

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

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Interviewee: **Charles Stimson**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Charles Stimson
January 5, 2014

SARAH SCHULMAN: So we start, you just look at me.

CHARLES STIMSON: Sure.

SS: And tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

CS: Like a psychiatrist's cognitive test. Charles Stimson; January 5, 2014; I'm 53, going on 54.

SS: Okay. And where are we?

CS: We're in my apartment, on East 13th Street in –

SS: Your fabulous apartment, where you've lived since 1984.

CS: Correct.

SS: Where were you born, Charles?

CS: Rockville Centre, Long Island.

SS: Oh, really. Okay, so you're a New York local person.

CS: I left when I was nine, so –

SS: And where did you go when you were nine?

CS: Virginia, northern Virginia.

SS: Oh, okay. So you actually grew up –

CS: Well, I lived there five years; '69 to '75. I went to the Watergate hearings.

SS: As a 14-year-old, or whatever?

CS: Fifteen-year-old, yes.

SS: How did that happen?

CS: I just was fascinated. It was live on public TV. And my sister lived in D.C., so I just stood in the back. It was the opening statement of L. Patrick Gray. It

was so great to see the fall of Nixon, because we had been enthusiastic McGovern people.

SS: Okay. So you were a political animal from day one, basically.

CS: Oh yes.

SS: And how come your parents were McGovern people? What did they do for a living?

CS: My stepfather was a conscientious objector, so he was actually a county delegate in Virginia for McGovern. My mother was of independent means.

SS: Okay. And when did your family come to America?

CS: 1635.

SS: Oh, really?

CS: Yes. On the *Truelove*.

SS: And what –

CS: *Mayflower* was 1620.

SS: So you're a D.A.R.; you're a daughter.

CS: Oh, both sides, yes, very much so.

SS: Oh, okay. But I thought that that that group tended to be more right-wing.

CS: Oh yes, they were. But –

SS: So your mother was different, somehow.

CS: Well, my parents were Eisenhower Republicans, I would say. And then, with Goldwater, they both became Democrats. They were Lowell Weicker, Greenwich, Connecticut Republicans.

SS: Okay.

CS: Which is just a different breed.

SS: So you grew up with political discussions around the table, and –

CS: Yes.

**SS: – all of that. And were your parents active in any kind of
community politics, or –**

CS: They were active in the church. My stepfather divorced — became a Communist, but I had no contact with him after the divorce. But he was a Dorothy Hay [Day] sort of Christian.

SS: What church did you go to?

CS: United Church of Christ, UCC, which is a liberal – It's actually the same church as —

SS: It's Obama's church, Yes.

CS: Exactly.

SS: Yes.

CS: But which comes from the nonconformist, Congregational, New England tradition. My mother was not concerned with denominations.

SS: Now, when you were following politics on TV, was there anything going on in your high school that you were politically involved with?

CS: No, not at all.

SS: No.

CS: They were horrified that I had a McGovern button. They were all – it was – in the high school, it was Fort Belvoir, which is the major base of the Army Corps of Engineers. So like 40 percent – a huge percentage of the kids were military kids.

SS: Now, I have to ask you this, because every piece of footage we have of you, you have this absolutely gorgeous, long hair. Did you have that hair in high school?

CS: I had big hair in high school. When I graduated elementary school, they gave me a dog collar — it's the only thing I ever graduated from — and scissors, like little toy scissors.

SS: Oh, my god.

00:05:00

CS: So I was the kid with long hair.

SS: Okay, so you're watching politics, you're not doing it yet. You're a little bit alienated from the people around you. And it sounds a little geek, slightly political-geeky. When did you become aware that there was a gay movement?

CS: I guess Time magazine, or whenever it was. I remember grabbing my mother's handbag, and saying, "Oh, free my people." Do you know what I mean? I wasn't – it was the '70s, so I wasn't openly gay, but everybody called me a faggot; everybody considered me gay. Whatever. I mean, I had a girlfriend, but –

SS: Were there any out gay people in your school?

CS: Oh, no. It's Virginia.

SS: Okay.

CS: Virginia in the '70s, it just wasn't on the radar.

SS: So when you –

CS: I mean, it was out there – do you know what I mean? “Gay” was a word. You read of it in magazines. But this was a conservative area.

SS: So there was nobody who was whispered about, or no scandals, or anything.

CS: No. People would call other people faggots, but I didn’t know anybody who was gay.

SS: Okay. So when you left there, where did you go?

CS: Lawrenceville, New Jersey; the town outside of Princeton. My stepfather went to seminary.

SS: Okay. Oh, so he actually was that committed to the church.

CS: Well, and then he found a younger woman within a year, and left my mother.

SS: Oh. All right.

CS: He was actually 18 when he married my mother.

SS: And how old was your mother?

CS: Forty-one. It was a big scandal, because my sister was 19. He’s also my cousin. He’s the son of my father’s sister.

SS: And is his name Stimson?

CS: No, Lewis, because it’s my father’s sister’s.

SS: So your father who became the Communist is the Stimson?

CS: No; my stepfather.

SS: Oh, so he – oh, I see. So he married your mother when he was 18; he went to seminary; he dumped your mother for a younger woman; and then he became a Communist. Okay. And –

CS: And he's on his third wife, and he's Catholic, now.

SS: Okay.

CS: And he was bar mitzvahed. His father was Jewish. Literally.

SS: All right. So I –

CS: And he was born from artificial insemination, which was very rare in the '50s – as was his brother.

SS: Because –

CS: His father is a big scientist in Sweden.

SS: Okay.

CS: So they had access to medical things. Like a – not a doctor, more a research guy.

SS: Now, that's a lot of upheaval for you.

CS: I like upheaval.

SS: You like upheaval.

CS: Heh heh!

SS: Okay, so you ended up in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. And then you –

CS: Just for one year.

SS: And then where did you go?

CS: When I was 16, I went to NYU.

SS: Okay. So now you're in New York. And I am assuming that now you're seeing gay people, and you also see political people. And so where were you entering into all of that? Were you involved in politics? Were you entering into the gay community?

CS: Just gay. I immediately identified as gay. Met somebody in the Ramble.

SS: Oh, wow.

CS: And it's been that way ever since.

SS: Right. So what was the gay community like? So this is nineteen-seventy —

CS: — six.

SS: — six. What was the gay community like, that you were —

CS: It was fun and colorful. Do you know what I mean? We got in drag. Just very free.

SS: Where did you like to go? Besides the Ramble?

CS: I didn't really go to bars, even though I could. There was no age. I mean, I've always been this height, since I was 15. And New York in the '70s, nobody cared about any of that sort of stuff. But just more hanging out with friends, and going around.

SS: And what was the gay scene at NYU? Was your gay life outside of school, or was it also —

CS: It was in the dorm. My best friend, who I'm still friends with — actually lived in a dorm, the Brittany, on 10th and Broadway, which was, at the time,

Parsons students. So half my friends were Parsons students, and half my friends were NYU students.

SS: And what did you study at NYU?

CS: Political science, history.

SS: Okay. And did you finish? No.

CS: Always dropped out.

SS: You dropped out. What year did you drop out?

CS: '78. Moved to France.

SS: Oh, okay.

CS: Just on a whim.

SS: And so, when you were in France, were you involved in anything queer or political?

CS: Just boys.

SS: – just living the life.

CS: Yes.

SS: Yes. And when did you come back to New York?

CS: Well, then I went to London, and studied a bit, and had a boyfriend; lived with him — Peter James — still a very dear friend. But not political, per se, there.

SS: So what year –

CS: But I studied politics there. It was during Thatcher.

SS: And that was until nineteen...

CS: Till – I came back for Joey in '82.

00:10:00

SS: Okay. So AIDS happens while you're in London. Were you aware of it? Was it on your radar?

CS: Not in London. I became aware of it when I was here. But I thought, oh, I'm just with one guy; it's for people who are sleeping around. I didn't think it applied to me. Because it just seemed to make sense: well, if you're exposed to 20 people, that's much more than being exposed to one person.

SS: Right. So when did it start to enter your life?

CS: Friend in Paris died of AIDS, an artist. I actually brought his work over to a gallery in New York – Charles Stewart. Then it occurred to me — it was the first person I knew with AIDS. I actually went back to see him, and he was very sick, in a hospital, and everything had fallen apart. But I wasn't living there when I knew he had AIDS.

SS: Okay. So then you come back home. And at what point did you realize that it was going to affect your life?

CS: I guess '86, '87.

SS: Okay, so you had never been involved in gay politics, you had never been in a political movement, until ACT UP.

CS: Correct.

SS: Okay.

CS: I think I had gone to a demo for like whatever, but not organizing meetings; nothing more than – because what was it? City Council eventually passed gay rights, so –

SS: Eighty-six, yes.

CS: Right, I think Miriam Friedlander. Whatever. There was some rally on Sheridan Square that I went to, but nothing ongoing.

SS: So what were you doing in your life at that time, in '86, '87?

Were you working, or – no.

CS: No. There was a salon here. So that's why I bought this place, so my lover could cut hair here. So I was helping out in that.

SS: Okay.

CS: But traveled a lot.

SS: So what made you take that leap into the Gay Community Center, and go to ACT UP?

CS: I tested positive.

SS: And how did you decide to get tested?

CS: It became available. As soon as it became available, I wanted to know.

SS: Now did you think that you were positive?

CS: No, I thought I was negative. Because I was just with Joey.

SS: And so you must have been really surprised.

CS: Well, his ex-lover had AIDS. So it sort of made sense. And then I realized, well – monogamy was something we never discussed.

SS: So you both were positive.

CS: Oh yes.

SS: And you found out together.

CS: Yes. We went together. Dr. Nathaniel Pier, who I think died of AIDS. It was actually just around the corner, on University Place.

SS: How do you spell his last name?

CS: Pier? P-I-E-R, Pier.

SS: Oh, okay. Don't know him.

So the two of you had this – okay, so now you're in this together. And so how did you go forth? What did you do from there?

CS: Well, I went into ACT UP, and then with ACT UP, I went onto Protocol 19, the AZT study.

SS: Okay, so let's back up a little bit. So Joey didn't go to ACT UP.

CS: Never.

SS: Okay. And why do you think that is? Why did you –

CS: We just each did our own thing.

SS: I know. But we're interested in like, why people – because so many people did not go to ACT UP, right? And only a few people did. So I'm just wondering what you think is the difference.

CS: I loved politics, and he hated the fact that he knew he was positive. Generally, he always regretted that, being tested. It would have been better not to know –

SS: Right.

CS: – because it's such a psychological burden.

SS: So you went in in a confrontational mode, and he went more into avoid.

CS: I guess so, yes.

SS: Okay. I mean, that's very normal of the time, right?

CS: Yes.

SS: All right. So you walk in the first day, to the meeting. And did you know anyone there?

CS: No.

SS: No. And what was it like for you, to walk into that meeting? Do you remember anything about it?

CS: Not in particular. No. It was good energy; I guess Larry spoke. I don't really have specific memories of –

SS: But your goal was to get into a protocol? Or did you know there was such a thing as a protocol?

CS: Oh, I had no idea.

SS: Okay.

CS: It was all new. I wasn't really sure what to do. It was like, you test positive, and then what do you do?

SS: Right.

CS: Heh. Wait.

**SS: So how did you start negotiating the organization? Like where
00:15:00 did you first plug in, or who did you hang out with?**

CS: Well, we were the first affinity group. So –

SS: What was your affinity group?

CS: MHA. We actually met here.

SS: Oh.

CS: Metropolitan Health Association. We would call it different things, but MHA was the official title.

SS: And who was in it?

CS: It was Adam Hassuck; Mike Frisch; Gregg Bordowitz; Neil Broome; Ira Manhoff; John Bowne, who's dead; Ortez, I think Alderson — I forget Ortez's last name; Steve Cordova; Rich Jackman; and SPREE, Timmy Vance.

SS: Oh, okay. I didn't realize you were the first affinity group, and you met here. So how did you start operating? What kinds of things did you do?

CS: First thing was Dr. Joseph; that's why we made up the name. Because we were like, oh, we just want to meet with him. And then we met with him, and just didn't leave, and got arrested.

SS: Oh, Stephen Joseph. Now can you just explain for posterity what the issue was with Stephen Joseph?

CS: I forget what the issue was, to be honest. I forget what our motivation — I thought people became too bitter against him, whatever our original cause was, was accurate. But then people just kept harassing him at his home, and whatever. I thought all that was a bit —

SS: Why did that happen? Why did it get out of hand like that?

CS: People just go crazy. I don't know. He was sort of a stubborn guy, and like, "I'm going to do it this way, and this is the correct method." Whatever.

SS: So you guys made an appointment with him, went into his office, demanded whatever it was. I think it was about counting — how they calculated how many people had AIDS —

CS: Okay, yes.

SS: Yes.

CS: That makes sense.

SS: And then you refused to leave? So what did he do?

CS: He called security and had us removed. But they were sort of flabbergasted. And we were flabbergasted that we could just walk in, and present ourselves as a nonexistent group. But I guess they just took people at their word, which is sort of a nice thing, but still.

SS: So did they arrest you?

CS: Oh yes.

SS: Okay. So what was that like? So suddenly, there you are.

CS: Yes. Planned arrest. It was fine. I had been arrested before. The first arrest was the courthouse, the county courthouse – which made B1 in the *Times*.

SS: What was that about?

CS: Just a lack of awareness for AIDS.

SS: Okay, I'm not aware of this arrest, so I don't know about it. The county courthouse.

CS: New York – Foley Square.

SS: Uh huh. And there was a – not City Hall.

CS: No, it wasn't City Hall, it was Foley Square. So it was Steve Webb; I think there was Mark Aurigemma; Steve Gendin. You know, Steve Webb killed himself; he was the big body builder.

SS: I remember him. Wasn't he Avram's boyfriend?

CS: I guess so.

SS: Yes.

CS: He lived not far from here, with a doctor. He was a really nice guy. I think it was platonic. Who knows?

SS: No, I remember him. That was the first suicide in ACT UP. So how did that affect you, when he did that?

CS: I was so sad. He was such an attractive guy, and bright, and it's just like – I hurt. I didn't know him that well, but this whole — his father never reconciled with him. Then did, and it didn't seem so hideous.

SS: But there were people who gave up, and then there were people who didn't give up. I mean, throughout the whole history of ACT UP, right?

CS: Well – suicide is in my family so it's just part of depression. And sometimes it makes sense. If you're really at the end of your life, and it's going to be hideous, well, why not?

SS: Why not?

CS: Yes.

SS: Yes. So you got into Protocol 16?

CS: Nineteen, I think –

SS: Nineteen.

CS: Yes.

SS: Okay. So how did you get in?

CS: You just went; you were just positive. It was at NYU.

SS: Okay, so can you just explain to everybody what it was like. Like, you walk in – it's at NYU Medical Center?

00:20:00 CS: Yes. Was it at Bellevue? I think it was conducted by NYU, but it was at Bellevue. Because you know, Bellevue – NYU is the attending staff at Bellevue. I passed out the first time when the blood was drawn, because I have fairly low blood sugar. I still can't watch my blood being drawn. But it was – I was in my twenties, so I had not really gone to doctors. Like most people in their twenties I had no other preexisting health conditions. So the idea of getting one's blood drawn every whatever it was eight weeks, sort of all the time just seemed weird.

SS: So what would happen? You'd walk in, they take your blood, and did they talk to you? Did you know –

CS: Oh yes.

SS: Tell us about it.

CS: Yes, it was Julie Fenesti, like I came to know the nurse –

SS: Um hm.

CS: – while I was doing it. And the doctor – it was a skinny guy who washed his hands a lot; generally very nice. And you got your little packet of drugs.

SS: And how much AZT were they giving you at the time?

CS: I'm oblivious. But I think I was on AZT, I wasn't on placebo.

SS: Do you remember how often you had to take it? Was it one of these like every-four-hour things, or –

CS: I think so, or four times a day. It was frequent.

SS: And how did it affect you?

CS: It sort of gave me a headache, but it wasn't overwhelming.

SS: And did it improve your bloods, or –

CS: I think so.

SS: You think so. Okay.

CS: I mean, I've been pretty healthy all the time. Diarrhea is the only thing that I've had that was really – and I think that was on one regime of medicine. But I've never been hospitalized for a physical condition.

SS: Great.

CS: Yes.

SS: But looking back, I mean, AZT was such a complicated story. And ACT UP never took a position on AZT. And at the time, I guess people thought it was going to save their lives. Maybe you thought that as well.

CS: I thought doing something is better than doing nothing. And that's my philosophy towards things. And that's not always a correct philosophy; sometimes doing nothing is better. But sometimes doing nothing isn't better. There were all these people, in the '80s, who were like alternative treatments, and the medicine is poison. And they died – the vast majority of them. So –

SS: What do you think was – did you ever have long discussions or arguments with people like Jon Greenberg, or those kinds of people?

CS: No. It's like people have to take their own bath. Actually, my best friend in high school was a Christian Scientist, so I think people can reject things. And there's certainly a lot to be said that people do more harm with drugs than are beneficial. But I believe in Western science. Because you say you believe in Western science, and

they go, well you know Mary Baker Eddy is from Boston, so they consider it science, too. I think it's –

SS: It's Christian Science.

CS: It's total nonsense. Apparently my grandmother was briefly, and my grandfather always referred to it as make-believe.

SS: So you're in this protocol. And then what were you doing in ACT UP? What were you working on?

CS: Just all the various different activism, whatever was there then.

SS: Okay, but help us. Because here we are, right? So let's try to be, like – yes. Think about it.

CS: Uh. There were so many issues. Just whatever –

SS: I mean, I remember you, and I remember you in the front of the room, and I remember you being very enthusiastic, and – I mean, it would be great if you could tell us like one project that you worked on, with some detail.

CS: You know, I just thought it was always important to get arrested, because a lot of people were afraid to be arrested through whatever– for job concerns, or just personal concerns. And also to just be publicly positive. Because in the '80s, people were much more fearful, not that people aren't fearful, or more privately oriented. It was very affirming, I don't know what silly words to use, to work with a group of people, and just to be even a cog in that. Do you know what I mean? Okay, maybe it was Gregg's idea or Mike's idea, or somebody else's idea. But just to be able to work with a cohesive group, to me was a good thing.

SS: Was there a particular project that you particularly enjoyed working on?

CS: Just the whole of it. Because I also like partisan politics. So I was active in Democratic politics, whether it was Tom Duane and Dinkins. The great disappointment, Dinkins.

SS: Right.

CS: But we thought it was a good thing, getting rid of Koch.

SS: Well, we have you on footage talking about bad conditions at NYU. Did you have friends who were there?

CS: My lover was there.

SS: Oh, Joey?

00:25:00 CS: Joey had his hernia done there. It was hideous. There were prisoners there; what I really remember is — just bells. Like a fire-alarm bell, just constantly going off. And no pillow cases. Just grungy. I mean, not, not like India. Not Third World. But really not what you would think for, I don't know, New York.

SS: So what was happening with Joey while you were in this protocol?

CS: He — well, Frankie died, who used to live upstairs, and was his ex. He died in '89. He did a couple of — he actually went to the Atlanta thing, in ACT UP.

SS: What was his last name?

CS: Covedo. He was Cuban. Franco Covedo. So I guess Joey really got — when did Joey start getting sick? More the end of the ACT UP period. Because he was at CHP, Community Health Project, which was also at the Center.

SS: What was Joey's experience? So were you involved in Frankie's illness, and caring for him?

CS: Oh yes.

SS: And what was that like, at the time, to have someone – was there any support at all, or did you have to discover everything?

CS: Franco did his own sort of healthcare. But he died pretty quickly. He died in '89; he died at Beth Israel. I actually gave him his last sip of water.

SS: And you were like twenty-...

CS: I was 29.

SS: Yes. So that's a lot, right? That's –

CS: Yes.

SS: That's very heavy.

CS: We had gone to London together. He was Cuban. All the Cubans, they could stay here, but they weren't – he eventually became a citizen, but he never got the papers. So, when we'd traveled to London he had some funny document, because you couldn't get a Cuban passport — because of course there's no relations with Cuba — but he wasn't yet a citizen.

SS: And was he angry?

CS: I think he was just fatalistic.

SS: Were you angry?

CS: I was angry at the lack of – that everything was such a struggle; that you have to get yourself on Medicaid to get healthcare. Whereas in Europe, you just get healthcare. You know? Why, in an industrialized country? Why anywhere? — does one

have to apply for services? You have to officially be broke. And there's no in-between. You can't just have \$30,000 and get healthcare. You have to have zero, and you have to go on food stamps, and welfare, and housing support. Otherwise, there's no – at the time, there was no way to buy your own insurance. It wasn't like your parents could just give you – okay, here's \$500 a month. Medicine is \$20,000 a year. That's just the insanity of it all.

SS: Yes. There was so much suffering. I mean, when you're in ACT UP – people who are trying to turn poison into medicine, right, through action. But nonetheless, it's a group of very young people, surrounded by incredible injustice, and seeing enormous suffering.

CS: And death. Like who expects – I remember Joey's 35th birthday. It was over there. I knew it would be his last birthday. My mother just died; she was, what, was she 84? I mean, it's sad when somebody 84 dies, and they're very sick. But they're 84; they're not 35. Who thought, as a Westerner, in the '90s, that I'd be facing death in my thirties? They were my contemporaries. Nothing in my life prepared me for that. If you look at the 19th century, yes, people died young. Whatever. My grandmother was the only one who survived – I think her mother was pregnant eight times, and she was the only one that lived. But that was the 1880s.

SS: Right.

CS: It was a different time.

SS: So when your boyfriend died, did people in ACT UP know about it?

CS: Yes.

SS: And were people present for you, or –

CS: My friends were, yes.

SS: They were. What did they do?

CS: Just came by. Like John and I put Joey to bed his last night.

SS: John who?

CS: John Donahue.

SS: Okay. All right, so he was in ACT UP.

CS: Yes.

SS: Yes.

CS: Neil Broome's friend.

SS: Okay. So I recall you as like a figure in ACT UP. I remember you doing all these things, and being in the front of the room. What kind of things did you work on? Did you work on demos, or did you work on getting certain protocols through, or –

00:30:00

CS: Demos. Actual getting stuff done – thinking of actions, supporting actions.

SS: Like what was an action that you thought of?

CS: An action I thought of. Just more participating in other people's actions. Because it seemed in ACT UP there were just so many ideas. There was a million things going on. Okay; let's stop discussing the 89 million possibilities, and just, if somebody has a reasonable idea, let's just go forward on it.

SS: So what was one of your favorites, that you thought was a really good idea?

CS: The things I remember – I thought attacking Koch was important, because I always thought Koch was just evil, politically. Both corrupt, and him being closeted. All that stuff was just appalling. I didn't realize he was – the police were of course much worse under Giuliani. He was such a peculiar figure.

SS: Was there a particular anti-Koch action that you –

CS: Well, I guess the Stephen J., Stephen Joseph – was that still Koch?

SS: Oh, that's Koch, yes.

CS: Just the idea that he, as a closeted gay man, wasn't out front. Just as somebody living in the Village. He must have had contemporaries who were dying. People that he worked with, or was friends with. You can't imagine he didn't.

SS: I guess he didn't care.

CS: He just wanted his little Catholic Church thing. I just always politically hated the right wing of the Catholic Church.

SS: So did you — speaking of the Catholic Church — were you involved in Stop the Church?

CS: I was outside. I didn't go in. Interesting, I was arrested when Ratzinger, who came to be pope, but at the time was – he went to Citicorp, which was a Protestant church, to speak. And I was arrested in that. And that was just a spontaneous thing.

SS: Who were you with?

CS: We just did it on the fly. It was Michael Signorile, it was Ortez. I was just, "Stop the violence!" – "No, let him speak, let him speak." But he speaks

English, but of course he's German. So his English – it's just this old man, who you can barely hear. That's probably my proudest arrest.

SS: Oh, okay. And what did you say? Stop the violence against –

CS: “Stop the violence against the gays,” because he was head of the Doctrine of the Faith, which is sort of number two in the hierarchy. And he said, nobody should be surprised at violence against homosexuals. So this tolerance of homophobia, coming from a leading official — of course, he came to be the pope, and really was quite a right-winger.

SS: And so they arrested you. Where did you go?

CS: I think just the police station. [Robert] Bork was there. I remember seeing Bork going in. So I was like, “Oh, these are all the real creeps of the Catholic Church. How dare a Protestant church, in some ecumenical attempt — of some vicious right-winger.” God knows what he was mumbling; I had no idea what he was actually saying. I don't think anybody did. It's this huge space, and he was just mumbling in his incredibly accented English. But it was this whole tribute to him.

SS: Well, you're bringing up something really interesting. One of the things, I think, that happened in ACT UP is that people started to feel that they could address the highest levels of power directly. And something has to happen inside you to feel like you can do that. But it's hard to explain to people what that thing is.

CS: I always loved heckling.

SS: Okay.

CS: Just spontaneously heckling. I heckled Kramer at the NYU thing.

SS: Wait, wait, wait. Slow down. What NYU thing?

CS: I don't know. Some NYU talk he was giving. It was at NYU Hospital, I think?

JAMES WENTZY: Was it Bellevue?

SS: Larry Kramer.

CS: I don't know. It was Bill Dobbs and – oh god, what's his name? Catholic, Jewish, what's his name? Jon Nalley. And I. Because you know, Larry Kramer had attacked Tom for being positive – and Robert, Rodger McFarlane.

SS: He attacked Tom Duane?

CS: Yes. Because he was – he was friends with Bella [Abzug], because he and Bella lived at 2 Fifth Avenue.

SS: Okay.

00:35:00 CS: So they were neighbors, and they'd been friends for a while. But Liz is a total idiot. And he – how many other people must he have known in the acting community who were positive, who hadn't publicly said they were positive? So why attack – Tom was just a district leader. And whatever; he was running for City Council. This is not – the public is not thinking, "Gee – who is positive who's running for City Council?"

SS: What year is this, when Liz Abzug ran against Tom?

CS: Ninety-one.

SS: Ninety-one. Okay. So you were –

CS: He lost in '89 to Greitzer.

SS: Um hm.

CS: And then, the Charter Reform; they redid the City Council in '91.

SS: So right in the middle of ACT UP, you went and heckled Larry Kramer; '91?

CS: Oh yes.

SS: Yes yes. Okay. And what did you say?

CS: I was just livid. How dare you attack somebody for being positive? And how many people did Rodger McFarlane – I mean, they're all theater people. How many people must have been positive? Did they out any of them? Did they do whisper —

SS: But why was he attacking Rodger McFarlane? I thought Rodger was his best friend?

CS: No, he wasn't attacking — both Rodger and Larry were attacking Tom —

SS: Oh, okay.

CS: – for not — why was he announcing it now, that he was positive.

SS: Oh.

CS: You know, he's doing it for political advantage, blah blah blah. But I think they were whispering that he was positive —

SS: What did you yell?

CS: Just hypocrisy. I was livid. Bill Dobbs – I just raised myself up on the chair. Heh. It's just nasty backbiting. Why attack somebody, just because you're supporting their creepy political opponent?

SS: I guess like now we're in a time when Larry is approaching the end of his life, and it's going to be very significant when he passes, right? Because we all have very complicated feelings about him.

CS: I was very touched to sit next to him at the reunion. I think he's a wonderful guy. But wonderful people do bad things, as well.

SS: And what do you think his legacy is – do you think it's going to be accurate, how he's remembered?

CS: I think it'll probably be a little idealized. But he's a really, he's a thinker, and an activist beyond whatever I know. Literary critic – but he pushes ideas, and most people are just so complacent about things.

SS: Now, did ACT UP ever do anything that you really disagreed with?

CS: No.

SS: No?

CS: I mean, like the Stop the Church thing, I do believe people have the right to their religion. But I believe people within the religion — like Tom, and all the people who were attacking the Catholic — they were Catholics. So from my religious upbringing, I certainly think you have a right to express opinion about your own religion. Would I go into a mosque or a synagogue and – I don't know. There are certainly synagogues and, I guess, mosques who I desperately disagree with their political positions, but I would do it on the outside.

SS: Right.

CS: I would say you're, whatever, misogynist, or homophobic, or corrupt. But I don't know if I would disrupt their service. But Catholics disrupting a service, that's fine. Because the Catholics were trying to disrupt what other people could do. Or the Catholic Church.

SS: Okay, well maybe we can tell the story through the history of the medications. Because you're in a early very protocol. You're taking AZT; I'm assuming it was a high dose AZT, probably, at the time.

CS: And I also thought it was important that if I was attacking the government for not providing drugs, that I should be part of the testing. It just made me feel better about my role.

SS: But also, you're in ACT UP, so you're helping create space for new drugs to be available. So where did you go from AZT? What was the next medication that you went to?

CS: I think – pretty sure I was on it for four years. I think it ended in '91. And then I was on nothing for awhile. And then Joey died in '94, and then all the protease inhibitors, Crixivan, or whatever it was called.

SS: So – okay, so how do you – how do you understand your own virus? Do you think that you had a weaker strain than Joey, or –

CS: I'm not really a scientist person. I'm more a history-politics person. So I think all that stuff's important; but my real – like I have feelings about it. Like I think – I like to think that being on the AZT stopped it from becoming worse. But is it just that I had less of the virus, or that my body reacted to it differently? I don't have the knowledge to know what the truth in any of that is. It's like, okay, you've become

positive, but are people infected with multiple viruses, multiple strands of the virus, and maybe I was just infected with Joey's strand, and Joey was infected with other things? Or is my individual chemistry stronger? I don't know. As I said, I'm really not a science person at all. So I don't –

SS: Right.

CS: I can read those articles, and not really – I'm a fairly smart guy, but I don't really understand, because I have no background in any of that stuff.

SS: So when ACT UP was involved in changing the CDC definition of AIDS, were you involved in that campaign?

CS: I was supportive of it. I don't remember a direct – I was certainly not doing research on any of that sort of stuff.

SS: All right. And did you have anything to do with anything related to needle exchange?

CS: Beyond going to demos for supporting it, no. I would say politically, I remember asking Fred Orenstein was a state senator who was indicted on corruption stuff, and very actively, I was the campaign chair of my Democratic club, supporting him. Joe Rose ran against him. And I asked Joe Rose: would you support needle exchange? And he said, no. So I was like, okay; I'm not sure about Fred, whether what he did was really ethical — I mean, it was deemed to be legal — but I don't want to elect somebody from the liberal part of Manhattan who doesn't support needle exchange. There's so little courage in politics.

SS: What was your Democratic club?

CS: Village Independent Democrats.

SS: Now did you agree with ACT UP not endorsing candidates?

CS: Yes.

SS: Okay.

CS: I think it's important, because candidates often make compromises, and why not get the support of people who are anarchist, or hate politics, who want to do direct action. Because so little is accomplished by electoral politics. I mean, I think it's still important, but also public pressure is. There are so many different things that create change. So the fact that you've elected, quote unquote, a liberal politician; well, maybe that accomplishes next to nothing.

SS: And what about when ACT UP went after Clinton during the primaries? Were you in favor of that?

CS: I think it had a better – he responded favorably to it. I think it had a good impact. So even though I didn't necessarily agree with the – I mean, I'm a big believer if one politician is better than another, you support the person that's better.

SS: Okay.

CS: But you still have to accept the person that's better is doing bad things. Like Obama is still keeping the prison open in Cuba, and just all manner of civil rights violations, does that mean that I regret voting for him? No, not at all. Because I think Romney or McCain would have been even worse. But Obama and everybody else still need to be attacked when they do bad things.

SS: But when Clinton was elected, it really affected the whole AIDS infrastructure, right? Because people started to move more into the Democratic Party, you start to see AIDS bureaucracies.

CS: Well, ACT UP sort of collapsed.

SS: Do you think there was a direct relationship?

CS: Yes. Because I think people wanted – there was somewhere for them to go. And it wasn't like, well, they're not even saying the word. It's so funny; Clinton said "gay and lesbian," or something, at his acceptance speech. And that was such a big deal at the time. And I don't think the Republicans have said that yet. I don't think Romney or McCain have said "gay and lesbian," period. Any sort of mainline thing, stuff that was done in the Democratic Party 20 years ago. Which is like, all they're saying is "gay and lesbian." But just the mere annunciation of the word.

So, because it had been Reagan and Bush, who had just been so incredibly awful, that now there was a mainstream thing for people to go into. And they were bought off. They went into whatever.

SS: But how come they couldn't see that that was going to happen?

CS: It happens, it's just the natural course of history, I think. Yes, it would have been great to keep ACT UP as a permanent thing, and it still exists in some form. But, you know, that was a lot of energy to maintain that. And it was really maintained for a very long time.

00:45:00 And it inspired people in other places. That's the whole weird thing about living in New York; you don't realize how people in Paris, or people in Chicago, or other parts of the world — you just think about your little neck of the woods; and that actually, everybody's watching us, because we're a real media center. Everybody reads the *Times*.

SS: Right. When did you leave ACT UP?

CS: I guess early '90s. I would go – I remember going back for something. But I forget. Early '90s; I don't really –

SS: Do you remember why you left?

CS: It was just too many meetings. It didn't seem to be going forward. And it was just smaller.

SS: And why did that happen, do you think? What was the cause of the split?

CS: I think just natural — like, how long can things run on?

SS: Right.

CS: It was amazing that it had its incredible energy when it did. And also, people started living. By '94 – Joey died in spring of '94, and that was really — there was that middle time when the treatments became effective. It's not that nobody dies of AIDS, but it's really, it's a very different thing.

I was told when I tested positive: “Well, you know, you could live five to 10 years.” That was '87; Joey died in '94. But I wasn't thinking – I didn't think I'd be in my fifties and healthy.

SS: Right.

CS: Not simply, “Oh, gee, I'm in my fifties,” that I'm running around doing stuff; I can – whatever, like a normal, flabby 50-year-old.

SS: Were you involved in the social life of ACT UP? Did you go out after meetings –

CS: Oh yes. That was the whole – those are my friends. I'm not a super-social person, and my friends are really ACT UP friends. I don't really – I'm friendly

enough with people at work. But my friends are ACT UP friends. Those are still my friends. And I wasn't really that, well, I would do stuff with Joey, clubby stuff. But – beyond friends in England, those are really my friends – my New York friends.

SS: So when you left ACT UP, you didn't feel like you were leaving your friends behind.

CS: Not at all. Not at all. I mean, John Donahue is my best – do you know what I mean? –

SS: Yes.

CS: My friends are really all through ACT UP. I can't think of people I know who aren't ACT UP friends.

SS: Let me ask you something else.

CS: Beyond my boyfriend. He wasn't in ACT UP.

SS: Right.

CS: But I knew him – oh no, no, that's right.

SS: We've interviewed a lot of people who've had significant crystal meth problems since they left ACT UP, or who seroconverted very late, like in their late forties or fifties. It's kind of this delayed reaction. How do you understand the big picture of the consequences of living through the epicenter of AIDS, and then actually living; and then it catches up with you in some way?

CS: Well, part of me is bitter, a little vindictive, towards those people, to be blunt. I became positive in my twenties, when I had no concept of what it was. Intellectually, I can understand how people, whatever – it's hard to use condoms forever. But emotionally, I don't get it. Part of it's I'm a very non-addictive person. I can use

ecstasy, or drugs, and have fun with them, and then not touch them for a year or 10 years or whatever. I don't have this desire to go beyond. Whereas other people are very addictive: my father was an alcoholic; his father was an alcoholic; his sister was an alcoholic.

I understand it's part of life, but it's not part of my personal makeup. I know people who have had crystal meth problems in mid-life, and it's just – I don't know. I've seen it within my family and within others, but it's hard. My brother-in-law died from a heroin overdose when I was 11, so I've always been aware that this is something that occurs. But seroconverting late in life; I am still – part of me is kind of mad at those people. And even people in their twenties who aren't being abused. I don't know. I consider myself responsible, and I, intellectually, I understand it. But I still think, "Why?" Why? I just – I would personally avoid it at all costs. Whether it would be in – making sure the other person was negative, or just practicing sex that just wouldn't involve any risk.

00:50:00

SS: Well, you gave four or five years of your life to ACT UP. How do you feel about that time now?

CS: Incredibly proud that I did it. I'm really glad I did it. I think part of it's just — I was capable of doing it. Not everybody – do you know what I mean? Other people are more creeped-out by the police, with good reason. Whereas I never felt that I would – I always thought it would be limited. Because it wasn't until, actually, the Matthew Shepard arrest, which was, of course, totally after ACT UP, that I was put through the system overnight, that I spent a night in jail. You're just waiting to be

processed, because they put you before the judge. And also being able to be publicly positive. That's not something everybody – whatever, it's no big deal —

SS: Right.

CS: But it was a bigger deal in the '80s. And people weren't capable of doing it, and people – if you can't do it in New York; if kids were being burned in Florida, burned out of their houses; we've got to be publicly positive in Manhattan. This has to be the left of the country. So if you're not willing to be a little bit brave in a safer environment, what the hell – you know, I grew up in Virginia, I grew up in a very conservative environment. So I know those people can't take risks. So we need to take risks here. And that's the way I felt.

SS: Okay, I only have more question.

CS: Sure.

SS: Is there anything else you can tell me before I ask you the last question? Any memory, any detail?

CS: That I really loved the people in ACT UP.

SS: Yes.

CS: That was really the main motivation for doing it, is there were really smart people who were really interesting people, who I loved spending time with. Even people who I couldn't tell you their names, who I had good conversations with.

JIM HUBBARD: – A question about Target City Hall. Did you know Phil Zwickler?

CS: Yes. Oh yes.

JH: So he didn't just come up to you, and stick a mic –

CS: No, we would chat at ACT UP. I'm still sad that people are dead. Do you know what I mean? I do trainings for the Board of Elections, so I'd always say the name "Robert Garcia" – because he was arrested. And they were like, "Oh, there's an outstanding warrant for Robert Garcia." "Oh, which one?" "Oh, I don't know; we don't have a date of birth."

Well, of course there are thousands of Robert Garcias! Just because it's a popular name.

And then I was like, "oh, he died in '93," or something. "It was somebody I knew then." I'm still sad that people are, you know, I still miss those people.

SS: Right. James?

JAMES WENTZY: Did you see that other documentary, *How to Survive a Plague*? I hate that title. Did you see the David France thing? The movie?

CS: No.

JW: I was just curious. Because he used some footage that I had shot in '91, with Kramer starting a speech after maybe 10 or 15 minutes of lewd behavior in the background. He finally started a speech, and, you know – "Plague, plague! Forty million people, it's a fucking plague! And you behave like this? Helping the city!"

SS: What, you think that Charles was at that?

JW: Yes. He would have had –

JH: Well that's the speech —

SS: Oh!

JW: – speech he gave after the – David France would use that footage, with an intercut of an ACT UP meeting response, like Larry Kramer was talking in front of an ACT UP meeting. But of course he wasn't. But –

CS: No –

SS: So is there footage of Charles heckling –

JW: Yes, you bet.

SS: – Larry Kramer? Oh, we have that footage. Oh, great. Okay.

CS: What was it, the *Native*? Remember, there was that weird gay paper –

SS: Yes, the *Native*.

CS: Yes. I think they quoted Bill Dobbs, but it's actually me shouting.

We were sitting next to each other, and we were very dear friends.

SS: Okay. So my final question is, just looking back, what do you consider to be ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

00:55:00 CS: Greatest achievement was really helping people with AIDS. Even those who died were able to make such a significant contributions. Whether it was Bob Rafsky – just all those – just getting to know wonderful people, and interact with great people. And it really did move things. We really did change things, even if people – in very tangible ways.

SS: And what was the biggest disappointment?

CS: I guess people kind of sold out a little, for pharmaceuticals. They became part of other organizations. Which maybe were beneficial. I mean, I am

certainly a consumer of pharmaceuticals. But the people could have been a little less compromised.

SS: Do you think they gave anything up when they did that?

CS: It's just change. It's just change. Things aren't all in a straight line.

One can't just be an activist 24/7 forever. Things go in patterns.

SS: Okay, thank you, Charles.

CS: Thank you.

SS: Thank you.

CS: Did you ever talk to Mike Frisch?

SS: Not yet, no.

CS: Okay.