California to the Induction Center in Oakland, and I was there about a night and a day and boarded a plane, a full plane, and off I went. And there was not one person on that plane that I knew. It took twenty-three hours. Now, over there, they're a whole day ahead of us.

We flew into Saigon, got in at two o'clock in the morning, and we got into these—like a bus, and they had chicken wire on the windows to keep locals from throwing hand grenades into the bus. I went to this other place, Biên Hòa. See, you have Tan Son Nhut, Saigon, Biên Hòa, and then Long Binh. I went there and I saw hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of guys from all walks of life, processing. Some were going home. A lot of them were just coming in country.

I got my gear, and they sent me into the 25th Infantry Division, which was a bad place to go. I go up there. I think I took a helicopter ride up there. It was very quick. Now, it's twenty miles north of Saigon. I had to go through these outdoor classes. I remember the very first day in those classes. There was about 100 people in the class, and the Viet Cong—the Viet Cong was also referred to as “Charlie,” which was like a disparaging remark that the Americans called—they called them “gooks,” “slopes,”

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“dinks,” “Charlie,” whatever. And they mortared the base camp, and there was this big explosion, and everybody’s running every which way to try to get out of harm’s way, and there was no place to go. There was about twenty guys that dove into a bunker, arms and legs all over the place. I dove into a ditch. But then these sirens were wailing, whatever that siren, whatever it is. Then when that stopped, we went back to our classes.

Now, I saw this guy who just came, who was out where I was. He survived a rocket attack on the compound, and a piece of flaming metal hit him in the eye. His eye looked like a mushy cherry tomato. His hand looked like a claw. He had a scar from his wrist clear all the way up to his—almost up to his elbow, and he was thrilled because he was going home. And I thought, “That’s something I don’t want.”

Then I think there was two convoys that went out there. It took two hours, two long hours to get way, way out in the field that they also called the bush, and nothing to—this is lesbians for “Bush.” This is the good bush. That was the bad bush.

So I went out there on this convoy, and these little kids would run up and they would try to sell us bags of marijuana for two dollars, and I was scared. And I remember about a good block and a half before we got to the opening of the entrance of a compound, where the artillery howitzers were set up, there must have been about—I never went around and walked around and counted them. They were, like, in a circle. I would say there were about twelve of them, and each one had a crew. There were big pieces of military cars and trucks and tanks and jeeps blown up alongside the road, upside down, the wheels, the carcasses, the wheels and everything, and I didn’t know what the hell it was about. Finally, I learned that they all ran over land mines. Three days before I

got out there, there was a convoy that went out, it went over a landmine, and somebody was very badly—there were injuries, really bad injuries.

I get out there. Here's the whole thing. I get out there. I was told to report to the first sergeant, and I went to the first sergeant, and he said, "Boy, where you from?"

I said, "I was born and raised in Kentucky."

You know what he said to me? "Well, I'm from West Virginia, but there are two things that I hate more, and that's a Kentuckian and a nigger." And I thought to myself, "Is this what I traveled 10,000 miles to hear?" He had it out for me from that moment on, and I went over to where I was assigned, and they told me what my duties were.

Now, we had this bunker. There was an underground bunker. You had to, like, step down on these little wooden planks. The bunkers, if you saw the movie *Platoon*, I think there was a scene in there of an underground bunker. That's Hollywood. This bunker was about fifteen feet long and about ten feet wide, and there were a crew of five people. Now, three people—the Howitzer, there was a door, like a latch, and they had a tube, and three people would get inside the Howitzer. One person had to handle the tubes, these heavy projectile—what's the term? The—

SS: Like missiles or something?

00:50:00 R: They were like—the rounds. The rounds. One round weighed ninety pounds. I weighed ninety-five pounds. And that's what they put me on. Then another guy did the powder, handled all the gunpowder.

So I was there. So that night, that night I got word that they were going to—that I had to go and do guard duty. The first sergeant put me on the perimeter all by myself. I had to get in a ditch. Now, there was this concertina wire. And he said to me, “If you see anything moving out there, come and get me.” I didn’t even know where his bunk was. I didn’t even know where he was sleeping. You don’t put a man on guard duty by themselves. I wasn’t in a foxhole; I was laying in a ditch with no weapon. I hadn’t slept properly since I got there. I was hungry. I was tired.

He puts me out on guard duty, and I am looking out there, terrified, and the wind was blowing and there was no full moon, so it was really dark, and I was desperately trying to keep awake. I kept looking out there, and anything that moves, it could be a dangerous. It could be the—who knew? I don’t know. I was so damned tired. I was desperately, desperately trying to stay awake. And it was hot because it’s very humid weather. It was way up in the nineties. Nobody had air-conditioning here. I was trying to stay awake, and my eyes were very, very heavy, and I was so scared.

Next thing I know, I have a flashlight in my face, and it’s the first sergeant. He cussed me out. He called me all these names and cursed me out. “You better be alert!” So he took me back and then he gossiped about me. So then I had no one to appeal to who. It was him. He was running the whole show.

So two weeks later—no, it was about—oh, I met a friend. I did have a friend out there, one friend who was from Michigan who came out two weeks later, and we used to talk. I actually was falling in love with this guy. He was so handsome. He was my age, twenty years old, and he appreciated the Vietnamese culture, and he

spoke—he didn't have anything against the Vietnamese, and we had these beautiful conversations. I can still see him waving at me sometimes when I'm dreaming and thinking of him. He was in another crew, with another crew. So some time went by, and then another guy comes out, and they put him on the ammo.

Now, let me tell you another thing they made us – I had to do. The first night in that bunker, I heard these scratching sounds, something behind these loose planks, scratching noises. And I said, "What is that?" They were rats the size of cats. And you know what I had to do that first night I was in that bunker? They told me, "You have to sleep inside your sleeping bag." So it's hot outside and it's hot down there. I had all my clothes on, and I had to put the sleeping bag on and just have my nose out to prevent myself from getting bitten by a rat. It was filthy down there and it was dirty. I had nothing in common with anybody. I thought, "Oh, god. How will I ever get through this?"

00:55:00 Then somebody else came out and they gave him the job of handling the rounds. I got four hours sleep a night. We were firing those howitzers day and night, because the infantry were calling in for support, because they were engaged in these battles with the Viet Cong out in the jungle. That was what artillery infantry was.

The first night I was down in the bunker, I was so damn tired. Not the night that I did guard duty, but the next night I just wanted to sleep forever, and somebody screams out, "Fire in the hole!" I had to jump out of that sleeping bag, get all these rounds ready. One after another, I had to carry them, carry them, eighteen of them for one session. I didn't know how I could do it, but somehow I did it.

Then this other guy came in. They gave him that job, and I was “promoted,” and that’s in quotes. “Promotion” is, like, in quotes. They show me how to prepare the explosives for the rounds. They were in these packets. They take this, you take this, you take that, and you put them all together. Then helicopters would fly over, and they had these big, big, big crates that they would drop from way above. You didn’t want to be underneath that. They were soda, crates and crates and crates of soda, Tab soda, and they would just land. I said, “Well, is there ice?”

They says, “We have no ice out here in the field.” So I drank Tab soda and I smoked cigarettes. That was basically my diet.

Somebody in the mess hall had an alter[c]ation with one of the Vietnamese women, so they told us we could no longer sit in the mess hall. There was, like, a couple of picnic tables, so we had to go outside and sit somewhere. So what does the first sergeant do? He said, “You have to shine your boots before you can come and get your meals,” yet I was walking through a half a foot of sand, and I just thought it was the dumbest thing. These rules were ridiculous, so I just stopped eating. Believe it or not, I had no appetite. I started losing a lot of weight. And, you know, when you don’t eat, you do lose weight and you get tired. And I didn’t care. I just drank my sodas, and I just never—I said, “I’m not going to shine my boots to walk through a half a foot of sand to see if I pass this inspection. What’s the point?”

So time went on, and one day they said, “Haircuts. You have to have haircuts.” So there was this big shed that the French built, and it had a corrugated roof, and I thought somebody was going to go behind this shed with me to get my hair cut. He

ordered me, “Get back there and get your hair cut. I don’t want any hair above your lip, over your ears. You get that hair cut.” But everybody had to get a haircut.

So I went back and I walked on this little trail, and I went way back there, and there was this old Vietnamese man who looked like Ho Chi Minh’s brother. I sat on this old broken-down lawn chair, and I was scared, because I’m looking out and it’s all just, like, fields. There are a lot of shrubs and trees and everything. It’s very narrow. In the blazing sun, he gave me a haircut. He pulls out a razor, and I grabbed—I was so scared, I took my—I was hanging on to my chair, and I closed my eyes because I thought he was going to slit my throat. I was so afraid and I just was holding my breath, and he shaved me, and I lived.

01:00:00

Then they put me on—everybody had to do KP, but no one told me what I had to do. So they said, “Go and help *mama-san*.” *Mama-san* is a term for an older Vietnamese woman. So there was this—across from the mess, from the, I guess, the main office in the mess hall, there was an older Vietnamese woman, and she just was rinsing off these dishes and stuff, and she said she didn’t need any help. So I wound up spending the whole afternoon rapping with her. We got along beautifully. I didn’t do any KP, because no one told me what to do and she said she didn’t need any help.

She went to her village. I asked her if she would get me a bracelet. She went to her village, because they would go to their village during the middle of day, and she brought me—I gave her one *đồng*, Vietnamese money. She bought me a bracelet that meant “long life.” I started wearing the bracelet. When the first sergeant saw that, he cussed me out and he said, “Stay away from her. She’s a Communist. She’s this. She’s

that,” blah, blah, blah.” He was making all of these, “She’s dangerous. You went against army regulations.” Hell, I liked her better than him.

So then something happened. A convoy came out one day. I was just completely—I had lost all sense of time. Watches fell off. We didn’t have alarm clocks. All I wore was my pants rolled up with my boots. No underwear, no tops. During a monsoon, when it would rain, I would just let the rain get on me to get the dirt off of me.

SS: We’re just going to re-adjust your mic.

JW: Your mic fell off.

R: Did it fall off? You mean I have to start all over?

SS: No. Oh no, it’s just when you shook your jacket.

JW: I see you’re stepping on it.

R: Is this still rolling?

SS: Yeah.

R: Am I okay?

SS: Everything is cool. We’re perfectly fine.

JW: Can you lift your feet for a second? One more. Thank you.

That’s good.

R: Why don’t you put it here? Clip it onto the wire her. You can do that, can’t you?

SS: I think he likes it on the side. Just don’t shake your sweater anymore.

R: Okay. I get excited.

JW: It's a victim of war.

SS: Okay. Great.

R: Then something happened. A convoy came out. They said, "Grab your stuff. You're going into headquarters." The first sergeant was overruled, and it wasn't his decision, and I felt like I won the lottery. "Oh, my god. I can't believe this has happened to me." I grabbed my stuff. I didn't say goodbye to anybody. I got on the convoy. We went back into headquarters, and then they made me an assistant to a guy who was going to be going home soon. He worked in the supply room. He was very vocal to himself. He was against the war. He said, "We shouldn't be spending all this money being over there when we should be focusing on schools, education, infrastructure." I agreed with him, but I didn't go around broadcasting my opinions. I kept it to myself.

I was way over on the perimeter away from everything, in a hooch. Now, a hooch is like—you know what a hooch is?

SS: No.

01:05:00

R: Hooch is sort of like circular, and it's got sandbags and a screen, some kind of a gossamer screen. I was with other guys in there, and I was thrilled that I was away from being out—oh, there was something that I forgot to mention. When I was out in the field, they told me and five other people who were the most recent arrivals, that we had to get into an armored personal carrier and go out of the compound and look for Charlie, look for the Viet Cong. I thought to myself, "How am I going to survive this?" And you know what? The first sergeant comes up to me and he said to me, "I want to

shake your hand. It was nice knowing you.” I refused to shake his hand and walked away, because I felt he was mocking me and making fun of me.

Then on another occasion while I was out there, they said that we had to pack up everything and move towards—near the Cambodian border. That scared the daylights out of me. That was cancelled. That mission for it to go out on the APC was cancelled at the last minute. So when I came back into headquarters, I said, “There’s no way I’m going back out to that field.”

So I got back into headquarters, and still we were in—the whole country—now, the whole country, you’re talking about a country that’s like a stem, but in square miles it was the size of the State of Missouri. I remembered I used to go down to the PX. I started talking to a lot of the guys that were over there. I started hearing all of these stories. There was one story I heard that everybody was talking about, where somebody planted a booby trap. You know what a booby trap is? Booby trap is an explosive device that when it’s touched, it detonates and it causes a massive explosion. Someone put a booby trap on a tray, a food tray in the mess hall, one of the mess halls on the base camp. This guy pulls out the tray and it detonates and killed thirty-eight Americans in the mess hall, and over 100 were injured. No one ever found out who did it.

I started talking to a lot of guys. They were sharing their stories with me, and they were pretty scary. They were very, very scary, the firefights that they were in. They were coming in from the field. I was going down to the PX, and they had like a PX, and they had like a cafeteria-type thing, and all these guys were coming in from the

field for a few days that were out in the jungle, and they played constantly on the jukebox. The African American soldiers played “Cloud Nine” by The Temptations, and the white guys played “Aquarius” by The 5th Dimension. They played this over and over and over again.

So I was down there trying to get through each day, again no sense of time, and one day I’m somewhere in headquarters and I see somebody walking towards me, angry look on his face, and it’s the first sergeant. He walks right up to me. He stuck his dirty finger in my face, and he said, “I don’t know who gave the order for you to come into headquarters, but I’m going to do everything in my power to get you back.”

I looked at him and I said, “I ain’t goin’.”

And he says, “Goddamn you. You’re going to do what I told you to do. I’m going on R&R rest,” which is called rest and recreation, “and I’ll be gone for two weeks. When I come back, you’re going back to the field.”

I just said, “I ain’t goin’.” And he stormed off and he walked away.

01:10:00

So that night I was in this bar with some of the guys and we were sitting around this big table. I was sipping my Tab soda. I love the Vietnamese music. They had this singsong voice, a beautiful music. I’m relaxing and I’m chilling out. There were two young—well, they called them *baby-sans*. The *baby-san*, *mama-san*, and *papa-san*. So the two young Vietnamese girls, they were in there, and there were people, and all of a sudden there was this big explosion and everything shakes. Stuff is falling on the floor. The Viet Cong mortared the base camp, and they knocked all the lights out. Everybody runs out of there, and I stay and I didn’t know what to do, and I’m in a panic. So I dove

under the table and I get under there, and I stay there for twenty minutes, and nobody comes in.

Finally, I came out and I could see shadows of people running all over the place—it was like in a movie—and flares going off, helicopters flying over. So I run over to where my hooch is, and they told us, “Fall out in formation.” Well, not formation. Everybody had to get all their gear on, and we were there for hours. There was a helicopter outside the perimeter firing for, seemed forever, something down on the ground, all this ordnance. It just went on and on and on. It was like a scene out of *Apocalypse Now*. You know that scene where they’re firing all the weapons? Did you ever see that movie?

SS: A long time ago.

R: So time went on, and the next thing I knew, I was being evacuated to Japan for rehabilitation, because I was still losing weight. My bones, you could see them sticking out of my ribs. So I went down to Biên Hòa, and I’m sitting on a cot one day and I’m very deep in my thoughts and I’m very sad, and there were some guys in this recreation room and they were playing pool and a radio was on, and I heard this voice. It was Judy Garland singing “Over the Rainbow,” and they announced that Judy Garland had died. Everybody—you could hear a pin drop in there. And that night the Stonewall uprising took place.

SS: But you didn’t know it.

R: I didn’t know it. I didn’t know anything about that, because I got this little paper called the *Stars and Stripes*, and they were writing all these horror stories

about stuff that was going on around the country. I didn't know anything about what happened at Stonewall.

Finally, they sent me to Japan to a military hospital near Tokyo, and people were from all over, and, Sarah, what I saw in that hospital would break your heart. I saw guys that lost limbs. I saw guys who were blinded. I saw guys who were in wheelchairs, human vegetables, all from the war.

My rehabilitation lasted a grand total of two weeks. I was sitting in a room with other guys, and we would talk about our problems, and it didn't amount to much. There were guys in there who refused to go back to Vietnam. When it was over, there were—two weeks later, all these people were coming in from the war, from Vietnam. There were so many people coming in, we had to get out of there to make room for them. So a lot of these people, patients, or whatever you want to—I call them casualties from the war—they all had their own issues to deal with. A lot of them went back to the States, but the doctor sends me back to Vietnam. I tried to talk to him and tell him that I didn't want to go, but it fell on deaf ears.

01:15:00 So I get on a bus for two hours, and I had to go to another place and it was these gigantic barracks, two levels, a lot of rooms, a mess hall, and you would fall out in formation. It was sort of like basic training, but you didn't have to run the mile. They would grab people to do details. I remember one day I was walking and this lieutenant walked past me and I didn't salute him, and he started yelling at me, "You didn't salute me! Do you see what I have here?"

I says, "Well, what about it?"

He says, "I'm a lieutenant in the army."

I said, "So?" I says, "We never saluted officers in Vietnam."

"Well, you're not in Vietnam."

I says, "Were you ever there?"

And he says, "No."

I says, "Well, please, please don't yell me about your bar. It's meaningless to me." So then after that, he sort of calmed down and he was friendlier towards me. I stayed there about a week or maybe five days.

This is before faxes, emails. They made me take a bus ride for two hours and go to this office to get a piece of paper signed. The doctor or whatever, orderly, didn't even look at me. He scribbled something on a piece of paper. I had to get on the bus and go two hours back to the base camp.

Finally, I was evacuated. I went back to Saigon. I spent the night there, and then I went—well, my whole rehabilitation was a grand total of two weeks, and it was nothing. Back to Vietnam I go. So I was in Long Binh, and I remember seeing equipment as far as the eye could see, and I said, "We will never get out of there." It's like being on a highway and you can't see the end of the road. It's like a little speck. That's how it was. I thought, "My god, how did all this stuff get over here?" I didn't go right back to my old base camp. I had to go to this area to build a bunker, and when I got there the first time, it was just a little hole in the ground, but when I got there the second time, there was all these rooms underground. But there was a bunch of us down there, but nobody wanted to do anything. We just laid around and caught up on our rest.

I go back to my old company. Most of the guys I was with before, they had left. Some came in from the field and they didn't want to go back to the field because they were scared. I had to go through these outdoor classes again, and we had a sergeant who was really gung-ho. Let me tell you, some of the stories he told us I don't even want to repeat on camera. It's just horrible what he was telling us.

I remember one day I was thirsty and there was hose and I went to get some water, and I took the hose and I threw it down, and he took his boot and kicked me right in the seat of my pants and said, "Stop wasting water."

And I'm thinking, "We're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars already, and you're worried about a little dribble of water." And I lost my balance and I pitched forward, and I fell right on my face. And that's when I found out at headquarters that my friend that I met, that I talked to out in the field, he had gotten killed. He was killed. I saw a whole list of casualties.

01:20:00 They moved me to another hooch, and I was there and time went on. Again, trying to keep track of time. When Judy Garland sang, that's how I kind of got sense of time, because, again, no watch. So I remembered—I could see firefights right outside the perimeter at night, the flashes of the weapons. There were battles going on just right outside the perimeter. I used to walk around in that perimeter all by myself at night. You know, they had tunnels underneath that base camp. Viet Cong had built a whole city right under the base camp and nobody knew about it at that time. To think I used to walk around there all by myself at night. I really didn't really meet any friends. I talked to people. I was just dealing with my own issues and trying to—it was survival.

After what I saw in Japan, I said, “I am going to go back in one piece.” But the rocket attacks continued.

I remembered in August—oh, I actually made a friend, a Vietnamese woman I met downtown that I used to talk to whenever I saw her. She came in off the base. She came in from a village, and we used to have these wonderful conversations and I would love talking to her, just talked about everything in general. I had nothing against the Vietnamese people, because they never did anything against me. I was put in a situation that I didn’t understand and I was trying to get through it the best I could.

I saw this guy in a truck one day near downtown. He honked his horn. He had got up in the cab of his truck. He remembered me from Georgia. He got a job driving a truck. He was lucky. He didn’t want to be out in the field. He told me that guys who were in basic training, they did their basic training and in two weeks they went to Vietnam. They got killed a week later.

SS: Wow.

R: They perished. So I remember we were in the cab of his truck, and he rolled a joint and he asked me, “You want a hit?” I was so petrified of taking a hit on that joint because I thought if I got caught, I thought, “Oh, my god. If somebody sees me with this joint, I’ll be sent to the LBJ,” which was the Long Binh Jail. It was a stockade where people from all over the country went if they got in trouble with their officers and stuff.

So time went on. August. Then before, during, and after Woodstock musical festival, the base camp was being mortared every single morning, and I

remember there was this earth-shattering explosion that literally knocked me off my cot. Now, I didn't have a sleeping bag all the way up with my nose sticking out. That was only out in the bush. And that explosion knocked me off my cot. That round came very close for a direct hit on our hooch. If that had hit that hooch, there'd never been a Rollerena. I actually went over and looked in the road, and it was about twenty-five feet deep and about twelve feet across. They didn't fill it.

Then the one thing I didn't want to do, some of the guys wanted me to go back out to the field on these convoys, but I refused to go, because I didn't want to risk the wrath of the first sergeant, because I was afraid he would detain me. Why put me in harm's way with him? And I was afraid of these land mines.

Then some of the guys would have the *mama-sans* do their laundry. I just washed my clothes in the little corrugated shower outdoors while other guys were naked showering, and I'd do side glances at them. Oh, god, it was wonderful. The highlight of my whole day was just seeing what they had down there, but I was low-key.

01:25:00 We went off the base camp and we went into this village, and this Vietnamese girl—I say she—woman. She was about eighteen. She saw me. She beckoned me to go into her hooch. She said, "I have something for you." So I slowly walked in. The others went somewhere else. She disappeared behind this curtain, and she brought this paper cup out of this liquid that had a foamy top, it was sort of scummy-looking, and she was trying to get me to drink it, and she pushed it up against my face. I didn't want to be rude, but I kept turning my face away. She says, "Drink, drink." And I kept trying to say no, and I turned to this old Vietnamese woman, about ninety, and she

turned to me and she shook her head and said, “Bad.” I could see her teeth, and they were all rotten from eating, not eating, smoking betel nut. That’s supposed to be a sign of beauty. It’s part of their culture. Oh, another thing about their culture—well, anyways, I pushed that cup out of my face and I ran out of there. I got back on the base camp.

Another thing that the Vietnamese would do, they would walk. Men would walk holding hands, and they weren’t gay, had nothing to do about being gay. I used to see that all the time. The women were beautiful, and I loved their music.

So before I know it, I was going home. I went to Long Bình and I went through all this processing. I was in this big room, and we went to, like, an outdoor—well, these bleachers. It was like a gigantic hooch.

Oh, one other thing I want to bring up. They made me go to see this person to sign a piece of paper. It’s like a doctor of some—whatever, a social worker. This is really, really terrible. I don’t know. I guess I should—I’ll say it. There was a little area. I was sitting in there waiting to see the doctor and there’s a *mama-san* or a nurse’s aide. There were two other guys in there. We’re looking at magazines. This guy comes in, broad daylight, and he is totally traumatized. He had bloody nicks all over his scalp, his face, his arms, on his legs. They were just covered, and he had dirt. He’s about twenty years old. He had his face in his hands, and he kept saying, “Oh, my god. Oh, my god. I can’t believe this happened to me. I can’t believe this happened to me.” He kept saying this over and over again.

And no one said—they were all doing their own thing, and I kept looking at him. Finally I got up and I said, “Is there something that I can do to comfort to you?”

And he said, “Oh, my god. I can’t believe this happened to me.”

And I says, “Tell me what happened to you. What happened to you?” He told me he was outside the base camp in a jeep. There was him and three other guys. Somebody ran across a dirt road, and they took off after this guy. They figured he was Viet Cong. They ran in – the first guy stepped on a booby trap and it exploded. He was blown to pieces. The second guy lost his legs. The third guy got the impact from the second guy, and this guy was the fourth guy, and he got all this shrap metal all over him. And I felt totally helpless. I didn’t know what I could do. This was thirty minutes before in broad daylight.

01:30:00 By the time I was ready to go home and I flew out of Tan Son Nhut, and we went on a packed plane to—we went to Japan, and then from Japan we flew to Anchorage, Alaska. I called my mama, who was then living in Chicago near my sister, and she was really happy to see me—not to see me, to hear from me. Then from there, I went down to California, and I was there like a day and a half, and I walked out of there. I went to Berkeley. I took my uniform off. I stayed there for a few days. I put my uniform back on. I went to the airport, and I got a military standby rate and flew down to L.A. for \$15, stayed there for a few days.

Then I went to Dallas and I was going to spend a weekend there, and I decided not to because it looked kind of not happening. But I figured, well, while I’m here, I’ll go over to Dealey Plaza to see where President Kennedy’s motorcade passed. I went over there and then I went back to the airport, put my uniform back on. Every time I went on the plane, I put that uniform on to get the military rate. They paid for—my last

address was New York City, my home address, but I was in no hurry to get home because I needed to do things to chill out. And I had a very nervous stomach. I was very anxious, and yet I was so relieved to be back home, back in the States.

After I left Dallas, I went to New Orleans, stayed at the YMCA, and I was going to leave the next day, but I thought at the last minute, “Let me see if I can get a room.” I saw this room for rent and I knocked on the door. This man, about fifty, with a big belly, t-shirt on, in his underwear and flip-flops, he answers the door, and he wasn’t shaven. He’s looking at me very suspiciously. I said, “I’m here to see about a room to rent.” So he just stared at me. He looked at me. I’m in regular civilian clothes. I put all my stuff in a locker at the bus station.

So he takes me through this—his kitchen had dirty dishes in the sink, bed unmade, and while we’re walking to this room way in the back, he yells out, “I don’t want no queers or prostitutes in here!”

And I say, “You know what? This is not going to work out.” I turned around and walked out of there.

So I walked into this bar and I met a guy who liked me, and he said, “Would you like to stay with me?” Now, this was not for sex. He just liked my company. So I stayed there three days, and I was in his clapboard house somewhere down in the French Quarter, and I walked around all for three days. Finally, I took a bus and I went through Mississippi, and then I was in Mobile, stayed at a YMCA for the night there. I went up to Selma, Alabama. I had lunch there. Then I went to Tuscaloosa, and then from there I went to Birmingham. I stayed in Tuscaloosa a few days. I was in

Birmingham. Then I took the bus up to Louisville, stayed there a week. From there, I flew to Chicago. I stayed with my mama for a week. Took the train and moved to New York City, and I've been here ever since.

SS: Wow.

01:35:00 R: The army said they were going to make a man out of me, I was going to learn a trade, and see the world. Now, when I came back, a few days later was the moratorium against the war. There was this big demonstration that was planned, and everybody was going to go to Bryant Park. It was October 15th, 1969. I wanted to go and see what this was about. Now, I was on the fence. I felt really, really bad about people who were still over there, but I was totally mixed up because I didn't know the history about why we were there. And I was looking around for books to read, but there was nothing out there for me to read. But I wanted to go to this moratorium. I go there. I spent hours, literally, on the steps of the public library, listening to debates between the doves and the hawks, talking about why should be there and why we shouldn't be there, but not making any judgments. I never went around to the back to see what was going on.

About a week later, I got a job. I went to this employment agency that helped Vietnam veterans, so I got a job down in Lower Manhattan, and I was down there. Now, I had my bracelet that the Vietnamese lady bought me and a pair of tortoise shell eyeglasses, and right away the manager who hired me told me to get rid of it. This was too radical for him. He said, "You would perfect if you would just get rid of this."

I said, "Look, what's the big deal? I want to wear my bracelet." He kept after me about this, but I wouldn't give it up.

So weeks went by and there were a lot of protests going on. I did not join any of the protests. I wasn't there yet. So the secretary to the president of the company, this elderly lady about seventy-two years old, drew up a petition, and no one saw what she wrote on the petition. She just had the petition, and she went around wanting everybody to sign the petition, but basically what it was about was that she was going to do a letter and send it to President Richard Nixon and tell him what a wonderful job he was doing. There was seventy people in that office. I was the only one who would not sign that petition. I never gave it a second thought. She came to me and she says, "Will you sign this petition?"

I says, "No." I went back to my work.

Then the next day, she came back and she says, "Are you going to sign this petition?" And she started getting on my case about this petition.

And I said, "No, I don't want to sign this petition, because I don't think we should be in Vietnam." She made these very unpleasant comments about me, said I was unpatriotic, ungrateful. I said, "Let me tell you something. All of a sudden, you're the expert on the war in Vietnam, yet when I was over there, no one knew what was going on, but yet you know all about what was going on. I do not want to sign your petition. I fought for the right to say no."

After that, I was on their shit list. I started getting these dirty looks from management, and the president of the company started standing outside his office for two

hours every single day and staring at me. I didn't have a clue what his problem was. I thought, "Is this man cruising me? What's going on?" I went on about my work, but I could see the veins. He just stared. I couldn't figure out what his problem was. Finally, some of the guys that I worked with—this is like a typing pool—they went to him and they told him I was a good worker, but he made up his mind I had to go. Guess how they got rid of me? I got paid on a Friday in February of '70, and they said, "We're going to send you up to our other office at 59th and Fifth Avenue."

01:40:00 I went up there on a Friday afternoon—it was a long holiday weekend—and there was a woman up there and they told me to go see her. I go up there to see her, and she says, "I don't know anything about this." Now, there's two desks in there, and I says, "Well, I was told that the other person had left and I was supposed to take his job."

She says, "I know nothing about it. I'm leaving and you have to go."

So I said, "Okay."

So I came back, like, on the following Tuesday, and the guy that I thought left was sitting in the desk that I thought I was supposed to be sitting in, but the woman wasn't there. I said, "Well, I was told I was supposed to work here."

And they said, "Well, no. This is news to me." I never left. I just took a few days off. I had to go to take care of some family business. So I'm standing around, and then it dawned on me that there was no job for me, and that's how they got rid of me.

But good things came out of it. I got another job at Rockefeller Center, and on Tuesday, May 12th, 1970, I laced up my legs and started to roller-skate. This Tuesday, May 12th, 2015 will be forty-five years, and that was the start of me roller-

skating. So once I started roller-skating, I started meeting a lot more people, and I was going to Central Park, and I was getting in with the hippies and the be-ins and the love-ins, and I was meeting all these very interesting people, and it was the start of a beautiful metamorphosis that continues to this day.

SS: Is that when you met your boyfriend, 1970?

R: Well, I met this person. We are partners. He met me in the fountain. I don't remember meeting him, because he met me and then we sort of hooked up later. He said I had a really heavy Kentucky accent, but I didn't realize it. We actually met in Central Park in the fountain. We were hippies. He was a hippie. He had hair down to here and he wore the clothes of the hippies, and that was the start of our friendship. So actually he called me just before I came here and said, "I know you're going to give a great interview."

SS: So did you get – when was Rollerena born?

R: That comes later. I have some notes here that I took, maybe to sort of—see if I can find somehow. Let's see. I went to my first Gay Pride march in 1971 before Rollerena, because I had a little umbrella hat. I had these visors. I had a little—oh, I had a backpack, which all of this I donated to the archives at the Center.

SS: Now, which Gay Pride was 1971? Was that Washington Square Park?

R: No, they marched up Sixth Avenue to Central Park, near the bandshell. It was beautiful. But again, when I came back, I went to the Stonewall and it was closed. I didn't know why it closed. I didn't know anything about what happened that night. So

in 1971—let's see. 1971 came, and I was out skating and doing a lot of things, getting more familiar with the Antiwar Movement, and I started marching again some more. In January 1972, I went to Hunter College and I took black history. They called it black history then. Now it's African American history.

SS: Who was your teacher?

01:45:00 R: A man by the name of Clark. I don't remember his first name. I got an A in the course. I had to take this course, because I wanted to know the history of the South. Actually, right now I'm reading a book called *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980*. I'm reading for the second time. It's heavy.

And '72 came. Now, how did Rollerena come about? Well, I'd been thinking about doing something else, but I didn't know how to do it. I was on Christopher Street, and I went into this antique store that was called the Opulent Era, and I asked them, I says, "Look." It was in September 1972. I say, "Look. If you have a bathrobe with some glitter on it, I'll skate up and down the street with it." All of a sudden, everybody sprang into action. Someone put a hat on my head. Someone put a basket under my arm. They pulled out this old Ginger Rogers, looked like an old Ginger Rogers ball gown from the thirties that needed to go to the cleaners. I put that on. I went out and I skated on Christopher Street, and it seemed like all of a sudden, all these people came out of the woodwork. It was like Glinda arriving in Oz. Were you there that night?

SS: No, I wasn't there that night.

R: Oh, my god. It was so beautiful. Slowly I started adding a little thing, adding things, and I got a wand, which was really a 1950s circus baton, and that was the

start of Rollerena. But after that, I was stilling calling myself Rollin' Skeets, and then it sort of rolled over to Roller Arena, because I figured arena like a rink, and then I just changed it to Rollerena. That was in 1972. I started skating all over the city. I started small. I started in small areas, but I was in the Village and people were saying, "Oh, you can't—." Some people were saying to me, "You can't do this. This is not normal."

I says, "Well, the hippies are doing their thing and having a blast. Why can't I do what I want to do?"

"Well, no one's ever done this before."

I says, "Well, I'm the first. I have to do what I have to do." And you know what, Sarah? This was all very good therapy for me, because it got my mind off things that were bothering me from the war, because I didn't know how to deal with what was bothering me. I was very sad about a lot of things. I had bad memories. So, started roller-skating. I went to all the Gay Pride marches. I remember 1973 when they were coming down from uptown, and everybody went by Stonewall and they went to Washington Square Park. Oh, my gosh. It was fabulous. All these wonderful lesbians, a big contingent. They had speakers. It was beautiful.

So I started going to all the parades. I took black history. That was the only course I took. I never wanted anything more. This was all I needed to know. I had left my job. By 1974, I had already left my job and I was working down by the World Trade Center, and I stayed there till I retired, 2003, and I started going to all of these events, whatever was out there. This was before the Internet, and whenever there was something to do that we had to march about, everybody would meet at Sheridan Square.

Everybody. It was all word of mouth. I went to all of those. I don't remember what all of the actions were about, but they were all to advance our cause.

01:50:00

Then let's see what I've got here. I've got my notes. I was going to the—so a lot of things were happening. I'm going to tell you about how I found out about this disease that was coming into the community. I remember I was—and from the Keller's bar. It was in the summer of '79, and somebody came up to me. Excuse me.

SS: So just for the people who don't know, so Keller's was basically a black bar that was—

R: Keller's was a leather bar, but it was for everyone. It was one of those first bars—well, there were a lot of bars, but it was on West Street and Barrow. I think it was Barrow. Everybody went there on a Sunday afternoon to hang out. I was standing out front one day, it was the summer of 1979, and somebody came up to me and said, "I have a friend who is at St. Vincent's Hospital with a very difficult-to-diagnose disease. He's very, very sick. No one knows what it is."

Then a few weeks later, this same person said to me, "Oh, my friend passed away."

Then '79, '80 came. I was in the bars. I was hearing a lot of people—I was hearing conversations from people talking about this strange illness. No one had a name for it, and it was scary. It was frightening. I was, like, kind of eavesdropping to hear what they were saying. They were all saying the same thing. "So-and so got sick," or, "This guy got sick," "Another person got sick." That was the beginning of how this was getting out there. So it was sort of like in the community. People were—you know.

So I was very concerned, and then I had a couple of friends that got sick, and they died very quickly.

So I remember we all met one night in '83, word of mouth, and there were several thousand of us. We were just marching through the streets of the Village. People are dying. I don't know if the term "AIDS" was created then, but we were marching all over the Village and shouting, like, out about what was going on. So I had—oh, there was a benefit in August of 1983 at the Five Oaks. Ruby Rims was the—you ever heard of Ruby?

SS: No.

R: She is a drag artist. And there was going to be a benefit for ARC, AIDS Resource Center. There was going to be a big benefit and a lot of entertainment, and I happened to go into the Five Oaks, and I said, "I would like to be a part of this."

So she says, "Sure." So I rehearsed "Coal Miner's Daughter," and, man, was I ever scared. That was a packed room, and I went on. When it was time for me to go on, I took a flier from *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and I went around the room before I was to go on, and I was taping it around the room to let people know that this is what I was going to sing. Actually, I sang off-key, and I was shaking so hard, and everybody loved it, and I was glad that I could do this, and it was to benefit ARC.

Now, I had a friend who was getting sick, and he was in and out of the hospital, and finally he just realized that he couldn't work, so I became like a buddy for him. I was calling him and I'd visit him at his home and that type of thing. Then he told me about a support group that was at Eighth Avenue and 20th Street, which part of

01:55:00

GMHC. So I started to go. There were, like, forty people in the room, and the facilitator had AIDS, and people would go—now, I went for him and I went because I wanted to hear what other people were going through. So we would go around the room. They knew who I was. I listened to their stories. They were heartbreaking. Everybody in this room—there were women in there, actually several women in there, and they all were in various stages of HIV, and some of them looked totally hap — not happy. Totally healthy. It was a support group, and I went to this, and it got to be hard to go there, and I finally left. It was painful. I left in, like, early 1984.

So then I was walking on—let's see. A lot of dates. Oh, I went to the—when William Buckley wrote the column for *The New York Times*, I went to the *National Review*. It was like in April 1986, there were a group of us, and we picketed, and I actually was carrying a sign “You don't need a—.” I forgot what the sign said. I went to that, and there was a paper. There was a free paper that they put out in the Village that came out once a week, called *AIDS Update*. Now, during this time, the *New York Post* had these headlines, these horrible headlines about AIDS, and they made all of this negative press. But they had this little weekly paper called *AIDS Update*, and I would go up to the Village every week, actually starting in '83, just to get this little weekly paper, to look at it to see what they had to say in this. It was scary. And I felt that people—well, if you didn't look like the macho or like mainstream, or you looked gay, I felt—I got kind of paranoid about it, and I thought people saw me—I was in the regular clothes now, and they figured I was gay, and I had to deal with this.

But months went on, months went on, and then I—let's see what I have here. Well, after I left the group, I was walking in the Village and I saw this one guy that was from the original group of forty. This was about '86. He had on his neck a tumor that was as big as a—it was huge. It was big like a golf ball. I asked him about it, and he says, "Well, I'm going to St. Vincent's Hospital to have this checked out."

I said, "What happened to the group, the original group?" because he was in that group.

He said, "They all died."

I says, "What?"

He said, "They all passed away, every single one." Those forty people. I was flabbergasted.

SS: It was like Vietnam all over again.

R: Yes. I thought, "My god. They all died?"

02:00:00

And he said, "There's another group that started." It was in a townhouse right off of Seventh Avenue. This is 1986, about right after that. He said, "Why don't go." I thought, "I'll go over there."

So I went there. It was, like, on the first floor, and I went in there, and I saw—actually, I saw one person that was from the original group, but there were all these new faces, and the facilitator had already one bout of PCP. I just couldn't bear to be there, because there was nothing out there, and I thought, "Everybody in this room is going to die." I went once and I couldn't go back, and that was in '86.

I knew this one guy that I met on the subway, way back in the beginning, he had AIDS, and he told me that all his friends stopped talking to him. I saw him up in my neighborhood. We were getting on the subway. And I said, “Do not walk away from this man.” And we got to talking and we got on the train together and we sat together, and this was when there was a lot of fear. I says, “You know, he’s dealing with something that we don’t know about.”

So he said to me, “You’re the only person that did not walk away from me.” I saw him a couple more times. He had already had two bouts of PCP. He didn’t look sick. And then I never saw him again, and I figured he passed away.

My neighbor was diagnosed and I had to deal with his illness. It was very hard. He went fast. Then I knew people—because I was skating and meeting people, I knew people that died all in one weekend. They went in the hospital on a Friday and they passed away on a Monday. Then one person I knew lived for three years, and he went through hell, and he finally passed away.

So one day—this was in—I heard about ACT UP, and I read it in the paper, and I was involved with tenant issues and doing other things, and I decided—I wasn’t ready to—I was curious about this catchy name “ACT UP.” I says, “Wow. That really stands out.” And I was in Sheridan Square one day and I saw Marty Robinson from the Lavender Hill Mob, and he said, “This new group just started, called ACT UP.” This is a few weeks after it started. “This is just up your alley. You’ve got to come to this meeting. Come to this meeting. Promise me you’ll come to this meeting.”

At that time, I was doing other things and I wasn't ready, and finally, finally, I—well, I did go there one day—one night in August of 1987, and the room was very, very crowded, and it was wonderful. It was packed, people standing around in the back. All the seats were taken, and I loved the—I listened to people get up and say what they had to say, and I said, “This is not Sunday School. People are here because they're scared and they want results.”

02:05:00 So I left because I was doing other stuff, but finally on Monday, October 19th, 1987—that was the day of the stock market crash—I went officially to the ACT UP meeting for good and I was in there and I loved it, and people were saying hello to me. I thought I was going to be like everybody else, kind of anonymous, and I saw Maxine. When she got up to speak, I loved how she spoke. She was so articulate. I loved the women in the group and how they spoke and how articulate they were. I started going to the meetings, and that was the start of me going to ACT UP.

Now—okay.

SS: No, go ahead.

R: I was there for several months. Someone comes up to me and says, “Would you like to be the ticket queen?”

I said, “What's the ticket queen?” They explained to me, “You will go around the room and sell tickets for actions that were for the buses.”

And I said, “Okay. What do I have to do? Just do that?”

So he gave me a quick rundown. He says, “I'm going to introduce you.”

And I said, “Wait a minute. I want to do this my way.” So there was the chalkboard, and then there was the front area, and then on the other side there was another partition. I says, “I’m going to go behind that partition, and when you announce my name, I’ll jump out behind the partition, and that’s how I’m going to introduce myself.” So I that’s what I did, and that’s how I was—they said, “Rollerena is going to be the new ticket queen.” So I sort of spruced up my wardrobe. I had a floral shirt on, sort of hippieish-looking, I had earrings, these glasses. I got me a fanny belt, and I got into business. Let me tell you, I worked that room, and I signed people up for these actions, and when people gave me money for their tickets, I just put it right into the fanny belt. I didn’t want to be in where I had to, like, count out change or whatever. I couldn’t put it in my pockets, so I just put it in the fanny belt, and I became the ticket queen.

SS: Because everyone already knew you.

R: They knew me and they were very gracious, and started meeting people, and I would—were you in a lot of these meetings in the beginning?

SS: Yeah.

R: So I would eventually get up and make a little report, and that’s what I did, and I worked on a lot of the actions.

SS: Now, did you have an affinity group?

R: I did.

SS: Which one?

R: The Delta Queens. I was with Maxine.

SS: Who else was a Delta Queen?

R: I think—let's see. Maxine was in the group. I think Randy Snyder was in the group, the late Randy Snyder. I think that Steve Quester was in the group. I think Heidi was in the group, Heidi Dorow. She was wonderful.

SS: Do you remember any actions that you guys did?

R: There were a lot of actions, and I worked the room for all these out-of-city actions. I can't remember all of them, but there were a lot of them. I tried to say—oh, gosh. I worked the FDA action, and I worked a lot of—well, when buses were required to go down to D.C., I worked those actions, but I can't remember all of them, there were so many.

SS: Did you ever get arrested?

02:10:00 R: Well, this is interesting. I didn't want to get arrested because I was working at that time, and I thought, well, I don't—I had a full-time job, a government job, and I remember there was a huge action at City Hall, around the City Hall Park area. Somebody said I was arrested, but I don't recall. But I know we went to South Carolina for an action—I forgot what all the details were—and we, like, sat down in the street and they hauled us in to be booked, and I think that it was dismissed.

There's something very interesting that came out of this. There was this very, very handsome African-American police officer who was making goo-goo eyes at me, and he had gloves on, and he was looking at me like, "Baby, where you been all my life?" I was looking at him, but there was this barrier between us, and he kept looking at me with these loving eyes, and there was this immediate attraction, and it didn't go any further than that. I fantasized about him and I'm sure he fantasized about me.

Then we—what were you going to say?

SS: No, go ahead.

R: I went to—that was for South Carolina. There's other people that have been interviewed, and they'll probably go into all the details about what the actions were. We went to Atlanta, Georgia, for the Democratic National Convention. We actually chased the Klan out of town.

SS: How did you do that?

R: There were two guys from Mississippi in a big truck, and they were going to set up some kind of a protest, so we made them leave. We ran them—we harassed them to get—and they got all their stuff in the truck and they left.

There were a lot of wonderful things going on in Atlanta around the Democratic National Convention. Now, when that was coming up, I was debating whether or not I wanted to go, and I remember I was in somebody's loft and they were going over the tickets of who was going to go, and I kept debating, "Gosh, I wonder if I want to go down to Atlanta for this action?" I kept thinking. Well, when I found out that Maxine was going, I says, "I'm going," because she had such energy and charisma about her. When I heard that Maxine was going, I says, "I'm onboard."

SS: I want to ask you some questions about the culture of ACT UP.

How do you think people dealt with death? When somebody would get sick and die, how did the community—

R: Say that again.

SS: There was so much illness inside ACT UP. So many people got sick and died.

R: Dying is a very lonely experience. You can be in a room with all your loved ones around you and slowly drifting into eternity and being comfortable. There were so many people who were desperate for something to prolong their lives, and it seemed like every case was different. People would get up and talk, “I have two weeks to live.” How did they deal?

SS: How did the group handle so many people dying?

R: Everybody did their best to prolong their lives, to make them feel that their lives were meaningful. It’s like being terminally ill. It’s like having—to me, I looked at it as another form of cancer. There were support groups. That’s what this support group that I was going to was about, because when I was going to that group, somebody—they would say, “Well, so-and-so passed away.” There was always somebody there to be with them, and they knew there was something very urgent that had to be done to prolong their lives.

SS: Is there any particular individual who you recall from ACT UP whose death was particularly meaningful to you?

02:15:00

R: There was a person, yes. There was one guy that I knew from back in the seventies, who he died and—three people passed away, and it left such a void of emptiness—this was like by late ’87—that made me feel like—it was just so hard. When my neighbor got sick, he accepted it. Actually, I went—well, he wasn’t in ACT UP, but

there were a lot who weren't in ACT UP. But those who were in ACT UP, it—like another life cut short.

I was waiting for the bus one day, a crosstown bus at 66th and Lexington, and this guy who had two bouts of PCP, and this was about '87, and he was going to the group, and he accepted it. Then I knew this other guy, who was not in ACT UP, who worked in one of the stores. He was very bitter, because he said, "I have so much to live for, and now I've got this disease." He had to give up his livelihood and go back home to another state. I saw a lot of that before I came to ACT UP. Then I knew some people, like I said earlier, who died all in one weekend, so they didn't have a—they died very quickly. And some suffered so terrible deaths. So by the time I came to ACT UP and seen so many already, and everybody did the best they could to make them feel that their lives meant something.

SS: Well, I want to ask you about the issue of being a survivor of that time, because we've interviewed a lot of people, right? And obviously the people we've interviewed are the survivors.

R: Yes.

SS: We've seen that a lot of them—I would say this. My assessment is that quite a few men, a little bit older than me—I'm fifty-six now—have really suffered, and we see a lot of people who their friends are dead, their partners have died, they've been sick for years and years and years, they've been on every terrible medication, and there's a bubble around them, because younger people don't understand what they've gone through. If you get infected now, it's a completely

different experience. It's hard to communicate the survivor experience. Do you have any insight into that? Because you survived that.

R: Well, it's up to the young people to educate themselves that there is information out there to know about what the generation was before them.

SS: But how do you experience that part of it?

R: I don't talk to a lot of young people about—

SS: No, but for yourself, as a survivor of that time.

R: I feel grateful. And I don't talk about HIV issues to young people. I don't come into contact—they don't want—it's not like—it's something people don't want to talk about. It's almost like it never happened. I mean, this whole new generation, okay, you've got medication, so we'll prolong their lives. They didn't go through what we went through. So I don't know if we could ever have a movement like ACT UP. ACT UP was, like, unique, because it was a unique time, because with all the efforts that went into ACT UP that all the people put into to get where we are today has helped this generation. So they only know about it from these two movies. What was the name of the movies?

SS: *United in Anger*. We don't mention the other film.

02:20:00 R: Okay. Whatever. So they can read books if they want to read books. It's like anything, any part of history. I didn't know anything about what Kentucky was like until I took black history. So I wanted to know what it was like. So how did I go about it? I took black history, African American history, because I wanted to know the history. My daddy's sister always said, "You cannot put old heads on young shoulders."

So they have to do—the young people—and I know there's young people out there. I'm sure there are. They have to come into it on their own.

SS: Okay. So let me ask you—I want to move on to another topic, which is gender and ACT UP. So now we're in the trans revolution time, and a lot of people are transsexuals, and a lot of young trans people or gender queer or transgender people ask about gender and ACT UP, and I find it hard to explain it. So you were a person who had a very unique experience and expression of your gender. You just went with who you were, and you weren't in a category at the time. So how was gender lived in ACT UP? How do you explain the – ?

R: I didn't see many transgender people, ACT UPpers. There were a few. I remember one person who was slowly transitioning to be more like female, which was kind of not the majority. They were there. There were a few of us. Well, I don't consider myself transgender because I'm not trying to be a female. I wear overalls underneath my blouse. You know why I wear overalls underneath my blouse, Sarah?

SS: Why?

R: I never know when I may need to milk a cow—

SS: There you go.

R: —and being from Kentucky, I'm good with my hands. But I think the group was for everybody, and even those who wanted to be identified as transgender were accepted.

SS: Did you ever experience any kind of oppression based on the way that you expressed your gender, based on the Rollerena persona?

R: When I was like out roller-skating?

SS: Mm-hmm.

R: There's been a few little incidents where—I don't—when I was Rollerena, I would dress in public. I had public places. I would leave my building, and I would have my stuff in a shopping bag, and I wore a backpack, and I just dressed, but I didn't go to—if people were waiting for a bus, I didn't go over to the people waiting for the bus and then say, "Excuse me, but do you mind if I dress like this?" I just did what I had to do. I wasn't looking for anybody's opinion about the way I'm going to dress. I had to do what I had to do.

SS: Because I remember you at every Gay Pride since I was sixteen. You were there welcoming and blessing us and blessing me—

R: Of course. You deserved every bit of it.

SS: Thank you. And within the context of the gay world at that time, there was no question about Rollerena.

R: Rollerena was the Fairy Godmother of New York City, and she was sexless. She wasn't looking to get picked up. She was different, unique. I mean, I dressed up. I had the ball gown, I had the wand, I had various eyeglasses, hats. I started going to a lot of events. I actually went to Studio 54 on Halloween night, 1977. It was sensational. That night three thousand people were in there. They treated me like a star, and there was so much energy in that room and it was so creative. The music was fabulous, and people were—actually, the first night I went, there were like two hundred people came up to me, straight people, all walks of life. "We're so glad you're here." It

wasn't like you can't do this, because you had to bring something to the table, so I brought something to the table. But I didn't just do it there; I was all over the city.

02:25:00

I actually once roller-skated into a Marine Recruiting Center in Lower Manhattan, and this guy was sitting at a desk. There was a desk there, and he started—I turned around and I turned back. He was gone. I thought, “God, where'd that guy go?” He slid under the desk, he was laughing so hard. I said, “Where is the general? I need to speak to the commander.” This was in 1973. This guy comes out and he's got medals from his nipple all the way down. I said, “I want you to do everything in your power to end the war in Vietnam.” I blessed him and I took off.

I'll tell you, I was always thinking like, “My god, what if people at my job see me as Rollerena? How will they respond?” And somebody that I worked with, who was very conservative, loved Ronald Reagan, I mean, she was GOP all the way, she saw me on *Real People*. She loved it. I was so happy and so surprised, because Rollerena wasn't trying to be anything but herself.

SS: Right.

R: But as far as the—but I think what happened because of ACT UP and how through the years and transgender expression today has sort of—kind of goes back to that era. I support the people who want to transition to becoming the opposite sex or male to female or female to male. When I see somebody on the street, when I'm in regular clothes or dressed up, that are transgender, I say, “Right on.” But I think with ACT UP, it wasn't like the majority, because these were active, a lot of activists in there trying to achieve something to prolong lives.

SS: Have we covered everything on your notes, or do you want to—

R: Oh, I want to tell you about when we went to the GOP, to the Republican National Convention in Louisiana, in New Orleans. I went down there with a group. Bill Bahlman was with the group. Maxine, Heidi, again Steve Quester, some of the names I've already mentioned. There was a kiss-in at this hotel where I think a lot of the delegates were staying, which was wonderful, and there was some kind of a convention, like a big room where they did exhibits and stuff. Ronald Reagan—we picket this place, because there was a lot of stuff going on in there, and Ronald Reagan went there to speak during one of the days we were there. So it came to the consensus, "Let's go in there and have a demonstration," and a group went in. There were these barricades. A group went in, but somehow I didn't go in with that group. They were way in the back. This is about fifteen ACT UPpers, and they were holding up—okay. This police officer detained me. I didn't have a sign with me, and I had to convince him that I was not part—that I wanted to see Ronald Reagan, yet I had overalls on and I had a t-shirt on. I didn't look exactly like I was somebody that was for Ronald Reagan. I didn't look like a Republican, but he let me go in.

So I went in and I saw the group way in the back on the right-hand side, and I sort of got on the fringe of the group, and all of a sudden, this crowd of Republicans started surging towards us, and, man, my instincts kicked in. I started walking away.

02:30:00 This one old lady took a can of beer, and she said—threw it on me—"There's one of those damn protestors." I was the first one in and the first one out. I leaped over those barricades like one of those vultures in these—like I just took off running, and I kept

running and running and running, and I went into a hotel, and I sat down—I was trying to catch my breath—and people were giving me these dirty looks, “He looks like one of those protestors.” So I left, and then I finally hooked up with everybody. They thought I got arrested, and I didn’t. That was something that we did.

Then the delegates were—I remember hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of delegates were pouring into the Republican Convention. It was the Louisiana Super Bowl. It was a big, big stadium where they were all going to talk about their agenda. And we ACT UPpers were all on one side and these young Republicans, these were like twenty-year-olds, guys and girls. Girls were real preppy-looking and the guys were in suits, and they had barricades to separate us, and we were screaming and yelling at each other. They had cops there to keep us separate. But they tried to intimidate us, but we stood up to them. This was all filmed. It went on for a long, long time. They were really trying to intimidate us, but we stood our ground, and we were there and we were determined to let them know what we were all about, and that was to project the ACT UP agenda.

Now, another thing I want to say is I never—when I was in ACT UP, other than being the ticket queen, I didn’t join a lot of—I didn’t go to any of the committees, because I was working full-time, I was going to the gym, trying to get that “perfect body,” and that’s in quotes. Had to keep that schoolgirl figure. Then I was dealing with people—I had friends outside of ACT UP who were in various stages of illness, and I wasn’t one to go to join committees, but I know there were a lot of committees that were within the framework of ACT UP, but I loved being a ticket queen.

Then finally after Stop the Church action, which I thought was wonderful and long overdue, I supported it, I know people were afraid that what—because it got all this publicity. Poor Cardinal O’Connor, he’s on the front page of the *New York Post*, sitting in a chair signing, “I’m, oh, such a victim. Feel sorry for me.” I saw that thing, and I thought it was wonderful. I wasn’t afraid. I was not afraid. None of this scared me, because I had already been through hell and I survived that. I know what fear was when I was in Vietnam, and I thought it was a fantastic demonstration. It was long overdue.

Then there were a few other actions. I remember we went down, a group of us went down to the CDC in January of 1990, and I worked—I don’t know. That was – so I did whatever I had to do, and I went to that action. I was really starting to get tired, so I finally left ACT UP around the end of January 1990.

02:35:00

Oh, there’s one other thing I have to say. There was an action. ACT UP Provincetown reached out to ACT UP New York to come up and participate in their Gay Pride march, and they, the powers that be, wanted ACT UP Provincetown, for the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall, to carry candles and sing church hymns, and they said, “No, we cannot do that.” So a group of us went up there. Ron Goldberg was one person who went up—I can’t remember all the other names—and I went up. They wanted me to be the grand marshal, Rollerena. So I remember standing downtown, skates, the whole—everything, and I had fliers and I was handing out fliers, and who came by? It was a big contingent of the lesbian group Moving Violations, and I gave them a flier.

SS: Oh, the motorcycle dykes.

R: Oh, they were fabulous. They took a flier, and we were all going to meet at this church in the parking lot for the march.

Before that, I was invited to go to a church that was very diverse, and I was completely dressed, the whole works, and the minister, who was a woman, said, “Does anyone have anything to say?” I got up in front of the entire congregation and told everybody to come to the Gay Pride march. “I want to see all your smiling faces there.” And a lot of them showed up, and it was fabulous. Somebody had a sign. I’m not going to say what the sign said, but the city fathers got very upset about this sign, and it just was a lot of criticism, and we all went. Oh, it was such a gigantic turnout, and people were chanting, and we went to downtown Provincetown. We went to this church. It was like a Town Hall, and I gave a beautiful speech. Were you—

SS: No.

R: Kate Clinton, she was the emcee, was beautiful. I’m glad I went and I was part of that.

Then by the end of 1990, December 1990, I was getting tired. Not tired in the sense—there was still a lot of work to be done, but I knew it was time for me to leave, go on. So I left, and then someone told me that someone had passed away. Then in March they said, “Would you come back and be the ticket queen and sell the tickets for Storm the NIH action?” I came back and I worked the room for that, and I didn’t go to that action. After I sold enough tickets up to time it was time to leave, to go the action, which I left the group, and that was my ACT UP contribution.

SS: Okay.

JW: Did that coincide with Rollerena doing public rolls?

R: Public—doing what?

JW: Publically rolling. Publically skating.

R: What was the question?

SS: What do you mean?

JW: I mean did—

R: Oh, I still can. I still roller-skated. I officially hung up the roller skates on Gay Pride Day, 1994, and, you know, going to Christopher Street in the eighties, after so many people were getting sick, it was just no fun to go there anymore. So I hung up the roller skates. I kept everything at home in a box, my gown and my accessories and stuff. Then I kind of was still out there doing things. I'd go in bars and people would still say, "Oh, how are you?" I was in regular clothes.

02:40:00 Then on Halloween night, 2001, they had a big party at Barneys on Madison Avenue, and I decided to go. Somebody said, "Why don't you dress up." I didn't know what to wear, but I had some—I had these glasses, I had an old hat that I'd saved, and I put some things together, and then I reinvented myself. So this is the reborn Rollerena, and she has been out there ever since, spreading peace, joy, and love everywhere she walks in her flats.

SS: Great. Thank you. Let's end there.

JH: No, wait. I have a couple more questions.

SS: One is the footage I've seen of you in demonstrations, like at the FDA action and at DiAna's Hair Ego, you're always in boy's clothes, and I was wondering if you ever did an ACT UP demonstration as Rollerena.

R: No. I wore overalls. I wore my—I did overalls. I had my old—actually, I wore those overalls, and then I kind of bought another pair of overalls. I always did my overalls. You know, at DiAna's Hair Ego, when she did my hair, no, I went as a man, but when I did the tickets, I wore these glasses and earrings and a blouse—well, a shirt, really, kind of with a lot of flowers on it. But when I did the actions, I went as a man.

JH: The other question, Aldyn McKean was the only other person I know in ACT UP who was in Vietnam. Did you talk about it?

R: No. I met Aldyn in the Halloween Parade one day on Christopher Street. He came up to me long before ACT UP. I recognized him. Then when he came after I came there, he was over there also, and he traveled around the country a lot. I stayed basically in my area of operations. This was a very, very scary place. That area saw, in four years, five thousand Americans killed, and thousands were injured. And I just wanted to come home and do other things, and skating led me to you.

SS: There you go. That's great. Okay. Thank you, Rollerena.

R: Thank you, Sarah.

SS: Thank you so much. Great.