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Interviewee: **Steve Quester**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Steve Quester

January 17, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: So we just start, so you tell us your name, your age, where we are and today's date?

STEVE QUESTER: I'm Steve Quester. I'm 40. We're in Brooklyn, New York, in my home, and today is January 17th, 2004.

SS: Where were you born, Steve?

SQ: I was born in Manhattan. My parents lived in Yonkers, at the time. I was born at New York Hospital.

SS: So, you grew up in Yonkers?

SQ: No, I moved out of there when I was a baby. I grew up in New Jersey, and for a couple of years, in Houston.

SS: So, did you have a politically minded family?

SQ: You know, it was kind of newspaper-reading, always voting liberals. They never, ever were out on a demonstration. My mom joined Hadassah at one point, and the National Organization for Women, at one point. So, it was kind of a very mainstream kind of liberal, yeah.

SS: Well, the National Organization for Women in those days was not really mainstream.

SQ: In those days. When I was a little kid, she wasn't involved in NOW – it's more when I was a teenager, or even in college. I think it was pretty mainstream.

SS: Okay, when did your family come to this country?

SQ: On my dad's side – his parents came in the '20s to escape the German recession. They weren't Jewish. They went back to Germany in the 1970s to retire. And my mom – both her parents were from New York.

SS: So, you're like a third generation New Yorker.

SQ: Is it three? I think so, yeah.

SS: So, when did you first start to become aware of the social, political world – if it wasn't something that was really emphasized in your family?

SQ: Well, I was aware in my family. I remember in third grade telling some kid at school how bad Nixon was and how everyone should vote for McGovern, and then getting hit over the head with his notebook. So, you know, strong opinions must have been expressed in my home, for me to think about that as a nine-year-old. And I remember in sixth grade, already I was passionately interested in equality. The first time I read in one of those weekly readers that the United States has X percent of the population and Y percent of the wealth, and how many people did without in the world, I was horrified. I couldn't believe it.

SS: So, how did that start to manifest actively? Or, at what point did that start to manifest?

SQ: From the time I was in sixth grade, I talked about it all the time, and read and read and read. It wasn't until high school that I took any kind of political action, which was a friend and I tried to start a high school chapter of the John Anderson for President campaign – it seemed like a very progressive thing to do.

SS: In New Jersey?

SQ: Yeah.

SS: How did it go?

SQ: It went nowhere, but it was fun.

SS: So, you did leafleting, and that kind of thing?

SQ: I think mostly we just signed up kids at school who were interested, and then never really did anything with it. Then as soon as I got to college, I got active right away.

SS: What did you do?

SQ: Some stuff for farm workers, stuff for the Gay Rights Bill in New York City, that kept getting defeated year after year.

SS: When did you come out in that story – if you were doing gay rights stuff in college?

SQ: I was out to the world sometime during my freshman year of college.

SS: Okay. And, you became active in gay politics?

SQ: A little bit. You know, my role was to try to urge the gay people at Columbia to do political stuff – which they mostly weren't very interested in.

SS: Tell us about this. So, we're talking around 1980?

SQ: 1981, '82, would be my freshman year.

SS: So, what was a gay organization at Columbia like, before AIDS?

00:05:00

SQ: It was a small group of men. Columbia College was all male. There was a separate organization called Lesbians at Barnard, that I went to a meeting once, to talk about how much we need to work together. I think I was very earnest. It was like the Audio Visual Club at a high school – it was the geeks and the misfits. I'm sure there were cool queer kids out there, and they weren't going to a gay organization in college. There'd be weekly meetings, and I have no idea what we did at those meetings, other than plan the famous monthly Columbia gay dances, which were a big, big deal.

SS: I remember. I used to date a Barnard girl, who was in Lesbians –

LAB, it was called. I remember those dances.

SQ: The whole city came up to those dances.

SS: So, you were involved in that, too? So, you were doing the partying part, as well?

SQ: I went to the dances, absolutely, absolutely.

SS: What was it like at school at that time? To be out at Columbia?

SQ: I definitely caught shit for it, but nothing that threatened me physically or my ability to stay where I was and complete my studies. It was just, guys leaving the shower if I came in, or leaving the elevator if I came in – stuff like that. In sophomore year, when kids were yelling outside my door at night, I went to the dorm counselor and he threatened to kick them all out of the dorm if they did it again.

SS: What about relationships with other political organizations? Was the gay organization part of any kind of coalition?

SQ: No, not at all.

SS: Why was that?

SQ: In those days, you had your political gays and you had your social gays. Most of them were not interested in political action.

SS: So, it was because the members of the organization didn't want it – not because the other groups were not interested in working with you?

SQ: I have no idea what the other groups thought. I remember now, when I was a sophomore – one of the things I did – and it was a Gay People at Columbia project that was sanctioned by the University by the residency system, is I'd talk to freshman on their dorm floors. I'd be like, "Hi, I'm a gay student, and let's talk," which was a really

great thing. It was actually a very political act in those days.

SS: Okay. So, when did you first become aware of AIDS?

SQ: Whenever it hit the news. I remember seeing that first article. It was on like the back page of the A section of the [*New York Times*], I think – “Rare Cancer Found in Gay Men.” So as it became more of a thing in the news, I knew more I didn’t know from any other source. And, I remember the front page of the *New York Native* in those years, and being very angry at the publisher of the *Native* for sensationalizing what was happening and coming up with weird theories.

SS: Do you remember any of those theories?

SQ: I remember the picture of the dolphins. I remember the dolphins really well, and that was after the pigs.

SS: So when did AIDS first become something that you weren’t just reading about, but that was somehow in your life?

SQ: Probably my senior year was the first time one of my friends at school got sick. So, it would be 1985.

SS: What happened?

SQ: Everyone was horrified. He got sick, he died. I still thought of it as something that happened to gay men who were older than I was. And at that point, I was – there was an evolution, somewhere in the middle of the ’80s, where I switched to safe sex, but also pretty much figured that I was infected already. There was some shift towards seeing that, oh, it’s going to happen to people as young as me, too. And I was just sort of waiting for the sword to drop.

SS: In the ways that you were having sex with the people you were having

sex with, at that time, was safe sex assumed, or was it just being introduced? What was the culture of it? This is '85?

00:10:00

SQ: The culture of it was, nobody gave me an argument if I pulled out a condom, and no one ever pulled out the condom themselves. That's my memory of it, anyway.

SS: Could you just tell me where this was? Were you going out? Or is this in college, with other college guys?

SQ: It was mostly other college guys.

SS: So you weren't going out on the town? You weren't going to clubs?

SQ: I was, but I wasn't meeting anybody at the clubs.

SS: How did you find out about ACT UP?

SQ: A friend of mine from Columbia was involved, Andrew Miller. He was the chair of the Action Committee when I got back from two years in Israel in 1987. I was bewildered. I didn't understand why AIDS would be a reason for a political group to exist. I thought it was kind of sad and pathetic. But I respect Andrew, who's a smart guy. So, I got really interested through him, and went to my first demo before I went to my first meeting.

SS: What was the demo?

SQ: It was the Civil Rights Commission hearings in Washington, where we wore clown masks. So, I took the day off work – that was in '88.

SS: Can you describe that action a little bit, and who you were with, and how you got your clown mask and all that, so people can understand how it all happened?

SQ: Well, I remember the moving force on that day being – the Chant Queen, his name just popped out of my head –

SS: **Ira? Ron?**

SQ: Ron Goldberg – at least, he was the bus captain. I went down with Andrew, and we had the masks on the bus with us. Someone had organized that.

We went because Reagan had asked the National Science Foundation if it was good idea to quarantine people with HIV and the NSF said no. Or he had asked the Surgeon General, isn't a good idea to quarantine people? The Surgeon General had said no. So, he decided to ask the Civil Rights Commission, because he didn't like the answers he'd gotten so far. So, they're having hearings on balancing public health and privacy rights. And, I understood at that point already that actually public health and privacy rights were the same – that what was good for one, was good for the other. There was no conflict, and that they basically were going to go talk to these bunch of clowns on the Civil Rights Commission, because they couldn't get the answer they wanted from real scientists. So we demonstrated, and with clown masks hidden in our clothes. And after we were done picketing at lunchtime, we went into the hearings and we sat down. The Civil Rights Commission is facing us, and some guy, with his back to us, is testifying and we hear some right-wing wonk talking about his graphs and his charts, and 8x10 color glossies with the paragraph on the back of each one, explaining what it was – and, he's going to tell them why it was actually a problem to have people out in public, like teachers, if they have HIV. And, we all put on clown masks and just sat there. There were a lot of us – like, a busload – we just sat there listening, with our clown masks on. And the guy who was testifying couldn't see us. And, Mary Berry looked like she was

going to shit her pants – she was having such a good time, because she was like, I think the one person on the Civil Rights Commission that Reagan didn't have in his pocket. And, it was boring to just sit there after awhile. So we stood up and held up our watches – the time old honored ACT UP tactic – time is running out. We held up our watches, that gets boring after a while, and so we turn our backs. And now, we're standing with our backs to him. And he says, "Well, you'll see here on the graph, the graph bends over," and all of us just spontaneously bent over and we went, "Woooo!" – and the guy turns around, and it's the first time he sees that there's an audience full of clowns listening to him. And he kind of lost his composure. It was fun. We had a really good time.

SS: How did it feel to do something like that?

00:15:00

SQ: It was fantastic. I was extremely happy. It was exactly the kind of action that I wanted to take. And then we took the bus directly to the middle of an ACT UP meeting. We walked in, in our clown masks, triumphant heroes, and it was the first time I see an ACT UP meeting. There were like 400 people at the Center, and the facilitator says, "All right, yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll get to that later on the agenda, go sit down," and go right back to Michael Petrelis, ranting about Bailey House and beds – a rant in which he uses the word "nigger" and is then ejected from the room by the facilitator. So, that was my first experience of an ACT UP meeting.

SS: And so you stayed?

SQ: And I stayed anyway.

SS: How did you first plug into the organization?

SQ: Action Committee. I knew Andrew and I knew Duncan Osborne through

Andrew.

SS: Can you tell us who was on the Action Committee at that time and what they did?

SQ: Do I remember who was on the Action Committee? I do not remember. Ron Goldberg for sure, because I remember he's the one that brought the idea – which was early in my ACT UP career, the summer of '88 – brought the idea of targeting Stephen Joseph to the Action Committee.

SS: Can you explain to history who Stephen Joseph was?

SQ: Stephen Joseph was the New York City Health Commissioner –

SS: Appointed by Koch, right?

SQ: Oh yes. And, ACT UP had already tangled with him over something or another, but people who had represented themselves as the Metropolitan Health Association in order to have a meeting with him, and took over his office, got arrested, carried out, whatever. So, he announced that New York City had adopted a new method of calculating how many people are infected with HIV. And, it was based on extrapolation from statistics in San Francisco. And, based on their calculation, they more than halved their estimate of how many people were HIV-infected in New York. ACT UP's attitude about that was, the Health Department, at the mayor's behest, rather than pushing for HIV prevention and HIV services, is trying to make the problem look smaller than it is. So that we don't have as much a stance to fight for prevention and services. So, we took over his office again. That was my first arrest. And it went to trial.

SS: How did you take it over?

SQ: It was easy.

SS: This is the summer of 1988?

SQ: August, 1988. We just walked in.

SS: Where was his office?

SQ: It was on Worth Street – the Department of Health. It's this gorgeous, Depression deco building, and we just walked in. It was an era of much looser security. It was like an element of surprise – we walked in on a meeting. He was holding a meeting with a bunch of people at a big, long board table and we walked in and started shouting, and there was someone videotaping – one of us – and so, he just dismissed the people at this meeting, and we all sat down at the board table and he just sat there, kind of stony-faced, staring at us, while we demanded that he tell us why he was manipulating the statistics. Then he had the police take us out.

SS: So, you got arrested – so where did you go?

SQ: Pitt Street station, the usual place for ACT UP.

SS: And, who were some other people that got arrested with you?

SQ: Mark Harrington, Jim Eigo, David Robinson. There were about 11 of us in all. I don't remember who else right now.

SS: And how long did you sit there?

SQ: In jail? Not very long. I think they let us out with pink tickets. We had gotten violation trespass. And then later, the DA amended it to misdemeanor trespass. And we went to trial, because the statute for criminal trespass in the third degree says that the complainant has to be the proprietor of the premises on which the people are alleged to have trespassed. Stephen Joseph is the proprietor of the Health Department. So, good, we can make him testify. So we sat through a trial that we knew we would lose, so that

we could just put Stephen Joseph on the stand and question him.

SS: Who were the lawyers?

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SQ: Joan Gibbs was the advisor for the five of us who represented ourselves.

And, I don't remember the name of the man who represented the other six.

SS: So, what happened?

SQ: We were guilty as charged.

SS: No, I mean when he came to testify.

SQ: He was mad. He was really, really mad. And we were allowed – because we were representing ourselves, you have a lot of leeway. We were allowed to ask him questions about AIDS, and you know, he just gave the same answers he would have given to a newspaper.

SS: So, that was the first time you really spoke to him, face to face? Or, that was the second time?

SQ: Second time.

SS: So, tell us the whole story of your relationship with Stephen Joseph, because it became quite an intimate relationship over time.

SQ: We ended up calling our affinity group Surrender Dorothy, because it felt a little bit like *The Wizard of Oz*. We're like, writing "Surrender Dorothy" across the sky – we wanted Stephen Joseph. So, the thing about ACT UP was that there was always somebody in the institution that we wanted to target. And so, somebody got us a memo with his schedule. We had a schedule. He didn't know we had a schedule.

SS: Do you remember how you got it?

SQ: No. So, all he knew was that we showed up wherever he was – in

restaurants, following him through revolving doors. We'd be back at the Health Department, releasing balloons into the high ceiling. We'd picket outside talks of his. His home telephone number got out, which ended up leading to a 5 a.m. police call out to my apartment, which was no fun.

SS: What happened?

SQ: They said they had traced calls to Stephen Joseph from my phone – which they had. They were not made by me, but it's true. I let them in. They showed me their badges and I let them in. I didn't know my rights. And they said, you know, "We're going to come back and arrest everyone in this apartment. You better not do this again." But they also had a list. They were like, "Do you know Mark Harrington? How do you know him? Do you know Jim Eigo, how do you know him?" But they never came back.

SS: And that's it? They dropped their charges after that?

SQ: They didn't arrest me. They didn't bring me any charges. But then – Donna Minkowitz wrote about it in the [*Village*] *Voice* – "the police are harassing ACT UP," and Nat Hentoff wrote about it – "Stephen Joseph is being harassed by these terrible people." And Donna writes about it, and Stephen – like, back and forth. Then, I write a letter to the *Voice*, saying I am the activist that Nat Hentoff is writing about, and this is what really happened, and Hentoff's response in the *Voice* was, "If the police had done the things that Quester says they did, they would have been arrested, because it's illegal." That was the response of the great civil libertarian.

SS: So what finally happened with Stephen Joseph? Did he ever recant on the numbers?

SQ: No, no, he never recanted on anything, and we've certainly had worse

Health Commissioners since him.

SS: Do you have any idea of what's become of him, by the way?

SQ: No, it would be interesting to Google him.

SS: So, what were some of the other things that you involved in, in ACT UP besides Surrender Dorothy? Was Surrender Dorothy only about Stephen Joseph?

SQ: Yes. I was in the affinity group Action Tours.

SS: Ah yes, tell us all about that. How did that get started?

SQ: Action Tours got started at the anniversary demo that was in Albany – I can't remember which year that would be – and we wanted to get into the Chambers. The Legislature was in session during our demonstration. We wanted to get into the Chambers and disrupt.

SS: What was the demand, do you remember?

SQ: We had a long list of demands for the governor, the legislature. I think it was mostly about funding, would be my best guess. And there was no way they were letting any demonstrators anywhere near the legislature's building – that big, beautiful building in Albany. So, we all had tags that said, "Action Tours," with a bus and our names. And we took two tours of the Statehouse – one just to scope it out. And we had a great time chatting with our tour guide – "Yeah, that's really from the Civil War? – and talking about it.

SS: And you did this on the spot? No – you went up early and did reconnaissance ?

SQ: We did the reconnaissance that day. And, we needed to get up some

00:25:00 stairs to try to get into the legislature from a high floor. They had some doors up by the balcony. And we said, "We want to see the grand staircase, we want to see the grand staircase." And the tour guide says, "Oh we can't go up there today, because of those demonstrators." "What are they demonstrating about?" And we said, "We really want to go up there." He said, "I can show it to you, but we can't go up there." So we said, "Well, we just want to take a picture on the grand staircase." And so, you know he's holding up the camera and we're like, "A little higher, a little higher," and we inched our way up, and then eventually doused ourselves with theatrical blood and opened the door of the legislature and yelled into it, and got dragged away right away.

SS: And who was on this action with you?

SQ: Jim Wagner, Rex Wasserman, Jamie Leo – I don't remember who all else.

SS: So, how long did you stay in Action Tours, as an affinity group?

SQ: Years and years.

SS: Can you explain a little bit, so people can understand what it was like to be in an affinity group, what kind of relationships you had, and what you guys would do together?

SQ: Well, I mean the main point of the affinity group for me was security – was about security of information. Because you do political planning, and the police know about your planning because they come to the meetings and they listen in, and these days, they read the e-mails. In an affinity group, no one knows about your planning except the affinity group. The police don't know, because you don't tell other activists outside the affinity group what you're planning. And you don't do it on the phone. And, I became close friends with a lot of people in Action Tours, or a lot of people came into

Action Tours because we were friends. We met every Sunday for years, and we'd sit down and say, "Okay, what action can we do? What can we do now?" And, we did some really spectacular things.

SS: Where would you meet?

SQ: At someone's apartment.

SS: Tell me some of the things you guys did.

SQ: We dropped a 900 foot banner off the Statue of Liberty that said, "Abortion is Healthcare, Healthcare is a Right." It was off of the pedestal, with another banner over her face that said, "No Choice, No Liberty."

SS: And how did you make that happen?

SQ: Many, many, many reconnaissance trips. We had to – some things I'm not going to say on video, just because we might want to try them again. We had to really figure out the mechanics of it, right down to the Garfield balloons that someone held so they would block the security camera in the crown of the Statue of Liberty. And, we all got away. No one got busted on that action. We had to bring cinder blocks to the Statue of Liberty. But, you wrap something in nice wrapping paper. The cinder blocks anchored it, and it stayed up. We rented a helicopter which took pictures of it, and stayed up long enough for us to get the press photos out and then we got back on the boat. And the park police came on the boat, and they searched some hapless Italian tourists who were wearing all black, because they figured these must be the activists, and they didn't touch us, because we were all in Republican drag.

SS: What was Republican drag?

SQ: I had grey slacks and a nice button-down shirt. And I had hair in those

days, and it was parted on the side. It was great.

SS: It's interesting, because abortion is one of the few non-AIDS issues that ACT UP embraced. Was there ever a conversation about that, in the organization?

SQ: Before WHAM, the Women's Health Action and Mobilization, was founded, there was no conversation about it. It was a no-brainer. ACT UP was militantly pro-choice. The ACT UP contingents at pro-choice mobilizations were incredibly inspiring and no one questioned it. Of course that's what we'll do. They're the same issue. It's about control over our bodies. And then when WHAM was founded – so, if you did AIDS you went to ACT UP, if you did abortion you went to WHAM, and a lot of the times, it was same people. It was just, which framework – including Action Tours. Action Tours at the Statue of Liberty that day was essentially functioning as an affinity group of WHAM.

SS: Because ultimately – and we'll get to this much later – but there were tensions in ACT UP about how broad the agenda should be. And yet, abortion seems to not have ever been debated. Was it debated?

00:30:00

SQ: Not to my recollection. But, abortion also completely fell off of ACT UP's agenda when WHAM was founded, unless ACT UP and WHAM were doing a joint action. It was very easy and neat that way, because it was totally the same people doing a lot of the work.

SS: Who were some of those people?

SQ: Karen Ranspacher, Elizabeth Michaels.

SS: So, it was heterosexual women in ACT UP. That's interesting.

SQ: Yeah, I couldn't tell you how much of WHAM were straight women and how much were lesbians. I actually only went to one WHAM meeting. I went as a representative of the Church Ladies for Choice – to ask WHAM to give us \$100 to rent a white convertible for the Gay Pride Parade. We decided that the Church Ladies for Choice must have a white convertible for the Gay Pride Parade. And, I remember one member of WHAM whispering to another member of WHAM, “We'd better vote yes – the Church Ladies have raised all the money in our budget.” That's before WHAM had the big money.

SS: What other things did Action Tours do?

SQ: We dropped a very long banner from the roof restaurant of Saks Fifth Avenue for the Pope, that said, “Condoms Save Lives.”

SS: What do you mean for the Pope?

SQ: He was on his way from Cardinal O'Connor's residence to St. Patrick's Cathedral and – whatever it is, 50th or 51st Street he was going up – that's right below the windows of that restaurant. So, I was one of the two people in the balcony.

SS: You have to tell us how you made this happen.

SQ: Obviously, we had brunch at Saks Fifth Avenue, prior to that. And we needed to see if the windows opened. That was part of the mechanics at the Statue of Liberty, too – how do you open the windows? So we had a waiter show us. “We want to take a picture out the window, I don't want the reflection of the windows. Does it open all the way? Oh good, thank you.” Hang out, so we could check out this little ledge outside the window, and what it was like. On the day of, we contrived to get that table by the windows – I don't really remember how, but we had some cockamamie story. But,

there were members of Action Tours all over that restaurant. It was like, I think, three or four tables. One was a big birthday party. Karen's mother was there, and someone's sister was there pretending to be this woman's daughter. And, it was her birthday, so they made all the waiters come over and sing "Happy Birthday," so the waiters wouldn't be there to stop us from going out the window. At another table, the guy – who's name I can't remember, but he was the Santa Claus from Macy's who got fired for being HIV-positive – he was there, with another activist who was pretending to be his daughter, and they pretended to have a fight and even broke a plate and stomped away and caused a big distraction over there. We had this very large banner kind of squirreled away. We went out on the balcony, and we were out there before anyone in the restaurant knew what was happening. And there were sharpshooters on the roofs across from us. So, we just kept our hands very visible, and did all the rope-tying kind of really slowly and obviously, so that they could see what they were doing. The cops came and pulled us in. Years later, in a therapy group, I met someone who was a waiter there, and I said, "Oh, you remember that?" And he goes, "That was you?" And he was all angry because we had put everyone in danger by doing this action. And I was like, get over yourself. It was a really good action.

SS: Do you think the Pope saw it?

SQ: Maybe. The crowd outside saw it. They were all booing. There was this big crowd waiting for the Pope. They're all booing, and then when the police pulled up, they all applauded.

SS: How did you get the ideas to just violate all of these institutions and feel that you could just walk and in out of these sacred iconic buildings? Where did

that come from?

00:35:00

SQ: We're mostly privileged people. The members of Action Tours were mostly white, mostly middle class, a lot of professionals. We're the people that don't get followed around when we walk into Saks Fifth Avenue. It's like, all these spaces already belong to us, and we all got a lot of glee out of horrifying and shocking the custodians of these spaces – like our poor tour guide in Albany – when we revealed ourselves for being the troublemakers that they didn't know we were. Did you know there was a jail cell in the basement of Saks Fifth Avenue?

SS: A jail cell? No. Why? Were you brought there?

SQ: We were jailed in the basement of Saks Fifth Avenue, yes we were. And the Security Chief came to the jail cell and he said, "You know you're banned from Saks. If you're seen here, we'll have you arrested immediately." And I said to him, "Does that mean that I can't use my Saks card anymore?" – because I really did have one at the time. And he said, "Well, I don't know about that." By the way, I have been back to Saks, and I was not jailed immediately.

SS: So, nothing happened after that? They let you go?

SQ: No, the police took off us to a precinct. We were given DATs [Desk Appearance Tickets] after a few hours, and had one of the usual community service ACDs [Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal], or maybe plea to a violation or something.

SS: Can you explain the support structure that an affinity group would have to create to do an action like this?

SQ: We always had on-site support and off-site support. So, on-site support

would be present at the action, but never reveal themselves to be part of the action – so they could observe everything that was happening, and they kind of follow out and watched. I remember when we interrupted Dan Rather on CBS News, in '91, I was outside doing support, and the inside support person – I could see him in the crowd, with all the people who had John Weir and Dale Peck in handcuffs and are pushing them, and he just blended in. He was wearing a nice fedora – just blended in, but he was watching to make sure that everything was okay. And then we'd have somebody in an apartment with phone lines and hopefully a fax, who would get lawyers and politicians on the case as soon as the arrest happened. And we had someone else doing off-site media, who would blast fax the press release the moment that the arrest happened.

SS: Now, would that person be from the Media Committee? Or, would they be the media person from your affinity group?

SQ: The media person from our affinity group.

SS: Okay. So, no one else in ACT UP would know this was going to happen?

SQ: That's right.

SS: What about the lawyers?

SQ: We'd tell the lawyers afterwards. I don't think the lawyers were in on any of this stuff beforehand. It's hard to remember exactly, but we'd call lawyers afterwards, and usually at the beginning of the arrest you don't need a lawyer. So, we'd make sure there were lawyers on call. Sometimes we'd call beforehand to say, "Something's going to happen, we need you to be on call." But, they didn't usually go down to the precinct. But sometimes, we'd have politicians' friends call.

SS: Who were the good politicians?

SQ: Tom Duane. Sometimes, we'd pretend we were from Ruth Messenger's office, and call ourselves. Duane was always good at getting us sprung. And people were rarely put through the system, from our actions. The folks who interrupted Sharon Stone on *Saturday Night Live* was also my affinity group.

SS: Were you part of that?

SQ: I was part of the planning. I wasn't in the action. They were put through the system. NBC has a lot of clout, and they were really mad.

SS: So you were saying –

00:40:00 SQ: I'm a little uneasy talking about Action Tours on camera, because we never took credit for what we did. If anyone in ACT UP had asked me, what's Action Tours? My answer was always, it's an entity shrouded in mystery, because we wanted the authorities to think that the population was mobilized against them. We didn't want them to know that it was the same band of pranksters doing all these different actions.

SS: So you were really a vanguard, but you wanted it to look like a mass?

SQ: Exactly right.

SS: We interviewed Jamie Leo and he talked about a lot of this, too, so you haven't broken any confidence. Let's talk about the Dan Rather action – can you tell us what was at stake and how it got planned?

SQ: In January of '91, ACT UP called a Day of Desperation, and the idea was to – ACT UP asked affinity groups to mobilize all over the city all day long, and then end with a big shut-down of Grand Central Station. And, Action Tours decided that if we got some media the night before, that would enhance everyone's actions that day. So, we

used the model of – we were thinking about the – there were lesbians who invaded the House of Lords over some anti-queer law, in England. And I think they swung in on ropes. We didn't do any swinging in on ropes, but we interrupted right in the middle of what they were doing. We have to do that. We have to do it to the news media, we have to do it to the nightly news. We have to interrupt the nightly news. What are we going to say to them? Okay, because we figure we've only got a few seconds before they go off the air. So, we decided that the first word has to be "AIDS." So if nothing else is heard, they hear the word AIDS. We decided, "AIDS is News, Fight AIDS not Arabs" – because it was during the Gulf War. So, we had teams go to the *McNeil-Lehrer Report* and CBS, and I think NBC, and there were wild rumors afterwards about why ABC wasn't targeted. It wasn't targeted because we had no one on the inside who could help get us in – that's why. But, folks were mad at NBC on the way into the studio I think, because Dan Rather had already been interrupted a minute before, and NBC had seen it, so they knew to expect something. But, folks walked onto the set of Dan Rather –

SS: What did you do? Tell us what happened.

SQ: I was outside support. I was physically right outside the CBS Studios.

SS: In the building?

SQ: On the sidewalk.

SS: In front of the building.

SQ: Our folks had CBS employee IDs – I'm not at liberty to tell you why or how, but CBS now has changed their IDs to a swipe-able card – and they just walked right in. It was just after Dan Rather got on the air. And it was John [Weir] who you could see kind of bobbing in front of the camera. And you could hear them very clearly

say, “AIDS is News. Fight AIDS, not Arabs.” And then, it was like a fascinating media moment, because it became a news story on stations all across the country, as long as they weren’t CBS affiliates. So, CBS never mentioned it again. They went black, they went to commercial, then Dan Rather comes on and said, “I’m sorry, we were interrupted by some rude people,” and he went on. But, local stations all over the country had this story where they kept showing John Weir bobbing in front of the camera, over and over and over again. So, we got a lot of play. The *McNeil Lehrer Report* – I think it was a different affinity group that did that, and we coordinated with them. And they chained themselves to his desk. They were there for a long time, so they had to stay with – whichever one of them – if McNeil, maybe, was in Washington, they had to stay with McNeil in Washington. They couldn’t go to Lehrer in New York. “Yeah, I still have these people in my studio. They’re holding me hostage” or something.

SS: So, you’re the support person. So John got arrested – who else got arrested?

SQ: Dale, and I don’t remember the third person. What is it about published authors and arrests and Action Tours?

SS: Then, what did you do?

SQ: We went to the police once they were in custody, and said, “Where are you taking them?”

SS: Did you say, we’re from ACT UP?

SQ: No. We just said, “Where are you taking them?” And then, we went to the precinct and periodically we’d ask, “What’s happening? What’s the status?” We’d make calls, we’d have politicians call. We’d sit in the diner across the street and then

come over and just basically be there, so that when they got out there'd be somebody there.

SS: And did they go to trial, do you remember?

00:45:00 **SQ:** No, I don't think they went to trial. I think they made some deal. I think they got charged with forgery.

SS: What was the overall strategy of doing these kinds of small, disruptive actions?

SQ: Stealing attention. It was all about attention. It was about magnifying the voice of a small number of people holding a minority opinion, who do not have access to the means of production. We were stealing access to the means of production, to make ourselves heard.

SS: Do you feel that, ultimately, you were successful?

SQ: Well, AIDS isn't cured and AIDS isn't over, so no, we weren't successful. But did we make some strides? Yeah, I think we helped shine a brighter light on the issue than otherwise would have.

SS: Do you feel it was successful at getting attention?

SQ: Yeah, I do.

SS: What do you think made it successful? What was the key ingredient?

SQ: Novelty. We had to keep coming up with new ways to do what we were doing.

SS: And how did you do that?

SQ: There were a lot of creative people in Action Tours. It was a creative bunch.

SS: Because most political organizations just repeat what they always did, tactically, and you're constantly coming up with new ideas. Do you have any insight into that?

SQ: It was just the combination of people. It was a basic framework. Action tours had an MO, and we always stuck to that MO.

SS: Which was?

SQ: Make yourself at home, make yourself belong, blend in, and then surprise the hell out of them. I interrupted Bill Clinton at a Dinkins fundraiser – I had a ticket to that dinner and it wasn't forged, and I didn't pay \$1000 for it. I talked my way in, 'cause I was wearing a tux.

SS: Tell us this story. It was a Dinkins' fundraiser –

SQ: Oh, it was beautiful.

SS: Was this when he was running for Mayor, or was he already Mayor?

SQ: He was running for re-election. And the day before, we heard that Clinton was going to be speaking at the Dinkins fundraiser at the Sheraton. So we just went, just like that. We just frigging went. So, I'm with Steve Melvin, and we both have tuxedos on, and we present ourselves as a couple. And we walk right up to the table. Before you go through the metal detectors there's a table, according to the alphabet – so, I went to the Q table. And, "We'd like our tickets." And they didn't have our tickets, and we got incensed and indignant because we were from the Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats, and we were told that our tickets would be waiting. My name is Steve Quester, and this is Steve Melvin, and how dare you – we knew that they wanted the Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats. It was much harder to do at a Republican affair.

We did a couple of Republican affairs, where we went as pretend straight couples – including, sometimes, two dykes as a pretend straight couple. But, this one was easier to pull off. And they handed us – they frigging handed us those tickets, fast. They were scared. We walked in, and I peed next to Al Sharpton, and talked with all the real estate brokers at the table we were seated at, and ate my meat. And when Clinton spoke – there was a bunch of us there – it was not just me and Steve. And, I stood up on a chair with a sign that said something about the AIDS Cure Plan and I just was yelling, “What about the AIDS Cure Plan? Where is your plan?” And it wasn’t the first time the Secret Service ever had to eject me from someplace. It was my third President in a row. So, they kind of knew me – but not enough to stop me from getting in. So they arrested me and they handed me – they took me out, and they handed me over to the cops – me and Steve. The others weren’t arrested, but we were. And we were taken to Pitt Street station, and people on the Lower East Side walking by the police station kept stopping and looking in, because there were two guys in tuxedos in a jail cell.

SS: And what happened, ultimately?

SQ: While we were being held outside, there was some deliberation between Dinkins campaign people and the police about whether we should be arrested or ejected. And there was some woman from the campaign – it was like, “We don’t want them arrested, we don’t want them arrested!” And then she left, and some other guy, who I remember his name tag – he the Labor Liaison for the Dinkins campaign – he said, “Arrest them. I want you to take them away.” So, I had everyone I could think of call the Dinkins campaign and say get this labor guy to tell the police we don’t want to press charges. We don’t want the arrest. And, I was told everyone – including, Deborah Glick

00:50:00

made a call for me and didn't get anywhere, and was kind of nasty with me afterwards, "Look, I tried to help you." No one got anywhere. So finally, Betsy Lenke booked us for WBAI. "Tomorrow morning, Steve Melvin and Steve Quester are going to be on WBAI, and they're going to talk about how the Dinkins campaign got AIDS activists arrested for interrupting President Clinton." And within an hour, I was summoned to the Dinkins headquarters to pick up a letter to the DA, saying please don't prosecute.

SS: That's interesting. So, they really wanted to show that they were on ACT UP's side.

SQ: They just didn't want to lose any of the gay vote in the fight against Giuliani. And our feeling was, we usually had charges that stuck, and we made the best deal we could and did some community service, or you know, pretended to do community service with an organization that liked us anyway or whatever. But in this case, we knew that the Dinkins campaign didn't want us arrested, and that one guy had said, yeah. And so, I was personally pissed. And I figured, we can get this undone. So, we'll get it undone.

SS: Who were your two previous presidents?

SQ: Reagan and Bush.

SS: What happened?

SQ: There was a group of us at the Republican National Convention in 1988.

SS: Where was that?

SQ: In New Orleans. Reagan was giving a goodbye speech type thing, in the Convention Center, I guess. And we just walked right in, because it was a public rally, but it was indoors. We walked in with those green Reagan face AIDSgate signs on foam

core – marching in there waving and were yelling, and the Young Americans for Freedom were going to kill us. I mean, the Young Americans for Freedom had been following us all over New Orleans anyway. They were really very threatened by us. So, the Secret Service surrounded us and removed us – which probably saved our lives – and gave us to the New Orleans police, who jailed us. And that was a spontaneous action. We were just doing a picket outside. We were like, “Let’s go in, we can get in. Let’s go in, you don’t need tickets.” And, I’ve seen an account of that arrest in my Secret Service file. And then, we went to the Bush speech on AIDS – you know, the first time a President ever mentioned the word “AIDS.” It was in Arlington, Virginia. And we showed up like, “we want to go in. We want to hear him talk about AIDS.” And the security said, “You can’t go in, you’re not invited.” And so we stayed in the hallway and refused to leave and got busted.

SS: I want to ask you about the logistics of these road trips. How would they be decided and organized? How was it decided that people were going to go to New Orleans, to this convention?

SQ: That all happened on the floor of ACT UP.

SS: Somebody would just stand up and say we should go to New Orleans?

SQ: Yeah, and someone would organize plane tickets and off we went.

SS: And, how would they select who would go?

SQ: Anyone who wanted to.

SS: And, how was there enough money for anybody who wanted to, to go?

SQ: Most people paid their own tickets.

SS: What if you couldn't afford it?

SQ: I don't know if we had money in the budget then to pay for people, maybe we did.

SS: And where did you guys stay?

SQ: I remember staying with a member of ACT UP New Orleans – Mark Kostopoulos, who is now deceased. We also went to the Democratic National Convention. Maybe we stayed in motels – I don't remember, we never slept. I have no idea. We went to bars at night. When we went to South Carolina we had a hotel – I remember I shared a bed with Bill Monahan.

SS: What were you doing in South Carolina?

SQ: ACT UP Atlanta asked us to go to the capital of South Carolina with them to protest their HIV reporting law.

SS: Which was what?

00:55:00

SQ: I think it was like, anyone who tested positive got their name reported to the state. So, we demonstrated at the state capital about it and then blocked the road and got busted. And, it was a big deal. You don't do that in Columbia, South Carolina – especially a bunch of queers don't do that.

SS: Can you just explain a little bit how it was conveyed to you that it was a big deal, what it was like working with the people from down there – just the whole thing?

SQ: We were total carpetbaggers. We didn't work with anyone from down there. Maybe ACT UP Atlanta did, but we met our friends from ACT UP Atlanta, and we were like, "Let's do the action," and we just did it. And it was a big deal – there was a huge police presence and huge local press attention.

SS: What about gay people from South Carolina?

SQ: I don't think they liked us very much.

SS: What gave you that impression?

SQ: We – I remember going to a bar, which was, you know, back of town and across the tracks and unmarked. And we were really rowdy in the bar, and they told us they didn't like it. They didn't like having people there who acted like that.

SS: And how did you respond?

SQ: We didn't care. I remember meeting with ACT UP New Orleans, and they said, "Well we've seen these images of some of your demonstrations and you look really scary. And, we would like to see a march where everyone wears white, and carries candles." And I remember Peter Staley was in that meeting, and he was very articulate and very patient with them. He said, "Well, we actually want to scare them. It's good that we look scary, because we want them – we want to get their attention, we want them to do what we want, because they're scared of us."

SS: Interesting. You mentioned the AIDS Cure Plan around Clinton, can you explain what that was?

SQ: A committee or a working group in ACT UP came up with an idea that there should be a national, directed research campaign for a cure for AIDS – the way there was a national, directed research campaign to put a human being on the moon – that the system, the kind of *laissez-faire* system of pharmaceutical company research and independent academics pursuing grants, tended to lead people away from new ideas or a paradigm-breaking, and just had people studying AZT over and over again, because it's safer – it's easier to get a grant. So, they came up with this whole plan. They wrote it.

They called it the Barbara McClintock plan, and later changed the name to the AIDS Cure Plan. And we went to a community forum that Jerry Nadler was holding, where he was talking about – you know he loved the plan for the tunnel to Brooklyn from New Jersey, under the harbor. He loves that. He talked about that, and he said it's time for questions, and there were a bunch of us there and we're like, "Why are you talking about that, when your constituents are dying of AIDS? What about the AIDS Cure Plan?" And he was like, "Let me read it. Let's have a meeting." And within a month, he had written the AIDS Cure Act and introduced it in the House of Representatives. It never went anywhere.

SS: So, when you said that to Clinton, you're asking him about a pending piece of legislation?

SQ: Yes.

SS: Do you remember any of the content of it?

SQ: Just that it would set up a certain level of funding. It was \$1 billion or \$10 billion. It was a not ridiculous amount of money – to have the United States government, through the NIH, direct scientists in their research so that they had specific assignments to look at a variety of avenues towards treatment and cure of HIV. And that all kind of fizzled when protease inhibitors came out, because that was like the great victory of the capitalist research system – that they actually came up with something.

SS: I want to ask you something else about Action Tours. Was there ever a time in Action Tours where somebody who was in the affinity group got sick and died of AIDS?

SQ: Rex did.

01:00:00 **SS: And how did the affinity group respond to that? Were you guys part of his care group?**

SQ: Yeah.

SS: Could you just really go into that, because I don't think people understand how that all worked.

SQ: I remember making a big grid that had the days of the week and the times of the day on it, with all different people's names and phone numbers – and that's like, everyone who would go over to his house – the idea being that he would never be alone at a meal, because he had stopped eating when he was alone. It was just people constantly there, constantly in touch with each other, constantly in his hospital rooms with him. And, it was – some of us in the care group were comrades from Action Tours, or from the Church Ladies for Choice, and some were coworkers – non-political friends.

SS: And where did his family fit into that?

SQ: He was estranged.

SS: I just want to get into the family question for a second. Was it unusual for someone with AIDS to be taken care of by their friends, instead of by their family?

SQ: No, I think that was the norm. I mean, I didn't know that many people who were – he's the closest person to me who died, and I didn't have the kind of devastation that people 10 years older than me had. But, my impression is that that was the norm – that it would be that the friends who took care of people.

SS: And did you ever talk to him about the fact that his family wasn't there?

SQ: Well, he would rail against his mother at every opportunity – he didn't want her there. He railed against his mother before he got really sick, too.

SS: This kind of alienation of gay people from their families at that time – was that something that people discussed? Or was it simply accepted?

SQ: I think it was just accepted. It was just understood that that's the way it was.

SS: And do you have any insight into why it was that way?

SQ: Why people were alienated from their families? Because you know, if your family was right wing in any way, or homophobic, there was just this immense hostility between them and you.

SS: Did you ever interact with the families of any of your friends at that time?

SQ: Rex had a good relationship with a step-parent. So, after he died we had a lot of interaction with them, which was very positive. But they weren't around much when he was sick. I think they just weren't in town, and left it to us.

SS: Let's talk about Church Ladies for Choice – how did that get formed?

SQ: That grew out of WHAM, and it was mostly Action Tours people who formed the Church Ladies. And we're still active, going strong. It grew out of activists' responses to anti-abortion provocations in the New York area. So, twice, there was the Cross of Life, where they make this big human cross across midtown, with signs that said, "Abortion Kills Children," where there'd be various hits by Operation Rescue on area clinics. And we'd been responding to those, as activists, in ACT UP and then in WHAM, for a long time and, the angry activist thing just feeds the psycho-Christians.

They just love that. And some of us queer men in those demonstrations had begun to use humor against the psycho-Christians, and it was much more effective. It really deflated them. I remember defending a clinic near Dobbs Ferry, trying to get some woman – she had to go to the bathroom. She was trapped in her car in the parking lot, because they had shut down the clinic. But, she just had to go the bathroom and had to get across the parking lot to the gas station. So, we had a circle of women surrounding her, facing her and then a circle of men surrounding them, facing out, and they walked like an amoeba, just so that she wouldn't get bombarded by these people.

01:05:00 And I'd been up all night, before I went off to Westchester, and drinking margaritas and taking ecstasy. And, some guy gets up in my face and he's yelling, "Don't kill your baby, don't kill your baby!" and I said to him, "Leave this woman alone!" And he said, "Your breath smells like liquor, do you have to get drunk to do this?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Who sent you?" And I said, "Satan did!" And he went away. I think I was wearing a red feather boa, at the time. That day, we had to hang out in the parking lot – trying to keep them off of these people's cars – all day. So we're singing, [SINGS] *I'm Meryl Streep, I had a kid, a dingo ate my baby, D-I-N-G-O, D-I-N-G-O* – having a real good time. So eventually, Elizabeth Michaels gave us a bunch of her cast off dresses – some of which you can see around my apartment. And she said, you know, "We're going to be the Church Ladies for Choice – show up." Everyone knew Dana Carvey's Church Lady. It was a known reference – and we just did it, and we went to the Cross of Life, and we had signs that said, "The Military Kills Children," and "Hatred Kills Children," and "Poverty Kills Children." The singing came later. It was sort of organic. It just kind of sprung up. And it just became this phenomenon. We were very

active during the '92 Democratic National Convention, because there were so many hits on clinics. So, you'd go five in the morning, and there are hundreds of clinic defenders there. And they're cold and they're tired, and they're really sick of hearing these people singing Ave Maria, or counting the rosary. And, we'd show up in dresses and we'd sing, "This Womb is Your Womb" to the tune of "This Land is My Land" – and we became these celebrities. We decided we were the USO of the clinic defense movement.

SS: Can you sing a song for us, please?

SQ: Okay. This one is largely stolen from ACT UP Los Angeles:

Hark, Monsignor Riley Blubbers

No abortions and no rubbers.

He thinks we should all abstain,

Cross our legs and go insane.

Only when we want a child,

Can we get a little wild,

Every sperm and egg to breed,

One more Catholic mouth to feed.

Mary didn't feel a thing,

Glory to the newborn king.

To this day, it is our experience that it really deflates the psycho-Christians when we do this stuff. They try to like, get up some energy to do their "Out, Satan!" stuff, but they're not ready for their liturgy and their music to be spoofed. And they're not ready to be made fun of. They're ready for anger. It's good.

SS: I wanted to move on to some other stuff. I'm sure people who are

watching this are noticing that you have a Jewish star and a Palestinian flag around your neck. And I just wanted to ask you about Jewish presence in ACT UP, and if you think that it had any kind of impact on the organization?

SQ: I have no idea if the Jewish presence in ACT UP had an impact on the direction of the organization. There were a lot of Jews in ACT UP, just like there's a lot of Jews in every left political movement. I remember having a kind of ugly debate in ACT UP, about whether we should meet on Rosh Hashanah – where, it was just so obvious to all the Jews in the room that this was – ACT UP would never have met on Christmas. And then – who are queer people in New York? It's a bunch of Jews from New York, and a bunch of thin-lipped, mayonnaise-eaters from big square states who have run to New York, who didn't get it at all. It was very frustrating. But most of the time, I don't remember –

SS: But when you were doing an action against the Pope, for example – without any qualm, do you think that being a Jew facilitated your willingness to confront the Catholic Church that way?

SQ: No. I was able to be a little more detached than the recovering Catholics among us. But I think that there's a real, political, united front between non-Catholics
01:10:00 who are frustrated with reactionary uses of power by the Catholic Church, and recovering Catholics who are equally frustrated.

SS: That brings us to Stop the Church – were you involved in that?

SQ: Yeah, I was arrested in the Church.

SS: How did you decide to be one of the people to go inside?

SQ: I thought that it was really important politically – since O'Connor had

made the sanctuary of St. Patrick's a political platform through his homilies, that we use that space as our political platform. And, it mattered a lot to me that our disruption was during the homily, and not during the sacred rites of the mass. I felt that a demonstration outside without a disruption inside would be much less effective and have much less of an impact. That being said, I disagreed with the people who – just from a tactical point of view, not from an ethical point of view – I disagreed with the people who yelled during the disruption. And, I remember the meeting in which we were saying we're going to have a silent protest inside, and some people saying, "You can't tell me to be silent!" and "We'll never be silent again." Or, being really frustrated that there was no way to enforce discipline because of ACT UP's radical democracy – exactly what made it so strong – that people who were going to yell were going to yell, and they didn't care what the rest of ACT UP thought about it. So, it was mayhem when the disruption began.

SS: Can you just tell us how it went inside?

SQ: I went in, in my Republican drag – same gray slacks – and went over to some candles and lit one, and kneeled. Someone later who had seen me said I didn't look very convincing at all, because I had no idea what I was doing. During all of these actions – a lot of Action Tours stuff I talked about with you before – like, a big part of the tactic was, when you're infiltrating, you don't acknowledge the other members of Action Tours who are there. You pretend not to know them, which was hard, but it was fun. It was like this hard acting assignment. So, I went in alone. So, I go and I sit in a pew, just trying to follow along with the service. And some people are kneeling, and I'm kneeling. And, they're sitting, and I'm sitting. They said "Amen," I said "Amen." And then people did that thing – when they make little crosses and on their forehead, and I did it,

because I'm trying to follow along. I figured, I could do this – and I was like, what are they doing? I couldn't follow that at all. But no one knows, so whatever. Then, he gets up to do his homily, and I guess there was one person who was going to start things off, so they did – they stood up and laid down in the aisle.

SS: Do you know who it was?

SQ: No. So then I stood up and laid down in the aisle, and a bunch of us did. So, I couldn't see anything after that, but I heard the commotion – this huge ruckus, people yelling. I'm sure the parishioners were yelling. And I remember, people who I was guessing were seminarians. They were in long white robes, stepping amongst us, dropping pieces of paper on us that were I think some statement from Cardinal O'Connor about how he couldn't be there – to establish trespass – and then just being picked up and carried out by the police through one of the side doors.

SS: Then, there was the response after.

SQ: Also, Tom [Keane]'s desecration of the host, I believe happened after that. After the demonstration was cleared, they had communion. And I don't believe he told anybody he was going to do that. And I remember after the fact, totally supporting what he had done. He is an ex-Catholic. He was responding to his own tradition. That's something a Jew could not have done. It would have been a horrible idea – starting the blood libel all over again. But that was a very valid form of expression for him, as a Catholic.

SS: What was the conversation inside ACT UP after the action?

SQ: As far as I remember, just really strong support for our own people. I remember a very defiant press conference the next day basically saying, "We're not sorry

at all for what we did.”

SS: Do you remember who spoke at that press conference?

SQ: I'm picturing one of the people, but I don't remember his name. I didn't realize until this conversation how many names I've forgotten. It's kind of distressing.

SS: It's normal, though. It's a long time ago. I'd like us to stop for a minute because I'd like us to turn on the heat and warm up a little.

SQ: It is cold in here.

SS: 'Cause then I want to go into a whole new area of conversation.

SS: I wanted to talk a little bit about the sub-culture within and outside of ACT UP and how it was organized. So, you're going to Action Tours meetings every Sunday, going to the big meeting every Monday, doing actions – how often?

SQ: A lot. I don't know, a lot.

SS: So, what percentage of your life was ACT UP?

SQ: Fifty percent.

SS: And what was the other 50% – what were you doing?

SQ: I was very dedicated to my job, teaching.

SS: You were a teacher at the time? Were you also a kindergarten teacher then?

SQ: First grade.

SS: What school were you teaching at?

SQ: I was at P.S. 144, and then the school I'm at now – The Children's School.

SS: How did they respond to you – getting arrested in dresses, screaming at Popes and Presidents. How did your jobs feel?

SQ: I think people at work didn't really know much. The Board of Ed's department investigation, they just wanted a Certificate of Disposition, and you know, they would just make a determination, and the determination was always to take no action against me. They'd be hard pressed to move against me, based on the kinds of charges that I've had – especially the dispositions that I've had, which were often violation, dismissal. There's a few misdemeanors on there.

SS: Did you tell your colleagues what you were doing?

SQ: Some. People that I'm friendly with.

SS: And what were their reactions?

SQ: Very supportive, otherwise they wouldn't have been my friends.

SS: What about parents of your students? Did they know what you were doing?

SQ: At the school I'm at now, parents – like, I got arrested last year at an action against Israeli war crimes, in March. And, I wrote to the parents about it. And I think I just didn't hear from the ones who weren't supportive, but I heard from a lot of supportive parents. Like, "We're really thrilled, this is exactly the kind of example we want for our children." One kid came in and said, "My mother told me to tell you that my grandfather got arrested on the same day that you did." I was like, "Oh, was he blocking the street, too?" "No, he was blocking a building."

SS: Do you think they would have been as supportive if it had been about something gay and AIDS?

SQ: I think so.

SS: In that time, or in this time?

SQ: Well, at P.S. 144 it was, like – I'm from a completely different culture than the parents were. I think they would have been like, it's just one more weird thing about this guy. My colleagues were cool about it. At the school I'm at now, I think they'd be really supportive. You know, it's like, crunchy Park Slope parents.

SS: So, how much partying time do you spend with ACT UP people, socializing?

SQ: Any socializing I did was with ACT UP people. So, the line between socializing and activism was a blurry one.

SS: What were some typical things that ACT UP people would do?

SQ: Giant parties at Maria Maggenti's apartment. There were a lot of those – or at Karen Ramspacher and Robert Garcia's loft – the famous loft parties, which were always a benefit for something. We'd always go out to dinner after ACT UP meetings. All my friends are from – mostly from Church Ladies for Choice.

01:20:00 **SS: Were there any particular bars or clubs that you went to at the time, that ACT UP people went to? Or that you went to get away from ACT UP people?**

SQ: There was no place I went to get away from ACT UP people. I think The Bar was a big ACT UP one. It's called Wonder Bar. Wonder Bar was just, total ACT UP central. That was the one bar I liked to go to, because I wanted to go into a bar where I know everybody already.

SS: What about sex and dating inside ACT UP? Was it a place of a lot of sex and flirting for you?

SQ: No. I tried very hard, and it wasn't. I wasn't one of the cool kids. I wasn't on the Swim Team.

SS: What's the Swim Team?

SQ: It was a group of tall, athletic men with goyishe jaw lines who were just absolutely gorgeous and hung out with each other at the back of ACT UP meetings.

SS: Who was on the Swim Team?

SQ: Steve Gendin – I don't remember who else, but they all looked like Steve Gendin.

SS: Let's get into this a little bit – so, you're saying it was a competitive sexual scene inside of ACT UP?

SQ: Among the men, yeah. I never was in on that scene. Once I met a boyfriend at ACT UP. I actually met him at a gay and lesbian self-defense training, at Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts.

SS: And what about the back room at Wonderbar? Was that part of ACT UP?

SQ: Very much so.

SS: So, would ACT UP people have sex with each other?

SQ: Yes.

SS: In the back room?

SQ: Yes. I remember friends coming out of the back room and saying, "I just fucked so and so" – absolutely.

SS: And then, how would it be for people to see each other at a meeting the next time?

SQ: I think it was fine.

SS: Okay. Was there any kind of division between positives and negatives

– sexually – inside ACT UP?

SQ: Not that I was aware of, no. There was a political division between positives and negatives.

SS: What was that?

SQ: When we were meeting at Cooper Union, and there was a proposal to wait – it was like, a six month moratorium on something – meetings with the government, maybe? Tracy Morgan spearheaded that proposal, and there were a lot of women supporting it who were, at least, presumed to be HIV-negative. And the politically conservative faction of ACT UP – mostly in Treatment and Data, and many of whom were positive, strongly opposed it. And I remember at one point, a woman was speaking and she said, “Look, it’s only for six months. It’s not as if it’s for the rest of your life.” And, the right side of the room exploded. And that really pointed out to me the division and the way in which – although, I was very firmly on the political left of ACT UP – how some of the HIV-negative people in ACT UP weren’t getting it – after all those years, they still didn’t get it.

SS: Let’s talk about that, because you said when you first came to ACT UP, you didn’t know if you were negative or positive.

SQ: No, by then I knew I was negative. I was negative for the first five years I was in ACT UP.

SS: Because I remember when you announced to the floor that you had sero-converted, it’s something that I’ll never forget. Why did you decide to make an announcement?

SQ: Oh, I don’t remember. Until you said it, I didn’t remember that I did that.

I don't know. It doesn't seem like a strange thing for me to do. It was just coming out. It's politically important for people to know you're gay, as you pursue certain political projects. I think in ACT UP it was politically important for people to know that people were positive. Thinking back on it, yeah, of course I know why I did it, because people had to know how much infection there was around them, and how many people were affected.

SS: So, how did it change your role in all of this, after being five years negative in the organization? Did it change where you situated yourself? Or, what you thought was important?

01:25:00

SQ: No, I did not turn into some treatment activist because I had sero-converted. I still was one of the broad agenda people. And then, I think that split was portrayed by the T&D folks as a negative/positive split, but was really a split between the people who were leftist and activists before they joined ACT UP, and the people who were comfortable, middle-class professionals, before they joined ACT UP.

SS: And what were the literal stakes? What was it that some people wanted to do, that other people didn't want to do – what was the fight about?

SQ: It was about focusing on – specifically on the way HIV policy affects communities of color, focusing specifically on the ways that HIV policy affects women. It was about how much we were going to internationalize the work, and how much we were going to look at the social costs of HIV policies, such as housing, child care. Those were all issues that were embraced by what I'm calling the left of ACT UP. The right of ACT UP wanted to talk about Drugs into Bodies – that's all they wanted to talk about.

SS: Because they felt not enough attention was being put on that, by the

organization?

SQ: Yeah.

SS: And you feel that there was enough?

SQ: Look, until the split began to emerge, all of us in ACT UP gave the Treatment and Data Committee a leadership role. They sat down and taught us – before the FDA action, before the NIH action. I was always for that. I was dismayed that they saw an expansion of the agenda as more ideas came up as a rejection of their agenda, because ACT UP never rejected that agenda.

SS: So, why did they draw that conclusion?

SQ: You know, because selfish white men are threatened when you talk about anything that's not about them.

SS: And that's really what it boiled down to in your view?

SQ: I think so, yeah.

SS: So, when you first realized you were positive, did you go to T&D to try and decide what kind of treatment you wanted to pursue?

SQ: No, I went to DAAIR to decide what kind of treatment I wanted to pursue.

SS: What's DAAIR?

SQ: Direct Access AIDS Information Resources.

SS: What was that?

SQ: Sort of a buyer's club that focuses on nutrient therapies and alternative therapies.

SS: And who in ACT UP was involved in that area?

SQ: The big honcho in DAAIR was Fred Bingham. I don't think he was ever

in ACT UP. Bob Lederer was somewhat involved with DAAIR. I can't think of any other ACT UP people.

SS: That's so interesting – all those years in ACT UP, and when it was time for you to decide what to do, you went outside of ACT UP to make your decision.

SQ: Well, I went to DAAIR because I had a close friend, who'd been my roommate for a long time and who'd been HIV-positive since the beginning of the epidemic, and he was using DAAIR therapies very intensely. So, it was about going to him when I got infected. He was my roommate when I found out.

SS: Can you just sort of tell us the social history of your treatment decisions, from the first time you found out you were positive until now, so we can see what track you went on?

SQ: Well you know, I was spending a lot of money, taking all these pills every month.

SS: From when you started?

01:30:00

SQ: From when I started – taking all these vitamins and stuff – and there was two years before protease inhibitors came out. And from the very beginning, I went to have my blood done every three months, and I charted things. My record keeping was very precise. Now, it's pretty loose. And at some point early on, I pretty much decided I was eventually going to die of this, but I could try to like, keep healthy. And then, once the successful treatment began to happen, I knew not to take it. I had good doctors who knew I shouldn't take it. I think my doctor at the time was someone who was accused by his colleagues at Beth Israel of murder, when he refused to prescribe AZT back in the

day.

SS: Who was that?

SQ: Robert Friedman. And, he turned out to be right. And so, I remember people outside of ACT UP – like HIV-positive men in my therapy group – just being completely horrified. Some of them had come to the therapy group directly from the [Aaron] Diamond Center, when they were all put on triple combination therapy the week that they had sero-conversion illness and they were like, “You’ve been positive for two years and you’re not taking the medicine?” And I was like, no. I don’t need it yet. So in 1998 – I’d been infected five years and my T-cells were still very high, but my viral load went through the roof, and I decided that it just scared me, really scared me. I said I want to start. So, I took a protease-naïve regimen. I used an NNRTI, and I adjusted things, changed the NNRTI, changed one of the nukes, took it for a year, a year and a half, and the doctor took me off it and said, “You know, your triglycerides are really crazy, let’s go off it and see what happens.” And it didn’t help my triglycerides at all when I went off the drugs, but my numbers stayed good, and they’ve stayed good to this day. It was I guess the beginning of 2000, that I went off the drugs. And my numbers are still good. The profession has changed. Now, even the CDC says wait, wait, wait, before you take anything. So, I’m just kind of coasting along. I have no idea when I’m going to need to take anything again.

SS: So, how long have you been on a drug holiday?

SQ: Well, I wouldn’t call it a drug holiday, because I only went on for a year and a half and I’ve been off for four years.

SS: And you’re still doing your bloods and everything?

SQ: Yeah, my bloods are good. I have terrible health problems which have a very bad impact on my life, but they're not directly HIV-related.

SS: How do you explain that you're so asymptomatic? How do you understand that?

SQ: I don't think it's that unusual. I think that year and a half on the meds may have helped stabilize me. But, people can go for a very long time with HIV, and not have their immune systems collapse.

SS: But, all of our friends who died in front of us – were they positive for five years, before they got sick?

SQ: No, they were probably positive for 10 years or more. And for every one of them, there's someone else who's been positive since God knows when, who never got sick. I'm one of those.

SS: Do you think it's genetic pre-disposition, or strain of virus? How do you understand it?

SQ: I don't know. All I know is, never take drugs until you have to – at least, HIV drugs. And, always watch. I'm very careful – every three months I check, and I ain't going to take anything until I have to, because the longer I wait, the better the drugs are going to be.

SS: Thanks for talking about that. When did you leave ACT UP?

SQ: I kind of drifted away. I didn't leave leave. And, it was somewhere in '95, I think.

SS: Do you know why?

SQ: I think I just was tired. I don't think it's any other reason. To this day, I

totally support the work that ACT UP does. To this day, I have a twang of guilt that I'm not going to meetings and doing it – but only a twang, because I'm very, very busy with other political stuff.

SS: Tell us what you've been doing politically since you left 10 years ago.

SQ: The role of Jews Against the Occupation in my life is so similar to the role of ACT UP in my life, that sometimes I say ACT UP when I mean JATO, or vice-versa.

01:35:00

But, I'm really very passionately and single-mindedly dedicated to organizing Jews against Palestinian oppression, and intervening physically against the occupation in the West Bank, specifically.

SS: What is your organization like?

SQ: It's a collective – a consensus-based collective – here in New York City, of Jews who support the Palestinian right of return, who oppose the occupation, and who oppose United States aid to Israel. And, a lot of us are also members of the International Solidarity Movement, which is a Palestinian-led movement, where internationals work with – under Palestinian leadership and with Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to resist the occupation.

SS: This is going to be a really naive question, but, is there any issue about being an openly gay man with AIDS, in that international movement?

SQ: I'm not open with Palestinians in Palestine. There's a lot – just out of cultural considerations – there's a lot that internationals aren't open about. People aren't open about having girlfriends and boyfriends – straight people. You just respect each other's privacy. And if I'm asked why I'm not married, I say, "Not everybody gets married, where I come from, it's not like here" – and that's the sufficient answer for

people.

SS: Have you interacted with gay or lesbian Palestinians at all?

SQ: A little bit. There's other people in JATO who have good connections with a Palestinian lesbian group that's been forming in Tel Aviv, of all places. And, the olive oil I use is – part of the money, when it was sold, was for Palestinian lesbian organizing.

SS: I just wanted to ask you one last question. Looking back, on all the things you did in ACT UP – and you did so many different kinds of things – in the end, what would you say – how would you characterize ACT UP's greatest success? And, how would you characterize its biggest disappointment?

SQ: Well, I think I have to say two things about the success. One is popularizing a model of political resistance that ACT UP didn't invent, but that has become much more widespread since ACT UP was most active, including in JATO. And, the other success is having contributed to a mainstream attitude in the media and in public life of, of course we talk about AIDS – that was so not the case in the late '80s. I don't think that ACT UP did that alone, but I think that ACT UP had a big part. The biggest disappointment is just how bad things still are. It's so horrifying to me that I can go along day after day, checking my bloods, and I'll take the meds when I have to. And, for the vast majority of HIV-positive people in the world, it's not that at all. They go along day after day until they get sick and die, because they can't ever get the meds, and the meds are available. It's such a different situation than it was prior to '95. The solution is so clear and so easy. So, if anything, it's more infuriating.

SS: Do you think that there's anything that we could have done then, that

would have resulted in a different consequence globally, now?

SQ: I have no idea. We didn't focus internationally then. But, I don't know what we would have been demanding, had we. Now, it's so easy. It's like, spend a few billion dollars, and everyone gets the meds. It's so easy. But, what would we have asked for in 1988?

SS: Thank you, Steve.

SQ: Thanks, Sarah.