

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: **Jon Winkleman**

Interview Number: **131**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **May 31, 2012**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Jon Winkleman
May 31, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: Hello, Jon.

JON WINKLEMAN: Hello.

SS: Just tell us your name, today's date, how old you are, and where we are.

JW: {LAUGHS} My name is Jon Winkleman. Today is May 31, 2012.
My age is, hm hm.

SS: No, come on.

JW: Okay; 44; I'll be 45 next month.

SS: Okay. And where we are? We're in my apartment.

JW: You're in Sarah's fabulous East Village apartment.

SS: Right. So, where were you born?

JW: I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1967.

SS: And were your parents native Rhode Islanders?

JW: My parents were. I'm adopted. My parents are from Rhode Island. My birth mom, who I met one year into New York, when I was at the height of all the ACT UP stuff, found me, when I was 24, and we've become good friends. She lives in Pound Ridge, New York, just outside of New York City.

SS: Okay. So were there a lot of Jews in Providence, Rhode Island?

JW: Yes.

SS: Oh, I didn't know that.

JW: No, two of the places, when they came over from Europe during the diaspora, both before and after World War II; most came through Ellis Island, but some went through Providence. It was a very big Jewish community. And the oldest

synagogue in the country is in Newport, Rhode Island.

SS: I had no idea. So your parents were both born there.

JW: Yes.

SS: So it was like home, home, home.

JW: That's – home, home, home. And I'll be there next week.

SS: Okay. Were you raised with, would you say, community-oriented values, or a sense of responsibility?

JW: Yes, yes. My father was a teacher, but he wasn't politically active. My mom was involved with very local issues that she liked. I remember, when I was in elementary school, there was a lot of traffic problems near my school, so she started a petition to get a streetlight put in. And she was successful about that. Recently, she got a fountain, where she's living now, that was near where she grew up, restored and finally working again, after being shut down for years. So she's always been involved with community things, either PTA or elections. And, yes.

SS: And were you involved with the synagogue or any kind of community groups growing up?

JW: I'd say – I'd call myself more an agnostic Jew. We went to temple for awhile. One day my parents realized, oh my god, he's going to be 13 soon. They kind of tried to do Hebrew-school cramming. So the rabbi gave up on teaching me how to read Hebrew; so he just sang haftorah onto cassette tape; wrote it in English phonetics; and had me just learn it that way. But I gave the best performance out of anyone getting bar mitzvah that year, because I was performing, they were reading. So – no – I mean, like, I eat smoked fish, and I consider myself culturally Jewish, but not so much

theologically.

SS: So when did you start to develop a political awareness, would you say?

JW: Before I came out of the closet, I was involved with model legislature, Boys Town, and other electoral, political things like that. By the time I got to high school, I was feeling very alienated from everyone else, and I wasn't able to really see what it was. I was invited to the junior prom when I was a sophomore. And the night of the junior prom, I – had just, all I could see was putting my head in a noose and hanging myself. And I ended up calling a suicide-prevention hotline; talking for a long time; and they talked me out of it. And then after that – I started like this isn't what I want to do, and that started my coming-out process. And shortly after I came out of the closet, I joined a gay youth group, Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth.

SS: So they already existed.

JW: They were three people, when I did it. Now the funny thing is, my uncle was a wrestling coach at Cumberland High School, where Aaron Fricke went. So before I came out, I was hearing through my uncle, all the stuff about Aaron Fricke, who was the first person to sue, and to win, the right to take his boy to the prom.

SS: What became of him? Is he alive?

JW: He's in San Francisco. I connected with him on Facebook like last month, because he's a friend of a friend. It's like, oh my god; I know you. And it turns out he was involved with my gay youth group before I went there. I think he was too old when I was doing it.

SS: So were you aware that he was trying to go to prom? Was that

something –

JW: It was in the news. Especially in Rhode Island, you couldn't miss it. It was in all the news, because it was a local story. My uncle was the wrestling coach, and has just retired now as the wrestling coach, from Cumberland High. So that was all over. And from what my uncle was saying, everyone in the school wanted to kill him doing that.

00:05:00

My mom — god — only after the recent bullying things did I finally tell my mom about my suicidal thoughts at that time. I waited this long because I think she did everything right, but I knew that it would really be upsetting to her. And finally someone just said, you really should talk to her about it. So after the crying, and after that really painful thing, she said that she thought I was gay when I was 10 – which was like, oh god, I was that bad at hiding it?

So she did a lot of things to try to make me – because she said, I didn't know what to do. I graduated high school in '85. So she's like, I didn't know what to do. There was nothing out there. So I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to ask you, because if you weren't, or you felt self-conscious, I didn't want you to feel worse. So she always made a point of pointing out her gay friends and coworkers. When I was in junior high school, she used to get tickets to this musical fair that would have summer tours, and we saw George Burns and George Carlin. And then she took me there to see *Liberace*. So now I could probably say, you made me gay, you took me to see *Liberace* when I was in junior high school.

So she really tried at least to show me that stuff. I saw *La Cage Au Folles* when it was first released. So she tried to expose me to that, because she suspected that I

probably was gay, and wanted to try to signal that it was okay. But at the same time, back then – when I looked at what was going through my head, it's just – there was really no place for gays in the world; and if there's no place for you in the world, do you really want to stay in this world? And that was the thing.

But also, with the Aaron Fricke stuff, he was on Donahue. When he was on Donahue, I remember seeing that there was a gay youth group in New York. I think it was early Hetrick-Martin. I don't know what they called it then. It might have been Hetrick-Martin. But so I thought, okay, there are youth groups out there. So I kind of went searching, and then found Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth; and then through that, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth.

It was also through Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth that I met Steve Gendin and got involved and that was way before ACT UP.

SS: You guys were gay kids together?

JW: No. He was at – well, all my activist stuff with RIGLY, though, before we got off that. So I started coming out my junior year. But then senior year — and this is one of my most proudest activisty things, even though it was really small; just because you're alone when you're doing it — for senior year, the Lettermen's Club always has a talent-show follies. And they had three football jocks hosting it. They always tell the same dumb jokes. Did you hear about the kid from the rival high school who was so dumb they flunked their urine test?

My senior year — did you hear about the Polack who was so dumb he flunked the urine test?

So all the jokes were ethnic jokes; but half the jokes were gay jokes —

and most of them were AIDS jokes. And so they had a preview during assembly. And I'm sitting next to one of the few girls who I told I was gay. And she's seeing me seething. And I just got up, went to the principal's office, started screaming, and they had to apologize the next day. And then I found out recently, in high school that Representative Claudine Schneider came our senior year. And I just found this out from the lesbian who I got reacquainted with who I knew in high school. And I asked her if she would support the gay rights bill, which was Bella Abzug's Equality Act, that would have added gays. And I didn't think anything of it. But Judy was saying that, oh my god; remember how pissed – the teachers were all really pissed off at you, and a lot of the students were like, Go, Winkleman; he got balls.

So yeah, I was kind of political, that. But then I took a year off, between high school and Rhode Island School of Design. And I was doing Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth. Steve Gendin and Christopher Jarvinen were at Brown. And Brown was hosting the National Gay Student Union Conference. And they reached out to us, and just said, since you're all in high school, whatever, no registration, just come. You're welcome; we'll give you free registration; just come. And that was a really incredible event. And then, when I was at RISD the year after – back then, RISD – Rhode Island School of Design – didn't have its own gay union, so they called the Brown group the Brown RISD Gay Student Alliance, and it met at the Brown Union, so I kind of was always hanging out there. And then – I met Steve through that. Then he was an organizer for the 1987 March on Washington. Then he got arrested on Wall Street, and brought back the big pictures, because that first year of ACT UP, he was going back and forth between Brown and New York to finish his studies. And then, in 1987, he and a

bunch of Brown students founded ACT UP Rhode Island, which had a heavy Brown-RISD contingent.

SS: Did you know his HIV status?

00:10:00 JW: At that time, no. No. When I first met him – he also took me to my first nude beach. I had a car, so people liked the fact I could drive them to the beach in the summertime. So we were going to the beach, and he was just talking about Brown, he was talking about wanting to work in an IBM company; be able to hire and fire all these people, this whole like '80s stuff. So it's like, when I knew him then, I didn't really see him – it didn't dawn on me that, oh, he was going to really become the big activist person he became after that. So no, I didn't know. And back then, in the mid-'80s, the whole – there was more reason not to get tested than to get tested, because if you did know you were HIV-positive, there was absolutely nothing you could do about that, or the opportunistic infections. And there was a high rate of suicide depression, and people getting self-destructive if they knew about it. So, I don't know – I don't know when he tested positive. I never asked him that. So no, I didn't know.

SS: So what was it like to come out as a teenager into the epicenter of the plague?

JW: It defines my whole life.

SS: Were you afraid to have sex?

JW: No. You're a horny teenager. No. I – it really defines my whole gay identity. And even though things have changed – my last test, I'm still HIV-negative. But I still identify myself as somebody living with AIDS, because it's just – just been such a huge part of my life. And even though it's over, you just don't – even though the

worst years are over, it's just still so much a part of you. It's part of who you think. It just becomes part of your being.

SS: What was your first exposure to people with AIDS?

JW: Mostly on television. When I was 15, I was working at a summer camp. And I think the first *Time* magazine article that had AIDS as a cover was on. And I think that was the first awareness.

My first meeting of Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, the adult advisor handed me a really good pamphlet on STDs, for gay men; and the part about gonorrhea, crabs, scabies, all this other stuff – is great. But then, at the end, it says: are you at risk for AIDS? And – this was printed immediately after they – it was right after they stopped calling it GRID, so they're calling it AIDS. And they had just, just discovered the virus, but they were still calling it HTLV-3. I wish I saved the copy of this one pamphlet I had. The questions were are you at risk for AIDS?

Do you live in New York, San Francisco, Boston, or Chicago?

No.

Do you go to a bathhouse more than twice a week? Not exaggerating.

Do you do poppers? Do you do drugs more than three times a week? Do you have sex with more than two people a week?

And you're reading this thing. And so it's like, oh, well, gosh, you're not at risk for AIDS. And it's crazy.

In high school, I got a job at a gay-owned diner in Providence. And I was working there on weekends in college, and I worked third shift. And there was this group of gay men who would come in, every week, really late. And as they started to talk to

me, found out they were from New York. And they were afraid to go to the bathhouses in New York. This is in 1986 or 1987. So they would come to the bathhouses in Providence, because they were afraid to go to the bathhouses in New York.

I mean, we were aware of what was happening.

SS: When did you first encounter men using condoms?

JW: I'd say it was probably around '86, was when – at least in Providence. I was in Providence till 1990. And fashion – everything – lingers like five years behind New York. So I didn't really hear people saying you absolutely have to use condoms until around '86.

SS: So when you first started to experience people using condoms; did it feel completely weird? Were they very unusual?

JW: No, because I was involved with these, a gay youth group, instead of just going to the bars. There was one bar in Providence, the No Name, that paid off the police. They were mob-owned. I could get in there when I was in high school. So I was hanging around with a lot of drag queens and everyone in high school. And you'd go there with a – do you have an ID? No. Do you have a driver's license? No. Do you have a library card? No. Just sign this affidavit. And doing that.

The bar scene, you didn't really hear much about it. But then, when I was involved with Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, and then shortly after, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth – which is still around, and it's the first gay youth group to be run by gay youth, founded in 1980. So from those things, it was, always use condoms, always use condoms. After 1985, then you started knowing more people in Providence who were getting sick, and it really started hitting people's radar that this is

not just New York.

SS: Who was the first person that you met who had AIDS?

JW: There was this kid, Michael, from Boston, who was older, and he was friends with a lot of my friends. The thing is, though, a lot of people didn't talk about it. Even in the gay community, people didn't want to talk about it with each other. Very few people would talk about it, because you couldn't do anything about it. Especially before they had the test, people were only diagnosed when they were in late stages, so everyone thought that you got it, and you died within a year or so. They didn't realize there was an incubation period – and especially before they had PCP prophylaxis for pneumonia and some of those opportunistic-infection treatments, people really died horrible, horrible deaths. So it's – now I know that a lot of people I knew had HIV, but no one really talked about it. And also, there wasn't the Americans with Disabilities Act. You found out you had AIDS; they'd cancel your insurance, you could lose your job. There were so many reasons not to tell anybody. So no, people didn't talk about it.

SS: So did you get involved with Steve's group, ACT UP Rhode Island?

JW: Yes. I was first involved with the Brown-RISD Gay Student Alliance. And then, when Steve was working on the '87 march, which was a response to both AIDS and the Hardwick decision — and I think that's an issue that was really also a big part of ACT UP's founding, though. Has anyone talked about that before, Hardwick?

SS: No.

JW: In 1986, Michael Hardwick, from Georgia, was working at a gay bar. And he was throwing beer out the back, and he threw a bottle in a garbage can. And he

got a summons for drinking on the street. And they made a mistake serving him. So they went back to serve him the summons. And his door was ajar. So the police walked into his apartment. And he was having oral sex with his boyfriend, in his own bedroom. And they arrested him for sodomy, in his own bedroom, with somebody's he's in a relationship with. And it went all the way to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court ruled that it was legal.

And the gay community was spitting mad. I think there was more outrage than there was after Prop 8. Because the whole idea that police can go into your own home, without a warrant, and see you having consensual sex with someone you're dating, in the privacy of your own bedroom, behind closed doors; and the Supreme Court's going to say, yes, it's legal to send you to jail.

So AIDS was starting to crescendo, and it wasn't just New York; everyone around the country was really scared to death of it. And on top of that, you had this, the Hardwick ruling, which was crazy. And Michael Hardwick eventually died of AIDS shortly after.

So then they had the 1987 March on Washington. And Gendin was on the national committee, representing college groups and college outreach. So he really organized a lot of us to drive down to D.C. and do that. And that was a life-changing experience. It was really incredible. Whoopi Goldberg saying "fuck you" to Ronald Reagan onstage, at the beginning of her career, when she had a lot to lose, because of his response to AIDS. It was a really empowering thing. And there were a lot of states that didn't have any gay organizations before, who started to organize after that. It was an incredible thing.

And ACT UP was happening around the same time as that happened.

There was a lot happening besides AIDS that was really – and there was huge civil disobedience – that some of my friends were arrested on the steps of the Supreme Court in response to Hardwick.

SS: The general civil disobedience issue –

JW: The general thing. I mean, people from ACT UP – ACT UP was just brand-spanking new, still covered with placenta, when the march happened in October — I think it was October 11th; early October — in 1987. So ACT UP was only around for a couple months, and most people in New York didn't quite know about it yet.

So some people from ACT UP were involved with that, but also a lot of other people.

It was also the only march on Washington that was created really democratically. Each local community elected their own local reps to the state board. The state boards elected the regional reps, and the regional reps elected the reps to the national committee. So it was a really bottom-up, genuine grassroots thing, and you really felt it.

SS: So then you went back to –

JW: To Rhode Island.

SS: – and then you –

JW: I think it was about when Steve started it.

SS: So what was ACT UP Rhode Island like? What did they do?

00:20:00

JW: A lot smaller. We didn't focus so much on a lot of the drug issues that New York did. Steve — and there was also a club around the time, James McGrath,

who owned a club, The Rocket. And it was funny, because when you'd go to New York, you'd see all these cute boys wearing Rocket T-shirts. It's like, you know James. And he would also – he was living in Rhode Island, but he would go to the Monday meetings. And he was involved with Peter Staley and the Power Tools. And he would come back. So we'd keep hearing reports from Steve or James about what's happening in New York. But mostly we'd focus on a lot of local issues.

The big thing early on was, there were some people in the state legislature who wanted concentration-camp quarantines for people who tested positive. That had no chance of passing. I think ACT UP Rhode Island's first civil disobedience was about that, and I wasn't involved with that one. But then the biggest focus was on mandatory testing and names reporting. Because again, back then, we just had PCP prophylaxis and there were still more negatives to getting tested than not getting tested, because you couldn't do anything, except lose your insurance, lose your housing, lose your job.

SS: Did you get tested?

JW: Then – no. Because again, it's like when I would talk with Steve; he would tell people. It's like, look; unless you're symptomatic, right now is not the best time to get tested. Once they started having better treatments and stuff, I did get tested. I think my first test was in – '87? And I went to – and I was really conscientious. I didn't want to go in Rhode Island, because things were run so badly. So I went to the Fenway Community Health Center in Boston. And I had one of my friends from ACT UP Rhode Island, who was also the guest speaker at my first Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth group, just there, as my support. Because I was scared to death. I mean, I still get scared to death; you always do. But it's – yeah.

SS: So when did you get involved with ACT UP New York?

JW: The NIH action. I was –

SS: I just want to wait – so you were involved with ACT UP Rhode Island for like three years?

JW: From '87 to '90.

SS: Were there people starting to get sick, inside ACT UP Rhode Island? Did you experience that?

JW: Yes. Well, my friend Thayer, who was the person I met from Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, who was intersexed. So – and she's also one reason I'm still involved with transgender rights. I had a very activist childhood.

She was HIV-positive. It was something really keeping it real. I mean, a lot of the RISD and Brown students were all so young. So even those who later got sick, and some of them whom I had known were sick, were still young, so a lot of them weren't dealing with big health issues yet.

SS: So were you aware – were there particular – what kind of campaigns did you work on at ACT UP Rhode Island?

JW: A lot of prevention stuff.

SS: What did you guys want?

JW: What did we want. Well the big thing was we were constantly fighting the state about mandatory testing and mandatory names reporting, which was the biggest issue at the time. My testing politics have changed since then. I don't believe in mandatory testing; it needs to be consensual; there needs to be education. But I think right now, there is a strong argument to get tested early, no matter straight or gay,

because there's a lot you can do.

So testing was the biggest thing locally. And we were constantly fighting that.

Then there was a lot of education. We were really trying to fight to get AIDS education, which you weren't seeing anywhere. And that's – even today, that's one of the things about that time that I'm most, I'm still very angry about.

I became sexually active in 1984. And when I read about AIDS history now, the doctors who first identify a cluster of this weird thing gay men were getting, in 1981 and 1982, anecdotally were saying: we know we gotta study it; but this is sexually transmitted. We need to treat it the same way we treat syphilis and gonorrhea. And I hear about how the CDC and all these – the Reagan administration knew what should have been done, and none of us got that information. And instead we heard that ridiculous stuff, like in the pamphlet I got at the gay youth group, or in the local gay-bar rags. There were these conspiracy theories about mosquitoes, pork, bad poppers, all this other stuff. And the people who were most credible, had the good information, didn't get it. And a lot of my friends from the gay youth groups never saw their thirtieth birthday.

And I'm still – furious –

SS: Who do you –

00:25:00

JW: – furious, furious about it.

SS: Whose responsibility was that?

JW: Reagan. The whole Reagan administration. They ran the National Institutes of Health. They ran the CDC. They ran all these government agencies. They had the information. You can pull up all these quotes from the Reagan years. Reagan

didn't say "AIDS" until a year before he left office. But a lot of his close advisers and friends were saying, AIDS is killing all the right people; AIDS isn't a problem, it's a solution. And they just did nothing.

SS: Jon, I want to ask you a philosophical question.

JW: Yes.

SS: What is the consequence on American life that nobody was ever made accountable for this?

JW: The consequence is a lot of mothers buried 20-year-old kids. The consequences is – I look at some of the smartest, brightest, most incredible people I ever met, and they're gone, and they should still be around.

SS: Right, but those mothers never tried to make anybody accountable. I mean, no one's ever stood up and said –

JW: It's because there is – I think that's why there was ACT UP. Because I think things finally reached a point where people had to hold people accountable.

SS: No, but ACT UP was something different, that was about –

JW: I don't know. I have this – when I went to the NIH action – I was working at the blacksmith's at the time, after I left RISD — and I was wearing an ACT UP T-shirt that was very gay — I think it was "Read My Lips," or one of them — and I stopped at a Benny's hardware store to pick up some stuff in my little mini-pickup before going down to D.C. And there was this woman who was just like stalking me in the store. And she was just – you know, I'm just going down an aisle, and she's just looking at me, and I'm getting really freaked out. And I turn a corner. She's standing right there. And she just says: I'm looking at your T-shirt. I know where you're going this weekend.

And she's nearly in tears. And she said, my brother has AIDS, he died, and my family won't let me talk about it. When you go down there, just know that you're going down there for me. Because there's a lot of us who've lost family members, and we're not allowed to talk about it.

And that's the way it was. A lot of families put something else on the death certificates, and didn't announce it.

We did a benefit later on, ACT UP, with Ann Magnuson, and she was talking about how she was friends with the director of *Parting Glances*. And he's the first guy to make a feature-length movie about AIDS. And when he got really sick, and went back to live with his parents outside New York, they didn't tell anyone he died, and then they pretended it was something else. This is some one who was out there. And that's –

SS: What was his name?

JW: I forget.

JIM HUBBARD: Bill Sherwood.

JW: Bill Sherwood, that's it, yeah. But that's the way it was. There was so much of a stigma.

SS: The fascists of Argentina and Chile have been made accountable, right? Or there's truth-and-reconciliation –

JW: You had Jean White. You had – I mean, a lot of people who were involved with ACT UP were relatives and were straight people who lost someone who they loved. We did have allies. Liz Taylor lost her best friend.

SS: Who was her best friend?

JW: Rock Hudson.

SS: Oh, okay.

JW: You did have a lot of people who tried to speak up. But the thing was, the media didn't want to cover it. It was a conspiracy – when you look at – I mean, Silence = Death meant something very different in 1987 than it means now. There was literally this vacuum. Where we're screaming – the whole community that's being affected by AIDS, straight and gay, is screaming in a vacuum; and there's no sound being carried anywhere. It was like there was two different Americas existing simultaneously.

Excuse me, I need water.

SS: Go ahead.

JW: In the '80s, it was like there were two different Americas existed in the same place and the same time. You had Reagan with Morning in America, the first time we've been proud to be Americans since Watergate, and the world has never been better. Go, Gipper! And then you have gay America, which is, everyone we know is getting sick and dying. And for all we know, within a year, we're going to be dead. And we're seeing this horrible thing, and all these other people are oblivious.

SS: Did you think it was inevitable that you were going to be dead?

JW: Yes. Yeah. When I was 19, there was a red spot on my chest. And I thought, I was convinced it was KS. And I just didn't want to tell anyone about it, and just doing it. And finally I had to go to the doctor for something else. I just said, can you look at this? And he said it was a fungus infection. And then afterwards, I was just angry, because every other kid I went to high school with who was 19 has that sense of being immortal, as a teenager. And here I am, as a teenager, and I have a greater sense of

mortality than people I know who are four times my age.

It was a really horrible thing to live through.

SS: So how did you get involved in the NIH action?

JW: It was one of those things, though, where everyone from – both James and Steve would come back, report on things, and this was happening. And I kind of wanted to go down. Friends of mine went to the first Stop the Church, which I wasn't able to go to.

SS: What do you mean, the first? Were there two?

JW: There was the anniversary the year after.

SS: Oh, what was that?

JW: It was a smaller one. It wasn't as big, or crazy. It happened in 1990.

Or '91 –

SS: Okay. What happened there?

JW: They just went to the church. There weren't as many arrests, and it didn't get as much coverage. More of the same stuff. It wasn't as dramatic as the first one, which really broke the silence of challenging the Church. But friends came back from that, and their stories – everything was great. And then the NIH action was happening, and we were getting all the teach-in material from James and Steve, and stuff like that. So I drove down, and went there.

And I was planning on leaving Rhode Island anyway. So I spent the week in Washington. Because I have a lot of social friends, not political, in Washington. And I was thinking about leaving Rhode Island for Washington, D.C. And the NIH was going to happen at the end of the week, so I was looking at places, looking at jobs, looking at

possible schools. And I went to the NIH action, and it was incredible. And then I kind of had a weekend romance with someone from ACT UP New York, and drove him back to New York.

Oh yeah, it's right along the way. No problem. And then spent a day in the East Village. And you know, it was like, wow, this is a place I could live. And about a month later, I moved to New York.

So ACT UP really did bring me to New York. Because I was really getting disillusioned with modern art. I majored in sculpture, and it was just – '80s sculpture just seemed like bullshit. And I was having less and less meaning in my life.

So I kind of apprenticed with a blacksmith. I kind of met the guy when I was at RISD. Because I thought that was always more functional, had purpose in the world. And the stuff I was doing with the activism just seemed much more life-and-death, more meaning. So that was kind of like fulfilling my creative juices. So I took off two weeks, a couple weeks after the NIH action; found a job and an apartment; then moved down to New York.

SS: Okay, two questions. You apprenticed with a blacksmith?

JW: Yes. {LAUGHS}

SS: You made horseshoes?

JW: No, no no no no no. Farriers do horses.

SS: Oh.

JW: Blacksmiths do architectural and ornamental ironwork.

SS: Okay, okay.

JW: So I'm a fairy, not a farry. If you go to Rhode Island, Charles Looff

was one of the premier carousel designers in the country. His premier carousel's still in Rhode Island. I helped restore the crankshafts that make the horses go up and down. If you go to the Blithewold Arboretum in Bristol, I helped restore the Lovers' Lane Archway. So I apprenticed with an artist blacksmith for a couple years after RISD, and then I got laid off when the economy crashed in the late '80s, and – that's when I decided, okay, maybe it's time to leave Rhode Island and move to New York.

SS: Okay, so here's a big question. What was the point of the NIH action?

JW: Lots of points. There was a lot of inefficiency with drug testing and drug approval. It took about eight years from when they found a possible new drug to when it became ready to be released on the market.

And that makes sense, if you're coming up with a better formula for a drug that already treats things that everyone can use; or if it's an acne medicine. But when you're talking about a life-saving drug for either AIDS, cancer, or something that is a fatal disease, and there's nothing else out there, eight years is a long time to wait.

00:35:00 So a lot of the focus on the NIH action was to really figure out ways of trying to expedite, but still have good information; not approve things that you haven't tested, but get rid of the bureaucracy, and find efficient ways of doing it. And also – because – I think AZT was approved about the same time ACT UP started – the same month. So there weren't any real AIDS drugs that were approved. So the only treatments that people could really take to attempt to help themselves were experimental drugs. So drug trials were treatment.

SS: But isn't that really what was demanded at the FDA action?

JW: It was a lot of things. I think – but the NIH is where a lot of the drug trials took place. I can't remember all the details.

SS: What did we win at that action?

JW: I think – some of the big, more macro-issue actions, I don't know if you can say you won something overnight. But what did happen, with the CDC action, the, well, at least with the FDA, and the NIH action, is you started having people with AIDS, including AIDS activists, sitting at the table for the ACTGs.

SS: Right.

JW: So the AIDS Clinical Trial Groups. So they would help prioritize that. You had more input and more discussion on alternative possibilities for conducting clinical trials, instead of the orthodoxy of, it has to take eight years or longer. What are things we can do to get the information, but do it more efficiently? How can we expand eligibility for the trials, so women and people of color can do it? Because it turns out not only are the white mice in clinical trials all genetically the same, they're all white male mice. In order to try to keep the variables as low as possible, women weren't allowed in those, and people of color had problems getting into clinical trials.

Since trials were treatment, we needed to make sure that they get whatever treatment there was available at the time as well.

Expanding the things that they were looking at.

It didn't come out of the NIH, but shortly after, Garance came up with — what was it — Countdown 17 Months, or 18 Months? Which was brilliant. And I love the fact that someone who had dropped out of high school, and was still a teenager, came up with a research priority that the NIH couldn't, which was that since an effective

antiviral treatment was probably a long ways away, and people were dying of opportunistic infections; there's a whole list of these most common fatal opportunistic infections, and we're not too far away from getting effective treatment for them. Why don't we put some attention on those now, because that'll at least save people now while we're working long-term on finding an antiviral thing.

So there was a lot of good stuff that happened.

Drug companies were meeting with us, because drug companies saw how angry we were and saw we were causing a mess. So they wanted our input. Sometimes they'd try to pacify us and that was a learning experience, but –

SS: Can you give an example?

JW: Of them pacifying us?

SS: Yeah.

JW: I remember Scott Slutsky saying that once. I forget which drug company it was. It might have been Merck. They took him to the Russian Tea Room. They would really wine and dine people, and try to do that stuff. It was awhile, but then people caught on that, oh; a place at the table doesn't mean anything if it's a token place. So we still need to keep asserting ourselves to make sure we have a voice at the table, and not just –

SS: You think everybody caught on?

JW: Obviously there are some people who – like that – I don't want to go into names. But yeah, there were some people who, one or two, that we found out were taking money from the drug companies and stuff like that. And that's not so cool. I think most people who –

SS: People in ACT UP personally taking money from a drug company?

JW: One person, who was not part of the TAG group. He was –

SS: Really? When we turn off the cameras, you better tell me who it was. Because I don't know about that.

JW: I don't know the details. But it was someone who I liked, and thought he was a friend. But then I found out, wow, he was getting paid by one of the companies, after he got involved with ACT UP. But the majority of people, even if they didn't agree on everything in Treatment and Data, on the floor of ACT UP, were there for the right reasons, and really wanted to see change. So yeah, I think when people did catch on, they did try to maintain a voice. And there is a – this gray area between being inside and outside. You want to be inside enough that you have a place at the table, and you're able to assert your voice; but you don't want to alienate people, and get thrown out of the room again, and have no voice. So there's always –

SS: I ask you about that, because everyone talks about that; the inside-outside strategy of ACT UP. Did people have a choice as to whether they were going to be inside or outside? Or did the apparatus of power decide who was inside and outside?

JW: It's a lot of things. I also, in more recent years, was on the board for four years on national Stonewall Democrats, and doing the DNC Relations Committee. I was on Hillary's national LGBT steering committee for a big primary thing. With those things, I was also doing the outside-inside thing. I think at my age, I have a better understanding of it now than I did then.

00:40:00 It's a combination of things. Sometimes an opportunity drops into your lap. And you want to be democratic, but if one person has an opportunity coming their way, do you want to say no, and wait a couple years for someone else to have the opportunity?

 So you have the randomness of that. You have the fact that some people have certain talents that other people don't have.

 Every successful thing in ACT UP, everybody who was involved, whether they're doing media, whether they're doing legal support, whether they're waiting outside of a jail with granola bars and water for someone to be released; everyone had an important place. But some people are more articulate in front of a news camera; some people are better at social schmoozing and political schmoozing; some people are better on their feet, making extemporaneous arguments during a board meeting.

 So –

SS: Right. But that's not what I'm asking. I mean –

JW: I think that's how it really happens.

SS: But people who work in government, especially in that era, or who run pharmaceutical companies; they are more comfortable with certain kinds of people. Right? People who are more like them.

JW: I don't think it's absolute. Because when we did – when Action Tours broke into NBC and CBS, so many people complained, oh yeah, the people who were able to sneak in were all the white males in suits. And it's like, no, Daryl Bowman, is African American –

SS: Who's Daryl Bowman?

JW: He was in Action Tours. And again, not everybody in ACT UP –

SS: Is he still alive?

JW: Yes he is.

SS: Oh, I don't know him. Okay.

JW: He's very dark-skinned. So it's not like he's ethnically passing as a white person. And he got in wearing a suit. So I don't think it's an absolute thing.

Garance, as a 19-year-old, was sitting at the table for a lot of these things, and she was respected, because she knew what she was talking about. She didn't have a college education, at that point; and she's a woman; and she's young. But they took her seriously, because – she was able to talk – go toe-to-toe with any of those researchers, and know what she was talking about.

So I think there are some things that – I'm sure there were racial and class advantages some people had, coming into ACT UP, that may have given them some skills, or a leg up, on some things. Obviously, if you're comfortable in a suit, in a boardroom, you're going to have an easier time talking to other people in a suit in a boardroom, without being intimidated, and asserting a place at the table, than someone who just feels like a fish out of water.

When I was doing Church Ladies stuff, and we'd infiltrate a Catholic church, I'd feel really uncomfortable when people started genuflecting. Because I grew up Jewish, I have no idea what they're doing, and I'd feel out of place. And I'm very assertive in political things, but that's one area where I'm clueless.

SS: Right. Now I remember you in ACT UP as a very young – you were like a boy, practically. Well you were 23, right?

JW: So young! Yes.

SS: You were very –

JW: Twenty-, 23.

SS: You were very young-looking, also.

JW: Yes, yes.

SS: What was it like to be there, on the younger side of things?

JW: It was incredible. When I was in high school, I didn't think there was a place for me in the world. And then you're in this room, with some of the most incredible people I've ever met; people who are acclaimed authors and playwrights and filmmakers and artists and television producers, and all these smart, incredible people. And you're like, oh my god, yeah, there's a place for me in the world. So it kind of – really helped me, helped that little kid who almost killed himself because he didn't think there was a place for him in the world, to know that, oh my god, this is all part of it, these are all incredible people.

And I tell people that Rhode Island Gay and Lesbian Youth was important for me to know I'm not alone. A year later, when I got involved with the Boston group, BAGLY taught me that I was fierce and smart, and just as good as anyone else. And those kids were, you just didn't fuck with them. They were – still, it's an incredible group. And then ACT UP taught me how to fight back.

So it's 25 years later; it's still hard to put in a context, because things were really horrible at the time, which is why you had an ACT UP. But at the same time, there were some really incredible things. People coming together who ordinarily would not be traveling in the same circles; people developing and discovering talents that they didn't

know that they had.

SS: Was age a factor in forming political and personal relationships in ACT UP?

JW: I don't know. I think there was a lot of older men in ACT UP who were not interested in me sexually, but who befriended me, mentored me, and were just really wonderful friends. And –

SS: Like who are some people who mentored you?

JW: I didn't have insurance. And there was a medical problem I was having. I came to him and Caspar Schmidt paid for me to see his doctor. Which is incredible. I wasn't really eating well when I first moved to the city that summer, I didn't have steady work until the fall. So he'd take me out to dinner after a Treatment and Data meeting. People like Elizabeth Michaels. They were just – I think the adults were very giving. And it really broke down. I mean, obviously, people have different experiences. When you want to go hang out at clubs all night, you're not going to invite the people from ACT UP who are in their sixties. I'm sure some of the people in their sixties, when they were doing stuff with people their own age, they didn't always invite the 23-year-olds. But there was a lot of mixing, and it was a real – sense of community, not like I've ever experienced in the gay community since then.

SS: Who were your closest friends in ACT UP?

JW: Oh gosh. A lot of the Action Tourists: David Buckingham; Otto [Mike] Coca; Elizabeth Michaels; James Wagner; Jamie Leo, who I still absolutely adore. From the Treatment and Data crowd: Tony Davis; Jim Serafini. There's a lot of people you miss. It's just, you just – Jay Blotcher. My first, when I finally got my first lease on

the Lower East Side — this was like '91 or '92 — Jay Blotcher was in the building, Jeff Emily and Mike Signorile was in the apartment below me. Alan Klein. There was a lot of really close friends, and people really took care of each other, and they still do.

SS: So let's talk about Action Tours – one of the highlights.

JW: One of my highlights, right.

SS: How did you get involved with them? Or were you one of the founders?

JW: No, I wasn't. They were founded before I got there. But then – during Day of Desperation, they announced that they were going to do something, and they kind of were hinting of maybe breaking into one of the networks. Oh, I've been behind the scenes on NBC 4, so I volunteered, and joined up with that. And it was really – I mean, for all the covert things we did, it was a very open group, where people just kept joining, and going on, doing that, so you have a core group. And so my first thing was the NBC/CBS action. I was at NBC, not at CBS. So John Weir got on TV. I was with two other people, and we almost – the door, there was a number code on the door. One person had to leave for a second, and we saw it open, then it shut. So we blew that. Also, NBC was taped, like half an hour after CBS. So they were kind of looking for us. So we got busted; but we didn't get on TV.

But the cool thing was, when they arrested us, they put us in a taxi. And it's like, what, do we have to pay cab fare? And it turned out it was an undercover police car, and the guy was saying that they usually use it for vice, because that way, prostitutes won't be scared away when they see a marked car. So my first Action Tours arrest was in a taxicab.

And then, Action Tours, they – met at James Wagner’s apartment every Sunday. And in the summertime, it would be a little later, so we could be outdoors. In the wintertime, it would be a little bit earlier. And we would just – it was kind of like a functioning group within ACT UP. It was kind of like an ACT UP within an ACT UP, where people just bring stuff from the floor of ACT UP, from the newspapers, from someone who’s in a committee that they were friends with, about what’s happening. And for like a two- or three-year period, we were doing about one action a week. And it could be something really big. Like break into NBC — which we did twice; once on Saturday Night Live, when Sharon Stone was promoting Basic Instinct. Or gagging the Statue of Liberty. And sometimes it would be Ira Manhoff on his own, harassing Barbara Bush signing a book about Millie at Macy’s. Which didn’t get attention.

00:50:00 It was about one action a week. It was really incredible. And one of the really cool things about Action Tours is, there was a big crossover between Action Tours and WHAM!, Women’s Health Action and Mobilization. And I think that alliance started with Stop the Church. Because one of ACT UP’s big issues with the Catholic Church was condoms. And {SNAP} pro-choice, condoms; the same person.

So about half the Action Tourists had a primary lean towards ACT UP; half had a primary lean towards WHAM!, but there was a lot of crossover.

So we were doing stuff that was AIDS, pro-choice, and gay. And we would just switch names on the media stuff, depending on how we were doing it. If it was AIDS, we’d use ACT UP. But since ACT UP wanted Queer Nation and other people to take the lead on gay stuff, we’d use Queer Nation, like with the – I think it was the Sharon Stone interruption was Queer Nation. We let WHAM! take credit for the Statue

of Liberty. And a lot of WHAM! people did support at the last minute. Or sometimes, we'd even use the Church Ladies for Choice, which was an outgrowth of that. Where if it was gay or choice, we'd just say Church Ladies, since most people associated Action Tours with ACT UP.

So there was a really, a neat dynamic in it. And I probably learned more about effective coalition-building from Action Tours than anywhere else.

SS: I didn't realize that Action Tours was this chameleon organization.

JW: Oh, it was a lot of things. And the great thing was, it was very organic; the coalition between women and AIDS activists. Because it wasn't like, okay, intellectually, we want to do this horizontally, or we want to have intersectionality. And doing that, it was a matter of, look, can you name a feminist woman in New York who doesn't have gay friends. So a lot of feminist women, straight and gay, were involved with ACT UP because AIDS impacted them. And a lot of gay men are very pro-choice. So there was some – so you had some people cross over for that. But then you have all these women who were going to these actions and working with us on that. And they're like, oh, we're going to a clinic defense next week, and do you want to come along? So without thinking, it's like, of course I want to go. So you end up starting to go to their things. And it's just a natural thing. They're always showing up and doing stuff for you, so you do it for them. Not tit for tat, but just because you do.

SS: What was the relationship between ACT UP and Queer Nation?

JW: The hive-off happened immediately before the summer I moved here. My official moving date – I looked for an apartment in June, I moved here in July. So it

was kind of that spring.

ACT UP decided they wanted more of a AIDS focus, and not become a broad gay-rights organization. So Queer Nation hived off. And some of the people who founded Queer Nation kind of missed the informality of the earliest ACT UP meetings, where you didn't have Robert's Rules, you didn't have committees, you didn't have more of a formal organization, which you kind of need when you have that much stuff being worked on and you have to cram it into like a two-hour meeting. You just need more process, just to get through it; keep things democratic, but doing it.

And so Queer Nation was kind of — which I really disagree with — they didn't have any process. So you'd have a facilitator. But Queer Nation never voted on actions. So if somebody from Queer Nation wanted to have a Save the Whales action, they could call it a Queer Nation action. And there was a lot of disagreement, because what if someone wanted to do something that advocated violence, or something that wasn't just not queer-related, but was something philosophically that we really disagree with; how do we separate, and they still wind up doing it. And eventually, the lack of process kind of caused the Queer Nations nationally to implode on themselves.

SS: Okay.

JW: I remember, in San Francisco; some people started, passed this thing saying that if somebody thought someone said something racist, that person would be able to stand up and just say: that's racist. They didn't have to explain what about it was racist; but the person who was speaking would have to shut up, sit down, and educate themselves as to what they think that they said was racist. So –

SS: That's so San Francisco.

JW: That was San Francisco.

SS: Yeah.

JW: So it kind of blew up, though, because you weren't able to do that. At least we had people like Maxine, who would try to say, hey, let's cool down; there's a difference between being racist and ignorant. If you tell these people, who've never had much experience dealing with people of color, what your point of view is – and then people did go along with it, and Queer Nation was kind of blown up.

00:55:00

What happened in Queer Nation New York, though, was there was a lot more infighting, and people just accusing each other of isms. So the people who actually worked on stuff outside the group stopped going. And then that's kind of when it did it. But also did a – stink-bombed, one of the premieres of Queer Nation – no, I'm sorry. We stink-bombed one of the premieres of *Basic Instinct* in New York with Queer Nation. We volunteered to – when they were going after Channel Thirteen for underrepresenting LGBT people, we volunteered to answer the phone during Pledge Week; and when they were cutting to the president, we all standing up behind him, yelling at him.

So we did some cool stuff in Queer Nation. It was good.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

JW: I don't think I left. I think it was kind of a phasing out. It started – Stonewall 25; I guess that was '93? That was kind of the beginning of the end. After Stonewall 25, which was, again, one of the biggest activist-queer highs — it was incredible — but that summer, six people I knew all died in a very short period of time. And I was walking home from work, and just starting to lose it. I just ran home, and when I slammed the door, I started crying hysterically for about three hours straight.

So I called up Chuck Brown, and I worked on David Drake's show, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*. Which was also a ACT UP hive-off. And Chuck lived a couple blocks away. So I went over to his apartment, and just tried to calm me down. And I just kind of emotionally crashed. I didn't drop out at that point, but that was the point where I was really starting to feel emotional burnout. You can't sustain loss like that without dealing with it.

SS: So, but if you leave ACT UP, you don't leave the loss; you still have people dying.

JW: You do, but I mean, it's hard to go a meeting where all your colleagues –

Coming out the year I came out, I am grateful I was in ACT UP, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. But being within ACT UP, I had a lot more friends and loved ones who had advanced stages of HIV than if I was just drifting through normal social circles. So you were kind of experiencing things in a much more intense way, because you're just seeing a lot more of what everyone is seeing.

SS: Were you ever in a care group?

JW: For myself, or to care for other people?

SS: No, I mean, like who's the person who you were closest to who went through illness and died?

JW: Oh, god. Rex Wockner from Church Ladies.

SS: Were the Church Ladies involved in his care?

JW: Yeah. He was in the hospital, and we had this fabulous New Year's Eve party in his hospital room. And, yeah, we were very involved.

SS: And how did that mesh with – did he have any family involved, or did he have a boyfriend?

JW: He was single. But you know, it's, again, we were his gay friends. And we had – you still have it now, but especially 25 years ago or more, most gay people created their own family, because their own families, even if they accepted the gay stuff, didn't really know how to deal with the gay stuff. So most people did have like a gay family that they created, along with their regular family, which might be involved with their life, or might not be involved with their life.

So the Church Ladies and Action Tours were that. And we still take care of each other, and it is great.

My arrest from the 2004 Republican Convention, which wasn't planned, but they arrested us, and they kept us in jail illegally for three days. And they were trying to preemptively arrest everybody that was the police chief's statement to the *New York Times* — preemptively arrest people before they got out of hand. And they were planning on releasing us after Bush got on a plane and left.

And I wasn't planning on getting arrested. But then when I saw everybody from the War Resisters, near where I was at Ground Zero, getting arrested before they did their CD, I was really pissed.

So there was a bunch of ACT UP people who happened to be there. Amy Bauer, BC Craig and so, since all the organizers were arrested, we kind of just switched on to our ACT UP marshal thing, and got everyone out of there and doing that. So we got as close to as we did. And then some of the people who were left over wanted to do the CD. And I joined in the last minute, not thinking, oh, I don't really have my support

group. And then I kind of disappeared for three days.

01:00:00 So I'm feeling really alone, isolated. They're messing with our heads, making it seem like we're going to get released in a couple hours, and there I am, arrested Tuesday, being released on Thursday. So finally, on Thursday, when I'm released, I'm just feeling, I'm filthy from head to toe, from being at that filthy bus station that was condemned for having all those toxic chemicals in it. I'm tired; I haven't really slept in three days. I haven't really eaten. And Donald Grove, from the Church Ladies, is waiting outside of Centre Street, with water and granola.

And I'm like, Donald, I didn't know, what are you doing this?

And he's like, oh, I'm not there for them, I'm there for you.

And it's like – how did you know?

And it's like, well, you know, you're queen of the sound bite. You said something pithy when they were putting you in a van and it was on CNN. And you know, we were talking with each other, and we said, oh, we better check to see if Winkleman's out of jail. And they started calling, found out where I was. And they were, unbeknownst to me, they were tracking me through the whole system; and they made sure somebody was waiting outside, with food and water when I was released. And that's – something from ACT UP that's still there amongst these friends today. And it's incredible.

And that's – one of the things I really miss about that time. I don't miss what was happening community-wide at the time, and I don't want to go back to the type of death we were experiencing then. But the sense of community and the sense of taking care of each other the way we were then, that's something which I still really miss.

SS: Is there anything important that we haven't covered?

JW: I'm trying to think. Maybe the Statue of Liberty action. I think before they were talking about being veiled, and it was being gagged. I mean, like a lot of – one of my contributions to Action Tours was a lot of the stuff I did was kind of visually-oriented. I mean, like in my head, I thought I was like leaving RISD and that stuff. But a lot of the stuff I did ended up being very – well, at least my ideas – I can't really claim any action, because everybody contributed, and nothing would have happened on anything if it wasn't, it was a really group effort. But thinks like the Macy's action with the Santas was –

SS: Why don't you tell us about that.

JW: Oh my god, it was hysterical. There was a small, tiny article in the back of the *New York Times* about a lawsuit. This guy Mark Woodley, who was a Macy's Santa — and they thought he was one of the best Santas — and he was doing it because he lost a lot of friends to AIDS, and he just wanted something to cheer himself up during the holidays.

And then, when he went back to reapply the next year, they asked him, are you taking any medications, and they do a drug test. So he said, AZT. And they decided not to rehire him. And they claimed it was because he was on antidepressants.

So I kind of suggested, I said, well, I think this, I found the article and I said: well, next holiday season, the day after Thanksgiving, we should go there, all dressed up as Santa, and do something.

So we all, we found these cheap Santa suits, for 25 bucks. There was 25 of us. And it was really cool, because we had Santas of color, we had Harry Wieder, a

dwarf Santa, which is great, because Macy's, under a certain height, you're an elf.

Everybody in Action Tours is Santa; we don't discriminate.

And so 25 of us went there. We had Christmas cards that read: A Tragedy on 34th Street. And then when you opened it up, it had all the facts. And we walk in. And of course, we start singing regular Christmas carols. And everyone is just happy. Twenty-five people, singing Christmas carols, dressed up as Santa, on the busiest shopping day of the year.

Then we get into the middle of the cosmetics aisle. Chains come out of sleeves. We chain ourselves together in a circle. And then we start singing — I'm really off-key — Santa Claus has HIV, fa-la-la, la-la-la-la. Macy's won't rehire he, fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la. They think Mark Woodley's the best, fa-la-la, la-la-la-la, la-la-la. Till he took an HIV test, fa-la-la-la, la-la-la-la.

Discrimination is illegal, fa-la-la, and just keep going on.

So it was one of the funniest actions, because it was kind of a checkmate. Because Macy's kept coming up to us, saying, well — we hear you, and we're glad you're here, but if you leave now, we promise, we're not going to call the police.

So on one hand, they were trying to get us — they needed to get rid of us, but at the same time, they were afraid to call the police, because they didn't want photos of Santa Claus being dragged out of Macy's in handcuffs.

So they kept going to us, it's like, no no no. Really! We promise! We won't call the police if you leave now!

And I'm chained to 24 other people, I really am not going anywhere.

So then they started trying to put up those little screens that say, pardon

our appearance while we're changing things. So this amoeba of Santas is just snaking in and out of the cosmetics aisles. Until finally, they surrounded us, and they start cutting the chains. And this one little kid says: What are they doing to the Santas? It's like, Macy's fired Santa. Macy's is bad.

And then there was a front page of somebody on the paper. It might have been Charles King; we can't tell. Because again, we all look the same, with the beards and the hats, Santa being dragged out.

01:05:00

And there were some people in ACT UP who worked for Macy's. And we talked with people, and we got – Action Tours was really good, because we always made sure we had all the information, and we did our own research. So we didn't just shoot from the hip. We really found out.

So we talked with people who were close to the Mark Woodley case. They didn't know about the action, so they had no involvement with the planning. But we found out everything about them, and that Macy's Human Resources was actually good with people who had AIDS on a store level. But the temporary holiday people didn't know how to handle it. So instead of going to the normal human resources, they went upward to the corporate, who don't deal with that stuff, and that's how it happened.

So Macy's is a great company, they have a great LGBT group. So we should go there now.

And then another visual one was the Statue of Liberty, where Bush 41 passed a policy that clinics that receive –

SS: What's Bush 41?

JW: The first George Bush; George H. W. Bush. The 44th president is

George W. Bush.

George H. W. Bush passed a gag order saying that clinics who receive Title X funding cannot mention the word "abortion." And the press were calling it the gag order.

So we came up with the idea of physically gagging the Statue of Liberty, as a symbolic thing. So we got up there, and there was a gag, and it said: No Choice, No Liberty. And that was a hoot. Because I can actually say, I touched the face of the Statue of Liberty.

And you think about this stuff, and now, and it's like, it just seems surreal. And it's just, I guess, we were really young, and we just didn't think we couldn't do anything, and there were so many incredible people in Action Tours. I mean, we had Jamie Leo, who was a graphic designer and a set designer. He designed the theater design for the original version of *Rent*, done a lot of great stuff. You had John Weir, David Feinberg, Dale Peck. You have James Wagner, who worked in corporate stuff and is a big art collector. Elizabeth Michaels, who's brilliant, and insane. You had all these incredible women – Karen Ramspacher. You had, I mean, just, straight, gay; it was just so mixed, and it was just so many creative people, that you just – we'd just throw out these crazy ideas, like gagging the Statue of Liberty and someone would say, oh yeah, well you know, maybe the windows open, I think the windows open with a hex wrench, or something like that. We should just go check it out. And it just evolved. And some of the crazy ideas went nowhere, but some of these crazy ideas happen. So we physically gagged the Statue of Liberty.

One of the former Tourists knows someone who works for the Statue of

Liberty Museum. And if you go online, it's not listed in the catalog; but he found out that they still have the banners. Because there's also another banner, the size of the whole statue, that went over the pedestal, that said, Abortion is Health Care: Health Care is a Right. And that was like one of the choice things.

So it was a lot of –

SS: So their archivists saved the banner?

JW: It's not listed in the public catalog they put online. But they have it. And then after seven years passed, we had Matt Foreman — who might have been — there's a bunch of people who worked with us as lawyers. We had a close relationship with media – there were some of the ACT UP media people who were kind of in and out of Action Tours, and the same thing with the lawyers. So there were a lot of people involved.

So Matt Foreman approached them to see if they would give the banner back, and they said no. So they still have it. As of last year, they still have it.

SS: So I only have one last question. Are we ready for that?

JW: Okay.

SS: Is there anything that you think we haven't –

JW: I'm trying to think. I don't know. There's so much. There's just so, so much. Tony Arena recently gave me his raw copy of the Ashes Action, which, I was one of the marshals, and helped coordinate that. And that really broke – most of the ACT UP actions I can recall like specific conversations and planning. And that's the one where once it started happening, it's a blur. And it was just surreal, looking at that footage recently. And I think one of the things about that, I think really separate it from

everything else I did in ACT UP, was and also pertains to my own emotional burnout, was a lot of our anger and a lot of our fierceness was the surface. And below that was just this extraordinary grief. And I think the Ashes Action was one of the only actions we did where all that surface stuff was stripped away, and when we went there, it was just – pure grief. And in some ways, was like really one of the most honest actions we did.

01:10:00

And if there's one thing which I think may have helped me stay in ACT UP longer, and I think would have helped the group stay around longer, is if we found a better way of talking about and dealing with the stress of losing so many people. And I was reading articles around that same time about doctors, general practitioners in New York and big cities like that, who had a largely gay practice, who were either retiring or changing their practice, because they just couldn't deal with losing all these patients. And so many people were dealing with serial loss, the same kind veterans from Vietnam or World War II, survivors of the Holocaust, and other horrible things, have gone through. It was just really intense. And yeah, that was a surreal day.

And I think right now, I'm trying to get some friends who were involved with the DNC Convention this summer some copies to give out to the LGBT DNC members, because –

SS: Well, they should see our film, *United in Anger*.

JW: I will help you get that to them, if you want.

SS: Okay, great.

JW: Because that action also happened, like, three weeks before the election in '93.

SS: I have a weird question about that action. Okay, so we've all seen

the footage, and we know what happened there. So people came, they threw their ashes on the White House lawn. There was testimony from people who had thrown ashes. And then the action ends.

Then what did you do?

JW: We dispersed as a group. There was a lot of — I just need water —

SS: Did you just go off with a few people and have food or something?

Or did you get back on the bus?

JW: We went down in groups. They called us the Seeing Eye Dogs. We had a special group of marshals whose only job was to make sure the people who were carrying ashes got to the fence. And as of that morning, there was so much security, there was so much press beforehand. It was the first time George H. W. Bush acknowledged ACT UP, because he was being asked questions during the campaign about the Ashes Action, that we ended up doing it. So I was part of the group of, these core organizers.

So we went down early. We were staying at someone's townhouse in Baltimore. So we were going back. So we kind of left there. So, well, first off, you just made sure everyone left in a group, because we didn't want anyone arrested or lingering.

It also rained — God — as non-religious as I am, if you want to talk about just an incredible spiritual thing: we didn't think we were going to get to the fence. And the side of the fence that they were supposed to go to was completely blocked off. So we didn't know what we were going to do. We knew what we were going to do, and we were just focused on it, and that was it.

So someone came up with the idea of just going around to the other side of

the White House, because it takes the police a long time, doing it. And so we end up going by the Quilt, which I don't think we initially planned on doing. And that was incredible, because there were people, including mothers, there who were asking us what we were doing, and we told them. They said, I didn't know why I brought this, but now I do, and they gave people in the action their kids' ashes. You know, just strangers. So that was intense.

And so we went down to the other side of the White House, and the police didn't set up. And we had a wedge, and we just pushed through. And all I remember is just grabbing the person and the fence; walking my hand and somebody was linked to me; and just seeing ashes flying over.

So – when they read the testimony, we saw them, we saw the White House grounds staff gathering up to like clean up all the white spots. And then, right when the testimony finished, it rained. And it wasn't supposed to rain. It was just like a sudden downpour, which was good logistically for us, getting people, but it also meant that the ashes were washed into the White House. So they're there forever. They can't sweep it up, they can't deny it. They're there. Mothers brought their ashes to D.C., and their kids are on the White House lawn.

From what I remember, the organizers – we kind of went away as a group, and then we had to go back to that. So we were kind of there, just to deal with each other. And I was just so emotionally charged. It was not like any other ACT UP action.

SS: Right. And then how do you get home? Or did you all come down together?

JW: The organizers, yes. We drove down in a group. And I can't

01:15:00 remember who was driving. So we drove down together and we left together. Because again, we had a very –

SS: But were people just dispersed, or would people just go out and get drunk, or –

JW: I don't know. Again, it's like I don't know what people from the regular crowd, I don't know –

SS: But for yourself, I mean.

JW: Myself, we just, we ate dinner because when you finish an action, you're just really, really hungry. And one of the first things they teach you in CD training is, eat something; don't eat heavy; and don't drink too much, because you're really, either you're really hungry if you've been in jail for a long time – you're just doing it, so I don't think we drank much. We might have had something to drink, but we didn't go out and get drunk at all. And again, the state of mind we were in was just – it was just like this electric, overpowering –

So I think we were just talking, and just kind of decompressing; talking to each other about what happened, what worked.

It was also one of the first and only ACT UP actions where the entire crowd that showed up did exactly what the marshals told them to do. Where it's like usually herding cats. Everybody did what they were supposed to do, and we got to the White House fence. Which, that morning, when we left the brownstone, we didn't think was going to happen.

But everybody did their thing. Looking at the footage, I didn't remember that Frank Smithson and somebody else brought fake blood. Which really pissed off a lot

of people. Because the whole point of the action was supposed to be, no more symbolic blood, no more chalk outlines of living people. This is the real consequence of what we're living with every day; and you can't ignore it. So there was supposed to be a real – I remember at the meeting on Monday, there was a big, a lot of people, especially people who brought ashes, who were furious that one person would bring fake blood to this one action.

We just decompressed. And then just tried to get ourselves together, and go with what happened. Take care of ourselves, eat; relax; and then drive back to New York.

SS: Right. Okay, so here's my final question. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you consider its biggest disappointment?

JW: I think Silence = Death is – tackling that is ACT UP's greatest achievement. The gay community was really invisible before ACT UP. Now I hear about, Harvey Milk's assassination was the same week as the Jonestown massacre. Growing up, I remember the Jonestown massacre; I remember all that coverage; I can't remember anything about Harvey Milk. I only knew about the Aaron Fricke stuff because of my uncle. It wasn't – there was really nothing. And I think one thing that changed forever was that the LGBT community really asserted its voice and asserted its place at the table. And that's changed things forever. The stuff Action Tours did with *Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* did challenge Hollywood and ruffle feathers, and they really started to rethink, that oh, wow, maybe we need a different way of portraying people, instead of just a threat to everyone else, or the butt of everyone's jokes.

I think that was, more than anything else, it was just basically breaking that, the silence and the vacuum that the LGBT community existed in before ACT UP, in a huge way that never happened before. And Harvey Milk, Elaine Noble, lots of people contribute to that. And we stand on their shoulders. And a lot of my older friends in ACT UP were involved with other movements. Aldyn McKean with Vietnam; Ann Northrop with Vietnam; Elizabeth was involved in a lot of old pro-choice stuff. So you had a lot of people – who were doing that. But I think we really cracked that open. And I think a lot of people who are out of the closet now would not have been out of the closet if we did not shake up the world the way we shook it up then.

And I think that's the bigger change, aside from the little things, which weren't so little, about changing the CDC definition, and that. But I think we really changed the way the country thinks about LGBT issues, and really demanded respect.

SS: And what was the greatest disappointment?

01:20:00

JW: That we still don't have a cure, as far as things like that. As far as – I think that's, part of the burnout was that you're losing all these people, you're doing all this work, and you're still not, you still don't have a cure. I think also, in terms of the infighting at the end; I think the biggest disappointment was that structurally, our Robert's Rules was a little too loose. When I've done parliamentary stuff beyond that, there's a whole thing on Robert's Rules about civility and discourse. And when I've looked at the other Oral History tapes about the big Treatment and Data fight; and TAG hive-off; I don't think it was men versus women, because you had some women, like Barbara Hughes, who went off with TAG; you had some men from T&D who stayed. I think the biggest thing was with the facilitating, we didn't stop people from personalizing

it, and playing different cards. You don't agree with my position because you're sexist; you don't agree with my position because you're HIV-negative. And I think that type of politics is really toxic, really very toxic. It's been toxic in every other group I've been involved with since then. And looking back at that really painful meeting, which I still remember clearly, I think that was my biggest regret, was that we allowed – we didn't nip it in the bud when people were starting to play those cards with each other. You can have people argue about any –

SS: Well, what was it really about, then?

JW: Well, I mean there's a disagreement. There was a clinical trial. And the thing was, do you want to let the trial go forward immediately; or do you want to wait, and to try to tweak it, to deal with –

SS: You mean 076 –

JW: Pregnant women, and stuff like that. And it was one of those things where in any activist movement, you travel down the road of the highest ideal; and sometimes you hit a wall, where you have to decide that you can't travel down the road. Pragmatically, you have to go one way or the other. And neither way is perfect. And you just kind of have to figure out how to do that. And I think that's kind of where we were at. And there were a lot of times when ACT UP did it.

But during that discussion on the floor, what really tore the group apart, though, was when people stopped — and the facilitators were allowing people to not argue the argument for their viewpoint, but just start throwing out: You're sexist; you're HIV-negative; you're this, you're that. And then the conversation wasn't about the real issue, or acknowledging –

SS: So you think the real issue was 076.

JW: I believe the real issue was people playing – I think ACT UP's greatest strength was the direct democracy; and the fact that we were non-hierarchal, and that we really created this great system. I think the breakdown was also with that system, where we were allowing people –

SS: Right, but I'm asking you to go deeper than that, Jon. Because if people are using fallback, it's because something else is – there's something else going on that can't be discussed. And I'm trying to find out from you what you think that was.

Why would people suddenly be using this whole other method of communication?

JW: I think people naturally do that, though. If you're not winning an argument, there's a natural tendency to try to take a cheap shot. But usually when you have a better run parliamentary procedure, you can keep it from going too far in that direction. Also, when I talk to people now, what's really been moving me, especially talking with people who I wasn't that close to in ACT UP, on both sides of that issue; is the fact that they were also dealing with serial loss. And you're hearing Peter Staley talk about serial loss; Tracy Morgan talk about serial loss; and the fact that at that time, all of us were going through this horrible, horrible grief process, which was putting everyone on edge. I think that's why we –

SS: And you're saying you that that's what was actually undiscussable.

JW: That was one of the, yeah, that was one of the undiscussable things, is

that there was a lot of stuff that was happening personally, and that is – I think if we had better ways of – I don't think an activist group should become an encounter session. So you don't want to waste the business time on the floor talking about all these things. But on some level, as a group, just like we took care of people who had health problems, or took care of people's physical needs when they were arrested; you need to take care of people's emotional needs when [they're] going through this.

SS: So the kind of experience you had with Charles Brown; that type of thing, or what you guys came through for Rex; that was, in a sense, private. It was a private conversation in ACT UP; it wasn't the public conversation of ACT UP.

JW: Yes.

SS: Okay.

JW: People in ACT UP would do that. If you heard somebody was sick or whatever, people would visit. If you heard somebody was in jail –

SS: But I mean, on the floor –

JW: There would be a call for that stuff. But there wasn't – and I don't even think there's an easy answer of how do you keep ACT UP focused on business, so it doesn't become a therapy session where people are focused inward instead of outward. And I think that's what killed Queer Nation, is it became too focused in on all the problems within Queer Nation, and accusing everyone else of being sexist, racist, or whatever; that nothing that was happening outside the group so it just fizzled.

So I don't know what the easy answer is to doing that. But yeah, I think there was a lot of burnout. And then around that same time, you did have David Ho and

the drug cocktail; and you had Bill Clinton, who is far from being a perfect president, but he actually did start doing stuff, and things did get better, a lot better, under Bill Clinton. So it was finally like we had, we politically had that much more breathing space than we had a couple years ago. You finally had a drug that was really improving people's lives; and you're emotionally crashing and trying to deal with stuff.

I went through about a year without just really having any fun, and I really, I was talking with a therapist about it. And he said that I might have had a partial nervous breakdown after that summer, where everything crashed. It was just, people need to deal with it.

SS: Do you think there was any racism going on?

JW: If you have 300 people in a room, I'm not going to say no one's racist or no one's sexist, because when you have that many people in a room, you're going to get something. I think when you have – but when you look at what ACT UP was about, look at what it was doing; ACT UP attracted progressive people, who really had an ideal vision for a better world; politically, health-care-wise, socially; equality. I mean, you really did. So I think you have a lot of people coming into ACT UP who wanted something better. So I don't think they were racists, I think they were really inexperienced.

My high school had maybe four or five black kids in it, total. We did a black musicals freshman, sophomore year, and there was only one black kid who tried out for it. We did *Purlie*. It's just – so growing up, I really didn't have experience with people of color. I knew a lot of women, but I didn't know a lot of people who were involved in the feminist movement, so I didn't have a lot of experience in that, though.

So yeah, there was from Day One in ACT UP New York to the present; yeah, there's a learning curve, to get caught up on it.

SS: Well, what's interesting is when you look at –

JW: But I don't think people were intentionally, I remember Maxine, during one of these arguments, standing up and saying, in the most beautiful Maxine way — she was really incredible with that stuff — she was saying, look, we need to dial it back a little bit. There's a difference between being ignorant and racism. Not everyone here –

SS: When I ask that, I don't mean about personal. I don't mean personal attitude. Let me just tell you what I have in mind.

When you look at the AIDS situation today, we have drugs; many countries in the world have no access to them, because of global pharma. So the way that the access is constructed right now has a lot to do with First World versus Third World, right? People of color around the world who are HIV-positive don't have the same access, globally, that white people do, to drugs.

JW: And same thing in New York.

SS: Right. So I'm not talking about whether I used the wrong word or you used the wrong word. I'm talking about the way things have played out. Or, we have these incredibly high infection rates among young gay men of color. Right? So the things that we won, the gains are being obstructed by institutional racism. So was there anything in ACT UP in the way that we approached certain issues or certain policy decisions that we made that might have reflected or contributed to that?

JW: I don't know. One argument I have with a lot of people who complain about gay pride is just drag queens and leather queens, and there's no business suits like themselves; like, well – you can't expect a drag queen to wear a suit and represent you. You need to go there.

So ACT UP was founded in the West Village, amongst gay men. So that was a heavy turnout. You did have committees that dealt with issues of color. During larger actions that were not people-of-color specific, people would bring up issues regarding communities of color, or women, and stuff like that. And the floor was always supportive of it. And the floor really did challenge that.

I mean one of our biggest campaigns and achievements, that required a huge amount of effort, was changing the CDC definition of AIDS to include the opportunistic infections that women and people of color got. And that was a huge thing, and that was all about women and people of color.

Around the time, I remember, there was a group of HIV-positive women who created — it was Stand Up Harlem — it was something like ACT UP — but they wanted to organize on their own, up in Harlem. And they would come to some of the meetings, and we'd support them, they'd support us. I don't think ACT UP really shut out, and ACT UP was constantly challenging –

SS: So then how did we get from where we were at, in terms of ACT UP's agenda, to where we are now, in terms of race?

JW: In terms of AIDS, or just –

SS: In terms of how race is so determinate around the world today about whether or not you have access to adequate prevention or adequate

treatment.

JW: I think a lot of it is class, and you have to kind of look a little beyond just skin color. Because you look at poverty, and that's a bigger factor on anything in healthcare. The reason we discovered AIDS in the gay community before the Haitian community or other communities that were being affected in 1981 was because gay men had health insurance; and in big cities, they would go see the same doctor, and have a continuity of care, so doctors noticed a cluster of something wrong. Whereas poor people don't have insurance; they go to an emergency room when it's necessary. So a doctor doesn't notice; oh, this is unusual. They just say, oh, well, it's an anomaly; maybe that person is doing drugs, maybe – it doesn't get noticed.

So I think there's a lot of stuff institutionally within AIDS that are really more about class. When you look at the countries where things are really bad, and again, poverty is the biggest issue in healthcare. But also, in the United States, there's about 300 women a year in New York who only find out they're positive when – oh no, I'm sorry; 300 people in New York a year who find out they're positive when they go to an emergency room because they're feeling really sick, and find out that they have full-blown AIDS; not positive, but full-blown AIDS. There's a lot of babies that are born where the mothers don't know they're HIV-positive until the baby becomes symptomatic. And with infants, once they become symptomatic, they don't respond to the cocktail; so they die of old AIDS, like it was 1982.

And you know, that still happens in New York. I think it's a poverty thing and a class thing more so than just racism. Racism and sexism is a part of it, because we don't value women as much as we value men. It's much easier to devalue someone who

looks differently than you; but a lot of it is really economic. Healthcare and economics, you know. We'll invest a lot of money in a country that has oil, but if a country doesn't have oil, we don't care. We don't care about genocide, we don't care about anything.

SS: So what are you doing now? What is your main commitment, politically?

JW: All over the place. I was involved with Democratic electoral stuff before I came out, and then LGBT stuff. After my burnout, I kind of just laid low for awhile, just to get my own head together. And then started getting involved with electoral stuff. So I do some Democratic electoral stuff; some pure LGBT-equality-activist stuff. But again, the ACT UP stuff is always with you and kind of influences, and —

SS: Are you supporting Christine Quinn for mayor?

JW: I love all — I think all of the people who are — all the Democrats who are running are great on LGBT issues and HIV issues. So I think they're all great. So I don't want say I'm not supporting somebody.

I think Quinn would be an effective mayor. I think also the New York City mayors have a national platform that's larger than a lot of governors'. And I think having an LGBT person on that level nationally would have an impact far beyond New York.

So I love Scott Stringer; love Bill de Blasio; love them all. But I really would think that there would be something with Quinn. So I think that would be good.

SS: Well, we'll see.

JW: We'll see. But who knows?

SS: Who knows?

JW: Yeah.

SS: All right, thanks, Jon.

JW: Sure.

SS: Thank you.