

**A C T U P**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
**P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Gerri Wells**

Interview Number: **075**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Gerri Wells  
May 24, 2007

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so the way we start is you say your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.**

GERRI WELLS: Okay.

**SS: Go ahead.**

GW: Oh. My name is Gerri Wells. I'm 52 years old. We're in New York City. And today is the 24<sup>th</sup>, right?

**SS: Of what?**

GW: Of May.

**SS: 2007.**

GW: 2007.

**SS: Okay. So you're a real New Yorker, right?**

GW: Yes.

**SS: Where did you grow up?**

GW: I grew up on 204<sup>th</sup> Street and Post Avenue in the Inwood section of Manhattan, uptown.

**SS: And were your parents born here?**

GW: No, my mother was born in Ireland. My mother still has an Irish brogue. She won't let go of it. And she's been in this country for many, many years, so. And my father's French-American.

**SS: Like Quebec?**

GW: His mother was born in France and he was born here. But he's French and American.

**SS: So what's Wells? That's not French.**

GW: That was his father.

**SS: Oh, okay. So did you go to Catholic school?**

GW: I went to religious instructions. I went to public school and I went there. I had religious, with the nuns; I had religious ins-, after school, every day.

**SS: And how did you feel about it?**

GW: I had, it was fun; I didn't mind it. It was like a fun kind of thing to do. And I learned stuff, and then there was like a social kind of thing at the same time, so.

**SS: Did you ever think about going into the Church?**

GW: Actually, I did, at one point. I had a nun who I became really good friends with, and she was sort of like, when going through puberty kind of attachment that I would go and talk to her every day and complain about my mother and about life in general. I think she was gay, when I look back. Because one day I went to see her, and she said, now I have to tell you that I really don't belong in the convent and I have to leave. And that was the last, and her name was Sister Mary Geraldine, which is really my real name; it's Geraldine, so. So I was like devastated when she left the convent. But you know; devastated, meaning for a month, I was upset. And after that month, I actually started coming into my own as far as identifying as being maybe gay.

**SS: Now your father worked for the Police Department?**

GW: Yeah. Yeah, he worked for the Police Depar-, he was a sergeant, Sergeant Wells.

**SS: And what about your mother?**

GW: My mother worked for a doctor. She was a secretary, a medical secretary.

**SS: So did they want you to go work for the Police Department?**

GW: Yeah. My father, I did work with the Police Department for a couple of years, with the Child Abuse Unit, up in Harlem.

**SS: So were you an officer?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Oh, I didn't know that. You went to the Police Academy?**

GW: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

GW: Just for a couple of years. I didn't stay too long.

**SS: How did you like that work?**

GW: I enjoy-, I felt it was, if I was going to do anything, it was quite rewarding. But after a couple years of that, I was burnt out. It was like, you see all the worst stuff. And that's when crack was at its highest point up in Harlem, so there was a lot of child abuse going on.

**SS: So how old were you when you decided to leave?**

GW: Gee, I don't remember.

**SS: Okay.**

GW: I only stayed a couple of years. And then I went, started my contracting business.

**SS: Oh, right. And how did you learn those skills?**

GW: I learned just by getting books and going to a library and reading a lot. And then eventually, when I started getting into it, I went to school and got my electrical license.

**SS: Okay. Now at that time, it was hard for women to get into the –**

GW: Yeah. At that time, they were throwing coffee in women's faces. They would send women for coffee. It happened to a friend of mine, and when she came back to the construction site, the foreman threw the coffee in her face and said, I wanted two sugars. So it was a very hostile environment for women at that point.

**SS: So how did you get in?**

GW: Well, I just worked for a contractor for a while. But eventually I branched off and did my own thing.

**SS: Okay. Now, who came out first, you or your brother? Who came out first, you or your brother?**

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GW: Who came out first; my brother.

**SS: And how did the family take it?**

GW: My parents never, my parents never, it's, I really don't have a hard story on that, because they kind of accepted it. My mother had gay friends and beatniks in and out of the house, and poets. I would wake up; there'd be a poet on the couch. I mean, it was a very New York kind of dysfunctional kind of, not a Leave It To Beaver kind of we'll all eat together and say grace. It didn't happen. It was like, everybody was kind of doing their own thing, and it was, you know; it was okay.

**SS: Did she write poetry?**

GW: My mother?

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: Yeah. And my mother sings. My mother did a lot of, has a great voice. Well, now she sings with the choir at her church, but she has a really great – she grew up singing. A very musical environment.

**SS: So did your brother come out to the family? Or were you guys out to each other first?**

GW: No.

**SS: What was his name?**

GW: His name was Edward, but he changed his name, because he did theater, to Easton.

**SS: Um hm. Easton Wells?**

GW: Yeah. And he – I don't really know the conversation took place. It was just like, it just kind of naturally kind of happened. He had a girlfriend in his teens. But it was just like a girlfriend. It wasn't really like a romantic kind of connection. They would hang out all the time. But – it just kind of happened. I mean, there wasn't a conversation, like, I'm gay. He was just like, yeah, this is, this is it, this is, it kind of unraveled.

**SS: Did it go the same way with you, or did you have to come out to them?**

GW: I just started hanging out with him and going to gay clubs together. And I remember, there was Bonnie and Clyde's was on one side of the street, and there was a gay male disco on the other. So we would do, like, an hour here dancing. Then we would dance across the street into his bar for an hour. It was sort of like we'd bounce

back and forth. It was the funniest thing. But eventually – I don't know if it was a conversation. It was just sort of a natural kind of thing. My mother would look out the window — we lived on a play street in New York — and he'd be the Double Dutch champion, and I was the stickball champion of the block. And she would just, like, where did I go wrong? Because like, it was like, it was what it was. I was playing stickball and he was playing Double Dutch.

**SS: So I remember Bonnie and Clyde's. Can you describe the scene there a little bit, for people now?**

GW: Well, you'd go downstairs, and it was kind of like – a dark kind of bar. And off to your right there was like a pool table. And then you go in the back. There was like a dance floor. And then there was an upstairs, where there was a piano bar kind of scene going on up there. It was a nice, it was a gay bar, a women's bar.

**SS: But I remember, downstairs was mostly black and Latin, and upstairs was mostly white. Is that a false memory?**

GW: No, that's true. It kind of went into that. It wasn't always like that. But that was how it ended up, like that.

**SS: Because there was that part on the west side of Washington Square Park where the black dykes used to hang out all the time.**

GW: Right, right.

**SS: And that was like overflow back and forth to Clyde's, actually.**

GW: Um hm, um hm, um hm.

**SS: Yeah. So that was your bar?**

GW: It was, yeah, we used to go there. Yeah. For a time.

**SS: So had you ever been involved in an organization before you got into AIDS, a gay organization?**

GW: Not really. Not really. The reason I got involved with – well, I don't know if you want to go into this –

**SS: Yeah, yeah.**

GW: But the reason I got involved at ACT UP is my brother was in the hospital. And I went to visit him, and his tray was being left outside his room, at that point. This is early '80s. And a friend of mine, and I was outraged about that. And a friend of mine, and I said, well, what do I do with this? I wasn't getting anywhere in the hospital. People were just like, they just didn't want to talk about it. No. This is, the nurses were too petrified to bring the tray in to him.

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So a friend of mine who was in, she was kind of active in left politics, leftist kind of thing, and she said, there's a guy named Larry Kramer who wants to start this group called ACT UP, and they're meeting. And this was the beginning of ACT UP. And I called Larry. She gave me his number; she knew Larry. And I called him, and I said, Larry, what do you do with this anger? I'm really pissed off. What do I have to do, because they're leaving his tray outside his room? It was just so unfair.

And Larry said, well, we're meeting at the Center tomorrow night. It was the night before, or something, or two nights. And then I went to the meeting, and there was only a handful of people there. It was just the beginning.

**SS: Who was your friend who made the connection?**

GW: Her name is Michelle.

**SS: So she never joined ACT UP.**

GW: No.

**SS: Okay.**

GW: No, that wasn't her –

**SS: That wasn't her thing.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: So what hospital was your brother in?**

GW: At the time, he was in Cabrini Hospital.

**SS: So what was the scene at that – this is like, what, eighty–**

GW: Well the beginning, it was the very beginning –

**SS: So it's like '87?**

GW: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: What was it like for your brother? What kind of treatments did he have, and what kind of support did he have?**

GW: Well, my brother wasn't really a group person; that wasn't really his thing. It's not for everybody. And I remember one day I talked him into going to a gay male support group, people with AIDS. I thought it would help him. Because his attitude was, I've been handed a death sentence; there's nothing that can be done. Like he just, he wasn't going to fight. And it was like, no, you should go to the group. I'll wait for you outside. And go to the group.

So I went with him to the group, and I waited out in the waiting room. My brother and I were real close. So I waited for him in the waiting room, and then he came out, and he says, don't you ever make me go to a support group again. I don't want to sit around the fuckin' room talking about dying with a bunch of other people talking about

dying. Let's go to the bar. I want a drink. I'm going to go have a beer. This is ridiculous.

And so he never really reached out for support. He just wasn't, that wasn't his thing.

**SS: And how did your parents react?**

GW: Well – well, when I found out that he had AIDS, I was working a job. I was up on Park Avenue, in the 70s. I had a crew working. We were renovating an apartment up there. And I got the call; what his T-count was and that he was HIV-positive. So I just shut the job down. I, I couldn't work that day, sent everybody home. People were delighted; they were all going home with pay. And I went to the church. There was a church right across the street. And I just sat there, and I cried for like an hour. Because I knew, I knew what that meant. I knew I had to brace myself, because he was going to die, and I had to deal with that.

And I called my parents. And – they were kind of in shock. My parents are both divorced and remarried. But when I called them, they were both, like, yeah? I don't think, I really think they were in shock when I first gave them the me–

I knew what the reality was, because I'd been in the gay community, I've lost friends, I've seen what it was doing, and I knew there was no cure, so.

So I had to deal with it. I had to deal with it that day. And I went out to my mom's the next day, and I said, see, you have to understand what the reality of this is. He's going to need us; he's going to, because he's not a group person. So he's going to need us to kind of rally around him.

So my parents stepped up to the plate, so they both were there for him. And we were all there for him. So that was his group. He didn't, that was his support group. It was right there.

So it was good. I mean, ACT UP was like, right on time. Because this is when all this shit was starting to happen, all this funny stuff, that was happening. Leaving the, not finding things, leaving the, so the battle needed to happen. But it was just, it was ideal that Larry decided to get it going.

**SS: So when you went to that first meeting, had you been to the Center before?**

GW: No. No.

**SS: So what was –**

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GW: I was totally – I was kind of shy; and totally not into the whole thing, the whole group thing, myself. So when I got there, something happened, something changed in me. You know, that happens when you, I think – I think when you're fighting for a member of your family or for a loved one, it changes, who you are, in a way.

**SS: Were you hoping that by being in ACT UP, you could get information about treatment for your brother?**

GW: Yeah. Yeah.

**SS: And did you?**

GW: Yes.

**SS: Do you remember what?**

GW: You know, I don't remember everything. But I know there was a lot of different, I was up and up on everything. So I was reading a lot about everything. So

when I spoke to his doctor, when I spoke to other people, I knew, well, why don't you try this, or why don't you try that? I've heard this might be good; I heard that might be good. Like that. So yeah, it was, I mean, that's not the reason why I got involved, but I could see that that was one of the pluses about being in the group.

**SS: So how did you first plug in, who were the first people that you met, and how did you first plug in?**

GW: Vito Russo, Larry, Maxine Wolfe; the whole group.

**SS: Do you remember did you join a committee, or did you just go on Monday nights? How did you find your place?**

GW: Well, I went on Monday nights, for sure, religiously. I went every Monday night. I was involved in, I did a little – I actually took, because I knew a little bit about the law, I kind of applied that. Like I would teach people about how to bring police up on charges, how to get shield numbers. I'm the one that brought that into the group; get their shield number; document everything; write it down. So I was kind of involved in that kind of stuff.

**SS: But how would you tell people that?**

GW: Well, there was like little groups that were to teach people how to get arrested, you know. So I was kind of involved with Amy and some other people –

**SS: Amy Bauer, yeah.**

GW: – yeah. Kind of involved in that part. You know, how to be a marshal, how to be involved, how to work the process. How not to get arrested, and how to get arrested and keep yourself safe when you see someone else getting arrested. How

to get out a pad and pen and document what's going on, and what time it took place, where it took place, to document the shield numbers, the officer's name.

**SS: So what is the best way to not get arrested?**

GW: To fight it. To fight, because then they have you up on assault. You don't fight it; you just, you can just like hang, just not move, like that. But you can't fight. Basically, you don't want to get into a physical thing with the officer, because then you're, it's, the charge changes. It's not, you're not doing civil disobedience, you're doing something else.

**SS: Why did people need to get arrested?**

GW: Because the—, well, the reason to get arrested is to bring attention to something. You want to bring attention to it. So – and to say it's important enough that I'm going to take this chance, of putting myself in this position. It seems that people will stop and look and listen a little bit.

**SS: And did you get arrested?**

GW: Yes.

**SS: What was your first arrest?**

GW: I was arrested, like, 19 times.

**SS: {LAUGHS}**

GW: {LAUGHS} So. I was arrested a lot. On Wall Street, was the first one. Wall Street. Oh, god, so many different times. So many different arrests.

**SS: What was that like for you, to really be, now you're really on the other side now. Once they're arresting you, I mean – what did you feel about that?**

GW: I didn't feel like I was going to be hurt by anybody. I didn't feel that. Sometimes I was a little manhandled, being bounced into the wagon or something. There would be a little hostility going on, a little tight on the wrists. And I knew how that all worked. But when I was getting arrested, I wasn't disrespecting the cops. Because it wasn't an anti-cop thing for me. That's not what it was. It was to bring attention to the problems.

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So I would always address, the – yes, officer. Okay. I'm moving. So it was never, I'm angry, and fuck you, you're a cop. That's not where I was coming from. It was never an anti-cop thing. It was always, this is an important issue that we're putting out there, and this is what we're doing. This is civil disobedience, which as Americans, we're allowed to do.

**SS: So for something like Wall Street, did you decide in advance you were going to get arrested? Or did it just happen?**

GW: No, I decided in advance. When I was arrested in St. Patrick's Cathedral, it just happened. Because I had a lot of conflict with that. My mother was teaching religious instructions, and I was raised a Catholic, and I had a lot of mixed feelings about, that was a hard one. But I did, I got arrested. But it was a hard one for me to do.

**SS: Okay, let's talk about that action.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Were you one of the people who organized it?**

GW: I was working on it, yeah. But I decided I wasn't going to get arrested. And at the last minute, I was in the church. And it was so interesting, because

I'm looking up in the altar, and I'm seeing that, as a woman and as a gay woman, I wasn't represented up there. So it brought up stuff for me I didn't even know was lingering in the nooks and crannies of my brain and my soul. I'm sitting there and I'm saying, I'm not even – and they were actively lobbying against handing out safe sex information. So they became my enemy. That wasn't my church, on some level. Even though I'm a Catholic, and it is my church. So I had a lot of mixed feelings about it. My mother was teaching religious instructions. And it was a rough one for me. And I'm looking around, and I see all these cops, and they're like, and you know they're all like ex-altar boys. And it's like I had a lot of flashbacks. And it was like this is one of the most important demonstrations that we're ever going to do. So yeah, so I decided to get arrested, and started chanting in the church; Silence equals death. And I got arrested.

And my mother saw it on *Eyewitness News*; me being really radical, with my black beret on, screaming "Silence equals death" in St. Patrick's Cathedral. And she didn't talk to me for about two weeks. It was very painful. She said, I can't talk. Every channel I turned on, you were screaming in church, and I don't know how to deal with this. She was honest. And then, two weeks later, she bought me a little Waterford crystal cathedral of St. Patrick's Cathedral. And she says, I understand why you did it. So it was a rough one. It was a rough one to be involved in.

**SS: Can you tell us a little bit about what was the chain of events inside the church? How did you get in, and what happened?**

GW: We all just kind of went in, on our own. And – you could, oh my g-, the tension; you can cut it, I mean, you know – the gorilla was in the room. I mean, everybody knew. You could feel it; you could feel it in the church. It was like, oh my

god, this is, this something, this is – I knew, out of all the protests and demos and everything we've, this was going to be – the heaviest. It was – and –

**SS: How did it start?**

GW: People started chanting "Silence equals death," and – it was, and the cops were extra rough on that one. Because you could see, you could see the ex–altar boys coming out. They were extra brutal on protecting their church. It took it into a whole other level.

But we got a lot of press behind it, a lot of reaction, good and bad and ugly; even from within our own community. I mean, there wasn't, I remember Andy Humm saying to me, do we really need to do that, when we were talking privately afterwards. And I said, we really needed, yeah, we really did need to do it. And he said, well, don't you feel upset about it? And I said, no; the only thing I'm upset about is that I didn't do it sooner, and that I wasn't there sooner. Because there were a lot of people that didn't know how to deal with it – going into a church, house of worship, whether it's Jewish or Catholic or whatever religion.

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**SS: But what did you actually do? What did you, Gerri, actually do?**

**You were yelling?**

GW: Silence equals death, yeah.

**SS: Did you stand on the pews, or lie down in the aisle?**

GW: No, I was in the aisle, going up the aisle, saying, Silence equals death, and then the cops grabbed, one cop on each arm grabbing me out of there. And I kept, I kept chanting until I left the church.

And everybody did their own thing. And then we had a press conference the next day, which everybody was – where they asked me that same question: Do we regret going into the church? And I said, no.

**SS: Now you were a very respected, you were in leadership in ACT UP. I mean, you were a visible, respected person.**

GW: I was a big mouth. I went from being a shy, to being a big mouth. And I don't know how that happened, where that turn came. But I became – it's so funny, because once you learn – that you do have a voice. I grew up in New York; I grew up fist fighting on the streets. So I knew on that level I can fend for myself, if someone beat me up or something. But politically, once you know you can, you do have a voice, and you can change things, even if it's only a little bit, that you can do that. And then you couldn't shut me up. Then I was always blabbering or talking. I don't know.

**SS: Well, let's go back to the early days; that first meeting that you went to. Do you remember anything about it?**

GW: I remember, everybody was excited. It was a small group of people. Everybody wa-, people were excited and pissed off at the same time. It's like – and everybody had ideas. Can't we do this, can't we do that? Larry had some great ideas, because Larry has been in the middle of it, with the Gay Men's Health Crisis. And so he seemed really frustrated by the whole thing, and had some clever ideas of how we had to – get in touch with the press and it's about media, it's bringing attention to it, and like that.

**SS: So were you on any committees? Or were you just doing the civil disobedience training?**

GW: It was mostly doing civil disobedience stuff, mostly.

**SS: Can you describe for us what a typical training would have been like?**

GW: It would be just talking about the penal codes and the law. To be a marshal, marshal training was also involved with that. And to actually do role-playing. Suppose I'm a cop and I arrest you. What do you do, how do you act? It was just answering a lot of questions. A lot of people were really nervous about getting arrested. So it was just really calm everybody down. As long as you know the law, as long as you know what you can do and what you can't do, you're in pretty good – and we had lots of our own lawyers. So when you get arrested, they can't do this. I was strip-searched; I was involved in the strip-search. So they can't do that, they can't do this. But if they do this, this is what you need to do.

**SS: What happened with the strip-search? What was the setup?**

GW: A bunch of us were arrested and a bunch of us were illegally strip-searched.

**SS: What were you arrested for? Do you remember?**

GW: Gee, I don't remember. They all kind of blur. But yeah, we were illegally strip-searched. And I went on *Good Morning America* to talk about it. Which was so funny, because a limousine picked me up at my house in the morn-, my neighbors are hanging out the window, like, what's going on? And yeah, they wanted to know. And Mayor Koch, at the time, he apologized to us for it happening, for the illegal strip-search.

**SS: Why do you think it happened?**

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GW: I don't know, I think somewhere along the line a lieutenant or someone like that was probably homophobic. And they say, let's scare these queers, I'm tired of them coming in and clogging up our jails. Let's scare them a little bit. And they probably been doing it for a long time, to just people who just didn't know the law and didn't know they can't do that. So it's probably a little bit of both.

**SS: Okay, I just want to get back to the nonviolence training, because that's a really important part of ACT UP's philosophy.**

GW: Right.

**SS: I believe it's true that ACT UP never committed an act of violence. Is that true?**

GW: Uh huh. Yeah.

**SS: And were people in ACT UP ever victims of police violence?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Can you tell us about that?**

GW: Well, they were just excessive force. Some cops are, were homophobic. And they couldn't keep that home. They would take it to work with them. And that's where it's a problem, because you're arresting people, you're dealing with all kinds of people. And a lot of people were, they hit them with the baton; they'd kick, accidentally trip them. It's just like rough, kind of rough play.

Part of what came out of ACT UP, which was, because I was on the Mayor's Police Council; and part of what came out of that is that we had, they had to have training, more training. And once a month I would go and, on the Police Council, and Marjorie Hill and Matt Foreman, and a number of other activists from the

community. And the chief, Johnson, he would sit on one end of the table and I would sit on the other one, and the other end of the table. And we would lock horns constantly.

And I would say, I would bring cases to him. This was a case where a gay person was, the officer used excessive force, and it's all documented, we have pictures of it, there's witnesses.

And he would say, not my officers.

And I would say, are you kidding?

And he would get really red.

And he was like, and I would say, why can't you just admit that there's some bad apples in the force, and just, train, get people sensitivity training? And I did sensitivity training at some of the local precincts. And he would never admit a cop on the force would use excessive force. That always blew my mind. That always, like, oh my god. If you're the one, this is the person that's teaching the other people on the force, and you won't even admit that there's a problem.

**SS: What's so interesting is that, I mean, in a sense, you're training, you and Amy were training civilians in nonviolence.**

GW: Right.

**SS: And how many people do you think you trained over the years?**

GW: Oh, a lot. Lots of people. Yeah. Hundreds, hundreds.

**SS: Hundreds.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: And none of those people ever committed an act of violence.**

GW: Right, right.

**SS: Why?**

GW: I don't know. I don't know. It's not about violence. It's about just people being treated like human beings. It's really – the gay community has dealt with so much crap. And the fact that we're nonviolent, in the whole, it says a lot about us as a group of people.

**SS: Now what about people with AIDS, when they got arrested?**

**What was your special protocol for that?**

GW: It was the same for everybody, to just be careful. Make sure when you get arrested that other people know if you need medications and stuff like that. That was important, getting your medications to you. Cops didn't, they used to put on their rubber gloves and stuff and make people feel awful when they were arresting them, especially people with AIDS, HIV. That's, one of the things, when I went into the precinct – I did that with the Anti-Violence Project, and I would go into local precincts and do sensitivity training with the cops. And basically, I would say to them, say whatever you want, this is all off the record. You could say whatever you want. And they would go off. They would say, well, you guys went into our church. That always came up; that was always one of the first things that come up. You guys went into our church. And I said, well, that's, it's my church, too. It's not just your church. It's my church. And it's sort of like, love it or leave it. Yeah, but if I love it, why do I have to leave it if there's problems? You stay and you fix it.

But they would say awful things. I never knew any dykes before, and blah blah blah. And usually, by the end of each, we would have these workshops. By the end of it, there would always be three or four cops that would come over to me and say, thank

you. I never knew any gay people before, or who were openly gay. And I appreciate you coming and talking to us. Because they had a lot of questions. And a lot of them, quite frankly, were really silly questions, but –

**SS: Like what?**

GW: Just misconceptions, just things that just didn't make sense. These officers were, if they had sensitivity training, a lot of this wouldn't be going on. So it comes from the top; it comes from Chief Johnson or whoever else is in charge at the time. If they're not telling, if they're not passing this down, then it doesn't happen.

**SS: But when you were on the force, could people be kicked out for being gay?**

GW: No, but you would be, it would be, you'd be given the worst assignments, you'd be, it's sort of like don't ask, don't tell. And also, when I would do the workshops, there would always be one or two cops that you knew were gay. And they would come over and say, I'm so glad you came. Because that's when the cops, they were peeing in your locker. If they thought you were gay, they would do all kinds of stuff. So they had it going on right with their fellow officers.

**SS: Now do you think that this interaction between people like you and the Police Department helped organizations like GOAL [Gay Officers Action League] move forward? Or do you –**

GW: It couldn't hurt. Because even if you're reaching three or four in each one, that three or four, maybe if they see one using excessive force, they would be the one that would grab their arm and say, hold it. So, yeah, I think it does help.

**SS: I mean, I have many, many memories of you being the person talking to the white shirts –**

GW: Right.

**SS: – at the demos.**

GW: Right.

**SS: And you knew everybody.**

GW: Right.

**SS: And I remember Vanessa Farrow –**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: – who was the cops' liaison to the gay community –**

GW: Right, right.

**SS: Now what was your relationship with her, and how was that all negotiated? Because people were not that confident in her at the time, and –**

GW: We, we got along just fine. She was on the Police Council also. She was fine. The thing is, I was talking to the white shirts because I didn't want people getting hurt, and I wanted them to have, to have someone they could communicate with. Because when you don't communicate, that's when someone gets popped over the head. Because when you're in that, Silence equals death, and people are screaming and yelling, and cops get uptight, too. So you're uptight, they're uptight, you know what I mean? And no one's talking to anybody. So that's when people, that's when someone gets kicked, or they put the, someone gets hurt. So it was good to communicate. Because I understood where they were coming from, because I'd been there.

**SS: Right.**

GW: And I also knew where we were coming from. So that was a good role for me to play.

**SS: But how was it for the liaison? Because that was a tricky position.**

GW: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: Yeah, it was. And a lot of people didn't like her, because she was from the other side. But she was still a gay woman. And politically, she was just doing her job. And politically, she understood and respected where we were coming from. And that's always a plus.

**SS: Why do you think there was so much animosity from gay people towards the police?**

GW: Because there's a lot of homophobia coming from cops. When you were at an ACT UP demo, all you had to do was look at some cops' faces. They were disgusted. Some of them looked like they were almost going to puke, for a number of reasons. So there were a lot of bad feelings. And it was justified. A lot of the cops had been abusive towards gay people. But this is what we had to work with. So to me, it was like, this is it. Either you're going to make matters worse, or you're going to work on trying to make it a little, little better.

**SS: Okay. Now, ACT UP basically took over your life.**

GW: Yeah, it did. It did.

**SS: I mean, what happened to the rest of your life?**

GW: It did, it did take over my life. It was a lot of work, a lot of stuff.

Well, my brother died in the middle of all of that. And –

**SS: And were people in ACT UP supportive of you and your brother –**

Tape I  
00:40:00

GW: Yeah, yeah. And I remember, the last day of his wake was a Monday night; it was an ACT UP meeting. And after the wake, I went over and sat in an ACT UP meeting. I didn't know where else to go. I was so, I was torn. But it made me feel better to get into an ACT UP meeting after. The whole family went over somewhere to eat or something. I said, no, I'll catch up with you. And I wanted to just go and feel that energy, that ACT UP energy. I can't explain it, but it made me feel better to be there. It was sort of like, it was sort of like my activist family. So.

So after ACT UP, well, I met Bridget in ACT UP. And we were together, well, for 10 years. So I actually went and had a little bit of a life, other than caring for my brother and activism and working. I got more involved with Bridget and less involved with ACT UP, at that point.

**SS: What was the –**

**James Wentzy: We have to stop.**

**SS: Oh, we have to change tapes? Okay.**

Tape II  
00:00:00

**SS: So how did you first make friends in ACT UP? Who were your first friends?**

GW: Oh, Maxine Wolfe, Neil Broome, Maria [Maggenti]. The women, a lot of the women, started hanging out. More women started coming in. Maxine was kind of organizing the women to have dinners and kind of like that. Illith [Rosenblum]. Maxine. Neil. Put Neil in the women's caucus.

**SS: Now didn't you and Neil do some big project together, right?**

GW: Yes, we did the St. Vincent's Hospital thing. We were at an ACT UP meeting, and we were hearing about some horror stories coming out of St. Vincent's Hospital.

**SS: Like what?**

GW: Just about like people's lovers dying or very sick, and they're not letting in their lovers to see them; security guards were being abusive towards gay people getting in there. So there was a lot, we were hearing a lot of ugly stories coming out of St. Vincent's. And somebody said, well, why don't we go over there? This was in the middle of a meeting: Why don't we go over there and do the thing, and do like a little protest outside the hospital?

And some guy stood up and said, oh no, it's not a good thing to do; it's a waste of time. And I stood; I was pissed off at that point. I said, you know what? St. Vincent's is a business. Period. And anytime you're going to give bad press to a business, it's not a good thing. They'll hear us if we go over there.

And we did. We all marched over there. And we did a march. And then we did it again the next Monday.

**SS: On the street, in front of the hospital?**

GW: Yeah, yeah. And then we went into, we actually went into the Emergency Room. And that caused, that was a big, pretty big protest. That caused a lot of mixed feelings, I think, from the community, because I got calls. You know, it was great, and I got calls from other people: It's a hospital. Heh heh. It's St. Vincent's Hospital. That's the Cardinal's baby. So there were a lot of mixed feelings about that. It's like going after the church again.

But it ended up being where Neil and I, we actually set up meetings, and we met with Sister Mary Sweeney and the directors of the hospitals, all the big shots. And we would meet with them every couple of weeks, and we worked on changing the rules at St. Vincent's Hospital to where people, their lovers can get in and see them and had more say. And people were treated with more respect in the hospital.

So that was a big one. That was one we worked on for months, going back and there was a little battle, little, wording, because you're dealing with the Catholic Church. This was not right and this was. But we got what we wanted, and we worked hard on that. And it went on and on, for about seven months.

I remember that. And I remember writing a letter to everybody at ACT UP, saying, this is what we got. And I listed – simple letter – this is what we got out of it. It was a lot of meetings. And I ended it by saying, if you settle for crumbs, you get crumbs. And I really feel that way. So it was good. It was a good –

**SS: So you did a lot of direct negotiation with Catholics.**

GW: Yeah, with the Catholics {LAUGHING}.

**SS: No, seriously.**

GW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**SS: And what were some of the things that you did that made it work?**

GW: I understood; I understand the Catholic religion. I grew up with it. My mother was going to become a nun. That's how Catholic. She was Irish Catholic. She was the first one to jump the wall in convent school and decided that it wasn't for her. She jumped the wall. She ran away and came to America, and then she married my father, who is a Frenchman. So then it really blew it out of the water. But I understand, I

understand respect for the religion. And I understand that we're all conditioned to believe, certain things, and that's how we're raised. And you have to be able to respectfully disagree. And that's always been at the root of my negotiating, you know. Even when I, I had lunch with Dinkins twice at Gracie Mansion. And him and I used to go at it. I debated with him publicly on television once. But it was always, respectfully disagreed. I wasn't, I had no venom. I didn't hate any of these people; I just disagreed with them. And I think that's important when you're negotiating.

**SS: What were you arguing with Dinkins about?**

GW: Just different things that politically he did. And him and I ended up becoming pretty good friends. When I got sick, and ended up in the hospital, he called me in the hospital. And it kind of blew me away. He said, it's Dave Dinkins. And I said, oh, come on, stop kidding around. I thought it was my friend Neil – {LAUGHS}

**SS: {LAUGHS}**

GW: – pulling my leg. And he said, no, this is Dave Dinkins. And he said, I just wanted to tell you, we're all pushing for you. This is after I had a stroke. And we're all praying for you. And it was a nice thing.

**SS: That's good. Let's talk about Maria and the Cosmo demo.**

GW: Oh, okay. The Cosmo demo.

**SS: Can you set it up a little bit, so people know –**

GW: Well, there was a doctor, at *Cosmopolitan* magazine, who said that – what did he say? – that women can't catch AIDS. That's what it was; that women don't catch AIDS. And he really believed it. So we all kind of, the women's caucus kind of went crazy. This is right up our alley. This is one of the reasons why we organized as

women; one of the reasons was to address this kind of stuff coming up. And it came up, and we had a big protest, on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, in front of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

And we were all protesting, and signs and marching and stuff. And I saw a cop grab Maxine Wolfe. And I got into it with the cop. I mean, I tried to disengage them locking horns. And I got arrested. They threw me in the wagon. And it was a really, it was a very bad time in my life, because my brother was very sick in the hospital. And I only took time out to go do the protest, because I was by his bed. So it was like, okay, we'll take a protest break. And he wanted me to. I had asked him, and he said, no, go. He was very proud of the fact that I was doing, ACT UPing. And so we went out. And they threw me in the paddy wagon. And it was like, oh my god, I can't be arrested. I have to get back to the hospital.

And the women went crazy. Maria Maggenti climbed on the hood of the, of the truck. I couldn't believe it. I was in there, and I just couldn't believe it. And she climbed, and then said, you're not taking her! You're not taking this truck anywhere! And all the women surrounded, and men, surrounded the truck, and were shaking the paddy, and I'm in the paddy, shaking it, saying, let Gerri go, let Gerri go! And it was, it was a moment. It was pretty fantastic.

Let Gerri go! And they were shaking the wagon. And all the officers are gathering. And you could see them, outside, the lieutenant and the captain. And oh my god, what are we, we're going to have a riot on our hands! And they let me go.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

GW: They let me go. But this was on the news. This was, like, a media event. When I went back to the hospital, my brother was very fragile, and just kind of sat

up in his bed, and he saw it on the news. And he said, that's my sister over there. So. It was a pretty great thing.

**SS: What was the function of the Women's Caucus?**

GW: It was to address women's kind of stuff. But also to feel our power within the group of ACT UP, our strength within the group of ACT UP, as women. You know what I mean? So we would work on, besides doing general ACT UP stuff, we would work on our own stuff, too, in addition.

**SS: But why was it necessary? Was ACT UP ignoring women's issues?**

Tape II  
00:10:00

GW: Somewhat, yeah. Becau-, I really don't feel like it was like an intentional kind of thing. But it was like, most of the core of ACT UP were dying, and they were gay men. That was the reality of it. This was just the beginning of the women and AIDS kind of thing. But it was mostly, so it was, I don't know, I wouldn't say purposely ignoring it. But it wasn't a priority. And it should, it had to be made a priority, because it was happening; it was rearing its ugly head, you know what I mean? So it was happening.

**SS: Now do you think there was sexism in ACT UP?**

GW: There was a little sexism. There's sexism everywhere.

**SS: Right.**

GW: You know, I don't think – I think gay men are more aware of it, of sexism, because of just dealing with their own stuff. But it's there.

**SS: So when the Women's Caucus would propose something, how was it responded to?**

GW: There was always a few fans that would support us. And that helped. But there would be a little more resistance.

**SS: Who was in the Women's Caucus?**

GW: Oh, geez. Maxine, Illith. Maria Maggenti. Jean –

**SS: Carlomusto.**

GW: Yeah. Did you talk to her?

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: Oh, she's great.

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: She was in it. I don't know, a lot of women.

**SS: Now what about when the women with AIDS started to come to ACT UP, out of Bedford Hills, and other women that came in? Did you work with them?**

GW: No. I was kind of, I got sick at that point. It was around that time. I had a stroke, so I was in the hospital, and that kind of knocked me out for a while.

**SS: What year was that?**

GW: Oh, what was that, '89?

**SS: Okay.**

GW: Maybe.

**SS: Right. Okay. So I wanted to ask you just a little bit more about the social structure.**

GW: Okay.

**SS: I know there were the dyke dinners at Maxine's house –**

GW: Right.

**SS: – so the women got to know each other more.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Who did you hang with, in a more social way, not just doing projects with?**

GW: Who did I hang with? Bridget; Bridget a lot; and Neil.

**SS: How did you guys meet?**

GW: Frank Smithson; Heidi [Dorow] –

**SS: And what kind of things would you – in your social group, in your friend clique inside ACT UP, what kind of things would you guys do?**

GW: Go to movies; go to dinner; work on things. We both worked on the Pink Panther stuff. That's an agency that I helped form, Pink Panthers.

**SS: Yeah, why did the Pink Panthers get started?**

GW: Because there was a lot of gay bashing; gay bashings were going up, big-time. So Neil, myself, and a few other people decided to start, like, a gay Guardian Angels, basically. And we set up a table on Christopher Street. We had groups of five, six, seven, 10 people, depending on how many people showed up, would go out. Maybe two or three groups. And we all had walkie talkies. And I was on the base. And people would go out.

One night there was a guy being gay-bashed on Sheridan Square. And we got a call from one of the groups. Said, oh my god, someone's being gay-bashed up here. And it was, and I remember seeing Neil, who was, their group was down by the river. And I called, all groups, go to Sheridan Square. Just to scare these people off. And Neil,

I've never seen Neil run so fast. It was like, all you saw was these big clunky shoes and his hair flying in the air. But the intensity of all these gay guys, and women, running up Christopher Street. And it was like we were defending our turf. It was like – and we were also committed to nonviolence, unless someone is attacking us. But it was an amazing group.

**SS: And what was your uniform? You had a cute uniform.**

GW: We had, yeah, I still have some of those T-shirts. I saved all my ACT UP T-shirts. And this one's a black one with the pink triangle.

**SS: And little berets, right?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Were they pink or black? I can't remember.**

GW: They were black.

**SS: Black.**

GW: Black, yeah.

**SS: Pink Panther.**

GW: Yeah –

**SS: So how did the police feel –?**

GW: And then "Pink Panther" was written in English and then Chinese and Spanish, in the back.

**SS: How did the police, and it was like a vigilante type of organization. How did the police feel about it?**

GW: Well, the police were working with us on this, because they knew we were going to do it, one way or the other. So either they're going to work with us or not

work with us. And they wanted to have some kind of, input into the whole thing. So the police were, they pretty much knew who we were, from the community. And they knew we were committed to nonviolence. And also, MGM tried to sue me, saying the Pink Panther name. It was like the funniest thing. And I was on Entertainment Tonight being interviewed. And it's like, did you steal, and I said, no. I said, why would we steal from the Pink Panther movie? This was about the Gray Panthers and the Black Panthers. We were like a group of people empowered within the community. And why would we name ourselves after a cartoon character? This is serious stuff.

But yeah. But that was great! Because that lawsuit generated so much conversation about gay bashing, and really got to talk about. Like Neil would say, you're such a media hog. Yeah, I am a media hog. If I know. Because people are listening. If you're going to be talking about it, if you're going to have, the airwaves, let's talk about some real stuff. Not Paris Hilton and her dog. Let's talk about gay bashing, and why people do it, and how can you prevent it from happening.

**SS: So how many gay-bashing cases did you guys get involved in?**

GW: There were three that actually, that we – I think we were more of a deterrent. Because a lot of gay bashers are sort of chickens. So they're not going to come in. Usually they've drunk enough. Throw a beer bottle out of their car and say, you fuckin' fag, or you dyke. But this was, it was a deterrent. So these guys, oh my god, I'm going to get my ass kicked by, all these queers. So I think it actually, it, I got a thing from Mayor Dinkins; it actually cut gay bashings down in the community, so.

**SS: The thing that was so strange at the time was that they would take place in the gay community, because people would come in from Jersey and Brooklyn to the gay neighborhoods to beat people up, right?**

GW: Mm hmm. Mm hmm

**SS: So that's where you were patrolling, actually.**

GW: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: It was such an odd, it wasn't like you were going out into the outer boroughs, necessarily.**

GW: Right, right. Well, they were coming in. They were having a few drinks. Yeah, a lot of these gay bashers end up being gay. I hate to say it, but a lot of them do. I remember being teased by a girl, and really being treated badly, growing up. And she would see me and cross the street and talk about me; oh, there's a dyke, coming across, walking on the other side. And it used to really make me feel bad. And talk about me behind my back. And then, I met her in Bonnie and Clyde's, years later. She asked me to din-, we actually went out together.

So a lot of the times, when people want to put their energy into bashing people — whether it's verbally or emotionally or physically — it usually because, they're thinking about it.

**SS: Did she apologize?**

GW: Yeah, she did.

**SS: Okay.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: So I wanted to ask you about class inside ACT UP.**

GW: Okay. All right.

**SS: And just what your perceptions were of how that operated.**

GW: Well, I think – I think most of the people at ACT UP are – are bright and pretty hip to the ways of the world. But there's a class system – like I said before, that's going to be in ACT UP and out of ACT UP. That doesn't really change too much.

**SS: But ACT UP had every kind of person, so you had the total spectrum. So there were some of the richest people in the world, right? And then there were people who were just making it, or not making it, and everything in between. And so it's unusual, in an organization, to have the whole class spectrum.**

GW: Right.

**SS: So how did those dynamics play out, from your point of view?**

GW: I think there were a lot of assumptions. And there were a lot of, oh, okay, I get it, now I understand. You could see that happening when it was happening, when there was, like, group discussions about things. There were people who really didn't care; who already had their minds made up about groups of people. And there were other people who were – which I think most of the people were learning from the experience, were learning.

**SS: But do you think that any of the anti-police attitudes were actually kind of from a snobby place, from a class place?**

GW: A small, a small amount, yeah. But I think most of it was just – anti-authority was some of it. And some of it was anti-police. They hate us, so we hate them.

**SS: Because when we interviewed Michael Petrelis –**

GW: Um hm.

**SS: – he said that he felt that when he first came into ACT UP, people welcomed him because he was a street fighter.**

GW: Uh huh.

**SS: But that when it became more about sitting down at the table with the guys from Harvard and the government officials and all that kind of stuff, he got pushed to the side. And he mentioned you as someone who was very kind to him and treated him with respect.**

Tape II  
00:20:00

GW: Oh, really.

**SS: And he saw ACT UP taking a more upper-class orientation over the years, as the organization got more into the system and more in negotiation with real power figures. Do you have any perception of that, or –**

GW: Well, I think a lot of people cashed in on their connections they made in ACT UP. Which is not a bad thing. Because a lot of these people went off and started Housing Works and other organizations that do great work, that are serving populations that no one else wanted to deal with. So I think a lot of people did well. And a lot of people, there was some power-tripping going on. It's sort of like hanging out with, different people, political people. But we're not perfect beings; we're ACT UP member. And we all bring in our own shit. And some of it, all in all, ACT UP was one of the greatest things that ever happened to the gay and AIDS community. ACT UP. I mean, people still talk about it to me. I don't feel like one minute in ACT UP was wasted. I think every minute counted, one way or the other.

**SS: Well, how did it change your life?**

GW: My daughter says to me a lot, Mom, do you have to be such an activist? Like when something happens and I say, oh no, that's not correct. We need to fight this, or we need to do something about this. It changed me because I went from being like a street fighter to fighting other ways, and learning that you can get a lot accomplished by fighting. Fighting's not a bad thing; it's a good thing. You're just trying to correct things that are not right, that are wrong.

**SS: So what was it like to have a relationship inside ACT UP? Did you feel like you were in a fishbowl? Like, that everyone knew your business and what was going on –**

GW: Yeah, yeah. A little bit. A little bit, in a fishbowl. I kind of fought, for a long time. And when I had my stroke, I kind of felt like, okay, that's it; I took a break. And that's when I decided to, we went to Fire Island for a while and did some traveling. And then I decided I was going to have a child. And then my brother got sick, so that put it off for three years, I took care of him. Then I got sick. So then I had to regroup from that. And then, by the time I hit 39, it was like either I'm going to do it now or never. And I went and, I was inseminated.

I mean, part of fighting the gay and lesbian, part of being arrested so many times, and the battles, and all that, I mean, you have to be able to have some of the joyful stuff that comes out of that. There's another side to that. And one of the things, for me, was having a child and in a relationship.

**SS: Do you feel that your health problems were partially a result of all of the exhaustion and round-the-clock work that you were doing?**

GW: I think so. I think being in the middle of the storm, the eye of the storm; I think you get great benefits from it. But I also, you're a human being, you're not a computer. And it's sort of like being kicked in the head, over and over again. And being in the middle of all that hate and anger. It has to, it has to have some effect. I'm not a doctor, but I think it has to. I think you get good stuff and bad stuff from it. But I wouldn't change it for the world. I wouldn't. I think myself and other people, we worked really hard and we accomplished some good stuff. And to me, it was worth it.

**SS: Okay. Now James wanted me to ask you, your father, since he was on the force, if it changed his attitudes.**

GW: My father wasn't a typical cop. My father was known as Jerry. People in the street would say, hey, Jerry, Officer Jerry. My father was always giving money to people who were down on their luck. And he was the one, he was the one who would pull other officers aside and say, no, you can't beat up this guy. He was the peacemaker. My father's an artist, so it's kind of a mixed bag. He worked for the Police Department, but his temperament is more like an artist's.

**SS: Now do you think that ACT UP was infiltrated by police infiltration?**

Tape II  
00:25:00

GW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I've seen cops sitting in ACT UP.

**SS: You knew that, and you knew who – so how would they operate? Would they just sit there and –**

GW: They were so obvious, you know. You know, the white socks, the black bulky shoes. I mean – {LAUGHS} – dark glasses a trench coat. I mean, they were so obvious. They just would stick out.

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

GW: They wanted to know when our next demonstrations were, where we were going. It made them feel like they had the inside scoop on things.

**SS: But do you think that they ever pretended to be activists, but that they were actually –**

GW: I don't know. I don't know.

**SS: Because we used to have that thing at the beginning of every meeting that –**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: – that if you're from the Police Department, you're required by law to identify yourself.**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: And no one ever did.**

GW: Yeah, well.

**SS: So were those guys breaking the law –**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: – when they did that?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Do you think that infiltration affected ACT UP in any way?**

GW: But cops break the law all the time, but they get away with it –

**SS: Right.**

GW: – I believe that there were cops that I can identify, and there were cops that we couldn't identify. I really believe there was an FBI involvement. Especially

when we were going after the big drug companies. They had a lot of pull in this town. A lot of money, a lot of power. And I think, I really believe that they were getting all the information they wanted to get. It was okay; we weren't doing anything, we weren't making bombs. We were committed to nonviolence.

**SS: But do you think that they played any kind of provocateur role?**

**Do you think that they would push ACT UP in certain directions, or create division?**

**Or do you think they just watched?**

GW: I don't know. I don't know if ACT UP could be pushed. I think it was hard to get anything passed on the floor. You know what I mean? You had to really, be a Larry Kramer or a Maxine Wolfe or something.

**SS: So you don't think anyone in leadership was secretly –**

GW: I don't believe that, no.

**SS: Okay.**

GW: No, I don't.

**SS: Okay. Do you guys have any other questions?**

**Jim Hubbard: Yeah, the Freedom Ride.**

**SS: Oh yeah, Neil and the Freedom Ride!**

GW: Oh yeah, the Freedom, that was great!

**SS: Can you explain to our viewers what the Freedom Ride was?**

GW: Well, after the Republican Convention, okay, in New Orleans, a bunch of us went across the South, doing AIDS education. It was Frank and Heidi –

**SS: Frank Smithson –**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: And Heidi Dorow.**

GW: Did you talk to Frank?

**SS: Not yet.**

GW: Oh, he's a great person. Frank and Heidi. Did you talk to Heidi?

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: You did.

**SS: Yeah.**

GW: Okay. Heidi, Neil and myself. And we went from New Orleans, and we went all through the South. Stayed at gay people's houses. One time, we stayed at a hotel. But it was mostly, like, we would meet with different gay communities. And we would have question-and-answer kind of things about ACT UP. And talk about AIDS and ACT UP. It was intense. We dealt with a lot of anger through the South. It was great, as a group. We all worked well together.

**SS: What were conditions for people with AIDS that you observed in the South?**

GW: They were just dealing with a lot of discrimination, more so. We thought we were getting it. They were getting it even more. There were just some pretty pitiful situations.

The night before we went into Arcadia, Florida, we got word that they were going to assassinate us when we got there. And Neil said we should call the cops or something. So I called the FBI. And I said, we got word that we were going to be assassinated when we pulled into Arcadia. Because we were doing something, it was sort of like in a town square, in a park. And – that they were going to shoot us. So the FBI

said, aw, we can't protect you guys. And a little while later they called us back and said, okay, you know. And then they called back and said, no, we really can't protect you. So, it's up to you guys.

So we went in, and we did the open town thing. And meanwhile, trucks are going by with rifles hanging in the back. Saying, we're going to kill you queers. We're going to ki-, and it's like, oh my god.

So we did the whole thing. And Neil was really nervous. He was hanging onto me. He was like, like he was such a Nervous Nellie. Neil, calm down! And then we got into the car. And we left the town. And we were still nervous, because we didn't know what was going to go down.

And this black car pulls alongside of our car. And it's like, oh my god, this is it. Meanwhile, Neil is on the floor, holding on to my leg. He's saying, oh my god, they're going to kill us.

Tape II  
00:30:00

So this car's driving right alongside of us. And then the dark window, you couldn't see through the window. So we said, oh, man, this is it. And the window came down. And it was the FBI. And he says, we're escorting you out of town.

We found out later that in the town bar, they arrested a bunch of people because they were figuring they were mapping out, drawing maps and figuring out how they were going to kill us all in the town square. So they arrested. Someone in the bar called the FBI, called the cops, and the cops called the FBI. That it was a planned thing. They were going to assassinate us. So.

**SS: Who were these people?**

GW: They were just town, local yokels, who didn't want queers coming into their town, talking about AIDS. It was that simple. So we had some party that night, at the hotel. Neil and I were screaming, jumping in and out of the pool. Because it was so stressful, just from the day before, and then, when that car came, and the window went slowly down. It was like, oh my god, a big double-barrel shotgun is going to come out and blow us away.

But yeah.

**SS: How did people receive ACT UP, gay people?**

GW: They loved us. They, they, we were like the heroes. In some towns, they were a little cautious of us. And most of the time, in general, they loved it, because, we were getting to put-, have a voice, which they weren't, really. And then some of the older gay people were a little, we were like the radicals, coming in. And don't tell us how to run our show. So it was like, we had to be careful our approach, how to be sensitive to that. They had their own way, and they worked hard. This is how they, this is how they hang, in the South. So we can't come in like a bunch of young bucks from New York and tell them how to run their show. So you had to be a little sensitive to that. But I think all in all, it was a good trip.

But it wasn't the first time I've had death threats. When I was organizing the Pink Panthers and getting a lot of press, someone would call my house all the time, and say, I'm going to kill you, you dyke.

**SS: Who was it?**

GW: I don't know. They never found out who it was. It was just someone, at random would call, and say, and threaten me like that.

**SS: Now what about, were you in ACT UP when we were at Cooper Union?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: Okay. Because at that time, do you remember Tracy [Morgan] and Heidi were claiming that they were experiencing harassment?**

GW: Yeah.

**SS: What was your take on that? Did you feel that that was an individual, or did you feel that that was some kind of governmental –**

GW: I don't know. I knew I was a few times approached on the street. It was happening a lot. That's one of the reasons why Pink Panthers happened. That came out of that.

**SS: What happened to you on the street?**

GW: Well, there was a couple of times that I was called names. One time, I was in the Peace Corps. And I was in Oklahoma, in some little town. And I was –

**SS: You were in the Peace Corps.**

GW: Yeah, for a little while. I worked in Oklahoma. And this woman I was holding hands with, she – these group of guys came behind us – and attacked me, basically. Went to grab me and her. And – I just turned around. I knocked one of them out. I just, because I'm, I'm a fighter. I learned how to fight. My father taught me how to box when I was a little girl, so I just happened to turn around, and at the same time, landed one, got one, and so they backed off. But that kind of stuff has happened, a couple of times, in the street.

**SS: Anything else, you guys? Okay, so last question.**

GW: Okay.

**SS: And thank you. I appreciate –**

GW: I hope I'm giving you –

**SS: You're telling us a lot of things that nobody else has talked about.**

GW: Oh, really.

**SS: So it's really, really helpful, thank you.**

GW: Oh, okay, good.

**SS: Just looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what would you say was its biggest disappointment?**

GW: Disappointment. Greatest achievement – I think going to Wall Street, and going against the drug companies. Because the prices on drugs, people who were sick were paying a thousand dollars a month for drugs, and some outrageous – and I think that was a great accomplishment. I think going after the Catholic Church was also up there.

Tape II  
00:35:00

Disappointment: I, I don't know if I have a disappointment. I just think so many great things came out of ACT UP. I don't know if there's a greatest disappointment. I think, in fantasy world, I wish it would be forever. But everything has a life, and I think ACT UP gave it a good shot.

**SS: Why do you think it ended?**

GW: Because everything has a life; everything ends eventually. It's just the way it is. I think ACT UP did so many great things. So many great people came out of it. I'm not disappointed about ACT UP.

**SS: Okay. Thank you, Gerri. That's great. Thank you so much.**

GW: Okay. I hope I was helpful.

**SS: You really were, because you did specific things that nobody else did.**

GW: Oh, really?

**SS: And so only you can –**