

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

A PROGRAM OF  
**MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &  
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Peter Staley**

Interview Number: **067**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **December 9, 2006**

ACT UP ORAL History Project  
Interview of Peter Staley  
December 9, 2006

**SARAH SCHULMAN:**     **Say your name, today's date, where we are and how old you are.**

PETER STALEY:     *(whispers)* What is today's date?

**SS:**     **It's the ninth.**

PS:     *(whispers)* Eighth or ninth?

**SS:**     **The ninth.**

PS:     The ninth, already. My name is Peter Staley and today is Saturday, December 9th, 2006 and I am 45 years old.

**SS:**     **And where are we?**

PS:     We're in Brooklyn, New York across from the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

**SS:**     **Right. Well Peter, it's funny, I've known you all these years I don't even know where you were born. Are you an East Coast?**

PS:     Actually, I'm Californian by birth, Sacramento, which I haven't been back to since I was a few months old. My family moved around a lot when I was young. We finally settled outside of Philadelphia when I was around 8 years old and I was there until I went to college.

**SS:**     **What were your parents' expectations for you?**

PS:     Well, they were, there was a pretty heavy pressure to be the best at something. My mother had a very famous father who made the cover of Newsweek at one point and was big in the Eisenhower administration, former president of MIT and all sorts of stuff. So, for some reason I was the one that was going to follow in his footsteps and there was a great deal of pressure, which I rebelled against in high school in very

negative ways. But I think she had hopes that I would be a great pianist because that's what I did growing up.

**SS: So you trained to be a concert pianist.**

PS: Yeah and I got into Oberlin Conservatory. Then after one semester dropped it like a stone and haven't played another note.

**SS: But you have a piano!**

PS: I know. It's good furniture.

**SS: Why did you drop it?**

PS: I decided I was doing it because of low self-esteem and it was the only thing I thought I was capable of doing. Once I broke free from the family, or the parents, there was a real change in college where I realized – mostly with the help of one of my older brothers, my brother Jess – that he really helped me build up some self-esteem and he helped me feel as though I could do anything I put my mind to. So I switched into the College and started majoring in economics and government.

**SS: At Oberlin.**

PS: At Oberlin.

**SS: So you were in a pretty hippie, left wing, but very high quality school.**

PS: Very. And then I did my junior year abroad at the London School of Economics. And the LSE made Oberlin look like a conservative think-tank. So, all of my schooling, I was having fabulous marijuana-induced political conversations about communism and socialism and capitalism. I was always on the right of those issues, that's for sure, in the conversations I was having. But, it was a great place to cut my teeth politically and learn about philosophy and politics.

**SS: Well that's really interesting. So you have a lifetime of being sort of the conservative person in a very left-wing spot.**

Tape I  
00:05:00

PS: With the exception of my father, yes. Where I'm far to the left of him. But yeah, the rest of the family is, we're all Democrats and, my upbringing, all my peers were definitely to the left of me, I think.

**SS: Did you come out at Oberlin, or was that in high school.**

PS: I came out at Oberlin and the London School of Economics, kind of slowly, in bits and pieces. I didn't even have gay sex until I went to London.

**SS: And was there a gay milieu in the school or did you have to go away from school into the gay community?**

PS: They had a pretty vibrant gay community at Oberlin, a gay student group and during my last years there, that's where I really kind of latched into, I started going to the gay and lesbian student union meetings and I was one of the few students with a car so we would pack it with a bunch of queens and go to Cleveland to the dance clubs – so that's where, yeah, that's where I was really coming out.

**SS: But you said that you weren't having sex yet. So you were already in a community without –**

PS: Well, again, that was almost like my last year at Oberlin. I had gay sex the year before my junior year abroad, when I visited London, as I was looking at the LSE as a possibility for a junior year abroad.

**SS: So being gay and being in a gay community were pretty linked for you from early on?**

PS: Yes. Definitely. Although, when I came to New York I was hired by J. P. Morgan – that’s what brought me to New York – and so I went deeply back into the closet. Having been kind of, definitely being very open at Oberlin my last year. But I went straight back into the closet and then my relationship to the gay community was just kind of socially on the weekends. It was a bar relationship. And I was even very careful about not getting too emotionally hooked up with a guy because that would have been harder to hide. So it was just a lot of semi-dating and just sex. There definitely wasn’t much of a sense of community when I came back to New York and started interacting with the gay community here. I didn’t know about the *New York Blade*, excuse me.

SS: *Native.*

PS: *New York Native.* I didn’t know that GMHC had been formed already and I didn’t know who Larry Kramer was. I didn’t have that sense of community. I definitely didn’t sense or have any knowledge of the politics that was going on.

SS: **So what year was that, that you came back?**

PS: Summer of, April of ’83.

SS: **Okay, so let me just kind of find out what it meant to be in the closet in ’83. Does that mean that no one at work knew that you were gay?**

PS: Right. In fact I put up a, I had a whole, I had a beard in everything.

SS: **You had a fake girlfriend?**

PS: I had a fake girlfriend who was my best girlfriend from Oberlin College who also lived in New York. We graduated the same year, so she returned to New York and we’ve remained good friends (*laughs*).

SS: **So she would go to company functions with you?**

PS: She would go to the annual Christmas party. Yup. I didn't have to trot her out too much, but, and it was hard.

**SS: What about other gay people in the office – how did you relate to them?**

PS: Well I didn't, I didn't know of any. Back then, anybody that was gay on Wall Street remained very closeted about it. I did eventually, there was a broker that I traded through a great deal, and we became very, very good friends. I did eventually come out to him and he in turn came out to me. He was married with kids. So, that was a great little respite when we finally discovered each other in that way. And that helped me get through my Wall Street years much easier, I think. And then when I sero-converted, or found out I was positive, I knew that my brother, who also worked at the bank, I knew that he had had a gay boss in Brazil who I had met once or twice – because he would always, he hated his boss. He would call him “that fucking faggot.” So, I asked my brother to approach this guy – his name is William Oullin – he was very high up in the bank – and ask him, if I, if I could seek his advice on whether I should keep this a secret at the bank. And so we met. And his advice was actually to keep it a secret and not tell the med-, the doctor at the bank or anyone else – 'cause he had gotten quite burned by the fact that many knew he was gay within the bank.

**SS: What was the nature of their fear? Why did they not want gay people at J. P. Morgan?**

PS: I just think, homophobia back then was very accepted socially in business relationships, so, for instance with the business conflicts that my brother had in the Brazilian office, where he didn't get along with his boss William Oullin, he was able to

use William's sexuality against him, by accusing him of sleeping with young Brazilian men, and it just, it was, a scandalous, wrong, sinful thing that could be used against you. And to do so was not unacceptable behavior. It was, it seemed to be a business tactic, certainly one that my brother used. And, so, one was just advised to – there were, from what William told me, there were plenty of people very high up in the bank who were gay, and some of them were out to each other, but they all realized that they had to tread very lightly.

**SS: So did you ever have a boyfriend during that time?**

PS: No.

**SS: Never.**

PS: Not until just before I was diagnosed.

**SS: And how did you meet him?**

PS: I met him on a vacation in Amsterdam. And he - was it a boyfriend or not? He had come to visit me in New York and his stay had turned into a whole month. And we were definitely having a great time together that month. And then I found out that I was while he was visiting. And then I latched onto that relationship, thinking it was my last.

**SS: And how did he respond when you got your diagnosis?**

PS: He was great. I think he was shocked. We were both 24 and he was from Amsterdam so he knew less about HIV than an American would, an American gay man would at that time. So, he tried to stand by me, the relationship lasted a year beyond that. But it had all the drama two 24-year old gay men having their first relationship would entail and adding on all this heavy emotional baggage of this death sentence that had

been handed to one of us – it was really – it was rough, but, and it didn't last. We've remained good friends too.

**SS: What made you decide to get tested?**

PS: It was funny. I, in '83, I figure, I peg my sero-conversion to around August of '83. I was working the commercial bank training program, incredibly long hours all week training for the bank, and then weekends I would surreptitiously go off and play, and it was the Boy Bar on St. Mark's [Place], and the St. Mark's Baths across the street. And then I met up with this bartender who worked at one of the piano bars over on Grove Street – beautiful young man. And he and I had this torrid three-week relationship in August of '83, (*laughs*) where we just had, we would always go to his apartment. He had a little duplex with a staircase and everything. There wasn't an inch of his apartment we didn't cover in three weeks. It was quite wild and, but I very quickly picked up a bunch of STDs right away. Which I really hadn't, this is very early in my sexual history, I hadn't really experienced before. And I asked around for a gay doctor, because I wanted to keep it closeted, keep it secret. And I found Dan William – he is well mentioned in *And the Bank Plays On*. He's one of the early AIDS docs. Just a gay guy who had a large gay practice in New York, and so he was one of the first to see the signs. And I was diagnosed with, besides gonorrhea or whatever, I also had herpes, which, in 1983, herpes was on the cover of *Time* magazine. It was, people were committing suicide with herpes diagnoses – that frightening, for some reason because it would end your sex life, it was the Scarlet Letter of its day. And it was for me too. It was not very treatable at that point. And I had fairly constant outbreaks of it. So it largely shut me down sexually, after that. And, especially for anal sex. So I didn't have, until I discovered in the fall of

Tape I  
00:15:00



'85, I largely didn't have any sex that would put me at risk during that period. So I'm kind of figuring it, that that's, and plus the fact that this bartender eventually died of AIDS, I'm kind of pegging it to those three weeks. It's a wild guess. It could have happened any time that summer. But, I found out I was dating Peter Lowney who was the guy from Amsterdam – the two Peters – and we were watching the first television movie ever done about HIV/AIDS, *An Early Frost* and the lead in that, Aidan Quinn, has this, he has PCP and he's coughing a lot. And I had had this prolonged cold and I was coughing a lot too, at the time. I had this cold, it just wouldn't go away. We were sitting there on the couch watching this thing and Peter jokingly says – he sounds like you! And I said – oh, maybe I need to go to the doctor. And, so I went to Dan William, based on this cough and Dan, base on what was going on in his office at the time, where everybody's sero-converting and dying – his whole clientele is getting sick on him – if any of his gay patients came through the door with as much as a cough, like I did, he would run a complete blood count, and, just to see if there was anything going on with the immune system. And sure enough, he could tell there was something wrong with the white blood cells. And he did a further, he did a T4 test on follow-up and an HIV test, based on the CBC, complete blood count. And the T4's showed 300 – they showed an inverted T4, T8 and I had about 360 T4s. So I had already, I was already immune-suppressed. My lymph nodes were swollen, mild lymphadenopathy, and all of that was enough for a diagnosis of ARC, which was AIDS Related Complex.

**SS: Had you known anybody who-**

PS: So I found all of this out before I actually got the confirmation from the HIV test, it took like two weeks back then from the City.

**SS: Had you, did you know anybody who had AIDS at the time?**

PS: No one.

**SS: You were the first person.**

PS: And I didn't meet anybody for, I didn't meet anybody with HIV for almost another year.

**SS: So what was the doctor's recommendation?**

Tape I  
00:20:00

PS: Well he, there were no drugs then. So, he tried to console me saying 300 and some T cells is not too bad. They did know at that point that the danger level was under 200, under 100, basically the under 200 was kind of the number people were talking about back then. And, I just, I tried to clean up my act as much as I could. I stopped all the recreational drugs, I tried to create some emotional support around me, so I did come out to my family, over the Thanksgiving holiday, a week after I found out, one at a time. They didn't know I was gay, so it was kind of, it was an Early Frost double whammy, is what I call it. The same thing Aidan Quinn did in the TV movie. So, and they were all great.

**SS: Even the brother with the faggot boss?**

PS: He ended up being the best of all.

**SS: Okay.**

PS: Yeah. And J. P. Morgan is now, he's on the executive committee, he's very high up at the bank and J. P. Morgan is considered one of the most gay-friendly places on Wall Street, and it's largely because of the dogged work my brother has done for the last 20 years, of making it so. So he had quite a conversion. And, it just goes to show you how much, how often homophobia is repetitive, socially repetitive, because it's

kind of expected, rather than actually, how much of it is heartfelt. Because I don't think it was ever heartfelt for him, I think it was just the way it was. And when he finally realized he had a gay brother, he was just, he was right there, right where he should be.

**SS: So did you follow [Dan] William's advice?**

PS: Yeah, I actually got up to over 500 T4s by just trying to reduce the tension in my life and no more recreational drugs and really concentrate on the "now." I told my family that – they all said, what can we do to help? And I said, well, welcome, I want you to welcome Peter into the family because he's my boyfriend and I need that right now. And, so, all that seemed to help. It took me a while before I realized I really needed to reach out and find somebody else in my situation. So it was August of '84 that I went to a GMHC support group that was in a church conference room in the West Village. And it was, I was instantly turned off by the, kind of constant negativism and pessimism and whining and – we can't have sex anymore – 'cause I actually wanted to get out there again sexually. But there was one guy who was just so well spoken, who seemed to have an optimistic approach and I went up to him right afterwards and I said – can I take you out for coffee? And it was a guy named Griffin Gold who was, I think on the board of the People With AIDS Coalition, or one of the founders. And that was my entrance into HIV politics in New York. That there was, because he told me about all of the stuff that was going on – the People With AIDS Coalition, GMHC, how the Koch administration were the bad guys. He gave me all these lessons. We became very close friends. That's kind of my entrance into –

**SS: So, did you go to the PWA Coalition?**

Tape I  
00:25:00

PS: I visited. The one thing I could, since I was still deeply in the closet there wasn't much I could do without risking that closet. But the one thing I could do was to start writing checks. And, so I became a really, a big donor of the PWA Coalition, and I became the granddaddy donor of the newly formed Lavender Hill Mob.

**SS: Oh, you were the money behind the Lavender Hill Mob? How interesting. And who introduced you to them?**

PS: I don't, I can't remember clearly the connection, but I think it was through Griffin. And I eventually sat down with Bill Bahlman who was my connection with the Lavender Hill Mob. I actually think I asked about them because I read about them in the *Wall Street Journal*, and so I went out and tried to find them after I read about them. So, I said this, this is what we need.

**SS: What action was covered in the *Wall Street Journal*?**

PS: They were zapping, they zapped the head of HHS, head of NIH, one of the Reagan officials. They heckled him.

**SS: Now that's a big leap for a closeted Wall Street guy to decide that the place he wants to put his money is a very out of control renegade direct action group. How did you make that leap?**

PS: God only knows. Ah, I don't know. I just, you know I, it was, there obviously was a level of frustration there and anger there. Maybe it was, maybe it was the closet playing itself out, or something, where I just, I, it was very obvious to me that we were being ignored and I, this was key – I never felt shame about my HIV. And that first support group I went to at GMHC – I rebelled against that instantly. That room was just filled with shame. That's why I kind of latched on to Griffin, because he was shameless.

He was a quirky, out there, dressed as he wanted, kind of half-female, half leather beast and didn't – and his family had kicked him out. He had a horrible family relationship and everything and he just was who he was. And I felt I was infected with this virus, and damn it, I wasn't going to feel ashamed about that. I wanted to be sexually active again and I felt I had the right to be sexually active again. I felt everybody was stigmatizing – everybody was – obviously I was building up a lot of anger and I really felt that the way this was going to break politically was the expression of that anger in a very activist way.

**SS: So how did you feel it with about people like Michael Petrelis or Marty [Robinson], how did you connect with them – the Lavender Hill guys?**

PS: Well, it was through Bill Bahlman and, they kind of kept me at arms-length. I let them do what they did and I would have these lunches with Bill where I would write him another big check and hear what they were up to and he'd be telling me their plans. It was only, this was, I think it was only during the fall of '86 that I started writing them big checks. And so it wasn't too long before ACT UP. I stopped writing any checks 'cause ACT UP started in March of '87 and everything went to ACT UP and the Lavender Hill Mob, they kind of got swallowed up by that.

**SS: How much was a big check? Just out of curiosity.**

PS: Just a few thousand -

**SS: But for them it was enormous. Yeah. So then you decided, when ACT UP started you decided to, or how did you decide to take that step?**

PS: I was actually walking to work on Wall Street that morning and got handed a flyer. There were people out way early before the actual action, which I think was like at 8 or 9 a.m. they were going to do the sit-downs on Wall Street, and I usually

Tape I  
00:30:00

got to work at 7. But I got handed the flyer and went up to the trading floor at J. P. Morgan – I traded U.S. Government bonds – and a couple of other guys had gotten a flyer. Trading floors on Wall Street were like locker rooms, with just vile, homophobic, sexist, racist language, testosterone up the wazoo, and, my mentor, I actually had a, the lead trader on the floor was my official mentor as I was being trained to be a trader and had become a trader. A guy named Mark Warner. He, I just distinctly, there was this argument going on about AIDS because of this flyer, and he was saying to one of the saleswomen, he said – well, if you ask me, they all deserve to die ‘cause they took it up the butt – and I just had to sit there and steam. I couldn’t do anything, except just kind of agree with a smile, which just is so – ugh. But, I got home that night and the lead story on Dan Rather was, not maybe the lead, but it was there – it was on national news. And I said – wow! That’s power. And there was the FDA who actually responded, saying we’re going to do this and this and this, that, they had one of their early, it was, at that point it was still bullshit. But they were reacting. And I said, this is Lavender Hill Mob to the nth degree. So I went to the very next meeting and didn’t miss a meeting after that. I was not, I guess at the first meeting or two, but after the first demo I was there throughout.

**SS: And had you ever been to the Gay Community Center before?**

PS: No. That was the first time.

**SS: So, do you remember that first meeting?**

PS: Yes. I remember there were, I think they were still trying to even pick their name. In fact I think, was it, weren’t they still meeting somewhere else first, besides the Center?

**SS: I don’t know.**

PS: Wasn't there an NYU meeting?

**SS: That's interesting because Maria actually mentioned that. Maybe there was an NYU meeting.**

PS: I think the first one I went to was not at the Center. It was in some big hall at NYU or something. And they were still debating the name. And there was also that attempted takeover by that crazy socialist New York group. What's her name, that female Black politician is part of it.

**SS: I know who you mean – Lenora Fulani.**

PS: Lenora Fulani.

**SS: The New Alliance Party.**

PS: Yeah, the New Alliance was trying to get a motion, and they actually got it passed, and then everybody realized that we had been had, so we had to come in numbers, while they kind of disappeared the following week, and we reversed it the following, so there was this early battle of controlling the nature and name of the group.

**SS: Can you tell us about the name?**

PS: It was packed already. The meetings were packed.

**SS: What do you remember about them choosing the name? Do you remember who proposed ACT UP?**

PS: I do not. I do not.

**SS: Do you remember what some of the other names were, that people-**

PS: No.

**SS: Okay. So, how did you start to get involved?**

Tape I  
00:35:00

PS: Well I just stood, I sat in back and listened for a while. I definitely was just very, I was just overjoyed to be meeting other people with HIV and that energy and I was blown away by, there were people that were becoming my heroes right away. Maxine Wolfe was just, just seemed so brilliant and wise to me and Michael Nesline grabbed my eye right away. He was so well spoken. I just loved the passionate debate and the people who had the courage to stand up there and really lay out these wonderfully passionate arguments. And I was kind of falling in love with each of those people. That's what was happening early on.

**SS: Did you see anyone there that you knew?**

PS: No, except Griffin Gold

**SS: Okay. So it was another-**

PS: Oh, and – my cue card here – Michael Hirsch, who I got to know through Griffin

**SS: Oh, right.**

PS: Who was there early on?

**SS: From the People With AIDS Coalition.**

PS: Yes.

**SS: Okay. So, PWA Coalition people were in ACT UP.**

PS: And then the people in the Lavender Hill group. So I was, yeah, I was seeing some people in –

**SS: So, what was your first way of participating?**

PS: Well, I started writing checks. I became, and I got to know Michael Nesline who was, at the time he was the first head of fundraising. So, I told him I wanted



to help. I told him I worked on Wall – I used to come in a suit, I used to come after work. So, I was one of the few coat and tie guys that made the room very diverse. And, so, I got to know Michael well and started hanging out with him. We actually became boyfriends in the summer of '87 and those were just wild times, wild times, favorite time of my life, that year, that and '88. It eventually just became like a wife, to the point where I was almost ignoring my family that had supported me the last couple of years, faithfully. They were everything, they were my church, they were my social life and they were where I became sexually active again, starting with Michael and then-

**SS: What happened to your job? Did you eventually come out in your job?**

PS: The day I left, yeah. It was a year later, a year after ACT UP. My T4s – AZT came out the same month ACT UP was born and I tried the high dose, the recommended dose at the time, which was very high. But it made me very anemic, to the point where I actually, a couple of times, nodded off at my trading desk, which is very hard to do, given how loud those rooms are and busy those rooms are. And I was pale, and I just looked terrible, so I had to stop the AZT. Then, in March of '88 my T4s just started, they were on a downward curve and they went below the danger level, they hit 107 and I was seeing a shrink at the time, trying to help me deal with all this. I just had this complete – 'cause I was so into ACT UP, I was head of fundraising at that point. So, I, I even was starting to go to demonstrations holding a sign right in front of my face so that my face wouldn't appear on TV. I was trying to participate in the demos and every night was ACT UP and every day was Wall Street and it was tearing me apart, that and the fact that there was Black Friday on Wall Street in the fall of '87 and the market

became very hard to trade, I was beginning to lose money. So, by March of '88, or was it February, March my T4s crashed, with the Dow, I like to say. And I said, well, it's time to take care of yourself. So I walked into my boss' office and told him I had AIDS and needed to go on disability and they knew in Tokyo, five minutes later. It's that kind of market, the news goes fast. It was a very, the U.S. Government bond market, there were only 20 other guys doing exactly what I did.

**SS: What was the reaction?**

PS: Shock. The people that did talk to me were very supportive. It was no longer '83, it was '87 – Rock Hudson had just happened. Rock Hudson had happened a year earlier, a few years earlier, excuse me, in '85. So, there were some people who got it and they were friendly. My boss tried to be helpful, and, eventually I had a battle with them over long-term disability, that, I had to hire a lawyer for, so it became a little nasty.

**SS: Did you get it?**

PS: Yeah, it was not with – I had actually left J. P. Morgan at my final year of Wall Street and got hired away by this firm called Chicago Research and Trading that was run by these social religious conservatives. It was a very entrepreneurial Wall Street firm. And they had broken into the government bond market, one of the few small firms to do so. And they built this whole huge trading outfit by snatching up traders everywhere. And they waved a lot of money in front of me and a big title and I stupidly took it. But I had –

**SS: We have to change tapes?**

**JAMES WENTZY: We have to stop-**

**SS: Oh, okay.**

**SS: Turned off my cell phone. Okay.**

**JW: Ready when you are.**

**SS: Ready?**

**JW: Yeah.**

**SS: Okay, did you get the long-term disability?**

PS: Yeah, I was with this new firm I had switched to, and they were furious that I didn't tell them I had HIV during the whole interview process, which of course I wasn't legally obligated to. But they felt completely bamboozled and so there were some very bitter, difficult conversations with the owners of CRT about getting a financial settlement out of that. I did get an out-of-court settlement that lasted me 5 years.

**SS: I want to get back to Griffin Gold. I actually remember when Griffin died and I remember you speaking at ACT UP being very upset about AZT. And I think it was about you, my memory of it is you being, feeling that he had died because he took AZT. I guess he died of lymphoma? Is that?**

PS: I don't remember that.

**SS: That doesn't sound right?**

PS: No.

**SS: Was there anything about his treatment choices that influenced you at the time?**

PS: I don't – from what I remember I was very angry at him for not having either taken AZT –

**SS: That's what it was. Right.**

PS: – or taken PCP prophylaxis. So there was some, he was not, he did not do the medical interventions he needed to, to keep himself out of the hospital and there was a fair amount of anger about that.

**SS: And why didn't he?**

PS: I don't know. I think he was resigned to the fact that this was going to take him, and he knew, maybe he knew that these were all half measures, and we did patch things up before – most of that anger was during his first hospital stay. But we did patch things up. I actually took him, when he was pretty ill, near the end, we went down for just a one-on-one vacation together in Key West, Florida. That was, both hard and good.

**SS: Do you feel that there were a lot of people early on who were not taking appropriate available medications?**

PS: No, I think most people were grasping onto – if anything it was the opposite. We were all taking AL721 and Dextran Sulfate and grabbing everything we could possibly try, most of which didn't work. But, and you know the AZT was largely unhelpful for most of us as well. I ended up going back to AZT on a whim, after I hit that 107 T4s and went on disability. I told Dan William, I said why don't I just try taking as much AZT as I could tolerate, and no more, even if it's suboptimal. And I went on 300 milligrams of AZT, which, even by today's dose is considered barely optimal. It's below today's dose. But I actually had a huge pop – it actually worked – I had a huge rise in T4s that slowly started falling again, but even the baseline it fell to was higher than when I had started it. And the same thing happened a couple of years later when I added black market ddI to the AZT. I did a very low dose, half the dose recommended and I had a huge pop in T4s. And I stayed on a low-dose AZT and a low-dose ddI until the protease

Tape II  
00:05:00

inhibitors came out. And that kept me above 300 T4s for over 10 years. The low-dose dual therapy nukes, which obviously was more luck than the meds. I just happen to be one of the few, I was on the outlier of the curve of how these nukes worked. They worked well for me, even at low doses. As long as I didn't have to deal with the toxicities. And AZT at 300 milligrams was a completely different drug than AZT at 1200 milligrams.

**SS: How did you get black market DDI at the time?**

PS: Through the People with AIDS Health Group. Basically it was the ddi of those who, leftover supply of those who had died taking the drug.

**SS: What was the name of the guy who ran that?**

PS: Derek Hodel. A very good friend of mine still.

**SS: Okay, so let's go back to ACT UP fundraising. So, the thought of Michael Nesline running fundraising is kind of humorous, I have to say. What was the early, what was their style for early fundraising?**

PS: What were they doing early on? I don't know if they were already, I think they were already trying to market the Silence=Death logo at that point. I don't know if that's something I initiated, or it had been initiated before me, but – it was a committee and I can't remember the earliest efforts. But it wasn't, it was very funny because I got accused early on of sleeping my way to the top. And that certainly wasn't the intent, but I understand the appearance, because Michael and I became boyfriends and I actually got to tag along with him at this – as the Coordinating Committee went off for a retreat in the Hamptons in August of '87.

**SS: At whose house?**

PS: Somebody, I think it was a friend of Steve Webb's. Steve had a rich friend who had a place he lent us. He wasn't there. So it was just ours, it was this ritzy little Hamptons house with a pool and we all just got smashed and swam around all weekend and got to know each other. It was wonderfully fun, and, I've actually got a couple of photos of it. It's an amazing little retreat. I don't think we ever did another one. That's when the organization was really trying to struggle with early administrative decisions, so the Coordinating Committee was working very hard at that time.

**SS: And who was on it at the time?**

PS: It was Bradley Ball and Steve Webb and Michael Nesline and, I don't know if Avram was on it at that time. But those are the names I'm recalling. I think there were about 8 to 10 people there that weekend, at least.

**SS: So then, was the Fundraising Committee your first real committee?**

PS: Yeah. And then about a month later, Michael and I were talking. He was like – Well why don't you take – and I was all up for it. I wanted to get more and more active and this was a way I could do it. So I took over fundraising, I think in September of '87.

**SS: And do you remember what the budget was when you took over?**

PS: No. But it was nothing. We were dealing with a thousand here, a thousand there, type thing by that point.

**SS: So what did you do to build it up?**

PS: Well, the two main tracks – eventually there were three – but the first two was the merchandising, and that was to take the Silence=Death logo and some of the other artwork that was being produced by Gran Fury, etc. and putting it on T-shirts,

posters and buttons and stickers, and eventually baseball caps. I figure by, between '87 and '92, we sold over \$1 million worth of ACT UP merchandise around the country. Had quite a mail-order business going, at one point. In the gay pride parades we would sell \$20,000, \$30,000 worth of merchandise at a pop. The biggest seller was always Read My Lips. Even more than Silence = Death.

**SS: That was Bob Gober and Marlene McCarty who did that?**

PS: As far as designing it?

**SS: Yeah.**

PS: I don't know.

**SS: Or that was just Gran Fury, probably.**

PS: I think it was Gran Fury. And they just took some stock porn for the picture. Actually, the full picture actually had, was porn, major erections out under those kisses. *(laughing)*

People don't know that. But the big battle was direct mail. And I thought that was a way to really bring in much bigger cash for the organization and a fairly stable way of fundraising as well. 'Cause benefits were just hard, a lot of work, and were unstable, you're spiking and down and benefits are a hard way to raise money. But direct mail is a kind of, has a smarmy nature to it. It meant that we had to hook up with a direct mail house who was going to profit from the relationship. And that's where I met Sean Strub who was the lead direct mail guy at the time for gay and AIDS organizations. And, it took quite a lot of speeches on the floor and discussions before the final vote was approved to proceed with the direct mail campaign. And then it almost all fell apart, because Larry Kramer was supposed to be the first, the guy writing the first letter – the

signature on the first letter. And that was during, he had his first spat with ACT UP, his first break-up of many. He doesn't recall that he left the group many times. But he wrote this angry letter to the floor, which I read, saying he wasn't going to sign the letter and he wasn't going to be back, and all this stuff. So all of a sudden we were without a signer. So I called, I got some, I asked around, tried to get the phone number of Harvey Fierstein – who was really big at the time. And I got his phone number and I left a voicemail at his home in Connecticut and he called back within a day, saying (*imitates gravelly voice*) “Peter, I'd love to do this. Yes you can put my name on it.”

And it was a huge success. The problem with direct mail is the mass mailings you do at the beginning typically lose money. It costs whatever, 20 cents, 30 cents per package that you're sending out – the letter and the envelope and the postage and all that. And you're sending it out to 100,000, so you have to, somebody has got to either put up that money, the \$150-\$200,000 or whatever it's going to cost, and typically you don't get it all back. What you do is you get your own, because you're renting lists at that time and you only get back the people who send you a check, which is usually 1% is good, 2% of people of the list you've rented for that one time, and they give money that barely covers the expense of that first big mailing. So this was something that had to be explained on the floor and, okay, so you're asking us to – we didn't even have the money to risk, but Sean's firm was willing to take the risk on our behalf, for some, we put something down or something like that. I can't remember the deal.

So, it was complex. It sounds like a scam, even as I describe it now. But that's how direct mail works. And then, when you have that list, when you keep hitting them up

Tape II  
00:15:00



in the year, it's almost pure profit and that's where you actually make a lot of money direct-mail wise.

**SS: So how much did Sean make out of that?**

PS: He – Whatever a business makes – 10%, 15% - who knows. He, and that was always, say a problem for the group too, so that we were working with a firm that was going to make money off of working with us. But it turned out that the first mailing was a massive success. We got close to a 10% return rate, with Harvey's signature on it, which was just extraordinary for a mass mailing. And we made way over the amount that was spent on it. So we made money right away. And, so we did direct mail for our whole history using a number of signers. And it definitely raised a great deal of money – probably for Sean as well.

**SS: What about the art auction – were you chairing Fundraising during that time?**

PS: For the first one, yes.

**SS: How was that organized?**

PS: That was extraordinary. That was definitely, I'm not going to take, I deserve just this much credit for it because it was a huge committee that made that happen. And it was a gigantic logistical thing and I didn't know any artists, so the people who actually went out there and got people to donate work, I think the only person I knew was the lawyer for the Mapplethorpe Foundation, and stuff. But it was, that was an extraordinary night, as you know. Especially with how much was raised and the excitement in the room and, when that totem pole sold for, was it close to \$100,000 or

something crazy like that? And the room broke out in “Act Up, Fight Back, Fight AIDS,” during an art auction! The gallery owner was like – oh, what did I do? (*laughs*)

**SS: I just want to ask you a couple of cultural questions about stuff that you’ve talked about so far. Here you are, coming off of Wall Street you have quite a bit of money, you’re coming from a certain kind of background and you’re interacting with and dating, and sleeping with and doing work with people who have absolutely no money and don’t come from your background. What was that like for you?**

PS: I don’t know. It was what I was. It was what I was used to. I didn’t find it unusual. I always felt blessed and lucky that I was in, that I didn’t have to worry about money. And since my days in college I was surrounded by people with very, very diverse financial situations and backgrounds and politics and I was never uncomfortable with that.

**SS: But did it affect the way that you approached things strategically? Did you have strategic conflicts with people because of your different levels of familiarity with the financial world?**

PS: Well, I, yes. I think there certainly all of that played out in the big administrative battles that happened in ACT UP. Which I was invariably on, the leader of one side of – whether it was the endless battle to see whether we should file for a 501(c)3, or the battle of whether we should get an office, or the battle of whether we should get a copying machine or whether we should do direct mail. These were all kind of capitalist financial establishment in nature positions. And I am sure all of those dynamics were in play, but I didn’t find the, I never found the opposition to those ideas

either unpredictable or even frustrating. In a sense they were exhilarating battles. I was definitely full of self-confidence and cocky and I was arrogant too, as all hell, to the point of being obnoxious. So, I look back on myself during those days and I'm a bit uncomfortable at how I fought things and how I was personally as an activist. I could have definitely used some humility back then.

**SS: Did you lose any of those battles, those administrative financial battles?**

PS: Eventually.

**SS: Like which –**

PS: But early on, it was like a non-stop string of victories. So –

**SS: But not in terms of treatment direction, but in terms of administrative structure or fundraising, that you feel that you did lose battles ultimately in those realms.**

PS: In the last years, in the last year, basically. Yeah. There was that huge one of who was going to be the new administrator. There was an election.

**SS: I don't remember that. Can you describe it?**

PS: I can't even remember the names now. And, yeah, there was even like a-

**SS: What was the role of administrator?**

**JAMES WENTZY: Workspace manager you mean?**

PS: Workspace manager, yeah.

**JW: Robert Rygor?**

PS: No. Yeah and the whole group broke into camps. The same camps that existed right there at the end between the Treatment and Data Committee and those who

were fighting against it, all played out an argument of who should be the next office administrator.

**SS: Where you office administrator?**

PS: No. But I was, I had my token candidate that was going – *(laughs)* That's how it was viewed. That there was the guy I was backing and then there was the guy everybody else was backing.

**SS: Who was the guy you were backing? Do you remember?**

PS: I don't.

**SS: I don't either. Well, let's get to that stuff later, because we have a lot of other things to cover. Okay. Fundraising, oh yeah. So, when you got together with Michael, can you talk a little bit about sex and dating between people who were positive and people who were negative inside of ACT UP?**

PS: Yeah, very quickly there was almost like this – I've always compared it to what I had seen in movies and heard about in books of what happened, kind of in the '60s and early '70s, with liberal whites, where it became cool in New York and other places to sleep with African-Americans. And, very quickly in ACT UP it became very PC to sleep with somebody who was positive.

**SS: Why?**

PS: To, as a way of saying I'm not afraid of this, that safe sex works – it's a political statement. And god bless 'em! *(laughs)* Because I was dying to get back into the ball game and all of a sudden I was in high demand and it was just fabulous. It was fun.

**SS: So how did you negotiate all the interpersonal dynamics of having so many boyfriends and having sex with so many different guys who all knew each other and were all in the same room?**

PS: It was rough. I went through boyfriend after boyfriend there for a while, and Michael Nesline and Robert Hilferty and then I started branching out of, outside of ACT UP after that. But each one was brought home for Thanksgiving-

**SS: Oh wow – so your family witnessed the boyfriend parade. (laughing)**

PS: Yeah. No, they all, frankly they were just like any twenty-something gay relationship is today – young and foolish. I made my share of huge mistakes and went up a steep learning curve, especially with Michael Nesline, who I really burned. And so, but it definitely for me had the added dynamic that I was very, very frightened of dying without a boyfriend taking care of me. So, there was not many times during that period where I did not have a boyfriend. I would latch on to whoever was showing interest at the time, whether it was a good match or not. And, so it was a, kind of, there was a desperation.

**SS: Well also you were sort of, you had almost movie star status. You were on the cover of the *Advocate*. You were on TV all the time. You were this iconic figure so that must have attracted a lot of male attention.**

PS: Yeah. It was – as I was saying, it was fun. I definitely enjoyed it.

**SS: Was there safe sex in ACT UP?**

PS: Yes. It was all safe. As I remember it, I never had unsafe sex - until the '90s.

**SS: And do you feel like you knew who was positive and who was negative?**

PS: Yup. There were certainly a fair number of positive people that still kept it quiet. But not as many back then as do now. There's a lot more – HIV is much more in the closet today than it was back then.

**SS: Why is that?**

PS: Well, for one thing – I've got my – they're just my own theories. For one thing, there were a far higher percentage of us who were positive then, than are today. It was supposed to be somewhere around 50% of gay men in New York and San Francisco were HIV positive in the late-'80s, before most of us died off. And now, it's down to, depending on the city it's around 20-25%. So we were almost, we were almost a majority of the gay population. Plus, it was harder to hide. A lot of us were sick, a lot of us looked it. And so, there were just so many obviously open, whether based on looks or just being politically open about it, there were so many people with HIV out there, that that made it easier, I think, for most people with HIV to admit it to friends and to come out about it. Today it's just much easier to hide, and therefore it is hidden. And, it's a smaller segment of the gay community so there, there's almost more stigma now than there used to be and I think it's a crying shame.

**SS: Okay. I'm going to follow-up with your comment about unsafe sex in the '90s, but later, when we get to the '90s. So I want to talk about your whole treatment trajectory and treatment activism and your history with that. Because, quickly you got involved with Treatment and Data. Is that what brought you there?**

PS: I think I started going to the earliest meetings. It certainly, even from when I was funding the Lavender Hill Mob, it was one of my earliest angers, that when I felt the Government was ignoring us, what was primary in my mind was - they're not spending any money – they're not doing what they did with Legionnaires' disease. Because I saw other examples, that were fairly concurrent history, in the early '80s where there was a very dramatic and instant Government response to a health crisis and it invariably involved doctors, everybody hitting the microscope. And nobody was hitting the microscope with HIV/AIDS. Or very few were. So that's always – I've always admitted my activism was always a very selfish form of activism. I wanted to live. And, so that's why I concentrated on most, was trying to force that cure out of a test-tube or treatments.

**SS: So what was T&D like when you first got there?**

PS: We were meeting at – I got the name wrong on that – at Herb Spiers –

**SS: Spiers?**

PS: At Herb Spiers' loft, I believe were the earliest meetings. I think I actually went to my first T&D meeting when I went to lobby them.

**SS: Oh, wait. Herb "Spiers" or Hugh Steers?**

PS: Herb Spiers.

**SS: Oh. Okay.**

PS: West 24<sup>th</sup> or something. Some beautiful loft.

**SS: What were you lobbying them?**

PS: There was some administrative battle that I was trying to, that I was going committee to committee to, giving little speeches, saying, I hope you can- this is going to

be coming up for a vote, type thing. I can't even remember what it was now. It could have been the direct mail thing, 'cause that was so hard to explain. And I think that might have been my first T&D meeting and then I started coming after that – definitely after I left Wall Street.

**SS: And partially 'cause you were looking for treatments for yourself.**

PS: Yeah. It's what I, it's the type of activism that I was most self-interested in.

**SS: So, where was T&D when you first came into it? What were the drugs that they were looking at and who was chairing it?**

PS: Jim Eigo was big and Mark Harrington was already big, and, mostly it was initially gearing up for the big fight with the FDA. And, we were learning the ropes of the FDA and we were latching on frequently to these early hopes, like AL721 and Dextran Sulfate, and why if these things are marketed elsewhere in the world and there's obviously virtually no toxicities, why can't they be made quickly available to people here. So we were learning about this gigantic bureaucracy – the FDA – that was preventing these life-saving drugs from getting to us. It was – looking back on it now, it was pretty primitive and naïve compared to the treatment activism that occurs these days. But, we were on a steep learning curve and going up it quickly and the FDA was the first mountain.

**SS: So what was T&D's response? What did you want the FDA to do?**

PS: We wanted access to drugs and we wanted a much quicker approval process, or we wanted stuff given to people before it was approved – some sort of mechanism for that. And, so everybody started eventually coming up with the idea of a



gigantic demonstration in front of the FDA. We even started learning who at the FDA were the power brokers. Frank Young was the Commissioner and Ellen Cooper was the woman who really was in charge of the drug approval process that mattered to us.

**SS: So when you say that you needed a mechanism for access? Would ACT UP go in and say – hey, we need a mechanism for access, or would ACT UP actually come up with a specific mechanism and solve the problem and then present it to the FDA?**

PS: I believe that Treatment and Data actually, along with Martin Delaney on the West Coast, was actually trying to come up with mechanisms in conjunction with the bureaucrats. Expanded access was something jointly born. I don't think it was something that they proposed based on our loose notion of – we want the drugs. We were beginning to learn how they work, and could there be- and we realized – well let's try to figure out a way to carve out an exception for life-threatening illnesses where you could get early access. And so, things like expanded access and accelerated approval, all those things were jointly thought up and negotiated.

**SS: So, what was their objection?**

PS: Old ways. Since the early '60s, their charter was to do no harm. The FDA was born from the scandal of a drug that lead to thousands of deformed babies and it was, the entire organization was set up to prevent that type of harm happening again. Quick approval had nothing to do with what it was about. And, so, and it was this very, very independent and considered one of the most immovable bureaucracies in Washington. Long before ACT UP started its campaign over early access to AIDS drugs, the Wall Street Journal had been railing against the FDA for years on its editorial page, to no avail

at all. They were just like a stonewall. So they were a strong, headstrong, sure of itself bureaucracy, personified by people like Ellen Cooper – who were brilliant, who definitely had their arguments for how they did things the way they did, saying if you did things too fast you could end up doing great harm. And those arguments aren't invalid. But there are, they begin to become ethically porous in situations as radically different as AIDS was, where death occurred so fast and so quickly and for so many.

**SS: So, ACT UP is in this situation where they're proposing solutions to the FDA. Now, what is the role of the pharmaceutical companies in that relationship, at that early stage?**

PS: Well there weren't many. Only some of them were beginning to- Burroughs Wellcome and Bristol-Myers were the only two in the game for a while there. And they were viewed, right from the get-go as gross profiteers, because of the price of AZT, which was set at \$10,000 a year, which was the highest price of any drug in history at that time, and just shocked everyone – not just people with HIV – but shocked most of the editorial boards of most newspapers in this country. And, for very much the same reasons that we were dealing with a logjam at the FDA, very strong personalities were involved at Burroughs Wellcome that felt what they were doing was the right thing and justified. And very self-righteous, “we know what's best” kind of white-coat mentality.

**SS: Now which came first, the action against Burroughs Wellcome on the floor of the stock exchange, or the FDA?**

PS: The FDA came first.

**SS: OK – so let's start with that.**

JW: No. We'll have to change tapes.

Tape III  
00:00:00

**SS: Change tapes? Okay.**

**SS: Ready? Okay, so even though the pharmaceuticals were just simply gouging people, they stood to benefit from expanded access, right?**

PS: Oh yeah.

**SS: So what was their role in that discussion with the FDA?**

PS: Well they were all supportive of what the AIDS activists were doing, obviously. In fact, AZT was approved quicker than any drug in history. And all the subsequent AIDS drugs were approved very fast as well, largely because of pressure of AIDS activism. So they stood to benefit greatly. And it wasn't actually until years later when the Treatment Action Group took a position against an accelerated approval of an AIDS drug that some AIDS activists had decided that the ball had swung too far in one direction.

**SS: What drug was that?**

PS: That was Saquinavir.

**SS: So, were you guys worried about that at the beginning? Did you discuss that these, that this was being helpful to these companies that were not accountable?**

PS: No, I don't think we thought much about that. It definitely played into the price of AZT, 'cause we were saying, listen, you didn't actually have to do much. This didn't cost you nearly as much as a normal drug. The government did most of the research, because of us it got approved in record time. You didn't actually have to spend much to bring this thing to market. So, how dare you charge the most of any drug in history? It definitely lead to a, there was this feeling that if you're going to benefit from

what we're doing with the FDA and activism then you've got to play fair with us. You can't stab us in the back afterwards. We want you to have a fair return and we want you in this business, but we don't want you stabbing us in the back, like that.

**SS: And how did you convey that, in person, with them?**

PS: Definitely. We went-

**SS: And who were the people at Burroughs?**

PS: I've just gone blank. Mr. AZT

**JW: The guy in Chicago?**

PS: No. He was down in Research Triangle Park. He died of a heart attack after starting his own biotech. Mark Harrington and I went down and met with him. He was the head of all research for the U.S. and, that's where we scoped out the headquarters for the demonstration in Research Triangle where we locked ourselves inside their headquarters. That was before the stock exchange action.

**SS: So what did he say when you made that argument?**

PS: He was brilliant and pompous and he basically said – whatever price we set was justified, 'cause we need, we're doing more for people with HIV than any other pharmaceutical company out there. We need all of this money to continue our AIDS research efforts 'cause we know what we're doing and we're helping. And, if you look at how much it costs to hospitalize a person with AIDS, the cost of this drug is nothing. There was a tremendous amount of arrogance that – we are doing a – we have done this amazing thing for person with AIDS and therefore any price we would have announced would have been justified for this.

**SS: So when you would go meet with a pharmaceutical company and you come in and you are-**

PS: David Barry-

**SS: What?**

PS: David Barry – who was considered Mr. AZT at Burroughs Wellcome.

**SS: So you walk in, and you are gay men with AIDS. How do they treat you? How do they view you?**

PS: With some trepidation. But we were also, those early contacts with Pharma sometimes, at least on that trip we were given quite a red carpet treatment. It was just Mark Harrington and myself. It was both a morning and an afternoon meeting with senior management of the company, including a very nice lunch in between. So, there was an effort to kind of impress and be treated with respect and glad-handled, and at the same time there was a real defensiveness about the radical nature of the organization that they were sitting down across from, and what we were capable of. There was a palpable fear of that. They had entire PR departments working overtime on us.

**SS: And what did they think that you were capable of? What was the threat?**

PS: The threat was demonstrations, being called vicious names in the media, being called murderers – which ACT UP did a great deal of. We would frequently personalize it. We were doing quite a job of certain senior people at the FDA at the time. So they saw that.

**SS: Were they murderers?**

PS: We would put people's pictures on posters and almost like branding them as Nazis, in extent. So, we hit hard in a very personal way. We had never been violent, but there was that constant fear from Pharma that we would be violent. So, there was definite walking-on-eggshells. They were very nervous of us, so-

**SS: Were they murderers?**

PS: No. I never believed they were murderers. I always, let me put it this way-  
*(his phone rings)*

PS: It's my brother.

**SS: Okay.**

PS: Hello – Hey – Yes. (Pennsylvania – romantic afternoon). What was I talking about?

**SS: Whether or not they're murderers?**

PS: Yeah, I would say that there were – I would put that label on a very few people. But I do think it is deserved for the indifference that some of the various high-up people in the Reagan administration showed.

**SS: Like who?**

PS: But again – the people we normally dealt with, we never got that high up. I think Reagan, himself is a murderer. So, and Gary Bauer and Pat Buchanan and that whole cabal were definitely driven by, in many cases, hate that prevented any government response for years, which resulted in many, many deaths, so. The bureaucrats that T&D dealt with, whether they be at Pharma or in the FDA or in the NIH, I never encountered that kind of hate. In fact, usually it was the opposite. It was people trying to do the right thing, but either having too much ego of the old ways of how they were

going to do it, or not being willing to go up against the Reagan administration that was in charge, or for whatever reasons they just had to be really pushed in a very public way to move faster or to do the right thing. But, for instance, the stuff we called Ellen Cooper was just not fair.

**SS: Do you remember what you called her?**

PS: We called her a murderer, we called her the Ice Lady and all sorts of things.

**SS: But do you believe that she behaved morally?**

PS: Yes. I think she, I think she thought that she was doing something that would benefit the most people.

**SS: But you walked away from a life that was originally focused on making profit. And you have not returned to that life. So to what extent does an individual who's a cog in a system, and exploited a system have responsibility for the consequences of that structure?**

PS: A lot. I think we all, I think we have a responsibility for that. I think that's why I hated it so much when I was there. I really hated every moment I worked on Wall Street. But, I also just kind of understood it for what it was. I didn't, I don't, I never had a, I still consider myself a capitalist. I understand the role that J. P. Morgan serves. And I understand, I actually see where there's a benefit in what it does to, whether it be the economy or its shareholders or the efficient distribution of capital, or the ability to loan small companies money, there are all sorts of, it plays a role, and so, but anything that big can also become very abusive of the power it has, including ACT UP. So, power easily corrupts. And I witnessed it on the mentality of the traders that I worked with. They held,

we all held, we thought we held a great deal of power, because we never traded anything lower than a million dollars. That was considered an odd lot if we traded something lower than a million dollars. And that gave, that fed these gigantic egos and the traders that I worked with had this game where every weekend they would see which of the nicest restaurants in New York they could get kicked out of. And that was their game. And, so I witnessed how power corrupts and how ego corrupts and it can happen anywhere. It happened in ACT UP.

**SS: Just one more question on this. What do you think would have been an appropriate profit margin for AZT?**

PS: That's a good question. Pharma is a high-risk business, and therefore – in a standard capitalistic model – deserves a slightly higher rate of return than a low risk business. And the losses can be much bigger. There is this false notion that all Pharma companies make a great deal of money. Actually, quite a few frequently lose shitloads of money at the same time, and there's a lot of turnover in the business and some companies in fact do die. And things like Merck, a company that big can actually get to the point where it looks like it might completely fall apart. So, on an individual drug that actually comes to market, I don't see it being unreasonable – if you're actually pegging it to the cost of production – to have something that is earning ten times that – I don't consider unreasonable. But they were doing things like 100 times, 1,000 times. It is a strange market because it's, you're giving government-granted monopolies. So, without, that's not like selling apples. You're given a monopoly by the government, and our government in return doesn't demand anything in return for that. You're then allowed to set any price in the world, which doesn't make a great deal of sense. The sky's the limit and nobody



can do anything about it. The only limit that exists right now is social pressure to not go through the absolute roof. Either that or you have to look at price controls. But it is not a purely capitalist system because of those government-granted monopolies. So, it's a different ball of wax and they're allowed to, there is, there was no competitive pressure to deal with that price of AZT. The only pressure was either going to be government, or social. And it ended up being social.

**SS: Okay. So let's get to the FDA action in which I remember you with a -**  
*(phone rings)* **Oh – wait, do you need to answer that?**

PS: Hopefully not.

**SS: Okay.**

PS: Hello – yeah. Anything you want. Okay. And some bread. Bye. All right.

**SS: So here you are, this very informed and sophisticated person of in financial world and you've been meeting with Burroughs Wellcome and you've been meeting with the FDA and yet – I remember you at the FDA action with a bandana, a warrior bandana around your head climbing on top of the façade of the building.**

PS: Yeah.

**SS: You play these two roles constantly, as this kind of renegade bad boy and then you're negotiating at the table with all of the big powers that be. What was that about, emotionally?**

PS: Well, it was very liberating, for one thing. And I've actually worked through a lot of this with quite a few shrinks. But I've had a history from early childhood of there being a little radical bad-boy inside that likes to act out. And the great thing about ACT UP is that it was, one could get very positive recognition for doing so. And

Tape III  
00:20:00

society could even look at one as being heroic for doing things, which I just thought, were exciting and powerful and effective. So, for me the cornerstone of ACT UP was the fact that we were willing to not be wedged in to one standard ideal of what an activist movement is, and that we had this level of desperation that permitted us to try any and all techniques at the same time. And that ultimately came down to this inside versus outside approach – talking versus civil disobedience and it had to be one or the other, which I thought was ridiculous. I loved the fact that it's almost the same argument that Bush is putting up now, that he won't talk to our enemies. Bullshit. You sit down with them, and the very next week you punch them in the face. That's what we did to Burroughs Wellcome and, to me everybody was playing their part, in a sense. Ellen Cooper to me wasn't evil. She was playing a very predictable role and what we had to we had to tell her what we wanted in very clear terms and then apply the external pressure to make her do what we wanted. But you weren't going to get her to do exactly what we wanted unless you did both things – the external pressure and sitting down and talking it out with her, explaining exactly what you needed, exactly what you wanted, and also making her realize that she was dealing with highly motivated, highly rational and intelligent people who had something to say, and not just some screaming raging idiots who were calling her a murderer and marching outside her front door. It was that combination that I thought was our power, the entire time.

**SS: Well speaking of screaming, raging people, can you tell us about the action that you did on the floor of the Stock Exchange and who was involved and how it came to be?**

PS: It started with Mark's and my meeting with David Barry at Burroughs Wellcome in early '88, January '88 I think, January or February. And, we flew down there and we met with him when we got that stonewall. We demanded a price decrease. We told them we would be gearing up for demonstrations if they didn't lower the price. They ignored us and I organized a small group of people to invade their headquarters in April of '88.

**SS: Who was on that action?**

PS: Blaine Mosley, James McGrath, there were about 7 of us, and we even had our own media spokesperson who didn't go inside, who had a coat and tie on, and we got past security and used high – we were called the power drill team because we had those battery-operated power drills and we sealed ourselves in with screws into this office after convincing a woman to evacuate. And, all over the local news down there, and very sympathetic news coverage. It was a story where the whole country was on our side from the beginning. Everybody was offended by the \$10,000 a year. So, it, but it really, and again they ignored us. But it really got full steam going in August of '88 when the government released new data on AZT showing that it helped people with, not only with full-blown AIDS, but it also looked helpful with people with AIDS-related complex. And, everybody said okay, well the market's going to expand for this drug. T&D started working in coalition with mainstream AIDS organizations. In a series of conference calls, and this was with GMHC and Lambda Legal Defense and AIDS Action Council in Washington, and AmFar. And we were all trying to work on multi-pronged ways to pressure them. AIDS Action Council was looking at pushing for congressional hearings with Kennedy, etcetera, and Waxman. In fact there were congressional hearings to bring

in the executives of Burroughs Wellcome to explain the \$10,000 price. And there was media being generated with *New York Times* editorials and so it was actually great coalition work. ACT UP was almost took all the credit for the price decrease, but it was actually wonderful diverse coalition work that ACT UP didn't do a lot of it that time, but that happened, and that was happening. It was actually very cool. So the company was feeling it from all sides and it was just snowballing. And the Stock Exchange action itself was just kind of the last push. They were under just tremendous public pressure by the time the Stock Exchange action happened. So it was kind of the last push that just pushed them over the edge. And ACT UP, we actually met with them in coalition with all these groups at a hotel outside their headquarters, 'cause they wouldn't let me near their headquarters in Raleigh-Durham about two weeks beforehand. And we told their PR people that the Stock Exchange action was going to happen. Not the one inside, but the one outside and that if they wanted us to cancel the action they had between now and then to lower the price and just constant trying to make this happen. And again that meeting was a complete stonewalling - just like the David Berry meeting earlier in the year. And we had a member of ACT UP who actually worked as a trader on the New York Stock Exchange who was able to tell us how lax the security actually was. And there was this door that you could use to get into the Stock Exchange, one of the, there are various doors you could go through. But one of them is right under the columns that you see of the famous picture of the Stock Exchange. So, it faces Broad Street, where the columns are and right behind those columns is that big floor you see on the news. So, that door is literally, you go into it and then there's three steps to your left, a little landing and another three steps up and you're on that floor. It's that close to the street. And that's

why, after 9/11, there's no traffic on that street anymore 'cause a bomb would really do a job on the New York Stock Exchange just from the street. So, and there was just one security guard there with no metal detectors. That's all there was for the entire Stock Exchange. So he told us about that door and I started quietly putting together a crew. Many had done the action earlier down in North Carolina. I had Gregg Bordowitz and, I'm trying to remember. We had James McGrath again, much of the same crew that I had before and there were seven of us. Robert Hilferty was one of the photographers, 'cause we needed to record the action without telling the press in advance. So we had to take our own pictures. And, what we did is, we needed to get those white trading badges. So, a couple of weeks beforehand we acted like tourists and we had video cameras. And we stood outside the Stock Exchange, acting like tourists during lunch when many of the traders are standing outside smoking and what have you. And we would zoom down and actually zoomed in on one of these trading badges. And then drew one up based on that design and took it to this kind of pawn shop in Greenwich Village that makes badges and things. And we told, we gave the guy a whole story that we were doing a skit for a holiday party or something like that, and we needed these badges for the skit we were doing. And they're just these white plastic tags that had those big num-, the traders' numbers on them with the name of the firm underneath and a black line through the middle – thick plastic rectangular things. They all had photo IDs, but our contact on the floor told us that nobody, everybody kept those in their wallets. Nobody had to show them to get in. It was just kind of a visual look. If you had the white badge, that's all you needed. So, we had these badges made, very cheaply. They looked great and we had to do a test run to make sure it worked. So, me and two others from the group – Robert Hilferty

Tape III  
00:30:00

and one other, the Tuesday before the action, which was on a Thursday, we went in with the opening bell, the rush before the opening bell. It opens at 9:30 and there are a bunch of traders that stand outside that door smoking their last cigarette. So, at 9:25 we stood around with them in trader drag, with a tie and shirts and our badges, pretending to be traders, and we walked in with them in the rush, to see if that would work. And, the security guard didn't bat an eye and all of a sudden we were on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. And, I wanted to figure out where we would do the demonstration. So we're walking around, the bell is ringing, trading is starting, everybody is busy, we actually pull out little pads of paper because that's what people seem to carry around. *(laughs)* So, we're looking like traders, and we discovered this old VIP balcony that wasn't used anymore, that had a steep little staircase, an old wooden balcony. And it was perfect because it had a big NYSE banner hanging over it, which would be a great backdrop for the photo. And, there was no gate in front of it. It was unused so we didn't have to push anybody aside, or have anybody wrestle with us once we got up there and I said – this is great, and you guys'll just stand on the floor we'll give you, we'll have two cameras – in case one of the shots doesn't work, two photographers – high ASA film so that flashes don't go off, or anything like that. And we'll chain ourselves up there and do our routine. But then I got stopped on the trading floor. This guy comes up to me, this old guy and says, "hey – you're new!" And, I'm like, "ah, yeah!" I start to sweat. And, he says, "Bear Stearns." I said, "yeah, yeah." 'Cause all of our badges said "Bear Stearns." We just picked a firm out of a hat. And he said, "that's weird – 3,865" – my number was 3,000-something. He said, "the highest number on the floor is 1600, there are only 1600

traders here.” (*laughs*) And I said, “I don’t know. This is the one they gave me.”

(*laughing*)

And I’m starting to sweat more and he goes, “well, I guess so, I guess they’re trying a new system, well, welcome.” And he shook my hand and that was it, he walked away, and I was like – holy shit! So we went back to the pawnshop and said – you got to make all new badges. We had like 48 hours before the demo was happening, so. And we all met at a McDonald’s beforehand that morning on Nassau Street, nervous as all hell. And seven of us, five that would go up to the balcony, two photographers, and, the photographers were supposed to take our picture and get out right away, outside, and hand the cameras over to the runners that would take them up to Associated Press. And, we had, each of us had stuff under our t-shirts. One person had a huge banner that was all folded up. He looked a little fat. I had a gigantic chain wrapped in a fanny belt that we’d chain ourselves to the banister at the top of this thing, so it would take them a while for, to pull us off the balcony. We all had handcuffs in our pockets. We all had little marine foghorns that were ear-piercing and that’s how we would announce our presence. And then we had these, in honor of Abbie Hoffman who was the first and only person to ever organize an action on the Stock Exchange at what was then the visitor’s gallery, which is now walled off because of Abbie Hoffman, with glass. He threw down fake, he threw down dollar bills onto the floor of the Stock Exchange, real dollar bills as a rant against how capitalism was funding the war. We did something in honor of him, we had fake \$100 bills made up that had, on the back of them it said, “Fuck Your Profiteering, We Die While You Make Money.”

Do you need any more light on this?

**JW: Yeah.**

PS: Do you want to raise those?

**JW: Or, even the light**

PS: Why don't we just.

**JW: I can do that.**

PS: And there's a light switch there if you need that. We're getting mighty dark in here.

**JW: Five minutes left for this tape.**

**SS: Okay. Go ahead, Peter.**

PS: So, we all piled in at 9:25, walking right past security and the five of us walked up the stairs of the balcony and pulled everything, knelt down and pulled everything out from under our shirts and we waited for the bell and chained our, put the chain around the banister all handcuffed ourselves to it, got the whole banner unrolled which said "Sell Wellcome". And, at 9:29 and 50 seconds we jumped up and put the banner over and all let off the foghorns, you couldn't hear the opening bell, and it was extraordinary. The place just, for a second, just went dead quiet except for the foghorns as everybody tried to figure out what was happening. And they then started going into a rage as they realized what was happening. And the photographers took their pictures quietly and got out, handed the cameras off, but they saw that the crowd had started getting really, they were beginning to throw wads of paper at us and getting very angry and they were concerned, so they foolishly went back in and they quickly got nabbed. The traders were looking around for conspirators and they got real roughed up, shirt collars were ripped and stuff like that. And these guys were just raging at us, and I used



to work with that testosterone and it was, ah, it was really one of the most gratifying moments of my life, 'cause I realized it was done. It was, we had succeeded, we got through security, it was done. The picture was taken, this was a gigantic news story. And they could scream all they wanted but we were going to be on the front page of the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal the next day.

**SS: Did their share price go down?**

PS: A little bit, a little bit. That wasn't the goal. It was just to really keep this as a major story. And it was, the next day. And three days later they lowered the price by 20 percent. Which was the first, and unfortunately the last time an HIV drug has had its price lowered in the US. But, fortunately we've seen very dramatic price declines in the developing world.

**SS: Okay. Good. Let's change tapes.**

Tape IV  
00:00:00

PS: But, it became a real, it became a real kind of "don't cross this line" type thing, so the savings were way beyond just AZT.

**SS: Right. Ready? Okay. Before we get into a whole new thing, I just have one tiny question. Can you tell us about the swim team?**

PS: *(laughing)* Oh, my god. The swim team. They had many names – Men in Black, the Dog Boys – have you heard of the Dog Boys?

**SS: No, why-**

PS: I think it's a subgroup of the Swim Team. The Swim Team was born at one of the great ACT UP parties, and there were a lot of great ACT UP parties. But one of the greatest ever was the one that, early on, that Maria Maggenti held in her apartment on East 10<sup>th</sup> Street above Tompkins Square Park and packed to the hilt. It was one of the

earliest parties, everybody got very drunk. And that gorgeous group of East Village men who were responsible for the new clone look of black leather boots, black bomber jackets, blue jeans and a t-shirt, they decided that they were all going to go run across the street and jump into the kind of little kiddy swimming pool that was in Tompkins Square Park in their white under- in their underwear. And then they just lazied back into the apartment, all – come into this crowded, horny, drunk party of gay men and lesbians and a smattering of straight women and their in wet underwear and they're gorgeous, and then I distinctly remember this chant of everybody being encouraged to strip off their shirt, and including the women. And there was this huge chant to get Maria Maggenti to be the first and she showed her great bra.

**SS: So who was on the Swim Team?**

PS: Oh yeah. Those names. Um. You're catching me here with names.

**SS: Okay.**

PS: It was the gorgeous East Village boys, though. And I'm drawing a blank.

**SS: I've got to tell you. Everyone remembers the Swim Team and no one can tell me who was in it.**

PS: Oh, I've got some of their names on the tip of my tongue.

**SS: Okay, well maybe you'll remember as we keep going. So, can you talk about the development of protease inhibitors in terms of ACT UP?**

PS: Wasn't Ryan Cull one of them?

**SS: Ryan Cull? Never heard of him.**

PS: Oh no no no. Ryan Clary. [Ryan Landry]

**SS: Don't know.**

PS: Remember he did that, I've actually got the video. He had that. He had a drag persona and he did that great early activism video at the CDC action and stuff like that, handing out fliers. Marta was his drag name. Oh, you've got to see this video.

SS: **Okay.**

PS: It's hysterical.

SS: **I'll watch it.**

PS: What was?

SS: **Okay – so I'm moving into a whole new thing now. ACT UP's contribution to the development of protease inhibitors, historically. Were you involved in any of that?**

Tape IV  
00:05:00

PS: Yeah, by that, we didn't develop protease inhibitors. The Government and Pharma came up with them and Merck being the company that did more than anyone, but certainly what led to the protease inhibitors was an infusion of Government spending on research, which occurred on ACT UP's watch. And that led to the discovery of the protease enzyme as a target, which Pharma started looking at. And we just greased the wheels and made it so that drug development could happen very quickly in HIV and even though we were raking companies like Burroughs Wellcome over the coals, so that they were one of the most disrespected corporate names in the country, by the time the mid-'90s came around, there were two to three times the number of companies involved in AIDS research as there were in the beginning, which really goes to show you how practical our approach had been all along. And Merck really wanted to make a major play and they pushed, after the basic research was done, they really pushed protease development faster than most any other company.

**SS: Now, was ACT UP, did you guys, were you so on top of the research that you could see what you thought needed to be developed and what needed to be funded and then pushed for those particular things to be developed?**

PS: Eventually, yeah.

**SS: So, can you say, tell some of the drugs that ACT UP was involved in advocating for?**

PS: All the integrase inhibitors. Well, not so much ACT UP as I think the later years of AIDS activism would you get into the position where you're actually following stuff from the point that Pharma puts it first in humans. We were not, I think during, definitely not during the late-'80s, or even '90, '91 or '92, kind of the big years of ACT UP, were we close enough to Pharma to be involved from the very first, to be able to push them to say, this is a new – first off, there were really no new targets that came up during the ACT UP years. They came up during the TAG years and the, the integrase and the protease inhibitors all happened after the ACT UP/TAG split. And, it was only after new targets were identified that we could start pushing Pharma to go after those targets.

**SS: So, you said that you were on low-dose AZT and ddI. And what was happening as you were starting to reach the end of that? What were you looking towards?**

PS: Well, I was, something that would hit a new target. All we had was reverse transcriptase inhibitors. And as we learned at the big international AIDS conference in Berlin, using one class of drugs wasn't working. And we all kind of witnessed it with the fact that our friends were still dying en masse, even as, the D drugs kept coming out, ddI and ddC and d4T, wasn't helping. So, during the mid-'90s was, for

Tape IV  
00:10:00

treatment activism, was incredibly bleak and discouraging and depressing and pessimistic and almost defeatist. You had this, you had all this energy from the ACT UP years where we thought we could scream a cure out of the test tube in short order, to a realization that that wasn't going to happen, and that most of what had happened up until then wasn't working. You had the split up of ACT UP and then you just had all this continuing death going on, into the '90s. It was, from 1990-96 was just horrendous.

**SS: Do you think that that lack of new target contributed to the split in ACT UP?**

PS: No, no. I don't think that had anything to do with it. I think there were many other reasons that led to the split of ACT UP.

**SS: But you don't think that it was, there was frustration around the lack of progress?**

PS: No. We felt a great sense of progress at that point, with how we had gotten the, what we had done had panned out, how we had gotten the FDA to do what we want, how we were getting the NIH to open up and let patients have a seat at the table. There continued to be successes on what we were asking for. But I see your point, too, if you sat back objectively you could say, well, people are still dropping like flies, so what is all this talking you're doing with the FDA and the NIH? What good is it really doing? So maybe yeah. Maybe that led some of the frustration and some of the battles, started feeding some of the battles that were occurring. *(phone rings)* 888 – don't answer those!

**SS: Don't answer those, never. So, do you feel that 076 was an important turning point for ACT UP?**

PS: Yeah.

**SS: Can you characterize that a little bit?**

PS: Well, it's weird, 'cause I wasn't actually intimately involved with that one. But, I think – the reason it was a turning point is 'cause the internal battles that had been raging for a good year at that point expanded at that point, 'cause, at least from my selfish perspective, before that a lot of it was focused on me. And then it got expanded to the rest of T&D.

**SS: Well then let's go back. So then how did you become the target?**

PS: A big part of it was the administrative battles that I continued to lead and that people were sick of losing.

**SS: That they were sick of you winning.**

PS: Yeah.

**SS: I see.**

PS: And there was this general sense that I was responsible for taking the organization into a more structured, more structured direction than people were comfortable with. Then there was a definite backlash against both real and perceived ego and arrogance and, on my part, that and the fact that I was the media darling of the organization and had a lot of the limelight and, it kind of culminated with the San Francisco AIDS conference, where there was quite a push to join the national boycott against the conference, because of the immigration ban on people with HIV. And Treatment and Data pushed very hard to say, "No – we've got to participate in this conference and protest in another way." So ACT UP split from all the other ACT UPs in the country, ACT UP/New York did, and T&D won the day and got the floor to approve us actually participating in the conference. And then, Vito Russo was scheduled to

actually be one of the plenary speakers at the opening ceremony. And this was after Montreal where AIDS activists had stormed the stage and demanded participation in these conferences. So the conference organizers in San Francisco had just decided this is one of the ways that they were going to reach out to AIDS activists that year, was to have a member of ACT UP actually speak during the opening ceremony. And, so Vito was invited. Vito got quite sick before the conference and had to bow out, and so the organizers invited me at the last moment, with about a week's notice. Larry Kramer was calling for riots, hold on a second. Hello -

**SS: [To Peter's boyfriend] Hi. We've taken over your home.**

PS: We don't have too much longer, right?

**SS: No.**

PS: Okay. Will that noise?

**SS: It's okay, it's just life. It's fine.**

PS: You're not sticklers for the sound thing.

**JW: No.**

PS: Okay. So, there was a real divide going on about our participation in that conference, and then I delivered this speech. And in that speech there was this, there was what I considered a very strong defense of ACT UP's role in AIDS activism, 'cause I knew that the scientific community was very threatened by us and criticizing us for our radicalism and how we disrupted things in Montreal, and I wrote this whole section that really reads as quite a defense of the role we play and, while admitting that sure we make our mistakes, but I also said, our mistakes don't really, they just make us look bad. They don't actually cost lives, whereas the mistakes that government makes, or that you might

make, can be huge. And, snippets of that got pulled and played out of context at the following meeting as though I was criticizing ACT UP, and making apologies for it. And, that - because *Nightline* played out the whole speech, a big chunk of the speech that night – I ended the speech quoting Vito Russo and with full accreditation, talking about how he was sick and saying I want to read, I want to close by reading some words that Vito delivered a couple of years ago in Washington, D.C. *Nightline* ran the whole thing as if it were my words. They pulled out the accreditation, and so there was this great bitterness that I had plagiarized and I got kind of raked over the coals the following, when we came back to New York after the conference, for all these egregious mistakes, of making ACT UP look bad –

**SS: And who was accusing you?**

PS: Who is that red-haired guy, longish red hair?

**SS: I know who you mean. He has, like an Irish last name.**

PS: Yes.

**SS: Kind of pudgy.**

PS: Yeah, kind of pudgy.

**SS: Yeah.**

PS: Yeah. And, oh and at the same time while I was in San Francisco, Sean Strub was running for Congress and he calls me up and he says, can I use your name, you're huge right now – can I use your name on a fundraising letter? And I said “sure,” I said and, “no problem, I trust you to lay it out fine” and everything like that. He ended up putting Peter Staley, ACT UP/New York everywhere. And of course, ACT UP doesn't do, and I completely agreed with it, doesn't do political endorsements. And I didn't see



the thing before it went out. And I hadn't even seen it at that Monday night meeting, but the red-haired guy had. So, and that was the icing on the cake. And it was the first time I got seriously hissed, just like an Ellen Cooper hiss.

**SS: But these sound like smokescreens. What was the real issue? What were people really angry at you about? This sounds like tiny stuff.**

PS: I think it had built up and a lot of it was real, a lot of it was, they, there were a large group of people that, for their own, they strongly believed differently than I did on the nature of the organization going forward, and viewed me as the leader of a camp that was taking the group in the wrong direction.

**SS: And how would you characterize that direction? What did they object to substantially?**

PS: Something that was administratively a little more traditional and structured so that it could handle its growth and that it could grow, and something that also continued to do both inside and outside work, that was willing to do a lot of traditional lobbying, as it were.

**SS: So they didn't want you to continue to work with the pharmaceuticals and the government? Is that what feeling was?**

PS: Eventually, yeah. There were, it was pretty, there was a vote on that, whether to allow continued discussions with individuals in government. There was a vote on that. That came out of the 076, I think.

**SS: Who proposed that?**

PS: I think there was a group, I think it involved Maxine [Wolfe] and others.

**SS: And what was it about what you were doing that made them want to control your access?**

PS: Well, we were definitely working very independently. We were acting very elitist. It was a fair criticism. We felt like we knew what we were doing. The debates we were getting involved with were very complex. We were kind of our own little enterprise. We weren't the only one in ACT UP. Pretty much every, every, there were lots of splinter groups in ACT UP and they were all acting very independently. That became very apparent at the church action. So, there were a lot of, and, there was just a lot of, people were threatened by that. They felt we were out of – I would perceive that they probably felt we were out of control and that we weren't, we were too narrowly focused and weren't listening to their concerns on some of the issues.

**SS: That's what most people point to. Can you say specifically what that was about?**

PS: Well I think at the time – for that debate it was about whether we were advocating strongly enough for women with HIV.

**SS: Okay, so can you tell us what were the specifics of that?**

PS: Again, I actually wasn't intimately involved with that one, 'cause I didn't work on the T&D side of 076. But, so I'm just, actually I'm just kind of guessing, but there was – and maybe you can refresh my memory. But I do know that Mark and others were meeting with Fauci and many of the, on the women issues committee were working on the, were making 076 an issue and Harrington and other weren't sharing their concerns or didn't agree with them on those issues. Does that sound right?

**SS: What about the CDC definition campaign, were you guys involved in that?**

PS: I wasn't.

**SS: You weren't?**

PS: No.

**SS: So, what happened? So you decided – wait, so Maxine proposed that you should no longer be able to meet with the government, did that pass?**

PS: No. It wasn't even close. No. It was a really, but it was a very frightening and it really, it kind of, for that, it was kind a very defining moment for the rest of T&D that, yeah, maybe we should be looking – 'cause I had definitely been saying for six months – I want out.

**SS: And why did you want out?**

PS: Very personal reasons. I felt very beat up and bruised from the infighting. It had gotten very personal. One thing I was good about was trying to take care of myself healthwise. I avoided stress like the plague. And ACT UP went from being a place where I thrived, physically, healthwise and mentally. It was my family, it was everything. To a place that was just very painful.

**SS: Looking at it with hindsight, what do you think were the big real reasons why ACT UP changed? You said small things, or personality issues, but it seems larger than that.**

PS: Oh sure. Yeah, no, there were these two gigantic camps. One that wanted to be, the organization to be a traditional civil disobedience group, and one that wanted it to be both civil disobedience and really smart lobbying group. And those two camps

started really butting heads. And it played out both in the activism and in the administrative battles, so –

**SS: Do you think the other camp would describe themselves as only wanting to do civil disobedience?**

PS: Maybe not. It got down to a point where they were trying to cut off the inside work. But maybe that was just in frustration of what they perceived to be our out-of-control or our too-independent streak, and our elitist T&D streak. I wouldn't doubt that at all.

**SS: So actually how did you guys leave?**

PS: Because they were in essence, trying to negotiate as well on 076, so, I don't think they were – so yeah, I could definitely understand how they didn't actually want to abandon for any and all time the inside track.

**SS: So you see the two factions –**

PS: They just wanted to bring it under control, or to make it more democratic and less elitist and it was very elitist.

**SS: So how did you guys actually leave?**

PS: Well, I had, in August of '91 I formed the Treatment Action Guerillas as an affinity group of ACT UP/New York. 'Cause by that time, affinity groups were this unfortunate way, I felt, of taking a very independent track of a way anybody could be elitist. And there were affinity- everybody had their affinity groups that were all elitist, that were all very untied from the democratic process within the Monday night meetings. And, so I definitely had it in mind- this was the first affinity group to have its own 501(c)3 and checking account. So it was definitely intended to be a place where I could

Tape IV  
00:30:00

leave. And we did, we started just with putting a condom on Jesse Helms's house – that's how we made our name, and I just kept waiting for the rest of T&D to get to the emotional place where they were ready to walk away as well. And it happened rather quickly with the 076 thing, I guess. In January we formally split.

**SS: And who were the people –**

PS: In '92.

**SS: Who were the other people who went with you?**

PS: Mark Harrington and Gregg Gonsalves and Marvin Shulman – it was about 10 to 15 of us, or so or maybe more. And it was very interesting, Larry wanted to be part of it too in the beginning, and we said no. It was, or we kind of just-

**SS: 'Cause you had to be invited to be in TAG?**

PS: Maybe – that's a good question – maybe initially but it was opened up pretty quickly. We had our own weekly meeting that was open to all, fairly quickly.

**SS: So were there a lot of-**

PS: Definitely within the first year.

**SS: -people who were in ACT UP and TAG?**

PS: Yes. There was a lot of overlap. And in fact, within months we did a big demonstration together which was the one at Roche, which was glorious, where we shut down every, all 18, 19 entrances to make a statement about, I think it was ddC at the time.

**SS: And so that was it – you never went back to ACT UP after that.**

PS: I didn't, no.

**SS: So-**

PS: But a lot of people continued to play dual roles.

**SS: So unless there is something else that you want to discuss, then we have a couple of more questions.**

PS: No.

**SS: All right. So, looking back on all of this, of all the people, you're one of the people who's had the most personal transformation in the arc of your time in ACT UP. What do you think, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what would say was its greatest disappointment?**

PS: I actually, well, I think it has a couple of great achievements. One was money for AIDS – to get the country to respond in such a way that the government started spending money on AIDS in all facets – prevention, research, what-have-you. The explosion of growth in funding for AIDS that occurred after ACT UP was born is really striking to see on a graph. And that led to the research bonanza that occurred later and that led to all the treatments. I would say it was, you could say – oh, it was all the treatments – but it started with the money which really had, came from gigantic, by making it a big public story that the bad guys, the Reagan administration and the first Bush was doing nothing about AIDS. And they were kind of forced – 'cause Congress was willing to play along – they were forced to play along and they started spending big money.

The second is what it did for the gay movement. I think it's – all the stuff we're seeing now, with gay rights and marriage and gays in the military – the modern gay rights movement was launched by ACT UP. It started in Stonewall, it died by the early '80s and it got re-started by ACT UP. And I think we just, we really changed the whole country's

perspective about gay men and lesbians. They perceived us as weak until ACT UP came along, and then I think they – maybe at times feared us, but definitely respected and kind of, there was an admiration and understanding of and a respect of what we did, that has continued to benefit gay men and lesbians every since.

**SS: And what about disappointment?**

PS: That we couldn't keep it going? 'Cause, god knows, there's still plenty of need. And it's not completely dead, but it's just so unfortunately fragmented. But ACT UP/Philadelphia ended up putting international AIDS on the map in this country, pretty much single-handedly – by zapping Gore for a year during a presidential campaign. And that just shows how civil disobedience is still needed and activism is still needed and it was a shame we couldn't keep it centralized, which would make us more powerful. But it seems to be an almost unavoidable nature of almost every civil disobedience movement I read about, so I'm not sure whether there was much any of us could have done to keep it all together. But I certainly accept my fair share of the blame for letting it all fall apart.

Tape IV  
00:35:00

**SS: Okay. Just my last question – and we ask everybody who is positive or has AIDS, if you could tell us what meds you're taking now.**

PS: I am on all three classes of drugs, 'cause I have a fair amount of resistance to most of the nukes. So, in addition to Truvada, which is two of the nukes, which may or may not be working for me, I take Viramune, which is a non-nuke and I take boosted-Reyataz, which is a protease inhibitor.

**SS: Thank you, Peter.**

PS: Thank you. You ask everybody what their meds are?

**SS: Yeah.**