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Interviewee: **Sharon Tramutola**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Sharon Tramutola
July 9, 2008

Tape I
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SARAH SCHULMAN: To start, tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

SHARON TRAMUTOLA: Sharon Tramutola. I'm 55 years old; we are on the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and it's July 9th, 2008.

SS: Okay, great. And thanks so much for doing this interview. So as you know, because you've read some of the transcripts, the first tape – each tape is 40 minutes long – we talk about who the person was before they came to ACT UP. So let's just start with that. Where were you born?

ST: I was born in Newark, New Jersey. And when I came to ACT UP, I was living in Jersey City.

SS: Okay, let's cover from when you born till you got to ACT UP. So let's start with that. Did you grow up in Newark?

ST: Yeah, Newark, New Jersey, in Ironbound. And I was an only child. And pretty normal childhood; nothing special. I went to one year of college; worked in day care for like the past 30 years; still do.

SS: What was Newark like in the '60s? You lived through all of the turmoil, right?

ST: Well, I lived in Ironbound. And the riots were pretty much not in that area.

SS: What is Ironbound?

ST: Ironbound is a part of Newark. They call it Ironbound because it used to be bound by four railroads, on each side. It's a working-class neighborhood. Now it's mostly Portuguese. When I was a child, it was more mixed, with different nationalities. Quiet.

SS: Your parents were Italian American?

ST: My dad was Italian, my mother was German; and my father loaded trucks. My mom worked at a school cafeteria until she was 70.

SS: And were they born in Newark also?

ST: Yeah, they were. And they actually lived across the street from each other. That's how they met. And they were dating since they were 13.

SS: So you had deep roots in that community.

ST: On the same block; the house that they lived in was on the same block where they met.

SS: So when you were growing up – so we all know that there were a lot of riots in Newark in the '60s and there was a lot of turmoil, but you're saying it wasn't in your neighborhood. How did your community respond to those events? Your neighbors –

ST: I think mostly fear. I think that people really didn't know what was going on. Most of the people in the neighborhood were immigrants, who were just working and getting by, enough to get by. I don't know if they

fully understood everything going on. I think people were just scared. They didn't know what was going on, and they were afraid.

SS: So were you raised with any kind of political awareness?

ST: Not really, no. I think the only thing that my father talked about was maybe unions, and the importance of unions. I mean, he was a union man. And I think that was instilled in me right from being really young; how important unions were.

SS: Did you have a big sense of community? Was your family active in the church, or some kind of community organization?

ST: No. {LAUGHS}

SS: Not at all.

ST: No. They went to church, but they weren't like really active. But as far as sense of community, it's a pretty tight-knit community, Ironbound; it still is. So the kids, you walk to school with the same kids all the time. You went through school with the same kids in your class. It's pretty, pretty dull, actually. Not much else going on. Mostly kids in the group wanted to get out because there wasn't much to do there.

SS: Did you want to get out?

ST: Sure. I think that everybody did. It wasn't very exciting. And I always read books and stuff about other places. And from when I was 13, I was sneaking to New York.

SS: What would you do in the city?

ST: We used to come to the Village. We'd hang out, say we were older, hang out in clubs.

SS: Which clubs?

ST: Oh, I'm not going to remember. I know there was a place that was on Bleecker, and I can't even think of the name of it. It's so many years ago. And we used to go to, they used to have Singapore Slings, and they were really cheap, and they didn't ask for I.D.

SS: Right. So then you went to college for one year?

ST: I went to Essex County College for a year. And then I dropped out, and worked in another daycare center.

SS: And that was in Newark?

ST: Yes.

SS: And so how many years did you work at that daycare center?

ST: Oh, I worked for one daycare center for like 16 years, because I worked for DYFS [New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services]. That's a child protection agency in New Jersey. And now, the place I worked for privatized. I worked at Odyssey House on 116th Street here, for maybe three years. And now I work in a daycare center again in Jersey City. And I've been there like 11 years.

SS: Okay, so the whole time, your whole adult life, you've been working with people who are in and out of the system, basically. Would you say that's true?

ST: Yes.

SS: So you're familiar with services, lack of services –

ST: Yes.

SS: – very familiar. So when did you first become aware of the AIDS crisis?

ST: Well, I read. And you read the magazines and stuff. And then a friend of mine got sick.

SS: Do you remember when that was?

ST: Maybe about '86. Really, at the beginning of the epidemic.

There were no services. And the little bit of services that were out there were hard to get to, and especially, he was a drug user. And once you're labeled a drug user in the system, it's really hard to get any services at all. And it was really hard to get him into rehab, because they really weren't dealing with AIDS at all, and they didn't know what to do with it. So it was really frustrating.

SS: So they wouldn't let him in rehab because he had AIDS?

ST: No, because most rehabs, they weren't taking people with AIDS. They didn't know what to do with them. They were still afraid, they weren't sure, what was going on, how you got it. And they didn't want you.

They would have excuses. There were, well, waiting lists. But there were spots; they just didn't want them.

SS: Now what were Odyssey House's policies towards people with AIDS?

ST: Odyssey House, by the time I got to Odyssey House, things were a little more liberal, and they had people with AIDS, but not a whole lot, because a lot of people with AIDS, I think they sent to Daytop Village, took a lot of people with AIDS. But they had an AIDS counselor. And it was – I guess it was a pretty free policy. They were in with the rest of the population. There was no isolation by then. And – I don't know. It wasn't the best system; there weren't a lot of services, and more services could have been gotten, but I guess people just didn't know then.

SS: Why was Daytop more open?

ST: I think Daytop, right from the beginning of the epidemic, I think that one of their advertisement things was they took people with AIDS. And they had some specialized services there.

SS: And what was your job at Odyssey?

ST: I worked in the daycare center, in the family center.

SS: Oh, okay.

ST: With the kids. And then we worked with parents. We did parenting groups with the moms. It was harder to work with the moms than the

kids, because the kids were, they were allowed to bring two kids with them when they came into Odyssey House. And they stayed with their moms. And we'd mind the kids. But they had parenting groups for the parents, which were really hard, because the parents, most of them really didn't want to be in the groups, and had to be there, so it made it rough.

SS: Because they were court-ordered?

ST: For a lot of them, yeah, and that's how they got their kids back. Because some of them had kids in the system; most of them had kids in the system, that they wouldn't get back unless they went through the program.

SS: Now what years were you working at Odyssey?

ST: Maybe '95 –

SS: Oh, so much later.

ST: Yeah, oh yeah; '95 to maybe '98.

SS: Let's go back with your first friend. So when he told you – did he tell you that he had AIDS? Or how did you find out?

ST: We didn't know at the beginning. When he went to the VA hospital, and they told him that he had AIDS. They were giving him, there was really nothing out there. I think they were giving him prednisone for some infections that he had. Then they told him he had sarcoids on his lungs. And they really didn't know what to do with him. And I think GMHC was just starting to get in existence. And they sent him over there. And they got him housing, and

they set him up on something where you got food stamps and stuff. So he did a little better. But as far as other services, it was really hard to get anything. People were still afraid.

SS: Where was the housing?

ST: They had him in a Y here, on 23rd Street, I think; the YMCA on 23rd Street. They had him there for awhile. And then they got him an apartment, I think in Brooklyn. It was like a room and a half.

SS: So that was your first personal contact with AIDS?

ST: Right.

SS: So how did you get into the AIDS community?

ST: Well, because this guy was staying with me for a long time. And I was bisexual. And I was watching the news one day, and I'd seen ACT UP on the news. And I was really pissed by that time. I mean, I was, this guy was living with me for awhile. And I was trying to get him services, and everything was really rough. And when I'd seen them on TV, and they were talking about what they were going to do, and they interviewed them at the Center, I think, the first time. Then I'd seen them again – it might have been the Gay Pride march. And I said, I'm going to go check this out.

So I came over and checked it out. And the first meeting I went to, I brought my girlfriend with me. And there must have been 500 people, at least, at the Center. And it was really confusing. When you first came in at the

beginning, it was real confusing, because it seemed like everybody knew so much. And they were talking about things that I never heard of before.

And my girlfriend said, I'm not coming back here. I don't know what's going on, I'm not coming back.

And I said, no, you are, you are.

So it was right before the FDA, we joined.

SS: Who was your girlfriend?

ST: Nobody you really knew, because she only came to ACT UP a few times. After the FDA, she said, I can't – she got hysterical. She got too upset when we went to the FDA.

SS: Oh, okay.

ST: And after that, it was like, she didn't come to an ACT UP meeting again. Her name was Lynn.

SS: But you were turned on by it? You were excited by it?

ST: Yeah. But you know what really made me stay; I was just telling my friend Lei [Chou] a little earlier. Maybe like the third meeting I came to – you know, I didn't understand everything going on, and I wanted to; but somebody came in the door and said, there's a gay-basher on the corner with a bat. And everybody in the meeting stood up and ran out the door after the guy. And I said, hey, these people really want to do something. At least they're not a

bunch of punks saying they're going to something, you know? And I start coming back.

SS: I want to back up a little bit. What was it like, being in a gay relationship in Newark, and in the neighborhood –

ST: I wasn't living in Newark. I was living in Jersey City then.

SS: Okay.

ST: I've been in Jersey City for 30 years.

SS: Oh, okay. So you were out of your –

ST: Oh yeah.

SS: Yeah. But do you know anything about the gay scene in Newark?

ST: No, not really. Because even though I was in Newark, even in high school, I was staying with other people all the time, and – so I wasn't in Newark that much, after maybe first year of high school.

SS: Okay. So let's get back to ACT UP. So you decided to stay. And they were planning the FDA action?

ST: Right.

SS: So how did you jump into the organization?

ST: Well, because they were planning the FDA action, they said they're going to form a thing called affinity groups. Right? So maybe like the third meeting, they said they were having trainings, and they were going to pick

people for affinity groups, who wanted to be in what affinity group. And I – I went to the first meeting – that was a group of people who weren't in an affinity group yet. And it was at Zoe Leonard's house.

And this guy that came to the meeting — I can't even remember his name — he came to the meeting that was going to form the affinity group. And he said that he was really, really sick, and he couldn't come to all the meetings. But he came to that meeting, and then he had somebody, he couldn't come down on the bus with us when we went to the FDA. But he had somebody bring him down on the train, the day before, for the action. I wish I could remember his name. And maybe like three days after the action, he died. And it really, really got to me. And I'm thinking, this guy, this was so important to him. And I think we even had T-shirts or something, made, the affinity group. And that's what made me keep coming back.

But, we formed the affinity group –

SS: What was the name of your group?

ST: The Candelabras. And went down to the FDA. And I didn't get arrested the first time. I was on – I was a little nervous. It was just the beginning. So I went down with them. And I was the support. Went down there. And it was just amazing, when we got down there.

SS: And let me ask you a couple things. Who else was in the Candelabras?

ST: Larry Kramer; Ann Northrop; I can't remember all the names; Sandy Katz. I can picture people, I can't remember their names. Kay – I don't know her last name, there was an older woman, Kay was her name. I can't remember everybody else.

SS: But did you guys meet – so you met at Zoe's.

ST: Yeah, the first time.

SS: You planned your action?

ST: Right. And then we met every week in different places. And we met at Sandy Katz's house a whole bunch of times. And then we did more training before we went down.

SS: Can you describe the training?

ST: Oh yeah. We did, they talked about when you get arrested, how to hold your hands, how to lay on the ground. Stuff like that. What to say. I can't remember everything, but what to say, if they ask you questions. That was about it, I guess.

SS: Had you ever been arrested before?

ST: Yes.

SS: So how were you feeling about possibly being arrested again?

ST: I was, I was really up for it. After the FDA, after that first time at the FDA, I was ready for anything. But I forget if, the first time we went,

if I got arrested, I got arrested. But I wasn't really going for it the first time, I wanted to check things out, I guess. I was never in an action before. So we went down. I figured, if I get arrested, I get, we get arrested, but I wasn't prepared to be arrested.

SS: So what did it mean to do support? What was involved with that?

ST: In support, you stayed with the people who got arrested; you went to the police station with them; you waited till they got out; you found out information about them, where they were taking them, and if you had to call their families, some people had directions. You took little papers at the beginning. And everybody would fill out a paper; their emergency person, your family; phone numbers to call if they were sick, if they needed medicine, you had to go get in and tell them that these people need medicine at the police station. You had, I had somebody's medicine with me, I couldn't remember, that I had to bring in; stuff like that.

SS: Okay. So what was the action that the Candelabras did?

ST: They were all over the news, the Candelabras. That action was one where they had the gravestones, and they were laying down. And, they diverted a lot of stuff. They were taking people away in a bus, and the Candelabras laid down with their stones. The FDA was incredible. We were just running from place to place. And they were, we died-in in about a hundred places

that day, before they got arrested. Trying to stop people getting arrested, or the cops coming, by this way, we'd lay down real fast and – that was it.

SS: What did it say on the gravestones?

ST: Oh, everybody had a different one. Some people had Rest in Peace and somebody's name, maybe that had died of AIDS. Or Dying from Government Neglect; Dying from Red Tape; stuff like that.

SS: Were you afraid?

ST: No, not at all. Not at all. By the time I went down, I was really psyched, and ready to go.

SS: So can you describe the whole action, the FDA action?

ST: The FDA action was incredible. I'd never seen anything like it in my life. People came in costumes. There was somebody with a ladder, who got – and the police wouldn't let the ladder go by, right, because I think it was Peter Staley was going to climb up on the building and unfurl a banner, right? So the group that was coming with the ladder, the cops kept trying to stop them. And other groups kept laying in front of them, so they couldn't get by, and – and then they were trying to pull them off, and somebody else was running in front of them. They were laying in front of the bus.

But – the action was pretty incredible. Even the people in the FDA were by the windows, waving, and holding up signs in support. No other action we ever had, I think, was ever like that again. And people were really prepared.

There were little groups that came in costumes. I don't know; there were people in costumes, there were people in lab coats, there was a group of people who, their action was to try to get inside. And I think they did, for a few minutes; I don't know how long, I don't remember.

But we did stop, they said, no more business as usual, and we did stop business as usual for that day.

SS: What was the demand?

ST: I think the approval of new drugs, that it would come quicker; that there wouldn't be so much red tape, and things that weren't approved could be tried on people, that compassionate-use stuff. There would be new rules for that stuff. And I think ACT UP did achieve that.

SS: Okay, great. So how long did you stay with the Candelabras? Did you guys continue after?

ST: Yeah, we were together for awhile, I don't know exactly. Maybe a year, year and a half. And then we broke off into other groups, because people got into other committees, and then you start doing things with your committee. So it didn't stay together that long. But we were together for a few actions.

SS: What were some other actions that you guys did, your affinity group?

ST: I think we did a Wall Street one. I can't even remember. We did, the NIH, I think we did together. I can't remember.

SS: Okay. So let's talk about the NIH action. So you went down there. Can you describe that action a little bit?

ST: Yeah. A lot of people went down to the NIH. And I think the night before, we had a meeting before. And everybody was really psyched up. And that was, I don't remember the guy's name, either. He [Tony Malliaris] made that rap tape, and everybody was singing the rap tape, and everybody was real excited about going. It was a huge action. A lot of people got arrested. But I don't think, it wasn't quite as good as the FDA. Because the FDA was really spontaneous. By the time we got to the NIH, a lot of stuff was negotiated with the cops about how people would get arrested, and what they would do with them. I think when we went to the FDA, I think it was a little more free; people were just getting arrested everywhere. It wasn't negotiated as much as when we went to the NIH.

SS: Why was there that shift towards negotiation?

ST: I don't know. I don't know. I think in the beginning, it just seemed to me that people were more gung-ho, and more into it. And then we got more people who couldn't get arrested, after awhile. And so you had to negotiate for some people, for whatever reason. Maybe immigration, or whatever reasons they couldn't get – So you had to do all that kind of stuff.

And I think the group just shifted by then. I don't think it was as militant by then as it was in the beginning.

SS: Can you talk about that a little bit more, why you think that happened, or what shows that?

ST: I don't know. I think that – I don't know. Some people got a little more complacent, I think, from being arrested so many times. I don't know. And there were some new people that came into the group. And the group was changing a little bit by then. Some people were leaving; a lot of people had died, who were really, really into things at the beginning, who weren't there anymore. There were some little splits because of different committees. And there was a lot of disagreement, I think, by then, about how we would get arrested, and all of that stuff.

SS: Okay. So where did you do most of your work in ACT UP? What committees or what –

ST: I was on Majority Actions and the Housing Committee.

SS: Can you explain what Majority Action was?

ST: Majority Actions were some women, people of color; and I think the idea was that it was Majority Actions because we weren't going to be a minority in the group. When I first came there, it was Dan Williams; there was a guy named Alan, I can't think of his last name; Robert Garcia was in it for awhile,

Robert Vasquez; Lei Chou; Emily Gordon; and a little later on, Wahn Yoon and Michael Wiggins. Marvin Palmer. I just can't think of everybody's name.

But we did actions. And not only actions, that went against just the system, kind of thing, like fight against the system. But I think it went – some smaller actions were – people of color were having a lot of harder time in the city; not only color but a class thing and poor people. And I think we tried to do actions that would reflect that.

SS: Do you remember what some of those actions were?

ST: Yeah. I mean, we did one at Kings County Hospital, because of the poor treatment at Kings County Hospital.

SS: What was the situation there?

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00:20:00

ST: People with AIDS were being turned away, I think, at the time. Or they were coming in, and they weren't being tested for HIV, even though it was real obvious that that might be the case, because they didn't really have the means, or they didn't want to deal with it, the medicine and stuff. They weren't testing them, giving them drugs for diarrhea and sending them home. And by the time they found out what they had, they had two T-cells, because they had been coming back and forth, they were never tested for HIV. So just better services all around.

There were a lot of people there with Medicaid. And people with Medicaid, clearly, in all the hospitals, weren't getting treated the same way as people with insurance. So there were some of the issues.

SS: What was the action itself, at Kings County?

ST: I know we marched to the hospital – I don't know we marched from where. But we marched to the hospital; we did a die-in in front of the hospital. We gave, we leafleted. We leafleted, like, not only the hospital, but the whole surrounding community. We were there from the morning, we went to different places before the actual demonstration. And I think we demanded better treatment. We met with somebody from the hospital, one of the hospital administrators. And I think that eventually, that emergency there got a little better there, for people with AIDS.

SS: ACT UP did a few actions in hospitals, and it's always very dicey, because you don't want to disrupt service. So how did you handle that?

ST: Well, it wasn't actually in the hospital; it was outside the hospital. And we decided, when we got close to the hospital, that we wouldn't be really loud, that it would mostly be banners and not chants. Most of the stuff was done a few blocks away from the hospital, across the street from the hospital. There were no actual actions in the hospital. Because we talked about, like you said, people being sick, you couldn't really block the doors, and all that stuff.

But I think it was annoying enough for the hospital administrators to come out and want to meet.

SS: And how did they treat you, the administrators?

ST: Well, I think that it went okay. Because there was a lot of media there. At the time, ACT UP was getting a lot of media. And I think that that's what they were more afraid of, the bad press. And it was a very large action. There were a lot of people there. And it was all over the TV. And it was in the papers; it made most of the papers. And I think that they felt they had to meet, and they had to do something about it, because it was just too public, it was just right out there.

SS: Now what was the dynamic? You're saying that ACT UP would not take up an issue like Kings County unless the Majority Action Committee pushed it forward? Or –

ST: No, I don't think that's it. I think that, there were two groups of people in ACT UP. There were the groups of people who thought that until they had AIDS, they thought that the government was out there, and working for them. And I went to an affinity group meeting with this guy, I don't remember his name; and he said it, quite clear. And he was really serious. He said, I can't believe that my government let me down. I had a good job, I had plenty of money. But when I got sick, the government let me down. I wasn't getting the services, I got treated like a pariah.

Then there was the other group — and it wasn't only people of color; but there's another group, I think it's more of a class thing — who knew that the system stunk, and the system had been letting them down, for years. And I think that because of that, it wasn't even that ACT UP wouldn't take it up, but a lot of people in ACT UP didn't see these as major issues, because it didn't affect them. And I think sometimes you can't really get into something, unless it actually affects you, because you don't really understand it, no matter what people tell you. It's like the guy said; he couldn't believe the system let him down.

SS: So inside ACT UP, the same people who were sitting next to each other every day, getting arrested together, were having totally different experiences of healthcare and –

ST: Well, I think anywhere where you have 500 people together, people are having totally different experiences. But I think there was – on one side, there were totally different experiences. And then there was, on another side, that, at the beginning, when I first joined ACT UP, there was an affinity that was there because of the, that it was the urgency; because of AIDS; because there was nowhere else people could go, especially if you were HIV-positive. There weren't many places you could go with your issues. There weren't many places you could go and talk about your personal stuff, and feel comfortable.

So I think that's what held the group together, as a group. But yeah, I think there were people experiencing different things. People with insurance were definitely feeling something different than people going in with Medicaid.

SS: So people in ACT UP who were on Medicaid; would they ever go to the people who had private insurance, and say, help me, I need a better doctor; what kind of medicine should I be asking for?

ST: Sure. I think that it was. But I think that – I think that, that's why committees formed. Because there's people with different interests and different things, and you know you're going to work harder for the things that you're interested in. And I think that's why different committee formed, the Majority Action formed. On some issues, they ask people to come, they asked the floor to come in. And people did come, and people showed up, and they work with us. And others, they didn't. And I think that's always going to happen, though. When you get people who don't have the same experiences as you, you get together on a thing that is the same about you?

SS: I want to ask you about Robert Garcia. We're trying to have people help us remember people who died of AIDS, who can't be interviewed here. And Robert Garcia was a really important person in ACT UP. If you have any memories of him that you could share with us –

ST: Well, Robert Garcia was in Majority Actions only for a little while, while I was in there, because he became a facilitator during that time, and he worked a lot with the larger group. And he was on a lot of other committees. But he worked real hard. He was real hard, and he was out there. I remember once we had an argument about going to an AIDS conference; who was going to go, but –

SS: What was the argument?

ST: Well, he thought that only people who were positive, and openly positive, should be able to go, and they should get first choice. And I wanted to go to the conference. So we had an argument, because he wanted to go, also. But he was a hard worker. He worked a lot.

SS: So who won? Who won the argument?

ST: Me. I went, {LAUGHS} I went. But he worked real hard. He worked real hard for a long time. And then when he got sick, it was– I think it put, it really put people back. Made them take a step back, and think. Because I know after awhile, there were people find – oh, I'd seen him in the street myself, like lost, and bringing him home, because he had dementia, really bad. And it was really hard to see somebody who was so articulate, who worked so hard on so many issues; who didn't even know where he lived after awhile. Really sad; it was one of the saddest things since I was in ACT UP, to see that,

SS: And how would people respond when that happened to somebody? How did the community respond?

ST: I think because it was such a hard thing to respond to. I think people had their own personal grief. But I think on the floor, and with the main group, I think it really just turned into more anger, to see people like that – I know that's what it did for me. You felt sad, of course you felt sad. But the anger was just overwhelming. It was like, how could you let this happen.

SS: Why do you think it happened? Why do you think there was so much neglect?

ST: I think it happened because, I mean it's quite obvious; because of the group it happened to. If it happened to straight white men; straight white men got Legionnaire's Disease; they found a cure, and they found the reason they got it in two months. So I think if it was a group of straight white men, they would have had something going real quick. But because it was people of color, poor people; IV drug users; gay people; it was a group that was unwanted anyway, by the system.

SS: Okay. Let's go back to some more about Majority Action. So what were some other actions that you guys did?

ST: We did a conference, up at Hunter College for people from around the country; we brought people, tried to bring other groups together, and talk about actions, and some women's issues; people of color. And I think it was

pretty successful. It was a three-day conference. And it was a little hard to get together, but it came off.

I had a baseball team in Jersey City that ACT UP funded. It didn't get much support from the main floor as far as people coming. They were willing to give the money. But it did a lot of good. We did a lot of outreach. We did a lot of –

SS: What was the name of the team?

ST: It just was ACT UP, on the back. I think it was the ACT UP Renegades. And there was a, a bunch of – almost middle-aged men, who played softball in Jersey City. But they got a large crowd. They got people from projects, surrounding projects, who used to come out and watch the games. And we did a lot of outreach, giving out condoms; a lot of leaflets. We got to talk to a lot of people. And we did it for two years, and I think it did a lot of good.

But you can't get a lot of people to come to New Jersey; that's the problem.

SS: Right, right. Let's see. Anything else about Majority Action? Any other actions?

ST: Yeah, I think that we represented ACT UP at a lot of conferences, because the majority of ACT UP were a lot of straight white — not straight — gay white men. And I think that Majority Actions went to

conferences, and was able to talk to people from other places, and people could identify with our group a little more, in some places, than the whole floor.

SS: Okay. Now you were talking about an AIDS conference.

Which conference was that? Was that Montreal?

ST: That we went to?

SS: Yeah, that you went to.

ST: We went to, I think, all the conferences, in the beginning.

Montreal. We went to a lot of minority AIDS conferences in different places. San Francisco; we went to another one in Canada. Quite a few. And we represented ACT UP.

SS: Can you describe what happened at the Montreal conference?

ST: It's hard to remember, even. We went to the conference. The thing I remember the most is the silliest thing. They stayed – we were staying at a school, right? And we got to the school, it was more like a little prison. It looked like a little girls' prison, right? And everybody called it The Prison after that.

But we stayed at this school. We went to the conference. People were like, really upset that people with AIDS weren't allowed into the conference, that it was, it was too expensive for them to go. So there was like no scholarships, or any of that stuff, to get into the conference. So everybody was a little pissed, and ACT UP didn't have as much money at the time, right? So to get

into the conference, I think it was Richard Deagle, printed us badges. And they were really good; they looked just as good as the people in the conference. And they had people in the conference's names on them, who had paid. Right?

So when you get in there, sometime you'd see maybe, I don't know, "Joe Harris"; and you'd see Joe Harris sitting over there, and you had the same badge on, so you had to get away from him really quick, right?

But the badges were really good, and it really worked, and it enabled us to get into the conference; to do demonstrations, like at – at some of the drug companies; to do it at the main event that they had, that stopped the main event. We all got in there because we had those little badges.

SS: How many of you got in that way?

ST: A lot. There were maybe over a hundred of us that got inside. And it really worked; it was great. He really did a good job. And that was before there were like, now, I guess it would be easy, with scanning and all that stuff. But he was really good at that, and our badges looked really good.

We even ended up with little bags. I don't know how. But they got conference bags, we had – we got everything when we got there, because we had our little badges.

SS: So how did you guys decide to take over the conference?

ST: I think we talked about it before we get in there. It was the secretary of health – I can't remember his name now.

SS: Louis Sullivan.

ST: Right. And he was really bad with AIDS policies and all this stuff. So we decided, when he talked, that we would turn our backs; make noise, turn our backs. And when we did, it was just – we didn't realize that there were so many people who felt the same way; there were doctors, and other people in the conference. So he really got screwed, because it wasn't just this hundred people, it was most of the conference turning their back on him, and making noise, and he was getting more pissed by the minute up there, but you couldn't hear a word of what he was saying.

There was a little bit of controversy, because some people were saying, well, it was AIDS information he was giving, and you shouldn't drown them out. But it was really bullshit he was saying, so it really didn't matter anyway.

SS: How did you guys end up on the stage?

ST: After we stood up and turned around, I think we just kind of start, we marched up on the stage, and nobody stopped us, at the time. But, the great part about it was when we went to the conference, it was even better, on our way there; they told us on the bus that when you get to Canada, they're going to take all your bags off the bus; when you get to the border; and they're going to search your bags, and you're going to have to get off, and everybody was really worried, right, that they might stop us or something.

And we all had shirts on that said, We're all living with HIV, right? So when we got to the border, the guy got on the bus that was supposed to take us off with our bags. And he, we're all ready with our bags, to get off the bus.

He said, you're all living with AIDS? Have a good day. And he got off the bus, and he didn't want to be bothered, because people were still afraid. And he left, so they didn't even, he didn't even look at us, hardly. He just left. So we didn't have to get off with our bags and stuff, so that was a good thing.

SS: Now what about the San Francisco conference?

ST: I went to a couple conferences in San Francisco. The International AIDS one. It was pretty incredible. We just stopped everything at the conference. We also stopped traffic. We were everywhere, as I recall. There were a lot of us that went; over 100 people that went. And the ACT UPs from all over the country, we met there. And we protested drug companies, high prices of drugs; a lot of the same things that are still problems now.

I think, the Montreal conference, I think, was the one, though, where ACT UP had made fast track with the drugs; they made a plan. And we passed them out there. It was Mark Harrington that wrote it. And I think that that was what, still today, I think that they use, as a guideline, is like, fast-tracking drugs. That would have never happened without ACT UP, and those protests.

SS: Now we have some footage of police violence in San Francisco.

ST: There was, there was. And I think part of it was they weren't really equipped to deal with – they didn't think there were going to be as many people; they didn't expect as many demonstrations and as many places, because it was, like, not just a conference, but all over the city, there were different places.

There was violence at a lot of the demonstrations. I was in Chicago, where I'd seen them step on a blind guy with a horse. It did happen, you know. And I guess –

SS: But I mean, you think of San Francisco; it's supposed to be the best place for gay people in the country. It's not a place where you think about police brutality against people with AIDS.

ST: But I think they were — and I'm not sticking up for them — but I think people were still really afraid. They were still wearing gloves and masks to arrest us. They were afraid, and – they didn't, I don't think they knew how to deal with it; how to deal with this.

Because people – I think they'd seen it, in a lot of places, that these people are sick; we don't want to touch them. And then you got to think, if you're the police, you have to say; how's this going to make us look? You see people are dying, and we're like beating them up. So I think that saved us in a lot of places where there would have been a whole lot more violence. I that San

Francisco, there was just so much of it, and they just, so many demonstrations, they didn't know how to deal with it. And I don't think they were really trained for this. Even though there's a lot of gay people, they weren't having huge demonstrations all over the city before this. And there wasn't a lot of training for this, and people were still afraid.

I think in some places, they were afraid of us more than we were afraid of them.

I was on the elevator in San Francisco. And this whole group got on, a tourist group. And a little kid was with his mother, and he said, hey — we had shirts on — aren't those the people with AIDS? He said, those poor people.

And she said, oh no, not them! They're proud of it, she said.

So I don't think that people were ready to deal with that. They were ready to deal with like, people who were going to come and — and you think of a patient kind of thing,. And when you came, people were coming out fighting, and then people in different cities didn't know what was going to happen, and I think that they overreacted in a lot of places.

SS: Well, what's interesting is that ACT UP itself was never violent. So how were you trained to not respond with violence to the police violence? How was that enforced?

ST: I think ACT UP talked about that all the time. It was in the by-laws; they talked about us being a nonviolent group; and that violence would just

Tape I
00:35:00

get more violence. Even if you touch the cop, I remember them saying, if you touch a cop when you're getting arrested, they could get you for assault on an officer.

And I think people in ACT UP, they were people who wanted to change what was going on, as far as the system. But these weren't for the most part, people in ACT UP were people who were going to jobs every day; some people were stockbrokers. It wasn't like you had this street-gang kind of mentality there. So I don't think it was that hard for people to go with the nonviolent thing.

SS: Yeah, it's not hard to go with it as an idea, but when you're actually there, and the cops are actually pushing –

ST: Well, I'm saying – I don't think – I think what ACT UP did is incredible. But I think for the most part, this group of people weren't a bunch of thugs, right? And I think lots of people were out there, they were getting arrested, but they were scared, I think, of what was going on. They were doing it because they knew it had to be done. But I don't think everybody was trained in street tactics, you know what I mean? And I think that maybe, in some cases, fear took over. You see people getting stepped on, the natural reaction is to step back, I think, for most people. It's not – do you know what I mean? It's not like – I don't know. I think there were people who just came out of going to some place on Wall Street every day; and I don't know, they never jaywalked, and they were

getting arrested. So I think that – actions – the reaction is different from people like that, and the people who were out there, and have to fend for themselves every day. Some people couldn't believe they were there.

SS: So the police misunderstood who they were, you're saying.

ST: No, no, I'm talking about as far as fighting back, as far as the people in the group fighting back. Not the police, police are used to – arresting people that have a history of being violent. And I think, for the most part, though, as many demonstrations as we had, I think that because ACT UP, who they were, got the least violence of any other group that would have did that. Do you know what I mean? I think that – I think that that's why many groups that came after ACT UP, or during ACT UP, didn't get the same results as ACT UP. Because a large part of the people in ACT UP had influence; they had money. I'm not saying everybody. And that's why ACT UP, I think that's a big part of why ACT UP worked. Not that they brought the large numbers of people. But it was who they were. I've seen demonstrations with like thousands of Haitians, who barely got any publicity at all; who were treated way worse than people in ACT UP ever were. And I think that that makes a difference. – some people don't want to talk about it that way, but I think it does. I think if ACT UP weren't who they were, in their regular life, that things would have went a whole lot differently.

JAMES WENTZY: We should change tapes.

SS: Oh, change tapes? Okay.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: So you're bringing up a really interesting contradiction. Because when I asked you before, why was there so much neglect, you were, like, well, they were gay people, they were people of color, they were drug users, nobody cared about them. But now you're saying, but they had all these privileges and all this access. So it's an interesting contradiction. How you could be a person whose life doesn't matter, and still have privileges? How did that work out?

ST: Well, because I think when you're gay and you're in your own life, it's not like you're a large group of people. And I mean – lots of people work on Wall Street, and go to their jobs every day, and they're not advertising the gay thing. And I think that people could – block that out in a way, as far as business goes. And money talks. It doesn't matter who you are if you got money.

But I think as a group, it wasn't just those people dying. There were a lot of people with no money, who were gay, who were IV drug users, and for the most part, that's who was dying. And I think that it's easy to neglect them, if you really want to get rid of them anyway.

SS: So what would happen — you were talking about the Haitian demonstration — what would happen when ACT UP, with all its access, would be in coalition with another AIDS community, or another AIDS organization, that didn't have that access?

ST: See, I think there were coalitions made with ACT UP to other places. But I think coalitions were ACT UP's downfall. They had a hard time making coalitions, I'm trying to say. And I think it's because there were so many people in ACT UP who really couldn't identify with some of the issues of people of color and, and a different class of people, without money. And a lot of people were in ACT UP to save themselves – and I don't think that's a bad thing, all the way around. And I think that they thought that most of the time that they had should be spent on issues for themselves, that would help them.

SS: Can you give an example of a coalition that you felt didn't work out, or –

ST: I don't think it didn't work out. I think that they just weren't good at it. There were a lot more coalitions that should have been made.

SS: Are you thinking of anything particular – anything specific?

ST: Well, I remember on the floor once, and we talked about – making this coalition, when we did the Kings County thing, with other groups. And a few people came up. And they said, we don't want to do it, or we don't want to be involved in it. It's fine if your committee wants to do it; but we don't want to waste time on that. We're here to do stuff for us. We want to get new drugs in the pipeline; we want to do things that are going to benefit us; and we're

just not going to do this. And I think part of ACT UP just didn't do it, and they didn't want to be involved in it.

So I think there was one part trying to make coalitions and trying to reach out to other people. And I think you had to, to keep growing, because the epidemic was changing and was moving. But you had this group of mostly white men who – I told you, had a little privilege; and some of them who started ACT UP; and they were in it because they wanted to save themselves, and I think that that's all they wanted to do, and I think that might be one of the reasons that treatment, the treatment part of ACT UP split, because those people were in that group. And, I don't think they see an advantage, and they wanted to do what was good for them, and I think that made it hard to make coalitions. And they were just part of the group that wanted to do, I think that made a split in the group, at some point.

SS: I just wanted to talk a little bit about how ACT UP operated. So if Majority Action said, we're going to do an action at Kings County –

ST: Right.

SS: – and other people said, we don't want to do that; could they stop you from doing it, or just not go?

ST: Yeah, but they wouldn't say *we* don't want to do it.

SS: Oh, okay.

ST: They, the floor was able to approve it or not approve it, like as an ACT UP–stamped action. And because it was so politically not correct to say, we, no; they mostly always said yes, but that didn't mean that everybody would show up, or help you work on it. You know what I mean? There were some people who would. But I mean, there were a lot of people who wouldn't.

SS: Well, they wouldn't stop you from doing something –

ST: Right.

SS: – but they just wouldn't support it.

ST: Right. They would support it, maybe, in theory, but, talking to you, but physically, wouldn't show up, or help you out with it.

SS: Okay. Now what about the conference at Hunter?

Weren't there other community groups involved in that conference?

ST: There were, but it was stuff that Majority Action set up. It was like the Latino Commission on AIDS; other people of color. There were some people from the general floor of ACT UP who came. The women's group came. And like I said, they wouldn't stop you, but they, and they gave you the money to do it, if you wanted to do it, they would approve the action, but it don't mean that a lot of people would work on it. Just like the baseball team. They approved it, they gave money. But a whole bunch of people, beside Majority Actions, didn't come to New Jersey to support it.

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: So then one of the ways ACT UP worked — tell me if I'm right — is that constituencies could use ACT UP's resources that the privileged people could attract to develop other kinds of programs. But they wouldn't get the numbers of support.

ST: Right.

SS: Okay.

ST: Right.

SS: So before we get to Florence, what other committees were you on? You mentioned, besides –

ST: I was on Housing.

SS: Housing. Okay, so how did you decide to get involved in that?

ST: I don't, I really don't know. I probably went with somebody else to another committee meeting. And once you went to these things, you got really involved, because you get in there, you go once or twice just to check it out, and then you'd be there, because there'd be issues, right, there were so many issues that were so important. And you'd end up going to a meeting every night. And I started going to Housing meetings. And Charles King – had lots of stuff already on the agenda for Housing. And we did a lot of actions with Housing.

SS: What was the situation for housing for people with AIDS, before the Housing Committee?

ST: There was none. It was a really bad situation. People with AIDS were living in the street, if they didn't have money; and they still are, in some places. But Housing Works has become one of the, what, the biggest providers in the country for people with AIDS, with housing.

SS: So when the Housing Committee started, was their goal to actually create housing?

ST: No. I mean, Housing Works, or just Housing?

SS: Well, Housing Works came out of the Housing –

ST: Right. I think that, when I first came into Housing, the biggest issue was, they were building more shelters for people with AIDS; and that people with AIDS being in shelters was a really crummy situation. You get coughed on, you get TB; you're using the same facilities as other people; you're catching different diseases. And they really need their own room, their own bathroom, that kind of thing. And that was the big thing, when I first came into Housing Works; the Bellevue Shelter. They wanted, they were opening the Bellevue Shelter. And Housing Works was saying, this is not a good situation for people with AIDS. They need something else. And they – that was the big thing when I first came in there. And they wanted them, they wanted more SROs for people with AIDS; more money for it. And that was the big issue then. Housing Works didn't come till later on.

SS: So who was on the Housing Committee? Who do you remember?

ST: I can't remember. You know what? Even at Majority Actions, I didn't even mention Ray Navarro, and he was really one of the big people on Majority Actions. But Housing; Lei Chou; myself; Charles King, Keith Cylar; Michael Wiggins; I'm trying to think who else. James Wentzy was on it for awhile, weren't you? On Housing?

JAMES WENTZY: I just watched.

ST: But you came for awhile, right? I can't even remember everybody's name. But it was a pretty big committee. People worked really hard. We had different demos down for, down at HUD, for more money for people with AIDS.

SS: In Washington?

ST: No, in the city.

SS: Downtown?

ST: Yeah, downtown. We went to Albany, for money for housing for people with AIDS. We had a demo there. We'd have little demos around the city. I remember chaining ourselves to desks or something, down at City Hall; just more money for people with AIDS, for housing and stuff. And getting pulled off of furniture down there. It was so stupid; we chained ourselves to furniture, right? And they had this huge cop come down, who didn't even need the clippers

to get you off handcuffs. And he was pulling people and the furniture up, and throwing them down so that the chains would break.

So – and they were dragging us along with our furniture. I don't think it was as good an idea as it sounded like before we did it. Then a lot of things weren't. A lot of things were trial and error.

SS: So how did they make the transition from an activist approach to housing to actually getting into the business of creating housing, or doing service?

ST: I think that was Charles King and Keith Cylar. I think that might have been Charles's idea, from the beginning; Charles had a big plan for housing, always.

He was one of the main people in the committee for housing; he had a lot of the ideas, and he knew a lot of the stuff. The protests were set up, a lot of them, by him, because he knew a lot of stuff going on. He worked as a reverend. He worked for another housing organization, I think. I remember, he used to give tours of the subways, where people were living, to, city officials. So he knew a lot of the issues, and I think that when they broke off the Housing Works, I think a lot of that was his idea.

SS: Was that controversial inside ACT UP, to be giving this service?

ST: It was. I mean, because ACT UP loaned Housing Works money to get started. And by that time, there were a whole lot of, it was later on; it was after ACT UP was around for awhile, and there were a lot of contradictions from the people inside the organization, of the issues. There was half of the group who really wanted to be into pushing new drugs, new drugs down the pipeline; clinical trials; that was like their main issue. And then there was another group, or little groups, that were more social issues: housing, access to care for people of color, poor people. And I think it was little groups that were inside of the group itself. And I think that the people who want, the drug-access people, who were more interested in that, wanted more money to go to conferences, and more money for, to get on their own little panels, different places, so they needed money to travel to these places. And they really didn't want the money to go out to start Housing Works. It was supposed to be a loan. They didn't know if the money would ever come back.

Tape II
00:10:00

SS: How much money was it?

ST: I don't remember. I really don't remember.

And I think they did pay it back, at some point. But I think, like before, I said, some people just weren't interested in those issues. They were there for their – their own stuff, their own agenda. Everybody had their own agenda, I guess. It's amazing that a group like that worked, and the way it did, for so long.

SS: Do you think that people in ACT UP who were poor or who were homeless were socializing with people who were very wealthy?

ST: Oh yeah, they were. And I think that the link was if you're dying, and if you're pretty desperate, you get into alliance with people; you get a different feeling about things. Sure there were. There were people who, I think, socialized in ACT UP who would never, ever, in a million years, if it wasn't that situation, even talk to each other on the street, or in another situation. But I think that's the thing that held the group together so long, and made it work. Even people you didn't like in ACT UP, right – you would support them in some way, because you had the same issues. The basic issues were there. You were there, people were dying, it was urgent; a lot of people in the group were dying; and this was it. There was nowhere else to go but ACT UP. And I think some people came to ACT UP or they would have jumped out windows if they didn't come to ACT UP, because it was also, in a way, some kind of therapy for people coming there. Whether you were rich or poor that was one of the only places you could talk about your condition, your friend's condition, whoever you were taking care of. That was the only place to talk about it. And I think that made an alliance that would have never happened anywhere else.

And the anger was there. Everybody was pissed. They weren't getting the services; most people were still treated like pariahs, in the beginning;

and that was the only place people were comfortable. And I think that made alliances that would have never happened anywhere else.

SS: I want to ask you about getting arrested. What was the first time you got arrested in ACT UP?

ST: I don't remember. It was right after the FDA, whatever that was. I think it was a smaller demonstration. It wasn't – I don't remember what it was for. It was a small demonstration, it was maybe like 10 people got arrested. Majority Actions had it, and I can't remember exactly even what it was for. That was the first time. But the first big time after that, I think was City Hall.

SS: Can you describe what happened at City Hall?

ST: City Hall was the first time we decided to make the wave system, where you get arrested in waves, right? So, one group would maybe have a demonstration on that corner, over there. And another one on the next corner, so you'd get arrested, like that. The first group would get arrested, and they called it waves, because the next one would come like a wave to get arrested. Right?

And what happened was, there were thousands of people there. And a whole lot of people got arrested. But I was in the first wave of that. So I got arrested so quick that I didn't see anything else! We got arrested maybe 20 minutes into the demonstration, we were the first wave, and we were out of there.

So we'd seen the people there, and – but we missed almost the whole demonstration, because we were in a paddy wagon and that jail, quick.

SS: How many times did you get arrested for ACT UP?

ST: I don't know. Maybe about 10 or 15.

SS: Ten or 15? And did they ever tell you, you have too many arrests; if you get arrested again, you're going to have a higher penalty?

ST: Oh, no. And you know what? I made it really good, getting arrested, for some reason, maybe because I look like – I don't know, I think I could have went anywhere with my little shopping bag, and I was always limping along? But even when we got, we got arrested at St. Pat's, and I was one of the people who went to trial; and we all had to go to probation. When I came to probation, I was the only person who, out of that group, didn't get recommended for jail.

SS: Why?

ST: Because I look like somebody's mother, and I was like, is this where we go? Is this where I sit down? And the guy said, who are you here for? I said, me. He said, you? What did you do?

I said – he said, why did you do this?

I said, I was on a mission from God.

He said, I understand.

And I didn't get a reco-, I didn't have a hard time with the police at all, and almost every time I got arrested, I was complaining, because I couldn't walk up the steps with the handcuffs in back of me, I had to get somebody to help me with the steps, and I was like, could you help me, could you help me, could you help me? And they were pretty nice. I didn't have any jail problems, you know, in jail. None. They didn't get – none of that.

SS: Okay. And St. Pat's was your only trial?

ST: That was the only trial I went to, yeah.

SS: Okay, we'll get back to that later.

I want to ask you about Ray. A lot of people have talked about Ray, and we also interviewed his mother. Do you have any stories about Ray that you want to share?

ST: Ray was the hardest-working man in ACT UP, I think. He – he was the person who started — and you talk about coalitions, with people, right? — he started safe-sex things at Escuelita, the club downtown, with drag queens. He got the drag queens to do safe-sex shows with people, which was really unheard of then. The guy who owned the club didn't want it, and Ray talked him into it. And he had to go through all of these, he had to do the training for them, and – yeah, I think he even shot a little documentary that he did with it, too; I'm not sure. But they got huge crowds down for this. And lots of drag queens, and I'm sure a lot of drag queens got condoms because of Ray.

Ray ran from one place to the next. He did a lot of work for Majority Actions. Because he was, he'd set up with other groups. He was somebody who was a good coalition-builder. People liked him, in other groups. And he was able to make that transition from his group to go almost anywhere. He was the kind of guy that was really pleasant, and could really get along with anybody, somebody you would just like you right from the beginning, that was Ray. And I think that's what made it work for him.

SS: Okay.

ST: And I think he stayed well as long as he did because he was working too hard to get sick. One time he told me: I can't get sick, I have an appointment next Wednesday. I think it kept him alive a lot longer than he would have.

SS: Okay. You said you went to the Florence conference?

ST: Yes.

SS: What was that conference about?

ST: We went to Florence. It was the International AIDS Conference. We did mostly protests at drug companies, at the time, for lower prices in drugs. I think that was the most protests we had. And we had three different ones, and I remember the drug companies were at the conference, we did three of them. Nobody got arrested.

And most of them were inside the conference. We had one large protest in the street, with – I can't remember the – Arcigay, or something like that, is the local organization there. And it was just, we just marched with them, because they were demanding more services for people with AIDS. And that's about all I remember from there.

SS: Okay. So let's talk about St. Pat's. Are you Catholic?

ST: I was a practicing Catholic as child, till I was about maybe 11.

SS: So given that, how did you react when you first realized what ACT UP was going to do?

ST: Oh, I thought it was a great idea. I couldn't wait to get involved. You kidding? I thought it was a really good idea. Even though I made my communion and confirmation, my family weren't real big churchgoers. They went on Sundays and Easter, but they weren't real involved in things. And I was an only child. My mother pretty much let me do what I want so I was not going from when I was 11. They were still going to church, and I wasn't going. So no, I wasn't like real involved in the church. But I thought it was like a great idea when they did it.

Because at the time, Catholics, the Catholic Church was doing a whole lot of – the AIDS centers, that were taking care of people; they were getting most of the money in New York City. And in all those places, they

wouldn't give out condoms or speak about condoms, and they were still getting the money.

And there was some law or something, where if they kept these centers as AIDS centers for I don't know how many years it was — for a certain number of years — that the city would give them the buildings. So they were making all these millions of dollars off of AIDS; they didn't give a shit. They were going on TV, and [John Cardinal] O'Connor, at the time, was like – he was really adamant about no condoms, no talking about condoms; gay people deserved AIDS kind of thing. I thought it was a great idea.

SS: And did you decide beforehand that you were going to get arrested, or did you just go –

ST: Oh yeah, I was in an affinity group – I got arrested there really quick, too, one of those places. Yeah, I was in an affinity group, we got arrested.

SS: Which affinity group was it?

ST: It was just from Majority Actions. Just at that time. It was just Majority Actions.

SS: So what did you do?

ST: We chained ourselves to the pews. Right? And Michael Wiggins was next to me, and the guy who cut me off was like, step over here, really nice. And then he, he kicked him under the pew, and was really repeatedly kicking him under there. And I'm screaming, on the side, right? Let him go, let

him go, kind of thing. And then they took us out, but I missed most of that too, because we were maybe the first few people to get arrested in St. Pat's, at the time. But I know it was huge – I still think, I know some people still think that that wasn't a good idea for ACT UP. I think it was one of the best things. I think it got one of the most publicity. And just that picture of O'Connor alone, the next day, when he said over my dead body; it was worth it. On the *Daily News*?

SS: So how did you prepare the trial? Who was the attorney, and how many defendants?

ST: Seven defendants; I don't remember the attorney's name, I'm sorry. And I think we only had one meeting before the trial.

SS: Do you remember who the other defendants were?

ST: Yeah. It was me, Charles King, Kathy Otter; let me see – Ann Northrop; Michael Wiggins; I can't remember who the other two people were. You. Well, you weren't one – oh yeah, Rod Sorge, right? And I don't remember who the other person was. I'm just old and senile, I'm sorry.

SS: That's okay. What was the charge?

ST: Oh – trespassing, I think. And we went down to a whole week; the trial was a week long, right?

SS: Did you have a jury trial, or a judge?

ST: Judge. The judge was reading the paper when we're down there, and eating her lunch, for most of the trial. It was like, we were in the pa-

we were in the paper every day, like Jimmy Breslin's column, saying, today, they stood up, and Kathy Otter was doing a little dance on the side. It was just every day, a little bit of reporting from it. We just told our stories. People from ACT UP came down every day to support us, and were getting kicked out every day, because they were making a whole bunch of noise in the background.

The best one was, though, when they had, they had the cops come in, who arrested us. And it had been months in between. And they brought the pictures of us, taking pictures with cops, right? They had to take a Polaroid when you get arrested? And mine, it was like we were on a date. We were smiling for the picture, right?

And Charles King, his cop came up to the stand, right? They were saying, Charles King was his own lawyer; he defended himself, because he's also a lawyer.

And he said to the cop, you were saying all these things about me, like being disorderly and hard to arrest and all this stuff. But didn't you say, he said to him, that I was one of the best people you'd ever arrested?

And the cop said, yeah. He shook his head.

He said, and didn't I loan you my pen?

The cop said, yeah.

He said, did you give it back?

And the cop got all red. He said, no. And everybody was laughing. It was like a big circus, the trial, right?

But the Catholic Church was really serious about it. They wanted us to have jail time. They had their henchman, whoever the guy was at the time, come down there every single day, for the trial. And that was the big thing. Their lawyer told us, they wanted jail time for us, they wanted to make examples out of us. But it didn't turn out that way. Because I think that the judge felt like – that she didn't want to be the bad guy, and didn't want people protesting at her house. So I think she had to find a way to get out of it.

And what they did, in the end, was they gave us community service. We had to go to probation once or twice. And that was it. And I think at the end of the trial, she tried to – sit on a fence, on both sides. And said, well, maybe not for the Church, but in the community, these people are the Gandhis of their time, in their own community.

But I think that it brought a lot of attention, the trial, at the time. And that's mainly what we wanted to do to the situation, to the Church, how they were people with AIDS, and I think that we did that, I think it was an accomplishment.

SS: What did you say in your testimony?

ST: Oh, when I got up there? They asked me first about – I talked about Michael Wiggins getting kicked under the seat by this guy there, he worked

for the Catholic Church. He was – he wasn't a cop, that was kicking him. He was the guy who takes the collections. And he was in there, so I mean, that looked really bad, too, talking about that, right? And they said, why were you there? And I told them, I felt that I was on a mission from God, and I told them in probation. And that this was like the most important thing to me, that I was probably sick myself. And I needed services, and I needed the Church. I was a Catholic, I brought my picture from my communion; had my picture with me, when I was on the stand. And I was a Catholic, and I felt my church was failing me. My testimony wasn't really long, and – I guess it worked; we didn't go to jail.

But I, and I think it did, I think we achieved what we wanted. We achieved that it got a lot of publicity, that the Church was getting all this money from the city, and the state — and I think not many people knew about that — for services that they weren't really rendering. They weren't talking about condoms, they weren't doing it, they were really falling backward. And I think that it made a difference, even in, after awhile, the Pope started to change, right? Now, he's saying, well, maybe condoms are not such a bad thing. And I think that would have never happened without ACT UP and those demonstrations.

SS: So how about for yourself? How did you make decisions around being tested, and that sort of thing?

ST: I had a hard time with that. The first time I was tested, I lived with somebody who was sick for awhile. And it took me a long time to get tested. Because at the time I got tested, there was nothing out there. It was like, what's the point? So I could just be depressed? There was a big controversy; everybody wasn't taking AZT. The people who were taking AZT, a lot of them were getting sick from it, and they just were trying holistic stuff. And I kind of felt, kind of hopeless. If I am positive, it's like well I'm going to die anyway, I don't want to know, kind of thing. It took me years after that — maybe 10 years — to get tested again.

And I got tested again because I was getting sicker and sicker. I had neuropathy really bad. And I said, well, maybe my situation has changed. They couldn't find out what was wrong with me. I have a thyroid condition. They have it under control, but the neuropathy keeps getting worse and worse. It's down to my feet now, and I have a whole lot of trouble walking. They tested me for, like, 90 other things, and I have none of those things. They can't figure out why this neuropathy is happening. It's not a hereditary thing.

So I got tested for HIV again, because that's the only thing I could think of. But I came out negative. But it took me years to do it again.

I think it's a hard decision to make, for some people. And especially during the time when I first got tested, because a lot of people felt there was nothing out there; why get tested?

SS: Now about your ambivalence about getting tested: did that affect your relationships with the women in ACT UP who were openly HIV? Were you working with any of those women?

ST: No. Because I have to be honest with you: I had had sex with somebody who was positive for a really long time, before I knew that. And I really, in my heart, felt that I was positive, the whole time. I was afraid to get tested; but I always felt I was positive. I used to wake at night, sweating. And I think it wasn't really night sweats, it was just thinking about it. But I really felt I was positive. I felt like somebody with AIDS. So no, that didn't affect it at all.

SS: And were you working with women with AIDS in ACT UP?

ST: I worked in a women's group for a little while. But the truth was, because I was already involved in Majority Actions and Housing, I was going to a meeting every night already.

SS: Right.

ST: I didn't have a whole lot of time for anything else. But no, it didn't really affect things, I don't think.

SS: Okay, I want to ask you about this thing, which a lot of people have said, about ACT UP becoming your whole life. Going to ACT UP meetings constantly, constantly. What happened to the rest of your

community? How did it affect your relationships with your old friends, people in your neighborhood, people who were not in ACT UP?

ST: There were no other friends. I had friends from the past who I see maybe once a year then, after ACT UP. ACT UP was my whole life. I went to meetings every single night. All my social events were ACT UP. All the people that I met in ACT UP, some I'm still friends with now. They became my family. There was nothing else, there was no time for anything else. I went to work every day, or most of the time. But I would be up all night, and we'd go to meetings. After meetings, most of the time, we'd socialize after. And I was still living in Jersey City. I'd get home, four o'clock in the morning, five o'clock, take a shower, get up and go to work the next day, and go back to a meeting the next night. ACT UP was your whole life. And I think many people made their relationships in ACT UP. Social relationships; I'm sure some people made some kind of business relationships in some places. But it became my whole life, it was.

It's something really hard to explain to people. But like I said before: even people who you wouldn't necessarily have been on the street with socializing, because it was such a big issue, it was a matter of life or death. We always felt like we were running out of time; everybody there was working really hard. You couldn't pay people to work as hard as people in ACT UP were working. There was no time for anything else.

SS: Now –

ST: No other interests, either. There wasn't time.

SS: Were you involved in any care groups?

ST: In ACT UP? No, not really. I know that by the time that Ray got sick, I know he had a really tight group around him. He was the only person I knew who, for a long time, that I was really friendly with, that got really sick, in the group, while I was in ACT UP. So no, not really. There was nobody, most of them were built from people who were friends with people who got really sick. Most of mine were acquaintances that got sick.

SS: There was a period where people were, like, dying every week. And every time you'd go to the meeting, people had died.

ST: Right.

SS: How was that affecting you emotionally?

ST: I think it still does. I think it changed my whole life. And I think it changed the way you look at people, at death in general. You're right; you'd be in a meeting with people one week, and the next week, you'd hear that they were either dying or on their way to dying. I went to three memorial services in one week. I wasn't as young as some of the other people. Some people were in their twenties, and I think even, it was even harder for them, because they never knew anybody who died before that. And there were three or four people a week dying.

But it affects, I think, the way you look at death your whole life. It just changed things. I think after ACT UP — and I think it's part of the whole issue; the death, the social situation; the whole thing with ACT UP, what a unique thing it was — I was depressed that, really depressed after that for a really long time. And I went to therapy. And he was saying you have, what is that; post-traumatic depression. And I think it was from that. We talked about it. It was such a hard thing to take. Even though we were out there working so hard, you couldn't stop people from dying. And there were people you knew, people you were close to. And it used to get really frustrating and depressing.

Because they're just — ACT UP wasn't a service organization. And because we couldn't give services to the people, our own people in the group, I think that — emotionally, that was a pull on some people. And I think I was one of them; why can't we help ourselves from the inside? But I don't know the mechanism to do that, and we didn't have it right then. And there's only 24 hours in a day. And I think most people who were really involved were doing this 24 hours. Even at work, some people were making leaflets. So it was a 24-hour thing. There wasn't time for the other stuff.

SS: What do you think were the consequences on the rest of your life, of the fact that you were in ACT UP?

ST: Ah, I don't know if it was a total consequence. Like I said, I was very depressed from it after awhile. And the dying. And you look at even

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other friends and family that die; it just doesn't have the same impact as it did before.

But I think that – I don't know exactly how to say it. Not only was ACT UP, I think that it changed a lot of policies, we did a lot of work. I think it changed the whole social situation of gay people. I think without ACT UP, people would have been 10 years behind they are now, as far as gay rights. I think in that way, it makes you feel good, ACT UP.

But I think there's this underlying depression, of people that were in ACT UP, that you'll never, at some point, you'll never match that again; I mean, the highs of it, again. And I don't know if that's a good way to explain it.

SS: I understand.

ST: It's really hard. It's hard to deal with, at some point.

SS: How much time do we have left on the tape?

JW: About 10 minutes.

SS: Is there anything that we haven't covered? Majority Action, St. Patrick's, Housing –

ST: Nothing I could think of.

SHARON'S SON: What about Robert at St. Vincent's?

ST: Oh yeah. A friend of mine that got really sick while I was in the group — and that was closer to, like, '94 — he was treated real badly. We took him, he was –

SS: Who was it?

ST: A friend of mine, his name is Robert – Robert Richardson.

We took him to St. Vincent's. He was a patient at St. Vincent's. He used to use the clinic there. They literally let him, they let him die, at St. Vincent's, in the emergency room. He had Medicaid, and I think this was one of the problems. I think if he had insurance, he would have got treated a lot better. But we went to Emergency room with him. They literally, he was, choking on mucus. And they really took their time to do tests. I was there with Lei Chou. We were protesting, they threw us out of the emergency room. They were threatening not to let us get back in.

He died in St. Vincent's emergency room, and he died from neglect. It could have been a whole situation, I think, if he had insurance, and he was somewhere else, I think he might be alive today.

ACT UP did a demonstration at the hospital. And after that, I think emergency room policies — because they made him wait and wait in the emergency room before they'd even seen him. When he got to the hospital, he was at the point where he had stopped talking, he couldn't walk, he couldn't stand up. I don't know if he was even, we were talking to him, we didn't know if he was understanding what we were saying anymore. They still made him wait like an hour before they even took him in and did his vital signs. And they had to get a wheelchair for him. They took their time with everything they did.

But ACT UP had a demonstration at the hospital, they did meetings. And they, I went to the hospital with somebody else after that. They did change their emergency room policies because of ACT UP, because of that situation. The triage procedures are much quicker now. People with AIDS are taken right away, if they're in really bad condition like that. Triage is – they're not supposed to wait more than 20 minutes before they take them in, and I think ACT UP was, changed that.

SS: Okay. Why did you leave ACT UP – or when did you leave?

ST: Around '95. I still came around to some meetings. I adopted a child. It was a little harder, he was small. It was hard to bring him back and forth on the train. And it made things hard for me going back and forth. A lot of people had left ACT UP. The small group that was left, I still try to do some actions with them. I don't think that ACT UP, because of the times, because of the change in this movement, people they have now; I don't think that that kind of activism, right now, could ever be as effective as it was at the time that it was. I think that there need to be new tactics, because I think that some of the gains for people with AIDS are going backwards now — privacy policies, things like that — that there needs to be some kind of watchdog group. But I have to be honest: I don't know exactly how they would work. I don't think that ACT UP tactics

would be effective now. And I don't know if there's a group of people ambitious enough to get that together. But if they are, they could give me a call.

SS: So I just have one last question. Looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what was its biggest disappointment?

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ST: I think there was more than one achievement. And I think that ACT UP changed the way that people get drugs. I think that ACT UP changed the lives of people with HIV everywhere.

When I got in ACT UP, if you had HIV, you were total pariahs. People wouldn't sit next to you on a bus. We went on a cruise once, to the Circle Line. The place was packed, they see us come on with those shirts, the whole floor, everybody got up. Some people even left the boat.

I think that that would have happened for a lot more years without ACT UP. It changed the social policies of people with AIDS. It changed, I think it brought gay rights forward. I think it brought gay rights forward 10 years ahead of what it would have been.

And there were people in ACT UP, like Mark Harrington, who met with government officials and who changed lots of policies for people with AIDS, and the way drugs get to people. And there wouldn't be, I don't think, as many drugs in the pipeline as there are now without ACT UP. And I think ACT UP is the cause of all that.

The biggest disappointment, I guess – I don't know. The biggest disappointment was – as ACT UP died out, the thing I just said: I think there could have been a lot more – but that we just really didn't know which way to go with it. I think that, not the same, maybe a group of people at the beginning. But there could have been some people that were left; they could have gone in a different direction. But I think that things would have to be escalated, and I don't know exactly how you do that.

SS: Okay. Thank you, Sharon.

ST: Thank you.

SS: That was great. Thanks so much.