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Interviewee: **Emily Nahmanson**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Emily Nahmanson

April 27, 2003

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, age, where we are, and today's date?

EMILY NAHMANSON: Okay. My name is Emily Nahmanson. I am 32. We are in my apartment in Noe Valley, in San Francisco and it's April 27th, 2003.

SS: Okay, great. Where were you born, Emily?

EN: I was born in New Haven, Connecticut.

SS: And when did you come to New York?

EN: I came to New York in 1988 for college at NYU.

SS: And when did you come out?

EN: I came out about a week after I got to college.

SS: How did that happen?

EN: Well, I remember exactly what happened. I was sitting in the fountain in Washington Square Park watching these three women – there's three or four women – who looked like they had been house painting. They had paint on. They were eating these sandwiches, and they were kind of tough and sexy and I looked at them and I was, like, I think those women are dykes. And then, I looked again and I thought – wow, I really like that. And it was, like, boom. And that was it.

SS: So, what was it like to be – how old were you at the time?

EN: Seventeen.

SS: To be a seventeen-year-old lesbian at NYU?

EN: It was awesome. It was totally great.

SS: What were some of the things that you –

EN: That I did? Well, one of the first things – well, first of all, I had this roommate from Portland, Oregon who was completely whacked out – like, transgender Robert Smith from The Cure look-a-like. She was a six-foot tall, just Amazon, insane, drugged up, awesome, incredible roommate. So basically, she instantly made friends with all of the freaks in the dorm, and I just tried to follow her around as much as I could. And then, I joined the NYU Lesbian Rap Group, and that was great. That's where I met a lot of people who were in my life at that time, and eventually led me, actually, towards joining ACT UP.

SS: What did you guys talk about in your rap group?

EN: I remember being horribly, horribly nervous most of the time, and excited, and I cannot even tell you what we talked about. I think there was gossiping and, I don't know – maybe, like, issues – political issues, social issues. But it was pretty – people also talked about relationship problems and it was like a support group type of group. But the best was when we'd all go out afterwards for beers at Eddie's. Beers and popcorn and potato skins at the college-y pub.

SS: So, you were living in a dorm.

EN: Yup. At first.

SS: And how was it to be an out lesbian in the dorm?

EN: It was fine. It was fine. After my first semester, I had two – one sexually ambiguous roommate and one lesbian roommate, who was my best friend. So, it was fine. My roommates were in the School of the Arts. So, it was great.

SS: And did you have any openly gay teachers?

EN: Well, I can't really say that I spent too much time in class. So, I didn't

ever really form strong relationships with any teachers. If I had, I probably wouldn't have flunked out.

SS: How soon after getting there did you flunk out?

EN: I went to class for two semesters, and then that summer I actually got an apartment on Christopher Street and worked in the city for that summer and then, the beginning of my – I went back to the – I went back to school for my first semester, sophomore year, but I just did not go to class very much and was done by then. And then, my parents said that they didn't have any money left and I was going to have to go to the Financial Aid office and figure that whole thing out, and I just did not have the emotional or practical capacity to buck up and navigate my way through that, so I just basically stopped going to class and gave up on the whole thing.

SS: So, how did you first find out about AIDS? Do you remember?

EN: Well, I can tell you that I really don't remember having too much of an awareness of it in high school. I graduated from high school in 1988, so that is kind of scary, I guess. I remember learning about class for the first time, when I went to college. 00:05:00 My family was always teetering on the brink. My mother always wanted to stay in the rich neighborhood, with the fancy people and the fancy cars, but we could never afford it. So, I had a very fucked up view of class my whole life. And then, I was always in the social awareness groups in high school, but I don't think we ever talked about AIDS. I was involved in my Jewish youth group a lot, so my activism energy was spent on helping raise money so that the Russian Jews could immigrate. So, I guess I must have – I don't know.

SS: When you were at NYU, was it ever mentioned?

EN: Yeah. NYU was – that whole period is foggy, I have to say. I didn't have an ah-ha moment about AIDS.

SS: Did you have gay male friends who were your age?

EN: In college?

SS: Yeah.

EN: Yeah.

SS: And did you ever talk to them about AIDS or safe sex or anything like that?

EN: Yeah, that was very present in the world – in our reality. I remember my first tangential experience with someone dying of AIDS was that I had this friend in college named Basil Twist – he's actually a puppeteer now. And he was dating this man, this mysterious older man, and it was kind of exotic for all of us. And he would go to NYU and then wait tables at the Moondance Diner and then go off with his lover and then the lover died – all in the span of four months, probably – all in the span of a semester. And that was, I think, really my first experience of AIDS coming closer to my life.

SS: Did you talk to him about it, or did you go to the funeral?

EN: No, no – definitely I didn't go to the funeral. I remember sitting around the dorm room, stoned, and talking about it a little bit, but it wasn't – it's hard for me to – I didn't really have relationships like that with people, at that point in my life, because I was kind of a little out of it, emotionally.

SS: Okay. So, when did you – did you go to gay events or ACT UP events first? When did you first step into the world of New York City?

EN: I went – one of the women in the NYU Lesbian Rap Group was roommates with Julie Clark and Diane – I don't remember her name – Diane and Julie – do you know these people?

SS: Julie Clark the dancer?

EN: Julie Clark moved to Atlanta with Laurie Cotter, okay?

SS: Oh yeah.

EN: Diane – I don't know – their roommate was this woman Caitlin Rothermel and she was an NYU student. So, one day, Julie came to one of our Lesbian Rap Group meetings with this fist-full of stickers and she said, hey. She was kind of tough. She was like, "Hey – you should come to this meeting." And I was like, "You're kind of cool, whatever you think is best. I'll go." It sounded really exciting. I think the Rap Group was on Thursday, and then the ACT UP meeting was on Tuesday night, I think, at the Center. So, she leafleted me, and I totally went. She found a – yeah –

SS: So, you just went over to the Center? Had you been there before?

EN: I went – I'm not sure if I'd been there before. I want to say that I had probably been there for a dance, for a woman's dance before, with some of my friends from school, but I'm not sure. And I don't think I went alone. I think I went with someone. I might have gone with my little friend Jennifer Allen, who was my closest, best friend, at the time. But, then again, I think I might have gone first, because I was always way more involved in it than she was, but she was always busier because she had a life and a career.

SS: So, can you describe what it was like to walk into an ACT UP meeting?

00:10:00 EN: Well, first there was the whole out-front scene – where everyone was smoking cigarettes and the little factions were gossiping and talking about what happened last week, and what was going to happen tonight and the big thing that was coming up. It was very social – super social. And then, there must have been a whole male cruise-y world. I wasn't too involved in the female cruise-y world. I was kind of – a little bit shy, and just awestruck by the whole thing at the time. It was incredible, overwhelming – lots of people, lots of really very good-looking people also in that room. And then, it also kind of felt like there was definitely an inner core. And, for some crazy reason – and I don't know why – and I couldn't tell you exactly how it happened, but I managed to get into the inner core and then that felt really, just great, because I felt like – yeah, it felt great. I felt like I found a – not only an activist group, but a social group.

SS: Who was in the inner core?

EN: Well, my core of friends who I did actions with – I don't even know – I got in this group the Costas, named after a guy who I didn't know, who had died.

SS: The affinity group?

EN: Yeah.

SS: Who was in the Costas?

EN: All right. Lee Schy, who's dead. Randy Snyder, dead. Walter Armstrong – I don't think he's dead.

SS: No, he's the editor of *Poz Magazine*.

EN: Okay. Heidi Dorow, Marion Banzhaf, Maxine Wolfe, of course – who else? Terry McGovern, sort of came in – not at the beginning, but a little bit farther down the road there. Oh – Walter – no, Phil Montana and Avram Finkelstein. Of course,

Maria Maggenti, who was just like – one time I said to Walter, “You know, we’ve been doing all this work together, Walter, why does Maria Maggenti hate me?” And he just looked at me and said, “Emily, Maria hates everybody.” And then I didn’t feel so bad. You can edit that part out!

SS: Let’s talk about some of those people – because these are all people that a lot of people mention and – tell me about Lee Schy.

EN: Oh, Lee. Here we go. Lee was so friendly, a great artist – just always taking pictures. He was like a real documentarian, but his pictures – I think he was an incredible documentary photographer. He – they had this great loft, I think in Chelsea, before Chelsea was really Chelsea, and he was constantly doing a new mosaic on the wall or, just – I don’t know – just very friendly, very nice. Totally approachable, totally cute – a little goatee. And, just crazy and angry, like everyone else – creative.

SS: Did you stay friends with him until he died?

EN: No, I had left New York, before he died. So, yeah. Right after I left New York, I was actually living in Randy Snyder’s apartment. He was very sick and he was living with his boyfriend.

SS: Who was his boyfriend?

EN: His boyfriend was a guy named David. I don’t – he wasn’t an ACT UP guy. I think he was some sort of professor, or some academic. Then, I moved back to Connecticut, and then Randy died and I didn’t really keep in touch with anyone, and I think I just found out through someone else that Lee had died. I don’t remember who, though. I don’t remember how I found out.

SS: So, how did the Costas operate? Like, how did you guys make

decisions? How often did you meet, for example?

00:15:00 EN: Well, I think we met mostly during the meetings. We were kind of off in the little corner, plotting our next action, or rather, what role we were going to have in the next big group action. And we would – I think a lot of the decisions were just very organically made, because everyone had the same idea about the way we wanted to – the message that we wanted to get across, and how we wanted to get that message across. Now, we always had some kind of artful flair to what we did. And, I think, also, we had the sense that whatever we wanted to do, we could just do it, and we didn't really care about the consequences because, after all, what's the worst that can happen? Well, the worst that can happen is you die. Well, guess what? People were going to die anyway, so no one really cared about that. And then, the second worst thing that could happen is that you get arrested. Well, that was par for the course, and that was part of the reason we were doing things, so – and in the meetings, I remember Maxine often had a lot of really good ideas, and I think a lot of people just took her ideas and implemented them. She was very – I thought she was amazing. She had been doing this for a long time, and it was just incredible that here's this woman who, I think was – God, Maxine is probably 61 or 62 now. At the time, she was in her late – I don't know, she was always an old lady, in my mind. I kind of felt like, well fuck, if Maxine is willing to do that, then yeah, I'll do it.

SS: You were 17, how did these people treat you?

EN: Seventeen, eighteen. Great. I never felt like I was so much of a youngster. I mean, I think Heidi was probably two or three years older than me – maybe five years older than me. I always felt like a little bit of an outsider, but I think that was

because I was so young and overwhelmed by everything. I mean, I still kind of feel like a little bit of an outsider anyway.

SS: Tell me about like, something that the Costas did.

EN: I remember one time we went to Washington, D.C., and the Secretary of Health and Human Services was this guy named Louis Sullivan, and he made – he tried to get them to pass a law that said, if you were HIV positive you couldn't immigrate to this country. And so, we made this giant banner that said: "Louis Sullivan, your immigration policies stink!" And we attached helium balloons to it, and then we got all this stinky, smelly stink stuff, and we let it loose in the Metro system in Washington, D.C., along with the giant banner with helium balloons on it. And then we like, ran screaming out the exits and came around and met back at the meeting spot.

SS: And that was part of what? What was the larger reason that you –

EN: I don't know if there was a larger reason that time.

SS: That you were in Washington, D.C.

EN: I don't remember.

SS: Okay.

EN: I don't know. We wouldn't have just gone down there for that. Maybe there was a housing march or something. I don't remember.

SS: What were some other Costas actions?

EN: The best one – the best one ever – was when President George Bush was speaking at – what's the hotel on Park Avenue? The Waldorf? And Avram – so, we rented this, like, conference room at the Waldorf. There was security lock down for blocks and blocks and blocks. So, we rented a conference room.

SS: They rented you a conference room? That's amazing.

EN: Yeah! Well, people had real jobs and knew how to call up a hotel and say, hi, I'd like to rent a room. It wasn't that like we had scarlet pink triangles on our heads. We rented a room and we all put on fancy clothes. I remember, I put on my Bat Mitzvah outfit! Try to imagine Heidi Dorow in heels and a skirt.

SS: Hard to picture.

00:20:00 EN: We rent this room, we go up there, we're having a meeting, and they made these little conference invitations of course and everything had to have accessories with it. And it was – the conference that we were supposedly attending was called “Future Ventures – Profiting from America’s Global Dominance.” And Avram, who had a goatee and a little soul patch – whatever – and huge sideburns, that everyone had at the time, and a shock of platinum in his hair – he was a hairdresser. He shows up in an Armani suit, clean-shaven, hair slicked back like, fucking Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*, and a copy of *Fortune* held under the crook of his arm. And then, you know, at the appointed time, we all ran screaming out of there, and down the stairway and tried to crash into the room where George Bush was speaking. Of course, I always managed to kind of run away right before the cops came, but I think some people got busted. Or maybe they just got tossed around. But they disrupted the speech – if not directly, then definitely indirectly. They definitely felt our presence, and then got kicked out onto the street. But that was the funniest thing ever – “Future Ventures, Profiting from America’s Global Dominance.”

SS: Did you guys do anything for the FDA action?

EN: The FDA, I think, was right before my time. So, they did, I'm sure. But

my first action was Stop the Church. I think that was in December. No – I don't know – December of 1989?

SS: When was it, Jim?

EN: That was the first time I got arrested. And that was, actually, before. I wasn't with the Costas at that point, I was with – who was I with? Oh, well, sort of. That's how I met Bill Monahan. You know who Bill Monahan is. Is Bill Monahan still around?

SS: I think so, yeah.

EN: All right – so it was me, Bill Monahan, Glenn Belverio, David Lopez, who died. David Lopez was like this 18-year-old, little, twinkie, wispy, gay guy, who was kept by someone with this penthouse apartment somewhere, where I went once. Probably some famous person, I don't even know. And he got sick and died within months. That was when I met Glenn Belverio, who turned out to be just my friend, my partner in crime, my artistic partner for most of the time that I was in New York, after that. But we dressed up in clown make-up, specifically to go and get in the face of the Operation Rescue people, who were at the Stop the Church demonstration. So, all these crazy anti-abortion fanatics. So, we dress up in clown make-up, and we're Operation Ridiculous. This is actually another brilliant, brilliant genius move on our part. So, we're on Fifth Avenue, there's thousands of people there. It's the most fabulous, insane energy to happen, I think, in the AIDS activist movement. We had worked so hard to get there. It was just going off incredibly well. My sister and all her friends came down from Barnard to march in the street with her picket signs. And we needed to get across the street, because there was something on the other side of the street that we had to put a

stop to, or we had to make our presence known. And we couldn't get across the street. So, we went onto the side street, and we took a cab down the block, and had the cab go through and come down Fifth Avenue. And here we are – five or six people in clown make-up, busting out of a cab. And once they saw us come out of that cab, we were gone. We were gone. We were arrested so fast. And here I am, standing in the back of a paddy wagon with all these people with all this clown make-up on. I remember meeting David Lopez a month after that. He's like, "Yeah, hey, how are you doing?" I didn't remember who he was, because he had so much make-up on in the back of that paddy wagon, that I couldn't even recognize.

SS: So, you got arrested before the action started inside?

EN: No, no, no. Oh yeah – we weren't one of the groups that was going to go inside. We were a street group. So, I missed the whole inside thing. But then, I want to tell you, I rented Tom Keane's apartment on East Second Street – 201 East 2nd Street – and I swear to God, this is the honest – this is a true story – me and Jennifer Allen, my college roommate –

SS: You need to say that Tom Keane is the guy –

EN: Oh yeah, Tom Keane is the alleged Wafer Smasher, Sacrilegious Wafer Smasher from inside of St. Patrick's Cathedral action. What I think – he just took his hand away, when they were giving him communion or – I don't know, if they put it on the tongue or in the hand. But he was written up in all the fucking Fox News – well, Fox News wasn't around, but he was the Sacrilegious Wafer Smasher, when in fact, he just simply said, "Communion? I don't think so." Right? Well, I rented his apartment after he sort of gave it to me and my two roommates. And there was a box of communion

00:25:00

wafers in the apartment, when we got there. Like, he had been practicing? I don't know – true story!

SS: What was the reason for Stop the Church?

EN: The reason for Stop the Church was that the Catholic Church as an institution was just horribly evil and really had, at its – had all this power to use for good in the world but was not doing it. And specifically, I remember people formed different groups to take on different specific reasons. I couldn't tell you a single one.

SS: Do you remember who organized it? Do you remember any of the preparatory organizing for it?

EN: Oh, there was one guy who used to be an altar boy, or maybe a priest. There is a lot of anger towards the Catholic Church in the gay community and in the women's rights community, and in the AIDS activist community. I think they were against safe sex education in the schools. They had a lot of influence in the city of New York, specifically – dipping into the public sphere, where they were not welcome. Well, they were overstepping their bounds, that's for sure. You know, it's just this huge, wealthy, powerful institution that was – I don't know – I don't remember who organized it specifically.

SS: Was it controversial –

EN: Conyers?

SS: Conyers?

EN: Conyers Thompson?

SS: I don't remember him. Was it controversial before it happened – inside the organization?

EN: I remember it was very controversial. I remember that there was always people in the organization who were offended by stuff and I don't know why I didn't have – I kind of lacked discretion to figure out when I should be offended by things. Maybe, I just wasn't offended by things. I remember one time, Maxine was very offended because someone made a poster of "Women Fight Back." Some fag made a poster – some rich, white, fag who found the clip art or something one day at the library. And it was these women with burka and machine guns. And it was: "Women Fight Back, Stop the Church." I think it was Maxine who stood up. She's like, "I'm very offended, these are religious women who are oppressed by their countries, and this is not an image that we can just paste around the city without some doing geo-political, multi-cultural" blah, blah, blah. But it's great, because it's true. These people – you can't just – on the one hand – yeah, if people had to learn about power and who has it and why it matters who has it and when is it okay to speak truth to power and when are you just being an asshole or you're trying to be clever.

SS: Well, what happened if there was a critique like that? Did they change the poster?

EN: Well, it depended. If it was someone who had power within the organization, I think, who – not because they were elected or appointed or anything, but just – really, charisma was power, a lot of the time, and there would be an open-floored dialogue, until it died, or until Michael Petrelis held up his watch and pointed to it, or until – I remember one time, Ellen Neipris stood up – and this is another classic line. People were hashing something just to bits, you know. Back and forth. And who knew? These people probably had some sort of relationship on the outside – like one of them

00:30:00 worked for one institution and another one worked for another institution and they saw each other at board meetings and they had a bone to pick. Meanwhile, I'm just, like a punk, a college kid, going to the meeting on Tuesday night. So, one time, they're just back and forth and back and forth. You know, it's an open floor, so people could just keep on talking, keep on talking, keep on talking. So, one time, Ellen Neipris stands up and he says – Ellen it's your turn to speak. "This is ridiculous, we're trying to come to a conclusion here" – and then, someone else yelled, "Shut up, this is a democracy, everyone should have their say." And she goes, "You can't have a democracy with 500 people!" And that was basically it. Either you could or you couldn't. I think the conversation would last as long as the energy was there to have it last, and then, if you were willing to go back home and do your work, do the work to take the next step during the week, then you just took it and ran with it. And if you didn't, then – it was kind of like, you had to prove yourself.

SS: Did you ever come in with a proposal to the floor?

EN: Not that I recall, not for anything big. I think – one of my good friends was working on the Ferraro for Senate campaign, so I'm sure, for a few times, we went up there and tried to get people to come support Geraldine Ferraro or something.

SS: Would ACT UP support candidates? Endorse candidates?

EN: No.

SS: So, how would they respond, when you brought up Ferraro?

EN: I don't know. Yell and throw shit. Go outside and have a cigarette.

SS: And how did you feel when that –

EN: Michael Petrelis would probably get up and yell, "No," – something

offensive – “that stupid bitch!” And then, everyone would yell at him. “You can’t say that!” “Oh, please – I can say whatever I want!” I don’t know. How would I feel?

SS: Yeah.

EN: It was all great, frankly. It was one big learning experience for me.

SS: Do you remember the first time you were arrested?

EN: I do, it was when I had clown make-up on my face.

SS: Oh, that was it. So, then what happened?

EN: I think we got arrested, and we went and just sat in this big old cell for an hour or so, or two hours and I was there with all my friends, interesting people. I felt pretty safe, very safe. Then, they let us out, and it was really just – I mean, it was just incredibly well organized, incredibly well organized. Smart people, people really wanting to take care of each other. You know, you’d get outside, and there’s your lawyer, telling you exactly what to do – someone there with hot coffee, if it was cold. It was just incredible, an incredible support system of people who just were angry and filled with love. One with the other was pretty powerful.

SS: Did you ever take civil disobedience training?

EN: I did. I took it –

SS: What was that like? Who did it and –

EN: It was Amy Bauer and John Kelly and they were great. It was just –

SS: What would they do? Like, how many people would come?

EN: For the larger actions, they were large – these large civil disobedience trainings, and basically, there’s a whole structure of civil disobedience methodology, I guess, that started with the civil rights movement, and we learned how to put our

handcuffs on, so that we could wiggle out of them, if they were the plastic kind. We learned how to resist arrest, if we wanted to.

SS: How?

EN: Go limp. We learned, if you just got arrested, it was most likely going to be – not a misdemeanor, even, it would just be a violation. And we learned that if you got arrested and resisted arrest then that would probably bump it up to a misdemeanor, and there was more serious consequences for that.

SS: So, in other words, people were told in advance that they should decide whether or not to resist when they were being arrested?

EN: To keep it in mind – just to know that every step you escalate has different consequences and to think about – well, it was all infused with the political consciousness, you know – so that it wasn't like you were running around, because you didn't have anything better to do. I mean, you got a history lesson of civil disobedience – where it came from, why it's important. Then you got the techniques of how to actually do it. And then, you got this sort of – what to do while you're in jail, decisions to make. Do you give your name, do you not give your name? The ramifications of that. For that most part, we all gave our names, but it was good to have that education, too, because
00:35:00 you'd always have people who would try and just jump in at the last minute and get arrested – you know, the anarchists with their black bandanas on. Or just someone that didn't really know what they were doing and didn't know that they ideally should know – that there's anything to know in this situation. It felt like it was really people taking care of each other, and that was – that was always the tone and the mood. There was a lot of care. There was anger, but with care. So, I think it really did create – not to mention –

obviously, these are a lot of white people who aren't going to be mistreated by the cops.

Well, yes and no, but –

SS: Do you remember people being mistreated by the cops?

EN: I actually remember one time – I was at some demonstration and I had no intention of being arrested and they were – the cops – and there was this woman Alexis Danzig who was very – she was always, like, a marshal – very – I think she wanted to be a marshal all the time, because she would just fly off the handle unless she had something to focus on. And one time, some cop was just giving someone a hard time, and Alexis walked up and started talking to the cop, and then she started yelling at the cop, and then they started to arrest her for nothing. And, I just remember, I went in and I was pulling her away, because I was, like, what are you doing? You can't arrest her, that's not part of our plan, you know? It was almost like, we had the plan and they were there to help us facilitate our plan, not the other way around. So, it was shocking, almost, when something would go not according to the plan in that situation. So, I can't remember specific cases of people getting abused by the cops, but I do remember – I do have this vague memory of some big case that someone had pending with – and then, of course, there was the strip searching of all the women, right?

SS: What was that?

EN: The FDA, I think – they did an action at the FDA. And all of these – no, because it was New York. Some big action in New York before I got involved, and all these women got arrested and they were strip searched – strip searched! And I think they sued the City of New York and won. And it was like – yeah, here's what we can do, when we get together and use our power.

SS: Did you ever have to go to court?

EN: I did have to go to court a bunch of times, and I always got off. I never got –

SS: Who were the lawyers?

EN: The lawyers were Jill Harris – the fabulous Jill Harris. And then, Laurie Cohen, who was like, my Jewish cousin from Long Island – just lawyering us.

SS: And how many people would be on trial at the same time?

EN: God, you know – anywhere from two to dozens. And you just sit in court and wait. But I think they would pepper the court dates out, so you never went. It wasn't like, you know, there's 500 people that got arrested in this action are all coming to court in one day. The whole – and then – the system was just really well organized, really well organized. People really knew what they were doing. I don't know where they got their education, I really don't. People must have just – if I were a little bit older, and knew how to listen a little bit better, I probably would have heard and remembered some great stories of people's pasts and how they came to this thing. It was interesting, the arrest culture, and then, I don't know – what else?

EN: About my date books? I still have my little date books from that time period. And so, when I look at them, it's like – meeting, zap this, meeting, action, go Center, 7:30, blah, blah, blah.

SS: How many nights a week were you doing ACT UP stuff?

EN: As many as we possibly could. When we were really involved in something, every day. Depending on who my best friend was at the time, and how

obsessive they were, a lot of the time. When I was spending a lot of time with Bro, Bro Broberg, a little bit later on during that –

SS: How do you spell his last name?

00:40:00

EN: Broberg – B-r-o-b-e-r-g. He's in Seattle. He was the most famous, most well-known, probably, because he was on the cover of *Out* magazine as the gay man who was married to a lesbian. It was *The Advocate* or *Out*, a few years ago. The new, new gay life.

SS: Oh, the new old gay life. So, you dropped out of school to be in ACT UP, basically.

EN: I did, I really did.

SS: And did you have a job?

EN: I worked – my grandparents had clothing stores in the city and I worked there for – yeah, I worked at the clothing stores for – probably, I don't know, part-time, full-time, I don't really remember. And then, I had a series of odd jobs in theaters and in display departments. I worked at Barney's.

SS: Did you get these jobs through ACT UP?

EN: I got them all through ACT UP. In fact, there was a time when Heidi and I needed jobs, and we stood up on the stage of Cooper Union one night during an ACT UP meeting going, "We need some jobs, if anyone has a job?" And then I got a call the next day from this guy, this movie director who wanted me to go around to the movie theaters where his movies were playing and count the people who were in there, to make sure –

SS: Who was it?

EN: Mark Huestis.

SS: Oh yeah.

EN: To make sure that he was getting paid by the cinemas. That was good for a couple of bucks. And, what else? I don't know.

SS: Who got you the job at Barney's?

EN: Well, I was working for the artist who made the caricatures in the windows, the Christmas windows.

SS: Who was that?

EN: Her name was Martha King. And I got this job through this friend of Glenn's – this woman, Maria Beatty, who is now, does slave S&M porno. And so, it goes in the world. So yeah, basically, it all came – branched out of my ACT UP life.

SS: Were you on any committees?

EN: I don't remember going to committee meetings. I think I must have been on the Women's –

SS: Caucus?

EN: You know what? I wasn't really that involved the Women's Caucus.

SS: What was it called? Was it called the Women's Committee?

JIM HUBBARD: I wrote "Caucus" and you changed it to "Committee."

SS: I did?

EN: I think it was called the Women's Caucus. What is a caucus?

SS: What was going on with the Women's Caucus, what was it?

EN: The Women's Caucus was crucially important to the ACT UP community, and to the AIDS activist movement. Now, I was not on the Women's Caucus, but I was,

later, one of the founding members of a group called WHAM – Women’s Health Action Mobilization – which was basically like ACT UP for women’s health rights. The Women’s Caucus was just all of these women who, like, either were in the civil rights movement, had a feminist background, were – I don’t know, perhaps some of them were women’s studies grad students, I really don’t know. They were the ones that made ACT UP political.

SS: Who was in it?

EN: It was Maxine Wolfe, Marion Banzhaf, it was Rachel Lurie, Monica Pearl – that’s all I remember.

SS: How did they make ACT UP political?

EN: Well, basically – here, you have ACT UP – this bunch, started by this bunch of upper middle class gay white men, who just had never been political in their whole lives, and just one day decided that they needed to do something, because all of their friends were dying, and no one seemed to care. And so, they just tried to, basically, waltz into the world of political activism, without having any historical context. So, the women of the Women’s Caucus – and men were probably not allowed into the women’s caucus. I don’t know that for a fact, but I’m going on an educated guess here, and if they had a problem with that, that was just tough shit. But they were the ones who said, hey guys, there’s some context here, and basically said, not only should you not be reinventing the wheel here, you don’t have to be. And here’s why. And they just brought an activist history to the group. And then, also, on top of that, called the men on a lot of their complete misogyny and racism and classism, and forced them to look at their situation in a larger context and really –

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SS: Can you think of a specific example?

EN: Well, the practical example, I think, in a slightly different context, is that for years and years, women didn't – the slogan that we used was: "Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It." And, what that breaks down to is that – here are these women that were HIV-positive but were not getting sick in the same ways that gay men were. They weren't getting pneumonia, and they weren't getting KS cancer lesions, and they weren't getting any of the other types of diseases that the men were getting. But, they had other illnesses present with their HIV. They had cervical cancer and Human Papilloma Virus and other things – I'm not sure, exactly. I don't remember exactly what they are. So, since they couldn't get an AIDS diagnosis, because AIDS requires the presence of HIV and then, two or three of these other illnesses – since it's a syndrome, since AIDS is a syndrome, women were getting sick and not being able to get services that were earmarked for people with AIDS. So, they get sick, they stay sick. They didn't have any money, because they were women. They didn't have any money because a lot of them were working poor women, and they would die. So, one of the important things that the ACT UP Women's Caucus brought to the world and to the AIDS activism movement is just the very idea that women get AIDS, too. And you know, while you gay men are out there, fighting and yelling and screaming and trying to get your piece of the money for treatment – well, we're not even getting our foot in the door.

SS: So, what was the campaign to change the definition of AIDS?

EN: The campaign was to realize that women and men are different. I guess it probably had an even huger impact on the overall healthcare system.

SS: But who was it aimed at?

EN: The medical establishment and, I guess it was also aimed at a lot of the service providers in the gay community, I guess. And I guess it was also aimed at a lot of community-based health organizations.

SS: How did ACT UP's women's committee eventually get that definition changed?

EN: I don't know. Do you? Will you tell me later?

SS: Yeah.

EN: I don't know – a lawsuit – Terry McGovern's project?

SS: What was Terry McGovern's project?

EN: Terry McGovern was this lawyer who started some project I don't remember. I remember stuffing envelopes there. I think they sued someone. The thing was that you had people on the streets, and then, people in the institutions. And guess what? Some of those people at the time were the same people. So, it made it really interesting and fascinating in a lot of ways. Hey, we have this really fucking big idea. Well, guess what? We can get it done, because we have clout, you know.

SS: Who were the women with AIDS in the organization?

EN: The women with AIDS in the organization were mostly women of color.

SS: Do you remember people's names?

EN: I remember a woman. I remember Jane Auerbach. I think she was white.

SS: She was a lesbian.

EN: Yeah, a white lesbian. I remember – I think I remember a woman named Katrina.

SS: What do you remember about her?

EN: You know, I remember there was this very delicate balance about, between – I feel even stupid saying this – but letting these women have their own voice. And, between that – it was a very paternalistic relationship, unless you were very careful. And just the fact that you have to be very careful is kind of fucked up. But I do
00:50:00 remember that a lot of women in the Women’s Caucus just had the political and class consciousness background, so that they were able to really let these women have a voice, and not have it be manipulative, or condescending.

SS: Do you remember any specifics around Katrina, or anybody else, when they got sick? Or – what was going on?

EN: I don’t. My gosh, I wish I did.

SS: What were the relationships between the straight women and the gay women in ACT UP?

EN: Interesting. I remember a few straight women who came into ACT UP as either fag hags or nurses. It’s interesting, because the fag hags were sexy straight women, and the nurses were dowdy straight women, so I think I viewed them differently. I know that me, as a young little baby dyke, I was always disappointed when the women were straight. The relationship between straight women and gay women? I didn’t really spend a lot of time with any straight women in ACT UP. There was one very smart, influential, older woman who was, I think, either a nurse or a doctor, and was right on the front lines as a care provider. I don’t remember her name, but I know that she was very – and very interesting combination of someone who dealt with people with AIDS everyday – giving them healthcare, but she was also very intellectual and very – she knew what she was talking about.

SS: Iris Long?

EN: No.

SS: Suzanne Philips?

EN: Suzanne Philips? Kind of large, tall – Suzanne Philips, she was a doctor, wasn't she?

SS: Yeah.

EN: Oh, with the bangs and the long hair.

SS: So, you didn't socialize with the straight women?

EN: No. Only there was one woman who was friend with this – I was friends with this guy named Mark Fisher, who died and had a political, open casket funeral.

And, he had this friend who was straight. I don't remember her name. I really didn't –

SS: Was it Pam?

EN: Pam. Yeah. I just thought she was a nice lady.

SS: So, what was the lesbian scene like inside ACT UP?

EN: It was good. There was some fun.

SS: Did you have sex with women in ACT UP?

EN: I wasn't really too involved with dating anyone. But I did wind up having a little fling with one woman. Actually, my first woman ever, in my life. So, yeah – that I met in ACT UP.

SS: Was there a lot of flirting between the women and a lot of romances?

EN: It was very intense. I think a lot of it went over my head. There was some heavy – not heavy, but – very eligible girls in that group. I was just too young. I definitely liked to watch it all happen.

SS: Who were the sex symbols among the lesbians?

EN: Definitely, Catherine Saalfield, in my eyes. I guess Maria, Maria Maggenti. And then there's other people who I don't necessarily associate primary with ACT UP, like Jocelyn Taylor. She was definitely a sex symbol, on a level of her own.

SS: She's in that Kissing Doesn't Kill campaign.

EN: Yeah. Making safe sex videos and the whole video activist part of it.

SS: What was the discussion about safe sex for women in ACT UP? Do you remember that?

EN: The discussion for safe sex for women – the discussion about safe sex for women was just, in my opinion, bizarre to think about. It felt a little bit like kid sister, me too.

SS: Who was championing that?

EN: I think there was a whole culture of sex positivity and letting your freak flag fly, and not only am I queer, but leather queer. Not only am I queer, but I like to fist my girlfriend, and I want everyone to know about it, which is great, and it was queer theory and the new queer cinema and just all this stuff that I really think ACT UP probably helped bring to the forefront of urban American culture. The people who were championing safe sex for women? Maybe several different groups; maybe the group that was making art about it; maybe the group that was saying to working class women, hey, you need to have safe sex, and we don't want to draw a line between what that might mean for one person versus another person.

SS: Did you do the Shea Stadium action?

EN: No. The one – was that "Men: Use Condoms or Beat It." Brilliant.

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That's just brilliant. That was before me, I think.

SS: Were there bars or clubs that the dykes would go to? Or were there particular places that were on the ACT UP radar for women?

EN: I remember going to Mars on Monday nights. No. We used to hang out in the East Village in fag bars.

SS: Which ones?

EN: Well, the Pyramid Club, King Tut's Wah Wah Hut – that's not a gay bar, but – that bar on 10th Street that was later Crow Bar, I think. Boy Bar – I didn't really hang out there – the one on First Avenue or Second Avenue, down – it's called Dick's Bar or Bar. No, Bar.

SS: On Fourth Street. The Bar.

EN: The Bar. Bar's in New Haven. I think we used to go out in groups a lot for dinner. For women?

SS: Were there particular houses that you hung out a lot?

EN: People used to have parties. Women used to have parties, good parties, in Brooklyn, with lots of women.

SS: Do you remember whose houses?

EN: Yeah, Maxine's house, I remember. I remember, of course, the loft parties, where Karen Ramspacher – another straight woman in ACT UP – and Catherine and Jocelyn all lived with Robert Garcia – those infamous, legendary parties.

SS: On Avenue D?

EN: No, on Warren Street, in Tribeca. And then, later on, when I was hanging out with a slightly different group – like Tracy Morgan, another straight woman in ACT

UP – straight, bisexual, whatever. We got to a point where ACT UP started getting a little bit more mainstream, where we would just do our own thing, and it all took place in people's houses. And it was some people from the Costas, but it was also some other people. And that was a – Bro, Bro Broberg, and his boyfriend at the time, Charlie Welch, and Heidi and Tracy and me, and Barb Manoian and Heidi DeRuiter. I also remember hanging out at different places. I remember dinner parties, birthday parties – hanging out at Benny's Burritos and the Hat Mexican restaurant – or, not Mexican.

SS: Did you have friends who weren't in ACT UP?

EN: No, not really.

SS: How did you feel about people who weren't in ACT UP?

EN: They would either eventually not be my friend anymore, or they would come to a meeting and join.

SS: Did it affect the way you dressed?

EN: Oh yeah.

SS: How did you look? What was your look?

EN: It was combat boots or Doc Martens. I was particularly fond of this pair of Canadian police boots that I had. Either short shorts that were really short, or short shorts that were long here but cuffed. Some kind of leather belt, ACT UP tee shirt and leather jacket – for women or men. Substitute jeans, if it was cold. That's pretty much what everyone wore, and it's pretty funny to look at the pictures.

SS: So, when did you leave ACT UP?

EN: I just think people stopped going because the passion wasn't there and – well, what happened? When did Clinton get elected? '92?

SS: Yeah.

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EN: I think, you know – I was still in New York at the time. Maybe I had just left. I think I left ACT UP when I moved out of New York, in 1992. The passion was gone, a lot of the people were gone. A lot of people who were there were, I think –

SS: You mean dead or they quit?

EN: Dead. A lot of people were dead. I mean, people were just dying and dying and dying. And, you had people coming in with these second generation of ACT UP tee shirts that were just wrong – that they bought – almost, like they bought it at the mall. There was shit going on here in San Francisco, with ACT UP Golden Gate and ACT UP San Francisco and there was the treatment people and the activist people and there was the inside the system people versus the outside of the system people. And I think that the energy just – people were just exhausted.

SS: Did you go to a lot of funerals?

EN: I did not go to a lot of funerals. I went to a handful of memorial services.

SS: For who, do you remember?

EN: Yeah, David Lopez, Robert Garcia, that guy whose mother was in the group, Ray?

SS: Navarro.

EN: Ray Navarro. My friend Luis Salazar died, but not of AIDS, I think he died of Leukemia or something at the time.

SS: What was that like to be 18 and having all these people dying?

EN: Fuck, it was weird, and it was weird because I'm trying to live my life. The weird thing for me was not being there at the time, because that was my reality. But

the weird thing was trying to even deal with anyone in my family, about anything, because it was, like, Mom, you're trying to say what about the color of my hair? Huh? What does that have to do with anything important in the world? My grandparents were actually weirdly supportive of me, during the time. It felt – I definitely need to do some more thinking, I think, about what kind of effect it had on the person I am now. It was just completely overwhelming and bizarre. I think, fortunately, I never lost anyone very close to me. So, it was the culture. That was just what we did. We ran around and got arrested. We went to funerals. We partied. I didn't have nearly as much sex as I probably could have or wanted to, anyway. We got in people's faces, and I feel like I had so much knowledge and so much righteous information to spread around the world. And I felt totally positive and great about everything I did. And I feel like I did it with so much conviction and anyone who had anything bad to say about it could just go fuck themselves.

That's what it felt like, and it still feels that way. And I proudly talk about it to everyone in my life now – proudly. I'm not, for a minute – I never for one minute, censor anything about it. It was an incredible thing to do. It was so much the right thing to do. And, we saved people's lives, definitely – changed the healthcare system in this country. So, it affected me on a very personal level, but I also think I did great fucking work, and it makes a lot of the nonsense and the stupid shit that you have to engage in just to get through life – in the new millennium – makes it really just not seem very important, and I think it gave me a lot of strength and power to help me get through my life today, because I know I've got some priorities in that movement, and from those people.

SS: Thank you, Emily.