

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

**A PROGRAM OF  
MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &  
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **John Weir**

Interview Number: **120**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **June 24, 2010**

**ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of John Weir  
June 24, 2010**

**SARAH SCHULMAN: The way we begin is you could tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

JOHN WEIR: Okay. I'm John Weir. My age is 51 – how'd that happen? Today's date is the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2010. And we're in the East Village, in Sarah's apartment.

**SS: That's right. Nice to see you.**

JW: Nice to see you.

**SS: So where did you grow up?**

JW: I grew up in New Jersey, way out near Pennsylvania, right next to the Delaware River, directly west of Manhattan.

**SS: Was it a town or a suburb?**

JW: It was – well, it was the woods, basically. There was a town nearby where we had our mailing address. Hunterdon County, the name of it is. It's now this very affluent bedroom community of New York and Philadelphia. But at the time, it was chicken farmers and depressed dairy farmers and we grew up on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. There was no one around.

**SS: And did you guys have a farm?**

JW: We had horses in the back – I don't know if "farm" is the word. Dogs and cats and goats and – let me see, there was a corral out back for the horses, so – but we weren't planting corn, or anything like that.

**SS: So what did your parents do? They raised horses?**

JW: My father worked at NBC-TV, in Manhattan, for 45 years. And my mother trained the animals. She later got a job as — later, after I got out of college — training animals and being an animal talent agent. She provided animals for the Metropolitan Opera, for their various — a goat that was in Porgy and Bess. But when I was growing up, she didn't have a job. Her job was to clean the house and train the horses, and neglect the children. {LAUGHS} Hi, Mom.

**SS: So your father, he commuted to Manhattan?**

JW: Yeah, every day, an hour and a half each way, I think. He took the car to Gladstone, and he got the Erie-Lackawanna train at Gladstone, and then got that to Hoboken, and then — first he got the ferry across; and then the ferry went out of business, and then he got the PATH train. So he did that in both directions.

**SS: So was it unusual for your area — I mean, you come from these sophisticated parents —**

JW: Right.

**SS: — did that make you different than the other people you were going to school with?**

JW: Yeah, very much so. My parents had a little group of expatriated New Yorker friends who were painters and kind of actory people, and then were involved in a community theater group. And they were forever putting on plays. And my brother and I went to school with the chicken farmers. Heh! Not that there's anything wrong with chicken farmers, but these particular chicken

farmers were especially mean and Republican. And so there was a gap between, I think, my parents' experience of the place and my brother's and mine.

**SS: And why did your parents choose to live in such a conservative environment?**

JW: I don't think they knew it was conservative, maybe. Because everyone they hung out with was fun and groovy. But my mother grew up in Denver, and she wanted horses, and she wanted to be, she grew up next to the Rocky Mountains. And so she wanted outdoor and trees and – she wanted to get on a horse and ride bareback in the woods, and stuff. And so they found a place that was – it wasn't Colorado, by any means. But it was very woodsy. So that's what she liked. And I think my father liked it, too.

They moved later, when I was in college, to a different part of the county, where they actually did have a farm. But they liked the woods, I guess.

**SS: So what kind of values were you raised with, in terms of community responsibility, or –**

JW: Well – my, they were both liberal Democrats, my parents. I think my mother voted for Eisenhower once, which she admitted to me one drunken evening. But they were very – it was the '60s, and everyone was being groovy, and my parents were antiwar and pro-civil rights, and all the right kind of liberal causes and so forth. And their friends were relatively politically engaged.

My father's job at NBC was to – he was the director of broadcast operations and communications. Which meant that he was the guy that delivered the TV show to your home, basically. He pulled the switches, he was in charge of

the people who made sure the stuff got on the air when it was supposed to get on the air. And he mostly covered sports and big international and national news events. So he was involved in covering all of the Democratic and Republican conventions –

**SS: Oh, wow.**

JW: – he traveled there. One of my earliest memories of him was at Atlantic City, for the '64 Democratic Convention, where Johnson got nominated. And he was in a control booth with a bank of monitors, in this black suit and narrow tie, overseeing the feed, I guess.

And he went to Europe when Kennedy went to Europe, and he went to China when Nixon went to China, and he went back and forth to Russia for a while; for the '80 Olympics before they got cancelled. So he was forever traveling around to big, major news events, and setting up the coverage of them.

Tape I  
00:05:00

So I think my brother and I, as a consequence, had a fairly keen awareness of what was happening, anyway in that part of the world. And the U.S. imperialist part of reality while we were growing up. So I think that did something to my being attentive to what was happening politically in a way that I maybe wouldn't have been otherwise.

**SS: Now which came first: being gay or being a writer?**

JW: Huh. Is there a difference? You would know. I don't know; being gay or being a writer. I think my mother came first.

But I don't know, I, I, I don't understand the gay thing anymore. I think maybe it doesn't exist. But I know that I was probably seven or so when I –

kind of got the idea that something was going on. Not sexual, but just – I mean, my brother and I were always different from everyone else, so that was the first thing I noticed, was the difference, because we had, we went to the dentist — {LAUGHS} — unlike the Appalachian children we grew up around. Not to be mean about Appalachian children.

But I don't know; the writer thing; I wanted to be an actor when I was growing up, so –

**SS: Did you act?**

JW: In high school and in college, yeah, all the time. Well, my parents had this theater group, and so we hung out at rehearsals all the time. They had a little theater group in an old stone mill on the bank of the south branch of the Raritan River. And so it was all stony and rustic, and they'd put on *Man of La Mancha*, and stuff like that. So I was around that all the time, so I really wanted to be an actor, and I did that in high school and college.

Then the writer thing, I guess – I think my mother always wanted to be a writer. And in fact, is. She, much later, she wrote a couple of mystery novels, and published them herself. So she's a novelist as well. But she told lots of stories about her childhood in Denver, and she's quite the – she tells quite enjoyable narratives, and they always have a little arc and a, and a punch line, and they're full of drama and – disobedience and bad sex and – so I think I learned storytelling from my mother – and gayness maybe, also. {LAUGHS} All those Bette Davis movies she made me watch when I was – eight. So –

**SS: Now were you out in college?**

JW: No. I went to college in '76 to '80. And no no no; no one was. Were you? In college – no. College – I'm trying to think if there were other – I mean, there were plenty of gay people. I was involved in the Drama Club, and I'm guessing half of them were gay. I mean, I know for a fact that a few of them, anyway, were sleeping with each other and this and that. But it was unbelievably closeted.

I went to college in the middle of Ohio; Kenyon College, which had been like an all-boys Lutheran cemetery until six years before I went there, or something. So it was extremely conservative and sexually repressed and – the Drama Club, I think, were really just a bunch of queers who had come together in order to monitor each other, so they didn't seem too queer in the world.

It wasn't until I got to New York that I decided to deal with being gay.

**SS: And what year did you come here?**

JW: 1980, right after I got out of school.

**SS: Okay. So what was the gay community like here in 1980, or the community you came out into?**

JW: {SIGH} Well, I mean – I don't know what it was like in 1980, because I was hiding for two or three years, I guess. I didn't really decide to deal with being gay until I was 23 or 24, I think. And I came out basically by – meeting a guy, who was my first boyfriend, who was involved in GMHC. He was the director of group services for GMHC, which had just formed, maybe in the past year. And so my first experience of public gayness, I guess, was going to

parties with guys who were involved in GMHC – most of whom are dead now, actually. Raymond Jacobs and Peter Kunst, his boyfriend, and Diego Lopez, and –

Raymond had this giant loft on lower Broadway, near Canal. It's a probably a big, beautiful corporate building now. But at the time, it was this really messy loft, and I went with Michael, the boyfriend, who was kind of preppy, WASPy-seeming guy from Connecticut; very pulled in, and tight and tidy. And Raymond opened the door, wearing – a wig and pearls and big balloony pants, and said: Darling, how fabulous! You came! And I thought, yikes, I'm gay! Ha ha. So that was my, I guess that was my experience of gay

Tape I  
00:10:00 community, was GMHC.

**SS: So you came out into the AIDS community.**

JW: Kind of. Yeah yeah yeah yeah. In terms of there being a group, it was definitely, that was when – I'd had a couple of experiences before that – I mean, of meeting guys and dating them very, very briefly. But yeah, my experience of a community was GMHC.

So immediately, it was about people dying, and having to take care of them. And way more so than later. From '84 to '86, maybe, that was kind of all it was about, was going to people's hospital rooms, and dealing with them. There was no notion of, that ACT UP later did, of intervening against any government agency. It was all about getting care for people who were sick and people who were dying. Yeah yeah yeah.

**SS: So which came first: getting involved, or having people in your life who had AIDS?**

JW: Well, I don't think it was an accident that I first got involved with – that my first gay community was GMHC. Because I knew — and then this is connected to the writing also maybe — I knew that whatever I did in my life, I was committed to dealing with homophobia, and how that affected people – particularly because of my experience in high school, where I'd been really harassed and – I had a miserable time in high school, because there was no escaping the – not that I was openly gay, but that I was not like everyone else, and the word they used was “gay.” And so I was fag-bashed, I guess – even though being gay was like the last thing I wanted to be, and I certainly wasn't out. But I got picked on relentlessly and abusively – not just by my classmates, but also by some of my parents' friends. There was just an intense atmosphere of anxiety about anyone being a homosexual in the '60s and '70s.

So I knew that I wanted to intervene against that, in some way, no matter what. And I think that's one reason why I wanted to be a writer, was so that I could write about it, and do what I could to make gay people more miserable, I guess.

So coming out into this community of healthcare professionals who were dealing with a lot of the effects of homophobia I think was not entirely accidental. So I ended up volunteering for Gay Men's Health Crisis because – but I would have anyway — but I happened to be there, involved with a bunch of guys who were doing it all the time, so it was a –

**SS: What did you do there? Were you a buddy?**

JW: Yeah, I was a buddy, for – oh, a year, maybe. I ran a gay writer — not a gay writer; well, they were all gay — a writers workshop. When I started, they were still in that little brownstone, on like West 18<sup>th</sup> Street, maybe. And then they moved a little up Eighth Avenue, to a building with a restaurant on the bottom. And we had a writers group in a kitchen every Monday, from Thanksgiving to Easter. And each of the guys in that group died, like, heh –

There were like 12 guys, and they died, one or two a month, or something.

And so I did that. And then I also was a buddy for, I don't know – four or five different guys, I guess.

**SS: Now were you going to Columbia at this same time?**

JW: I went to Columbia later. I got out of college in 1980 and moved to New York. And then I went to Columbia. I started Columbia in '86 – in February of '86. So that was kind of my vacation from AIDS, a little bit.

**SS: Let's talk about that for a minute, because Columbia MFA program is notoriously conservative.**

JW: Yeah, indeed.

**SS: So what was it like to be out and gay, and writing about AIDS –**

JW: Well, I was –

**SS: – at Columbia?**

JW: – the only person doing that. Was I the only one? There was one other gay guy there, and there were a couple of gay women. I'm sure that's why I got in; because you have to send them a 20-page writing sample, and I got rejected the first time, and so I spent six months rewriting it, and I wrote about – for the first time, I started writing about the work I'd done at GMHC. And this one guy in particular, I'd been buddies for; this guy named Bruce, who lived on the Upper East Side, on 79<sup>th</sup> Street, and had run an art gallery. And I went to his house two or three times a week – above and beyond, I think, what was expected of me, from October until – he died the day his healthcare insurance ran out. Ha ha! I don't know how he planned that. And so I wrote about him. I think – no, I guess I was writing a really early, early, early version of my first novel. But I'm sure it was the only writing sample they got in 1985 that had anything to do with AIDS. There wasn't that much writing about it at that point, of any sort, of fiction.

Tape I  
00:15:00

**SS: Could they help you with your work? Was there any understanding of what you were grappling with?**

JW: There were, I think – huh. I liked being there, because I had deadlines; and I can't get anything written without deadlines. And I met some friends who were smart and fun; three women, and this guy who was gay. And they were really helpful. But no – they had no idea. But the gay thing was less, heh, remote to them than the African American thing, because there was only one African American in the whole program, I think, and she was actually not, she was Caribbean American. And she wrote stuff in patois, and no one had any idea

what was going on. It was a very white program, and a very upper-middle-class program. And I think those were maybe bigger barriers.

I had the impression that people thought that I was writing of a subject matter that was really new and cutting-edge, and they were respectful of that, in a funny kind of way. But from like a marketing standpoint, I think.

**SS: Right. So having the experience of being one of the pioneers of AIDS fiction, and –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – having nothing to rely on –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – that was already existing –**

JW: Right. Except Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, I think was the only, like –

**SS: that regard.**

JW: – that happened. But anyway, I'm sorry; your question was?

**SS: Well, what were some of your thoughts about what you were doing? Did you know you were creating a new literature? Or did you feel like it was impossible to for the moment, or –**

JW: I was so naive at that point in my life; and so unfrightened – ha! Now, at this point in my life, I'm scared to write anything. But I think at the time, I just thought: I did have a sense of commitment to getting that material out in the world, and I knew that other people weren't doing it. But I think – I think I didn't think too much about that stuff; about what it would mean in the larger

span of things, in terms of opening up fiction to a different kind of – I don't know, maybe I was thinking about it. It's hard to remember. But I do know that – I was aware that other people weren't writing about AIDS – two or three people, maybe, fiction-wise.

David Feinberg's book came out a year before mine did, and – when did *People in Trouble* come out? I think a little after that, maybe.

**SS: Yeah; 1990. But there was – all the guys who died.**

JW: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: Robert Ferro –**

JW: Yeah, Robert Ferro, and John Fox. John Fox.

**SS: John Fox –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – were you friends with John Fox?**

JW: No, I never met him. And yeah, Robert Ferro.

**SS: The *Max Desir* guy.**

JW: Yeah, *Max Desir*; *Family of Max Desir*.

**SS: What was his name?**

JW: Oh no.

**SS: Jim, do you know?**

JW: I'm going to be punished by –

**JIM HUBBARD: Wasn't that –**

JW: – by his spirit.

**JH: Robert Ferro?**

JW: That was Robert Ferro.

**SS: That was Robert Ferro.**

JW: Yeah yeah yeah yeah. Yeah.

**SS: And George Whitmore.**

JW: George Whitmore.

**SS: Yeah, there were a few –**

JW: Yeah, there were. I was very arrogant at that point and thought, I'm going to be the guy who writes this book that deals with AIDS in a way that will blow everyone away, and, heh. And I was kind of dismissive about other gay writing, I think – in a way that I wasn't later. But I do remember seeing *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theater, and Larry Kramer being – always a controversial figure, and I think having wrangled with any number of people at GMHC at that point, including the guy I was boyfriends with and various of his friends; and so it was like a, kind of a gossip session to go see his play, and think about which GMHC people his characters were based on. That story happened to Paul Popham in real life, and – so there was that. And I left the – and I really liked it; I thought it was really powerful. And I think that's when I thought to myself: well, now I have to write about this. If Larry Kramer can do it so can I kind of thing.

So that was what made me think about writing fiction stuff. I'd written some nonfiction things about doing buddy work, that I read at some kind of GMHC training or something. I read something, I wrote something about this guy Bruce and this guy Tom. But they were nonfiction. But it wasn't until I –

and I never thought of publishing them. But it wasn't until I read, until I saw Larry's play that I thought about writing fiction about AIDS.

And it didn't occur to me that – treating it like a, like being funny about it was the wrong thing to do with it. People complained later that — Edmund White — that you can't have a sense of humor about AIDS, and you shouldn't be funny about it, but –

**SS: Who said that, Edmund White?**

JW: Yeah, he wrote an essay, in *Art* – what's that called?

**SS: Forum?**

JW: Yeah, thank you. *Artforum*, where he said, AIDS is too

Tape I  
00:20:00

serious to treat humorously. And I think singled out David Feinberg, and maybe me; I can't remember.

But that seemed to me like the necessary way to deal with it, I guess, at the time, so –

**SS: What year was *Eddie Socket*?**

JW: *Eddie Socket* came out in '89. I was, I started writing it in '85, maybe. Something like that.

**SS: So how did you get to ACT UP?**

JW: Well, I knew about ACT UP because I'd been involved in Gay Men's Health Crisis, and I knew that Larry Kramer had done this thing in his apartment, and so it was kind of, there was a buzz about it. But I was in grad school, it seems to me. Was I? What year did ACT UP – was it '89?

**SS: '87.**

JW: Oh, '87, okay. So I was still in grad school, and I was still finishing my book. And I was, I got out of grad school in December of '87. And I sold the book in March, and so then I spent the next year revising it. So I was all involved in that. It was like my vacation from AIDS. And I wasn't really in – everybody I knew who was really sick had died, and there were a couple people who were living with HIV, but they were healthy enough, and so I felt like I had a, heh, a year where I could just be selfish, and I went to Vermont, and rewrote the book. And then – came back. And what was the question?

**SS: How did you get to ACT UP?**

JW: Oh, when I came back, I started dating this guy – whose name was John, which was problematic – ha! It felt like I was confirming all of the narcissistic cliches about gay men; that I was dating someone with my own name, and a very sweet guy, and – he had gone to a couple of meetings — I think at the Community Center — and he talked about it. And so that kind of put it in my head. But my book was just coming out, and I was still kind of lost in my little self-promoting bubble at that point. And it wasn't, I guess, until I met David Feinberg that I started going – it certainly wasn't – I went with David the first time I went.

I met David because I did a reading from my book, *Eddie Socket*, at A Different Light. And David had reviewed it, heh, in *Outweek*. *Outweek*? Right; it wasn't *QW* yet, or –

**SS: Yeah. And did he like it?**

JW: He – it was a competitive review. It said – I thought I wrote the best book about AIDS, but I guess someone else has! But I'm cuter! It kind of said that. But his is cheaper, so you should buy his! It said something –

And it was a very funny review, and it felt like he was flirting with me, in his caustic, hectoring way. And I read. And then he came up, at the end of that reading, at A Different Light, in November, I guess it must have been, of '89. Right; that's when my book came out. And he came up to me, and said, Hi, I'm Dave Feinberg, and, ha! And he was this little guy with a gigantic chest and these little legs. And you know, he was wearing a T-shirt with houseflies all over it. Heh. And, like, painted on; they weren't actual houseflies. And I still have that T-shirt.

And so he invited me to lunch. And then back to his apartment, after lunch, on 52<sup>nd</sup> and Ninth, his apartment was. He had a railroad flat, with pictures of men in underwear all over the place, and a shelfful of books that was leaning like this. And I was sitting on his couch, and David was on one side, and the shelf of books was on the other, ha. And it was kind of like, choose me or the books. And – but I mean, nothing sexual – I think I'm the only – guy David didn't sleep with immediately. Not that David slept with lots of people, but I think I was, I think that was supposed to have happened. But at some point, he decided that I was not a guy to sleep with; but a guy to buy lunch. Ha! Which worked out better for me, actually.

And then shortly after that, we went to an ACT UP meeting. Which was still in the Community Center.

**SS: Now did he know he was infected –**

JW: He had a, yeah, he found out in – I think he found out before – shortly after his book came out. Is that possible? After *Eighty-Sixed* came out.

**SS: So he wrote *Eighty-Sixed* not knowing that he was HIV.**

JW: I think that's true. I might be wrong.

**SS: What do you think, Jim?**

**JIM HUBBARD: I think B.J. finds out that he's positive –**

JW: Yeah, B.J.; but I don't think David did.

**JH: I always assumed that was him.**

JW: I could be wrong.

**JH: But I don't remember.**

JW: I don't remember either. No, maybe he knew already. He must have, right? Anyway – he certainly knew when I when I met him. And I remember – ah – I remember distinctly when, after I had lunch with him – ha! – and you know, he bought me a very cheap tuna fish sandwich. And then I went up to his apartment, and then he walked me out, or something. But in his apartment, he said — this is what he said, this is how David seduced people — So, if I told you I was HIV-positive, would you not want to sleep with me? Like that.

Tape I  
00:25:00

And I really liked him for it, because it was just so – his honesty, I think some people had a hard time with his honesty. Because there was a certain performed aspect to it. But it was still honesty, and I hadn't really – I still had

some friends from GMHC who were HIV-positivfe. But I hadn't – it was kind of like reentering into that moment.

And I – I was such a sap when I was twenty – I guess I was 30 at that point. But I just remember thinking, I'm going to keep this guy alive.

We walked across the street. And like I waved goodbye. And he waved goodbye. And that went on for like five minutes, of waving goodbye. He'd turn around and wave, and then I'd – and then finally, he vanished.

And I thought; well, this time, I have to, like, make sure someone doesn't die. Because GMHC was all about people dying, basically. And I thought, okay. It was like a little deal we made somehow. And I think he understood that, also.

Which of course – heh heh – didn't really work out that way, but – so my commitment was to David in that moment, I guess, to like – and then, you know, also to the community. But in particular, my starting to go to ACT UP meetings was kind of to keep track of David.

And then I started getting really involved in – not for that long, but very involved for a while.

**SS: So how did you get involved? Did you join a committee?**

JW: Yeah. David was best pals with Wayne Kawadler. Was Wayne in Action Tours? Was David in Action Tours? I guess – somebody was in Action Tours. The next thing I did after going to a couple of meetings was going to Jim Wagner's apartment, on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, to an Action Tours – Jim Wagner and Jamie Leo and Jack Ben-Levi and – Mary Grace; what is Mary

Grace's – and Elizabeth Michaels, and a whole bunch of people. And it must have been a trip to Albany, where we went and interrupted the Senate hearings, or something like that.

But anyway, from going to meetings with David, then I started getting involved in Action Tours. And then very quickly, started doing actions; culminating, I guess, in the Day of Desperation thing.

And then – and then I ran away to California for a while, because I broke up with another boyfriend. And when I came back – that was the year – I guess, that David started getting sick.

**SS: Let's go back a little bit.**

JW: Sure.

**SS: So can you just explain what Action Tours was, what their aesthetic was –**

JW: Oh.

**SS: – and how they operated?**

JW: Well, Action Tours; heh heh; aesthetic. They had already – it was a – theatrical, but that doesn't single that out, because everything in ACT UP was theatrical in delightful ways. I think they had recently gone and dropped stuff over the Statue of Liberty.

And Jim Wagner, who was, there was no head of it, but it was his apartment we met in — and you've interviewed him; he's a very, you would think he was like a proper German burgher. He's very, a very low-key, quiet, solid-seeming, Midwestern preppy guy. He must – always looks about 40, and like

he's maybe a suburban dad. And the last thing you would imagine would be a raving queer activist. Heh. And very technical –

And Action Tours was always planning things out so carefully when they were planning actions. And they'd gone to the Statue of Liberty to drop a banner over the head of it, and spread a banner at the foot of it. And they'd – I think you talked about it – it's in one of your tapes, actually — where they'd gone ahead several times to the Statue of Liberty and visited it, and taken wax impressions of the nuts that held the windows open in the face, so they could find the right wrench. So there was always a kind of engineering aspect to the way we approached actions, I guess; which was to go there ahead of time, to scope it out, to figure out what the key was to getting into whatever room, and there were lots of reconnaissance missions ahead of time. And it was like war strategizing, kind of.

And Jamie Leo was the, was the yang, or the yin, or, I don't know, the other side of that. Because he was very involved in ACT UP also – I mean in Action Tours. And he was equally effective at doing all that stuff. But he was kind of the public performer, the theatrical, making posters, fabulous outfits, and – very attuned to the media moment. So it was kind of like the engineer and the actor, in a certain sense. And I think the rest of us were, in some way, carrying out their directorial vision, perhaps. It really did feel like theater – but all of ACT UP felt that way, I guess.

Tape I  
00:30:00 I  
00:30:00

**SS: Did you guys ever get arrested?**

JW: Yeah. Well, we got arrested –

**SS: Besides the TV thing.**

JW: There was a – that wasn't ACT UP though. That was a pro-choice thing, where we were lying down in front of the Holland Tunnel. We got arrested for that. We got arrested for –

**SS: I mean Action Tours. Did any of your actions end up with you guys all being arrested?**

JW: Together –

**SS: Yeah.**

JW: – in jail? The one I remember was the Day of Desperation/CBS News thing, where we were all in jail.

**SS: Let's talk about that.**

JW: Okay.

**SS: Okay, so ironically, your father was a network TV –**

JW: My father, who just died. My father died in – three weeks ago, in fact.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

JW: Yes indeed. And whose job was – to send broadcast feeds out to affiliates, so you could get a TV show in your home. And I went to a meeting in Jim's apartment. And we were planning for the Day of Desperation. And Ann Northrop had worked for CBS for a while, and had an ID that she could get copied, so we could all get in there. I think we coordinated it with The Marys. They were going to go – everyone decided they were going to interrupt a network news broadcast the night before the Day of Desperation in Grand Central Station.

And we were doing CBS and ABC and NBC, and The Marys were doing the MacNeil/Lehrer Report. And when this idea was being surfaced, presented in this meeting – and at that point, Action Tours was, there were a lot of people in the room, and there were lots of willing bodies. And I thought – ts-, I know how to get into a newsroom, ha! If there's one thing I know how to do, it's how to get into a newsroom, because I grew up around that. My father covered all the moon shots, and they'd – they had mockup sets of the moon in Studio 8H, where they shoot *Saturday Night Live*. And my brother and I used to crawl around on the sets of the fake capsule, the fake moon capsules. I'd been in and out of all those studios a lot, so I just thought, this action has my name written all over it.

And, A, and my father will probably kill me. And my mother and my brother. Heh heh.

But that was one component of it, was the CBS thing. So I volunteered to do that. Dale Peck and me and Darrell Bowman were the three who were going to go jump in front of a news camera. And then Jim Wagner and Dan Borden — Ann Northrop, of course, gave us the fake ID for the CBS building – which was remarkably easy to reproduce, at the time. And they did that. And then we ran, again, lots of reconnaissance missions to each of those TV studios.

And I knew that I couldn't risk jumping into an NBC studio. So I volunteered to do the CBS thing. But I also volunteered to go to NBC three or four times, and scope out the path to the newsroom. And – I don't think I ever told my father that, actually. I went there, to visit him. He must have wondered

what was up, because suddenly – I would never go visit him, and suddenly, I was coming twice a week for a couple weeks to say hello. And then I would leave his office, and go down to the studio where the news was happening, and figure out the access — exit routes, entrance routes, and so forth — and figure out how to get in there.

So I conveyed that back to the group. And in the meantime, they figured out how to get into the CBS studio, which was unbelievably easy to get into. It's on 57<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, kind of – the building is at the base of a hill, kind of. And it's all on the first floor. You walk in the door — maybe it's different now — and through some security doors, and then turn left and go down the hall. And then there was the Dan Rather studio. And there were no – it was during the Gulf War, so maybe there, there were all kinds of people in the building who maybe ordinarily weren't there. So maybe that complicated things. But it was quite easy to get in.

Should I tell more?

**SS: Yeah, tell us everything.**

JW: Oh, I see. Am I doing it chronologically? We practiced it a couple of times. We met at the Coliseum bookstore, which is now a bank. And me and Darrell and Dale and Dan Borden, I seem to remember, being there. Put on our little business suits – Elizabeth Michaels — that – a bunch of us went ahead of time, in business suits, to see if our IDs would work, and to see if we could get in easily enough – which we were able to do. We must have done two dry runs. And we made a little banner that said, Fight AIDS, Not Arabs – which

Tape I  
00:35:00

we had, the three — me and Dale and Daryl — were carrying, folding up. And we were wearing suits and ties. And we'd figured out what we were going to say ahead of time.

The genius, I guess, of ACT UP in general was how careful people were to plan this stuff, and how many people in ACT UP were already involved in some media outlet of some sort. Lots of people had lots of information ahead of time that they very willingly shared. So we always had our strategic insiders. We could never done the CBS thing if Ann didn't have the ID card.

So anyway — the night of the action, I guess we met again at the Coliseum bookstore, and we walked over there. And you know, through the windows, through the security gates, and down the hall. And I suppose we'd studied the news broadcasts, so we knew how it started, and it was, I think Jim was standing with us. And Daryl and Dale and me, I think, in that order. And then — we couldn't see a monitor, but we could hear the announcer saying, this is the evening news, with Dan Rather. And then we just ran on, the three of us, chanting Fight AIDS, Not Arabs! Which I'm not sure you hear that well in that —

**SS: You hear it.**

JW: Yeah, do you? And trying to unfold the banner, at the same time, because — we should have unfolded it upfront. But then everyone would have seen it, so it was all folded in a little square. And we were trying to unfold it. And we're chanting, and we're holding, also holding each other's hands at the same time; and chanting, Fight AIDS, Not Arabs, and getting out in front.

And I knew it was like predetermined somehow, I thought — I know how to get in front of the camera. And I just looked for the monitor, the red light on top of the camera; and s-, do that. And it didn't matter what I said, really. And that's — if I hadn't been the first guy — it's just happenstance that I was the first guy in the line. But I think I made sure I was. Because I thought, I'm going to fucking get on that fucking news show! in front of that camera, one way or the other!

And then, of course, all the technicians jumped on us, immediately. All technicians, all these guys that I — my father worked with guys like that. They were — that, they came to our house for Thanksgiving. I knew exactly how angry they would be. And it was all men, all white guys, I think, working in the studio. And cameramen and sound people, and guys in the control booth. And they just, they just came out, and tackled us, as if it were a football game, or something; and dragged us out. And then off we went to jail.

**SS: What happened to you? Did you have a trial?**

JW: No, they — we went to Midtown North. We had to wait in the lobby for a while while the — {SIREN} siren in the distance — while the cop car showed up, till the van showed up. And they handcuffed us, and held us over this table, over this semicircular desk, I seem to think, for maybe half an hour. And all the CBS people were kind of circling around us, with; “You pigs” written on their faces, kind of. And then the van showed up, and they took us out to the van. And we're still chanting, Fight AIDS, Not Arabs. I don't think we ever stopped

chanting that, from the whole time they jumped on us in the studio until we got sent into the van.

And then they took us to Midtown North, and we were all in the cell for a while. But not as long as one would think.

And it was in that cell that Dale Peck told me all the plot of his first novel.

**SS: Oh, he hadn't written it yet?**

JW: I think he was starting it, or something. And he told me the whole conceit of it. And I was like, ah, sure, sure, heh. So some guy, writing a book. And then we got – ACT UP was also very good at getting things dismissed. We weren't charged with anything more than – not a misdemeanor; what's the thing less than a misdemeanor? It was just a – it got waived. It was as if we'd been arrested for anything else –

**SS: Right.**

JW: – any other civil disobedience. And the network didn't – the network didn't do anything. That was the insanity of it, for me, actually. Part of the point of doing that was to get, to – anticipate the Day of Desperation the next day in Grand Central; and to make AIDS something that people had to deal with.

Tape I  
00:40:00

But for me, it was also breaking through this pasteboard mask of network – those network news shows are, they're scripted and they're full of lies, and there's just a glossiness to them, and a smoothness, and – an inability to deal with anything except the three issues that they're told to deal with over and over

again. And here we were, going in, being a news story, right in front of them, you know; under a nose, here was news happening; and CBS never mentioned it.

I mean, if I were Dan Rather, and had an instinct for news, I would say, stop those guys! Bring them in here, interview them! Maybe that's being a little idealistic. Ha ha! But –

**JAMES WENTZY: We have to stop and change tapes.**

JW: Oh, okay.

**SS: Okay.**

**SS: Okay, so there so many writers in ACT UP.**

Tape II  
00:00:00

JW: Right.

**SS: And so much AIDS literature came out of there.**

JW: Right, right.

**SS: But we never really talked about it, did we, at the time?**

JW: No, we didn't.

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

JW: Uh, weird. Never talked about writing about it, or never talked to each other as writers, or –

**SS: Writers who were in ACT UP –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – never said to each other, hey, we're all creating –**

JW: Yeah.

**SS: – this literature –**

JW: Yeah, that was funny, wasn't it.

**SS: Yeah, why do you think that was?**

JW: I don't know. Shyness? I was, I was always a little scared of lots of people in ACT UP, because they were so powerful and effective, and focused, and good at the civil disobedience stuff that they were planning. And I felt like I was kind of a gadfly. I'd drop in, I – jump in front of a TV camera, and then I, then I go home and write about. I felt like maybe I was, at some level, that writer thing, of always looking for, how are you going to articulate it in print later. So a little part of me was calculatedly thinking, okay; how am I going to write about this? But it wasn't about ACT UP. I think that the thing that we never talked about in ACT UP that much was that people were still dying; and ACT UP was all about, GMHC did its job to help people die, and we're not going to deal with it anymore. We don't want to die, we want to stay alive, and we want to help everyone else stay alive, and this is going to be all about – getting drugs for people so they can stay alive as long as they want. And the whole notion of loss and mourning, I think, got a little bit pushed aside, maybe. I mean, I don't know if you felt that way, but I did. And that was what I was writing about, was the anxiety about living in this moment, where my 25<sup>th</sup>-birthday party – half the people in the room had died in two years – something like that.

And so that was the kind of stuff that I wanted to deal with. The political stuff – that's a question, really, is why – because David Feinberg was certainly writing about the actions, and the drugs he was taking, and the drug trials, and the ACT UP meetings. And he wrote tons of stuff specifically about ACT UP and what it was like to be involved in it. And I wasn't really doing that.

So I think maybe I felt like – it was my civic duty to write about the political aspects of it, and I wasn't doing my civic duty. So maybe I – maybe I just assumed that everyone else was more politically hip, or something, than I was.

**SS: Well, *Eddie Socket* was very well received. And many people love it.**

JW: Right. Thank you.

**SS: Did people mention the book to you, in ACT UP?**

JW: Yeah. Yeah. Did they mention the book to me? I guess they did. It came out in the fall of '89. And that was when I really started getting involved in ACT UP. From November until about May of that year, I did a lot of stuff. And everyone, you know, everyone knew the book had just come out. So – but I don't know that I really talked to anybody about it.

**SS: The other writers, like Michael Cunningham; did he acknowledge your book to you?**

JW: Yeah.

**SS: Or Larry?**

JW: Not really. Why is that?

**SS: Did you acknowledge their books?**

JW: Oh! {LAUGHS}

**SS: I'm curious.**

JW: Oh, I went to readings. David was a very networky fellow. Maybe I gave all that to him to deal with. And he went to readings and called people up. Some gay guy would publish a book, and David would find his phone

number in the phone book — it's no longer possible. Are there still phone books? I don't know. But David would comb the phone book, and he'd find Michael Cunningham's phone number, and he'd call him up, and he would be miraculously listed. And he'd say, Michael Cunningham, you wrote a book, let's have lunch!

So he did a lot of that. And I went along, at various moments, to lunches and stuff like that. So I guess I sort of did it through David.

But I think —

**SS: Who did you guys have lunch with?**

JW: Paul Rudnick, we had — the day that Madonna's sex book came out; David bought a copy, and made Paul Rudnick look through it with us, and make all kinds of snarky comments about it. It was actually quite hilarious. We went to the writers conferences they used to have those — gay and lesbian writers conferences. They had a couple in Boston that I went to. So there was a fair amount of networking.

But — yeah, I don't know. It's probably me. I'm not especially a guy who likes to talk to other people about my writing.

But the funny thing about ACT UP, I guess, was that — we didn't want to talk about anything except the actions and the success or failure of them, and our impressions of each other as human beings. There was a lot of gossip. But it was very focused on the group thing everyone was doing together, and it felt so important that — I don't know. I'm probably saying ten things that are entirely untrue. But I don't know why.

I talked to Jay Blotcher about writing a lot, I guess, because he was always writing stuff. And he talked to me about *Eddie Socket*. I never talked to you about it. Why is that?

**SS: I don't know, John.**

JW: You're a, intimidating goddess of perfection, so – but I was writing reviews of people's books, so there was that, so I was certainly communicating with people.

**SS: But when you went to California –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – for a year, right?**

JW: Well, not that long. It was maybe five months.

**SS: And then when you came back –**

JW: Right.

**SS: – had ACT UP changed, in that time?**

JW: Yeah, that must have been '92. Day of Desperation was '92, right? So –

**JAMES WENTZY: '91.**

JW: Oh, '91, okay. Oh, okay, so it was '91 when I came back, in the fall.

**SS: Oh, you went away before Day of Desperation.**

JW: Yes.

**JH: Day of Desperation was January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1991.**

JW: Oh no. Okay. So I went away after that.

**SS: Okay.**

JW: What had changed was – I don't know, I remember thinking that I really didn't want to leave New York. But I was breaking up with a boyfriend, and I got a big grant, and somebody who worked for the Advocate offered me a room in his apartment for the summer. And it seemed like an easy way to break up with the guy I was living with, so that's part of why I went to California. But I didn't especially want to be away from New York, because, mostly because of ACT UP, which felt like – and I had issues with it along the way, and later on, but it also felt like the one place on the planet – the meetings – I'd ever been to where all the people who'd gotten picked on in high school suddenly had control of things. And the balance of power had shifted, and the atmosphere was different, and even though there were still problems with sexism and racism and problems that all, I guess, activist movements that are predominantly white still have — so there was that to deal with — but it did feel like a bunch of people who had gotten pushed away from positions of power were suddenly in a place where they could take the power in our hands, and do stuff for themselves, and have agency, and – maybe try and change things.

And that was really – wonderful. Really, that energy and the sense of doing something about this terrible thing that was happening; and maybe having a possibility of doing something. I compare it now to like thinking about the British Petroleum thing, and all that oil going out into the Gulf, and there's just nothing I can – who can do anything about that? There's like, it's such a

horrible, helpless feeling. And I feel that way about most – big public tragedies. But at ACT UP, I didn't. So that was really important.

So I was happy to be back in New York, for that reason. But I think that the – I don't know – was it because Clinton got elected? There was – was he elected in '92, Clinton? There was I – I think that was a moment where we didn't have the Evil Empire to fulminate against, or fulminate about. Reagan-Bush were gone, and not gone officially until January, and Clinton was no picnic, but there was maybe less of a sense of urgency, maybe.

And then David started to get – I guess in '92 he started getting sick.

**SS: Now when he started getting sick, did that change what you did in ACT UP? Did you become more treatment-oriented?**

JW: No, I was never that treatment-oriented. I never really knew anything about any of the drugs, the drug trials. And David was always furious with me that I – he'd call me on the phone, and say, what have you done today to end the AIDS crisis, John Weir? And – and I would have done nothing. And – every day he called me up and woke me up with that: What have you done today to end the AIDS crisis? And, that was his hello. And –

And which became more and more, what have you done today to keep me alive? And – but I'm not good with numbers or public authorities or deans or CEOs; people in charge of things. It wasn't what I felt like I was good at. I was good at being a body lying on the street with my arms through steel pipes, handcuffed to 25 other people, in February, in 14-degree weather chanting,

Fight AIDS, or We'll never be silent again, or whatever. That I could do. I didn't feel like I had the expertise to approach all the medical issues.

Tape II  
00:10:00

I think Clinton's election dampened the sense of, we'll never get what we want. It's way easier to have a revolution when the guy in charge of the opposition is Ronald Reagan or George Bush. And Clinton was much cuddlier and allegedly – and he was lifting the ban on gays in the military right away, which of course didn't work out. But the sense of having that oppositional force kind of evaporated, I guess, when he got elected.

But I think I stopped doing ACT UP stuff maybe in '92; in like February.

**SS: Why was that?**

JW: Oh, I went to an ACT – there was a big pharmaceutical company in New Jersey.

**SS: Hoffman-La Roche?**

JW: Yeah, it must have been. And that's when we – Dave and me and Wayne Kawadler I guess, Kelly McKaig. There were some new people involved in ACT UP when I got back from Los Angeles. And I guess they kind of got my enthusiasm going again. Because it was hard to keep doing it all the time, especially if you had to earn a living. But Dave was always attaching himself to all the new cute guys, and he's a collector of new people, a collector of friends, wherever he went. And so I met new people through him, I guess, and got involved again.

And the last action I was involved in was – when we went to New Jersey at – I don't know – seven in the morning on a Tuesday, or something, and attached ourselves to each other with these big pipes, and with handcuffs inside, so we were handcuffed to each other, inside the pipes. I don't know how that happened. And then, so we were this giant human chain, heh. We couldn't really move, and we lay down on the asphalt.

And nobody came. Ha ha ha! There were like three bored cops, who'd come over from the next little Jersey town, and they were leaning against their car, drinking coffee. And a couple of commuters drove by. But basically, we lay on the ground for about two hours chanting. And I think our own people were taking film of it, or video. But nobody really showed up. And it was really cold. And Dave was chattering. His teeth were chattering, and he was turning blue. And that kind of freaked me out.

And I think that was the last action I was involved with. But shortly after that, David really did start getting sick, and that was a whole separate – 24-hour-a-day – emergency.

**SS: How did you experience David's acting out in front of ACT UP?**

JW: Ha ha! What do you mean?

**SS: Well, there's a myth, there's these huge mythological stories about David coming to ACT UP meeting on an IV, yelling at everybody.**

JW: Oh, my god! I'd forgotten about that!

**SS: You failed –**

JW: Wow!

**SS: – because I’m dying.**

JW: I’ve clearly blocked everything.

**SS: Did you witness it?**

JW: Yeah, yeah, I carried his IV bag.

**SS: Oh, can you tell us – how did he decide to do that?**

JW: Not to give David all the agency – I feel like I’m letting David stand in for whatever I did in ACT UP. I would have done it without him. And not to say I’m not an international flirt myself, so I think David and I were evenly matched in that regard.

But that was – oh, it must have been in September, or something. It was either – was it after – it must have been after he got out of the hospital. He weighed 90 pounds, or something. He’d weighed 150, and he’d lost 50 pounds in three weeks, or something.

But that was one of many incidents in a larger citywide theatrical event that was Dave Feinberg’s coming-home-from-the-hospital party. He had a big party – you were at that party, were you not? I’m Still Standing. Heh. That was the theme: I’m Still Standing. And he had us — me and Wayne Kawadler — write invitations and send them out. And –

Anyway, he could do what he wanted. The poor thing.

**SS: And what was that like for you, to have all of – he was the PWA who acted out his anger and pain –**

JW: Yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah.

**SS: – in front of everybody.**

JW: Well –

**SS: And you were his best friend.**

JW: Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah.

**SS: So what did that – did you feel like you had to do everything he said, because he was dying?**

JW: Yeah. Well, very much so.

**SS: Do you feel like it helped him to do that?**

JW: Uh –

**SS: Did it hurt you?**

JW: Hah! Really complicated. I had that little bargain that I made in my head. It's like, okay: this guy, okay; I'm going to love this guy unconditionally, and therefore, he's not going to suffer. Ha! Which is my Jesus complex, or something.

**SS: Right.**

JW: I don't know what was going on in my head. But that was the deal I'd made with him – without telling him, of course. And then I think I wrote some stories in which I revealed that, and maybe read them out loud at a – you read with us, I think, the three of us read at the old Scribner's Bookstore once.

Tape II  
00:15:00

And I read a story that I wrote about being with David at the Boston Gay and Lesbian Writers Conference; and about his spitting up green bile, or something, and seeming a little bit vulnerable. And I wrote a whole story about that, and read

it, in front of David. So he was very aware – and he wrote about me all the time. My name certainly comes up a lot in his last book, I think. And –

So there was this self-conscious performance awareness of our writing about this experience we were both going through, and our casting each other as characters in the drama the two of us were composing. So that was my part to play, at one level, was to be the helpmate and I was going to carry it through to the end. But also – it was just so terrifying. I'd certainly dealt with lots of people who died – in all kinds of – there was no bodily disaster that I hadn't been exposed to at that point. So nothing David was going through physically was new to me. But it's still not a picnic to watch that happen to someone. And it was terrifying, and poor David, and – but it was also happening to David, who was the most theatrical, out-there guy I'd ever met, and loved staging little scenes, on a good day, when he was perfectly in control of all his faculties, and didn't weigh 90 pounds, and wasn't wearing a diaper, and wasn't plugged into an IV. So he just became a more extreme version of his own theatrical self, when he got sick.

But the moment you're talking about – I guess he must have just gotten out of the hospital. And I think it's on tape somewhere; I think somebody taped it.

**JAMES WENTZY: I did.**

JW: Did you? Oh, was that you? You must have it then, on tape.

**JAMES WENTZY: Yep.**

A: Sorry, ha ha! Imagine that! And it was at the Community Center, because ACT UP had – had swollen to some kind of, 700 people on a Monday night, and now it was much fewer, and they'd moved back to the Community Center from Cooper Union. And Dave was going to do that in-the-tradition-of-ACT-UP thing, where you go and scream at people, like Larry Kramer used to do, like David Barr used to do; Bob Rafsky. You get up and say, what the fuck are you motherfuckers doing about my health! And screaming and screaming and screaming. And, oh, I'm angry! Why aren't you angry! Where is your anger?! And David was going to have that moment. It was like his farewell tour. And I at that point was – kind of his – Wayne Kawadler and I. Wayne was – equally attentive to David, and really the best friend he could possibly have. If I ever get that sick, I'm calling Wayne. So I think Wayne was maybe there also.

But anyway – so I had a sense of commitment to David, because if this is what he wants to do – I'm going to be there for him. But also, I guess I had a sense of commitment not just to him, but to the craziness of AIDS, and the need to document it for as many people as possible, because it was just so crazy, the whole – especially at the beginning, the way that people died; a thousand miles, sometimes, away from their families in Iowa; alone, in a studio apartment on the Upper West Side, with lots of people abandoning them, and their bodies deteriorating in a particular kind of way, and their having to manage the secrecy versus publicity about it — who was going to know, who wasn't going to know. And here, this stranger, this 24-year-old kid, comes into their house once a week, and makes him a grilled-cheese sandwich in their microwave. And talks to them

about their day. And there was just, it was a very weird, infuriating and tragic experience to witness the ends of some of these guys' lives. And even more infuriating that no one fucking knew about it, in a larger world; and didn't want to hear about it.

So there was a certain level at which I was like: maybe David was acting out my rage, also. And if he wants to walk down the street, dribbling diarrhea, and screaming at people at high noon, on Lower Broadway: then fuck it. I'm going to walk behind with a pooper scooper, basically, and be a part of this display. But it was – so that was my anger, also. But it was – it was really upsetting, certainly. And it certainly alienated me from my friendship with him, ultimately. Because he was just, at the very end of his life, just so angry, 24 hours a day. And he never slept, and he was – and everyone was the enemy. So that was hard to deal with.

Tape II  
00:20:00

But I think the thing that was the most painful, for me — and it wasn't just David, although he typified a certain attitude, which is that no one who doesn't have HIV has any idea what it's like. The only person who has rights is the person who has HIV, and the rest of us have to facilitate their dealing with it, in whatever way, and make it possible for them to get better. And – in a way, I didn't have any rights around David, because I wasn't the one who had HIV.

And I didn't – and it didn't feel that way to me; it didn't feel like David was the only guy who was losing something. It very much felt like – I mean, I wasn't just losing David; and the whole thing was such an unbelievable

freakout; and my sense of self in the world was affected by watching this guy deal with his rage and grief about dying. And it really affected me – and I –

I ended up angry with him, that he hadn't – that he'd sealed himself off, and said, this is only happening to me; you don't have anything to say about this, except to pay the cabbie, and help me out of the car when we get back to my apartment.

And there was a certain amount of that in ACT UP, I think, in general, of the people with HIV are sacred, and that people without HIV are somehow – aren't entitled to say anything about how they're feeling about it. Maybe it was just David; I don't know. But anyway –

**SS: Well, after he died, did you ever do anything with AIDS again? Or were you burnt out?**

JW: I didn't want to talk to a man again for two years after David died. I was definitely burnt out. And I stopped doing ACT UP. He died in – Halloween, the day after Halloween, in '94. Yes. And – no, I didn't. I did nothing more with ACT UP. ACT UP at that point, though, it seems to me, had really shrunk, and wasn't doing much itself. I got this teaching job, and that became a whole other thing. The teaching job became about my teaching in Queens, and suddenly realizing that I was surrounded by 20-, 18-, 19-, 20-, 21-year-olds, who thought that they'd never met a gay man. Heh. And I was the gay professor, so it was suddenly my job to represent gayness to all of these students who otherwise were telling me that they would go into New York and beat up

fags in the West Village on Friday nights; but because they took my class, they weren't going to do that anymore.

So that was – I guess my activism shifted from being very involved in the gay community to, even though I was still living in Manhattan, to kind of moving out into a neighborhood where everyone I knew wasn't gay, and trying to – I don't know, offer gayness to them, whatever that means.

But after David died, I – I don't know – I was really angry with – it was freaked out and enraging, and – I don't know how anybody goes through that without – I know all kinds of people have gone through it, so clearly – but you think to yourself, why is the Earth still turning today? Why do I still have to get up and go to the bathroom and make myself coffee. Like some cataclysmic bad thing should be happening for the next three weeks to mark the fact that this guy just died. But that's not what happens. You have to get up in the morning and go to the bathroom, still.

I had lots of feelings about that whole thing to work out. Which kind of immediately took the form of my being really angry, I guess.

**SS: It took a long time for you to do another book.**

JW: Oh, right, I wrote another book, didn't I? Yes! Also about David, right? No, not also; the first one was not about David; I didn't know David when I wrote it.

Yeah, the second one, well – I'd started writing about David, really, within months of meeting him. He interviewed me for the *Advocate* – the *Inadequate* – which no longer exists, I guess. And made me say all kinds of

Tape II  
00:25:00

embarrassing things that I would never have said otherwise, and printed them. So from the outset, there was this kind of, I'll-write-about-you, you'll-write-about-me thing happening. So I had started writing about him fairly early on in our friendship, and kept writing stuff on my own without publishing it anywhere, or knowing what to do with it. And then when I started writing — when I started writing — I don't know when I ever really started writing a second book. Suddenly, I just had a lot of stuff that I had to do something with, and I kind of glued it all together. But a big part of it was about David.

But in that book, I really wanted – I really wanted to start the friendship between these two guys, between me and David, at the point where the friendship had evaporated, and it had turned into something else. Because it wasn't like he was the same guy, I guess, maybe you've had that experience. When people get that sick, they – I mean, he was a skeleton; he was on antidepressants for a little while that knocked him out. And then when he was off the antidepressants, he was back to being a raging skeleton, and he wasn't eating, he couldn't eat anything. Nothing, he'd eat nothing; everything came straight out. He really didn't eat for like two months. I don't know how he managed to continue to have all that energy.

He was losing everything that mattered to him. And – how could he not be angry? But also, how could he still be the same guy that I'd liked in the first place. And he wasn't, really, the same guy. It was like a monster had inhabited my friend, and I still had to take care of him. That's what I wanted to write about, I guess. Which I don't think anyone enjoyed, because who wants to

spend time in that moment? But again – I don't know; this is my issue with Dan Rather, again, on the Evening News — is the amount of stuff that never gets conveyed; even still, for all the writing about AIDS, and all the writing about traumas and catastrophes around the world; there's tons of experience that isn't conveyed to people, or people somehow don't get the – the seriousness of whatever matter, or there's an impulse, I guess, to tune stuff out. And AIDS has evaporated from the national consciousness. When the World Trade Center fell down, and — God rest everyone who was in there, and it was horrible — but I remember saying to somebody; what was his name? He was a Mary; bearded guy from the South; James — he said, when 9/11 happened, I thought, know everybody will know how I've been feeling for the past 15 years. Which is not to say that it matters more that a bunch of people died of AIDS than it matters that a bunch of people died in a falling building. But that 4,000 people, and the whole country still isn't over it, and we started wars because of it. And AIDS is just like – who knows about it? My students have no idea, and my students are not stupid. I mean, they're delightful, smart; they're from all over the world; it's in Queens. They speak three different languages, some of them. And they've never heard of AIDS. They've heard of AIDS, but they've never heard of ACT UP. They don't know that AIDS is a problem in the U.S. now. They have no notion of that. They have a vague notion that it might be a problem in Africa, I guess – if they think about it at all.

But it's evaporated from the U.S. national dialogue, altogether. It's like a theme park you can go visit, maybe, if you want to. And that's so enraging. And – I don't know what question you asked me that led to that.

**SS: That's fine. I just have two more questions.**

JW: Okay.

**SS: In terms of your life trajectory –**

JW: Ecch.

**SS: – where was it –**

JW: Dead by Friday, I'm hoping.

**SS: – where does ACT UP fit? Like, what does ACT UP mean to you, in terms of how you look at your life?**

JW: It's the one thing I did that I'm not ashamed of including all of my old boyfriends. No, it was really important. It was important to me for all kinds of ways.

I couldn't do it now, because I think you have to be – I don't know how – Larry Kramer must have been 50 at the time. I don't know how you have energy for that after the age of 35. But I have a job, I wouldn't have free time for all that stuff now. I don't know, maybe, if I felt my life depended on it.

But it was not just that – going through GMHC, and being involved in that from the time I was 24 until I was 26 or 27, I guess; and being so surrounded by people who really were sick and dying, on a regular basis; and having a boyfriend that I could never really split up with, because we'd try to split up, and then someone would get sick, and we'd meet again in the guy's hospital

Tape II  
00:30:00

room, and start crying, and we'd have to be boyfriends again for another six months. That experience was really maddening and frustrating, and tragic. And ACT UP was – okay, we're not all going to die, we're all going to live. We're going to be fine, and we're going to have some agency, and we're going to go confront those motherfuckers who don't care about us. And that was really important for me as a human being, to feel like, okay, I do have some agency; and, I have it through this community. Which was the really important thing, I guess, was my sense that it wasn't really about me. And even though I was so focused on David, it wasn't about David, either. It was about this group of people coming together to change something for themselves, and for each other, and for the culture around them.

And to experience New York in a particular kind of way — Manhattan, especially — to say, well, if we want to go to Governor Cuomo's campaign acceptance speech and interrupt it and shout, Shame, shame, shame, we're going to do that. I stuffed envelopes for that dude the first time he ran for governor, and voted for him, and made phone calls. And he betrayed me. And so now I'm going to go into a hotel room and say, You betrayed me, you asshole! And that was I think everyone should have an experience of really feeling like — well, maybe those Tea Party people think that, so it has a negative side — but to feel like the city was yours, that you weren't just a visitor here, but that you had an active interaction with it and could affect the way people lived here was really important.

And ACT UP was – it was a great big social thing, too. Certainly the last time I had that huge a social network. And that was fun, to know all these people. And I still know plenty of – there are some people I haven't talked to in 15 years, and I can Facebook them, and have a conversation, and they can help me out with this or that. So there was a sense of being plugged in to some kind of network of people who were – doing stuff that I cared about.

**SS: Okay, so here's the last question.**

JW: I'm ready.

**SS: So looking back –**

JW: Yeah.

**SS: – what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?**

JW: Oh, hm. Well, they did a lot of stuff really right, I think. Just – I really think that it made a difference to the way people understand homosexuality. Obviously it also got the pharmaceutical companies to, a little bit, to behave themselves. So it intervened – it was people intervening against corporations – and that's really hard to do. And then also, I think it – I think it did affect the national discourse about what homosexuality is and what these people are like, and what they do and what they want – in a good way.

Disappointment-wise: ACT UP never worked out its issues with racism and sexism, I think. I mean no one ever does, right? But I think that was a big issue. And also I think there was a certain kind of valorizing of the person who was living with HIV was sacrosanct and had to set the agenda, and everyone

else could only watch. And I think that kept people from engaging their feelings about AIDS. Which really was not just a political thing, but a lot of people who were getting sick and maybe going to die. And it wasn't really good at processing its feelings about stuff like that, I guess.

**SS: Thank you, John.**

JW: Thank you, Sarah. Thank you, Mr. Wentzy. Thank you, Mr. Hubbard.

**JH: Thank you.**

**SS: Okay.**