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Interviewee: **Jose Fidelino**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Jose Fidelino
October 13, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: Just to begin, can you say your name, where we are, how old you are, and today's date.

Jose Fidelino: I'm Jose Fidelino. I'm, we're in our, my office, in the Time Life Building. I'm 37, and it is October 13th, 2004.

SS: Before we begin, we must bring out that you are the poster boy in "Kissing Doesn't Kill." Can we get it in the camera there?

JF: Is it visible there?

SS: Now, can you just tell us who all the other people are?

JF: Oh my god. I know this is Robert Vasquez-Pacheco, here on the far left, kissing Heidi Dorow – a nice, token heterosexual couple, even though both of them were gay. I honestly don't know who I'm kissing, here, next. Mike, or Tom? I honestly can't remember. That's me, when I had hair. And then that's Julie Tolentino and Lola Flash, who were a couple at the time. I think their kiss looks best. They look, they look very cute. They had the best hair; it was the '80s.

SS: Right. Well you all have pretty great hair. So let's start. I really don't know anything about your background. I remember you from ACT UP, but I don't know where you grew up, or anything like that.

JF: I am a nice suburban boy from Kansas City, Kansas. Came here from, got, arrived there at the age of four, from Toronto. I'm Canadian; it's my big secret. I got rid of the accent, so no one knows.

SS: So what brought your parents to Kansas City?

JF: {sigh} You know, that's a question I really should ask them one day. I have no idea. It was probably a job. They wanted to get out of Canada, and into the

States, and it was probably the first job Dad got. So I wound up in the middle of nowhere, and I left as soon as I could.

SS: So, when you were growing up did you have any sense of community, or did your parents instill any kind of community feeling in you?

JF: No. Ha ha ha ha. Basically, we were some of the only non-white people around, for miles and miles. And it was, it was sort of an alienating experience, I have to say. Which, you know, still shapes my identity today, that I am not an insider.

SS: Did they still have connections with people in the Philippines at that time?

JF: Uh, most of their family was in Toronto or New York. So, no. Unless you had a lot of money, you didn't go back much. And you know, there was no e-mail or anything back then, so it was pretty much just us in the middle of the wheat fields.

SS: So there were no other Filipinos to be seen there?

JF: Not very many. Not very many, no.

SS: So did your parents raise you with any kind of sense of social responsibility, or...

JF: Ah...

SS: ...awareness of what was going on in the country at the time?

JF: Um...no. Heh. My parents are die-hard Republicans, as first-generation immigrants often are. And you know, for them, it was just work, and going to school for us, and going to Catholic school for us. And you know, I can say I'm a very moral person, probably because I went to Catholic school, even though I'm a die-hard atheist at this point.

SS: How did Catholic School make you a moral person?

JF: When I look at kids today, I realize that I was just raised differently. There was a certain basic set of assumptions about things that you do to people, or don't do to people, that makes you either a good person or a bad person. Even though I reject a lot of Catholic dogma, I think it really did imprint on me – my sense of right and wrong.

SS: Can you give some examples?

JF: You just don't hurt people. You can do what you want, as long as you don't hurt anyone. And when I see a lot of things going on, like government policies, that hurt people, it's like, well, they're poor, they're starving, it's not a good thing. And I don't see how any amount of — what do you call it? — libertarian government philosophy can justify letting people starve, or letting people have no access to health care. Just because you say it isn't the government's role doesn't mean we don't have a moral obligation to provide it.

SS: Now was that carried out in the way you were treated in school even though you were the only Filipino there?

JF: Um...um, yes and no. I mean, it could have been a lot worse. I mean, no one ever hurt me physically, even though I was definitely not part of the mainstream crowd.

SS: Where did being gay fit in in that?

JF: Oh, who knows. I mean, {laugh}, it probably had a lot to do with it. But at the same time, I was one of the only nonwhite kids in the school; I was one of the smartest kids in the school. And you know, none of those things work for your popularity when you're a kid. And you know, the fact that I was a proto-homo, who

knows how much of it was that, and how much of it was the other things. I mean, it certainly didn't help.

SS: So when you say you got out right away, did you know where you wanted to go for a long time before you left?

JF: I think from the time I was in high school, I knew that I needed to go to a big city. And I had relatives in New York, and went – I'd visited. And I just thought, well, there peop-, strangers don't talk to you in grocery lines. I'll go there.

SS: So you came to New York.

JF: So I came to New York. Nineteen eighty-six.

SS: Okay. Oh.

JF: Dropped out of school, after two years of college, in Connecticut. And basically just plopped down, and tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

SS: So you came right in the middle of all that stuff. Where did you land?

JF: I ended up in a cute little apartment in the West Village. A four-hundred-dollar one-bedroom in the West Village. I don't know why I ever gave it up. Uh, rent-controlled. Ah. Anyway. Yeah. I landed in the middle of it. I remember running around like a madman, because all of a sudden I was having sex for the first time in my life. And the weird thing is that I had this thing for older men. I had a thing for skinny men. And in the late '80s, in New York, that meant almost everyone I dated was a PWA. Not by choice, not by any sort of plan or anything like that. It just sort of happened. It was very odd. And then – what is it?

SS: Do you remember the first time that you realized that you were seeing somebody or about to have sex with somebody who had AIDS?

JF: Yeah. And I guess, I, I mean, the two years that I was in school, safe sex education was a really big thing,

SS: In college?

JF: In college.

SS: And where was that? Was that among the gay students, or was that [just] for everybody?

JF: {sigh} I think it was promoted for everyone on campus, but particularly in the gay group. The gay group that I was part of took it upon ourselves to educate everyone on campus about safe sex. And I, oh god, I don't remember if it was just everyone at the time, or just, you know, idealistic young college students. But like, latex for everything. Which you don't see today. People are a lot laxer today. But I mean, giving, putting a condom on someone just to give him a blowjob? I mean, my god. {laughs} Um, it was a different time back then. And I think people were so much more dogmatic about safe sex.

SS: So when you were — I want to stick with this for a minute — when you were, where do you go to school?

JF: Wesleyan, in Connecticut.

SS: Okay. So you're at Wesleyan. And heavy safe sex emphasis. Had you met anyone who had AIDS before that?

JF: Just briefly, back in Kansas City, I met someone in like 1984 who had AIDS, who'd gone basically back home to die. But as for people I knew on a more

intimate basis, or just on a more, you know, significant basis than just an acquaintance, I don't think I met any people with AIDS until – I got to New York, and started sleeping around.

SS: So in this college environment, would you say AIDS is theoretical?

JF: Yes. It was a complete theoretical concept. We were all, you know, we're all in our twenties. Who knew someone with AIDS, when you're in your twenties? At the time. I don't think I'd met a, even met anyone who'd had anything worse than crabs.

SS: So do you remember when you came to New York, do you remember your first realization that you were going to have sex with someone who had AIDS?

JF: First realization. Uh, yeah. I remember thinking that it wasn't that big of a deal. He was really sexy. And he had visible KS lesions. And it wasn't a problem. I thought, this is what latex is for. And I remember being really shocked when, like, he blew me without a condom, and he, he didn't use Saran Wrap when he rimmed me. And I thought, oh my god, that's not safe. And it didn't occur to me that he didn't care, because he didn't think that he was going to catch anything worse from me, and he didn't think that it was going to be a problem for infecting me. So I just, I remember, that was my first encounter with not-absolutely-strict safe sex. And I was just appalled. But you know, that's what happens when college kids hit the real world; you're appalled by any number of things.

SS: So did you find that your attitude was unusual, or were you in a circle where that was pretty much the way it was?

JF: I think I'd swallowed the dogma, where it doesn't matter what a person's status is, as long as you have safe sex. It wasn't a concern for me.

SS: Okay. And were you seeing any of these guys for a while? Did you have relationships with them?

JF: A few dates? For a few weeks, a few months, tops, nothing significant.

SS: So you weren't in a caretaker position or in a relationship to a boyfriend?

JF: No. No.

SS: So there you are, you're dating all these guys, and this is your type, and you don't have any hang-ups about it. And it's 1986. And did you start to come into contact with people who were really sick?

JF: Around '87, '88, I think I had three people who I had dated at one point all die within a year. And that was sort of weird. But at the time, it seemed like men of a certain age in New York were dying left and right, and it was sad. But it wasn't something that I thought was unusual. Isn't that weird.

SS: So how did you cross the line from observing this or having these feelings to deciding to be involved in a community?

JF: Ehhh. It was weird. I remember having a couple of encounters with people who were in ACT UP – different people. All of whom told me it was something I had to do. And that it, it didn't hurt that they were, I think, three of the best-looking men I knew.

SS: Who were they?

JF: There was this one guy I knew from my job called Howard – Howard Pope. There was one of my neighbors, whose name I can't remember. Russell, Russell Someone. And then another guy who I knew from my other job, who were all just, it was like this new cult. It was this new thing; it was all they could ever talk about; ACT UP. You have to join, you have to do it. And I don't think I joined for the most altruistic reasons. I mean, I felt I needed to do something. Because yes, I saw all these people around me dying. And I felt, I mean it was also something that I was raised with: that you need to have a civic sense; you need to give back to the community. But I probably joined because they were the three most attractive men I knew. And I thought, sure, I'll go to a Monday night meeting. Sure, why not?

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SS: Had you ever been politically active before? Well you were in the group at Wesleyan?

JF: I was in a, yeah, in the gay group at Wesleyan. But it wasn't, it was never anything like protesting on the streets. It was always very working-within-the-system. And in fact, I, I still had problems with yelling on the streets. I, when I was in ACT UP, rather quickly I stopped doing the demonstrations and became a marshal at demonstrations, where it was more facilitating the demonstration than actually being a part of it.

I'm a good boy; I'm a good Asian suburban boy. I don't do these things.

SS: And were you out to your family at this point when you joined ACT UP?

JF: Yeah. I came out to them in high school. They knew. And it was an-, it wasn't a big deal. They are very loving and accepting, for being rather conservative Old World stock. Surprisingly so, when I heard other people's coming out stories. I, like, it's weird. I never got a sense that they'd, they would ever stop loving me, no matter what I told them. And that was, that was great. We didn't talk about it much, because we don't talk about anything in our family. But it was always understood that it was fine. Even though my mom still wants grandkids.

SS: Were they concerned about you getting infected?

JF: Uh, yeah. Any time they, like oh my god, my first trip to San Francisco, I went with my parents. Ha ha ha ha. Uh, such a mistake. Uh, but uh, like I ran off one night to head to a bar. And I thought my mom was gonna cry. She just said, be careful. Be careful. Like, like I was gonna run off into a, a, an orgy or something, and, and, and get sick and die. But yeah, they were concerned. A lot more concerned than I was, I think.

SS: So you came to the Monday night meeting. And what did you find?

JF: A-oof. My first Monday night meeting was weird. Everyone who had been going to Monday night meetings said it was even a weird night. I can't quite remember what was happening. But there was some — when wasn't there some conflict? There was some big conflict going on. And they were yelling at someone, some woman, for something. And she was taking a stand. I can't even remember the specifics anymore. But she was taking a stand that apparently was not very popular. And she was getting a lot of crap from people in the crowd. And there was a whole bunch of

yelling going on, and I just remember thinking, boy, this is weird. And it was a very crowded night down at the Center. And I think I was one of the few non-white people in the, in the room. That was another weird thing. At the very beginning of ACT UP — when was this? — early 1988 — ACT UP was very much a white, male thing. And it was disturbing to me at the time, to walk into a room of so many white men, angry with this one woman. And I was just — I was troubled by it. And I kept asking the people who I knew, who were in ACT UP, whether this is normal, and whether this is the normal dynamic, and whether it's such a white, male thing there. And they all assured me it wasn't. But I think they were all lying. {giggle}

SS: But you decided to stick with it. Why was that?

JF: Uh — immediately, I thought that, well, you know, you can't criticize it for being a white group and not join. I thought, if you have, if you have problems with their diversity, or lack of diversity, you have to do something to change it. So I stayed.

SS: And did you have a Filipino gay community, or any kind of parallel gay community?

JF: Does my mom's hairdresser count?

SS: Does what?

JF: My mom's hairdresser? {laughs}

SS: No, in New York. Did you have any other community that was not so, where you were not so outnumbered?

JF: Uh, no. Um, I mean that's the weird thing. My, my parents were, you know, assimilationist. They had Filipino friends, but I was, I was, you know, it was like,

always in among white people. And a Filipino community just wasn't something that I was even aware of. And I'm sure there's one here, but I never went to look for it.

SS: So how did you start out in ACT UP? Where did you first land?

JF: {sigh} I think for awhile I just sat in the general meetings. And then, after a few months, the two Roberts — Robert Vasquez and Robert — god, I can't remember his last name.

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SS: Garcia?

JF: Robert Garcia — uh, I think decided to throw together the — I remember we eventually called ourselves the Majority Action Committee. But I can't remember — we had a different name in the beginning. It was going to be a people-of-color committee of some sort. And someone walked up to me and asked me if I wanted to join. And I said, sure.

SS: So can you tell us — 'cause we have not covered this part — can you tell how Majority Action got started, and who was there, and what the first actions were?

JF: Oh. God. Um, I remember, it was the two Roberts, and Kendall Someone.

SS: Thomas.

JF: And a few other people. Emily — a white woman — was always a key mover and shaker in the group, which I thought was sort of unusual, but okay. Um, {laughs}. They decided to start recruiting people of color as they walked in the door, so they wouldn't feel alone. So that they would know, as soon as they walked in, that there was a friendly face that they could talk to. So they, I think they put me on, I called it

cheerleader duty. Because you needed to be up and effervescent and outgoing, and walk up to people, and say hi, and be like Julie the cruise director. And it's not my personality, but I decided, okay, sure, I'll do it. Where we would walk up to people and snag them as soon as they walked in the door; tell them about the issues of people of color; ask them if they wanted to join.

And at first, I don't think we had very many actions on our own. It was basically just getting a critical mass of people together to talk about issues that were not being discussed, or even thought of or focused on, in the main group. And I don't think we really started doing things on our own until that summer, of '88? Then we started doing a few things out in Brooklyn. I can't even remember what we were doing, most of the time. Most of the time, it was this weird dynamic of trying to do things externally, in the, you know, in the city, that we thought needed to be done; and acting like a conscience in ACT UP, trying to keep the group's focus on the issues of people who were not suburban white boys.

A lot of the people in ACT UP at the time were – came from the same class. It was people from the suburbs, white boys from the suburbs, who had had an easy existence, and then realized for the first time, with AIDS, and with being gay, that they don't have the privileges that every other suburban white male has.

I remember, in our group, it was a really big point of contention when people would talk about empowerment. You remember: everyone was talking about empowerment, and how good it felt. But we took the position that asking the government to take care of you is not empowerment. And that's what a lot of people in ACT UP, that was their goal. They were, they wanted the government to take care of them, as the

government takes care of any suburban white person. Which is, I suppose, equality, of a sort. But it's not empowerment. Empowerment is taking the power for yourself, to do for your self. And it was just odd, where a lot of people were focusing on getting the drugs into the bodies. And we were focused on getting the bodies just primary access to health care. And then, after that, maybe they can get the drugs. And so it was this weird dynamic, where we spent a lot of our energy just dealing with exclusion within ACT UP.

SS: Can you remember any kind of specific event? I know it was happening every day, but can you remember a particular issue when you took a stand?

JF: I remember, there was this one issue that lost us a lot of popularity points. It was about making sure that any fund-raisers we had at a club were not at clubs that had discriminatory door policies. I remember — what was it — at the time, Mars was a really hot club. Chip Duckett was running the, like, hottest gay night in the city. And they had a strict door policy. I don't know if it was discriminatory per se against people of color. But there was always, there were all these people at the door, being excluded. And there was a door person picking people who could come in. And we just thought that that is not, that was not fair. And that is not the sort of place that ACT UP should be associated with. And there were any number of clubs in the city that did have discriminatory door policies. And so we wanted to set a policy of, that if ACT UP held a fund-raiser, it would not be at a club or a night that had a discriminatory door policy. It would be first come, first served, and that would be that.

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And we caught a lot of flak for it, when we tried to pass a motion that we wouldn't have fundraisers at clubs. They, a lot of people were saying, well, how else are

we going to raise money? Or, you know, this affects the ability of the group to raise money. Shouldn't you have brought this up with us first? Meaning the, what was the fund, maybe it was the Fundraising Committee. Whatever it was. The fund-, the committee that dealt with raising cash. Whereas, on Monday nights, people were always screaming at politicians for doing what was expedient, instead of what was right. All of a sudden, when it came down to ACT UP's finances, they were very concerned about what was going to hurt us financially, as opposed to what would hurt us morally, or doing what was right.

And it was just, it was, it was divisive, in that it lost us allies. A lot of people who were in power in ACT UP — I know that supposedly there was no power structure in ACT UP, but there was a power structure in ACT UP — it lost us allies. They didn't like us, because of it. A couple of people in the group actually started separating themselves from the group, because they would rather not deal with alienating people within ACT UP, with a strong stand.

SS: What do you mean “some people in the group”? Which group – in Majority Action?

JF: {sigh} In the Majority Action Group.

SS: They started separating from ACT UP?

JF: Separating from the Majority Action Committee.

SS: Oh, because you guys were getting stigmatized?

JF: Because we were taking unpopular stands. And it was, it was frustrating.

SS: Can you give more specifics about — oh, this is fascinating — like what some of the conflicts were, and why people were —

JF: {sigh} Um — {sigh} — I, I don't want to name names.

SS: No, but just go through the issues.

JF: But, you know, there was this, there was one person in the committee who — definitely pulled back from Majority Action, who was a big Majority Action cheerleader. And then, all of a sudden, when we started taking unpopular stands, decided he would rather be — I think there was like, Outreach, or Communications committee, that was going to do public speaking. All of a sudden, he wanted to do that. And I thought it was pretty obvious that it's because he would rather be popular. And I don't know if I'm reading it wrong, or anything like that. But we had a, you know, a good friendship going before. And then, all of a sudden, he wanted nothing to do with me or the group. And it was, it was, it was hard to take.

SS: What were some of the other issues that you were dealing with ACT UP about?

JF: I think the main one was, there were two schools, of people who, one of them was focusing on getting the drugs through the pipeline and into bodies. And there was the other school in ACT UP that wanted to focus on getting people primary health, primary access to health care. And that was a constant struggle. We were always focused on the fact that people of color, people who were in lower economic brackets, died faster after diagnosis, if they were diagnosed at all, just because they didn't have a, a close relationship with a doctor, or didn't have any access to any health care at all. And if they did, it was through public clinics, and it wasn't that they were getting the right

amount of information to empower themselves to choose the proper course of treatment. Whereas, you know, your typical educated, single-income, no-kids person had health care, had a regular doctor, who could help him seek the latest treatments. You know, there were a few treatments coming out at the time, I think all of which have fallen by the wayside. But you know, at least at the time, it seemed like there was hope that if you took enough initiative, you could find the treatment that would work for you.

SS: What were some of the treatments, do you know?

JF: Oh god, do you remember when Compound Q came out? It was some Chinese cucumber thing, and everyone thought it was the end of the AIDS crisis. I remember Larry Kramer getting up in front of the audience, or in front of the, the group, and telling everyone that the AIDS crisis was over. And there were any number of things. Like CD4, and – lecithin. And all these things that people were taking and trying, if you knew about them, if you had a doctor who could get them to you. And most of the people I knew didn't even have health insurance. I don't think I had been to a doctor since college.

And the weird thing is that I had always assumed that I was positive, the whole time I was in ACT UP. Just because I'd done some stupid things when I first came to New York. And – and so I always operated under the assumption that I have no health care; I have no access to these treatments; I couldn't afford them even if I knew what they were, and that is what motivated my focus on access to health care, as opposed to drugs into bodies. You know, ironically, I, I always thought that if we get the drugs that would cure the AIDS crisis, people would forget that there is an AIDS crisis. And that's what's happened. The, the cocktails came out and people started living longer. And all

of a sudden, the AIDS crisis isn't a front-burner issue at all. And people are still getting infected, and people are still dying, and people still have no access to health care. Poor people, people of color, are still dying sooner of AIDS than people who have money and a primary-care physician. And it's just not talked about.

SS: I want to talk about this really important thing that you're bringing up, which are these two different strategies inside ACT UP. Who were the figures that you would say were emblematic, or in leadership of the two different ideologies?

JF: It seems so petty to name names. But I mean there was the Treatment and Data group; people who were involved with, who knew, it seemed, everything about the latest medical treatments, and what was coming through the pipeline, what maybe was, would show promise, and what wouldn't. And they were, they focused on that. There were people who, there were very few people in ACT UP who were out as people with AIDS. I remember that. It was always an ambiguous thing, whether someone was positive or not. And there were very few people who were out and open about it. But the people who were out and open about it were usually the ones who were focused on treatments. And you know, I can't blame them. That's self-interest. I, if I had health insurance, and if I knew that, if I were diagnosed, I would want the fastest thing to save my life as well.

SS: But there were people in Majority Action who had AIDS.

JF: Yeah. But you know, some people, I mean, I assumed I was positive at the time. But I also knew that – I had other issues that I thought were more important, and I thought access to health care, first, is more important than getting drugs into bodies.

And you know, in a way, now that 15 years has passed, I can see that treatment is, you know, medical treatment is necessary as well. Because even if I were positive — which I found out later I wasn't, which was a surprise. Even if I did have access to health care, there were people I knew who did have access to health care, and still were dying, because there was no treatment. And yes, access to health care is a good thing, and it would prolong your life. But without the other, it wouldn't do you much good.

So now that, you know, 15 years after I've left ACT UP, I always thought of them as two separate schools of thought — two separate strategies for dealing with the AIDS crisis. And now we realize, of course, they are the same thing. You can't have one without the other.

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So in a lot of ways, I was wrong. But in a lot of ways, I was right. Because you don't hear people talking about AIDS these days. People assume that the AIDS crisis is over.

SS: Because the two guys that you mentioned who started Majority Action, they were both people with AIDS. Robert Vazquez is alive and well.

JF: Thank god.

SS: And Robert Garcia has died.

JF: Um hm.

SS: So they were, you know, they made their commitments to the people-of-color community. And one survived and one didn't. And you couldn't really argue that it was a consequence of —

JF: Well, no. I mean, there is no logic to any of this, of course. I can't say that any of it is a consequence of what we did, or what stands we took, or didn't take.

But it was, I mean, I remember, it was a divisive thing. It seemed like you were drugs-into-bodies; or you were health-care-is-a-right.

SS: So let's talk about specifically, within ACT UP, where did this play out? What kind of actions were controversial, or what were the actions around – 'cause I know ACT UP didn't have empty theoretical conversations. Everything was around an action. So where were the places where this surfaced?

JF: Ohhh. Well, that fund-raiser policy was one of them. What made me happy about it, though, was even though perhaps the people who were in power were not happy with us, it seemed like the majority of the floor totally supported us. And then of course, the feelings of the people on the floor were totally dismissed by the people in power, as just like groundlings. There was another time, when we wanted to, what is it? There was a, some sort of study that came out that showed that Citibank was discriminating against people of color – not issuing them bank accounts, not issuing them loans, not putting branches in neighborhoods that were predominantly black or Hispanic. And it turned out that we were banking with Citibank. And we had a CD, or a certificate of deposit, at Citibank. And we wanted to pull our bank account from them, and do it with Amalgamated, which was a union-based bank account, and it had no discriminatory policies, as far as we could tell. And that was a big hubbub. It's like, but we're going to lose money if we pull our certificate of deposit. Which is what we were always asking the government to do. It's like, you always have to do what's right, not what's cheap. And then, when it came down to it, they wanted to do what was cheap.

But you know, that won as well. We, you know, got our funds out of Citibank. But again, it was another thing where the floor had its say. And people who

were working behind the scenes, and like the steering com-. I forgot what those steering, what's the steering –

SS: Coordinating Committee.

JF: Coordinating committee — dismissed it as any action that passes the floor is, or any action presented to the floor is going to pass on the floor. And whether it was right or not was treated with some sort of disdain. It was weird.

SS: So were you successful in recruiting people? How many people ended up in Majority Action?

JF: I think at its height, I think we had 30 people going down to the FDA with the Majority Action Committee.

SS: Can you remember who some of those people were?

JF: Oh, no. {laughs} And even then, we had this big fight among each other, among one another, about, like, whether we wanted to be aggressively demonstrating, and doing this; or just more passively demonstrating and doing that. I can't even remember the details. But I remember, immediately after FDA, it split in half. Ha ha ha! Half the people left. And then it was down –

SS: They left ACT UP, or –

JF: Uh, some of them left ACT UP. A lot of them left the committee. A lot of them may have just been with us for the FDA demonstration. But – there was some big hubbub that I wasn't a part of, for some reason, that split Majority Action.

SS: We need to stop? Okay. To change tapes.

JF: Okay.

SS: So was Majority Action an affinity group at the FDA?

JF: I forgot what we called ourselves. One of them was called The Kitchen, because they, the big meeting we had where we were going to discuss strategy, they met in the kitchen. Or they were called La Cocina, because they met in the kitchen. And I can't remember what the rest of us called ourselves. But all I remember is that I was a marshal at that demonstration as well, because I didn't want to take part. I needed to be an observer instead of a participant. And we just sat and enjoyed the day. It was {laughs} –

SS: You didn't do an action?

JF: – well we were at the action. And we were taping up the sign on the highway, near the highway, that showed the FDA, you know. It was the big sign for the Food and Drug Administration. And we wrapped it up in red tape, and that was our big thing. And then after that, we just sort of walked around with our signs, I think. I can't remember. Meanwhile, the people off in La Cocina were getting arrested {laughs} while we were just, you know, quietly picketing outside a side entrance, or something like that.

SS: So what was your discomfort with being in demonstrations?

Why do you think that marshalling was better for you?

JF: I don't know. Maybe it's an Asian thing. Where I'm never supposed to raise a stink. I'm never supposed to be confrontational. To this day, I'm not. I prefer dealing with people in a structured setting, in an appropriate setting, in an appropriate way. And usually, I get screwed. But you know, that's how I was raised. So that was my compromise, where I would help other people demonstrate; keep them safe; keep them from getting arrested, if I could; keep them from getting beat up by some onlooker; but not have to do it myself.

SS: So how did you feel about the training?

JF: The marshal training?

SS: Yeah.

JF: I thought it was great. It was Amy Bauer, and someone whose name I don't remember, who trained a bunch of us. And we were supposed to go on and train other people to become marshals, but it never quite took off to that point. But I think most of us who had been trained to train other people as marshals stayed as marshals and usually helped keep demonstrations working smoothly. It didn't have to be Amy and that other woman all the time.

SS: Let's go back to this issue about healthcare access. Who were the other allies inside the organization who were in favor of access as a primary focus?

JF: I remember it was the, the women's group that shared our same concerns, but ironically, there was bad blood between the women's group and our group.

SS: Oh, why?

JF: And I never understood it. I never understood it. 'Cause I liked a lot of the women in the women's group, and I don't know if I, we ever did anything specifically to them. But I remember, at one point there was an open letter to ACT UP about, that was basically critical of Majority Action, without outright saying so. And I never understood what it was that we had done wrong.

SS: And that was signed by the women's group?

JF: Signed by, I think it was written by Maxine? What's Maxine's, Maxine Wolfe? And signed by the women's group, or at least peop-, some women in the group.

SS: You don't remember what the criticism was?

JF: But I can't remember what the criticism was, or, but all I remember is that it was directed at Majority Action. And I could never understand why. Because of the two groups that should have been working together, it was women and Majority Action. And we never did.

SS: So when they did a campaign to change the definition of AIDS, to get the CDC definition changed, were you guys involved in that?

JF: Oh god, what year was that? I don't remember that.

SS: Oh, maybe that was later.

JF: Because I left in, pretty much left ACT UP the spring of '89.

SS: Okay. Were there women in Majority Action?

JF: Yes, but only white women.

SS: Hmm.

Tape II
00:05:00

JF: That was odd. It was predominantly black and Hispanic men, and two white women — Emily and another woman, whose name I don't remember, who dealt in health care, and had a lot of clientele, or patients, who were black and Hispanic women — but who were white themselves.

SS: Now, do you feel that the people of color in ACT UP who had AIDS were getting the same access to treatment as the white people in ACT UP who had AIDS? Or treatment information, I should say.

JF: I remember, in ACT UP, if you sought the information, and you were aggressive about it, you could get it. It wasn't really an issue, in ACT UP, of race. I always thought the problem, in ACT UP, was economic. I mean, I was 22, working

retail. So of course, I had no health care. Most of the people I knew were in their twenties, young and were not working a corporate job either and had no access to health care. And that was the main difference. Whereas there were a lot of people who had medical jobs or corporate jobs, who had great insurance packages. But, so there wasn't discrimination based on color, it was all about economics.

SS: So what would happen if somebody in ACT UP needed something, and they didn't have the resources? Was there a way to –

JF: {sigh} It was never anything structural. Friends would run around, and try to get things done for someone who was in the hospital. And you know, basically we relied on the system as it existed — emergency rooms, clinics, whatever — and just made do. And you know, racked up the bills, if that's what it came to.

SS: So what was Majority Action's relationship to the rest of the organization? Was it antagonistic, or –

JF: Um –

SS: – did you feel isolated, being in the group? Or did you feel –

JF: I felt a sense of isolation, if we took unpopular stands. Or as we took increasingly unpopular stands. It wasn't an avenue to getting invited to the right parties, that much I know. When I first joined ACT UP, and I was more of a social butterfly, and I hadn't committed to Majority Action, I remember going to parties all the time. And then not. And I don't know if the two were linked. But all of a sudden, most of my friends were in Majority Action. And even though I was friendly with a lot of people, still, in the main group, it wasn't my main – outside of meetings they were not my main circle.

SS: What about like dating and sex, and all of that, inside ACT UP?

Did you feel that that was racially separated?

JF: Um, no, but watch out when two guys in Majority Action liked the same guy. {laughs} That was ugly! {laughs} Ehhh, I don't know. New York, I always felt, was a hard town to be dating in, period. And specifically difficult if you're Asian or a person of color. I don't know. I slept around in ACT UP, and it didn't seem to hurt me.

SS: So if people were flirting or partying in ACT UP, did they talk politics?

JF: No. {laughs} Half the time, I remember, at the general meetings, it was like social time for the people who were on a committee, or in a specific group. Because we always thought that that's where the work gets done. Like I, at one point, I was doing the general meetings on Monday, the Coordinating Committee on Tuesday, the Majority Action Committee on Wednesday, and then doing an action on Saturday or Sunday. And I'm thinking this is a full-time fuckin' job. So when I saw my friends, on Monday nights, I wouldn't even listen to what was going on at the front. I would just be like running around and gabbing with people who I didn't see the rest of the week. So no, like when we socialize, of course it was always in the background. This is the assumed body of knowledge that everyone shared. But we wouldn't discuss AIDS or politics, in particular.

SS: Why did ACT UP become your whole life?

JF: Because I didn't have anything else? I don't know. It, maybe it's because I'm sort of obsessive that way. When I commit to something, I commit

everything to it. But you know, that isn't very wise. Because I'm burned out after a year and a half. A lot of people, like I volunteer at the Center now. And sometimes there, I'm there on Monday nights. And I still see the diehards coming through, on Monday nights. I've seen Maxine, and Richard –

JAMES WENTZY: Deagle?

JF: – Deagle. And I feel so guilty. I'm thinking, my god, I didn't even last 18 months, and these people have been at it for 15 years. It's incredible.

SS: Why did you burn out? Why do you think that was?

JF: Two things. First, I remember, there was a study that came out, where they needed participants, but you needed to get tested. And it was only for people who were positive. So I thought, okay, I'll finally get tested. I had resisted getting tested before because there was no real treatment at the time. And I remember, for some reason there was a politically correct line, that you should not get tested. You should assume that you were positive and behave accordingly, but you shouldn't get tested. I don't know what the reasoning for that was. I think a lot of it was that there was no viable treatment even if you found out you were positive.

So anyway. I didn't get tested for a while. I had always assumed I was positive. And then, all of a sudden, this treatment came, or this study came up, and there was a possibility of a certain treatment. So I thought, okay, I'll get tested, and see if I can get into this study. And my results came back, and I was negative. And that was quite shocking. 'Cause I'd had unsafe sex before. And that sort of dampened the, the anger. All of a sudden, it wasn't quite so personal. Even though intellectually, I still felt the same issues, I mean I still sensed the issues, but I didn't feel them in the same way.

SS: Um hm.

JF: And then I got a long-term boyfriend. And, and –

SS: And he wasn't in ACT UP.

JF: He was not in ACT UP. And all of a sudden, that took up a lot more of my time. I mean, you know how it is, when you first meet a guy. That's how these things happen. And I stayed with him for nine years, so it's not that I just threw away ACT UP for nothing. This is our ring, by the way.

SS: Mm.

JF: Not with him now, but this is still the ring, and I wear it. So it was this weird combination of finding out – of those two things happening. And then, I think, there was a lot of conflict going on with the church demonstrations, at St. Pat's.

SS: What was the conflict?

JF: There was a big demonstration there. And a few people were acting out their anti-Catholic angst. A lot of people, oh god, what was this one guys' name? Tom Something, with an Irish name, obviously raised Catholic; I think got up to the front of St. Patty's and stamped, stomped on a communion wafer. And I just thought, this is ridiculous. Yes, the church is not helpful when it comes to AIDS. And yes, the church says a lot of bad things and is against education and is against safe sex, as opposed to abstinence. But you know, stomping on a communion wafer is not going to help.

SS: Were you at that action?

JF: Uh, no. No. And I remember, a lot of ACT UP's momentum dissolved after that.

SS: Hm.

Tape II
00:15:00

JF: Um, I don't know if it had to do with that specifically, but I think by the fall of '89 — I left ACT UP pretty much in the spring of '89. By the fall of '89, what was it, now, I'm sorry. In the summer of '89, the meetings were so big they had to move out from the Center. And they were meeting in Cooper Union. And then, by the fall, all of a sudden, the meetings had just dwindled. And I don't know why. I wasn't around for it. I do remember being around for some big scandal, with Dan, in Majority Action, taking money that he shouldn't have. Thank god I was not around for that, I have to say. And I was friends with Dan. I was horribly disappointed. And I'm, I don't even know what happened to him, at this point. But —

SS: We interviewed him. You can see it on —

JF: Oh, really. I should, should have done my homework.

SS: That's okay. Well, you weren't there at the time? You just heard about it?

JF: No. I remember stopping in at one meeting, at Cooper Union. And seeing people in Majority Action falling on their swords, for not being, for not having caught what was going on. And just, I remember getting really upset that it happened. And I mean, obviously some of it had happened while I was part of the group, and representing the group to the Coordinating Committee, and I had no idea. There was a, we had gone down, as a group — oh, hey, there was a woman of color in Majority Action, who went down with us to D.C. to the, an AIDS conference. Of course I can't remember her name, sorry. And you know, we made a lot of contacts. And supposedly, we were invited to help structure the thing, or help put it together for the next year. And Dan was going to be the person coordinating with the —

SS: What conference was this?

JF: – the conference organizers. I can't even remember. But I remember, it was a conference for people of color and AIDS.

SS: Um hm.

JF: And he kept coming back to us, and saying that he was getting stonewalled, and that he couldn't get a hold of people. And it turned out that they had been trying to get in touch with us, but Dan was too much of a mess to follow through. And we, of course, had just taken him at his word, that he was getting stonewalled, because so many people were stonewalling ACT UP at the time, that we missed a great opportunity to help shape a conference, a national conference for people of color with AIDS. And that was just stunning to me. And it hurt. But I had already left the group at that point, when all that news came out. And so I didn't have to deal with the fallout.

SS: Did Majority Action work with other organizations outside of ACT UP?

JF: I remember when we first started, that summer we tried. But working with nonprofit groups in New York takes a lot of work. And everyone is dealing with their own little set of issues, and their own little worlds. And unless you actively keep these things together, they just fall apart on their own accord. And that's pretty much what happened.

I remember, we did an action at Downstate Hospital, out in Brooklyn, with a Brooklyn AIDS group, that was not specifically gay. It was more people of color. And we were supposed to build on that relationship. But we never did.

SS: Who were some of the people in ACT UP that you really admired?

JF: Mark Harrington.

SS: Can you say why?

JF: I remember, if I needed to know anything, he, I would walk up to him and ask, and he would know. It was just amazing. If you needed to know the latest stuff, there were a lot of people on Treatment and Data who knew everything. I love Robert Vasquez. He was just a cool guy. So sweet. Uh – who else did I love in ACT UP? Ron, from Actions. What was Ron's last name?

SS: Goldberg?

JF: Goldberg. He was so funny. And just so sharp. I remember running into him five years ago, out on Fire Island, in a bar. And just screaming. And we sat and talked. It was, you know, one of these tea nights, and everyone was running around cruising each other. And we spent the entire evening just yapping about ACT UP, and not even, well, I don't know about him, but I didn't cruise anybody that night. It was just him and me, yapping, all night long, about this and that in ACT UP. It was, it was great seeing him again.

Did you interview him? Is he in this?

SS: Oh yeah.

JF: I should see his thing.

SS: What about people getting sick? Did you have friends in ACT UP who got sick, and how did you deal with that?

JF: Uh, yeah. Of course I can't remember his name. Someone in ACT UP – Ray Navarro – got sick while I was in Majority Action. And it was, it was hard. I remember, he didn't have health care. He, or he didn't have insurance. And he wound up in the hospital one day. And – uh, it was, it was hard.

SS: Did you visit him in the hospital, or –

JF: Uh – just once. I think I was in, I, I, I was in denial. And it was on the East Side. As if that's an excuse.

SS: How did –

JF: I didn't leave my zip code.

SS: How did people deal with illness inside of the organization?

JF: It was weird. It was, it was something that everyone just sort of assumed happened. And it wasn't like a big shock that it happened, even though it wasn't good. It was just sort of like – it was sort of like saying, you know, your parents came into town. Oh, and I got diagnosed with pneumonia and was in the hospital over the weekend. It was, it was unusual, in that it didn't happen to everybody. But at the same time, it was something that wasn't so unusual that the world stopped for everyone else. It was just sort of assumed that these things happened to us.

SS: And what do you think the consequences of that have been on you?

JF: Um, I don't go to funerals anymore. I just, I can't. I remember, I didn't even go to Vito Russo's memorial, even though he and I had been close. I – I can't deal with it.

SS: Is there a way now that you express your citizenship? So many years after ACT UP, are you part of any kind of –

JF: You mean return things to the community in a civic-duty kind of way? Yeah. I'm always appalled that more people don't. I volunteer at the Community Center once a week. I take part in their book sale. It raises funds for the Center. And I read for the blind. It's not gay. I think it's the first non-gay volunteering I've done since I arrived in New York. But I keep thinking that the volunteering at the Community Center is not hard work. It's just standing there and you know, making sure that we put the books out, and get the money for them, and it's a lot more social. But like reading for the blind for three hours is hard work. And it's not social, because you're in a booth alone, with a microphone. So I keep thinking the two of them balance each other out? One of them is actually doing specific good for the community. And the other one is, you know, doing something gay, and helping. But you know, not, it's not all that hard work.

For six years, I volunteered for God's Love We Deliver. I worked in the kitchen, prepping meals. And –

SS: You lasted a lot longer there than at ACT UP. That was –

JF: It wasn't as intense. {laughs} It was just chopping vegetables. And that can be social and doing good work at the same time. So that was easier to do.

SS: I only have one more question, unless there's something, is there anything you want to talk about that –

JF: No.

SS: Okay. What would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement?

Tape II
00:25:00

JF: Uhhh. I think it put it out on the table that health care should be a right. I remember almost crying, watching the news, when Hillary Clinton was putting forward the health care bill. Because I thought, we have made our moment. And then of course, that failed. Probably never to be brought up again, in American politics. Even though they're making noises about it in the Kerry campaign. But it was our moment, where people finally realized that health care should not be something for the wealthy; it should not be something that you can afford, like a new car. It's something that everyone should have. And that, I think, changed the, not just the political debate, but people's, your average person's perspective; that health care should be a right. And I think that, that was our best thing.

SS: Okay, thank you, Jose.

JIM HUBBARD: Can I –

SS: Um hm. Go ahead.

JIM HUBBARD: You mentioned before we started filming that you had a critique of the FDA action that got cut out of Gregg Bordowitz's tape [*Seize Control of the FDA* by Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto]. I wondered if you could –

JF: God, I remem-, he interviewed me. And he said that, and I said that I hated it. And the specifics are lost on me. I just remember thinking that the FDA was a, there were so many specific things that the FDA was in control of. And just running around and keeping people from leaving the building parking lot. Like, I remember there was this poor delivery worker, who had absolutely nothing to do with the FDA, was just shipping boxes into the building, or something like that, who was trying to leave. And

we kept him from leaving. And he got really pissed at us. And I think he called us faggots. And of course, everyone pounced on him, and totally trashed his truck. And okay, he was an asshole. But really, how did that help the cause? Breaking a window at the FDA, and doing all that stuff. I remember, we lost our focus. The FDA had power over a lot of people's lives. And could have saved people's lives by speeding up the drug approval process. And that somehow got lost, with just a bunch of people running around in frustration and anger, outside the building. Never made that connection to people who would have been watching –

SS: So you feel that that action had no consequence on fast track, or any of that?

JF: {sigh} Um, I mean in a general sense, yes, it brought attention to the FDA: a lot of people had never heard of the FDA before, much less what it did with drugs, and how it could help people or hurt people through inaction. And in that sense — that we generated media attention for what the FDA does — it was a good action. But while you were there all day long, just endlessly circling the building or whatever, it seemed like that focus got lost. But I remember criticizing the minutia of actions, and losing track, myself, of what the action was doing in a more general sense, in that it was getting attention, it was getting press, it was effecting people's opinions and the media movers' and shakers' opinions. And so in that way, you know, when I look back at the FDA, it was a huge action. And it was a huge success. We got a lot of press, locally, in D.C., and nationwide. I mean, most news stories never mentioned the FDA before. And then it became a part of the regular discourse, that this is an agency that affects people's health.

SS: Okay. Anything else? Thank you, Jose.

JF: Thank you.

SS: Great.