

# **A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **James Wagner**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Interview of James Wagner

February 28, 2004

**SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could just say your name, today's date, your age, and where we are?**

JAMES WAGNER: James Wagner. Today's date is February 28, 2004, and we're in my home in Chelsea.

**SS: And how old are you, James?**

JW: 63.

**SS: So, where were you born?**

JW: In Muncie, Indiana.

**SS: And how long did it take you to leave?**

JW: Well, my parents were only there for a couple of years just before the war, and they left for Detroit, and I lived in Detroit until I went off to college, actually – on the edge of Detroit.

**SS: So, when you were growing up – so this is the '40s and '50s – the '50s – did your parents talk to you about politics? Was there any kind of ethic about some kind of social intervention in your household?**

JW: It's difficult to remember at the time. My parents were both Republicans, but old – I guess they're virtually extinct today – mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Republicans. I remember their supporting Republican candidates. But they were both college educated in Jesuit colleges. I remember my father, especially, being very conscious of, at the time it didn't mean very much, because you assume your own experience as general, I think, as a child. But he was very concerned about the social issues as they related to individuals. And, I know that he went out of his way, even to my mother's distaste, in helping people that he would come across, either through work or elsewhere. So, I was aware of this, but this was something that I just didn't think of as political. I just thought

it was something that made sense, I suppose.

**SS: Did you grow up in a church?**

JW: Yes.

**SS: Which church?**

JW: The Roman Catholic Church.

**SS: Were you involved in doing good works or any kind of community church activities?**

JW: No. And the family was Catholic, but I didn't remember. At least, it's my memory that they were not really involved. But now, as I visit relatives as more than adult, I'm surprised at how Catholic they really were. At least, the relatives were, but I don't remember it being much of a presence in my own family.

**SS: What kind of future did they want for you? What kind of career did they want for you?**

JW: I can only say that they didn't seem to want – or were concerned about discouraging me and dissuading me from anything related to the arts. So, in a negative way I can say that that seemed to be the case, which is where I might have gone otherwise. But, being a dutiful son, I probably paid more attention to the fact that my father – who was an engineer. If I wanted to be an architect, it was basically a question of being an engineer, first. I knew I didn't want to do that. And, anything related to the arts, or even my interest in the arts, or music, if it was opera, they were thinking it should be something more practical, for instance – even in listening to opera. So it was Sigmund Romberg, instead of Wagner, in spite of my name.

**SS: What kinds of arts education or exposure did you have as kid?**

JW: Absolutely none – in any of the arts.

**SS: How did you discover opera?**

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JW: Very late, actually. I don't think I was that interested in opera until I was probably in my late '30s – and even specifically, Wagner. Classical music, though, I was always interested in. And we lived in Detroit, where he had at least two, as I recall, classical music stations plus the CBC, which would play classical music programs from Europe, from England and from Germany. So, I was very interested in Cage and Stockhausen and Henze – usually avant-garde classical music, from the very beginning – almost the very beginning. My first records were Beethoven and Brahms LPs – as soon as LPs were available.

**SS: Did you have any friends who shared this interest with you? Or was it kind of private?**

JW: Good question. I think it was pretty private. I don't think I really had friends who were interested in the arts in that way, as a child – that is, before college, especially before high school.

**SS: Did you get any messages at all about homosexuality? Were there any single people in your family?**

JW: Not in the family. And even to this date – it's an enormous family – there's almost no – in my parents' immediate family I have one nephew who's gay of about 12 and has been out from the beginning. But, in my larger family – I have 95 first cousins, and I knew many of them – there was never any indication to me or any word from anyone else that my cousins or uncles or aunts were. Many of them were priests and nuns, which might explain some of it. And as far as the greater role is concerned – I think I was basically unaware that there was such a thing. I knew that people were called homosexuals, but not by that name, by much worse names. It was probably the worst

thing you could possibly be, but I didn't know who was. And, even going back to a certain point, Liberace was described as not being homosexual. So I thought, if he isn't, who is? Where is this coming from? But, I had no idea. I knew I was – whatever *it* was – from as early as I had consciousness.

**SS: So, you grew up in an world where there were no arts, no gay and no politics.**

JW: Exactly.

**SS: Okay, so what happened? When you went to college?**

JW: I went to college – also a Jesuit college. And then I would say, almost my first week of graduate at Madison, Wisconsin, everything disintegrated.

**SS: What were you studying?**

JW: History – European history, especially.

**SS: Everything disintegrated your first week?**

JW: The church thing, the religious thing. I probably was less and less interested in my later years in college, although it was a Catholic college. But, by the time I got to Wisconsin, I don't know what happened, it just didn't make sense – the whole thing, the structure, just disappeared. And I also became more politically aware, partly because of the people I was around – in a secular, political, social, concerned fashion. This was 1962. So really, before the '60s, but not before people were thinking about things. My entire youth up to then was a conscious puberty and early maturity was in a period of apathy, was far as politics was concerned. It was the '50s, and it's pretty true, politics were not that important.

**SS: So, did you start to be sexually active when you were in graduate school?**

JW: No, in fact I'd never had a sexual experience until I was 24 – with somebody else.

**SS: That was after graduate school?**

JW: Well no, I stayed in graduate school for a very long time – partly because I could, partly because I was getting fellowships and partly because of the Vietnam war, and I didn't know what else I was going to be doing. So, I was in graduate school until 1969.

**SS: In Madison, Wisconsin?**

JW: No, later in Europe and at Brown – always in history.

**SS: So as the Vietnam war is unfolding, and all of these political movements are being created and you're in graduate school, did you come into contact with –**

JW: No. I would say because – well, I was in Europe for a year, in '63 and '64, which is probably a very important period. In fact, I was in Germany, when Kennedy was assassinated. And when I came back, I was working very hard. And it was at Brown. Brown seemed to be one of the last places of the great universities – and I wasn't even that well known, at the time – to become politicized. And, not until the late '60s – just before I finally left or dropped out of school – was there much political activity on campus. So, my involvement was delayed by circumstances. And I was still not involved in any movement or any group – in fact, until I came to New York.

**SS: So, when you dropped out of graduate school – so, you never finished?**

JW: No.

**SS: Is that when you moved to New York?**

JW: I actually fell in love and ran off with a sailor, to Newport. I was in

Providence.

**SS: So you left school, and you ran off with your boyfriend to Newport and what did you do with your life?**

JW: I had a liberal arts education, which was 10 years of college and graduate school. I had no craft, I had no training. I had history, I had liberal arts, but I had no skill. So basically, at that point, and probably to this day – a lot of things have changed – but at that point if you needed a job, you couldn't get one on any level, unless it was a bank or an insurance company. I tried both. I substitute taught, for awhile. I had taught at Brown, and eventually was hired by an insurance company – to pay the bills, basically. I had no income, of course, other than whatever I could get from a job. And I stayed with that job, with a couple of different companies.

**SS: That was all in Newport?**

JW: Well, originally, I was still living in Newport, but the job was in Providence, and eventually I moved back to Providence, and I stayed until '85.

**SS: So, what was your life as a gay man like in Providence in the '70s?**

JW: It was pretty wonderful. It was a very interesting community. Providence, I always thought, was more interesting than Boston. And I would go to New York occasionally – probably not often enough, because it was – while not that far, it was difficult to come to New York and be comfortable, because nobody had extra space, and you couldn't afford hotels. I was always attracted to New York and thought I should be in New York, but I was distracted by my personal involvement with Tom, and eventually with a house. We bought a house instead of renting, because somebody persuaded us it would be cheaper. It was a wreck of a house. It turned out it was an 18<sup>th</sup> century house. We found out only weeks after we'd moved in, and spent 10 or more years restoring it,

basically. The environment, the people were pretty interesting. There were some very eccentric people all ages, who formed a community in Providence. This was even before Stonewall. So, there were the typical bars in the '50s and early '60s that were on precarious basis with the police and the authorities and the media – the newspapers – who raided regularly. But there was that, and parties. And all that centered from all around Brown and the School of Design.

**SS: Because it's a Portuguese town, right?**

JW: Not that part of it. I lived in I guess what was, until recently, and at that time was largely Portuguese – it's been gentrified – the residential part of town, above the hills in downtown, and right next to Brown. And I had Portuguese friends, but I wouldn't have called it a Portuguese town.

**SS: Okay. So you're there until 1985, and the AIDS crisis, of course, begins in '81 and '82 – how did you experience it in its early years?**

JW: I was aware of it right away. I think I saw the first article that appeared in the *Times* in '81. And, having a sense of history and place and time and geography, I think I understood pretty well what this meant within a short while when there was a little more information. And I knew what it meant to me – which meant, safe sex. At that time, I think I was beginning a relationship with somebody, or had been in one for a short while – somebody else. I thought it was very important. I don't recall how much importance anyone else gave to it.

**SS: What was going on in Providence? Did people feel that it was relevant to them?**

JW: I think people didn't think it was relevant to them. It was a New York thing, at first. I haven't thought of that for awhile, but I believe that's it. And for me, I

thought well, it's a New York thing and these people are going back and forth to New York. It's not going to stay in New York.

**SS: So, who was the first person you had contact with who actually had AIDS?**

JW: When I first moved to New York – a friend, a good friend of somebody I'd gone to college with, whom I stayed in touch with, but not with his friend, although I knew him well, in college. I think – yes, he was already in a hospital, or went into the hospital, shortly after I'd arrived in New York. And my friend was basically his caregiver. I think his primary caregiver. The friend, fortunately, had a great deal of money and friends and so that was not a problem for him. But, he didn't have a family. And it was my friend who had AIDS. And when my friend, Michael, my own friend, was unable to go to the hospital, I would spell him, so to speak, to go visit Tom – it's a different Tom. This was the first person I think I knew as a friend. And it wasn't somebody I'd been close to for probably a decade or two – two decades probably.

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**SS: So, what was the experience or the environment around visiting a person with AIDS in the hospital, at that time?**

JW: Horrendous. My experience with hospitals – my mother had been a nurse, and I had had a few emergencies in hospitals – one of which saved my life – but this was not in New York, and I don't know how much it was a matter of geography or time – things are different today. But hospitals were perfect, hospitals were wonderful, hospitals were where good things happened, if they could. Hospitals were not something to be afraid of. And, I went to this hospital and it was probably my first experience in a hospital in New York.

**SS: Which one was it?**

JW: It was downtown – I’ve forgotten what it’s called. It’s near Pace. I think it was called Beekman Hospital. It was a relatively small hospital, and I’m not sure why I was there – I guess it depended on his doctor – and my office was downtown, so it was easy for me to get to. I would bring him milkshakes. I was appalled at the treatment – or lack of treatment. Of course, I was frightened. We knew nothing. This was ‘85 and we really knew very little about the disease and how contagious it might be. So it was difficult for me to decide what I could do or couldn’t do to help him, and I was afraid of contact to a certain extent. But I didn’t want anybody to know that. So I did what I could, and in fact I did help him out and clean up and move things around his room, and brought him food, because he wasn’t able to eat much that the hospital was able to give him. But the housekeeping in his private room was appalling, and he seemed to be very neglected.

**SS: Now, you mentioned casually that he had no family, was that because he was gay?**

JW: I don’t remember. As I say, I wasn’t that much in touch with him. I don’t know if he had separated himself from the family, or if it wasn’t a large family to begin with, and they weren’t near or had died. I don’t remember hearing anything about his family.

**SS: Okay. So, at what point did you decide to get involved?**

JW: I didn’t, because I had – I don’t know why – because I didn’t have enough of a presence of the thing, except in my head, and what I would read about it. I didn’t have a great store of friends in New York. I came to New York because I wanted to be in New York, not because I had tons of friends in New York. And by the time I got here, a lot of them weren’t here anymore. So, I would say I certainly was not an activist and

didn't do anything – I may be skipping something – but, until I saw the first – and even afterwards – I saw the first news of an ACT UP demonstration, the Wall Street action – it was March of '87. And, I was in the midst of trying to get out of a lease downtown, and into this apartment at the time, and it was very stressful, and I had just broken up with somebody, and it was difficult at work. So, I didn't do anything at the time, but I was totally in awe of what I had read. I was very impressed – the same thing I think you hear from so many people – that gay people – gay guys, it seemed at the time – had the courage to do something like that. And it wasn't the community that I had thought I was a part of, but it was something that I wanted to be a part of. But, I did delay it. I didn't really get involved until – I think a year later – and very slowly, because I didn't know anyone in ACT UP.

**SS: So, how did you enter into the world of ACT UP?**

JW: I sort of slid into a march, up to Central Park, the next June. I think it was in 1988.

**SS: Deliberately? Or, you just happened to be –**

JW: No, deliberately. I think I decided that I was going to go, and I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody who wanted to go or I could ask. I just went up there by myself and started talking to people, and ended up going to the meetings. This is when I think ACT UP had its own marches up to where the field for activism for Gay Pride was in Central Park.

**SS: Now, had you ever been in a gay march before?**

JW: No.

**SS: Had you ever been in any demonstration before?**

JW: Nothing of any significance, except an architectural thing in Rhode Island

– a preservation thing. That was my first experience.

**SS: What do you think it was that made you take such a huge, personal step?**

JW: I don't know, because I've never been a joiner. I'm not the least bit interested in competitive sports or team sports or anything that anybody else is doing. I think the energy, the importance of the cause, the affinity I felt for these people – even though I didn't know them. The diversity, I think, that by then I understood to be a part of it, but I didn't understand how diverse yet.

**SS: What do you mean by diversity?**

JW: Well, they weren't all interested in doing the same thing, and they weren't all coming from the same direction. There seemed to be a huge spread in age – there were women, as well. Up to that point, I never remember seeing any great degree of combination or any women – gay men and women – together, unless there was a friendship somehow, or a neighbor somewhere in the building. It just wasn't something you expected to see – at least in New England, and I'm not sure about New York, either. It seemed to be a first.

**SS: So, then you started going to meetings?**

JW: I did, very quietly. Again, I didn't know anyone, so I talked to somebody who seemed sympathetic.

**SS: Do you remember some of the first people that you noticed there or had made an impression on you?**

JW: People I noticed, but not necessarily ended up talking to right away, I think. The facilitators, very often – just the usual – the people that are now regarded as stars, I suppose.

**SS: They made an impression on you?**

JW: The energy, the intelligence, how articulate they were, and the fact that they would just get up and talk in front of a huge group. Even though it was, presumably, a friendly group, it was very difficult. I couldn't even imagine doing it. Even today I find it very difficult.

**SS: Are you saying it wasn't a friendly group?**

JW: It was. It was a friendly group. In other words, you weren't haranguing or being harangued. Certainly you were being critiqued, but it was a group which is trying to do the same sort of thing, presumably, that you wanted to do.

**SS: So, where did you decide to plug in, after you looked around for awhile?**

JW: To do something, other than just sit in the meeting you mean? As part of an affinity group. And it was somewhat accidental, but I think Jamie Leo probably started talking to me and said that he would like to do something. I don't know how this happened, he probably decided I was somebody he would be interested in talking to. And then we got a few other people together, and we started doing things, and it became what is known as Action Tours.

**SS: Okay. So, if you could just sort of tell us the story of Action Tours, with as much detail as you can recall. Who was there? What your first actions were? How you operated?**

JW: I don't think I'll remember without looking at the notes, and I've got huge files. I can't remember the sequence – whether it was – the first time we did anything was the Easter Parade, and I think that would have been 1991, I'm not sure. It must have been 1991 – no? The Albany action was '90 or '91. That was the fourth anniversary –

'87, '88, '89, '90 – 1991, that was March. We had this idea of the so-called Fifth Avenue Easter Parade, which was attended by the media and all kinds of people – going into the midst of the parade and basically, in the theatrical form of a funeral, dealing with the number of people that were dying today and will die tomorrow – because it would seem like a totally frivolous parade, and the idea of dressing up and mourning, and with the added effect of a big muffled drum – walking through or up Fifth Avenue, in the midst of this. And it did create a little bit of a stir, and there was some mention in the papers and it energized us all to do something else. So, when the fourth anniversary of ACT UP was coming up and they were talking about going to Albany, we decided to do something there, too.

**SS: Who was we?**

JW: It was myself, Jamie, at that point – many people who didn't continue with Action Tours, some who did – Steve Quester, Sharon Tramutola, Jocelyn Taylor. I'm going to miss names. If I start giving a few, I'm going to leave a lot of the important ones out.

**SS: And how would you come up with an idea? Where would you get together?**

JW: Well, our idea was to – partly because it was going to be difficult to get into the Statehouse, but we wanted to do something at the target, which was Pataki or the legislature, which I believe was not really in session – at least, not active that day, but the offices were all in the State Capital building itself. And obviously, it's going to be very difficult for activists or protestors to get in anywhere, and we decided we could pretend to be somebody else. And this eventually is what became the modus vivendi or operandi of the group – is to use disguise or pretend to be part of the target, or be part of the group.

And so, we dressed up in legislative drag – male and female – and went into the capital itself. Our other gimmick was to pretend to be part of a tour. And we had – this was Jamie’s idea – identified ourselves as Action Tours and there was a little picture of a bus and big type: ACTION TOURS. And inside, these little plastic nameplates with these name cards that you’d put on your clothing. And, you’d have your own name below it. And so, we went into the Capital trying to identify ourselves as such, and when we got to the top, we actually found – I can’t remember if we couldn’t get into Cuomo’s office, or if he was not there. And so we had also prepared leaflets, little flyers and theater blood.

The idea was the state has blood on its hands, or the legislature does. So we were going to, at the right moment, in front of the governor, or on the balcony of the legislature, throw theater blood on our faces and our hands and chant certain things about the state – “New York has blood on its hands,” and go on as far as we could. Because the target didn’t exist, or we couldn’t get to it – at that point, we started at the top of these grand staircases at the statehouse. And, the demonstration was all outside, so far as I know. Or, almost everybody was outside rather than inside. And so, we started – there were about 10 of us, I think – or a dozen, perhaps, with this theater blood, dressed pretty conventionally middle-class, running from the top of the stairs down, all the way through the bottom, and out the front door, where there was a rally already and everybody was chanting. There were speakers and signs and other theatrics. In the meantime, we were not arrested. We had thrown them off guard so fast and kept moving so fast, and I think, partly, the blood – no one knew whether it was real or not – threw people off. So, we got out and dispersed into the crowd at this point, and nobody was arrested, which is probably the pattern that we repeated in one form or another for a few years.

**SS: So, you pretended that you were like, middle Americans on a tour.**

**Did you have someone who was the tour guide?**

JW: Jamie is pretty good at theatrics. So, I think he did that even more than it was really necessary, because nobody was paying much attention to anyone in suits inside – demonstrators and AIDS activists, gay activists weren't going to look like the legislature in session. So, that's what we did for years after. The costume varied from something like suits – which is the most common – to tuxedos and gowns, which was very difficult for the women. Most of the women didn't have any access to gowns or even have any familiarity with wearing them, at that point. So, the guys would help out. And that's what we did. We would basically get into banquets, and –

**SS: Can you tell me a specific example?**

JW: There were so many. There would be Republican – I can't think of specific examples, but it would be Republicans or Democratic – either social events or meetings. I remember a Police Athletic League meeting.

**SS: Where was that?**

JW: Very often they're at grand hotels. So, I think that one was at the Plaza.

**SS: And why were you targeting the Police Athletic League?**

JW: I can't remember all the details, at this point. I think it had something to do with the Church, as well. But, I would say there were dozens of events over a period of a few years in which we found – and, I wouldn't have been a part of every one, if I was out of town. The group would meet generally here, and plan to do things of all kinds. The custom wasn't always that set. At one point, there were twenty-two Santa Clauses who got into Macy's and did an action. I wasn't here, at that time, I was on the West Coast. All dressed as Santa Claus, dealing with the issue – Macy's had fired an HIV-positive male who had applied for, I think, and been a Santa Claus in the past. I'm

not sure of the whole story – Mark Woodley – with no cause other than the fact that he was HIV-positive – so, of course, he couldn't be a Santa Claus for Macy's. So, twenty-two Santa Clauses entered into Macy's. This is prior to Christmas, so it was in November. I think of the same year – 1991 – but I'm not sure.

**SS: And what did they do?**

JW: That's pretty well documented, actually. I think there were a number of publications – mainstream or otherwise – I'm not sure, but I know that they went into Macy's. Some of them were thrown out, I think – carried out, others went on down the street, to confront Christmas shoppers. There's always flyers and signs – almost always, anyway – when we're doing this sort of thing, whether it's for the general public or the attendees at a banquet.

**SS: So, were you literally making things?**

JW: Yes.

**SS: What kinds of props – you personally?**

JW: I personally – I remember one thing – and I still have examples of it. In fact, I have little props for most of these actions in files. Faceless Bureaucrats – I remember we did that a few times. It worked very well. The first time – Cuomo had an office in the World Trade Center, and we were constantly attacking Cuomo for not doing enough – sometimes speaking well, but doing nothing for AIDS, AIDS funding, or just AIDS awareness. And there was some occasion – I can't remember the occasion – where we decided to be – I think it was a meeting – to go to the Trade Center plaza, because you couldn't actually get into the Trade Center itself or his office – or, he wasn't there – it wasn't visible. Why go to an office not attended by Cuomo, but he has an official office there. The plaza was at lunchtime – and to dress in suits or the equivalent for the women

– and wear masks that said, Faceless Bureaucrat, and carry signs. We had these plain masks that we basically – just an oval with holes for eyes, and text that I have in my office – with a computer I would print these things, and we’d cut them up with glue – there’d be Faceless Bureaucrats on this mask, dressed in suits and overcoats, because it was cold, as I recall. And with signs, like lunch boards. Horizontal signs on our chests, hanging around our necks on a string, it would say different things like, “It’s not my fault, I didn’t know anything about it.” “Nobody told me about the ovens.” Various strong language, as though the bureaucrats had no blame, or couldn’t imagine having any blame, either before or after something was done. And it attracted attention and got lots of media coverage. So we did it, I think, two other times for other events, over a period of a couple of years.

**SS: Did you have personal contact with those kind of bureaucrats?**

JW: This is one of the things I could contribute. I guess that’s why I thought this is something I could do, because I was – I worked in an office, and it was a pretty decent job, and I was constantly with insurance – and there’s nothing much more bureaucratic than insurance. And, I knew – I thought, and I’m pretty sure I did – how these people thought, or didn’t. And I certainly knew how they dressed and behaved. And one of the things that made it possible for me to continue to be in that kind of job for a long time is that if I had to wear a suit, it was going to be a decent one. So, I enjoyed dressing up, so to speak – though I’d prefer not to, and I haven’t worn a suit since I stopped that job. But, if I was going to have to get dressed up, I’d dress up well. So, I knew how to dress well enough so that no one would question my credentials to go into places, including in one case, I went by myself to a fundraiser for Clinton, while he was in New York, just before he was nominated the first time. And it was \$1,000 per person,

that I was supposed to go to a fundraiser. And I went into the entrance – and somehow, I had been told about this by somebody else who had heard about it, but couldn't possibly disguise himself properly. So, I'm going in there with my Italian suit and overcoat and fedora. And I walk in, and they asked for my contribution. And I said, "Oh, my secretary must have forgotten to send it in – I'll have her do it tomorrow," or something like that. And so they let me in, and I ended up talking to Clinton. So yes, my contribution was that I was able to do that or, in some cases, coach.

**SS: What did you say to Clinton?**

JW: I had props, so to speak. I had literature. I had copies of his record in Arkansas on homosexuals, which was not good at the time – to remind him of that. And, I had a copy of the ACT UP – I think they were called the 21 points, 14 points – whatever it was, that we were working on, at the time. It was not a large group. There were probably only a few dozen people there raising money, in a townhouse. And, I talked to him in turn – I think for about five minutes – it seemed like five minutes, it was probably less. And of course, he was totally gracious. I'd never met him or seen him before, and he seemed very sympathetic about AIDS and that he was going to read what I'd given him. And I basically, nervously, tried to tell him what I could in as quickly and efficiently as I could imagine, since I knew my time was going to be limited, somehow. He was going to be pulled away. I wasn't – of course, somebody like me wasn't expected to be there in the midst of this adoring group. And then I walked away, and I shakily downed a glass of wine, I think and walked outside. But when I did, there were other ACT UPpers and Tourists, I guess – Action Tourists, outside – only a few, though, and some of the media. And they asked me about what had happened and I told them. And when he came out – apparently, he went across the street to a group of

demonstrators and the media and said that he was going to talk to ACT UP. And he did. I think a day or two later, while he was in New York, a meeting was called, and I think a couple of dozen ACT UPpers went and explained the plan to one of the candidates – which is all he was, at the time. I've forgotten exactly what happened after that, but he actually did have a meeting in his hotel suite.

**SS: What was ACT UP's relationship to candidates, in general?**

JW: Relationship? That year, especially – this would be the '92 election – ACT UP and the various affinity groups – certainly ours, trailed all the candidates and tried to engage them with ACT UP's program to end the AIDS crisis. And, the relationship was that none of them were going to supported, as such. I think even if one of them had come out totally subscribing to our program – as Jerry Brown did in the end when he was in New York – it wouldn't have been that ACT UP would support that candidate, it would just mean that the job was now to get the others to do the same thing.

**SS: And why would ACT UP not endorse a candidate?**

JW: I don't know, but ACT UP – I think the principle was never to do so – the point wasn't to endorse a candidate, but to get ACT UP's point across, and to get people to do – there was no way of knowing that a candidate who subscribed to ACT UP's tenets entirely, would be the one who would be elected in the fall. And ACT UP didn't have that kind of ability to see that somebody was elected.

**SS: So did Clinton ever enact any of the points?**

JW: That of course, is another story – not that I know of, not effectively, certainly. I mean, no one was really happy with what happened once he was elected.

**SS: Can you say for yourself how you experienced his election, in relationship to AIDS?**

JW: It was an enormous disappointment – that’s all I can say. I was just astounded, I think, even as cynical as I thought I had become by that time – that he found it impossible, or unlikely, or uninteresting for him to do anything. He certainly had all the power to do at least a bully pulpit, which I think he could do, and it’s so cheap, once you’re elected, especially. That he did so little – and of course, it wasn’t just AIDS. It was sort of discouraging.

**SS: Did Action Tours ever do anything that you disagreed with?**

JW: No. I’ve been thinking about this, lately. I think one of the disadvantages of a small affinity group, as opposed to a large group of ACT UP people in a room, is the affinity group is a little bit less critical of its members. ACT UP is critical, but not as critical, maybe – it certainly isn’t as critical as somebody who’s – or, as a group which doesn’t have as much in common. And, I think it’s very hard to discourage somebody from an idea, which might not be the best, and might not be the best use of resources. So, I won’t say they did anything I didn’t approve of. I was probably, in many cases, I probably didn’t speak up because I didn’t seem to have the information. So, the few things we did, with hindsight at least, and only with hindsight, I’d say, I’m not sure why we bothered doing that. I don’t think they were big mistakes, but I think they may have been not the best use of our energies.

**SS: Can you think of any examples?**

**SS: James has been thinking – tell us.**

JW: There’s one – not only one, necessarily – one thing I can think of that I feel somewhat embarrassed about, because I didn’t have enough information at the time – and even now, I don’t. And, I think it was probably arguable – it would have been arguable at the time, and that’s when we did two things, I think, related to the film

Tape I  
00:40:00

Tape II  
00:00:00

*Silence of the Lambs*. And I never saw the film, so I can't really speak to the merits of the film or even to our anger, or our attempt to educate or instruct. But we infiltrated the Golden Globe Awards dinner at the Rainbow Room I think, on one occasion. And – was it *Saturday Night Live*? when Sharon Stone was a guest.

**SS: Okay, let's start with the Golden Globe thing. Can you just set up for people what the conflict was about *Silence of the Lambs*?**

JW: That's the problem, I don't – I think I got – I sort of let other people deal with the issue. The *Silence of the Lambs* – I'm not even sure, somebody else could probably explain it, even anyone in this room – was a film that was criticized for the way it treated homosexuality, and specifically, one of the characters who was perceived to be a lesbian or a – I can't even begin to explain it, that's part of the problem that I had at the time, and I still do.

**SS: This was ACT UP or Action Tours?**

JW: Action Tours, specifically.

**SS: Okay, so there was no AIDS link?**

JW: That's an interesting point, though. There were a lot of things that Action Tours did that weren't specifically AIDS, and a lot of things that even ACT UP did, although it was always called – we were always calling ourselves on it. Was it AIDS-related, if it just was a question of homosexuality? But I think we have to remember that at the time, in the late '80s and early '90s, AIDS was identified with homosexuality, so almost anything – any way that homosexuality could be portrayed negatively had some impact upon AIDS and how AIDS would be regarded or treated. So, how far do you go in a direction away from the specifics of AIDS? So, I think it was basically, homophobia, and how that would affect the fight against AIDS. And so yes, it is

somewhat remote, and the specifics of the film I cannot really argue or discuss. But we went to try to remind the people who were there. I think the idea was that this was – it was inappropriate to portray homosexuality traditionally – and forever – in Hollywood as evil, I think was the basic idea.

**SS: So, how did you get into the Golden Globes? What was the action?**

**JW:** Oh, it was easy. In gowns and tuxedos. It would certainly be much more difficult now. Even at the time, every time we did something like this we had to remind ourselves it's going to be much more difficult the next time, or for the next group or the next cause, whatever it might be. Because basically, they were like lambs. At all these events, no one expected anyone to crash for political reasons, or if they did, they would be identified or they would kid themselves thinking that they could be identified. So, you could tell what an activist or a demonstrator was. And of course, we never looked like wild and crazy activists.

**SS: So the Golden Globes didn't ask for an invitation? Anyone could just**

–

**JW:** I don't remember if we had one. We often did or were able to copy – somebody inside, in some cases, would be able to give us something that we could use, and duplicate or mimic. But in some cases if you looked right, with the right attitude, you could get into these things. And very often, that's all we did. The Golden Globes were pretty easy. I mean, at that point it was probably not as large an event. I'm sure it wasn't as large as it's become, at that point. It was just a large dinner in the Rainbow Room with Stone and others.

**SS: What happened?**

**JW:** We actually talked to the director and some of the critics and, I think,

actors who were there, and tried to explain why we were there.

Tape II  
00:05:00

**SS: What did they say?**

JW: I don't remember the details. I think I was doing something else in the room, at the time. Very often, I would be kind of on the lookout for something else, but I didn't really – also, as I explained, I don't think I knew the issue. So, I was part of the planning, in that case, but not part of the message.

**SS: I want to go back to something that you raised that I thought was really interesting. You said often there would be someone on the inside of whatever organization it was, who would provide you with –**

JW: Or, somebody – because ACT UP, and even Action Tours to some extent – or people in ACT UP who knew about Action Tours and what we could and might be able to do – would have a connection – either themselves, or through somebody else, get invitations to things, or hear about something through media connections that was going to happen. In some cases I actually have an invitation, or it might be something for which you were invited to contribute a hundred or a thousand dollars for – just to find out something was happening. And occasionally it would be something that would appeal to us as an appropriate target, and one we could actually approach.

**SS: But what I'm getting at is that, were these gay people or people with AIDS, who worked inside these organizations that were secretly supporting ACT UP? That type of thing?**

JW: Sometimes it would be that. And sometimes it would be members of ACT UP who couldn't themselves do it – either because they would be giving their activism away, perhaps, or because they weren't able to dress for this particular occasion – because, we're talking about people with real money or influence.

**SS: You raise the issue of broadly defining what an AIDS issue was at the time. Now, Action Tours did a lot of pro-choice stuff, right?**

JW: Yes, including for WHAM, specifically – which is Women’s Health Action Mobilization.

**SS: Could you try to represent, a little bit, the discussion inside Action Tours, before you made that decision?**

JW: Okay, we didn’t – there was never any discussion, like, are we part of ACT UP, only? Or, a part of WHAM? Or, are we free agents, entirely? Because some of the people in Action Tours were also members of WHAM or Lesbian Avengers or other groups, it just never was an issue. The issues were all there for all of us. And, I think we were trying very hard to be open to the problems of other groups that were somehow related to us, I suppose, I think, because all of us, if I can say this – I think I can say it safely – all of us were very aware that we wanted to include women in ACT UP and in the AIDS movement, fight, and beyond that, people of color or any groups, that ACT UP should remain, and become more inclusive than it was. That’s one of the things I’ve always thought was a big problem, and one that we weren’t able to solve, in the history of ACT UP is people of color – getting larger numbers. It was obvious as time went by, it was clear that this is where some real work had to be done.

**SS: I’m focused more on the abortion issue specifically, because ACT UP did a lot of stuff around that – the St. Patrick’s action – both ACT UP and Action Tours. Was there ever any discussion about this, or was it just assumed that, of course, you were going on the front line of the abortion battle?**

JW: I don’t remember there ever being a discussion.

**SS: So, no one was anti-abortion that you came across?**

JW: Anti-right to abortion, I think. There were probably some people who – actually, I know one person in particular in ACT UP that had a real problem with this – but not part of Action Tours.

**SS: So, can you tell me what kinds of things Action Tours did with WHAM?**

JW: Well, the most dramatic was covering, or veiling, the Statue of Liberty with a banner – veiling the face with one, and a separate banner at the same moment covering almost the entire base of the Statue of Liberty. It was really, I think, a beautifully planned event. The face – the banner on the face was I think removed very quickly – so, it was only up there for a minute, perhaps, and the banner on the base for somewhat longer – maybe 15 or 20 minutes – and we did get photographs of it. But, “Abortion is Healthcare, Healthcare is a Right,” was the banner on the bottom and the one that covered the face said something about liberty. I can’t remember the exact text.

Tape II  
00:10:00

**SS: Do you remember what the reason was for this?**

JW: The reason was for visibility of the issues. I can’t remember the immediate occasion or what time it was. I don’t think there was anything going on at the moment, but I’m not sure of that. I’d forgotten how we started with – we wanted to do something very visible, and there’s nothing much more visible than the Statue of Liberty – except right now, when it’s closed. But, we found a way to get in. In fact, I went in a few times to find the right wrench that would open the windows. I forget what the technical term is – it’s a certain kind of wrench. It’s like a female hole, male wrench, or the other way around, and it has to be the right size, and these little bronze windows in the crown of the Statue of Liberty. We had to open at least two of them, in order to hang a banner over the face. So, we went up once – I think I brought some wax to put as an

impression against the hole, so I could figure out what size wrench and went back and got one and back and tried it again. And then the day we did it, we had a few dozen people carrying cinderblocks in handbags, or parts of cinderblocks, to anchor down the big banner, which was enormous and very heavy. And just the construction of these banners – that big banner, I can't remember the dimensions, but if anybody looks at the Statue of Liberty or the photographs, it's enormous, and very beautiful block letters – white on black. Everything we had, we had to carry in casual bags, waiting hours, I think it was, in line to go up into the Statue of Liberty, and coordinate doing it at the top and the bottom at the same moment. We even arranged to have a helicopter, so we could get a picture, knowing that it wouldn't last. And, we wanted to make sure – that was the most important thing – is that we'd get it into the media as it almost always is. And we did, except the helicopter couldn't take off, for some reason, and never got the picture. But there were pictures and WHAM used the image.

**SS: Who were the WHAM people that you were working with?**

JW: The names? There are quite a number – I have lists, I don't remember them all now.

**SS: Do you remember anybody?**

JW: Well, Elizabeth Meixell.

**SS: Well she was ACT UP, also.**

JW: Yes. In fact, a number of them were both. There are some names now – artists that are pretty well known. I can't remember the names.

**SS: It's just really interesting – this male/female thing – because in ACT UP, it's one thing to have men and women working together on an issue that was initially perceived of as a gay male issue, and then people began to understand that**

**women were also infected. But, this is gay men working with straight women and lesbians on an issue that's primarily focused on heterosexual women.**

JW: Yes.

**SS: So, was there anything different, for you personally, in stretching in that direction?**

JW: No. I suppose the next question would be why we didn't end up with other issues, like anti-war? I don't have an answer for that. Why was it just moving on to women, at this point. I think it was because of – these were dangerous subjects – homosexuality and women's healthcare, I think, and were not easily supported by mainstream – even mainstream lefties or liberals, to the same extent that some other issues – even anti-war issues – were. But I think also, these were our friends. These were people we were working with already, and they felt very strongly about this, for personal reasons and their friends' reasons – that is, women – and the men thought, of course, this is absolutely right. It's the same stupidity and mistakes that are being made in that case, as well.

**SS: So, you think that the political expansion came from the personal relationships of the people working together, in some way?**

JW: I don't know if I can answer that. I don't know how that happened. It just seemed totally natural to us, it seems.

**SS: Action Tours – it seems like you did a lot of these kinds of zap things, all over the place. Did you have a particular philosophy or ideology about doing lots of little actions, or did it just turn out that way?**

JW: No, I don't think there was ever any ground plan or any agenda – any annual report or projection that this was the sort of thing we were going to do. It just

seemed that we were going to be able to do – we were, and became very good at just getting into places where other people couldn't, using attitude and disguise, or attitude and drag of some kind or another. And what we did was largely chance. You'd hear about something ahead of time. I mean, if you hear about it after it's happened, of course, it's useless. So, if you hear about it ahead of time – and presumably, everybody either hasn't heard about it, or hearing out it, they still can't do anything about it, but maybe you could.

**SS: Now, you said, anti-war – well, of course, one of your most famous actions was in response to the Gulf War.**

JW: Yes.

**SS: Can you just tell us how you came up with this idea, and how it was enacted?**

JW: We had – I don't remember how – there probably is only one explanation. The idea of interrupting what we did in the end, is interrupting CBS News – Dan Rather's *Evening News*. I know from the fact of my age and my interest in history has always been something that the left has said we've always wanted to do this sort of thing. But, that's not why we did it. We did it basically because we could do it. We were given the opportunity or the suggestion by Ann Northrop – I think that's the very beginning of it, and even before – it was done at the end of January I think, 1991. And we were thinking about it in November or December the year before, because Ann Northrop had told me that she could loan or give me her own ID for CBS Studios – knowing the kinds of things we do, and if we were interested. I think that's how it started. I don't think I was talking to her about doing something like that, in the first place. It came directly from her. And I said, well, maybe we can do something with this. So basically, the idea was to go in and

represent ourselves as being part of the traffic coming in and out of the studio, and interrupt the *Evening News*. There was no war at this time. Of course, there was talk of war – this is the Gulf War we’re talking about. And it just happened that, by the time we were planning – we did a certain amount of planning. I went into the studio twice. I managed to make copies of the ID for myself and a number of others, and we had lots of spares, so that if people weren’t able to go at the last minute, we had a second string of people who were going to go into this, and, as it turns out, we were thinking, okay, why not all of them? So, we were also going to go to NBC and ABC, except that we never had time to get into the ABC – actually, it got started because we were all trying to do it at the same moment. Now, it was going to be the day before a major ACT UP anniversary – Day of Desperation is what it was called, at the time. We were going to do it the night before, as an introduction to the day. And so, it all had to be done and we didn’t have enough time, basically, to do all three networks. But, we planned to do two – CBS and NBC. Peter Jennings and ABC wasn’t hit, and at the time people thought it was because Peter Jennings was maybe more sympathetic to AIDS issues, specifically. And again, we weren’t really talking about the war, as such. The war had actually begun, officially, the week before. So I had gone into the studio once before that and security was pretty easy. After that, it was much more difficult, but I still had no trouble getting in with the ID. So I figured, go ahead and do it. And, the day we did it – I think it was the first day of any violence in the war. An Iraq Scud missile had hit Tel Aviv that afternoon, I think it was. And that was the big story on the *Evening News*, and that’s how it began. In fact, that was shown on the screen just after the introduction ad and just before we interrupted Dan Rather.

**SS: What was it about the war that was so –**

JW: Well, the fact that the war was either stupidly or cynically created, instead of – it was a distraction, as our current war or wars are – from what was really important to people – and, specifically, AIDS. The media were talking about war and not talking about AIDS. But, even without the issue of war, the media still wasn't dealing with AIDS as, obviously, they should have been. So, this was a very dramatic for us illustration of the neglect and failure of the media. So, the idea was to interrupt the news, which was reporting on the war, it turns out, at the moment. And, we had to be very succinct. We knew we'd have only a few seconds probably, at best. And so, we had to get the word "AIDS" in first. The first thing to be said was, "AIDS is News," which is what John Weir – who was the only one actually on screen and the other two shouted. I was there as support and to make sure that they weren't going to be shot or killed – as if I could have done anything about it, if they wanted to.

Tape II  
00:20:00

**SS: Who were the other two guys?**

JW: Dale Peck and Darrell Bowman – and myself were the four inside<sup>1</sup>, but I was in total – we were all dressed in suits, but I was not going to be on screen, because I still had a job to go to. Basically, I didn't want to be arrested on national television, when I wasn't even out as an activist – or at that time, even as a homosexual – in my job. So, I was support. "AIDS is News. Fight AIDS, not Arabs," was the second phrase. And I don't think anybody heard the third, which is, "Money for AIDS, Not for War." And at that point, the screen went blank, they were grabbed – the screen went blank for

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<sup>1</sup> In an email to the ACT UP Oral History Project dated 8/16/2004, James Wagner added, "Of course, in reality there were many more ACTION TOURS men and women involved in the planning, support and backup. My file shows that there were 30 people perched around the city that night, poised to do their thing when or if it became necessary (alternates, outside support, photographers/videographers and media people). Among those 30 were the four others arrested at NBC the same night, before they were able to get on camera."

seven or ten seconds, and Dan Rather came back on after that. So, it wasn't an anti-war demonstration as such, it was an AIDS event.

**SS: I want to talk a little bit about the culture of Action Tours. Did you stay in Action Tours for your whole time in ACT UP?**

JW: Yes. In fact, Action Tours doesn't really exist now, but the relationships do. We still see each other a lot, but there's not, as such, an Action Tours.

**SS: So, how often did you people get together?**

JW: I don't think we had a schedule – I'm trying to think – I think what happened – this was before the Internet. It would be much easier today, although more easy to track too, I suppose, by the authorities. But, we would somehow – somebody would contact or make calls. Or, we'd have an idea – either at the general ACT UP meeting, or somebody would come up with something, and we'd contact each other and we'd meet, generally here. And if it took – and it usually did – more than one meeting, we'd say we'll meet again tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. There was never a schedule. But for awhile, for a couple of years, it seemed very, very frequent. I'd say virtually every week – once a week, on the average.

**SS: So, you were meeting with Action Tours. You were going to the ACT UP meeting and you were doing your actions.**

JW: Yes.

**SS: So, how much of your week was devoted to ACT UP?**

JW: Well, quite a bit, and it depends on who was – we would distribute the responsibility for certain things – researching something, making signs, making fact sheets, doing props. So sometimes there was a lot of work in addition to just the meetings and the actions themselves.

**SS: Would you say it was like a lifestyle?**

JW: It really was, yeah.

**SS: And how did that affect the rest of your life?**

JW: I think through most of this time I was single, but I did have a nine to five job, fortunately, mostly nine to five, not very irregular, and that's why I kept that job for so long, and it paid well, and I could hide there, up to a certain point. Eventually, that stopped. And I was still interested in the arts, so I would still be able to go to performances.

**SS: What about your friends who were not in ACT UP? How did those relationships –**

JW: I don't think I had many friends who were not in ACT UP, in fact. I think ACT UP – except for a fairly small number of friends that I had when I either just came to New York, or just before or just after, ACT UP became my network of friends and probably, to a certain extent, still is.

**SS: Is there any way to characterize how ACT UP changed you, as a person? What its consequences were on you?**

JW: I should be able to answer that, but I can't right away. I started out in college as, I won't say Republican – I'd say more of a Libertarian, and certainly, far to the right of almost anybody – anyone I can imagine knowing today. And gradually, beginning with Wisconsin, if not actually before Wisconsin, when I was still in my undergraduate years – becoming a little bit more liberal. And, I think I've moved further to the left ever since, including –I think it's ongoing. And ACT UP had a great deal to do with that, but I think I was doing it anyway. It just gave me a way to express that. I'm not a noisy person. I can be a very angry person, but I don't really make a fuss – to use

an expression – by myself very often. Actually I do if I'm really upset about something.

**SS: Was there something specific about the AIDS experience that led you to feel that structural changes were necessary in the way we live in this country?**

JW: Yes, I think it removed a lot of naiveté. I used to think everybody really intended and was trying to do a decent job – whatever that job might be – about society. And, I realized that it wasn't quite so simple, even for those who were regarded as liberal, or who should be aware of things. I think it opened my eyes much more than they would have been otherwise. It hastened the process.

**SS: What about your personal experiences with people with AIDS? Was there anybody in Action Tours who got sick, that you were involved with?**

JW: Yes, David Feinberg was a member of Action Tours. There were not that many. I remember another affinity group, the Marys, which was very hard hit, but there weren't that many in Action Tours. Myself – I had no idea whether I was positive or negative, until 1989, and I was fairly surprised to find out then that I was positive. And I think I've been positive for 20 or 25 years, and very healthy. So, my participation in ACT UP was not because I – and I didn't have friends even then, when I first joined, other than the one I mentioned, and one other friend. Actually, a lover – or a former lover – of a good friend was dying of AIDS when I first met him, and did. But outside of that, I didn't know anyone else. So, my personal experience with AIDS hardly existed.

**SS: Let's talk about David Feinberg, because you know Jim was very close to David. Were you involved in his care group or –**

JW: No, I wasn't even a close friend of David's. David was part of the group, and I really admired his work and his personality and everything about him, actually. And I really envied those who were close to him personally, because it seemed like an

extraordinary relationship. But no, he was a member of Action Tours, and probably would've wanted to be more of one if he were – eventually – he would do anything that we were part of, but he didn't like coming to the meetings very much, and at some point, he didn't have a great deal of strength.

**SS: He approached his illness very differently than a lot of other people, in that he was really out there about what he was feeling and experiencing.**

JW: Yes.

**SS: Do you remember any particular incidences or expressions of that?**

JW: No, I can't think of anything right now, other than what we would have seen in the ACT UP meetings.

**SS: Can you describe any of that?**

JW: No, the memory is too faint at this point.

**SS: So when you found out that you were positive, did you look to ACT UP to decide how to deal with it? Did you go to T&D and talk to people?**

JW: No, even then I realized I wasn't going to be good with T&D. I'm not that interested in medical issues. I never had a great memory, which I think you'd really need to have. I don't have that kind of scientific curiosity, and I wasn't going to be able to make myself into an expert. And at that point, my test numbers – whatever – still are pretty good. I didn't really have to know anything for my personal salvation, and I didn't know anyone else who could profit from information I might get. And, I knew that whatever we learned today would be changed tomorrow. It was happening very quickly then, and to some extent it still is. So, I didn't go into T&D. So it didn't help me. I didn't use ACT UP for personal, medical purposes. And, I don't think it changed much at all – my relationship to ACT UP. It's something that – now, that was a different piece

of information, that's all.

**SS: Because, if I recall, in that era, the fad of the moment was to heavily hit early on.**

JW: Yes, with AZT. Yes, I think by the time I found out though, that was already changing – '89, I'm not sure about that. Yeah, they were overdosing people with AZT, which is the only thing they had. I can't remember the chronology, but I think that's what we had in '89. And, I had very high T-cell numbers, which again, is all we had to tell us anything. So my doctor, and I think almost any doctor, would have said, don't bother, at this point.

**SS: Everyone that we've interviewed who's positive – we've asked them, if they wouldn't mind telling us what medications they were taking. Do you know?**

JW: I'd have to go look in the cupboard, because I'm still not good at it. I take a cocktail. I can't remember the exact names. I can tell you, if you want, give me a break. And I take Acyclovir. I think that's it.

**SS: Do you have any consciousness of any of the medications that you're taking now having been something that ACT UP was involved with at any point?**

JW: Well, one of them is AZT, and that was changed in my cocktail prescription a year ago I guess, or less. So, I've always resisted that, and my doctor said, that's fine, we'll just do something else, because of its history. So, that is one of the drugs I'm taking now, so I was very aware of its history and that this might mean something. But, at this point, I don't –

**SS: It's really interesting, because one of the clichés about ACT UP is that treatment activists were positive and that the artsy-fartsy people were negative, but actually, that's not really true. It never divided that way.**

JW: You've found that to be the case, then?

**SS: Well, we're finding that out.**

JW: It's odd – people didn't necessarily talk about their status. I think, early on, some people thought it was a positive thing not to know. Others thought it would be useful. Really early on, there wasn't much you could do about it, if you were being cautious anyway, and a lot of people weren't, of course, at it turns out. I don't have an opinion about that. But I think, I don't know.

**SS: Did you socialize inside ACT UP, or just in terms of Action Tours?**

**Did you go to ACT UP parties? Clubs?**

JW: Oh yes.

**SS: Was safe sex something that was part of ACT UP's internal culture, or was that just part of the rhetoric?**

JW: That I couldn't tell you that from personal experience, because I did not have – I don't think I had intimate relations with people in ACT UP, which is probably pretty unusual, too. I think my relations were not with people in ACT UP. So, I can't answer that question, I think. I think I can say, from what I have known, that a lot of people slipped up. Whether they had or intended to have safe sex all the time and slipped up, or really thought, sometimes, you just can't. I don't know, but I believe that's the case. I don't think anyone's perfect. Yet, that's pretty hard for me. I myself think I must have contracted the disease 20 or 25 years ago, because I have been safe, unless, while I was sleeping something happened, which is very unlikely. But, it is odd. And yet, I've known some people, very close, who were negative and suddenly became positive. Basically, as far as they could understand, because of one event where something messed up. Which is astounding, considering the luck other people have of remaining negative.

**SS: When did you stop going to ACT UP?**

JW: I suppose I should be able to remember that, but I don't. In the mid-'90s, at some point.

**SS: Do you know why?**

JW: No. It seems like it was sudden, that the energy or the sheer numbers declined dramatically, but I'm not certain. It's just somehow in my memory, vaguely. When other people outside of ACT UP ask me what happened, I explain as best I can that it seemed like – well, many people died. Other people were now part of the establishment that had been the target, other people were now – like TAG – were no longer a part of ACT UP, and that was a great deal of the energy. The targets that we'd always seen and approached were now so diffuse. Some things were being done, but it wasn't quite as dramatic to find a target, and everybody seemed to agree, yes, AIDS exists. Yes, something should be done, but it wasn't quite as easy to find the villain. And sometimes we were the villain ourselves, now. I don't know what happened.

**SS: Did you continue to be socially active, after you left ACT UP?**

JW: With people in ACT UP you mean?

**SS: With any kind of political movement?**

JW: Yes.

**SS: What kind of work have you been doing since then?**

JW: Work? I think I probably couldn't describe it as such, but if there is a demonstration – whether it's an ACT UP demonstration, which do continue, or anti-war or political demonstrations, I'm very much a part of it. And with the Internet now, I have a website, which I think is more political than it is arts. It was intended to be arts and politics, when I first started it.

**SS: Are you working with any organizations?**

JW: No.

**SS: So, I just have one last question. Just looking back, what would you say, if you could make an assessment – what would you say was the missed opportunity or disappointment of ACT UP? And then, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement?**

JW: I think the missed opportunity is something I alluded to before – the fact that we weren't able to – and I don't think it's ACT UP's fault, entirely – it's just something that was determined by so many other factors as well – to involve the African American community, even in New York, which is – even then, was obviously – was so much needed to be involved in AIDS activism.

**SS: Were you involved in any efforts to do that?**

JW: I can't think of anything specifically, except that I was always very much aware of trying to include a diverse group in Action Tours, to the extent that we could. I think that ACT UP always felt – and not everybody was interested, I think – but, ACT UP always felt helpless in trying to do so, and I think part of it is the culture – for the most part, other than the middle class African Americans – the culture of the community and the churches and the attitude towards homosexuality.

**SS: You think it was because of black attitudes towards –**

JW: I think so, but we also didn't have a relationship. I mean, ACT UP was very much, but not entirely, a middle-class, white person's thing, and it just never seemed to be able to get out of that – I think, as it was perceived by other communities.

**SS: Why do you think that was?**

JW: I don't know, except that maybe the people that began were friends that

started ACT UP, were the nucleus, at the very beginning. And they were never able to attract enough of the groups from elsewhere – although women were a part of it, and that wasn't part of the people who started it, I think.

**SS: Was your world interracial before you came to ACT UP?**

JW: No, I have to admit that. In fact, my world was very sheltered, from the time I was born – not just racially – but, not diverse, at all. The greatest thing about my world now is being in New York and thriving and looking for it everywhere, any kind of diversity everywhere.

**SS: So, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest accomplishment?**

JW: I think, to the extent that -- well, obviously, recognizing AIDS as something we all have to be concerned with, obviously – to the extent that that has happened. And two, I think, as an example of the ability – the fact that anyone can do something, if they are determined to do it – if they're clever enough, and if you don't mind being rude. And, you can do it as an individual, and you can do it as a member of a group – like, an affinity group, or by creating or joining or becoming part of something like ACT UP, regardless of what the stakes are, or regardless of what the issue may be. And that could be war, women's issues, homosexuality, other diseases. We've seen the pattern repeated elsewhere. And, all over the world – in so-called third-world countries, are now doing some of the things ACT UP was doing. I don't mean that ACT UP was the first one to do any of these things, or have any of these elements. But, its visibility, eventually, and its pizzazz has made a big difference for a lot of people.

**SS: Okay, thank you James.**

JW: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]