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Interviewee: **Polly Thistlethwaite**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Polly Thistlethwaite
January 6, 2013

SARAH SCHULMAN: Ok. So you look at me not at the camera.

POLLY THISTLETHWAITE: Alright, Sarah. Of course.

SS: So you start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

PT: My name is Polly Thistlethwaite, and today is January 6th, 2013, and we're in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, in my apartment.

SS: And how old are you?

PT: Oh, yes. I'm fifty-two.

SS: Right. Younger than me.

PT: Just a little bit. Always will be just a smidge.

SS: That's right. So where did you grow up, Polly?

PT: I grew up in Decatur, Illinois, which is a town when I grew up it was about 90,000 population, and it's between Urbana-Champaign and Springfield.

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

PT: Yes, both my parents were born and raised in or around there.

SS: So when you have those kind of roots, in an area, was that accompanied by some kind of value about community or responsibility to other people?

PT: Yes. My parents were both very community-minded. My dad's a high school teacher. My mom's an elementary school teacher. My dad was a very anti-war liberal Democrat, pro-feminist, pro-integration. It was my fourth-grade or third-

grade class that was the first integrated class in Decatur, Illinois, sometime in the seventies.

SS: Were they involved in organizations?

PT: They met in the Methodist Church Youth Group, Grace United Methodist Church, and they were active in the church, not terribly active when I was growing up. Dad was a president of the Decatur Education Association in 1971 when there was a teachers' strike, and it was a long and very difficult strike. It was about two months long, and he led the organization and caught a lot of flak for it.

The strike was mostly about pay, and — strikes like this were going on all over the country around that time — but it was about how much power the school board had and how much power the teachers had. The school board had exercised excessive power, the teachers thought, and so they struck, not only for pay and working conditions, but also because of the exercise of control over their employment. So, finally settled and went back.

Dad and Mom, over the course of their lives, they went from being Methodist Church members to Universalist Unitarians. Now, of course, they progressed left, and they're still very active with their Universalist Unitarian group.

SS: So did you grow up in the Unitarian Church?

PT: No, I grew up in the Methodist Church.

SS: So when did you start to become politicized or to behave in a political way?

PT: Well, I was aware of the kind of disputes that were going on in 1971, and although Mom and Dad didn't bring me to the picket lines, I saw them and I was

around. Probably somebody else was watching us while they were picketing, so I was aware of that kind of work and sort of participated in it. I licked envelopes and put stamps on things and did that kind of work for them.

But then I went to college in Urbana-Champaign down the highway a bit, and I think the first protest I was involved in was about the raising the drinking age from eighteen to twenty-one. I was firmly against that.

SS: You were?

PT: Yes, I was.

SS: Why?

PT: Well, because I was twenty or so. Yes, it seemed like a really bad idea.

SS: There were enough people against that to have a demonstration?

PT: Yes.

SS: That's interesting.

00:05:00 PT: Probably twenty. I remember twenty marching down Greg Avenue towards the bars on a Friday afternoon. But there's a little picture that somebody took of me. I have a fist raised or something. It's really goofy.

SS: Wow. So you started out in temperance.

PT: Yes, anti-temperance, right. Then — let's see. Well, then I got my degree in Anthropology - an undergrad degree is '82, with which I could do very little. So I jumped into kind of a part-time situation in grad school at the University of Illinois in communications, and I worked in the communications library there - that year, and I

was the periodicals clerk. I checked in magazines and newspapers when they came in. It was a journalism program, so I check in newspapers from all over the place.

So I read the newspapers. I liked that. I kind of found out a little bit more about the world around me that way and started to kind of — I didn't like the clerical work so much, but the whole library community was very pro-education, pro-freedom to read, anti-censorship, and I got a feeling for that kind of politic.

Then, instead of continuing in that graduate program, I bailed, and with the encouragement of some of the librarians I was working with, I went to library school, and it was a quick master's degree. It only took a year and two summers to finish.

SS: At U of I?

PT: U of I. It was the Melvil Dewey School, the largest library nowhere near a major city. They used the Dewey Decimal System there, like nobody else does, the 300s. Melvil Dewey didn't anticipate the rise of the social sciences, so the 300s get really, really long after the decimal.

So, I went to library school and worked in the library, worked in the main part of the library, the main stack. I was the head of the circulation department in the main University of Illinois library, and as the night manager, which I was, essentially, I had access to all of the caged parts. It's usually that if you were requesting some book that was off limits, you had to go and find it and then request it, but with a key, I could just go and browse and see all of the books off limits, which was great fun. So they ranged from naughty sexual porn from across the ages to nuclear engineering stuff, to home bomb-making, and all kinds of different things that somebody at some point thought was appropriate to put in a cage.

So I kind of became politicized through experiencing, exploring the ways that people did and didn't have access to information. I was the gatekeeper, I was the mediator for that, and became very conscious of mediating certain things. Problems would come to me. If somebody didn't return a book, it would come to me. If somebody wanted to go into the stack, into the forbidden area, I had to mediate that.

SS: Do you think that there are books that should not be in circulation?

PT: No, I really don't.

SS: Now, where were you in your little queer self at that point? Because librarian is historically a queer profession, right?

PT: Yes.

SS: It's the first gay professional organization.

PT: Very good, Sarah, yes, it's the first professional — well, yeah, the first professional little subgroup was in the American Library Association. Barbara Gittings founded that in the early seventies, I think.

So my little queer self, well, you know, just look at me. I was a tomboy kid growing up, but then I had a little social breakthrough and I actually had longer hair and I had a boyfriend, boyfriends, and I was Homecoming junior attendant. That was the peak of my high school popularity. I was the junior attendant. Didn't run for senior attendant because I wanted to give the other girls a chance.

SS: That was very feminist of you.

PT: I know. I was very community-minded, "give everybody a chance."

So I did have that little kind of gender twist, but then got to college and then in my

00:10:00 — freshman rhetoric class fell hard for a really interesting girl from — where was she from — Evanston, right outside Chicago.

SS: Ah, a rich girl.

PT: Yes, she had a big house, a Tudor house and really interesting, estranged family. But I got to go to Chicago a lot.

We were all very closety, and I lost a lot of friends because I was afraid of the shame that not only would I bring on to myself but to my family, and so I didn't say much about it for a while. But then I broke up with her and then I became involved with Pat Stanley, who is the finest fly-half of my generation. She's a rugby player. And through her I became involved in the entire — oh, I'm skipping a girlfriend, but that's okay. I'll go back to her.

But Pat's social circle was the Chicago Women's Rugby team, and that was just — it was like running around with the Michigan Women's Festival completely attached to you as a cloud. They were just wild. They were butchy, loud-mouthed, they smoked and played rugby, they drank incessantly, and they were smart and valued each other, very community-minded, the rugby players.

So with Pat I attended a lot of rugby games and rugby tournaments, and all of them involved this huge display of sexual audacity. You know, the game itself is people running around and knocking other women down and tackling them and climbing on top of them. I mean, it's a very physical, sexual, I think, game, and just the whole scene was a trip, wonderful, fun. I never played rugby, but I sure did enjoy the rugby team.

SS: Did you start to take in that there was this larger gay community or lesbian community?

PT: Slowly that was sinking into my midwestern mind. You know, still it was hard for me to imagine outside the flat states.

SS: But Chicago had an incredibly complicated lesbian community that was pretty deep.

PT: Yes, yes, and my best knowledge of it is through these rugby players, but most of them had lived there their whole lives. But I spent a lot of time at the Swan Club. Did you ever go to that?

SS: No.

PT: Paris Dance was this happening little bar. It's a very segregated town after hours. C.K. and Augie's was —

SS: C.K., Augie's, I remember that. That's right.

PT: C.K. and Augie's was — yes. So we floated around those places. The Swan Club we called the Swan Dive, was like a little, one-rail bar, and the Paris Dance was a big disco, as was C.K. and Augie's.

SS: Now, can we have a little Chicago bar discussion for a second?

PT: Mm-hmm.

SS: Did you know Marilyn's?

PT: No.

SS: The Gold Coast?

PT: Hm-mm.

SS: The Bistro?

PT: Nope.

SS: His and Hers?

PT: Nope.

SS: How weird. Okay.

PT: No, I just had a little slice of it.

SS: We were there at the same time, but we just had —

PT: You were there?

SS: I was there from '76 to '79.

PT: Now, that's earlier than me.

SS: Oh, okay, because you're younger.

PT: Don't forget that. I'm just a little bit younger than you are, and, no, the scene changed a little bit. I graduated from high school in '78, and so probably wouldn't have hit those bars until '80 — wait. She wasn't the first girlfriend. So, '82, maybe, '81, '80, '81. The names sound familiar to me, but I never did go there. What part of town?

SS: I went to U of C. That's why.

PT: Oh.

SS: Anyway, but we're talking about you.

PT: Right.

SS: So you're sitting in the library and you're reading all the periodicals and it's 1982. And are you getting any gay periodicals? Did the library collect at that time?

PT: No, we did not get gay periodicals there in the communications library, but the girlfriend that I failed to mention earlier was upstairs in the Women's Studies Program, and they did obtain some queer periodicals there in the Women's Studies Program. So I was reading *WomaNews*, and I remember you were a primary contributor to that rag, Sarah.

SS: That's right.

00:15:00

PT: Thank you very much.

SS: Sure.

PT: Had a broad reach to the Midwest. I was reading *Gay Community News* and even the *Body Politic*. Those were the more left-leaning publications of the time, right?

SS: Right. Did you get *Off Our Backs*?

PT: Oh, yes, *Off Our Backs* and *Sinister Wisdom* and *Lesbian News*.

SS: There was also *Big Mama Rag* —

PT: *Big Mama Rag*.

SS: — from Denver. Now, what were the Chicago papers, though?

PT: *Windy City Times*.

SS: Really, at that time? Okay.

PT: I think so.

SS: So that Women's Studies Program, that was a brand-new program.

PT: Yes. I remember Berenice Fisher was running it, and my girlfriend at the time was Susan Bandera. She was like the office assistant, office manager.

SS: So when did you come to New York?

PT: Let's see. After library school, then my first job — I don't know. I just got really, really lucky, and Yale University hired me. I know. Why? I had no experience. I guess they wanted a young impressionable person with good grades. That was me. So I moved out to New Haven.

SS: Were you involved in the gay community there?

PT: In New Haven, not really. Susan and I moved out there together, and the clerical union struck at that time, and if I had not crossed the picket lines, I would have lost my job, so I was crossing picket lines. It was a very difficult strike, and I felt — I didn't socialize a heck of a lot around that time. It was difficult, and it was not a good time. And I was doing a controversial act about which I had no pride, so I didn't walk around too much with that. But I did make a few lesbian friends there, mostly from the library, mostly through the library. I think Jodie Foster had just left when I got there, but there were still buzz around that.

SS: So that's like '84, right? Is that where we are now in the story?

PT: Yes, '84. You're good, Sarah.

SS: That's why I get the big bucks.

PT: Eighty-four, and so I was at Yale, and I was at Yale for about eighteen months, and then there was a job opening at New York University, and I was eager to escape New Haven, Connecticut. So I landed the job at NYU. In '86 I started.

SS: At Fales?

PT: In the Bobst Library.

SS: Bobst Library, okay. Now, okay, so you moved to New York. Up to this point, what was your awareness of AIDS?

PT: I had very little awareness up to that point about AIDS. You know, my dad was a biology teacher in high school, science teacher, and my grandmother was a registered nurse, so we always had a lot of medical discussion and biology discussions around the table, so I think I was probably talking to him about the epidemic and the strangeness of the epidemic before anybody else, before anybody else in the queer community.

But when I came to New York, then I was working. I immediately began working with the Lesbian Herstory Archives in '86. I had heard about it, I think even when I was in college at the University of Illinois. I think that I saw this little postcard. I have a picture of it now, but it's this postcard of Deb Edel leaning up against a car.

SS: Oh, right. I know that one.

PT: My memory is fuzzy. I think I saw that in the Urbana-Champaign bookstore, when I first made note of it. But the rugby team could have had it on their refrigerator. I don't know. Any number of ways.

SS: I think it's Morgan Grenwald who took that photograph.

PT: It is.

SS: That's right.

00:20:00

PT: Yes, it is. So I was interested in that. And I was living alone. I was commuting back and forth to New Haven to see the girl on the weekends, but the Lesbian Herstory Archives had Thursday night volunteer nights, so I did that for years and years.

I found a number of the archives and I called. They didn't have their address public. It was in Joan Nestle's apartment, so it was like this secret thing you had to call.

So I called the number and left a voice mail on the answering machine, and I remember coming in from work at NYU one time and turning on the answering machine, and there's Joan Nestle, and she was just cracking up, because my name was so funny to her. She'd never heard of a name like this, so she was cracking up, saying, "Polly Thistle Whistle, you betcha. Come to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. We will whistle your thistle," or whatever she was doing. She was just being so goofy.

So I thought, "Well, I'll bet you this is a good time." So I went up there the next Thursday night. So while I was working at the archives, I met the group of people there: Joan Nestle, Maxine Wolfe, Deb Edel, Judith Schwarz. Mabel Hampton was living in or around the apartment at that point. Golly, who was the woman who owned *WomanBooks*?

SS: Karen.

PT: Karen, tall, good-looking woman. Irare Sabasu was up there. Paula Grant. So I started hanging around with them, hearing their opinions. I think that there had just been some effort to close the baths that Joan was involved in resisting, and there was in very close proximity to the time I got there, this whole kind of series of stories about the sex wars. So while we were checking in periodicals there, I heard all about, "And then I got up and said this. And "can you believe what Sheila Jeffreys just wrote?" So there was just a lot of political talk around the periodicals table, and I think that's where I got the most of my queer political education, is from that place.

SS: So what made you decide to go to ACT UP?

PT: Well, Maxine Wolfe was one of those people around the table talking politics, and she, I think, started to go to ACT UP, like, right off the bat, like in '87 or so, but I had been hearing about it from her. And then when was the Shea Stadium? Eighty-eight?

JH: May of '88.

PT: Eighty-eight. That was was the first time I went to a demonstration. That was at her invitation, and I have the —

SS: Let's see.

PT: You want to see this thing?

SS: We want to see everything you have.

PT: No, you don't, because it's really too much. But look at this. I have this note from Max on the Shea Stadium thing. It says, "Hi, Polly. I sat you in the section I'm in. This should be fun. We have three sections now. See you next week for lunch."

SS: You saved that.

PT: Well, I just put it like that. But isn't that cool?

SS: Yes.

PT: But then there's another one that —

SS: On this really crappily-made hand-scrawled flyer. It was clearly typed.

PT: Yes, and mimeographed, even, maybe. No, it was probably Xeroxed, huh? "Questions? Call Maxine or Rebecca." It's probably Maxine's number she still has.

SS: Right.

PT: Oh, so what to wear. “Shea Stadium can be cold. Don’t bring drugs. You can bring food. You have to buy beer there.” You know, very practical advice.

And then here’s this thing that we got when we went there. It was kind of information that you need to know, like, during the first half of the third inning, this message, we’re going to roll out these banners. Don’t Balk At Safer Sex. AIDS Kills Women. Men Use Condoms. No Glove No Love. I loved that one. Strike Out AIDS. Silence = Death. So it was incredibly beautifully organized.

00:25:00 So then when we got there, I think I worked with Illith Rosenblum to hand stuff out, outside the stadium. We weren’t quite sure we could do that, but we did, and Illith and I are both friendly sorts, so we didn’t get much guff.

Then we sat down and unfurled these banners at designated times, and we had enough money invested in buying these sections that we could get stuff on that ticker. I can’t remember what was on the ticker, but it was crazy. I think it was “Men Use Condoms or Beat It.” Wasn’t that like a slogan?

So that goes up in Shea Stadium, and instead of hostility, which we halfway anticipated, the place was just up for grabs. I think everybody was just getting the biggest kick out of it, and they loved it. So there was no hostility. People were raising their glasses to us in this section. I felt like it was, despite its risk, leaving the gay ghetto, leaving the Village and going to Shea fucking Stadium, it was really successful. It was a lot of fun and very effective demonstration.

SS: It also was an interesting action because it’s aimed at men to help women.

PT: Right, right, like all of the advertising for condoms had been, like, women should buy condoms and women should be the ones responsible for managing the condom, but this was definitely directed at men who should be taking responsibility for the condoms or beating it or losing it, yes. So it was a great shift of focus there. Perfect. Beautiful, beautiful political thinking.

SS: So after that action, did you go to a meeting? You went to a Monday night meeting?

PT: I started — I was kind of in and out at that point. I think I was — I don't know. I was a little bit slow to start up. I was doing other things like I showed up at an American Library Association Feminist Task Force meeting wearing my leather jacket, and they immediately put me in charge of the Feminist Task Force. So I was in charge of the Feminist Task Force from, like, '86 to '88, and then I worked with the Gay Task Force and the Gay Book Award, you'll remember, in the eighties. So I was doing a bunch of stuff.

I wasn't the kind of ACT UP member who gave my whole life and soul to ACT UP, though I loved ACT UP. I was always doing a bunch of stuff and managing whatever girlfriend I was managing at the time, too, so often out of town. So I was doing a lot of different things, always working at the archives and always with a full-time job.

I joined this little band at the WOW Café. I got together with Betsy Crenshaw - another librarian – who started this band. She was actually a really good musician, and the rest of us — and Harriet Hirshorn was in the band. She was also a good musician. But they put us together, and we were this little country band, and we

would do cover hits from K.D. Laing and such. So I was always doing a bunch of stuff. I was just going crazy in New York, kind of trying to experience everything that I could.

SS: So how did you get involved in the book?

PT: Well, I didn't go to the FDA action, but that's when I started going to Monday night meetings, was around the FDA action. I remember kind of being bummed out that I didn't feel I had a group to work with at the FDA, so I started going to the Monday night meetings. And about that time, I believe the Women's Caucus formed the idea of doing a teach-in, primarily because we felt like we had issues to push that our male colleagues weren't so informed about these issues.

SS: Can you back up a little bit and explain what the Women's Caucus was and how it got started?

PT: You know, I'm not sure how it got started, Sarah. It was something that I just sort of landed in.

SS: Who else was in it when you came in?

00:30:00

PT: Maxine, Maria Maggenti, Heidi Dorow may have just have been started around that time, Gerri Wells, Brigitte Weil, Illith Rosenblum, give or take, Liz Tracey, Sydney —

SS: Pokorny.

PT: — Pokorny. Zoe Leonard.

SS: And where did you guys meet?

PT: We met — sometimes we met during the meeting or after the Monday night meeting, but we would meet separately, and a couple of times we had it at my little NYU-subsidized apartment in Washington Square Village. Usually it was in Manhattan.

I don't think we went to Max's very much because it was too far away in Brooklyn. We met at Brigitte's house, and I loved going to Brigitte's house because she is a hell of a cook, and she made such exotic foods as — oh, god, I can't remember — gazpacho during the summer. I'd never had gazpacho. So good. So it was great. We met at Zoe's once or twice, I think, down in the Lower East Side.

SS: So why was there a Women's Caucus? So you're saying that you had an agenda that you wanted to raise in ACT UP?

PT: Marion Banzhaf and Risa Denenberg were key members of the Women's Caucus, and I think that their work, Risa's work in particular with HIV-positive women, and Marion and Risa's experience with the Feminist Women's Health Centers in — was it Tallahassee?

SS: Mm-hmm.

PT: Was helping the women get an idea that HIV was present in certain communities of women, and we thought that it was important for ACT UP to understand, if not understand and embrace, issues of HIV as they manifested and impacted women. So that's why we decided to have the teach-in.

Now, the caucus itself predated my arrival, so I can't exactly tell you who and how formed it, and it was fluid during the time that I was there, so people came and went and worked for a while with the group. My affiliation with it was almost exclusively around the creation of this teach-in and the handbook and then the subsequent publication of this *Women, AIDS, and Activism* book. I think the teach-in was in — golly, when was that? In eighty —

JH: March of '89.

PT: Jim, you're good. March of '89, and this didn't come out until '90, like, late in '90.

SS: So start with the teach-in. What did you prepare for the teach-in?

PT: I prepared the bibliography for the teach-in. One thing, I had that job at NYU, and libraries in New York, unlike those in the Midwest, are usually closed, like you have to be affiliated with the university in order to get into it. I got people into the library to do certain kinds of research. Not everybody in ACT UP was doing work at NYU, but I worked with a lot of people doing a lot of different kinds of work, medical and legal research. But I was able to really work with a lot of the women doing research for the handbook, so that was really rewarding to me.

SS: When you did this bibliography, how much literature was there?

PT: Not a hell of a lot.

SS: Do you have it? Is that the bibliography?

PT: Yes, I think I do. This was probably about it.

SS: Was it just articles? There were no books, right? There had been no medical studies.

00:35:00

PT: No, but we're citing, of course, Pat Califia, *Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*. Naturally we're citing books. And we had Chris Norwood's *Advice for Life*. I think that was a book at that point in '87. Cindy Patton's *Sex and Germs* came out in '85.

SS: Okay. She actually knew something.

PT: Diane Richardson's *Women and the AIDS Crisis*, that got a pan. So this is an annotated bibliography, Sarah, so I read and then presented, and my annotations were often supplemented by my colleagues in the Women's Caucus.

SS: One of the problems in the day was that there was no scientific research, right? Wasn't that one of the issues that Women's Caucus was pushing for? Because women were excluded from experimental drug trials.

PT: Yes.

SS: There was no medical data, so all you had were these social science books, right?

PT: Yes. We have the *JAMA* citation, "HIV Virus in Women." It's in response to this Glennon and Hardy. God, these names are — so it was just a little bit, but, yes, it's a brief — if it's a fifty-item bibliography and several of the items are witches, midwives, and healers and Pat Califia's oeuvre, then that's the kind of literature that we were working with.

SS: There's almost nothing. Now, how did this become the issue that you guys decided to grapple with? Were there women with AIDS that you were working with or who were informants on some level?

PT: Yes. In my files, too, I think I have a couple of letters from HIV-positive women.

SS: Can you share that with us?

PT: I think they'd be confidential.

SS: Are they dead?

PT: I don't know. I don't know who they are. I'd show you off camera.

How about that?

SS: Okay. Okay.

PT: I remember listening very closely to Risa Denenberg and the kind of work that she was doing. She was doing gynecological exams on women who were — I think she worked in the Bronx, right, in Bronx Lebanon or something?

SS: I don't remember.

PT: But she and Rebecca Cole had — she's a nurse, too, right?

SS: No, she worked at the AIDS Hotline.

PT: She worked at the AIDS Hotline. So their firsthand experience influenced the thinking of a lot of people in the Women's Caucus.

There were a couple of women once who came to the group who were a couple. One was HIV-positive, and they had been seeking treatment at St. Vincent's, and the non-HIV-positive woman couldn't be with the HIV-positive woman. So we had their testimony and their input for a little while. But most of the information came from the people who were working in healthcare at some point.

I also had another friend, other friends who weren't working with ACT UP directly, who were working in healthcare, we were getting incidental reports from. Efat Azizi was doing some medical work there at that time.

SS: So, in other words, the motive for the Women's Caucus to push issues of women with HIV in ACT UP came entirely from lived experience and anecdotal information. In other words, you created this as an issue. This was not something that was being covered in the newspapers.

PT: No.

SS: ACT UP generated this.

PT: Yes.

SS: Okay, great.

00:40:00 PT: I should have said it more clearly, huh? Yes, it wasn't something that was — AIDS was barely being covered in the mainstream press, and the gay press was covering it in this very — the gay press was reflecting the distress and the damage it was doing to the communities, to people's lives and political communities and social groups. Yes, there was no scientific coverage. There wasn't much policy. There wasn't much being done at all on any level of government or in medical research. So, we were choosing to identify and push those issues.

SS: So how did ACT UP respond to the teach-in?

PT: I think the Women and AIDS teach-in, if it wasn't the first, it was one of the earliest teach-ins. I remember that the response to this handbook that we had made was really overwhelmingly positive. We were getting requests from around the country and within the group. Everybody wanted a copy of this handbook.

SS: How did people hear about it?

PT: Word of mouth, I suppose, maybe. I don't know. Maybe some queer cable show picked it up. I don't know. I think it was word of mouth, though. There was some coverage about the teach-in in *Gay Community News*, in some of the gay press.

So I had access to a Xerox machine, so I was doing a lot of the Xeroxing, so I know I can tell you firsthand I was doing some white-collar crime there, with some illicit Xeroxing going on and mailing as well. So there was a big demand for it.

The teach-in itself, I think we had it two times, two nights, a Saturday and a weekday, but I can't remember. I just remember the Saturday event being hugely crowded, and I learned a lot during the creation of the teach-in and during the presentations itself. I learned a huge amount.

The funniest story I have about it is I was getting ready to present. I gave one of the tail presentations about the bibliography, and I was kind of tracing the feminist health literature and connecting it to the healthcare crisis we were facing now. We thought that it was important to do some education about the gynecology of females, because our brethren had very possibly not so much experience with female genitalia. So at one point, I don't know if it was a joke or not, I heard somebody — somebody came up and said, "Larry Kramer just said, 'Oh, that's where the clit is.'"

SS: Right. It was at that level.

PT: Sorry, Larry. It was that level. Really? Oh, my god. Can't you imagine them camping it up in the back too? I can. So I really don't know.

SS: Given that historically gay men had very little interest in women in any regard, why did so many men in ACT UP come to this teach-in?

PT: Well, I think that — you know, I don't know, Sarah. That's a good question. I think that the Women's Caucus had a good deal of influence at that point. We — many of the political leaders in ACT UP were based in the Women's Caucus: Maxine, certainly Marion, and —

SS: Maria.

PT: — Maria, Ann [Northrop]. There was high expectation that this would be not just sort of in a parental kind of way, but I think that lesbian political

sensibilities were driving a certain part of the organization and driving the leadership of the organization.

The Women's Caucus was fairly like-minded over the years that I worked with it. I remember people came and went, but we were all sort of a similar political sensibility. Garance [Franke-Ruta], who was an incredible researcher, I worked with her early in her exploration of medical stuff, but she was an incredible researcher, but she never attached to or worked with the Women's Caucus so much. I'm not exactly sure why that was. Iris Long never worked with the Women's Caucus. So, there were different sensibilities among women in ACT UP, but the politics, the lesbian sensibilities, lesbian political sensibilities located in that caucus had a lot of sway.

SS: So this is the precursor to the CDC campaign, and so you guys spent like a year on this book, right?

PT: Not quite a year, but, yes. You probably know better —

SS: Was there concern that spending so much time writing a book was not direct action? Did you have that discussion?

PT: Yes, we did, and I think that some people chose to drop in and out of the project because they were more interested in direct action or not, but by the same token, there are others who opted into this kind of work because it wasn't direct action. A number of women had had bad experiences with civil disobedience and didn't want to go to jail, didn't want to have to put their bodies behind bars, and so they chose not to do direct civil disobedience and worked on this project as another alternative.

SS: How did you get the deal with South End Press? Who negotiated that?

PT: I don't remember. Cynthia Chris and Monica Pearl were the editors, came in to edit the published version, and I don't remember if they negotiated the deal with South End or if it was established beforehand. You know what? Memory is churning here. I think Kim Christensen might have had something to do with the initial contact with South End Press.

SS: Because it was Loie Hayes at South End Press was the editor, right?

PT: You're much more familiar with the publishing —

SS: I don't know how that relationship happened, because it happened very quickly.

PT: It was Kim Christensen.

SS: This was published very quickly. Usually books take longer.

PT: It was, yes.

SS: And what was your contribution to the book?

PT: Well, I revised and expanded that annotated bibliography. I think I put it on my résumé, my professional résumé, and then I got a little nervous because it had butt-fucking in. But I think it was the first annotated bibliography of any import with butt-fucking appearing in it. So I did that, and then I co-wrote with Zoe Leonard the chapter on prostitution and HIV, which means that I wrote down what Zoe said, pretty much. She's very hardheaded, and it's a lengthy chapter, lengthy, but it's good. It's chockfull of all kinds of stuff.

SS: What were your findings on prostitution and HIV?

PT: Pretty much — I had worked with Zoe a little bit. We had gone to meet Joyce Wallace, who was doing free HIV testing on the piers. She had some grant money and she had a van, and she was allowing sex workers to come in and have free anonymous HIV testing. So at that time, the test involved some length of time between the sampling and the results, so she had to go back to the same place all the time, and sometimes people would come back and sometimes not. So Zoe and I were kind of checking that out.

00:50:00 She had unpublished findings that suggested that the — where there was this whole narrative about prostitutes being vectors of transmission to the general population, women being the modes of transmission. It actually is turning out that sex workers were transmitting HIV much less frequently than assumed to their clients, and that, in fact, men were transmitting HIV to women at a much greater rate. So the thrust of our chapter was to turn that assumption on its head with all different kinds of discussion about this experience that we'd had and just sort of generally discussing the situation of sex workers around the world.

SS: That's a really interesting point that you're raising that absolutely no one we've interviewed has brought up.

PT: What's that?

SS: That at that time HIV was used as an excuse to crack down on female prostitutes, with the assumption that they were endangering the johns, when actually female-to-male transmission has, in fact, never been proven in the United States and that it was actually in reverse.

PT: Oh, female to male, okay. Joyce was doing this study. I don't even know if she did publish her results or not, I didn't keep up with that literature, but she was telling us that anecdotally that's what's going on.

SS: So it's part of the social issues around AIDS, where HIV was used to crack down on all these communities instead of helping people.

PT: Yes.

SS: You see that across the board.

PT: The disease was used as a club by the Moral Majority, by the rising Christian Right, to club, to batter the gay and lesbian social issues. Yes, it was completely serving that purpose, not just with HIV in men, but it was also, used as an anti-prostitution argument.

SS: So how was the book received when it was published?

PT: I think that there were some negative reviews, weren't there, Sarah? I don't know how its sales were. I know we gave away a lot of copies. I kind of had boxes of them and would ship them free. It was really cheap, like seven bucks, so we tried to make it very accessible pricewise. There was some deal with South End where the price was a notch below. So, I think it probably got pretty good distribution, but there was some negativity about the focus that the women's group would have on AIDS as opposed to other diseases that might impact women more.

SS: Where did that come from?

PT: I don't remember exactly the authors of that critique, but I heard it enough around the Lesbian Herstory Archives, say. That would be the kind of the thing

that somebody might say to me when I said, “Hey, you know — .” Do you remember where it came from?

SS: I don’t remember that critique at all. Were you there when the Women’s Caucus then went from this to the CDC campaign?

PT: I participated in the CDC demo, but I was not as involved as, say, like Heidi or Tracy or Max on that. I was kind of back at that point.

SS: So show us what else you have. What other projects did you work on in ACT UP?

PT: Anyway, this first edition is really cool. Do you have one, Sarah?

SS: No, I don’t.

PT: Because it’s got all kinds of flyers about the stuff.

SS: I don’t have one. Why is AIDS a lesbian issue? Let’s go back to that old saw. I just saw that title.

PT: Where did you see it?

SS: “AIDS is a Lesbian Issue.”

PT: Well, you know, it was being used as a hammer of homophobia.

SS: Here it is.

PT: “Yes, and we can do something about it.” This is from 6/88. Thank you, Maxine, for annotating that. “Lesbians can get AIDS because we share needles and because sometimes lesbians sleep with men and because we’re bisexual.” Same thing.

SS: So there’s no claim of female-to-female transmission, which is good.

00:55:00

PT: I don't think so, no. I know that's a big can of worms you like to open, huh? You like to open that up. You like to talk about that, Sarah.

SS: I sure do.

PT: You like to talk about lesbian or female-to-female transmission.

SS: The lack of--

PT: The lack of evidence for HIV transmission, yes. You know, I know we're supposed to be — I would just like to talk to you about it for a little bit. Was there much evidence for men who, say, ingested semen as the only sex act that they performed? Is there much evidence of transmission for that?

SS: Well, I think there was. Gentlemen, what do you say? There was always a kind of — whenever anyone would say that's how they got infected, people wouldn't believe them.

PT: Yes, I know. There was always a doubt about that.

JH: That's true — but it is possible.

SS: What do you say, James?

PT: I know a couple of guys seroconverted in that way, unless they're not truthful about it.

SS: What do you say, James?

JW: Miniscule evidence.

SS: Miniscule evidence.

PT: Miniscule evidence.

JW: Miniscule evidence of miniscule possibilities.

PT: Huh. But we know that HIV is present in semen.

SS: Yes, but it has to be semen to blood in order to be transmitted.

PT: And blood can happen if you've got a tear in your esophagus or a canker sore or an internal —

SS: Yes, all those ifs exist, but how many —

PT: If you've had dental surgery.

SS: But how many cases like that actually occur?

PT: Very few, probably. You know, I just didn't want that to have to be me or my buddies. And we were finding HIV, Sarah, weren't we, in vaginal secretions and in that magical fluid, the lesbian ejaculate, the female ejaculate. We were finding levels of HIV. So it seemed to me if I wasn't having that much sex with that many women, I thought it would make sense not to have put ourselves at risk.

SS: At the time, I reviewed every case.

PT: I'm sure you did. You're very thorough. Every case of alleged female-to-female transmission?

SS: There was seven or eight cases at that time in the New York City Health Department, and in every single case there was somebody using needles. So there was no case of somebody claiming sexual transmission where there was no needle use.

PT: So it's kind of like only ingesting semen —

SS: I thought there was a psychological issue involved, that all these lesbians had been around all these men who were dying, and there was some kind of projection trigger, whatever, but that there was no medical justification.

PT: You think we had AIDS envy?

SS: No, it's not envy. I think it's if everyone next to you, if something terrible is happening to them for years and years and years and years and years, why should you feel immune, even if it's not happening to you actually. The feeling of endangerment can be a real feeling, but, as we know, feelings aren't facts.

PT: Yes. You know what I think also, this lesbian safer-sex talk was a way for all of us, all genders, to talk about transmission, to talk about safe practices and not kind of get stuck in these categories of — I feel like by making — I can tell you're unconvinced.

SS: I'll let you have the last word, because it's your interview.

PT: You needn't. Please.

SS: Well, I think for people who don't need to have obstacles to their sexual practice, who don't need safe sex —

PT: Like those nasty dams.

SS: — to search it out and seek it is weird. I think there's a little pathology involved in that.

PT: Hmm. You know, if a woman who I was going to have sex with had just had a needle stick, I'm not sure that I would feel — at the time, I would not have felt very confident or comfortable having oral sex with her.

SS: Well, it's a gender thing, because men who are at risk don't want to have safe sex, so why would women who are not at risk want to have safe sex?

PT: I don't know. I don't know, but it's true, I think. I don't know too many lesbians who did actually use the dams, but it was in the cases of where there was a possible infection, mostly because they were healthcare workers or —

SS: So you don't accept my idea that it's psychological, there's a psychological —

PT: I think it's interesting. I'm not rejecting it. But I think you're generous to say, like, proximity to it might have kind of rubbed off. I don't think it's some, like, creepy —

01:00:00 **SS: We know there were men in ACT UP who pretended they were HIV-positive when they weren't.**

PT: Yes, that was rare, though.

SS: But that's a similar kind of sense of endangerment inevitability that everything —

PT: Rare but interesting cases, huh. What was that guy's name at the--?

SS: Derek Link. We've already made record on this.

PT: Okay. Okay.

SS: And he wasn't the only one. So, okay, fine. But, anyway, it's nice to know that that leaflet did not claim that.

PT: No, I don't think we ever did. I don't think I ever —

SS: Just because at one time at an ACT UP meeting Maxine stood up and pointed at me, pointed her finger at me and said, "Women will die because of you."

PT: Oh, Sarah.

SS: And she was wrong.

PT: I say more women have lived fuller, more robust lives because of you.

SS: Thank you, Polly.

PT: I don't think words can kill in that kind of way.

SS: All right. So what else do you have there on your file there?

PT: Oh, heavens. Where do we start? How are we doing with time here?

SS: We're fine. We have all the time in the world.

PT: Okay. You know, I'm not accustomed to going on and on. I'm shy. I don't know. What do you want? Let's see. We've got —

SS: Just go through and tell us what you have.

PT: Okay. So that was the first edition. This is my signed copy.

SS: Very nice.

PT: Isn't that sweet?

JH: How much time was there between the Xeroxing of it and the publication?

PT: Well, this was March of '89, you were right, and this was November '90.

JH: So, a year and a half.

SS: Wow.

PT: Zip. And it was a grueling, grueling process, let me tell you.

SS: It was the worst of consensus politics.

PT: It was condensed consensus. There was no time to breathe or blow off steam or anything. It was just sort of we had to go through the whole process. And even my little joking about Zoe, it was so rough because there was no time for — we wrote intensely together in my office for several times, and then we'd get an edit, and then it was resisted. And if it was resisted, then what are you supposed to do? So there

just wasn't enough — or the general amount of time that it takes for minds to be changed, and there was enough respect for what people thought and wrote and differences in styles and everything. And it's great. I'm very proud of the work that we did here too. You'll like this, Sarah.

SS: "Rename the dental dam."

PT: Yes, because it's got a boring name. So at the women's teach-in, we had this "cunt-test" to rename the —

SS: And what was the winner?

PT: I think "con-dam" came out as the number one. Never did catch on. And I think in the slang category, "box top."

SS: That's funnier.

PT: But I do have a comprehensive list of all of the nominations right here.

SS: Can you just read some of them?

PT: Love cover. Cunt-forter. What? Oh, cun-forter. Cun-forter. The vulva veil. The pussy poncho. Lady latex. Oral fixture. The crotch flap. That's like mud flap. The Hoover.

SS: Oh, the Hoover Dam.

PT: Vulva Va Voom. Dame Dam.

SS: Okay, I think that's enough. All right.

PT: All right. There you have it.

SS: Moving right along.

PT: For an archive near you. But that's fun. Cunt-tests are fun. Cunt-tests are fun.

JH: So all this material is also in the Lesbian Herstory Archives?

PT: I would suspect it is. I kept the stuff that's special to me, but most of the things I collected I left there.

So what do we have? Oh, here's a list of participants. Sorry, I didn't see this before. It's a call for ACT — chapters. Oh, this is a different kind of chapter, not a book chapter, but your other chapter.

Here, I'll tell you. I'll read this one letter from an HIV-positive person. "My name is so-and-so. I am HIV-positive ARC (AIDS Related Complex). I have three children and I'm a single parent. I have been diagnosed with myopathy. I live in public housing on the sixth floor, my elevator is out; walking on a cane; building is locked. I've been living here ten years, my rent is paid, but I'm getting kicked out. Can you help me?"

01:05:00

JH: What's the date of that?

PT: There's no date.

SS: And who's it addressed to?

PT: 1990, December 3rd, 1990, ACT UP Women's Committee.

SS: Can I just look at the signature to see if it's someone who I know for a fact is dead? Okay. I don't know this person.

PT: And then here's a Christmas card from somebody. "God bless all of you for all you do for those of us who are HIV-positive." So, like that. And because I had access to a computer and a copy machine, I did some of the correspondence.

SS: So what did you do for that woman in public housing?

PT: I don't exactly remember, but I wrote her back or gave her some —

SS: Because this is before Housing Works, so ACT UP hadn't gotten into the housing business yet.

PT: I didn't open the mail there, so that came through probably Marion or Max or somebody else who might have had access to that mail pouch. So I don't know if they may have done something else with that before I responded to the person or not.

So you've probably had people talk about the strip-search thing, right?

SS: Yes. What did you do with your money?

PT: I didn't get any money.

SS: How come?

PT: Well, because I had just gone to the civil disobedience training right before, because this was my first big demo, and I think Gregg [Bordowitz] and Amy Bauer and maybe Alexis were doing this demo. And one of the features of the training was that you can actually resist things that happen to you in jail. You don't have to comply.

So I was at the very end of the — I was the last of the thirty or so women. Ellen Neipris and I were at the very tail end. I can't remember if we were next to each other in cells or if we were in the same thing. I had overalls on. I was going to be a mess to undo, and I just said, "No, I'm not going to be strip-searched." And Ellen said the same thing, and we weren't.

SS: Oh, wow. That's so interesting.

PT: Yes.

SS: So all the other people agreed, but they could have said no.

PT: Yes. You know, maybe she was tired. I just remember I have this vision of her walking away with a gloved hand, like, “Whatever. I’m not going to do it.” I’m sure whoever was having to do it didn’t want to have to do it. And I was the last in the last batch, so maybe she’s like, “Whatever, walk away.” But I like to think it’s because she was coming at me with the “Drop the outfit” thing, and I said no. So it wasn’t like — so I wasn’t strip-searched.

So I went to the first kind of meetings to see what was going to happen. I thought we were going to do a class-action suit and I could be of assistance in suggesting my resistance. But then it became clear that we weren’t going to do a class-action suit and there was a lot of meetings to go to, and I think a very small group decided to pursue it on a personal compensation basis, and I dropped out of the whole thing at that point. So I wasn’t in that group.

SS: Which demo was this?

PT: City Hall.

SS: City Hall 2?

PT: One.

JH: Target City Hall.

SS: Target City Hall, okay.

PT: Target City Hall. I can tell you, though, that working at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, that that organization was the beneficiary of a great deal of strip-search money. A great deal of it came our way.

SS: And one person bought a motorcycle.

PT: I don't know about that.

SS: Yes. That's okay. I do.

PT: I think that there were some people who were really seriously impacted, maybe. But most of us were just like, "Woo, whatever." Nobody was cavity-searched. It wasn't that kind of strip-search. It was just kind of a take off and pat down kind of thing. I wasn't paying close enough attention to how it was administered.

SS: So what happened to the charges on that arrest?

01:10:00 PT: I think they must have been dropped, right? And then part of the deal was like with the settlement, people could never talk about it, so it couldn't become an issue. But this is one in a series of many strip-searches of women activists. Wasn't Andrea Dworkin was strip-searched as well back in the seventies in this antiwar thing? Joan Nestle told me about this. So there was this whole pattern of women demonstrators being arrested and protesting, and then it happens again.

So the New York City Prison governance is always breaking their rules about how to treat prisoners based on — I don't know what, but they're not following a rulebook very closely. Just think of the amount of money that is spent on settling those kinds of claims or claims of people who have been put through the system when they shouldn't have been put through the system. I mean, come on. What a waste of money.

SS: It's like the Catholic Church.

PT: Yes.

JW: Now the courts have said strip-search is legal now. Last year they said that.

SS: What else have you got there? I see you have a lot of other stuff.

PT: Okay. These are just photos. You'll like that. That's my mug shots from the CDC.

SS: Great, great. That's fabulous.

PT: But isn't that something?

SS: Absolutely fabulous.

PT: That's the matron. I don't know what would we call female prison guards? She gave me those pictures, weirdly, as I went to jail.

SS: She liked you, Polly.

PT: You think so?

SS: Yes. And what is this "Sodomite in Action" card that you've got there?

PT: The "Sodomite in Action" is kind of the label. I don't know why we were wearing the — why we needed nametags. But I don't know, was it the dance we went to before? Were we just helping the police out with the nametag? I don't know.

SS: There was a dance in Atlanta before?

PT: No, I don't know. I can't remember. "Demonstration to repeal the sodomy law." Maybe this was the card we gave to the support people. I don't really know what it is. I clearly did not label it.

SS: Now, where was this demonstration?

PT: This was at the CDC, which is outside of Atlanta, and there's a double-header demonstration that weekend. Wait. This was the sodomy demonstration, and the other demonstration was the CDC. So we actually ended up in the can twice in the same weekend for two separate demonstrations, and I am fuzzy on the details of

which was which, because it's been so long. But I think *Hardwick v. Bowers* had just been decided in, what, '86, and then Reagan tried to appoint Bork to the court. So there was a lot of interest in resisting — in demonstrating against the dumb Supreme Court action. So we combined this with the CDC demonstration on the same weekend.

I think it was at the sodomy demonstration that I was blocking traffic and I was with David Robinson, who was in a skirt, and some guy, some furry-bearded, cowboy-hatted white guy got out of a truck. He had been inconvenienced by our blocking the traffic, and he hooked his door and he stormed out, and he started to kick David. And he was yelling, “Yid!” used stuff like anti-Semitic stuff, and it was like, “Wait, you know...he's...” What kind of hate do you want to call that?

So, anyway, I remember trying to push this redneck guy away from him, and, anyhow, somehow David scrambled away and enough people piled on the other guy, and the police pulled this guy off of David, who very shortly after was able to identify the man's confused hatred for whatever it was that David was representing to him.

01:15:00

But I think that was the point of arrest for all of us at the sodomy demonstration. I don't think that was the CDC. I can only just remember the traffic, the white truck. It was frightening.

SS: When you went to Atlanta, where did you guys all stay?

PT: I don't know, but —

SS: ACT UP would just suddenly — somebody would just have airplane tickets, and you'll all just go to the airport, and then there'd be a hotel? How was all that arranged?

PT: I don't know. I was in my twenties. I wasn't paying attention, really. I think we all drove down, and there was a hotel and there were assigned roommates, and then everybody ended up sleeping wherever they wanted to anyway. I remember sleeping, going to Gerri Wells' room and just piling in there with a whole bunch of other people. Did I pay a little something? I may have.

SS: I think ACT UP paid for it. I'm not sure.

PT: You think ACT UP paid the whole thing? It's likely. That's two arrests, too. That's an expensive weekend, in addition to the car-fare and hotel and occasional breakfasts — breakfast meals probably taken in the middle of the day.

SS: What's that pink little zine that you have there?

PT: This is a band that I was in, the Traveling Millies. One of the songs that we did was a send-up of a Randy Travis song. Randy Travis, he sang this song about cheatin', and on the one hand, the woman he's wanting to sleep with is so beautiful and there's no reason he should leave, but on the other hand there's a golden band. So we set it up and we said, "Well, on the one hand, you're so beautiful." It was a song about cheatin'. "But on the other hand, there's a dental dam. Ours were beige and hers are blue. There's lipstick on it too." So that was —

SS: There you go, a popular cultural moment.

PT: It's a joke. It's like the way to talk about cheatin' with this funny little twist, so it was fun.

Here is an advertisement for the con-dome.

SS: Oh, the female condom.

PT: The female condom, yes. I guess somebody had written us to try to get us to really like them and push them, but —

SS: They never caught on, did they?

PT: No, they didn't. Look at the very difficult insertion procedure.

SS: Yes.

PT: And then kind of different letters that I — you know, you were often invited to write a letter about something to some pharmaceutical company or something.

Here's something from the Seal Press rejecting *Women, AIDS, and Activism*.

SS: What's their reason?

PT: "It would take too long and the information would become outdated. We encourage you to self-publish."

SS: Who signed that, by the way?

PT: Holly Morris. Did you know Holly?

SS: Yes.

PT: You've published with Seal before, right?

SS: Yes.

PT: That's probably why we wrote them. "They'll publish Schulman. They'll publish our thing."

What else. This is from Cynthia. These are reviews of the book. This one from Cindy Patton looks positive.

SS: She reviewed the book? Oh, that's cool.

PT: Yes.

SS: In what publication?

PT: *International Women's Day*, naturally. *The Guardian*.

SS: Oh, *The Guardian*. Oh, good.

PT: Oh, it was the supplement, *International Women's Day* supplement to *The Guardian*.

SS: *The Marxist News Weekly*, right.

PT: Here's the reception, November 27th, '90.

01:20:00 Oh, golly. I also worked on the — I worked with you, Jim, I remember that, on the activism teach-in we did. It was in June '89, and we produced a second book. In this instance I worked mostly with men, it looks like, David Deitcher, Robert Garcia, but Maria and Heidi, Ron Goldberg. So we all kind of researched histories of queer activism, and the best part of the event was going to be Jim Hubbard's featured films from his expansive career on the front lines. And I remember the workshop took place at some kind of Soho-ish kind of gallery, and it was supposed to be like a two- or three-hour workshop, and it ended up taking all day. So we didn't get to Jim's stuff until way too late, but it really was the coolest part of the — it really was.

SS: Oh, like your film about *Cruising* and *Blues*.

JH: Yes. The one memory I have of that is showing the *Cruising* film, and Heidi — no, no, Alexis asking me what the chants were, and I couldn't remember at all.

SS: Because your film is silent. Right.

JH: Well, because the intention with that film was actually to distribute police whistles to everybody in the audience and have them blow the

whistles, because that's what I remember, all the people just constantly blowing the whistles.

SS: Oh, to fuck up the shooting of *Cruising*.

JH: The shooting, yes, and echoing off the canyons of New York.

PT: Anyway, I always felt bad because it was poor planning on our part, and certain people went on and on, but yours — but we didn't schedule it properly. I was so inexperienced with running an event, particularly I couldn't give anybody the hook. But several people should have got the hook that day.

But it was great. I did the bibliography again. And, again, because I had access to libraries and archives, I was an appropriate member. I felt very useful in my midwestern way. It was perfect. So I liked not only working with people who needed certain kinds of medical or legal information, getting them into the library, but also working with these projects that required some kind of access to libraries.

You know, can I talk about that just a little bit?

SS: Go ahead.

PT: Did I already say this? NYU was this — the library, the Bobst Library had been plopped down in Washington Square kind of in the early eighties, right, before I arrived. But it was a large structure, it was kind of too big for that area, and it was a private university, and you could get into it if you had an ID from NYU or at The New School they had a consortium, or Cooper Union. But people from the neighborhood couldn't get in, and they had some kind of deal where you could pay \$1,000 a year and get access to the library, or 250 if you lived within a certain radius. Right after they built the building, they kind of made a concession to the community board or something. But I

was in charge of the circulation department, and then they kind of just put me in charge of the people who ran the booths, so I was a gatekeeper, literally, for that building, so I could have people in.

But also NYU was an open stack, and it was a government repository, so all of the government materials that went to that library, the library was obliged to make them open to the public. So just by sharing that mere fact at an ACT UP meeting would allow people to get access to that stack, because nobody would follow them after they, say, took a look at the population tables and then strolled over to the medical section.

01:25:00 So, anyway, I enjoyed doing that. I enjoyed breaking those rules. I enjoyed using my position in that way. When I was working at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I was kind of building this sensibility and this critique about how archives are constructed and who gets to be in the archive and what parts of the archive are legal or extra legal or what parts are going to be available to the public, what parts are going to be excised completely. There was some evidence of personal collections being heavily edited by the New York Public Library to exclude the lesbian and the queer content in collections.

So I was building that critique, but also at the same time it was important to provide public access to work, so I was kind of doing this archivist thing and thinking about how the collections are built, and then doing this librarian thing and thinking about the ways people get access to material and how it should be free. Liberated information is the only information that's going to have any impact.

Librarians have really developed the critique of publicly funded and academic material in general being licensed or closed off to many people, and this open-

access movement for scientific and academic publication has been something that I've been increasingly involved in, but I think it's very seriously in line with what we were doing in ACT UP, trying to get information into the hands of everybody, to have a functioning democracy, to allow people to have access to information that gives them control over their bodies, to make better decisions about their healthcare.

SS: Also it subverts NYU's ongoing war against the neighborhood.

PT: Yes. It's kind of audacious that NYU would build a closed yet open stack. Like, they would close it, but make it an open stack to their own community. It was just a thumb in the eye.

SS: What else do you have there?

PT: Oh. Oh, golly.

JW: Any chance you've got a postcard of the target with James Curran specifically?

PT: Target City Hall?

JW: No, the CDC campaign with James Curran as the director of the CDC.

PT: Did I just put down the CDC thing? I'm mixing things up. City Hall. Here it is. Oh, you're looking for the CDC, not City Hall.

SS: Right.

PT: My folder is just called "Atlanta," so it'll be both things mixed up in there.

JW: And it might have been a year or two after the demonstration.

PT: The James Curran graphic?

JW: The postcard, yeah.

PT: Most of this looks to be — “Sodomy action timetable.” Isn’t that sweet? Oh, this is stuff that people in Atlanta offered us about what’s going to happen. “Arrested individuals will be charged with disorderly conduct and must pay a \$70 collateral bond.”

You know, I remember being in jail in Atlanta. I don’t know which arrest it was after, but a bunch of us from the Women’s Caucus were all in the same brink, and it was right after Zsa Zsa Gabor had resisted or she’d been drunk or something and she had called the officer a lesbian, or she didn’t want to go to jail because she was going to be in jail with all these lesbians. So Jean Carlomusto writes on the wall, “Zsa Zsa was right.” Zsa Zsa was right.

Sorry I mixed all that up, but it was a hoot. There were also women in with us who were not part of the demonstration. I’m not finding this thing.

SS: Oh, who had just gotten arrested.

PT: Yes. And we posted bail for them, too, for some of them, probably not for everybody in there, but people who were in our thing.

So I don’t have that graphic, James. I’m sorry.

SS: That’s okay. Is there anything else in the pile that you want to tell us about?

01:30:00 PT: What else should I tell you about? It might take too much time to kind of go through here. I was with the Bored of Ed affinity group.

SS: Oh, there’s José [Fidelino] on the cover.

PT: Yes. For the Target City Hall demonstration.

SS: What was the Bored of Ed affinity group? I don't know about that.

PT: Who were we?

SS: Why was it called Bored of Ed?

PT: B-o-r-e-d.

SS: Oh, you were bored of Ed Koch.

PT: Yes. And we were highlighting education issues.

SS: And who was in the affinity group?

PT: I was friendly with Alexis Danzig. Here we are. That's the whole group.

SS: Is that the Bored of Ed?

PT: Mm-hmm. Same picture, just different sizes. Donna Minkowitz. James Revson, the guy with the tie, he wrote about it for *Newsday*.

SS: Oh, there's Amy Bauer.

PT: Amy Bauer.

SS: Oh, that little guy who used to date the person whose name we're not mentioning. Rolf.

JH: Oh, Rolf.

SS: Rolf, he's there.

JH: Rolf Sjogren.

SS: Who is this, this guy?

PT: I don't know. I was just going to ask you if you knew who he was, because I really liked him. I was next to him.

SS: I remember him. Who is that?

PT: He had fresh nipple piercings when we were arrested, and he was very concerned that we guard his chest during the arrest.

SS: You know who it is, James?

PT: He had a big bass voice, gorgeous voice.

JW: So many people, so little time.

PT: Yes. But right after the FDA action, some of the Costas invited me to join them, and I had gone to a little bit, but they were such a tightly oiled machine at that point that I peeled off, and they were doing a lot of work that wasn't — they were just a little too active for my schedule. So I peeled off and worked with the Bored of Ed group for the Target City Hall demo.

There were a couple of guys who were Radical Faeries in here from California, so —

SS: Do you remember their names?

PT: I don't remember their names.

SS: So what else did you work on in ACT UP?

PT: Well, I could talk a little bit about the — I had a friend who came up from Kentucky whose brother had HIV and who died, and I was only involved just kind of tangentially in his care. So, unlike many of the women in ACT UP, I didn't have a lot of close friends who were gay who were HIV-impacted, but I did start working with men more. Actually, more men started helping out with the Lesbian Herstory Archives a little bit. Charlie Barber donated his office equipment, and John Kelly worked with the archives. He's was a good carpenter and expert in all kinds of instruction, and I actually

learned how to plaster from Alexis Danzig and John Kelly. And Zoe Leonard is not a bad plasterer either. So just imagine that crew up plastering the ceiling in the Lesbian Archives. That's who it was. So there was a lot more back-and-forth in my life, at least, between gay men and with gay men because of ACT UP.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

PT: I think I kind of stopped going around '91 or '92.

SS: Why was that?

PT: Well, it was mostly because I was doing other things. I was working on fundraising for the Archives Building, and I think that we'd bought the building in 1990 and then '91, '92, involved in fixing it up, and I was kind of in charge of managing that massive volunteer activity. So I was more focused on that.

01:35:00

It seemed to me like a lot of the work that my former colleagues in the Women's Caucus were doing was really focused on certain issues and it was more intensive, a lot of people who were really, like, full-time activists devoted to a particular set of issues, so I wasn't as connected. Since I always had multiple foci, it wasn't so easy for me to stay as fully engaged as I was, I think. But there wasn't any conscious decision to leave. I didn't march out in a huff. I didn't get tired of these dykes or fags. There was no hard feelings. There wasn't even weariness on my part. It was sort of just a kind of general disengagement.

SS: Well, I only have one more question. So is there anything we haven't covered that you think we should?

PT: Not that I can think of right away.

SS: Okay. So my last question is what we ask everybody, which is, looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

PT: Well, ACT UP had many great achievements, I think. The one that was most resonant with me is that the CDC expanded its definition of AIDS to include how HIV manifests in women, thus changing the whole landscape for disability benefits for women affected by HIV. That's a very tangible targeted benefit, and it was very rewarding to see that come to fruition.

ACT UP was an organization that was wildly successful and hugely popular in a short run. It demonstrated that this sort of sloppy urban democracy involving people from very disparate communities can accomplish something, and I think that ACT UP New York and other ACT UP groups, but I think particularly ACT UP New York, is an inspiration for our generation in that way.

I don't know about disappointments. You know, the background of ACT UP's work is devastation, so to speak about this disappointment in the background of death and destruction, I don't think — I can't construct or articulate a disappointment in the organization.

But I really thank you guys for your work on this project.

SS: Thank you.

PT: It's really an honor and very flattering that you would ask me to participate, and I think the construction of this archive is magnificent.

SS: Thank you. It's our twelfth year.

PT: I know you've been at it a long time.

SS: Yes, we're aging.

PT: You're aging but still fresh.

SS: Thank you. You've told us a lot of stuff that we needed to hear.

PT: Really? You're very sweet to say something positive.

SS: That's true. Thank you.