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Interviewee: **John Voelcker**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of John Voelcker
May 30, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: So if you could just tell us your name, today's date, how old you are, and where we are.

JOHN VOELCKER: Sure. I'm John Voelcker. And that's spelled V, like Victor, O-E-L-C-K-E-R. [UI]. Today is May 30th, 2012. And we're inside my apartment, on Gramercy Park.

SS: And how old are you, John?

JV: Ah. I am now 52; I'll be 53 in a couple months.

SS: Okay, great. So what is your background? 'Cause your name has that German spelling.

JV: I think, like most Americans, I'm kind of a mongrel. On my dad's side, we're half Irish and half German. My mom was adopted, so we don't really know. But we sort of attribute her to nice Midwestern WASP.

I was born in London, and grew up largely in Rochester, New York. I went to school in California; but in 1981, I ended up in New York. I always wanted to live in New York — it's the big city — and I managed to get a job out of school. So I came to New York, and I've been here ever since.

SS: And what brought your parents from London to Rochester?

JV: My parents are actually American. My dad got his doctorate in the UK, teaching engineering. And I just happened to come along at that point. We went back a second time, on his first sabbatical. I was actually in London in

the Swinging '60s – [who knew]? And we almost stayed; my mum would have liked to have stayed.

I think, in retrospect, it's a good thing we didn't. Because, particularly in the '70s, it wasn't a particularly happy place to live.

SS: Right.

JV: So I grew up upstate New York, and then went to California. I kind of left Rochester when I left high school. It's hard to imagine; I've been in New York City 31 years.

SS: So did your parents raise you with any particular values about community, or was politics discussed in your family?

JV: Interesting question. We did discuss politics. My parents are somewhere between – conventional Republican and, in the case of my dad, fairly right-wing Republican – or social Darwinist Republican, I think you could say.

We were raised with a strong ethic of doing what we felt was right. And the older you get, sort of the more you appreciate the things your parents gave you, even if you have your issues with them. That's what maturity brings, I think.

My dad once told me: I don't really care what you do, as long as you do it well. Everything that you do, do it well. Don't ever lie. All of the sort of traditional, those sorts of traditional values.

I went to a liberal private school in Rochester; I think one of the few schools, in the '60s, that aggressively reached out and had a scholarship program for what were effectively poor black kids from the ghetto in Rochester.

SS: But so when you were growing up — and we're the same age — the Vietnam War's on television; Martin Luther King is on television; you have this Republican father; what's going on in your mind, when you're looking at all of that?

JV: {SIGH} I think the first thing I remember politically was Kent State. We were in England when Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were shot. And because I was a little car geek even then, my memory — I can't remember which one it was — but Formula One racing driver Jim [Clark] was killed in an accident the same weekend. I was more upset about him than about this person that my parents were talking about in hushed voices.

But I very much remember Kent State; the famous photo in the newspapers. I don't remember talking so much about that with my parents, and my dad, as a college professor, clearly saw student activism pretty close. He was in engineering, so — stereotyping, there were probably fewer engineering students in some of the protests. But when we did have political arguments, I usually felt pretty beaten down. He's a college professor, and a good arguer, so —

SS: But did you identify with the protesters? I mean, you were gonna grow up and become part of this hugely illegal movement. Were the seeds sown at that time?

JV: I think the seeds were as much in believing – decide carefully what you believe; and if you believe it, and if it's important to you, do it, and do it right. That's about as – we were not a radical or activist family. We were probably conventionally progressive in some ways, my mum more so than my dad. My dad still thinks, in some ways, that he's had very good women engineering students; but most of the programs to bring women into engineering are destined to fail, because more women, proportionately, give up engineering; hence it's a waste of time.

SS: Right. So Neanderthal – yeah.

JV: He's an interesting man, and I think I'm lucky that in the end, somehow or other, I made my peace with him. And we still dust it up, to some extent. But I've gotten much better at saying, you know what? I don't want to have that argument. And I think if I have a regret about my relationship with my family, it's that I wish they could see, or feel, the pride that I have about the things that we did, in Act Up — in my case, with other organizations, as well — and sort of understand its historic context.

SS: Now when did you start to be aware that there are other gay people in the world?

JV: {SIGH} It's funny. I went to school in California, and I actually remember watching the White Night Riots on TV. Which was probably my sophomore year. And I actually read Tales of the City in its serial form, in the San Francisco Chronicle. And I didn't connect myself at all to that. I was an

extremely slow learner. In fact, once I moved to New York, I sort of had this internal promise, or goal, that I would have sex with someone before I was 25. I made it, barely.

And I didn't connect myself to that activism. I knew that activism was out there. I went through a brief libertarian phase in college. A lot o' anger there, for a whole variety of reasons.

And so I came to New York; I was working for a consulting firm, for three years. And very gradually beginning to sort of explore. And I knew that there were, in my lights, sort of nice, conservative gay boys out there. And slowly and gradually, I started to make steps toward meeting them, and I finally met a guy, and we were boyfriends for awhile, and so on. But I was a very slow learner.

The funny thing is, once it started to happen, sort of 24, 25; there was a lot pent up, and it moved fairly quickly. That was — let me think now — I was 25 when I left the consulting company, in 1984. And five years later, I walk into my first Act Up meeting.

SS: Right. But 1984 is already well into the AIDS crisis.

JV: Yeah.

SS: So when you started really coming out and you started looking for a boyfriend – I mean, AIDS is already known.

JV: It was. And it was this huge, almost un-understandable thing, you know. But I think there was probably in my mind then an element of, well, it

was those people, the promiscuous ones, or what have you. It was a fabulous life that I had no access to. I had probably read about discos and Fire Island and stuff like that. It was all so foreign to me. I was a nerdy little engineering student. And so gradually, meeting very sort of middle-class, clean-cut gay boys with jobs, I started to come out, started to grapple with some of that stuff. But I knew maybe two people, loosely, who had AIDS. And of course, back then, you had it and then you died.

SS: Right.

JV: There was a guy – I did a consulting gig in ‘83, ‘84 at MGM-UA — film distribution company — and there was a guy who worked there. Nice-enough guy. And over the time I was there, he got a little bit thinner, and I heard later that he had died maybe 18 months later.

But in a funny way, it didn’t feel like it connected to me.

SS: And when did that change?

JV: Probably – it’s funny; it’s probably when I went to see the AIDS Quilt, because I recognized a name from someone in my class at college. People whose circumstances were very much like mine. And I think the sheer emotionalism of that – it was displayed on a pier in New York — I don’t remember when; maybe ‘86, ‘87 — and for whatever reason, it all just crystallized, almost like a flash. And I walked out of there different.

I think I had planned to sort of go into [a drive-by-, and wander up and down and [watch it], and go on and do something else, and I stayed for three or four hours. I pretty much walked out, and thought, I need to do something.

I had been wanting to get involved, just because, you know – I think, like many people who are stumbling through that embarrassing, awkward, ugly process of coming to grips; I had met a bunch of guys who were, you know, friendly and helpful. Some of the advice was a little off-base: the guy who said that whenever you go home with a guy, be sure to put your wallet in his freezer, because if he rolls you, he'll never think to look for it there. But –

SS: Nice friendly, trusting community.

JV: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JV: [It's like, really, Matthew]? I'm hoping I don't go home with [UI]. But I had been wanting to volunteer, just to give back, 'cause there was this community out there, that I sort of could see glimpses of. And I figured it was a good way to get involved, and meet boys. So when I came out of the Quilt, I thought, well, this is a need. I should do something around this. No idea what.

And I sort of did my research, and looked around. And for whatever reason, GMHC didn't really – I'm not sure I'm a social-services kinda guy, really. And I don't know if you remember; there was a performance-art collective from San Francisco called Survival Research Laboratories.

SS: Yes.

JV: Okay. So –

SS: Those are the pierced and tattooed people.

JV: Among other – well –

SS: Yeah.

JV: Matt, the guy who blew his hand off with rocket fuel; and I knew them from covering them, writing about them. And they did a show here in New York, put on by Creative Time. And I was one of dozens of people who volunteered to crew. Which is basically being a roadie for large radio-controlled mechanical robots with flamethrowers and buzz saws and twirling blades, and so forth. And I went and crewed.

And there was a guy there who happened to be on my little gang, and he hadn't brought a sweatshirt. But he had a Silence Equals Death button. And I loaned him my sweatshirt when it got cold. And that turned out to be Matt Ebert.

And one of the things I remember, the very first Act Up meeting I walked into, he happened to be there. And he's like, oh, hey, good to see you. Do you want your sweatshirt back?

So immediately, there was this connection to something I knew; a person, and a welcome.

Matt also has very pretty blue-gray eyes.

SS: Right.

JV: And I'm sure I'm not the first person to mention that there was that aspect of Act Up –

SS: Right, that's right.

JV: But I was curious about Act Up. I had seen the coverage of the 1987 Pride Parade. I think I'd seen them in the parade. I came in in spring '88.

SS: What was going on when you came in?

JV: I came into a Monday meeting. I honestly don't remember what actions. It was probably June or July; it might have been after Pride; I'm not sure. And I hung around for a few meetings, to try to get my bearings. It wasn't overwhelming, but there was a whole lot to digest. It was so big, and so many people, and so much going on. And I found there was a Media Committee, which was being run by Michelangelo at the time. And I thought, well, that's something that I could probably do. And so I went along to a Media Committee meeting – I don't remember if it was in his apartment or not, or maybe in a side room at the Center. And pretty soon, there came a project: this idea of the language being used by the mainstream press to cover HIV and AIDS issues is horrendous. This whole idea of bodily fluids. Well, some are transmissible, and some are not.

And so we sat down, collectively; wrote up a list of terms. And then there was this pause for, like, right; who's gonna take this on? And I sort of waved my hand, and said, I can probably do that.

And I wrote it up. We did a sort of a collective edit the next week. I got the gay typesetter at my job at the time to typeset it. And we had a whole

bunch printed up, along with little Rolodex cards — there's a time capsule — that had the Act Up phone number and some contact information. And we did a mailing to somebody's press list, of probably 50 or a hundred major media outlets.

SS: And so tell us specifically what words you wanted them to use and what words you didn't want them to use.

JV: Sure. "Bodily fluids" was one. Obviously, HIV is transmissible in semen and blood; but not in sweat or saliva. So if you tell someone to avoid bodily fluids, you're saying, don't kiss; you know, don't brush against them; and that's inaccurate.

"AIDS victim." Big, big sort of conventional catchphrase. And the idea that you shouldn't call someone an AIDS victim; call them a person with AIDS. It's a condition, not this sort of — thing that has victimized them and made them a lesser person.

I'd have to go back and look at the rest of them.

SS: So you mailed out like a hundred of these.

JV: Yeah. We mailed out a little press kit, actually; sort of an Act Up backgrounder, about what Act Up was. Michelangelo had done PR, for, I don't know who-all, but I think for a PR firm. So he introduced me. And I had seen him, as well, at work. I was working at a magazine by that point. He introduced me to the concept of the press kit, and you have a backgrounder, and you have a press release, and then you have the supporting materials. You mail it

out in a little folder. You have a Rolodex card. And we did that. We adopted the technique done by PR firms. So the Media Committee kind of became the PR firm for Act Up.

SS: Now did you do followup phone calls?

JV: I'm pretty sure we did.

SS: Do you remember any of those conversations?

JV: Not really. I was working a day job, where a lot of other people weren't, necessarily. You've probably come across the phrase "New York's Finest Cater Waiter."

SS: Yeah.

JV: And so I was a little bit limited about what I could do during the day. We [UI] office [UI] and so on. But that was the first Media Committee project I did. And relatively soon after that, I did my first action. I didn't run it.

SS: Okay, I just want to ask you one more question about that.

Did you start to see results?

JV: Slowly. We at least had something to give out to reporters. And we got extras, and we gave them out to all the reporters. When Act Up did actions, Media Committee people sort of showed up; didn't participate in the action; but instead, sort of ran around to all of the media who were there, saying, hi, I can connect you to activists who are willing to go on camera, or willing to be quoted in the paper.

We didn't really do so much quoting ourselves. We were more a conduit. But it gave us something to give to them, and say, and by the way, while you're writing about AIDS, here's some stuff you should know. Here are some terms, here is the latest medically accurate way to portray some of these issues.

Didn't always work, but slowly, over time, you [start to saw] the language change. In concert with other folks — I think probably GLAAD had some version of the same thing, at some point.

SS: So the Media Committee had media professionals, and then it had people who were learning the ropes, right?

JV: Yeah.

SS: And how did that work together? What was the dynamic?

JV: Like any Act Up committee, it was a volunteer committee, and we were happy to have anyone. A lot of media people, whether working in media or freelance writers, or videographers, or what have you, sort of gravitated to it.

Michelangelo is a fairly forceful personality, and he — he was pretty clear about how you did media. And a lot of us learned from him the ropes of activist media, or activist PR. Along with people like Ann Northrop, who famously, up in front of the room before an action, would explain to everybody who was taking part: here is the sound byte. Complex thoughts about medical issues are very hard to convey in the midst of an action. But if you have 200 people chanting Drugs Into Bodies Now, that message gets across, and the whole floor, before an action, would do those kind of things. That was a piece of

[M]edia: training any activist to represent the group, represent the goals of the action.

SS: You used the phrase “activist PR.” And I’m wondering if that was an act of invention. Because these people didn’t come from previous political movements; they came from corporate PR.

JV: It’s a good question. We really quickly got tired of that sort of shtick; ‘60s radicalism [in a] ‘80s media savvy, which got used umpte-um times. But it is really kind of true.

I think part of it was that a lot of the zaps, especially in the early years, were incredibly creative, and they were appealing to media, if they could be spun in the right way. So if you had somebody artistic who could figure out not just chain yourself to a building, but, you know, climb up on top of the building and unfurl a banner — right, okay — so then, what’s the slogan on the banner? That’s the point of the demo. Here is the fact sheet, here is the press release.

I don’t know; in retrospect, it seems natural. I’m sure we all stumbled our way toward it. And we worked with the folks in each demo who were preparing fact sheets to be handed out on the street.

SS: So would the affinity groups – like would Action Tours tell you in advance what they were gonna be doing?

JV: Affinity groups not so much. This was the bigger ones. And there were side discussions. You didn’t necessarily want to announce at an entire Media Committee meeting — which could, at its height, have been a couple

dozen, 30 people — oh, and by the way, there's going to be this affinity action that will be highly illegal and it's going to happen at this time and place. Will any police officers in the room please identify themselves now.

But I'm not aware of us inventing it. I came into Media Committee probably a year after it started. I don't know when the committee started. And it was what we were sort of fumbling toward, and it worked pretty well.

SS: Did you ever experience that anything was leaked; that there were informants?

JV: That's a good question. I don't remember any personally. But the assumption — not only Media, but I think everybody — was that there were informants among us. And so if you didn't want something to get out, work with this very small group of people.

SS: Right. But I'm wondering if any of us ever actually experienced anything being —

JV: I don't remember any.

SS: No. Okay.

JV: Does anyone else? I'm curious. No. All right.

SS: Not yet.

JV: Maybe the NYPD wasn't quite as omnipotent as we thought they were.

SS: Right. Or else they were really good at it.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Okay, so then you went on to do – you did media for an action. So what action was that?

JV: Labor Day, 1988: Queers for Quayle.

SS: Queers for Quayle?

JV: Yep.

SS: Okay, you gotta tell me about this one. Okay.

JV: It's actually – I mean – it's a funny story, and I think the sort of ridiculousness of it was what made it so memorable for me, and sort of convinced me, oh, I can do that as well. And you know: that was part of Act Up for me, was discovering that I was capable of doing a whole bunch of things for something I believed in.

But on Labor Day, 1988 — height of the presidential election — each party had a New York City photo op. And Dan Quayle got the Statue of Liberty. So when someone found out that Quayle was going to be at the Statue of Liberty – well, let's do an action. And I don't remember where the idea came from. A guy named, I think, Steve [Crouch]. Has that name come up?

SS: [Questar]?

JV: No. Steve [Crouch].

SS: No, no.

JV: Big blond guy. C-R-O-U-C-H.

SS: Anybody?

X: Uh-uh.

SS: No.

JV: Last I heard of him, he was in San Francisco. That might have been [five, eight] years ago. But anyway, he might have been involved – no, he was probably involved with the Stephen Joseph thing at Public Library. Anyway.

Somebody came up with the idea: let's get on the ferry, along with all the Young Republicans, incognito; and then, when Quayle is speaking, do a protest.

Okay, great.

I have the misfortune of looking like a Young Republican. I always have.

SS: Right.

JV: And so we decided to do that. I ended up being the Republican costume designer. And I remember sort of having this discussion.

Now, Maria: you've got your hair pulled back, that's great. You've got this sort of nice little suit thing going on. But nice Republican girls do not have nose rings. You gotta take it out. Here's an envelope.

I actually brought a whole bunch of envelopes. I took out my own earring at the time. Everybody had their little envelope.

And everybody, it turns out, every activist has one of these shirts and a pair o' chinos and a pair o' Topsiders, somewhere. So, no combat boots. You know.

And so all of us, on this sweltering hot Labor Day, get up at eight o'clock, or gather at eight o'clock on Sunday morning to — or maybe Monday morning — to go on the ferries that were taking the [import-a]-crowds out to Liberty Island to cheer for Dan Quayle.

There we are. We all sort of stuck together. Little moments of drama on the ferry: oh, that Young Republican over there; he sees us, he knows something's going on.

But we actually got a spot, right in the middle of it.

As media guy, my role was to go out and sort of try to get the cameras on us. So I sort of snuck out, and I was hanging out in front of the camera row. Bored out of their minds. It's like, great; we're sitting here in the sun. Quayle's gonna speak. Unless he says something really stupid, this is going to be a nonentity.

And I was like, very quietly, hey: two minutes are Quayle speaks, you might want to point your camera there. Just very quietly, piece by piece. And of course, they're instantly, like, really? What's going on?

And I'm like, well, you know, something might happen.

They didn't give it away. And when somebody gave the signal — I forget what it was — the posters or banners or signs came out; the chanting started

I'd love to go back and see the footage now. But it was a complete surprise. We had some people around the protesters with arms linked, pretty

quickly, because there was some physical confrontation. And in the end, the police came in, separated us out, put us on our own ferry, sent us away. Quayle stopped, got confused; said something – I don't know what. But it came off essentially as we wanted it to. We had disrupted the event; we had gotten the signs out, the messages up. We had gotten on TV. And it was one more thing where Act Up's message was essentially: Excuse us; there's something more important going on here.

SS: But did you actually say Queers for Quayle?

JV: Queers for Quayle was the informal name of the demo. I'm sorry.

SS: Oh, okay. It wasn't like Lesbians for Bush.

JV: No.

SS: Okay, okay.

JV: I'm sure there were nice Republican gay boys in the crowd, but I don't think they were in that group. No, it was just – Queers for Quayle seemed nice and euphonious.

SS: So there's a real complicity between Act Up and the media, in a sense.

JV: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JV: We were good news, for a long time. I mean, it's got all the drama, right? It's got death; it's got sex; it's got homer-sexuals; it's got confrontation and disruption; and it's got angry people yelling at each other.

Perfect.

That's pretty much for the TV stuff. I think we were, we tried to work – we tried to work with print media as well. Some were better than others. Newsday – forgetting the name of the reporter. Larry Garrett, was it?

SS: Laurie Garrett, yeah.

JV: Yeah. Newsday was a lot more attuned to the science, and sort of trying to get it right. The New York Times back then, in the Abe Rosenthal days, when they wouldn't use the word "gay" — where everything was "homosexual" — not a particularly stellar record, in historical retrospect. But over the time I was with Act Up, we made contacts. There's a young reporter, back then — I think it was his first job — named Jason [DeParro], who came and covered some Act Up stuff. He was young, he wanted to make a name for himself, and he really wanted to get the story. He did some good stories.

Bruce – what was Bruce's name?

SS: [UI]? No.

JV: Was it – no. Bruce Something, who had sort of the AIDS beat for awhile at the Times. He was better with being fed prepackaged stories. And that was another thing.

SS: So did you guys ever go to the Times, and sit down and have a talk with them? Or was everything –

JV: We did not, no. That was – in the same way that I think Act Up and GMHC sometimes worked hand in glove to – Act Up being the, hey, pay attention, and GMHC being the nice gay boys; stuff like that was sometimes left to GLAAD, who would talk about those things, and could much more easily get a meeting, than Act Up. And in the early days, New York Times would have been justifiably scared that Act Up would have welded itself to their doors.

SS: Right. Now who was running GLAAD at the time?

JV: I believe it was still Craig Davidson. Is that the right name?

SS: I don't know.

JV: I think it was Craig Davidson. Yeah. That was – GLAAD was only probably – certainly less than a decade old — maybe five years old — at that point. And it was the early, initial, scrappy days, way before Hollywood celebrities and all that stuff. But they were really very focused on correcting, or attempting to address, this enormous amount of really egregious coverage of our lives – gay and lesbian as well as HIV; in fact primarily gay and lesbian.

But they were the good gays and lesbians. And Act Up was more the leather-jacketed — I hesitate to use the word “storm trooper” — but you get the idea.

SS: So did the Media Committee ever try a new tactic that absolutely did not work, or that backfired?

JV: I think the most memorable answer to that, for me, would be getting our clocks cleaned, in terms of media savvy. We had been very successful at shaping our message for awhile; and Stop the Church was – the change there. Because I think, probably naively, we thought that we could make more of a case than the combined forces of the mayor of New York and the archbishop. Which was foolishly naive.

SS: So you saw that coverage as a failure of the Media Committee?

JV: Um – well, probably like all good boys, we take some of it on ourselves. But the message did not get out the way we wanted. The point that led all the news coverage was not the archdiocese's role in spreading harmful and medically inaccurate information – that condoms didn't work. The lead story — 'cause you only get sort of about eight words; and if those eight words aren't your message, then what you're tryin' to convey doesn't get across. And the message was not, activist group protests archdiocese information that kills, or there's a better formulation. The message was: homosexual people disrupt mass at St. Patrick's. And all of the rest of it, let alone the reproductive-rights angle, because it was a joint effort with — I'm forgetting their name now.

SS: WHAM.

JV: WHAM, thank you. Yeah. I mean, they completely got swamped. And Act Up got conflated with gay — accurate, in large part — but

our message, what we were tryin' to convey by that large demo, by and large did not get out in the mainstream media.

SS: So when something really, in that sense, went awry, how did you guys act together, or what was it like inside the committee? Was there blame, or did people feel ashamed?

JV: My memory was, for the first week, we were just kinda stunned. Heh. Um – and then I think there was a hard-nosed look at where the realities of media power lie. There's a side note to that. My sort of activism after Act Up — because I went into the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization — which spent a great deal of time interacting with the archdiocese.

I think we always tried to learn from what worked and what didn't. And I think – I don't know, but probably we were the first grassroots activists to rent cellular phones; bring them to demonstrations; and connect hometown reporters to people from their town who were in the process of getting arrested. There's a clip – some of the footage from the FDA, of Michelangelo or someone walking around with one of those gigantic cell phones. And we were pretty impressed at that, and it really did work.

So I think we tried to continue to pioneer. We got more professional about sort of explaining to the media: we're on your side; we're trying to help you, be a resource for you. And so we started to dress up a little more, I think. I would wear this, and maybe leave the leather jacket at home. Just sort of presenting ourselves in a way that – media, like anyone else, if you give

them the story, the message line, neatly packaged and tied up in a bow with relevant resources; they are more likely to write the story the way you want it.

SS: Were they a homogenous crew, the mainstream media?

JV: No. You had your share of gay people – almost all of them closeted, at that time. One of the camera guys for CNN at Queers for Quayle was actually a closeted gay guy, which I only sort of barely registered at the time, until he asked me out on a date the next week.

SS: So you were in bed with the media.

JV: I'm sure I don't know what y'all are speakin' of. Yeah – whatever it took. Don't run that.

But –

SS: Do you think that gay sexual culture facilitated – I mean, would you say people in Act Up were having sex with people in the media, in the government, at the pharmaceutical companies? Did that transcend all of these political boundaries?

JV: Government and pharmaceutical companies, I can't speak to. In the media, I think rarely, just because there weren't as many gay people, or openly gay people, then. And a lot of 'em were so incredibly closeted that they'd walk away.

SS: Malcolm Forbes.

JV: Yeah. I was thinking at a little bit lower level. So it was relatively rare. I mean, I think, frankly, sympathetic straight men and women

probably gave us better, more accurate coverage. If they were good reporters, they wanted to find out. And obviously, if Act Up is doing all this stuff, right; if people are putting their bodies on the line; if you have many people who are ill, who are doing these physically dangerous things, and risking arrest and jail and so forth; there's gotta be something there.

So what's driving them?

That's a good question for reporters. And then they were the ones who were more susceptible to the, here's this drug; here's why we think it's actually useful and valuable. Here's the impediment; and here's why we're protesting.

SS: Just two more questions about the media. Were there specific closeted people who you felt obstructed representation?

JV: Malcolm Forbes was the biggie. Although it wasn't as if Forbes magazine was top of the heap in covering AIDS and HIV, frankly. But he was such a visible figurehead in the media.

In terms of the rogues gallery, frankly the one I remember is Bill Buckley, who notoriously wrote, in, I think, 1985, that gay people should be – was it tattooed on their forehead and on their buttocks?

SS: Yeah, but are you saying that he was closeted?

JV: No, no, no. Sorry. Side note.

SS: Yeah.

JV: Closeted people – I’m not remembering any, but you may have someone in mind.

SS: I’m just wondering if there were people – I mean, the Times was our biggest problem. And were there gay people at the Times who identified more with the power structure of the Times than they did with the gay community, and who may have chosen sides in that regard?

JV: At this point, I don’t remember. It’s entirely possible.

SS: So let me ask it this way: did any media people ever ask you for information for themselves, about medications or treatment?

JV: No. Not that I remember.

SS: Okay.

JV: It’s entirely possible it happened.

SS: Right.

JV: But I think at that point, anyone in the mid- and late ‘80s; any working media person in New York for a major media outlet would have kept their HIV absolutely as secret as possible. I think that was pretty much broken with the New York Times reporter. And again –

SS: What was his name?

X: Jeff Schmalz.

SS: Jeffrey Schmalz.

JV: Jeffrey Schmalz. Thank you. Yeah. When he told the Times that he had AIDS – he had a long career there, he was well-respected and well-

liked. That was a watershed moment. And he then, for awhile, got sort of the AIDS beat.

SS: Did you ever deal with him directly?

JV: I met him once, but no. And in retrospect, he died pretty quickly, before, if I remember correctly, before that sort of '95-'96 point. But the Times, in their clumsy, best way, tried to do good reporting. The Post was always a problem. And there was actually a guy in Act Up who worked for the Post as a music reporter.

SS: Who was that?

JV: Jim Farber.

SS: Okay.

JV: Yeah, I think he's at the News now. And he was briefly sort of around the Media Committee, as well.

SS: And did you interact personally with Laurie Garrett?

JV: No. Mostly Michelangelo did, and then, after he stepped down, Jay Blotcher – who – I can never remember if Jay and I co-ran the committee. I think he was sort of the titular figure, because he had more time during the day, and was able to do that.

SS: So as you rose and got more experience, did you start changing tactics or changing your ideas about what you thought would be effective?

JV: I think we got more ambitious, and started to say: we can, in fact, go head to head with some of the big media outlets. Cosmopolitan, for instance. That wasn't an action I was involved in, but the whole idea that Cosmopolitan, again, was putting out medically inaccurate information; that was something where, if I remember, the women's group and Media worked pretty closely together to protest.

SS: So can you give us an example of an ambitious campaign that you were involved in, dealing with the mainstream media?

JV: {SIGH} God.

SS: Let me ask it this way.

JV: Yeah, sorry.

SS: I once had a public debate with Larry Kramer.

JV: Okay.

SS: And I said to him, you know Larry, when the media calls and asks representatives, why do we always send white males; and he said, but Sarah, shouldn't we send our best people? Anyway, that's Larry.

But okay, so – when the media called, how were the decisions made about who should be going on shows, and –

JV: Largely, we tried to get the people who were closest to the issue, from whatever Act Up committees it was. I think in the beginning, we were very scrupulous about not being, quote, spokespeople for the group. That slipped

a little bit in the end. And in a demo, either you give someone a quote, or you don't, and sometimes you can't connect them.

SS: Right.

JV: But especially with the medical issues: all right, find someone from T&D – whoever it is. And you know the names of the T&D people as well as I do. Those were the ones that sort of – hey, Mark, or hey, David, or Spencer, or whoever; here's this reporter. Would you please explain protease inhibitors –

SS: Right.

JV: – and why they're important, and what the status is.

SS: So could you tell us any kind of – any of the TV experiences that stand out for you as memorably successful, or that didn't work out?

JV: Well, there was John Weir, on CBS Evening News, although that was not a Media Committee action.

SS: Right.

JV: God, I'm sorry, Sarah. I feel like I'm –

SS: 'Cause didn't you get Peter Staley on Nightline at one point? Do you remember that?

JV: Yeah. That was about '88, right? I think that was just when I came in.

SS: Okay.

JV: I will say, the one thing about Media, though: I think, at a certain point, we began to talk, on the Media Committee, that this sort of shock tactic, of having a demonstration, was beginning to lose its potency. And I first remember us discussing this around the Grand Central action. This idea that, okay, there are a bunch of AIDS activists — and people were pretty much calling us AIDS activists by then, as opposed to angry gay people, or whatever — and this is what they look like — you've seen them before on TV — and they are going to this place, and they're marching, and they're yelling, and somebody's going to disrupt something.

That became an old trope for the media. And I remember a lot of discussions for us about, how do we turn this?

In a lot of cases, the answer was more to the medical side of it. And a stepped-up effort not just to say, hey, we're angry; people in jail have no HIV treatment. Or, this person is dying because of this experimental drug. But when T&D started to get more into design of drug trials, then I think Media tried to step it up and say, okay, yes; that's the [attention] technique, but we're not just a bunch of angry dying people. Here is the substantive issue. We have the scientific background to back it up. And here are the people you should talk to about the issues. And in some cases, maybe GMHC has a point of view on it as well. You, reporter, have obviously talked to the FDA. Here's our person, who knows this, who writes drug-trial-design protocols. This is the point of view of the people whose lives are most directly affected.

SS: Right.

JV: And so I think there was an attempt to move beyond sheerly the getting-on-TV to say, hey, there are a bunch of angry dying people; to, those people are now organized, knowledgeable, a resource for you, the reporters; and here is, yes, there is this tactic, and yes, they went out to New Jersey and welded themselves to the door; but, here is why. This is a serious, substantive issue of medical policy, of access to care, and so on.

SS: Were the access issues harder to spin? Like housing for people with AIDS, or needle exchange? Did you work on any of them?

JV: Yeah. Yeah, they were – media then was more white-male than it is now. It's not perfect now, but it's gotten better, in 20 years. And you mentioned Peter Staley. I mean, Peter is the ideal TV spokesperson. He's good-looking, he's articulate, he's an affluent white male; easier TV sell than a homeless drug-using person who has, in some cases, worse and more-immediate needs than Peter may have. But whose story do you want to do?

So, yeah. The jail issues were incredibly hard, in my memory. I mean, god bless the people on, I can't remember what the committee was called.

SS: Debbie Levine, and –

JV: Yeah.

SS: – yeah.

JV: Who dealt with the horrendousness in Rikers Island, and all of those kinds of issues. Incredibly hard to sell.

SS: So what would happen if you called a reporter and said, I want you to do a story about HIV-positive prisoners?

JV: They would listen. And they'd say, okay, thanks.

SS: Right.

JV: Yeah. I mean, you knew who could work with, and who you didn't. You weren't gonna call the New York Post on that one.

SS: Right.

JV: But you could call a Times or a Newsday, or – it's hard to get TV; TV's all about the visual. And there's, you're not really gonna get into Rikers, and do visuals there. So you kinda knew who to pitch it to. But trying to get a newspaper story on those problems; there was kind of a, well, we did that story last year.

SS: And what about needle exchange? Was that hard to explain to people, from the Media Committee?

JV: Was it hard to explain in the Media Committee, or to outside –

SS: No, for the journalists to understand it.

JV: Oh. No. I think once you've presented data that said: if you give drug users clean needles, then, in fact, fewer of them get infected; that's an understandable point. Maybe it's being an engineer; I tend to like to start with data. Reporters get that. It's more a question — and we've heard a lot, especially after a couple of years of, well, you know, I'll try to sell this to my editor, but – mm. So sometimes the reporters themselves were interested, 'cause they saw that

here was a story that hadn't been done. But then it became, oh, you're doing too much about AIDS.

Well, what's a new angle about what we do, that won't hit the too-much-about-AIDS button?

I think these things have a cycle. I was probably privileged to be in that point where Act Up was — I sound like I'm selling a product — new, fresh, exciting, interesting, different. Those are all things that the media goes for.

SS: Right.

JV: After awhile: oh; look, dear; Act Up's doing another demonstration on the Six O'Clock News.

I think the issues became tougher. And it takes longer time — more nurturing, a closer relationship with reporters. And we had good relationships with a handful of reporters, by and large. They didn't always write what we wanted. But they were largely factual.

You still get the, you know, people with AIDS say it's unfair to be put in concentration camps. Well, on the other hand. You still get sort of false balance. But things improved. And I think that was — what helped was that we saw, between kind of mid-'88, and I pretty much left Act Up in sort of mid-'91 — but over that three-year period, we could see, slowly, better reporting happening. There were still outrages every week. Someone would come into the meeting, and, I can't believe this, we have to protest this. All of which was justified. But I

like to think that we had some small part in changing some of that discussion, and getting the issues out there.

So it was both – getting the awareness, in the first part, which I think was where I came in. After a year, Act Up was really about getting people to focus, because you can show a big demo on TV, but 99.9 percent of the world isn't watching; won't see it; goes right through. So you have to repeat that.

And I think then it shifted to: why are these people so angry, what are the issues?

Harder, in some ways, to take medical-policy issues and make them compelling. Because then you get a long, dense article in the Science Times

–

SS: Right.

JV: – instead of a front-page, so-and-so is, you know, homeless people dying on the streets, or what have you.

SS: But also, the innocent-victim thing is really complicated emotionally, right? Because their idea was, if you're straight, you're an innocent victim.

JV: Yeah.

SS: So if you're Kimberly Bergalis, or someone like that.

JV: Ecch.

SS: But a lot of gay people did feel guilty –

JV: Yeah.

SS: – for being infected.

JV: It's the whole fascinating psychodynamics of sexual attraction and disease, together. I mean – I'm 53. If you'd-a told me when I was 23, and desperately trying to find someone I was comfortable enough to sleep with, where we, and I, would be today, I wouldn't have believed it. But I have to think that GLBT people have come farther faster than almost any other minority group. History speeded up. But back then, it's hard to express — and this is where I feel really old, when I talk to young people — it's hard to express how shameful and how other it was.

I remember talking to my mum, some years after I came out. And she said, well, we knew a homosexual person when you were growing up. That nice curator at the Rochester Metropolitan Art Gallery. And he lived with his friend. And, you know, that was it.

I remember, in 1984 — and this is my personal journey — most people were further advanced than I was. But in 1984, Newsweek did a cover story on growing up gay. And it had two nice white-bread white boys on the cover. And I didn't go to my local newsstand to buy that. I went somewhere else.

It was so not a part of the discussion.

My mum's reference was not only whatever his name was at the art gallery; but Cruising; which –

SS: Ah!

JV: – somehow seemed to have an enormous impact on parents.

Not a happy confluence of events.

SS: But where are we now? You say, when you look at where we are now. Where are we now?

JV: We're at a place where – transgender kids are being discussed, and parents are trying to do the right thing by them, instead of smacking them upside the head and telling them, man up. We're at a place where, I think, the marriage movement is unstoppable. I think marriage equality will be with us nationally at 2025. We're at a place where – I work in a relatively conservative industry, the auto industry — although on the media side of it, which is more progressive — but basically, I haven't — with one exception, and the guy is crazy — I haven't gotten any feedback at all, and I'm pretty openly gay, even in the context of our industry. And even 15 years ago, I might not have been employable in that industry.

SS: Do you think that gay male sexual culture has changed?

JV: Hm, there's a smart-ass answer in there, about – I don't know, I read about it.

SS: You're not still reading about it, John.

JV: Yeah. Barebacking. You know, there's nothing so powerful to incent safe sex as seeing three of your good friends die horribly in 18 months while they have been fired from their jobs, evicted from their landlord, and disowned by their family. Much of that, in many circumstances, is gone. Not all

of it, but now that it is a, quote, manageable disease, I get very angry at the slipshod — god, I'm gonna sound like a moralist — I get angry at the lack of awareness of the importance of HIV. Back in Act Up days, it was a point of pride to kick someone out of bed if they wouldn't be safe. And I remember doing that a couple of times, and it was widely discussed. I don't think that's the case anymore.

SS: But do you think that all these straight people who've changed, and now accept us and all of that; that they imagine gay male sexual culture as it actually is? Or are they imagining like a nice couple that's exactly like them, but it's two men?

JV: I think the starting point is a nice couple, with a bedroom door that you never go behind. But it's kind of about frameworks that people understand. And I think the kind of sexual culture that I never saw, in the late '70s and early '80s, was probably less understandable than the couplehood thing. Not to necessarily think that marriage is ideal for everybody, under all circumstances — it feels a little heterosexist to me — but —

SS: Do you think Act Up would have been as successful in this current climate?

JV: I don't know if you can answer that. I mean, find me another circumstance in the U.S. where a group of people has been making progress; and then, due to an externality, all of a sudden has laws passed against it; gets evicted by families and churches and from their jobs and from their housing. The degree

and the ferocity of the fear and the backlash, I think, is the part that it's hardest to convey.

SS: Okay.

JV: When I tell people about that Bill Buckley article in 1985; people don't believe it. Somebody who's 25 can't imagine a mainstream, respected commentator — someone who's on 60 Minutes, or whatever — saying, yes, you should tattoo those people. Forcibly.

That's an extreme example.

SS: Right.

JV: But I think an Act Up–like entity will evolve, for other reasons. I don't know where the Occupy movement is going. Certainly there were some similarities there. But I don't think – if another sexually transmitted disease came up – let's say this one affects lesbians; and it hits an epidemic level; I think the reaction would be very different.

SS: But sex was such an important part of Act Up.

JV: Yeah.

SS: I mean, it was a lot of the loyalties and the connections and the desire to be together.

JV: But I'm not sure that that was visible to the outside world.

SS: Right.

JV: I think that in a way, it was sort of our little secret. It was one of the things that I valued. A lot of people said Act Up was the high school they

never had. And there was certainly an element of that for me. I met people who didn't really care how I viewed myself. They looked at, A) the things I could do for the group; and that gave me some cred; and then the we're-all-gay-and-in-this-together thing was hugely welcoming and welcomed, for me. And I think one of the things I treasure most, outside the work we did, was the parties. Because I could [UI] be the only person who talks about, you know, whose ever loft that was — somewhere downtown — but A) it was the men and the women celebrating together, in a way that I've rarely seen since. I like going to lesbian bars, where that happen[s]. And I can't think of anything quite that big and powerful and vital, where gay men and lesbians and all the other groups still play and act together, shoulder to shoulder, as one. Find me one, and maybe I'll —

SS: Okay.

JV: — [UI].

SS: So inside the Media Committee, were there people who got sick and died during the course of your working together?

JV: There were a couple. But by and large, no. Certainly not like some of the other committees.

SS: What about Bob Rafsky? Wasn't he in the Media Committee?

JV: Bob was in the Media Committee for awhile. Bob — it's funny; I tend to think of Bob as divorced from the Media Committee because he was his own personage, so much.

SS: Right. He was his own committee, right?

JV: He was Bob Rafsky, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JV: And so in that sense, we certainly shunted a bunch of speaking engage-, I mean, for – I think Speakers Bureau was separate from Media Committee, but there was a lot o’ overlap there, too. And Bob got a fair share of those, or put him on the phone. It could be a double-edged sword. I mean, Bob rarely went completely out of control. But he could be so forceful that sometimes, for your nice media reporter sitting at a desk somewhere in a big building, the message might get overwhelmed by the passion.

SS: Right.

JV: But, yeah.

SS: And did you guys ever try to work with Gran Fury, or any of the artists who were designing the graphics?

JV: In the sense that graphics didn’t really – they weren’t really events; we certainly – Ken [Woodard], who — I don’t know if you’ve talked to him — but he did a lot of work for Media Committee in terms of designing particular things, be it poster layouts or other sorts of things; handouts and flyers. In the best of all Act Up events, you would have a consistent graphic identity across the posters, the stickers, the handouts, the press kit, the – we actually had a couple press kits that were designed, all of the materials. At minimum, there was sort of a logo for the big actions. But there was that interplay with the graphic

folks. But in terms of the pure artwork, not really so much. We knew them – I love what they did. I still, I'll go see a Gran Fury exhibit at the drop of a hat.

01:01:22

SS: Okay, let's get back to you as an activist. So tell us about the Montreal AIDS conference.

JV: Acch.

SS: Why did you decide to go?

JV: A couple of things. I sorta kinda speak French. And I think one of the things that some people didn't necessarily quite understand was language politics in Quebec. And I could take the time – and I had never been to an AIDS conference. I'd heard a lot of stories about earlier AIDS conferences.

So we had a bus trip, actually. And there are photos, on Facebook, of all things. And it was sort of, okay, we're gonna rent however-many buses it was. And on bus, there were a bunch of people that I remember that I'm still in touch with. And we stopped in the Adirondacks, and so on. But got there.

To this day, I have no idea where I stayed. I don't think it was in a hotel; I think I was on someone's couch. But I ended up working with a couple of other people to run the activist center, which we sort of arrived to coalesce with all the other activist groups there [and such]. Oh, by the way, we have this storefront. We have an activist center. Like, really? Cool!

Does it have a lot of phones?

Yes.

Does it have –

And so, all right.

The back story, as I understood it, was that there were a number of local anarchists, from Montreal, whose main characteristic was that they [weren't showered], as a protest. They were pretty memorable. One of them was apparently quite wealthy, and her dad was a local real estate broker. And somehow, something had been arranged, and we got this storefront for the duration of the conference. It was, I think, a couple of kilometers from the center. But I ended up helping to run, with some of the other groups, the activist media center. Bonjour, {SPEAKING QUICKLY IN FRENCH} – ici John. Hello. AIDS Activist Media Center. This is John.

And a lot of incoming phone calls. I don't remember if we had a copy machine there, or a Xerox store down the street. But that was where we essentially did the stuff; took the calls in; worked with everybody to try to get the different groups – we on Act Up Media Committee ended up helping to do some sort of on-the-spot training for smaller groups; Act Ups from other cities.

SS: Uh huh.

JV: Act Up San Francisco; fairly big. Some of the other Act Ups that were there were a lot smaller. And so we did a lot of sort of groundwork, and, you know, here is how we do a press release; it's important to have this and that. And then came the big march, where the activists took over the conference.

SS: Now had you decided in advance, or did that just happen?

JV: That just happened. And we got a bunch of phone calls saying, y'all better get down here; this thing is going to happen. And we should have some media support.

SS: Can you just summarize why Act Up took over the conference?

JV: Because, if I remember the details, there was minimal or no representation at all on the panels, amongst the speakers, amongst the keynoters, of actual people with actual HIV.

It's funny; I still get a little choked up when I see that media footage, because I think of that as a high point, in some ways. Seeing some of the footage in the movies 20 years later – I personally was scared and nervous that this could come off, because the Montreal police are not known for their gentility. And the whole idea of a whole bunch of people from another place and another country coming in to disrupt this event, where they were bringing in people from all over the world, into a nice, shiny Montreal to have this big-dollar event. So when it came off, it was exhilarating and crazy. And I think the message got out, ably assisted by some killer speeches from the people who actually took the microphones.

SS: Do you remember who they were?

JV: Boy. Mark Harrington, undoubtedly. Boy. No. I wasn't actually paying a lot of attention to what was happening up on the stage, to be perfectly honest. Our role in Media Committee: roust out the report-, find the

reporters. Who's standing there with a reporter pad; who's standing there in a nice suit, with a microphone, in front of the camera? Talk to them. Get our people in front of them. Give them the talking points. Explain things in easy-to-digest sound bites. Give them resources to make the story that we want them to make.

SS: Right.

JV: Not in those words. And so once I knew that someone I knew was up behind the microphone, I knew, okay; that person can represent what's – A) their own point of view; but B) what we're tryin' to convey with this whole action. And it was more a case of the groundwork.

SS: Okay, let's take a little break.

JV: Okay.

SS: Okay. Anybody wants to use the bathroom –

JV: Yeah, please.

01:07:08

{BREAK}

JV: Just organizing my back. Sorry.

SS: So you started this interview by describing yourself as this very conservative person from this very conservative background. And you're so conservative, you're so [UI]. And then you tell us about all these incredibly radical things that you're doing year after year after year. I mean, what was happening to your sense of self?

JV: Wow. I think the wonderful thing for me personally about Act Up was that I, for the first time, found a place where my particularly weird mix of skills was valued; where I felt like there was a place where I could be sexual; and – I don't know if people talk about the fun aspect.

SS: Um hm.

JV: But there was an incredible amount of laughter, in the midst of some pretty grim news, in Act Up, while I was there. I'm still in touch with Ron Goldberg, the chant queen. And Anne Northrop was incredibly funny. Whenever she got up to speak, and to do media training – there's another conservative, white-button-down shirt for ya. And so I think probably I didn't stop to think too much about the bigger picture, because it was vital; it was of the moment; I was having fun; I was doing stuff with my comrades and with this huge group of passionate people. We didn't always agree. But for the first time in my life, there was a whole group of people who had my back, and vice versa. And that was a hugely powerful thing.

It gave me the courage to come out, at home. It didn't go very well. And it – in some ways, I think it integrated all the different parts of me. And in the end, in my case, I had a whole lot o' anger about a lot o' stuff, that I was able to put toward a productive end, that helped people; that hopefully kept people alive; that got the truth, or at least another point of view, out into the public discussion, that had been hidden away and not discussed, and we don't go there, and all of that.

And so from my own sense of self, all of that was good and powerful and positive and uplifting. And it was fun.

SS: Now what happened when you started experiencing death?

JV: I have a funny trajectory in Act Up. We certainly had people who died. I think about Vito; I think about Bob Rafsky. But I pretty much stepped away from full-time involvement, and then pretty quickly, from most involvement with Act Up during 1991. And so in a funny way, I feel like maybe I got some of the good years of Act Up, before the really grim times. And I would hear, one step removed, about other deaths, or I'd find out a couple months later: oh, you mean he died.

So in that sense, I didn't have that many deaths. There were deaths, of course; people were mourned on the floor. I personally wasn't there in close for the onslaught.

SS: Okay.

JV: And you know, in retrospect, it's not survivor's guilt, but in a funny way – I look at the people who were there through the early '90s, until the arrival of the combos. And the discussions about all of these people that we know. Are they gonna make it? Are we gonna make it? Will this entity survive? Will the infighting do us in?

I feel sort of lucky, accidentally, to have missed that, in history.

SS: But did you ever feel like this is gonna get me, this virus is gonna get me. I'm surrounded by people who are infected, it's inevitable. Did you ever go through that kind of thinking?

JV: No. Once, I went with my best friend to get tested. And he tested positive, and I tested negative. I knew, and I was bound and determined, as I remain today, not to seroconvert. And back then, I was cocky enough to think that I knew exactly what to do.

It was more a case of people that I loved and valued and thought were smart and funny, and so multidimensional; losing them. Not just for me, but for the world. What's that list of artists; all of the artists who were lost –

SS: What happened to your friend who tested positive?

JV: He's still with us.

SS: [Oh, good].

JV: More importantly, my first lover was positive when I knew him. He ended up having been positive since 1979. He is still with us.

SS: Okay, great.

JV: Looks a little different than he used to. But, yeah. He's an example of how anger and fight and spunk probably keeps you alive. But he's been living for awhile now on the, I'm down to one last combo. And the combos keep coming.

That was, in the end, sort of as a side note, I think one of the things that we, reasons that we split up. Because the combo started working, and he

came back from a fairly grim place. And then we were able, on a more equal basis, to say, is this really working as a relationship? Because I like to think I'm not the guy who walks out on someone who's sick.

SS: Right. This is the guy you met when you were working for Tom Duane, right?

JV: Yeah! So I found myself out of a job; happened a lot. And I knew Tom Duane from him attending Act Up meetings. I knew he was a local politico of some sort. And he decided to run for City Council, in the fall of 1990, I guess.

They were doing some redistricting, and there was this gay district that was created, with sort of the West Village and Chelsea. And Tom had been ticking all the boxes in party politics. And so he ran for City Council.

SS: Now who was he running against? Abzug's daughter, wasn't it?

JV: Yes, Liz Abzug.

SS: Right.

JV: Talk about gay and lesbian cage fight. So Tom, at that point, was the first openly HIV-positive candidate to run for anything fresh in the country. There had been, I think, two other who had been revealed to be HIV-positive after they'd won office; and I think they ran for reelection; I don't remember the details. But Tom was the first person [to say], HIV-positive, and I want to run for this office – much less New York City Council.

Liz Abzug was the other candidate. She – I don't remember the details; I don't know if she was sort of quietly lesbian, or if she came out during the event. But in any event –

SS: But that was a primary, right? They were both Democrats.

JV: That was the Democratic primary –

SS: Yeah.

JV: – yes. I should point out that in that district of Manhattan, if you win the Democratic primary, you win the election. I don't even know if there was a Republican.

SS: There also was the New Alliance Party. Didn't they run someone in that election?

JV: God. Your memory is better than mine.

SS: A gay guy – whose name I forget.

JV: Who was that? Really?

SS: Can't remember his name now. Yeah. Anyway.

JV: God, Tom would know. Ask Tom. And I worked on that campaign.

SS: So what made you decide to go into electoral politics?

JV: I had never done a political campaign before. I had zero – except for getting elected sixth-grade treasurer. But I had no sense of politics.

There was actually a very small amount of pay associated with it, as sort of part-time work. And it sounded interesting, and I like[d] Tom.

And so what I stumbled away from it with was that political campaigns are for the very, very, very energetic; the very young; and the very possessed. It was crazy. I mean, the man had no life. It was all shaking hands, and the Chelsea equivalent of cutting ribbons on [sewer plants], and fund-raising. My responsibility was really to keep him on track to fund-raise; to make ump-te-ump phone calls every night; to track the donations; all of that.

SS: And who was supporting his campaign?

JV: Well, his campaign manager – oh, you mean in terms of financially?

SS: Financially, yeah.

JV: Tom had a handful of real estate people, who were gay, who gave him money. And then he had a really broad base of small donors, from his work in the political clubs and so forth.

SS: And he had a cute little dyke assistant.

JV: She wasn't a dyke when she came in.

SS: Miss Quinn, she wasn't?

JV: Christine Quinn arrived as a cheerful, fresh-faced, young, what, 24-year-old, I think, housing activist, from Queens. Her dad, Lawrence Quinn. She grew up – I don't remember what town. But she had worked for – was it Michael [McCain]? What was his name? Worked for a housing activist

who Tom knew of. And this was gonna be her chance. And Chris and I were the two romances that came out of the Duane campaign. I met my first lover. He was a friend of Tom's from awhile back. I was handing out volunteer cards, he was eating salty snack foods. And Christine entered as a young, single straight girl, and exited with a lesbian lover.

SS: Oh, Laura.

JV: Laura Morrison.

SS: That's right.

JV: Absolutely. Yeah.

SS: That's right.

JV: It's funny, because Chris and I still grin at each other whenever we see each other, just because we shared that funny thing. And she reminded me recently: I guess I gave her words of wisdom as a {CLEARS THROAT} older, experienced gay person. But yeah; I still chuckle [UI] with that. But it was kind of a seminal campaign in New York gay politics.

SS: So what was a gay, openly-HIV-positive councilman able to achieve?

JV: Essentially, visibility; and a presence on the City Council, to be the voice, from a personal point of view, for the needs of people with HIV. Be it housing for homeless people with HIV; changes to Division of AIDS Services; the list is long.

SS: But did he carry out the Act Up agenda? I mean, was he an advocate? Or –

JV: Tom was pretty clear that there were going to be certain things that it was more appropriate for Act Up to do; and there were certain things that he, as an elected official representing a district, could do.

I think some of those boundaries were a little blurry. Tom certainly has his own arrest record. He's participated in numerous demos.

Now that he's a state senator, not so much. But in the days when he was a city councilperson, he was at a lot of those events, and certainly we used him as, hey, this is openly gay and openly HIV-positive city councilperson Tom Duane. Why don't you interview him, 'cause he's in a suit.

And that helped, in certain circumstances.

SS: Um hm.

JV: But yeah; the Duane campaign was an interesting thing. I actually stepped away, 'cause I got a job, before the election. I think I left in June or July. And so watched from the sidelines, and did a lot of phone-banking.

SS: Something I forgot to ask you during the Montreal thing, was the Tiananmen Square demonstration. Can you tell us about that?

JV: {SIGH} Yeah. It's funny, I'd forgotten that. Because that's such a visceral moment, even today.

The Montreal AIDS conference happened to coincide with this planned protest in Tiananmen Square. And news didn't travel as fast; no one had

mobile devices. Sometimes you had to wait a whole day to find out what had happened in the world that day. And the activists center was our headquarters. And at the end of the day, once the sessions were done, people had stopped being on panels; protests or leafleting or flyers, or whatever we did; everybody came back for a sort of a six-o'clock general meeting.

And I forget the chronology of days. But I think maybe the second-to-last day of the conference was the day that the Chinese police moved in.

And of course, it was the lead story on every single network. And the image of the protester with the flower in front of the tank, over and over again. And what I remember is probably 200 or 300 people, in this stifling-hot activists center, on a summer day; sitting in absolutely rapt silence for 15 or 20 or 30 minutes, watching this news coverage.

And then people – it was one of the few times you get a roomful of activists who are absolutely dead-silent. And I forget who said it, but someone stood up and said: That could be us. And there wasn't – I don't know if anybody did anything in solidarity. I have a feeling that probably people did something symbolic.

But I think that brought home to a lot of people the actual hazards of going up against what many thought of as our government. And for me, [UI] back to Kent State, you know. That was what I thought about.

SS: Well I mean, how did you feel when Act Up would do something really radical, like St. Patrick's, and then you'd have GMHC issuing a statement against the action? When you have that – when you just collapse under the pressure of the authorities?

JV: I think I was sufficiently – I don't know if "radicalized" is the right word. There were Act Up demos I didn't participate in or causes that I didn't feel connected to. A handful I probably disagreed with. But after Stop the Church — and I should point out, I wasn't at that demo. I was just out of the hospital after some surgery. So we had a little off-site media center, where we sat there, fielded phone calls; had press releases, faxed things out, that whole bit. And we just sat there, and watched the whole thing cascade out of control.

I think it was the first time that we felt, on the Media Committee, the whole thing was just running in a completely different direction, and we were absolutely [powerLESS] to stop this onslaught from men – supposedly celibate men in crimson robes, and the mayor of New York – or [former mayor, at that point].

But after that – the Monday meeting after Stop the Church was probably as packed as any I've seen. Everybody wanted to find out. There was a lot of recrimination on the floor. But my understanding was that GMHC had issued a statement. And everybody was very curious to find out what was in it. And summarizing: my memory — correct me if I'm wrong — but my memory was that there had been this brutal board fight at GMHC, that we heard about.

And that some portion of the board had said, if GMHC issues a statement condemning this action, we are walking out now.

And so the statement that came out had an opening line something to the effect of: We understand and sympathize with the rage and frustration that led to this action – followed by a bunch of qualifications. Which I think was more than many of us had expected, and brought home to me a lot of the behind-the-scenes sympathy for what Act Up was doing, that we might not have seen.

The other thing is – I mean, I tend to forget now how scary Act Up was, even to many – average New York gay men and lesbians. The whole idea of a bunch of people who are out and loud and in some cases, visibly ill; assertively, aggressively, and interruptingly pushing for something; made a lot of people nervous. And I had people who, when they found out I was in Act Up, just sort of walked away. They were too scared of it.

I think what that brought home, that GMHC statement, was, there's actually a lot o' people out there who support us, even if they're not saying so.

GMHC, sort of a logical place for that. They saw the carnage firsthand. But I remember that statement, and people expecting the worst. Because GMHC was not necessarily lauded on the floor of Act Up.

SS: No.

JV: And –

SS: They were the enemy, actually, yeah.

JV: Yeah. So that was an interesting moment. But the whole St. Patrick's demo, from the Media Committee point of view, I think left all of us pretty wiped out.

SS: Well, the issue was that we felt they weren't effective.

JV: Yeah.

SS: And I mean –

JV: GMHC, you mean.

SS: I still feel that way about them. Yeah.

JV: Well, and I think several years later, when my lover at the time, it became time for him to enroll, as a GMHC client; now, Bill was actually a member of GAA, the Gay Activists Alliance, in the early '70s. He was a New York kid who grew up in Inwood. He remembers reading about the Stonewall riots in the New York Post, and seeing Christopher Street, and saying, that can't be the same Christopher Street that's on the IRT. And at age 19, he sort of snuck out of the house for an afternoon, and took the IRT all the way downtown to Christopher Street, and discovered that it was.

And so he pretty quickly became sort of his generation's version of Act Up. Found his first lover, etcetera. And so he, A) got the Act Up thing. But B) when he went into GMHC — and this was probably '94, '95; not all that long afterwards — he had been giving money to them since the very first rodeo. He went to the rodeo, which I think was their first-ever fund-raiser.

He walked in, and they're like, okay; to become a client, here's what you do. Fill out the papers. And then we had a sort of an acclimatization session. And I remember him coming back and saying: You know what? We had a session where all of us clients sat down, and it was explained to us that it was not permissible to call someone a fucking faggot within the walls of GMHC. I would have thought that would have been self-evident.

And so even then, you had the, yeah, it may have "G" in the name; but it has become a social services organization of a very different type than, I think, many people who helped fund it and get it off the ground initially thought.

SS: So did you feel that GMHC should not have been doing services for the broader AIDS community?

JV: Absolutely not.

SS: Oh.

JV: It's about providing services. There was, I think, a sense amongst its gay clients that the — {SIGH} — the nature of being gay, and being a gay man in New York; and perhaps having been involved with GMHC for a long time; was not only irrelevant, but in fact an annoyance.

SS: Huh.

JV: I wasn't there; I can't say. But I know he came home shocked, and rarely went back.

SS: It's interesting that you bring that up, John, because it seems like today, AIDS and gay are really separated.

JV: Yeah.

SS: Even though we know that it's young gay men of color who are getting infected. But –

JV: Although I would point out that many of them don't necessarily identify as gay.

SS: Right. But the gay establishment never mentions AIDS.

JV: Hm. One of my long-term fears is that the – if we get marriage equality; if we get employment nondiscrimination, et cetera; middle-class and upper-middle-class gay white males will be prime fodder for recruitment by parties customarily associated with some of the more socially regressive policies.

SS: Do you know that there's a word for that?

Homonationalism. You heard that?

JV: No. Homonationalism.

SS: Yeah. It's this professor at Rutgers has – because, like in England, more gay people are joining right-wing parties, and – yeah, exactly what you were saying.

JV: Yeah, it's –

SS: But that was our earlier conversation, about where are we today.

JV: Yeah, yeah. And in fact –

SS: They go hand in hand, right?

JV: – it may be a peculiarity of the auto industry. I happy to work for a gay man who is proud of never in his life having voted for a Democrat. We are a diverse community, in unexpected ways.

SS: But I mean, if gay liberation is about gay people becoming right wing, is it worth it?

JV: Um – I always figure that in the end, it was about gay people doing whatever they were gonna do, without regard to their sexuality.

SS: Okay. But in your heart of hearts.

JV: {SIGH} Get back to me in 20 years.

SS: Okay! Okay, I know that you left Act Up in '91, and we're gonna get to that in a second. But you did work on one of Act Up's biggest actions, which was the FDA.

JV: Yeah. Let me turn that off, 'cause it's gonna chime at us otherwise.

SS: Okay. Don't forget you're plugged in, you're plugged in. Ah, okay. That's fine.

{ETCETERA}

SS: What was your role in the FDA action?

01:30:39

JV: The FDA was actually my first really big national action. And I was one of a group of, uh, six, eight, 10 media people who came down, sort of under Michelangelo's – he wasn't the leader, but he probably ran things, anyway. And the goal, really, there was to, as always, assist the media — broadcast media, print

media, whoever was there — with understanding the point of view of the activists; convey our talking points; and specifically, something we tried, because it was a national action, putting media together with people from their venues. If you had a Virginia TV station there; great, find an activist from Virginia who can sort of talk and throw in, you know, when I was growing up in So-and-So, Virginia, ba-da-ba-da-ba-da. Because it makes it a more effective interview if they have a hometown person.

We did that; we handed out the usual backgrounders.

In a way, it was the same stuff we did in New York demos, but writ much larger. I had talked earlier about the cell-phone thing. That was the first time I remember using cell phones to do live interviews – I think NPR, but I'm not sure. I think maybe we actually gave sort of a play-by-play to NPR over these gigantic phones, to sort of explain to them, oh, someone has now scaled the roof over the entrance; he's unfurling a banner. That kind of thing.

And whenever we could, interviews with actual activists. Why are you here? Why are you willing to be arrested for this? What is it that the FDA is doing?

And that one went off pretty well. There wasn't – my memory of it is that we were relatively pleasantly surprised that we were able to get so much done. We essentially did shut the place down. We got the photo op with the banner, which went out across a lot of wire services. And the points — AIDS

activists today, quote, shut down the Food and Drug Administration to protest what they say is inaction on approving life-saving drugs?

SS: Right.

JV: Bingo. That was sort of the point. And if that got out there, in however-many activist voices; we did our job.

SS: Great.

JV: Yeah.

SS: So why'd you leave Act Up?

JV: Ah. There is actually one FDA story, and then ask me the question again.

SS: Oh, go ahead, tell me.

JV: Do you remember Kiki Mason?

SS: Sure, of course.

JV: Okay. I believe it was after the FDA. Many of us went out to a gay male establishment with naked men dancing on the bar. And Kiki liked conservative-looking, clean-cut young men. And he met such a young man, from Virginia. And as the story goes — and this was recounted to much glee in Media Committee the next week, because Kiki was sort of in [on the] Media Committee — they were walking out to the guy's truck after having decided that they wanted to get to know each other.

And Kiki said, what's that on the bumper?

And the guy says, it's a Bush sticker.

And Kiki says, why is it on your bumper?

And the guy said: Because I support Bush for president.

And Kiki says, really? Do you want to — launching into a graphic description of what the guy had told him he wanted to do?

And the guy's like, yeah.

And Kiki said, good luck with that; and slapped him as hard as he could across the face, and walked back into the bar.

SS: {LAUGHS}

JV: Activist justice.

SS: That's a great story.

JV: Anyway. I pretty much stepped away from Act Up in 1991, due to an accident, really. Which was that I was dating a guy named Brian at the time — an Irish American guy from Brooklyn. And he happened to be involved with the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization — which, at that point, in 1990, was a group largely of recent Irish immigrants who were sort of appalled at what passed for Irish American culture, largely derived from the '50s, in New York, and wanted to get together and meet other Irish lesbian and gay people.

I don't remember where the idea came from. But they had applied to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. And when Brian called me up, he said, there are these people who are doing this thing. They've just been accepted into the parade, conditionally. You're involved with Act Up, right?

And I was, yeah.

And he's like, do you know anything about hostile marching situations or parades?

And I was like, well, I know some people who know some things.

And he's like, could you do me a favor? Could I put you in touch with them, and could you maybe help them sort themselves out, because I don't think they have any clue, the [rain] of misery that's going to descend on them if they march in that parade.

And I said, sure. I called Amy Bauer, and a couple other people. And we essentially trained marshals for the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization – marshals being people who march between protesters and the outside world, to try to help protesters conduct a good demonstration, and inform them if they're doing things that are gonna hurt themselves, put other people in peril, or lead to arrest [if the police hadn't already told them that].

So we trained marshals. We probably had 40 marshals. We were able to draw on Act Up. There was a certain Act Up sympathy for this. And the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization marched with David Dinkins, then the elected mayor; first African American mayor of New York; at whom rocks, beer cans, wads of paper, and all sorts of other things were thrown, amidst a hail of antigay and racial epithets, such I hope I never hear again.

And it was the leading news story that day, and for the next couple of days. I think much of the rest of the world was kinda shocked. I think the

recent Irish immigrants may have been a bit shocked at the horrendousness of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who run the parade.

And I ended up throwing in my lot with them. We immediately began making plans for the next parade, which we ended up not being allowed to march in; and conducting a very large-scale civil disobedience that year, and for several years thereafter.

For reasons having to do, I suppose, with my family; with a different kind of fight, probably still smarting a little bit from Stop the Church; it felt like that was an equally important thing for me to do. And I did that from 1991 to 1995. And in the spring of '96, I woke up, and decided I couldn't get arrested one more time; I couldn't sit down and face off with NYPD commanders to discuss how the arrests were going to go down one more time. I was done.

SS: So was ILGO. 'Cause they kinda quit that year, didn't they?

JV: Yeah. I think they kept on for one more year. But it was, in a lot of ways, for me personally, more emotionally draining than Act Up had been; in part because, I think, in 1991, Act Up was still really seeing accomplishments, before some of the grim days, and the drugs not arriving as quickly as people had hoped and prayed that they would.

SS: Let me ask you this, as somebody who put five years of my life into ILGO as well; what is your truthful understanding of why they failed?

JV: There was a court case that decided that it is the right of people who throw a parade to control its message. Which I think, in the end, I agree with. And I genuinely think that it is probably a fact of life that when an immigrant community moves to another place, it freezes its culture in time to the year it left. And it will take – I hope – I talk to Ann and Paul about this. I hope that as old men and women, we will march in that parade.

SS: With our mayor, Christine Quinn.

JV: With our mayor, Christine Quinn.

SS: {LAUGHING}

JV: From your mouth to God's ear[s].

SS: Please, no!

X: No!

JV: Um – you know what? My take on Chris is that Chris is an absolutely traditional Irish politician –

SS: Absolutely. She's –

JV: – who happens to be a woman and a dyke.

SS: – she's Tammany.

JV: I don't know if I'd go quite that far.

SS: {LAUGHS}

JV: I'm not aware of any mansions Chris has built, although –

SS: No.

JV: – maybe those stories are yet to come out. But I remain, on a personal level, very fond of Chris.

SS: Um hm.

JV: I hope I never read of Tammany Hall–like doings. Seriously.

SS: Right.

JV: But – I really think that the majority of progressive New York simply assumes, well, [UI] cave to public pressure. You know. It's obvious that the – the Irish are a stubborn people. And Irish Americans who came to this country in 1950 are very stubborn. Added to – I also think the “other” factor: people didn't understand the degree to which the archdiocese had a personal stake in this, and a vendetta against the gay community following Stop the Church.

SS: Hm. That's interesting. You're the first person who's ever said that to me.

JV: Really?

SS: Yeah. That's interesting.

JV: Every single meeting we had with the Police Department, for the first couple of years; and certainly the rare meetings we had that were brokered with anyone with any connection to the archdiocese or the [AOH]; it was assumed that we were one and the same.

SS: Okay.

JV: Act Up equals ILGO.

SS: I see.

JV: That's a generation-long wound, for them. We're now two archbishops beyond O'Connor, whose name my family shares. Had I been named after one side of the family, I would have been John O'Connor. And I think also – it took me awhile to recognize the waning of power to affect public discourse in New York of the archdiocese, even compared to 20 years ago. Egan wasn't a particularly – you know, mediagenic person in the way that O'Connor was. And back then, remember, we were relatively early in John Paul II.

SS: Right.

JV: And so you had a young, dynamic, Polish pope, who was still in the process of essentially dismantling Vatican II. And so I don't think people understood the changes that were underway in the Catholic Church: the purge of any progressive elements, that continues to this day; the absolute hard-line, doctrinaire positions being taken. And of course, you have a defensive posture from the start, from the abuse scandals.

SS: Right.

JV: It was interesting to talk to my Irish comrades about that, because they were earlier on in the abuse coming to light, and the coverups, and the criminal acts, let alone morally reprehensible acts, of bishops who, for years and decades, hushed it up, moved the perpetrators around, et cetera.

And as I understand it, they don't have civil suits in the same way. So victims of abuse couldn't necessarily use the cudgel of suing an archdiocese for damage. So –

SS: So the consequences of Stop the Church: the positive side is that there are now condoms in the public schools.

JV: Um hm.

SS: But the fact that gay people still can't march in St. Patrick's Day is perhaps a negative consequence of Stop the Church.

JV: I believe that to be true, yeah.

SS: Very interesting.

JV: I don't know that absent Stop the Church, whether or not ILGO would have been allowed to march. But I think the fact that Stop the Church was December '90 — is that right? — and —

SS: When was it? Yeah.

JV: Yeah. And our first parade was April '91. Gay people in the church, Stop the Church, was the only thing anybody talked about.

SS: And when did Dignity get thrown – when did that happen?

JV: Good question. Don't know. Never part of Dignity.

SS: That's before Act Up. Yeah, that's interesting. This is very interesting. I'm gonna think about this some more.

JV: Oh yeah. It's – there's probably a nice doctoral study to be done on attitudes of the Catholic Church and the New York Archdiocese toward gay and lesbian people.

SS: I mean, having worked with ILGO for five years, I felt like one of the problems was that they were unable to constantly try new tactics.

They were more comfortable with repeating things that didn't work, which is also – and that there were still problems on the gay side. And then they just gave up.

JV: Yeah. I think it was very dispiriting, for a lot of us. I, in the end, for whatever reason, just decided I didn't have it in me anymore; didn't have the energy. And I've always believed that it's dangerous to protest and get arrested if you don't have the passion and the conviction –

SS: Right.

JV: – inside you.

SS: That makes sense.

JV: And so – yeah. It's – most people I talk to don't realize that gay people still can't march.

SS: I know.

JV: But then, most people I talk to don't realize that gay marriages don't have to be recognized; that it doesn't do you a damned bit o' good with anything federal –

SS: That they're not real.

JV: – and that there don't exist LGBTQ employment-discrimination protections.

SS: Right.

JV: In some cases, the media portrayal gets ahead of the realities on the ground.

SS: So let me ask you: I only have one last question. So is there anything you think we – want to look at your list?

JV: {MUMBLE} Got it all.

SS: Okay, so just thinking about Act Up now, with all of this retrospect: what would you say was Act Up’s greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

JV: Wow. I think the greatest achievement was that – I don’t know if it’s a single thing, but we were able to coalesce into an effective voice for people who were being persecuted, denied services, treated like dirt; and at that same time, to insert — “medical clients” isn’t the right word, or “patients” — but to insert the sufferers of a disease into the process of determining how that disease is treated, and how drug trials are designed.

SS: Okay.

JV: Some of those steps, in retrospect; the people I know and respect who know the process better think may have gone too far. I can’t weigh in on that, one way or another. But at a time of almost indescribable fear and despair and panic and pain, Act Up gave a ray of hope — more than a ray of hope — to a bunch of people. And it gave the lesbian and gay community a fierce fighting force, so that we were no longer viewed as victims, and people that could be trampled on.

Not a [UI], but –

SS: But that’s a good one. [UI]?

JV: Failure.

SS: Yeah.

JV: Um – Act Up’s biggest failure. You know, I don’t know if it’s a failure or not, because I’m not enough of a student of protest movements to know if protest movements can metamorphose into something else. I worked at startup companies off and on my whole life. Every order of magnitude, the company has to completely reinvent itself, and if it doesn’t, it dies. From five employees to 50, you sort of know everybody in the company. Fifty to 500, completely different. Five hundred to 5,000, et cetera. It’s why a Bill Gates, to use a corporate model, is so impressive. Because he ran a company, and grew it, from three people in a room to what Microsoft is today.

I don’t know if activists and social justice movements can do that. I would say that Act Up was very good at what it did; that some of the infighting probably did it in, especially when we stopped having triumphs, and the drugs didn’t come.

I had a friend of mine once tell me, you know: the lovely thing about Act Up was that it was a pure focus. Any sentence that you heard either referred to one that had HIV in it, or someone actually said, HIV. He said, I kinda lost interest when I started hearing more about the isms; all of the [UI] –

Is that an inevitable future? I don’t know. You know? There is no such thing as a pure disease. And Act Up had questions of antigay and anti-lesbian behavior, and racism, and sexism, and ableism; all the other isms. He, as

one data point, felt there was too much of that. He didn't hear HIV enough, and that was when he kind of drifted away and did something else.

SS: So what's a way to talk about the special experience of women with AIDS, let's say, who we know couldn't get benefits and couldn't get treatment, without boring someone like him? How do you do that?

JV: {PAUSE} Use the same tactics; and focus in. The affinity groups with people who cared about specific issues — be it jail; be it women; any of these issues — I don't know, as you get bigger, and as the issues get more complex, if you don't automatically fragment and [hive] off different groups. I don't have a clear answer to that. Learn from the successful tactics of your predecessors; ditch the ones that didn't work; and try stuff. Act Up tried a lot.

SS: It's interesting, because Act Up, it did work in Act Up. We did get the CDC definition changed, after a four-year campaign, that was focused, really, on young women and poor people. And all of Act Up gave its support to that campaign, and we succeeded.

So I mean, I – he doesn't relate to that. But it was effective.

JV: I think his point was not so much about women and HIV, or poor people and HIV. It was about sexism writ large.

SS: I see.

JV: Racism, writ large. I remember times – does Act Up want to support this event? I remember a discussion about, does Act Up want to support

an antinuclear event. And if I remember, the consensus of the floor was, anybody who wants to go, groovy; go. This is not an Act Up issue.

SS: Um hm. So what do you – what did you think of us doing that demonstration with WHAM, at the church, as an abortion-rights group?

JV: There was so much overlap there. And frankly, I think, although it was a hard case to make politically, the idea of control over your bodies, whether it's reproductive rights or condom use, is allied enough that it made sense.

SS: Okay.

JV: It's a harder thing to pitch, frankly. You know: condom – Church says condoms are bad, Church is medically wrong and lying and killing you. Easy message.

Church says a bunch o' different groups aren't allowed to do different kinds of things, but they all involve their bodies. A little bit more diffuse. Harder message to get across, from a media-whore point of view.

SS: Hm.

JV: But I think it made sense, in the end. And one of the sad things is, I think WHAM's message got completely lost there. In retrospect, maybe, I don't know – only WHAM can say whether or not that turned out to be a good thing. But you know, it's funny; I was very excited by the Occupy movement, and I made a decision not to participate, because essentially I don't have any time. And I get to say that at 53; maybe I don't at 33.

SS: Yeah. You gave at the office, yeah.

JV: Yeah. Well, we, oh, we do, actually – you remember Brian Zabcik?

SS: Sure.

JV: Brian and I ended up doing a bunch of demonstration marshaling trainings for various of the marriage events over the years. Which was sort of fun. And in a nice way, it sort of persuaded me how much things have changed. Not always for the better. A sense of entitlement among some of the marriage-equality protesters; assumed a level of personal safety in the face of police that I would never ever assume. The whole – we had a little shtick, and it fell to me to say, when you're talking to an officer, if you talk with your hands, lock them behind your back, because you don't accidentally want to brush an officer. Because if you do, that can be construed as felony assault, and that's a very bad thing.

Whereupon one of the nice young people from the floor said: But they'll understand. We're just tryin' to communicate with them.

SS: {LAUGHS}

JV: And I – no. They don't have to understand, and they're not interested in your communications. They're a paramilitary organization that responds to chains of command; and they are tolerating you because they haven't been given orders to prevent you from coming up and talking to them. That's all.

This was a hard concept to grasp. But on the –

SS: Right.

JV: – other hand; thinking of the things we did; that’s probably progress. At the recent sort of Act Up anniversary Occupy demo; I remember going up to one of the cops, and saying, it’s really nice you guys aren’t wearing rubber gloves anymore. And he was like, well, you know, we do wear rubber gloves when we have to. I’m like, ts-, no, you’re younger than I am. Um – you guys all used to wear latex gloves, because we were gay.

And he was like, yeah, we don’t do that anymore.

I know. All those guys are retired now.

So, progress happens. You just don’t necessarily see it on the front lines all the time.

SS: Okay, I think that’s a good line on which –

JV: Yeah.

SS: – to end.

JV: Like I said, I can talk forever and ever and ever –

SS: No no, it’s great. Thank you so much, John.

JV: Well, I hope it was helpful. I don’t have that many details.

SS: No, it’s very helpful. You told us a lot of new things that we didn’t have.

JV: Really? Hm.

SS: We certainly didn’t have Queers Against Quayle –

JV: Oh.

SS: – we didn't have Tom Duane; we didn't have Tiananmen Square; and we didn't talk about ILGO. So it was –

JV: Okay.

SS: – really cool.

01:56:14

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