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Interviewee: **MaxZine Weinstein**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of MaxZine Weinstein
October 16, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: Hello.

MAXZINE WEINSTEIN: Hello.

SS: Please, could we start by you saying your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

MW: Is this like one of those drinking-and-driving tests? Sure. My name is MaxZine Weinstein. I'm 39. Today is October 16th, 2004, in the year of someone's Lord. And where? At the community I live at, which is in Dowelltown, Tennessee, at a place called IDA.

SS: And when you were in ACT UP, were you known as MaxZine?

MW: I was known alternately as MaxZine or Mark.

SS: Okay.

MW: My name was kind of in flux.

SS: Okay. Where were you born, Mark? I mean, MaxZine? Sorry.

MW: That's okay. Well, I was born as Mark, in Manhattan General Hospital, in New York.

SS: And where did you go to school?

MW: I was raised and went to school in New York, on Long Island, Syosset schools. And then in West Des Moines, Iowa, for high school.

SS: So when you were growing up, did your family talk to you about civil responsibility, or being community-oriented, or did they have particular ideas about justice that they presented to you?

MW: Yeah. Particularly, I grew up in a very Jewish area of New York, and then moved to a very not-Jewish area in Iowa. And we had Holocaust survivors living across the street from us. And we were forced to go to Hebrew school for five years. And our family insisted that it wasn't so much about us learning religion as it was about us learning where we came from, and the importance of preventing tragedies from happening, like the Holocaust. Them – since my parents were of the generation that – they grew, came to age during the Holocaust, they and their parents had, and grandparents had escaped out of Russia during the pogroms, it was a really important part of our family's history and our heritage. And so they instilled in us the idea that horrible things have happened to Jews for centuries, and we had to learn to be a part of helping to prevent that from happening again.

SS: So where in your life did you take the step of extending that beyond the category of Jews?

MW: Phew. I think for me, probably when I moved to Iowa. It was really, it was very, that's an easy time to identify it. I was 15, starting high school; and felt very out of place simply for having dark hair amongst mostly kids who were blond and, and initially, when I went to school. There were reactions, like from a teacher, that sort of subtly warned the class, watch out, this guy's from New York, as if I was supposed to have a switchblade in my back pocket. And this had nothing to do with any of the Jewish thing. It was just a sense of realizing, oh, people that are treated differently, or look different, are gonna – are gonna then be treated differently, and that there was an expectation that we're supposed to be scared of difference. And I'm sure I realized it at a

younger age, too. But that's when I – it kind of crystallized in my head that something was very wrong.

SS: So was there anything that you did that reflected that understanding?

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MW: Other than smoking a lot of pot to survive high school, and whatever else I s-, did, um – you mean things that I might have engaged in? I think I buried myself in reading a lot of books and trying to learn about history. I do remember my first; I remember my first two protests. My first protest was when, probably I was about 11, at summer camp, at a Jewish summer camp. And they fired our counselor, who happened to be black, and one of the few non-Jews in the camp. And, this was in Pennsylvania. And we didn't, they wouldn't tell us why they fired our counselor. But we liked him a lot. And, and we were just appalled. And about a hundred kids went, and we blocked the road to prevent them from taking him off the campgrounds. And, and we don't know why, or whatever, they, they wouldn't tell us. They said it was none of our business; he had done things wrong, and he had to go. But we se-, we felt some sense of injustice. So we blocked the road.

Of course, we weren't smart enough to realize that they had two exits – that they could just drive him out. And the, the head of the camp came out, and tried to calm, you know, a hundred rowdy kids down. And people threw rocks at him. It was, I did it; I swear. It was, it, but it was pretty intense moment; a sense of, a sense of, like, when something wrong is done, you got to stand up; even if you don't know what the wrong is, you got to stand up.

And then, in high school, maybe a little more consciously, I went from a school system, in New York, that was extremely open, to a school system in Iowa, during the Reagan years, that seemed to be the most conservative place on the planet to me, as a 15-year-old. And they forced us to go to pep assemblies — what are they called? Pep rallies? — before, if it was a day or a weekend of a football game, they'd say, okay, third period's, everyone come to the gym. And there'd be 2100 kids in there. They'd force you to stand when your section was supposed to stand, and cheer. And I felt like I was at some neo-fascist rally or something. And some friends and I started a campaign, and successfully stopped them from making the pep rallies mandatory.

And that was, that was when I really think I started to kind of bud, in my mind, as someone that wanted to actively challenge conformity and oppression.

SS: Did you know that you were gay, at that time?

MW: Well yes and no. Hey, what makes you think I'm gay? Um...

SS: The pink hat.

MW: Oh, okay. That's just to keep me warm. I knew I was gay, but I was not dealing with it in the least, except for really tortured longings that I had.

SS: So then when did you leave Des Moines?

MW: I left Des Moines as soon as I could. West Des Moines, which is worse. I went to Ann Arbor, Michigan to go to university in 1983.

SS: Okay. And did you come out at school?

MW: Yeah.

SS: And what was the gay world like there that you came out into?

MW: The gay world in Ann Arbor in 1983, that period – I should say, I came out in stages. First I thought, oh, I'm bisexual, and that was somehow easier to swallow and deal with. And so it was kind of a long period that probably, that started sexually before then, but it wasn't like a real conscious part of my identity. So it was kind of a couple of, a good few years of struggling with dealing with it.

And I think one of the things that made it hardest for me to come out was that I was very involved in antimilitary activism and kind of the effects of the corporate takeover of the university and trying to effect change. And there were a lot of lesbians, but there were no gay men involved that I – maybe occasionally someone would come through. And all the gay men I knew seemed focused on discos and fashion and relatively apolitical.

And I remember going to a – we went to some demonstration at the university. I'm having trouble remembering what, exactly, what it was about. And most of the — and this was before I came out and called myself gay. And most of the people there wore paper bags over their head to symbolize how closeted people needed to be in order to feel safe in the university. And we went and had a sit-in at the president of the university's office.

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And I was kind of excited then to realize, like, oh, yay, here's some gay people who want to stand up for themselves, and that, and so, in a sense, it was easier for me to connect with gay people through politics than it was through some kind of gay culture, intimacy, in like a bar setting, or something like that.

SS: Which organizations were you part of at the time?

MW: The main one that I was a part of was called PSN – Progressive Student Network. And that gay group — I’m trying so hard to remember what it was called — it was, had a really bulky, awkward name, called like LA GROC – Lesbian and Gay Rights on Campus, or something like that. I don’t know why people go to these expensive universities and come up with really bad acronyms, but –

And then, I was kind of one of these six-day-a-week activist types, that I didn’t do very much homework, except during protests, I tried. And I was involved in so much. I was involved in anti-apartheid protests, and – some environmental groups, and LASC, which was the Latin American Solidarity Committee. A few of us started a Big Mountain support group. Probably a few others that I’m forgetting. So kind of all over the place.

SS: Why do you think that gay students didn’t feel welcome in those movements?

MW: I’m not really sure. Because lesbians definitely did. And I think those movements were very influenced by, by the feminist movement in Ann Arbor. And my sense at the time was that a lot of gay culture seemed to be extremely materialistic. And looking back, I kind of wonder whether my judgments were really more about some kind of internalized homophobia I had. I never liked disco music, for example. Now I enjoy it more. But at the time, it just seemed like about a certain kind of materialism that I just had no interest in. And so, at the time, I just kind of attributed it to that there was something that couldn’t mesh. But in retrospect, I realize that homophobia, in almost every movement I was involved in, homophobia was extremely prevalent, and made it really uncomfortable for people to be involved.

SS: Did you have any openly gay professors?

MW: That's digging deep into memory. I knew openly gay professors, or openly gay faculty, I should say. I don't know if they were tenured professors. But I honestly can't remember if I specifically had classes with openly gay professors.

SS: And was there any kind of gay content in the curriculum in your classrooms?

MW: I don't think so.

SS: Okay. So it's a pretty hostile environment, in a lot of –

MW: In the early to mid-'80s, yeah.

SS: Okay, so you're coming out into this environment, and it's '83, '84 and it's the beginning of acknowledgment of the AIDS crisis. How did you first become aware of AIDS, in that context?

MW: I just remember hearing that there was a disease that gay men were getting and dying from, or getting very sick from. And I remember, it was, the first term I remember hearing was GRID, I think. I don't even remember what that stands for. Something like that; Gay, I don't remember. And I just remember hearing that, and hearing that it was mostly San Francisco and New York, or something. It sounded like a scary thing, but it didn't seem like, uh, it wasn't big when I first heard about it; it was just some mystery.

And it seems like it was also around the time of Legionnaires' disease. I'm not sure. But I somehow attribute those times in my head, and it seemed like society was willing to spend a lot of money to figure out why this Legionnaires' Disease was

happening, but no one wanted to do anything about AIDS. And Reagan was president, and he certainly didn't want to talk about it, or deal with it.

SS: So do you remember the first time that you actually encountered safe sex, or somebody wanting to have safe sex?

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MW: I can't say that I remember any specific first time. I think, like – I remember that, I don't remember when the term "safe sex" was coined. But I think that I was coming into my gay identity as that was going on, and had a sense that maybe I had probably missed, if I was safe, I would have missed, like, some time when I would have been exposed to HIV or AIDS.

SS: So was it part of your sexuality from early on? Was that a part of what you, when you would get together with guys, was condoms part of it? Or was it something that you just had to adjust to, or bring into your life?

MW: I think I remember it as being pretty much part of it. Yeah.

SS: When was the first time that AIDS became real in your life? That you met someone who had AIDS, or that you saw its impact?

MW: I don't, I definitely don't know anything about an actual, I can't remember an actual moment or person or time. But probably around '86, but I don't really know for sure.

SS: And that was still at school?

MW: Yeah. I was kind of, I never quite made it through school. I was much more interested in the activist projects I was a part of and dropped out as a senior. But I don't think it was anyone at school. I just remember volunteering at like a local AIDS group, or something.

SS: So even though you had never met anyone with AIDS, you decided to volunteer at an AIDS group.

MW: Yeah.

SS: How do you explain that?

MW: It just seemed to make sense that – Well, I'm not saying I didn't meet anyone with AIDS. I didn't have any close friends with AIDS at the time. I'm sure, I mean, I have a sense of going to conferences, or something, or going to places, or hearing speakers that were people with AIDS. But I just can't place who that was. But it wasn't really something directly close and personal in my life. But I definitely had a sense that there was something really wrong, and that, that it didn't make sense that the government didn't seem to care about people with AIDS, and it just kind of fit in with all those other alphabet groups I mentioned, to be in some way a part of supporting people that were affected by AIDS.

SS: So what was the group?

MW: I think that was probably – the Washtenaw AIDS Resource Center, or something like that. I can't remember the name. Washtenaw was the county where I lived.

SS: And what did you do there?

MW: The two things I most remem-, I just went down, and I was like, I don't know; I went to, I wasn't a very active volunteer there. And I gravitated towards writing letters to people in prison who had HIV or AIDS. I know I went to some kind of training, and some kind of, doing office grunt work. But I think — and again, I can't really remember the specific years — but I think it was also roughly around the time that

ACT UP was starting, and I was hearing about that, and that sounded more like the kind of thing I wanted to be doing, was, which was political advocacy work.

SS: So how did you get hooked up with ACT UP?

MW: Definitely the way I got most involved was my boyfriend at the time — partner, still, in life, SPREE — was very involved in ACT UP/New York. And we met in '88, I think. And —

SS: Where did you meet?

MW: We met at a Radical Faerie gathering in upstate New York. And he was living in New York, and I was living in Michigan. And then I would go spend a lot of time in New York with him, and, and since he was involved in ACT UP in New York, it just made sense for me to be involved as well, with him.

SS: The Faeries are singing in the background. Is SPREE Timmy? Is that —

MW: Yeah.

SS: — the same person? Okay? Yeah. 'Cause a few people have mentioned him, so I want to be clear about that.

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MW: And I, and actually, even before I went to New York, I remember going to some demonstrations. And I went to shut down the FDA in D.C., and —

SS: You went from Michigan?

MW: From Michigan, yeah.

SS: So let's talk about that. So was there a bus of people —

MW: No.

SS: — from Ann Arbor, or did you —

MW: There was a carload of us –

SS: About how many?

MW: Three or four.

SS: And you guys were, how did you all know each other?

MW: I'm trying to remember who went. I had, another guy I was having some kind of affair with at the time, or something, who I had met at a Faerie gathering, who lived in Iowa, ironically, who came to Ann Arbor. And then we hooked up with another friend in Ann Arbor, and then a friend of ours who lived in Toronto, who had AIDS. Toronto is pretty close to Michigan, so we all hooked up in Michigan and drove to D.C. together.

SS: Now, had you ever been at a large gay action or demonstration before?

MW: Yeah. That was '88, maybe?

SS: What year is the F-, yeah?

MW: Let's see, I'm trying to remember if I went to the March in '87 in D.C. I went to some large march somewhere — gay march — and I'd been to, like, gay prides, and –

SS: How was the FDA action different than the March or gay pride event?

MW: Well it was definitely more confrontational; shutting down a building's a confrontational thing. And gay pride isn't generally known for being confrontational.

SS: Can you sort of like just describe what the action was, or what your experience was there?

MW: Yeah, I remember going, I think there was a large AIDS vigil, maybe outside of the White House, the night before that. And there were a lot of meetings. And they had a display of the AIDS Quilt – the Names Project quilt – on the Mall. So there were all these various AIDS-related activities in D.C. And various affinity groups preparing to do, to go to the FDA in Maryland, early, probably early on a Monday or a Tuesday morning. And the way I remember it is, people immediately went to block entrances to the buildings. There were different affinity groups doing different actions, kind of mostly theatrical-oriented, some coming in white doctors' robes, or something. People blockaded the driveway in and out, or one of the driveways in and out of the building, and when someone came to make a delivery, he said, oh, I'm just making a delivery, and people said, no you're not, and stopped it, and were pounding on his truck. It was extremely loud. I remember the workers who were in the building probably couldn't get any work done. They were all just staring out at us. There were people who scaled the building a little to hang banners. There were whistles, and those loud errrrr!, noisemaker things.

And I remember our affinity group; we merged with an affinity group that SPREE was in, from – ACT UP/New York, which was MHA.

SS: What did MHA stand for?

MW: Metropolitan Health Association, it started as. But then it changed for different actions. Actually by then it might have been Surrender Dorothy. I don't really remember. And I just remember, we went as close to the entrance as possible, like,

take us away! Arrest us! We're doing civil disobedience! We're shutting your building down! And the, and our joke about it was that no matter what we did, we couldn't get arrested. It seemed like it was really important to someone, some powers-that-be not to arrest multitudes of people, maybe because they thought that would be a good way to get less publicity. But I do know it got a lot of publicity, and it was – our whole way back to Michigan, via Tennessee and Short Mountain, we picked up every newspaper, and it was on the front cover of everything.

SS: How did that feel?

MW: Oh, it felt great. I mean, it felt good. But the purpose of the action, as I recall, was to change the bureaucratic process as far as approvals of pharmaceutical drugs. And, and it seemed like that was a powerful statement going out, not just about the process for AIDS drugs, but medicines in general, and, and I suspect a lot of people in the United States would be happy to see some changes, so that drugs that could be potentially effective for diseases would be approved quicker.

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SS: Who else was in MHA? Do you remember?

MW: My memory is –

SS: Think, try to remember two people.

MW: Try and remember two people? See, I can't remember who was in what. I think Bill Monahan was. I remember being there with Ortez Alderson. But I can't remember the way, if, I can't remember; I might be mixing up actions. But those are two names so.

SS: So just to kind of demystify the affinity group system –

MW: Okay.

SS: So you guys just arrive in a car, and suddenly, you're in this affinity group. I mean, how did you understand what their way was of doing things, or what their plan was? They had been planning before, right?

MW: Right.

SS: So how did you just step in?

MW: Well, the idea of an affinity group is basically to have people that know each other, and have developed a sense of trust, plan and do a particular action together. And some political actions are more, involve a higher degree of risk, like trying, in that case, trying to actually get in a building, and do something to – property in the building, for example, might be a higher-risk thing than, as far as the law goes, than sitting, just linking arms and sitting in front of a door. And I think it, I think basically what happened with that particular demonstration was that SPREE was like, oh, my boyfriend's coming, and he's going to join us. And so I didn't go to a whole lot of meetings, or trainings, or discussion groups. I just remember, like, introducing myself to people, and them being like, great, glad you're here. It wasn't some big, romantic, kind of Hollywood movie-style revolutionary planning. It just was like, oh, hi; nice to meet you. There's what we're doing, and if the cops do this, then we've agreed to respond such-and-such a way. That's how I remember that particular thing.

SS: You said that thing about going into a building and destroying property. Did that ever happen, actually? Did ACT UP ever destroy property?

MW: I know people took files out of buildings.

SS: Of the FDA?

MW: I don't know if – I can't remember well enough that specific day.

But I know of times when people took files. And –

SS: Did people get in the building, in the FDA building?

MW: I can't remember. I know they tried really hard.

SS: Okay.

MW: And I'm certainly not trying to – overdramatize what people might have done.

SS: No, I mean everyone has a different experience and different memory, and that's all. So then you went back to Michigan? Or did you end up –

MW: I went back to Michigan, yeah.

SS: Okay. So in the next few years, how did you interact with ACT UP New York? What kind of experiences did you have with them?

MW: I visited New York a lot. Three, four, five times a year, six times a year, while SPREE was living there. And when I went, that was just, I'd go to the Monday night meetings at the Center, and go to, it seemed like, in the late '80s, there was a demonstration once a week, or more, often. And since I was visiting there, and didn't have anything other to, anything to do other than visiting friends. And that was the main thing. I would just try and go to whatever demonstration was happening.

SS: So can you describe a little bit what a Monday night meeting was like?

MW: Uh huh. A Monday night meeting, in the late '80s at ACT UP New York was three or four hundred people, crammed into a room that usually couldn't seat everyone who was there, as I recall. It seemed like a very testosterone-driven thing, with

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a lot of people angry and shouting, and making jokes, and there were, if I remember right, a few people sitting up at a table, at the front of the room, who were facilitating, and helping to run the meeting. And then just this sea of people. I remember the bathrooms being kind of cruisy – the men’s bathroom, anyway. It seemed like, and there were a lot of people with AIDS, and a lot of people who were close to a lot of people with AIDS, or close to people who had been dying, who had died. And seemed like, just a huge concentration of righteous indignation, focused on trying to change the way society dealt with AIDS and people with AIDS.

SS: So if you’re picturing it in your mind, can we think about some of the individuals that you remember from that time who made an impression on you?

MW: Yeah, but now you’re going to ask me names. Yeah, I definitely can think of –

SS: Can you tell us some of them?

MW: There’s where the names are, I mean I can remember Jim Eigo standing up with a lot of treatment information. I can remember, I definitely remember the people I know — some of the names that I mentioned — because that’s who I would socialize with more at the meetings. And so whoever SPREE tended to be friends with, I tended to be friends with, since I showed up with him. And like Ortez, who I mentioned, was his closest friend.

SS: Why don’t you tell us about Ortez a little bit?

MW: Yeah. Ortez was just amazing. He was an actor and a super-good actor. He lived in New York, but then went to Chicago a couple years before he died,

and I'm, I don't think he was very sick when he was living in New York. He had a boyfriend in Chicago, named Arthur –

SS: Do you know Arthur's last name?

MW: I would think I would. But I can't remember it at the moment.

Arthur was definitely more in the shadows. They had a kind of relationship where Ortez was kind of the vocal, loudmouth, out-there person, and Arthur was there, behind him.

And I visited them quite a bit, because the last few years of his life, Ortez lived in Chicago, and Ann Arbor was really close. So, but I can't remember his last name. Ortez

–

SS: Did you see him act?

MW: What's that?

SS: Did you ever see him act?

MW: I felt like I saw him acting all the time. Seriously. We talked about doing a show together. We were, SPREE came and lived in Ann Arbor for a while, and I saw video footage of him acting. I don't think I ever saw him on stage. It's possible that he may have done something at an ACT UP benefit cabaret, and I kind of vaguely remember seeing him do something, but I remember the videotapes better, and just being around someone who's so on all the time. And he had videos of him in London onstage, I think, New York, Chicago, and that's more what I remember. And he was just really amazing. I think the time, as far as ACT UP, that I remember the most was we went to these national AIDS actions in Chicago. And a primary fo-, there were a couple of focuses of that demonstration. One was insurance companies who were based in Chicago who refused to insure people with HIV. The risk was just not worth it for them. And

also, the Chicago General Hospital — the large public hospital — had no beds on their AIDS ward for women, which just seemed awful. And there was a group of women who drove a truck. We, we went marching all around Chicago. People were sticking ACT UP stickers, like Silence Equal Death stickers, on the horses of, the cops riding the horses. And, and we started at the Prudential Building, and went to different hot spots in Chicago. And a group of women had driven up with a truckload of mattresses, and they threw them down in a busy intersection to symbolize, well, there's no beds on the AIDS ward for women, so anyone want to join us and occupy these beds in the street. And Ortiz and I, Ortiz, like, come on, I'm tired of marchin' around. Let's just go. And so we joined that action, and were arrested on these mattresses in the streets. And I just loved that — I loved that that wasn't his plan, that it wasn't an affinity-group thing. It was just like, it's time, let's just go. You want to join me, and –

SS: What happened when you got arrested?

MW: They took us to some processing center. There were a lot of people arrested that day — a hundred, two hundred — I don't remember how many. Well, they put us in a wagon. I think it was, it was April, but it was really hot out. And we were sweltering in the back of the truck. And I remember people banging on the metal grate, trying to get the police attention, begging them for a little air or water, which they pretty much ignored. And they took us to some processing center. They drove us around for a really long, unnecessarily long time. I don't know why we circled Chicago, but we did. And then, I, we were released. I don't remember if we had, I think we had to post bail to be released, and chose to do so.

SS: Individually.

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MW: Yeah.

SS: So it wasn't organized.

MW: No, there was a lot of organization. It might have been that ACT UP just posted it for everyone who wanted it; I can't remember. But there had to be bail for each person, as I remember. And I went back for my trial about half a year later. Which was kind of a fun little episode. Most people didn't go back; most people were not from the Midwest, and weren't going to bother going back for some misdemeanor trial. But I was close enough, so I went back. And the judge, whose name was either Nudelman or Noodleman — I never knew how it was pronounced — he asked me to state my name for the record or spell it, or something. And, no, he goes, are you Mr. Weinstein? And I said, yes. He goes, is that Wein-STINE or Wein-STEEN? And I said, oh, it doesn't matter. He goes, well, it does. I said, well, you could call me what you want; either one's fine. And he was like, no, we need to know for the record: is it Wein-STINE or Wein-STEEN? And it was just this absurd — I felt like I was in a really bad Marx Brothers film, or something. And the whole time I was thinking, well, wait, are you Noodleman or Nudelman. I thought he wouldn't like if I asked, so I let it go.

SS: What were some of the other demonstrations you did in New York?

MW: Well, we were talking a little bit earlier about Koch. And I remember one at the Brooklyn Bridge, or at City Hall, maybe it was, where people were going to take the Brooklyn Bridge. Where people had big signs. It was right after Mayor Koch had a press conference, insisting that he wasn't gay. And then someone made big poster boards, like, of the, I think it was the *Daily News* or the *Post* — I don't remember

who — had a picture of Koch, with the headline “I’m Not Gay,” or something. And someone made big poster boards of that. And, and I’m Cary Grant, or whoever. And I went to that, I remember that one ’cause I went and got, like, a little Statue of Liberty hat that tourists have, and had a green dress, I think, on, to do like a Statue of Liberty thing. So I remember that one really well.

SS: Did you guys take over the Brooklyn Bridge?

MW: No, I, I didn’t. And I wasn’t intending to. I remember the meetings before it, or a meeting before it; people saying, well, there’s different levels of action. Some of us are going to just march around City Hall, maybe. And some are going to take the bridge. And the police blocked off, if I remember. If I remember right. I don’t even remember what happened, but I didn’t try and shut down the bridge.

SS: Why do you think the country was so resistant to helping people with AIDS?

MW: Well, I think the country, I think part of the country was really resistant, and part was really wanting to help. There was a tremendous amount of help. But I think primarily, homophobia and racism were the main reasons why the country didn’t want to help. I think there were, or I think there were a lot of people that just wanted to see people with AIDS quarantined, or die, and that would be God’s judgment, and that would be a good thing.

SS: Do you think it was because of religion?

MW: Religion certainly played a big part in it, for some people. I mean, I think America has, like, a long history of Christian theocracy going on.

SS: Yeah, but what about in your more immediate world? 'Cause we were talking earlier about leftist organizations that were not welcoming to gay people in different ways. I mean –

MW: Uh huh.

SS: Like your straight friends, or your family: were they making the same commitment to AIDS that you were making?

MW: Well, that was interesting. When I told my parents that I was queer, their biggest concern was how I would be treated. They're like, are you sure? 'Cause you're going to have a rough life if you are. You want to think this again? And they talked about AIDS and were like this is just a scary path you might be on, and we're scared for you. They didn't say, we're antigay, or you're wrong, or you're a bad person. But they were kind of scared. But I don't, I think I had a lot of straight friends who were very supportive of people with AIDS. When we started ACT UP Ann Arbor, maybe in '89, maybe '88, I'd say a good half the people who came were straight people, straight-identified people. There were definitely people that were gay that weren't out yet – maybe not even out to themselves. But there were a lot of straight people that were involved, who had roots in other activist movements.

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SS: How many people were in – change tapes? Okay.

SS: Ready?

JIM HUBBARD: Yeah.

SS: Let's talk about ACT UP Ann Arbor for a minute.

MW: Okay.

SS: How many people were in it?

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MW: When we started it, there were maybe eight or so of us who got together to start it. And pretty quickly, there'd be about 25 or so people involved in it.

SS: And what were some of your campaigns?

MW: I think the, heh, it's so funny, last night I had to ask SPREE. I'm like, I need some reminders here. I'm having trouble remembering what this group that I started did. But the main thing we talked about was awareness about how, just to get awareness about discrimination against people with AIDS, and how cumbersome the system could be when people got diagnosed, or were even trying to get health care to get diagnosed. So the first campaign really was focused on just changing the way people were treated.

SS: How were they treated at the time?

MW: There was a lot of disdain for people. There was a lot of bureaucrats not really being so helpful towards people with AIDS, probably because of homophobia, um, AIDS-phobia.

Another big campaign was education in the public schools, which went shockingly poorly. And maybe at the time, it, I'm not really sure — there's the late '80s — at some point, the Christian right started to really go after taking over school boards full force. And that might have been the beginning of that period, but we might not have been aware. If I look back correctly, we might not have been aware of how pervasive and how strong their strategy was. Because Ann Arbor's a relatively progressive city, with a relatively progressive history, that claims to have the first openly lesbian elected official in the country — I know a few places claim that — back in like 1972, long before

I got there. But, but the school board was really insistent on not having explicit AIDS education, and we thought that was pretty horrifying.

And other projects I remember work-...

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SS: So what did you do? What was the outcome?

MW: People lobbied the school board; wrote letters to the editor. Kind of went in and stormed things occasionally.

SS: Did you win anything?

MW: I moved out of Ann Arbor before any of that got settled, and kind of lost touch with what they were doing. And then the group got very factionalized, too, because a few of us, who were kind of key people who founded it, left. Right then, some, like, leftist, Trotskyist, or –

SS: The RWL [Revolutionary Workers League].

MW: I think it was the RWL — kind of tried to take over. And so much of the energy of the group got focused on dealing with that. And when I would ask people how ACT UP was going, because I was still interested in hearing what was going on in Ann Arbor, that was the main thing I heard, was about the conflicts going on within the group.

SS: Let's just talk about that for a second. How did this, 'cause this is legendary, so I just wanted to go into it. How did this out group, what was their strategy for taking over ACT UP?

MW: Well see, it's hard for me to answer that totally well, because it happened when I left.

SS: Okay.

MW: I mean, they were showing up before we left, before – I think I was involved in so many groups in Ann Arbor that they tried to do this to. And it seemed like the basic strategy was to send people in who befriended people and tried to get themselves into leadership positions in the groups, insist on forms of decision-making that ostensibly would be the most democratic, and therefore more people would have a voice, when it was clear that they had a very specific agenda that was about them getting their way.

SS: What was their agenda?

MW: I think their agenda was really to create groups of people that would be converted to becoming rank and file of the Revolutionary Workers League, or other such group. There was NWROC, which stood for National Women Rights Organizing Committee, which I believe was another RWL group, that, around the same time as, in the late '80s, early '90s, there was a lot of pro-choice demonstrations, and NWROC tried to insert themselves in. They di-, they usually didn't come and say, hi, I'm with the Revolutionary Workers League, although sometimes they did.

And another strategy they had, which I found really kind of insidious, was trying to get members of their group to go, who they thought could most be identified as being part of the community that was affected by the issue. So for gay and AIDS groups, they'd try and find people that would be identified as queer. And then there was, I even remember getting to the point where people were denouncing them, saying, you're coming to our meetings and saying you're queer, but you're not even queer. Why are you lying to us? It was really, I just remembered a lot of really twisted arguments and things going on.

SS: Did you ever talk to any of them later? With a little bit of retrospect? About what had happened?

MW: Any of the RWL people? I've kind of lost touch. I've been just gone from Michigan too long to really, no. And there were some people that I really tried hard working with, 'cause I believed, firmly, in working in coalitions. But I felt like when SPREE and I, in particular, were in Ann Arbor — and SPREE was an extremely powerful personality. He was HIV-positive. He had been involved in ACT UP New York, coming to a place where there wasn't really an ACT UP culture. He was a really powerful personality, and, and I think that kind of charisma, that, and the theatricality that we established the group with, was what drew people there, and kind of was a lot of the, was a fair amount of the glue that kept it together. And our strategy for dealing with people like the RWL was, we're going to have too much fun for them to really take over. They, they liked a good argument, and we thought we have to set the terms so that this is about keeping' the eye on AIDS, people with AIDS; and having fun doing what we're doing. And I think that made it challenging for them. And then once we were gone, it got a lot more divisive.

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SS: Okay. So you said you had remembered another demonstration in New York that you wanted to talk about?

MW: Yeah. Well I was, I remember two things. I particularly remember, when you were asking about what the meeting culture was like, one of the things I remember: My feeling about it all was, coming from being, like, a Midwestern kid at that point, that it was really awesome to come to New York, and soak in this kind of angry, mostly queer, militancy. It felt really good, like it energized me to go back in Michigan.

And I was really excited by that. And it seemed like one of the things about ACT UP that I really appreciated was it was one of the most vibrant activist movements of the '80s. It was just awesome. At a time when it seemed like a lot of people who had activist pasts were mourning the Reagan years, and then the Reagan-Bush years, it seemed like here came this thing, almost from out of nowhere, in response to this horrific disease that just weren't going to go by the rules and the conservative times that everyone was telling us it was.

And I think that one thing it did, too, was it created amazing understanding. It was very easy for the media and the public to write off some people, like ACT UP, as this, these loud, crazy people. But I think it really pushed the envelope, and possibly kept society from becoming a lot more repressive towards gays and lesbians and people with AIDS. And I firmly believe that.

But on the other hand, one of the things the meetings also did for me was I found it kind of disturbing that I felt like there was, people would come to the meetings and make announcements. And sometimes the announcements part of the meeting was really long. And it's clear, when you have a meeting of three or four hundred people that it's going to be cumbersome, no matter how you do it. It's, but a lot of the announcements seemed really important. I remember pro-choice announcements about different demonstrations. I remember someone coming to announce something about El Salvador, and someone coming to announce something about Haiti. And I remember people kind of s-, freaking out about that at times, too. I specifically remember Larry Kramer getting irate, and saying, this is not about El Salvador. This is not about abortion. This is about AIDS.

And I was, I thought that was a really poor call on his part. I thought that it was a great misjudgment to not form alliances. And I thought it particularly came out in the worst way with respect to AIDS in regards to the Haitian American community, and Haitian community. Because in a lot of ways, that, as I recall, in the '80s, and the '90s, that there was a lot of activism coming from the Haitian community, both about what was going on with trying to transform Haiti from a dictatorship to some kind of democracy, and in regards to all the refugees seeking to get into the U.S., and because Haitians were so, at the time and still are, so greatly affected by AIDS. And it seemed like, to me, strategically it would make sense to figure out how to form coalitions, especially with a group like Haitian Americans, that were being so put down, in so many ways, in this country.

And I remember SPREE and I went to a large demonstration in midtown Manhattan that was about Haiti, that was primarily focused towards protesting the dictatorship at the time. And I remember someone had come to ACT UP and announced it. And it, it really saddened me that there weren't more people from ACT UP there, becau-

SS: How many were there, would you say?

MW: We can't agree, in our memory. SPREE thought there were a handful. I remember being surrounded by people who didn't look like they were from ACT UP. I just remember us two going to it, and I remember wishing there should be more of us out here. And I know people are busy, and focused on one main thing. But I thought it was something that should have been addressed better and looked at; how to, ACT UP was identified, in a lot of ways, as a gay-ghetto group, even though it wasn't all

gay men, by a long shot. And, but that was a lot of the persona, certainly a lot of the media persona, and I totally applaud people that didn't fit into that who I thought really, including yourself, who I thought really made ACT UP what it was. But I think it's important for people in predominantly white groups to get out and form coalitions with people who are being shit on a lot worse.

SS: Do you know Anne-christine d'Adesky?

MW: No.

SS: Does that sound familiar? Anne d'Adesky?

MW: The name sounds familiar, but I don't know her.

SS: Okay. I want to challenge you.

MW: Okay.

SS: What's wrong with having a gay group, a group that's predominantly gay? Working on AIDS? When gay people are abandoned by the culture at that moment?

MW: Well, there's nothing wrong with having a group that's predominantly gay. But there is something wrong with the largest political group focused on AIDS not, if it were only a gay group, and the problem with that I see, is there's other groups being abandoned by AIDS. And the Haitian American community is one that I identified. And, who have a lot harder time accessing services than even gay men with AIDS do.

SS: Okay. But given the Haitian thing — I'll give you that —

MW: Okay, give me that.

SS: But what about the other part of what you're talking about.

MW: Okay, I'll give you another one, then.

SS: Okay.

MW: Which is that the protocols and things being established for drug tests were focused on, overwhelmingly on men. That's a mistake. There are women with AIDS. There are women affected by diseases.

SS: But who are the organizations that took the actions to change that?

MW: Who were the organizations? Well ACT UP was definitely involved in that. The question was, what's wrong with a group that's just gay men. And, and my answer is the, a problem with it just being gay men is that it's just one group. And we're so ma-, I just think we're stronger at making change when the more diversity there can be. It's not just like some kind of liberal, let's-celebrate-diversity attitude. It's just recognizing that there's a very oppressive culture that we live in, whose institutions are, and corporations and governments, are dominated by straight white men, and that we're more likely to make radical change if, if we don't isolate ourselves.

SS: Let's go around on this one more time.

MW: Okay.

SS: I agree with everything that you're saying, ideologically. But I think that ACT UP created a lot of change that affected and improved the conditions of people with AIDS who are not gay men. And the gay community in general. At GMHC, Gay Men's Health Crisis predominantly serves people now who are not gay. And most of the advances for women with AIDS that came out of ACT UP. Women with AIDS were not really represented in ACT UP. There were

some — about 15 or 20 — over the whole course of the organization. So I think there was a lot of work that was done that served communities that were other than who was in that room?

MW: Uh huh. Oh, I don't disagree with that.

SS: Oh, okay.

MW: I don't know that we're disagreeing, really. The only part that I, that I mainly object to is the part when someone like Larry Kramer, who's a visible spokesperson, says, this is about AIDS. It's not about abortion; it's not about El Salvador; it's not about Haiti. That's, that's when I object.

SS: Okay, well then let me ask you this. Because now we're on the same page. How do you see – okay, I understand any person with AIDS should be a concern of an AIDS movement, whether they're Haitian or women or whatever. IV drug user.

MW: Um hm.

SS: But can you tell me, in your ideology, why an AIDS organization should be involved in something like abortion rights, or El Salvador, that's not AIDS-related?

MW: Um, well in my ideology, my idiotic-ology, um, I think that an AIDS organization should be involved because I think that there's a relationship between government trying to tell people what to do with their bodies, as far as sexuality and drug use and disease goes, as far as AIDS, there's a relationship between that and the government trying to control women's bodies as far as abortion goes. Or the government trying to affect, have little neo-colonies, like El Salvador. There's a relationship in the

policies that are established that kind of s-, that come out of a patriarchal, white-supremacist society. And therefore, addressing kind of the whole of the picture, finding ways. It doesn't mean everyone has to go to every, be involved in every group, nor can anyone. But it does mean that looking to unite with different groups that I think share an agenda makes sense.

SS: Okay, because this discussion is ultimately what split ACT UP.

This very question. So when you were in ACT UP, besides that moment of Larry saying that, can you think of other examples where this tension was expressed?

MW: I definitely remember the issue kind of hovering around. But, I mean I can remember other people saying similar things. I, the difference with using Larry Kramer as an example is I remember him doing it vocally at meetings where there's hundreds of people. I certainly can remember discussions happening. But as far as like concrete examples, they're just not coming to my mind.

SS: Okay.

MW: Probably if I, probably in an hour from now, I'll be thinking of things. And I think the point you mention about this predominantly gay-men group, gay male group made a lot of difference for women is a valid point. I think a lot of that came from women pushing for that to happen. The Chicago AIDS Action that I mentioned earlier, by making a focus on access for all, not just for, you know, like it was interesting that there was a focus on insurance companies, and being able to buy insurance. And well that raises questions about who can even afford to buy insurance. And so there were definitely some class issues that are circulating amongst all these things we're talking

about, because it's very different to buy a, a cushy life-insurance policy than it is to just simply have a bed for you when you get to a public hospital that's crumbling.

SS: Okay. I want to talk a little bit about the culture of ACT UP, inside the organization. And I know you weren't living in New York, right, so you weren't –

MW: Right.

SS: In terms of your experience, what was the relationship between people who were positive and people who were negative? Was there a distinction?

MW: Yeah, I think there was. I think — and I've tested negative the two times I've tested for HIV — and I think there were a lot of differences, because I, I think one of the primary differences was that particularly if someone's having symptoms, it, they have a whole slew of health concerns to go along with all the legal and political concerns that people are addressing. And I noticed it most, unfortunately, because I feel like there were a number of times at demonstrations or conferences where I felt like in the excitement of preparing for the action or doing the action, that there were times that people weren't giving the support that people who were affected by the disease needed.

And SPREE and I wrote a play, with another friend, about that, that we were perfor-, toured the United States and Europe with, about that very issue, called *Queens are Wild*. Because we kept noticing that it seemed like a lot easier for some people to deal with, get their arms around the political issues of AIDS, but not always the personal issues of what kind of support did people actually need. And there's looking back at a time before protease inhibitors, and before the kind of infrastructures that exist now, medically.

So that was one way in which I think it was really different. And I think also that there were, that there was sometimes, conversely, a way in which people that were positive were glorified, and I don't, I don't know. There, there was the group PISD — People with Immune System Disorders. There was, and I thought it was awesome that people were taking their space and identifying themselves as people affected. But the reason why I say there was some sense of glorification, because then I remember people even accusing a few individuals of claiming they had AIDS, and saying, you don't really have AIDS, why are you claiming you have AIDS? So it, it must —

SS: You don't think that ever happened?

MW: Oh, it did happen. I mean, or people, I don't know what the truth is. I didn't go sneak in and take people's blood to try and find out. But I remember the accusations happening. And it —

SS: Why do you think someone would say they had AIDS if they didn't?

MW: I think s-, well I can't put myself in their shoes, but I kind of imagine someone would say they had AIDS if they didn't because they would feel like it conferred some kind of legitimacy on, on their public image as an activist.

SS: Did you ever feel for yourself that becoming infected was inevitable?

MW: There were probably times when I thought it was very likely. Or it, it just seemed like almost everyone around me, at times, was HIV-positive, or had AIDS, and so it seemed like something' like where my time would come up. And fortunately, it hasn't.

SS: Okay. So when did you leave ACT UP?

MW: Well – I didn't necessarily ever, like, specifically leave. SPREE and I lived on the road, touring and performing and writing plays, for a couple years, 1990 through '92. And I felt like when we were in cities where there was an ACT UP, we were a part of it. He tested positive in San Francisco, and we were a part of ACT UP out there. We were based in Amsterdam while we were touring Europe, and we went to ACT UP/Amsterdam stuff. And there was an international AIDS conference there, and we were part of a protest. So there was never any conscious kind of decision to leave it. And then we both landed here in 1993, where there was no ACT UP Tennessee. And I think by then, most of ACT UP, the larger groups, were splitting apart by '93, I think. Except maybe ACT UP/Philly. And, but we still have done occasional AIDS actions. And then he got full-blown AIDS, got really sick. He's been in intensive care. And a lot of our effort then, here at IDA, here in Tennessee, was focused around just helping him to make it through the bureaucracy of TennCare and the system we have here.

SS: So how is his experi-, I mean I'll ask him, but for you as the caretaker? What's your experience been with the Tennessee hospital system?

MW: It's pretty mixed. I think in some ways, Tennessee is a lot better than some states, because he's managed to get a lot of his medicines covered and so forth, things covered and provided for in ways that people aren't getting it in all states. The Comprehensive Care Center, which is a facility in Nashville, is, seems to be a pretty amazing place, as far as providing services; medical, psychiatric, and so forth, for, nutritional, for people with AIDS. And they get people coming from other medium-size cities to study their facility, because it's, in some ways, a model to cities of around a

million people. So, and best of all, there's some really good advocates there, who have been amazing at helping SPREE through the system, as far as getting medications and health care.

But there's, there's also, all of that is seriously under threat now. The, TennCare is like, at risk of falling apart. And we have an extremely conservative government in Tennessee. The Democrat who's governor is acting like a Republican, according to the *Nashville Scene*, a weekly, the *Village Voice*-owned weekly in Nashville, as far as threatening TennCare. And he made his multimillions through the health care industry. And we have Senator Frist here, who's the Senate majority leader, who is the only doctor in the Senate, whose family's wealth comes from the largest private health-care company. HCA, Columbia HCA is his family's company. And he's got some horrible right-wing politics, with this veneer of being the good doctor.

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And I think that, those kind of political issues aren't being addressed so much. We've had a demonstration, and, we had a demonstration at Frist's office last year.

SS: What organization?

MW: This was ACT UP. This was a, what did we call it? ACT UP/Downtown, or ACT UP/Short Mountain. Because someone from ACT UP/Philadelphia came down, and we stormed his office to – this was specifically to protest the Republican government from not living up to their promise to give, to fund the Global Fund for AIDS, particularly with respect to Africa. So we're trying, in small ways, to continue the energy that, for us, was really important in our lives in the '80s.

SS: I only have one last question, unless there's something that you think we haven't covered.

MW: Something I think –

SS: Is there something important that you feel we haven't covered?

MW: Can I have a moment to think? [long pause]

Okay, I thought of, like two things, maybe. I think one thing for me that was really good about being involved in ACT UP — you asked about what it was like to go to ACT UP New York, then go back to Michigan. And I feel like it definitely helped embolden my activism from a queer perspective, as did Queer Nation, when I was involved in that. And I, while I was involved in ACT UP, I was still involved in other activist movements. And I went out, and I can remember going out to places where I might be the only openly queer person, or at least visibly, and trying to find other queers at, and it was almost like a game. It was a game partially because it felt better when I could find other queer people to be around, because I thought, for example, an anti-militaristic movement, it doesn't make sense to not challenge homophobia, because I think homophobia and heterosexism are a big part of upholding a militaristic culture.

And I went out to the Nevada nuclear weapons test site, to protest the nuclear weapons testing. And this was also back in the late '80s. And just put on a sign, I got myself to serve dinner. There were 600 or so people camped out in the desert, to go and trespass on the nuclear weapons test site, to draw attention to that. And I put on a pink triangle sign that said, like, queer affinity group meeting, wherever, at dinner tomorrow or lunch tomorrow. And it was awesome. It was a little scary, because I felt like there were a lot of men there, who, we're going to stop the nuclear weapons

complex, and who were kind of scared of this faggot serving food. But I met a lot of queers that way, and we, and it turned out there were a couple of people who were involved in ACT UP/San Francisco who were there, and so we formed this queer affinity group, and had a lot of fun, but also got to challenge the homophobia in that movement.

And I feel like that's an effect ACT UP had that's really positive – that kind of in your face, we're going to be out, we're going to be loud, that affected a lot of movements. And I feel like the current antiwar movement in the U.S. is so much more embracing of queers than antiwar movements were in the '80s. And I think ACT UP is an example of a group that has a lot to do with why those changes happened. That was the main story that I wanted to tell.

Tape II
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And then the other thing, I think, I don't, you know, when you ask, what happened with folks from that split that happened in Ann Arbor. And I hope that a lot of people are still out there, doing things that are important to them as far as trying to have political change, because we need it in this country. We need it desperately. They need it in Amsterdam, where I was involved in ACT UP/Amsterdam. They need it in Paris. They, all the places where I was aware of ACT UPs still have just as great a need for change.

And AIDS hasn't gone away. And the politics may have shifted, but a lot of the issues still need to be addressed, and I just, I just hope the people that I've lost touch with — the ones that are so alive and able-bodied — are out there screaming. And the ones that are alive and not quite as able-bodied as they once were are doing things in their way. And I just like to picture that, even though ACT UP as this big, loud thing on

the news nightly might not exist anymore, I like to hope that all of us who were involved are still pushing a lot of important agendas.

SS: Okay. My last question was, you have this sort of global view of ACT UP. I mean, you founded a chapter; you were part of San Francisco; you were part of Amsterdam. All of these different chapters, what was their relationship to New York?

MW: Oh, I thought you were going to say, what's wrong with you, that you couldn't be tied down to one place?

SS: No.

MW: I think – a lot of people in different ACT UPs that I encountered, a lot of people really looked up to New York as, well, that's where ACT UP was founded; that's where a lot of the media was coming out, the ACT UP media was coming out of, and a lot of people were really impressed with that, and looked up to it. And some people also were a little bit weary, like in the sense that a lot of people think that New York acts like it's the center of the universe, and doesn't necessarily know how to pay attention to the rest of the world in a way that the rest of the world needs. So it seemed like it was a really mixed bag.

And even though I didn't go, there was a time when there was a big demonstration at the CDC in Atlanta, and years later, I would talk to friends, now that I'm in the South, I have a lot of friends in Atlanta, and still, I, if I wanted to, I could get a conversation going now of people who still have critical memories of that, because they felt like the New Yorkers came in, and, with their agenda, and their ways of doing things,

that weren't appropriate for how the South is. And that that actually maybe hurt more than it helped, at least as far as local Atlanta organizing went.

So it's, I'd say that it's a very mixed thing. People looked up to New York, and loved that it was there, and it was a great symbol, and representation of how you can create a large, powerful, loud movement. But were also a little not so sure about if New York was trying to dominate things.

SS: I just thought of another question.

MW: Sure.

SS: How did you get the name MaxZine?

MW: I took the name MaxZine because I was named after my grandfa-, my great-grandfather, no, yeah, my great-grandfather who was named Max. And I was given the same Hebrew name as him, which was Mordechai. And, but my parents said, in the '60s, it just, no one was naming boys Max at the time, and it's questionable how much of a boy I am, but that's another story. And I kind of liked the idea of having a name that was kind of a genderfuck name. And I was also, I had published a newspaper, and was really into 'zines. So I spell it M-A-X-Z-I-N-E. And I just kind of wanted it, a name that would be fun, and took it on that way.

SS: Okay. Thank you, MaxZine.

MW: Sure. Thank you.

SS: Okay.