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Interviewee: **Karl Soehnlein**

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**ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Interview of Karl Soehnlein

April 18, 2003

00:00:00

**SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, how old you are, today's date and the address of where we are?**

KARL SOEHNLEIN: My name is Karl Soehnlein. I am 37 years old. Today's date is April 18, 2003. And we are on Moss Street, in San Francisco.

**SS: Karl, do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS?**

KS: I remember, very vaguely in high school. I had a little class that was called "Journalism" – a high school elective – and there was something about gay cancer. I remember being part of group of people making fag jokes about it. And I don't know if that was the word AIDS, but I remember there was that gay man dying in an article in *Time* magazine, probably, which is what I used to read.

**SS: Where was this?**

KS: I was in New Jersey – in a suburban high school in New Jersey.

**SS: And were you gay yet, at that time?**

KS: No, except in my fantasies and wet dreams – I was very gay. But I had a girlfriend and was not gay at that point.

**SS: And when did you come out? How old were you?**

KS: I came out in college. I was 19. It was my sophomore year of college and I met Alan Klein at Ithaca College, upstate New York. And we became boyfriends. He seduced me one night on a futon, while we watched *The Hotel New Hampshire*. And I remember the breakthrough moment, when we both admitted that we thought Rob Lowe was cute. And it turned into sex from there. I shook through the whole thing. And Alan was already kind of out, although I didn't really know it. And then, I went through a

little bit of torment for a while, and then we kind of settled into a relationship that lasted six years. And when we moved to New York – we moved in together the summer of '87 – we were already involved in ACT UP at that point.

**SS: So, when you guys first got together, what kind of life were you looking forward to? Do you remember what your idea was?**

KS: What kind of a life? I was looking forward to living in New York City. I grew up in New Jersey, just 30 miles across the Hudson. So, I figured I'd wind up in New York City. And at the time, I was a film major in school. So, I had some idea about moving to New York and being a person in the film world, and I didn't really know if that was going to be.

**SS: And what was your picture of what the gay community would be like, waiting for you?**

KS: Well, right before I moved to New York, when I was finished with college, I had a really clear picture of the gay community, because I would go down to the city, and I was already out on campus. And so, I would go to the city and hang out in the Village. I kind of knew exactly what the West Village was all about.

My senior year – sometime in the spring – I accompanied a group of us who were part of the gay and lesbian group on campus. We went to Columbia University, where there was an AIDS teach-in. Or I guess it was not AIDS-specific. It was gay and lesbian conference of some sort for students, and Larry Kramer spoke. He was the opening keynote speaker and did the famous Larry speech – which was, “This half of the room stand up – you're all going to be dead in five years!” And kind of blew us all away, because we just coming out and, you know, we were starting to have sex with each other

on campus, and it was all very kind of safe and wonderful. And we knew about AIDS, and we knew, even at that point, that you had to use condoms. There was AIDS education already in places. This would have been 1987. I even wrote a pro-condom usage editorial in the Ithaca College student newspaper and all that. So, we kind of knew about AIDS, but I wasn't so worried I was going to get it. It didn't seem like I would get AIDS. I was 20 or 21.

00:05:00 And so, that conference at Columbia really shook me up a lot. And then, when I thought about then moving to New York, where Alan already was – because he was a year older than me and was already living – he was living with his parents on Long Island and working in the city. And I would go down and visit him, and we would go into the city. And I started to think a lot more about AIDS, after I had been told that I would be dead in five years because of it.

**SS: Was that your first exposure to ACT UP?**

KS: I believe I already knew about ACT UP. Somewhere in that same period of time, I saw the photo with the caption in the *Village Voice* from the very first Wall Street action. So, I imagine I had seen that, and then gone to Columbia, but the order might be switched. And I had a class at the time that was a political theory class – a seminar on gay politics at Ithaca College. There was an out gay political professor.

**SS: Who taught that?**

KS: Marty Brownstein. He, I believe, is still teaching at Ithaca College. We'd lost touch, but we stayed in touch for many years. He was out at Ithaca for years and had finally got them to teach this Gay Politics Seminar, which was a political theory course. We read Marcuse and we read Hannah Arendt and we read all these kind of political

thinkers. And then, we somehow figured out how to put gay politics in that context. I wrote my final paper for that seminar on ACT UP, or in part, on ACT UP. We had to write, what's the future of the gay political movement. And I had seen the coverage in the *Village Voice*, and I had heard Larry speak, and I felt pretty sure that that kind of political protest was where the gay community was headed – as much as I could make any prediction of that sort.

**SS: So, was Larry the only person scaring you that you might get AIDS? Was your family concerned about that? Or your professor?**

KS: I remember my parents – when I came out to them, were worried about disease. Or worried, just in general. But one of their worries was that I would get sick, and I told them that I knew how to protect myself. I would use condoms.

**SS: Had you ever met a person with AIDS, before you came to ACT UP?**

KS: I met or heard speak people with AIDS at that Columbia conference. And maybe someone came and spoke to us at school. But no – not like, someone I would hang with.

**SS: In retrospect – because since hindsight is 20/20 – since you had no personal experience with AIDS, why do you think you chose that as the place to make your stand?**

KS: Oh, I know why I chose it. I was politicized. I had been getting politicized since high school, in one way or the other. I went to No Nukes protests. There were things going on in Ithaca. I remember being part of a demonstration that the chant was “Embargo South Africa, Not Nicaragua.” There was all that '80s political action that was going on, and I was tuned into it.

And when I finished school, I was still living in New Jersey with my parents. I hadn't yet moved in with Alan to New York. One of the first things I did was I went to another event in New York City – it was at Riverside Cathedral. It was probably in May or June of 1987. The *Village Voice* had sponsored an all-day teach-in or confab of some sort, on AIDS. People like Ellen Willis spoke – you know, the *Voice* political analyst writers were there. And, once again, Larry Kramer spoke. And this was at the end of the day this time – after listening to lots of people. Simon Watney spoke; people spoke about AIDS prevention campaigns in Europe versus America. And, that last thing was Larry Kramer, who got up once again and said, “I can't believe all you sissies sitting out there, talking about AIDS. What are you *doing* about AIDS?” And I was there by myself. There I was, 21, curious. And I remember getting on the phone – I went to a pay phone and called Alan – when it was over, I called Alan, and I was in tears. I was shaking. Larry had affected me more, I guess, this time. And I don't know why it was more – maybe just because the second time is worse or something. And I said to him, “We have to do something. We have to do something.” And a little while after that – do you want to just keep rolling through the progression here?

**SS: Mm hmm.**

00:10:00 KS: A little while after that, we had decided that we would go to a meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center on 13<sup>th</sup> Street and check out this meeting. It was not an ACT UP meeting. It was a meeting for the march on Washington, which was happening in 1987. It was a planning meeting. And we went to the Center, and it was the big room at the Center, with all the folding chairs set up. And we sat down and it was the worst meeting I've ever been to. And there was all this in-fighting, and everyone was

sniping at each other. And one of the big issues on the table was that the gay atheists were really mad that atheism was not among the list of demands, in some form – that we weren't using the march on Washington to break down the way God is infused into the American government. Alan and I just looked each other and thought, this is fucking hell! Forget getting involved with the gay community, all they do is bitch at each other. But we knew that after that meeting was the ACT UP meeting. And I said, "Let's stay for that." And we stayed, and we went to every ACT UP meeting after that for two or three years. We were just hooked.

**SS: What got you?**

KS: It was so exciting. I'm getting goose bumps just remembering that moment. It was the complete opposite of that meeting we had just been to. It was totally organized. It was run like a tight ship. It was Michael Nesline and Avram Finkelstein facilitating the meeting. And Nesline was hilarious and droll and together and knew when to cut people off and knew when to encourage people to speak. And there was this whole system in place, about how you could speak, but you couldn't do crosstalk, so there was no in-fighting. The agenda was clear, from the beginning of the meeting. And, on the agenda that night, was ACT UP talking about what it was going to do for the Gay Pride Parade. This was 1987, and it was June, and Gay Day was coming up. And, the decision had been made, or it was made at that meeting – I forget – that ACT UP was going to have a float that was a traveling concentration camp. And inside the float were going to be all the people with AIDS, who represented the way we felt Reagan and his henchmen wanted to quarantine and isolate people with AIDS. And we're going to have people of all different kinds in this float. And then, we were going to have guards,

walking alongside, with yellow rubber gloves, because the police had worn yellow rubber gloves to handle ACT UP protestors at a recent demonstration. I believe it was the demonstration they had just done in Washington, at the first International AIDS meeting.

So, there was all this stuff that was totally worked out. They knew what they wanted to do. It made sense. It was exciting. And then, there were guys like Steve Webb, standing up saying, “We need people, sign up tonight!” And he’s like blonde and hunky and muscle-y, and I was like, I’ll sign up! You’re sexy. And that was part of it, too. It was sexy. I was 21 and surrounded by all these men who were so attractive to me and that was part of it – absolutely, that was part of it. And that it was always part of it, I think – for many of us who were involved in ACT UP, who were in our early 20s. It was this sexy place to go. You didn’t have to always go to clubs and bars. We would go to an ACT UP meeting, do something important, be part of that, but also like, get this kind of jones off the whole thing.

**SS: How did they treat you – the older guys?**

KS: Well, nobody treated us like anything that night, because we just kind of watched and then left together and we were excited and buzzing about it. But we signed up for – that meeting or at the next meeting – we signed up to do something for Gay Day. And what we had signed up to do was to be part of the booth, that would be along Christopher Street, where the ACT UP merchandise would get sold – the t-shirts, the Silence = Death buttons and all that kind of stuff. And I knew that Christopher Street route, because I had been to the Gay Pride Parade before and would watch some of the parade and then it would wind up downtown, and wherever you buy your souvlaki, you get the latest button and you put it on your denim jacket.



00:15:00

So, Alan and I said, “Oh yeah, let’s do that – let’s go to the booth.” And I got this call in New Jersey, because I was living in New Jersey. And I got this call. It was a Saturday morning. It was the day before Gay Pride Day. And I’m sleeping with Alan on the pull-out couch in the basement of my parents’ house. At that point, my parents were letting us sleep together on the pull-out couch in the basement – which hadn’t always been the case. And the phone rings, and my father says, “It’s Steve from ACT UP.” Oh my God, it was Steve Webb – the guy I was totally turned on by, right? And I get on the phone and, “Hello?” And he says, “Is this Karl or Alan?” And I said, “Yes it is.” And he said, “Look, you signed up for the booth, and we don’t have anyone for the booth between this hour and this hour, because everyone is marching. So, were you planning on marching?” He was all kind of agitated. And I was like, “No, we’ll do it. You need someone from 10:00 to 12:00? Sure, we’ll do it!” And so, we did that. So, we were kind of much liked, at that point, because we weren’t going to march. We were going to be in the booth, while everyone else was marching. And that was sort of the point at which people started to know who we were because we became known as “Karl and Alan, from New Jersey.” And that was sort of the little tag that was attached to us for a while.

Now, working at booth, I met Larry Kramer face to face. We were at the booth, selling buttons – I met Macky Alston that day – he was the other person who was assigned to the booth with us. And we wore our Silence = Death t-shirts, and we yelled and we got people to buy them, and we were very popular. Everyone wanted to know about ACT UP. We had started to make waves. And then, the concentration camp float came by, and it was amazing. There was someone with a Reagan mask, sitting on the front of the truck, shaking his finger and laughing and there were all these people. I

remember Emily Nahmanson inside the concentration –

**SS: The young girl?**

KS: No, the older Emily [Gordon] with the red hair. A straight woman with glasses.

**SS: I'm trying to find her last name.**

KS: I remember Maria Maggenti was one of the guards, wearing rubber gloves and a mask over her face and dark glasses. And there was a lot of excitement about that float. There was excitement for us – to just kind of see that it had happened. Yay, our gang did this. But there was a lot of really intense excitement from other people who were starting to really get what ACT UP was doing, along the route. So then afterwards, a lot of ACT UP people converged on the booth, and one of them was Larry Kramer. And, we were with Larry, selling buttons. And I thought, I can't believe it, he's kind of a nice guy, you know? We were just laughing and talking, and he wasn't telling me I was going to be dead. He wasn't shaking his finger at me. So, we got really involved with ACT UP.

**SS: Like how involved?**

KS: How involved? Well, I was facilitating meetings at a certain point. I was one of the people who ran for and was elected to facilitate meetings. I think Alan and I first got involved with the Outreach Committee. That was the first committee. And that was really my baptism into identity politics.

**SS: Who ran the Outreach Committee?**

KS: I don't know who ran it, but I remember Maxine was involved, Maria Maggenti was involved, Ortez Alderson was involved. It seemed like the place where

women and people of color were showing up, because part of the goal of the Outreach Committee was to reach out beyond all these gay white men, who were the majority of the group – or seemed to be – at that point.

**SS: Why did you choose it?**

KS: I don't know. I guess it seemed like something like a friendly guy could do – outreach. Reach out!

**SS: So, what did you guys do?**

KS: Well, I remember, one of the things we did was for the March on Washington. We had to come up with a business card that was sort of known as the “palm card,” because nobody wanted to use the word business, right? And we were going to hand out these little things that looked like, and were the size of, professional business cards. But we were going to give them to people, so that they could put them in their wallets. And it was going to have a pink triangle, Silence = Death. It was going to have some text, and then, how to get in touch with ACT UP. There was a phone number and an address, and when the meeting times were. And, we had this meeting to nail down the language. And I remember sitting at a table in Dojo's with Maria and Maxine and maybe David Gips? I don't know – there were a bunch of people – maybe Robert Garcia? And we just hammered out this language, word by word – how we were going to describe ourselves to this thing we were going to be handing out to thousands of people.

And then, very pleased with ourselves. We gave that information to Oliver Johnston – sweet, sweet graphic designer man from the South, who took it and rewrote it. Oh, we were so outraged that he would re-write this thing that the committee had worked so hard on! And he came up with the famous, notorious phrase that one of the things that

ACT UP does is that we “Liaise with PWAs.” First of all, nobody even knew that “liaise” was a verb, second of all, why would you use such a verb, third of all, were PWAs what were we liaising with? As if we were like, the ambassadors from the non-infected world or something. But Oliver was such a good-hearted guy that it was hard to stay mad at him. But it was really interesting. There was a kind of person who was involved with ACT UP, like Oliver, who had been there from day one, who didn’t want to do everything by committee, and if you had an idea about how to make it fit better on the thing, you would just do it. You didn’t have to work it out through a committee. But, we were this kind of like, second wave that had come very quickly upon the first, and we were all into how to do it right; how to have the right kind of group – the right meaning, what we would now say was “politically correct.” But now it has such a bad connotation.

**SS: But what does it mean to you when you say it?**

KS: Right?

**SS: Yeah.**

KS: Well, what it meant back then was that we were going to not repeat all the offenses of the world, of the dominant world. We were not going to exclude groups that had been excluded. We were not going to make assumptions that were narrow or that only reflected white people or men.

**SS: How did you feel to be part of a project like that?**

KS: Well, it tore me up because I wasn’t used to this, and I understood the motivation behind inclusively, and I certainly understood what it felt like to feel invisible and persecuted as a gay man. So, I didn’t want to then be part of the persecution of people of color, or women or immigrants and any of these other groups that were kind of

part of this notion of who we had to reach out and bring into ACT UP. And I remember really, really clearly, one of the formative experiences of my political identity, political consciousness, was being in an outreach meeting. It was in someone's office – someone had an office, meeting conference room that we were using in mid-town.

And we were going around and round about who knows what – something about how we were going to make sure we got more Black people at the next town meeting we were doing. And Ortez Alderson, who was Black and who was older and was rail thin and a PWA and fiery, spoke up at a certain point in this discussion, after it had been going on for a while, and just looked at us all with these narrowed eyes and said, “Do you people even know what you're saying? Do you even know what you sound like?” And he said, “Do you know what happened today?” And we all looked each other and we didn't know what happened. “James Baldwin died today! Do you know who James Baldwin is?” Well, I kind of knew who James Baldwin was, but not really. And he went on about what James Baldwin had said and how we had to educate ourselves about these issues regarding race, and that we didn't even realize the ways in which we sounded privileged and racist. I went home that night and I was living with Alan, at this point, in Queens, in Astoria, and I came home and I cried and I cried and I cried, because I didn't know what to do with this. I didn't know what to do with the fact that I felt like being white meant I would never understand people who weren't white. And I wanted to, and I wanted to be free from all those prejudices and offenses that I knew were wrong in the world.

But there was a way in which I just felt like I didn't know how to act, or to proceed forward, without making mistakes, because I wasn't even aware of my mistakes.

00:25:00 And it was really hard to kind of sort that out. This was the first time I was really coming up against identity politics. And I was so pure of heart and intention. I really wanted just to like, make this world a better place, and I just thought, I can't do it, I can't do it. And I felt guilty. And guilt was something I could easily be paralyzed by because I was a good Catholic boy from New Jersey, I knew a lot about guilt and disappointment. And Alan was pretty levelheaded with me and just, you know, was kind of bringing it back to my attention, and not so much – wasn't really letting my guilt leave me paralyzed. He said, you just have to figure out how you do what you do, and do your part, and try to do the right thing – kind of calmed me down. But those very issues, I think, never ever went away in ACT UP. I mean, the question of race, the question of gender, the question of inclusivity and visibility and who speaks for whom – those things went on and on and they were really hard.

**SS: Was Ortez the first person you knew in ACT UP to die? Or Steve Webb, actually, no?**

KS: Steve Webb was probably the first one, because he killed himself, which was so puzzling. How could this guy who was so strong and so inspiring to me, and so much of why I even stayed in that room, kill himself? And I remember being at this memorial service we had in the Center, and Michael Nesline saying, "If he wanted to die, why didn't he just put a bomb in his hand and shake Jesse Helms' palm, and blow them both up?" And I thought, yeah. And then I thought, well this is obviously not about Steve's politics. This is about Steve as a person. That was hard, and it was really hard, too, because Steve and Avram were going out, and Steve's parents came into his apartment and cleaned everything out and left Avram out in the cold, and Avram was

treated poorly, when he went to visit Steve's family. It was in Creve Coeur, Missouri or something like that. So, that was the first person I knew who died. But the first person I knew who died of AIDS, I don't know who that was, actually. They all blur together now, because there was a period of time where people were just dying – probably within six months of me being in ACT UP.

**SS: Had you ever been close with older gay men before?**

KS: Well, Marty Brownstein, this professor – I'd been close with him. He wasn't just my professor, we hung out. He was the mentor of the student group on campus, and I was sort of one of his little stars. So, we hung out at his house. We watched election results on TV together. So, Marty let me know kind of what an older gay man might be like. But, it was different, because he was isolated and in this campus environment. So, it was different to come to New York and see men much more in the community.

**SS: How did your relationship with Larry proceed?**

KS: Well, Larry and I – we were fine, most of the time. If Larry came to a meeting and we were out at a diner afterwards and Larry came along – everything was fine. But there were a couple of instances that stand out for me, and one of them was – I was facilitating a meeting, and there were 500 people, easily, in that room. It was packed, it was summer, it was hot. It was contentious, and I don't remember why.

But Larry interrupted, screaming in the course of this contentious discussion and silenced whoever had been speaking, and silenced me, saying, "I can't believe we're talking about this!" Whatever it was, it wasn't what Larry wanted to be doing. We were talking about the wrong thing. We were probably hashing out and fine-tuning something

about identity or inclusivity – one of these issues that always came up, in the course of trying to figure out how to do actions the right way. And Larry was screaming and screaming, and I said – I cut him off, and I said, “Larry, it’s not your turn to speak. Someone else is speaking, you have to wait your turn.” And he said, “You’re a Nazi!” He called me a Nazi! “People are dying, and you’re fussing over how to print the flyer – what to say on the flyer!” And I was shaking – oh my God, I was shaking, and my voice was shaking. I was 22. This isn’t fair. He was Larry Kramer, and he was calling me a Nazi, and I’m German, and I’m really sensitive to being called a Nazi, actually. I don’t like that. And I said, “Larry, I have been elected by this group, to stand up here and run this meeting. You’re among the people in the room, who has to abide by the rules” and  
00:30:00 blah, blah, blah. Ah, blah, blah, blah, he said and stormed off into the corner. “I’ll be in the corner if anybody wants to do anything.” And I think I might have gotten a little bit of applause, after I kind of shut Larry up. And on the mythic level, it was a real moment in the narrative. This was the moment when you have to kill the Buddha, because you need to be able to stand up on your own. You have to kill your teacher, or your master, or whatever that is.

There was one other moment with Larry that stands out in my mind, which is – flash-forward, years later to St. Patrick’s cathedral. I had been interviewed by the media – by Channel 7 News – ABC, New York news, as one of the people kind of explaining what had happened in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. And when the interview ran that night – which is a story in and of itself, it said under my face: Frank Murphy – instead of Karl Soehnlein, it said Frank Murphy. And it was a Monday or something, so when I went to ACT UP, everyone had seen this, and it was kind of being talked about, and Larry came



up to me and said, “Why didn’t you give them your name?” And I said, “I did give them my name, Larry.” “Well, it didn’t say your name on there – what, are you afraid your parents are going to see it?” I said, “Larry, you know what? The reporter didn’t put my name” – so there we were, butting heads. You’ve got to cool out, because this isn’t about me, this is about ABC. Why would you distrust me? Distrust the media. Those are a couple of Larry moments that stand out. And I think, like everyone, I kind of had a love/hate relationship with him, because he was so hard to deal with in so many ways. But his motivational power worked on me, and so he always retains a certain – I remain respectful of him on a certain level, because I know what he did was effective for some of us, for a while.

**SS: What about the familial kind of relationships there? There’s multi-generational and people are coming of age, and it’s all gay. Do you think that it fed in some other kinds of needs that you might have had, related to your own family?**

KS: Yeah, I think very quickly I started to think of ACT UP as my chosen family. I think I got introduced to that lingo – of the idea of the families that we’re born with and the families we choose. And I quickly understood that I was closer to these people than I was to my own family at that point. My family was kind of coming along, slowly, with dealing with having a gay son – and not only gay son, but a gay son who was an activist, who might wind up in the newspaper, as I did a few times, for various reasons – was part of a group that wound up in the newspaper. And it was hard on my family to know what to do with that. I mean, they were just dealing with, how do you tell the neighbors that you have a gay son? This is the late ’80s – it’s pre-Oprah, pre-Bill Clinton, pre-all the kinds of liberalizing effects of the ’90s. So, it was hard to be close to

them. I had a younger sister – two younger sisters, but one in particular, who was really uneasy that any of her friends would know she had a gay brother. So, it was hard to be close.

Meanwhile, I was finding all of this closeness, like I had never known with any friends before, with my comrades in ACT UP. “Comrades” seems like a good word for it. And you know, I don’t know that there were like, substitute parents. It felt much more like peers. And that was really amazing to me, because I was 21, 22, 23, and I had friends who were in their late 20s, 30s, 40s. People like Maxine Wolfe, who was probably – if not 50 – yeah, a person 50. People like Hal Branson, who was an older man, who took a shine to me and was very kind. But we all felt like peers. I didn’t feel like anybody was pulling a hierarchy trip on me, and that was a lot of the lingo. So, it became a family. They were the people I wanted to be with at holidays. I would go to New Jersey for Christmas dinner, but I would leave before dessert, so that I could get to Brooklyn, to sit down with Maxine and the group she had assembled, because I wanted to spend Christmas with that family. Yeah, you know, we did things families do. We broke bread and we supported each other and we fought. It was a family.

00:35:00

**SS: When you talked about Avram – how badly he was treated by Steve’s family – were you aware of other people? Did people talk about their families? Or what were people’s relationships with their families, around AIDS and ACT UP?**

KS: There were a lot of horror stories about people’s families. I mean, when Lee Schy died, Joe Ferrari experienced the same thing that Avram had – where the family had Joe at the funeral but wouldn’t tell anyone that he was Lee’s lover or boyfriend or partner, or any euphemism. He was Lee’s friend, and Joe freaked out and caused a scene,

and they'd been together for five years. And he actually kind of thought they liked him. But they couldn't honor him at that moment. There were stories like that. And then, there were just a lot of people who were kind of like I was – where, my family wasn't hostile. They were trying. It wasn't enough for me, so I would get mad at them, and I would provoke a lot of arguing, and I felt like it was my duty to make my family get on board, and they did.

And there were people like that. Alan's family wound up doing that, too. His mom had a lot of trouble with me. His mom was a princess on Long Island, and I was over at their house a lot and swimming in their pool, and eating meals with them, but there was a place she couldn't go and I had to confront her, eventually. I hear from Alan now that she's his ally, and she's come around. So, it seems like we were all kind of at odds. Every now and then, someone's mother would show up at ACT UP, and the whole room would burst into applause. It seemed like there was nothing more beautiful than someone's mother showing up at ACT UP, because what more could you want? For your mother to say it's okay what you're doing here.

**SS: Were you aware of anybody who was sick? Whose family did not come through for them?**

KS: Not off the top of my head.

**SS: Why did you decide to become a facilitator? – The truth.**

**SS: Before we get into that, I just wanted to ask you, what were you doing for a living?**

KS: I had a job at the Collective for Living Cinema – a non-profit film

exhibition and workshop facility. I was one of three people on staff there. I was the Administrative Director, and I guess, actually, that came in the fall. When I first joined ACT UP, I was trying to freelance in the film industry, and couldn't make it work, financially. And when Alan and I moved in together, I got that job, so I had a steady paycheck.

**SS: So, you still wanted to be a filmmaker?**

KS: I didn't know what I wanted to do, in terms of film. I realized, very quickly, that film took a lot of money and a lot of technical know-how, and collaborators and I didn't know how I was going to pull that all together. And what happened was, I eventually started writing about film for *OutWeek*, the *Village Voice*. And doing reviews, and that kind of pushed me more towards writing – away from film.

**SS: What was Alan doing for a living?**

KS: Alan was running the New York office of Compu-Prompt, a teleprompting service. So, he was like, going on the set of *Entertainment Tonight* and scrolling the text for Mary Hart. And I did a little of that, too. I freelanced a little for them. I was a teleprompter, for a while.

**SS: Okay. So, then from outreach, you went to becoming a facilitator?**

**Was that your next –**

KS: Yeah, I was a facilitator, and you asked why I became a facilitator?

**SS: Yeah.**

KS: I don't really know. I think it's crazy, when I think back on it. It was such a big thing to do, and I think I just thought I could do it. I think it felt like a way I could contribute without going to six committee meetings a week – if you could do your

part at the main meeting, on Monday. And, I think someone might have encouraged me at some point. You know, like, “Oh, when you speak in the meetings, you seem like you have a calming effect when people are freaking out.” And I thought okay, great, I’ll do it. It turned out to be really emotionally devastating at times. In the same way that I got so freaked out when Ortez was calling me on my white privilege, I could really internalize a lot of the hostility and tension and confusion in the room. And I would try to make it all better. That’s kind of what I had to do, as facilitator, and really, some nights I would just go home and I would be so tired, and I would be so eaten up inside and felt I had done a bad job and if the meeting had left people unhappy, it was my fault. So, I didn’t do it for all that long – maybe a year. Which I guess is long.

00:40:00

**SS: Who was your co-facilitator?**

KS: Maria Maggenti was a co-facilitator, David Robinson, Robert Garcia? I can’t remember. We overlapped. There were different terms that someone was finishing and someone was starting.

**SS: So, what was your responsibility? Take us through the –**

KS: Of facilitating a meeting?

**SS: Yeah.**

KS: You would read the agenda for the night. Bradley Ball was the secretary of the group, and he would sit up there and take minutes. You would read the agenda and then you would start the agenda.

**SS: Who set the agenda?**

KS: I believe the agenda was set by the Coordinating Committee, which was one representative from every committee who had a separate meeting on a different night.

And I went to some Coordinating Committee meetings. I think when I was involved with the Outreach Committee for a while, I was the outreach representative at the Coordinating Committee. And, the Coordinating Committee, at first, was a lot of the original people involved in ACT UP – Bradley Ball, Michael Nesline, Avram Finkelstein. The original guy on the Media Committee was named Frank – not Frank Jump – Frank somebody. He died pretty early in the ACT UP life.

And there was a way in which the Coordinating Committee was sometimes demonized by the room at large, because they did have a certain amount of power. They did get to set the agenda, and they did get to sort of fine-tune things, that were kind of left a little bit rough, when the group decided on them. And there was a way in which – you know, you kind of understood that the guys on the Coordinating Committee – or, men and women, because there were women who were getting it, too – were kind of doing the necessary work, where someone has to make a decision and kind of fine-tune the loose ends. But there were ways in which the group sometimes distrusted the Coordinating Committee, and then the people on the Coordinating Committee, who felt like they were giving all this extra time, felt like they were not being appreciated. So, as facilitator, you were always aware that that tension was going on. So, if someone challenged something that was on the agenda, you'd have to say it was decided on by the Coordinating Committee, and if people freaked out about that, you'd have to say, these are the rules of the group. These are the things we all agree on. We can change them if we want to, but we can't change them right now. Right now, I have to get through this agenda.

You always had to be so levelheaded, when people were freaking out in front of you – not that people were freaking out – I don't know why I keep thinking of it that way.

I experienced it that way, because anyone who was kind of hot under the collar about anything – and many of us were – came to me, as the facilitator, as a crisis to be dealt with, and you could have a crisis every five minutes.

**SS: Do you remember any substantive controversies during your reign as facilitator?**

KS: I remember Michael Petrelis was a pain in the ass. He's still a pain in the ass. He's here in San Francisco.

**SS: We're interviewing him on Monday.**

KS: Good luck. Michael would say whatever he wanted to say, with no regard for what had been decided to be put on the agenda. He was a personality crisis – but that's not an issue that was a substantive crisis.

**SS: Like a real debate.**

KS: Yeah. I remember debates that formed around certain structural changes in ACT UP. For example, when there was a decision made – maybe from the coordinating committee – that we should consider having an Actions Committee. Whereas before, the group was the Actions Committee. We were all there to do actions, and suddenly there was going to be an Actions Committee that was going to decide or recommend what actions were. And, if you wanted to organize an action, you had to go to that committee meeting, and then that committee had to bring it to the floor, and the whole group had to vote on it. So, there was definitely controversy about that. I remember we had to discuss whether or not that was a good thing or a bad thing – whether that was a compartmentalization of power. The same thing happened with the Issues Committee, because before, we could talk about all the issues about AIDS on the

00:45:00 floor. We could talk about drugs and insurance and housing for PWAs. But, after a while, we couldn't have any substantive discussion. That had to happen in a smaller group. And I remember when – what was that guy's name, Kayton something?

**SS: Kayton?**

KS: Kayton [Kurowski]? He was an older guy, with kind of gold blonde hair and glasses. He was heavysset, and he was one of the first people who were involved with the Issues Committee. And I remember him standing up and saying, "If you know someone who needs a bed and they don't have a bed, and they're a person with AIDS – that's an issue, bring it to the Issues Committee. If you hear about a politician who's going to bring some homophobic legislation or AIDS-phobic legislation to the City Council, bring it to the Issues Committee." So, I remember having to facilitate structural changes. I remember having to facilitate an intervention by that fucking International Socialist Organization. There were a handful of those people who would come to those meetings, and they were such troublemakers – and not in the way that we all were troublemakers, but they were troublemakers in that they were trying to cause trouble within ACT UP.

And they were always the people who were against the Actions Committee or whatever. You could count on those people to think that or kind of stir up the notion that power was being wielded secretly behind the scenes. And there was some demonstration – and I can't remember which one it was – where they were trying to get us all to leave the meeting and go march somewhere, at that moment – stop everything, we had to do this now. Maybe it was because Cardinal O'Connor was going to be in the Village? It's kind of vague to me. And, I remember, one of these young fellows – there was a woman



with a British accent who was part of the group – Allison was her name, and there was a guy – did he also have a British accent? Did they all have British accents? They were the people with the newspapers, selling their newspapers. There was a guy who was saying, “In the spirit of Stonewall, we must leave!” At which point, Marty Robinson stood up and said, “Don’t you invoke Stonewall, I *am* Stonewall!” Marty had been at Stonewall, and he was happy to let anyone know that at any time. I loved Marty. He was crazy and smart, at the same time. I was very, very sad when Marty Robinson died. He took Alan and I on a walking tour of the Old Village once that was really special. But Marty really kind of shut that group up that night, and there were times when, as a facilitator, you just kind let the people with the most powerful presence kind of sway the room, because you hoped for consensus. You hoped for majority agreement and you couldn’t always do that yourself. Sometimes, you just had to kind of catch the moment where it felt like everything had shifted, and then kind of say, “Okay – can we bring this to a vote? Motion for vote. I need a second. All in favor.” We did this kind of Robert’s Rules of Order – Roberta’s Rules of Order, it was PC to say that.

It’s funny – you’re asking about a lot of these substantive things, and I have to say, in certain ways, I remember the people and the places and the feelings, and not the issues. And I think it was always one of my personal fears that I wasn’t really much of an issues guy. There were people who were brilliant, who were down working with the CDC or working with PWA groups all over the country, all over the world, and they were really compiling the data, and they were the experts on their particular subject, within the huge problem of AIDS. But I wasn’t really one of those people. I was not the issues guy. I was much more of like the – someone who was kind of part of the life of the organism

as a whole, procedurally. And maybe that's why I became a facilitator. I wasn't the scientific guy who was going to understand how a retrovirus worked. And I still don't keep up well with science, with all that stuff.

**SS: Who were your close friends who had AIDS in the organization?**

00:50:00 KS: Gregg Bordowitz was a close friend of mine for a while. We hung out. We related too on the kind of artsy tip, because he had been through that Whitney program in media, and I had gone to film school and I was working at the Collective, so we had some commonality – though, I totally lost touch with him. Lee Schy, who I mentioned. Lee was one of my closest friends and was a photographer and was a lot of fun. He and his boyfriend, Joey, would do things like throw a Tupperware party, where they'd get an actual Tupperware representative – a middle-American, middle-aged woman who'd come in and do her thing.

**SS: It's like hiring a stripper or something.**

KS: It was. It was very camp. But she did it straight-faced. She was into it. She sold some Tupperware. I think I still have one piece of Tupperware from that party that I refuse to get rid of. And Bradley Ball was a very, very close friend of mine, and I have some amazing letters from Bradley, if you ever want to see copies of them. Bradley was one of the first people involved with ACT UP. He was the secretary of the group for years and years – like I said, he took minutes at many of the meetings. He was really, really, really smart and really witty.

**SS: Were you involved in Bradley's or Lee's care at all, when they got sick?**

KS: No, I wasn't really much involved in anyone's care, because I left New

York in '92. I went to Tucson. And Bradley and Lee both got sicker after that. So, I didn't spend much time involved in anyone's care.

**SS: When you had close friends who had AIDS, did you talk with them about it in an intimate way?**

KS: I would talk with them about their routine. You would always talk about which drug they were taking, or when they had to see their doctor. People could talk about their symptoms and stuff, but we didn't talk a lot about feelings. Bradley wasn't someone who talked about feelings much, either, and neither was Lee. There was a way in which it was normalized, so you could say, "Oh, God, I can't believe I have to take this drug, it really gives me the shits." Or "God, last week I was taking 10 pills, this week I'm taking 12." And there was a way in which we were all sort of battle weary, and far too jaded for what actually we were talking about, which was mortality.

But in terms of like – I don't remember having a lot of conversations with people about – with people with AIDS, who I was close with, about what their emotional experience was. I had a lot of conversations with people who didn't have AIDS, about what their emotional experience was. And I remember some of those really well. I remember being on a bus to Albany. We were going to protest at the state legislature, and Maria and I were sitting next to each other, and in the seat in front of us was Suzanne [Phillips] – whose last name I don't remember. She was a nurse, and she had long blonde hair. She was a straight woman.

**SS: She was a doctor. Suzanne – she was one of the founders of the People With AIDS Coalition.**

KS: She was a little high strung. And that day, she was really high strung.

And she was saying, “I can’t believe it, all my friends are dying, all my friends are dying. It’s not hyperbole, all of them are dying.” And Maria was saying to me later, “God, all my friends aren’t dying.” I said, “Yeah, but all our friends are getting diagnosed.” And that was starting to happen – people who were our age or in our kind of peer group within ACT UP were starting to get diagnosed as HIV-positive. And I remember thinking – does that mean we’re going to be where Suzanne is at some point, if this continues its course? And, in 1995 – in January, when Bradley and Lee both died within two weeks of each other, I thought, I’m kind of there now. I guess that’s what’s happened – that wave of people who were getting sick in the late ’80s, were now dying in the mid-’90s, and it was still kind of right before protease inhibitors really kind of kicked in and changed things for people.

**SS: Did you talk with the other guys about sex? Safe sex? Let me ask you this differently – did you ever have a close friend in ACT UP who suddenly seroconverted?**

KS: Yeah, I know this happened. I can’t think offhand, though – having a conversation with someone who just seroconverted.

**SS: Did you talk with other people about sex?**

KS: Mm hmm.

**SS: Did you feel that people were having unsafe sex or having safe sex?**

KS: Everyone was having safe sex.

**SS: Everyone in ACT UP?**

KS: Yeah. I mean – at least that was my experience. When I was there – like I said, I was right out of college. I was 21. I had a boyfriend, but we had an open

relationship and we would have sex with other people together, and sometimes have sex with people separately, and we always used condoms. We always used condoms with other people. Sometimes, Alan and I didn't use condoms together, for anal sex. Nobody used condoms for oral sex. But everyone used condoms for anal sex, and there was this whole notion that, you just imagine that everybody carries the virus, so you just always use a condom. We just assume everybody is positive or potentially positive, so you just always use a condom. And then, you're okay. And we knew how to use lube and how to apply a condom. We all knew all that. We learned it if we didn't know it. I had sex with dozens and dozens of guys in ACT UP. I was really promiscuous, in a really exciting, great way. I don't say promiscuous as a judgmental, terrible word.

But I don't ever remember – back then, in the real heat of ACT UP – '87 to '91 – that period of time when I was involved – I don't remember – we thought that the whole notion that you wouldn't use a condom as being something that was happening. Later, yeah. I remember there was a point, where all of a sudden I was going home with guys, and nobody was using condoms, and I didn't understand why, because this was still before protease inhibitors. In fact, that period for me came around the time that I moved to San Francisco, which was '93.

I was in New York, for the summer of '93. I did not have a boyfriend at that time – or did I? I'm trying to think about Alex and I – if we were together or not. But, I was having sex with people, and suddenly I was finding, I would go home with someone and he would try to fuck me without pulling out the condom, and I would think, what's up with that? And suddenly it just seemed like that was happening. And when I first moved to San Francisco, that fall, suddenly that was happening. I was starting to have sex

without condoms with strangers. And I was freaked out. I didn't understand what was happening, but I was still doing it. And I started to talk to my friends about it and we kind of all thought – maybe we just can't do this anymore. Maybe the condom isn't natural and hot, like we've been trying to say along – like, maybe what's natural and hot is skin to skin, is body fluids being exchanged. Maybe there's some way in which we want that thing we never got to have, and we're just tired. I remember seeing a therapist, and he decided that I had a death wish. And I was so traumatized by this idea that I had a death wish. And then I thought about it and I thought – I don't have a death wish, actually. I'm just rebelling against the thing that I'm being told I can't do. I don't want to die. And so, I eventually cooled out with the unsafe sex. But at that point, it seemed like it was not the default that you would use a condom anymore, and that, I think, is still true today. I think there's a lot of sex that goes on without condoms.

**SS: So, in the ACT UP sexual culture, was it mostly in people's homes?**

**Or were there certain sex clubs that ACT UP went to?**

KS: Most of the sex I had would be in peoples' apartments. There were certain places where – I have to think – there were certain clubs we all went to. On Sunday, we went to Mars. Everyone went to this party that Chip Duckett threw called Mars Needs Men.

**SS: Where was that?**

KS: It was on the West Side, in the meat packing district. It faced the river – it's right up – whatever that road is, right there. Pre-Chelsea Piers. I don't know – the Crow Bar opened up at a certain point and they had a back room. That was probably more like '90 or '91.

**SS: And that was like an ACT UP place people would go?**

KS: Well, kind of – although at that point the kind of hipness of ACT UP was starting to wane.

**SS: Why is that?**

KS: I don't know. I think a lot of us got tired. A bunch of us died or got sick, and there was a way in which – there were a lot of people who were at ACT UP because it was trendy – only because it was sexy, not because it was also important, and I think that group went somewhere else. And things changed.

**SS: So, what other major arenas were you active in, beside facilitating and outreach?**

01:00:00

KS: Well, I went to lots and lots of demonstrations.

**SS: Did you get arrested?**

KS: I did get arrested a handful of times. I remember going through the – getting fingerprinted at a police precinct on the Lower East Side – Ridge Street or Pitt Street – whatever that is. I got arrested and spent the night in jail, in Albany, at that demonstration, where we protested outside the State House. It was the only time I spent the night in jail. There were about 20 of us, maybe. There were maybe two women, and the rest were all men, and we had to spend the night in jail cells in Albany. And the way it was set up, was that there was a long hallway with a concrete wall on one side, and jail cells on the other. So, you couldn't see anyone in any other cell, but we were all lined up – two, two, two to a cell – all the way down. And we had a great time. We were so campy and catty and yelling out loud to each other. No one could see anyone, except the person you were in the cell with. And I remember this one thing that happened, where

we all started calling each other Steven. And I don't know if it's just because it was a good sibilant word, that you could try to camp it up with like, "Steven, how are you doing?" "I'm fine, Steven, I'm here with Steven!" I don't know why, but I remember this really clearly. It was silly, and we were kind of full of adrenaline, and no one could really sleep. There was – the jail cells had a bench, a toilet, and that was it. I was in a jail cell with Luis Salazar, who I didn't really know, who was my age. And I remember we gave each other massages – like back rubs and foot rubs, and it was really nice – it was really, really nice. And we shared our food. We got half a pint of milk. It was like being back in the cafeteria in high school. You got those little square things of milk, and a tuna fish sandwich. I remember that tuna fish sandwich was so awful. All I wanted to do was have a cigarette. I was smoking at the time. I just wanted to smoke. And the next morning, there was all this kind of brouhaha about whether we were going to get thrown in jail for real or whether they were going to let us out. Jill Harris was our lawyer, and there were maybe some other people on the legal team, and they got us out, but it looked like we were going to get fined a lot. And I think that all kind of went away.

**SS: What was the issue that you got arrested for?**

KS: The state budget. We were trying to get the state budget to have more money for AIDS. And more specifically than that, I don't remember. We were the last group left. There had been a big march in Albany. There had been a rally, and then we were the last group that went and sat, literally outside the doors of the main chamber of the state legislature, which were these big glass doors. And we were having a sit-in. We wouldn't move until we got arrested. And I remember we were calling out for Mario



Cuomo to meet with us, and for – who was the guy who was the head of the state legislature? Sheldon Silver? George Miller? I don't know – there were names – they escape me now.

There's a funny story about this, in that – I have a friend now in San Francisco, a friend I made here named John Vlahides, who grew up in a little town outside of Albany. And he was living in New York at the same time I was and was not particularly involved in ACT UP, but when he heard there was going to be a demonstration in Albany, he decided to get on the bus and go, because it was kind of his hometown, his home city. And, he was there, watching me get arrested outside the State House. And what, for me, was kind of my most intense ACT UP experience – getting arrested and spending the night in jail, was for him, the thing that made him not want to join ACT UP, because he thought we were silly. He remembers us chanting one of our silly chants about, you know – like chanting at the cops, “Your gloves don't match your shoes, you'll see it on the news!” Or these kinds of things, which we would do after four hours, when you've gone through every serious chant you've brought on your chant sheet, and you just want to keep a feisty presence up, but you're punch drunk, stir crazy. But John stumbled upon us, when we were in our kind of eleventh-hour silly mode, and just thought, this is not for me. And then, years later, here we are pals, and it's funny that we had completely different experiences then.

**SS: Were you involved in the Stephen Joseph campaign?**

KS: I remember going to the demonstration, but not really being involved with the campaign.

**SS: Were you involved in any campaigns?**

KS: I remember being in a lot of meetings where we were writing fact sheets, and I would be kind of one of the people, helping to actually write the fact sheet. But not a lot of the campaigns. The big thing that I got involved with – I’m just remembering this, now – was that I was one of the people who coordinated our Gay Pride Day procession one year. And I’m going to say it’s ’88, the second Gay Pride. That first Gay Pride was the concentration camp and the second one – it might have been ’89, but it was the year where we made these posters that were kind of tents – where they had big Xeroxed photos of various politicians and public figures who had said something or done something terrible about AIDS. And we wrote GUILTY across their face. And we carried them, kind of Cleopatra style, so that you’d have this kind of tent structure and you’d have guy here and a guy here – a person here, and person here, and you’d all be marching down the street and it was like, Dannemeyer and Helms and Reagan and Bush and all them – guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty. And I was involved with that. I was one of the coordinators of that. And, I remember working with Tom Kalin, because Tom had access to a photo lab that could make huge Xeroxes, and I remember being in the Xerox room with him, working on the faces of all these villains.

**SS: Were you in any affinity groups?**

KS: Yeah. I was in the Costas.

**SS: What was that?**

KS: We were named for Costa Pappas, who died of AIDS – who was one of Lee and Joe’s good friends. The thing I remember about the Costas was that we went down to Washington DC for an AIDS conference? I can’t remember the occasion. But our affinity group action was that we were going to protest George Bush Sr.’s Secretary

of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan, and we had a banner that said, “Louis Sullivan, your AIDS policies stink.” And, we went into the Metro, and we unleashed stink bombs in the Washington DC metro, and then let up this banner on balloons that said, “Louis Sullivan, your AIDS policies stink.” And then we all just fled the Metro – quasi terrorism, I guess.

**SS: Who were the other Costas?**

KS: Maxine, Nesline, Lee and Joe, Maria, Heidi [Dorow], maybe. Alan was not a Costa. Alan and I were starting to unravel at that point and being in the Costas was a way for me to have a separate thing from him in ACT UP. Was Robert Vazquez in that group? I don't remember.

We did something else – we had a participation in the protest at Grand Central Station during the first Gulf War, where we unleashed banners on balloons into Grand Central Station that said, “Money for AIDS, Not For War,” and we blocked all the entrances to the platforms, where the commuter trains left Grand Central, and we formed a human chain. And there was a huge ACT UP demonstration in Grand Central, but we had our own little affinity group corner, where we blocked certain – we decided we were going to take that passageway and those tracks, and we blocked them. Bill Monahan – I remember being linked arm and arm with Bill Monahan, as we were being screamed at – bloody murder vein popping, by these well-dressed working people, business suit kind of people, going home, wanting to get on their trains to Westchester County: “I have to catch my train!” And screaming – and I remember saying, “We're not moving, we're not moving, WE'RE NOT MOVING – shut up!” Get it through your head, we're not going to let you go, just because you're mad at us. This is a political action. We're here for a

reason, we're making a point.

01:10:00 **SS: So, when ACT UP did this Day of Desperation – this action you're just describing – was there anyone in ACT UP who supported the war?**

KS: Not that I remember.

**SS: So, it was not controversial at all, to do an anti-war action?**

KS: I don't remember it being. The way you're asking the question makes me think that maybe there was someone.

**SS: I'm just wondering because, I mean, here we are, right in the middle of the second one.**

KS: I think – I don't remember anyone being against it. I just remember thinking that it made sense – money for AIDS, not for war. Why are we dumping all this money into protecting Kuwait, which is a rich country, with oil reserves – when we're not dumping money into the budget to stop people from getting sick and help the people who are sick?

**SS: Why did you leave ACT UP?**

KS: I remember why I stopped facilitating first. I was getting tired, number one – “burning out,” I guess is the term for it. My mother got sick is what happened. My mother got cancer, very suddenly, in the summer of 1989. She went into the hospital, and they didn't know what it was, and she was on a respirator. They were trying to figure out why her lungs were filling up with fluid, and she was diagnosed with a really rare form of lymphoma – of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma – the same thing Sarah Pettit died of; same thing Jackie Kennedy died of. She was dead within six weeks. And that knocked me for a loop. I didn't have it in my head to deal with my mother dying of cancer in the midst of

organizing my entire life around gay men dying of AIDS. I didn't know what to do with it. I remember being on the bus to New Jersey, to go visit my mother in this hospital, in the town I grew up in, reading about Jesse Helms denouncing Robert Mapplethorpe on the floor of the Senate. It was the same day. I knew how to deal with Jesse Helms. I didn't know how to deal with my mother dying of cancer, so it really screwed me up. I didn't know what to do. I was beside myself. And, shortly after that – shortly before that, I got mugged and beaten up and my jaw had to be wired shut. I got mugged for money, in New York. The wires came off my jaw, my mother got sick, my mother died. Shortly after that, I was at Wigstock, and I got gay-bashed, while in drag. This was all within six months, in 1989, so I'd been beaten up by the world – literally and figuratively, and I was still going to ACT UP meetings and facilitating.

I remember being at this meeting. I think maybe my Mom hadn't died yet, and the Actions Committee had come forth and said that they were going to do an "actionette." An actionette was going to be something that didn't require the full vote of the floor, as an officially sanctioned ACT UP meeting – sort of like a zap, right? Come meet me in the corner, if you want to be part of the actionette. So, actionette was our happy new term for the night. Oh great – we found a way to just go do something, without having to go through the formal debate and voting procedure. And this is where Garance Franke-Ruta comes in, because she was our star "lipstick lesbian" – hip and trendy, and all of 19 years old at the time, who stood up and interrupted me when I said, "Okay, anything else about the actionette?" And she stood up and said, "The use of the suffix '-ette' is a feminine diminutive that's offensive to women" – and went on about that. And this is parody, right? This is a parody. And I remember just looking at her and

saying, “Thanks, maybe we won’t call it an actionette, but if you want to take part in that, it’s in that corner.” And, I just went home that night and I thought, I am not doing this anymore. There is no way I am going to be put in my place about a cute little phrase like actionette. I was on the other side of identity politics at that point where, like, no, no, no, this doesn’t tear me up inside anymore, this just makes me think you’re an asshole, and I don’t want to have to facilitate a meeting that you’re in.

01:15:00 And, I think, really – sort of burning out on some of those divisive moments in ACT UP. At the same time, I was having all these terrible things go on in my own life, made me just think, I need to slow down. I need to slow down. I need to not go to every committee. I need to not even go to every Monday night meeting. That was a revolutionary idea – personally. You don’t have to go to an ACT UP meeting on a Monday night, because I went every week, which just makes sense, because as a child, I went to mass every week. Every Sunday, until I left home for college, I went to mass, and I got out of college, and every Monday, I went to ACT UP, and it was my new religion, right? It was the thing I believed in. It was the thing that was organizing my world view. In between church and ACT UP, I went to college and stopped believing in God, so it flipped.

So yeah, for me it was mostly personal burnout. I was starting to write more. I knew that I wanted to go to grad school, and I was putting more effort into my creativity and thinking that this is maybe the place for me to make a contribution now – to write about the things that matter to me, instead of putting my body on the line. And because I wasn’t one of those hardcore issues people who was absolutely essential – there were some people that if they had left, they took all this knowledge with them, because they

were the only people who knew anything about this particular clinical trial going on, but I wasn't one of those people, you know? I helped run the place, run the organization, and so, someone else could do that. So, after that, I just started to go to big demonstrations.

**SS: I remember when you were gay bashed at Wigstock. That was very shocking. It was right in the East Village. Can you just go into that, a little bit?**

KS: I was in drag. Alan was in drag. You know, lots of people were in drag. It was Wigstock. It was a drag festival.

**SS: What were you wearing? Tell us.**

KS: I was wearing – thank you for asking – a platinum blonde wig, with a scarf over it, and dark glasses – very Tippi Hedren – and I think a black velvet, sleeveless kind of top and some kind of sweater or shawl. I think I was actually wearing leggings and not a dress. It was my first time in drag. And Alan sort of looked like Rhoda – Rhoda Morgenstern. He had a black flip and we were at Wigstock, and standing facing the band shell, no longer there – and there were these guys – local guys, straight guys – young, late teens, early 20s, a couple of them had rugby sticks, and they were kind of in the crowd, and I had seen them. And then, they were kind of bothering people, and suddenly they were upon us, and saying stuff to us. And I remember saying something sassy back to them and had this little change purse that had a snap clasp, and I just kind of said it and it went snap, and the next thing I knew, I got a rugby stick smashed right in my face. It hit me right in the jaw. And I went stumbling backwards, and they attacked us. Alan didn't get it so bad. He got shoved around a little, and Darrin – Darrin Britton and I got hurt with these rugby sticks. We got beaten up. He got it across the shoulder blade, and I think actually he had a fractured shoulder blade. I had bruises on my face. And so, we

immediately turned and started yelling at the police saying – “We got beat up by these guys with the rugby sticks!” Beaten to a pulp. We got hammered. And there were a couple of cops nearby and we were saying, “They just beat us up, these guys just beat us up!” And there was a guy, not in drag, named Mark Carson, who saw what had happened and kind of was right on the cops and was really in their face: “You have to do something, you have to do something!” And they arrested him.

01:20:00           They didn’t arrest these guys at first. And then we started freaking out and started causing attention. So, the cops grabbed the guys who beat us. They finally called some other cops over, and they figured out what was going on and they dragged them all into that little brick house, back by the bathrooms, and they found some room there. I guess it’s where they store the cleaning, sanitary stuff, whatever. So, immediately, the word started to spread, and there was this whole group of people who were sort of the ACT UP, activated group, who surrounded this brick structure, where the cops had Mark and these gay bashers. And they were all chanting, “Let him go, let him go!” And Alan was on someone’s shoulders with a bullhorn, saying, “We just got beat up by these gay bashers! Our friend tried to help us. They arrested him. He’s in there with these gay bashers!”

I, meanwhile, ran up to the stage where Lady Bunny was giving her intro to some act, and I started screaming, “We just got gay-bashed, they just beat up a bunch of us in drag. They’ve arrested one of our friends. You need to tell people this is going on!” It seemed like an outrageous thing that there would be a gay bashing in the middle of Wigstock. And Lady Bunny said, “Oh, you just got beat up? Now, you girls – you’re driving the boys crazy, so be careful out there.” And just went on. And I took off my



wig and threw it at her and started screaming, and she just didn't deal with it. And it caused a huge controversy in the pages of *OutWeek*, and in the community – wherever you could find the dialogue at that moment – because the demonstration went on, and Wigstock went on, and it was seen as – from our point of view – Wigstock was wrong, because they didn't stop the festivities to address a crime that had been committed in the midst. And from their point of view, we were ruining the day. They didn't need to stop the show. It was being dealt with. The cops were there. Let that go on but let us keep going with the show.

**SS: You were like the ISO.**

KS: Yeah. We were the disruptive ones, in their eyes. And it wound up with a sit-in on Avenue A. I remember Steven Spinella was there and stood up and addressed the crowd in a wig at some point and it was very calming. We wound up going to the station house. And that whole thing was such a fucking tragedy – personally, for me, because the guys who beat us up got off. They did not get charged, and the reason they didn't get charged was because their defense lawyer used a homophobic defense – basically said we came on to them. They were in the midst of a crowd of homosexuals. We were known activists with a political agenda, and the cops wouldn't even have arrested them if we hadn't been agitating for it. And the jury acquitted these guys who beat us up.

**SS: So, this is in the East Village, at the height of ACT UP, at Wigstock?**

KS: Yes, yes, absolutely. In the East Village, at the height of ACT UP. It's shocking, right? That someone walked into this crowd and beat up someone.

**SS: Well, what was the true level of homophobia at the time? Can you**

**think back?**

KS: I always felt like New York was pretty homophobic on the streets. I remember every year, leaving Christopher Street – the Souvlaki Fest, at the end of the Gay Pride Parade, where you'd been dancing on the pier and wearing your t-shirt, and holding your boyfriend's hand, and crossing Sixth Avenue to head back to the East Village, and feeling like, immediately, there was some guy calling you a faggot, like right away. I didn't walk around holding my boyfriend's hand without worrying, in New York – in the late '80s, early '90s. I felt like there was a lot of homophobia out in the streets. I was young and defiant enough to feel like I could stand up for it, but it was scary.

**SS: Did you have friends who were not in ACT UP?**

KS: It was hard to keep up friendships with people who weren't in ACT UP.

**SS: Why is that?**

KS: It was so all-consuming, and it felt so righteous, that if someone wasn't on board – wasn't stopping AIDS with their every day, I couldn't really deal with them. I lost some friends. I lost a lot of straight friends, and then I lost some gay friends who were kind of quasi-closeted or just not willing to go to an ACT UP meeting, and I just thought, I can't deal with you. I really didn't know what to do with those friendships. It would always shock me that I would talk about ACT UP – say, I would get together with a friend from college – a straight roommate from college, and we'd have dinner and I'd be telling him about ACT UP, and then he would change the subject and talk about something else, and I just thought, I can't talk to you, I cannot talk to you. And it was weird. I mean – it felt very much like I was – at the time, it felt like I was righteous, as I said, and I didn't have to deal with them, because they weren't dealing with the agenda of

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the day – the crisis of the day. Now, I look back and I think, well, maybe I could have done more to kind of make room for that variance, but that wasn't something I could do or wanted to do back then.

**SS: So, we're talking to you today, and now you're working on your second novel, teaching creative writing; you finished your Master's a while ago. So, when you were in ACT UP, there were a lot of writers and artists and this was to be your future, but how did you relate to them in that context?**

KS: I remember one of the affinity groups – I think it was Gran Fury, but it might have been another proto-version of Gran Fury – did a poster that was directed at the art world. Gregg Bordowitz might have been involved with this, and it said something like, “With 42,000 dead from AIDS, art is not enough – Take direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” And this was sort of the poster of the month – whenever it came out. And I remember at the time, that that sat wrong with me. I felt that art was important for art's sake, and that if you were a painter and you were painting abstract images or smashing plates and sticking them on the canvas or whatever, you could keep doing that, and that art made the world a better place, and that artists were dying from AIDS, and art needed to go on, because artists were dying. I didn't feel like every artist had to suddenly be doing propaganda posters, which is I guess kind of the intent of that – you had to do something. But, I never said that to anyone, because I didn't want to dissent from what was obviously the right thing. The right thing was that – stop making your vague, abstract things and make art about this crisis. And I wasn't really an artist myself. I was sort of like a film reviewer, sort of dabbling in fiction, and thinking I might one day write a novel. So, I didn't really identify as an artist. But I remember that,

because I went to a lot of films. I went to performance, and I thought those things made my life good and better and livable, in the midst of demonstrations and committee meetings.

But I understand where those people are coming from, too. I understand it, but it never fully sat well with me. And now, here I am today, and I do identify as an artist. I also play music. I have a boyfriend who's a graphic designer and a painter and a dancer, and most of the people in my life are not activists – they're artists, and a lot of us are going to protests again because of this war. But I think that part of me that always felt like art was important is the major part of me – it's the major part of my identity now. And I don't know that I can ever be an activist again in the same way that I was. I don't know that I have the stamina for it. I don't know, I don't know. I mean, things can get pretty ugly, still, in this world, and I could be right back there, doing it again. My political consciousness hasn't changed, but the way I spend my time, and the way I want to spend my time is different now. And that's also the difference between being 37 and being 21. So, that's kind of where I went.

01:30:00 And I also feel like – my writing is almost all gay content, somehow, and any authority that I can find in my literary voice, I believe, exists, in part because I found my voice through ACT UP. I, literally, became a person who could speak out and speak the truth, and that comes out in my writing in a very different way. It comes out in fiction versus fact sheets – the writing I was doing for ACT UP. But ACT UP helped form my identity as a writer, as much as coming from the family I did formed my identity; as much as my religion formed my identity; as much as all those things. ACT UP took me, as a sort of half-formed mass of young adulthood and kind of put me through this boot

camp in truth and justice and survival and importance. And, on the other end of it, I didn't end up as an activist, I wound up as a writer. And that's how I feel like how I understand its place in my life.

I got an e-mail about a week ago from some guys I know – a bunch of gay boys – a little crowd of people I've become friendly with, who are all about 10 years younger than me. And, they've all been going to the anti-war protests, and they are starting an affinity group. And they asked me if I wanted to join. And I wasn't able to go to the first meeting, which happened a couple of days ago. But, I told them, keep me posted on what you're doing, let me know. And it's the first thing I've even come close to flirting with, in terms of activism. I do know that I do not want to get arrested. At this point in my life, I don't want to do civil disobedience. But I'm interested in knowing what they're doing – in part, because I like them, and I think they're smart and they have a lot of energy, and they've written some really clever signs for the anti-war protests, that kind of make me think they could be fun activist people, and that's always been important to me, too – the Emma Goldman thing: “If I can't dance, I don't want to go to your revolution.” They like to dance.

So, who knows? Maybe I will get a little involved in activism again. But the last 10 years have been all about being a writer.

**SS: Thank you, Karl.**

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KS: Thank you.