

**A C T U P
O R A L H I S T O R Y
P R O J E C T**

A PROGRAM OF
**MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Jamie Leo**

Interview Number: **037**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **December 21, 2003**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Jamie Leo

December 21, 2003

SARAH SCHULMAN: OK. So, we usually start, you just say your name, today's date, your age and where we are.

JAMIE LEO: My name is Jamie Leo. Today is December 21, 2003. I'm 49 and we're on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in New York City.

SS: Where were you born? I don't even know that about you.

JL: I was born in West Union, Iowa – a tiny little farm, very near Amish country, where I grew up. And we were in an Anglo town, as it was called, right on the edge of one of the largest Amish communities. And my Dad worked with the Amish largely.

SS: That's interesting. How were you raised to view them?

JL: With complexity, because a few of my childhood playmates and friends were Amish. But the Amish as a rule had a very – they discouraged the young people from having anything to do with the Anglos. So there was a complexity there, because my parents knew some Amish people quite closely, so I knew some of the kids quite well because of that.

SS: So in your town, were they the "other?" Or were there other others?

JL: No, because they were on the outskirts. They had their own community, and because they didn't have automobiles and didn't have electricity, there was a whole different set of rules about how they would come on their carriage into town, to do their shopping on occasion. So you usually went into their community for any interaction.

SS: So when you were growing up, who were the people who everyone –

JL: Who was the other? My Dad and older brother, because my Dad was a dark Italian in a tiny town that still has on its country seat that no Catholic church can be built in the country seat.

SS: That's interesting. How did he end up there?

JL: Through this grant, to do some work. He was a dentist, and so – without going into too much personal stuff – it was something that he wanted to do. The being a dentist thing, of working with patients who don't want anesthetic. So it was strange, but interesting. We were paid with sides of beef and eggs. I think my Mom had hoped she might have a new car now and then. That didn't happen because of that. But now in retrospect, I think it was a pretty cool thing.

SS: So your father was the only Catholic in town?

JL: And they were ostracized for a while. My brother was a little bit as well, because he's darker as well. And that was very informative to me about a) religion, because religion somehow factored into that, and it was also interesting to me because it was about the Amish being nearby and the Lutheran Norwegians. I don't want to digress too much, but I had an early experience because I was raised both Catholic and Lutheran and it was Missouri-centered Lutheran and they are almost Fred Phelps psycho-Christians. They're scary people. There are lovely people among them, but there are some scary – and unbelievable racism and all that Martin Luther stuff. I remember at an early age that was something that stood out and bothered me a lot. The first person I knew that actually had a gay son and he – will I get sued saying his name? I would hope so. But he was Reverend Grant Merseth. And Reverend Grant Merseth – my parents were very cool about it. They were like, do the catechism and the Catholicism, just do it

00:05:00

for Grandma and Grandpa. And then when you get older, you'll think about your own sense of what religion is to you – the same way you're studying math – just look at it. Which I thought was actually cool of them, but at the end of the horse and pony show of learning all that creepy Martin Luther King – Martin Luther King, indeed – Martin Luther stuff, we were supposed to have little moment – and I was this little spherical, round little pudgy Iowa kid – and they want us to have a little moment of philosophical discussion about all the crap we had just learned. And Grant Merseeth took my question, and it was, “Well, you haven't really covered the dinosaurs very well. This whole Noah's Ark thing and it doesn't really fit.” In a scene right out *Ulysses*, Merseeth launched into, “Oh now, they put the dinosaurs there to fool us.” Which fool wasn't wasted on me either. And I said, “No, that isn't true,” and one of the sweet memories of my childhood, because growing up in Iowa one of the things that we did regularly was to go to the Badlands on our way to see family that lived near Yellowstone every other year. There were no trails. You would go off the side of the road and just see an incredible Paleozoic wonder and just put it in the trunk. It didn't even feel like shoplifting, at the time. It was just something that we did. So we had several shoeboxes of really great museum quality stuff, and I was like, no. So he started to go ballistic, “No, they put them there to fool us, they put them to fool us!” And I said, “No, and you know what? Maybe the devil put you here to fool us.” And I walked. And, two of my little best playmates walked with me and it was a major crisis in our town. Dad lost patients over it, and yet, my parents stood beside me. It was a very cool thing.

SS: So, which came first, being gay or being an artist?

JL: Oh I was going to tell you – this particular minister, whose name I better not say again, it was his son – the first person I was absolutely certain was gay. If the poor guy's not gay, that's kind of sad now – I mean to be in this – but he was obviously headed that way. Which came first? Gay or artist? Artist in my case, because sexuality came later, or as I knew it – though Dad had one friend, Mr. Wolf, and he had this great cocktail opened shirt, and there was this incredible pelt, and he was always kind of prone to lift me and hold me. And I always remember thinking at a very early age that that was great. But, I was drawing at the same time.

SS: How did you family respond when you started becoming an artist?

JL: Not good, not very supportive, unfortunately. My Mom would once in a while say, “Oh, maybe he'll be an architect.” And that was always odd. And my Dad – we had a big family – as is the case in these Bible Belt – secret that I didn't know about, and that was that my father wasn't my real father, and that my mother had just trotted around with this secret like it was some – even as an adult, it's one of the saddest things about my Mom and I, was that she never told me until she died. And I would have been such an advocate to have talked to her. Anyway, I don't know why I just told you all that – you're just a good interviewer. So, I was an artist because of finding my own private world. That was a big piece of it. There was safety there in that piece of paper, that construction.

SS: So how did you do it? Did you have an art teacher?

JL: No. I made puppet shows, and would enlist all the neighborhood kids to make puppets shows. And some of them were quite big productions, actually – we would

involved 10 or so kids to do these big sweeping epics. We'd turn a swing set into the proscenium. It was Midwestern – *Andy of Mayberry* stuff to some degree.

SS: Were you ever raised with any kind of sense of social justice?

JL: Yeah.

SS: In what way? How was that expressed?

JL: The only time my Mom ever wept was when Robert Kennedy was killed.

00:10:00 My Mom was an Iowa democrat, in the best sense of the word. She always worked in the community, always worked in the Election Board. She was often a delegate, and this was back when delegates were like the people next door. Maybe they still are, but it doesn't strike me as that way as much now. But it really was a community thing and she was very active. My Dad was principled, although he always took the line of, "One of the holy things about voting is that you don't have to tell anyone how you vote." So, that was my Dad's politic. But lots of ethics. I'm happy to say.

SS: What about in terms of intervening when other people were being victimized? Was that an ethic?

JL: No, but I also think that has something to do with being in a town of 1300. I guess my mother was – you know, one of the nice things about the small town that I grew up in was that it really was – and I suspect the Amish influence is there, but it's also Scandinavian, to some degree – there's a real community. If one of the farmers had a really crappy crop, there was no discussion – everyone shared. It really was communal. There were no rich people in my hometown, and there were no particularly poor people in the hometown. I guess that was part of the social fabric – more than my parents, in particular, in that way. My kid brother had gone to a science show, so we were in Des

Moines when King was murdered, and we saw a riot occur. And it's fuzzy to me, and in fact I thought to myself that I should go look up the details of it. But we were on a Greyhound bus, heading home, and we saw some Black people. We were in a town that had no – my Dad was the Black person in town, as an Italian. And so, we saw some Black people protesting and we saw the place attacked and we saw people get beaten up. And one of those people, as I recall was either badly hurt or died – but my mother testified for that, and went to Des Moines a couple of times to report what we had seen as a witness. That was that exposure.

SS: So right there, you were taught not to side with the police in that type of an event.

JL: I don't know that that's what that taught me. I think what we saw there – certainly, that was the case, but I think it was more of an adolescent, Vietnam age response, that I started to become, as many people, concerned about the abuses of authority.

SS: When did you leave your town?

JL: As soon as possible.

SS: When was that?

JL: I went the University of Iowa

SS: In Ames?

JL: No, the Iowa Writers Workshop.

SS: Iowa City.

JL: And I was very lucky that that was there. And in fact, my family were sports fiends – which is why they ended up with me – there's poetry there. But they

would always go down to these Big Ten games, and I would always go to this incredible place called the River City Free Trade Zone, which was this giant hippie place, with geodesic domes and lots of drugs and constant poetry readings, because it was after all, the Iowa Writers Workshop. I was getting to see, really, a whole slew legendary poets – a whole slew of things – on those Saturday afternoons while they were seeing the football game. So that was my first getting out. And then, Iowa was its own planet – Vonnegut and Williams and the workshops were fantastic. I went into the Iowa Theater Lab and touring and working the Grotowski and [Richard] Shechner. So while I was in Iowa, I was already making my way east, to a degree.

SS: Were you out at that time, when you in college?

JL: I don't know – I was kind of bisexual at that time, because I remember in high school, I was saying things like – my stupid quote to just sort of be slick about the whole thing was, “Anybody who doesn't value the beauty of a woman's cheek, or the embrace of a man's hug, is a loser.” That was the lay of the land for me at the time. And was I kidding myself? Probably, but it served me well. It served me to be comfortable with who I was at an early age, or comfortable with my sexuality at an early age. And then I was in Baltimore. I landed in Baltimore, and it was in Baltimore that I made a shift to a gay lifestyle. My best friend and I were together for two years in an intimate relationship after I had been out for several years. We are who we are, but I sort of wish we lived in a world where the lines didn't have to be as strictly regulated as they are socially – at every end of the spectrum.

00:15:00 **SS: Let me get back to your Iowa influences, because you named two really distinctly different kinds of artists. On the one hand you said Vonnegut, and on the other hand, you said Grotowski.**

JL: We got our drugs from Vonnegut. We'd always buy our marijuana from Henry's Gaslight Village, which was this incredible artists/writers colony there. The workshops with Tennessee Williams were amazing. It was this furious, brilliant, mind-blowing figure, but Grotowski was this nurturing sage.

SS: But also, they had different values about the artist in relationship to the social world. And I'm wondering how you balance the two different views.

JL: Vonnegut was not as important to me as Grotowski. Grotowski's ideas in particular – and Ric Zank, the great leader of the Iowa Theater Lab's idea of what art's capability is to affect profound change in people was just as beautiful as it can be.

SS: What do you think it was about you at that time that made you open to receiving those ideas?

JL: That's a lovely question, Sarah. Well, my family moved from my hometown to the town where my family lived from then on, my sophomore year of high school. And in my freshman year in high school, I had found myself. I had a wonderful speech coach – this beautiful, beautiful woman – and she grabbed me in the hall and she said, "Jamie, we have something called Speech Contest, and I see you with your friends and you make your funny characters and I think you should talk to me about this. And I know that there'll be a problem, because your dad will want" – everyone knew my Dad had been an all-American wrestler, and so I was expected to be a wrestler. In fact, I have a great erection story if you'd like to hear it, about wrestling. The Cliff Notes is that I

pinned the principal's kid, because he was such a doll. I don't think I had reached puberty yet, but I knew enough to get excited by him, and I think it scared the poor kid out of his wits, and I pinned him. So until the day my dad died, it was like, "That was the finest moment of James's life." And I thought, yeah, boy it was! Where was I? I worked – I'm sorry, I just lost my train of thought.

SS: I was asking you about what made you open to the idea –

JL: This woman got me doing this Speech Contest, and I got top state honors my first time. And I wrote my own speech, and it was called After Dinner Speech – where you had to take a topic and make a 10-minute extemporaneous speech. I loved it, and I didn't have to do wrestling because it was at the same time. I was in heaven. I was going to be Puck in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* the next year. And that to me was just like – I found myself. So we moved to this town that had no theater and clumsy music, and where the football team, every time they lost a game got taken to steak dinners. So, I got myself into a lot of trouble because as I started to make friends, I started to say to kids, this is so fucked up. Because the town I grew up in – my best friend was the captain of the football team, valedictorian and the lead in the class play. And it was a smaller town and everyone did everything. In this town, it was really fucked up, immediately fucked up. And so by the end of my sophomore year, I and a dear friend of mine had founded a theater company of kids and the thing was that we would not allow any adult material. Everything had to be built, written by students. And by my senior year, we were given a scholarship and we were touring. We toured throughout the three-state area there of Minnesota and Wisconsin. It was marvelous. So I had already written new work, we had already struggled. There was already some social struggle happening.

Remember, this is also the early '70s, so the whole social dissonance of that particular time and place was big and on my mind.

SS: So how did you get to New York?

JL: In Baltimore, the lab was getting to ready to move to the Catskills, and I knew that that wasn't for me because I had left a small town. The short end of it was that is when I made my step to New York with my then-Baltimore boyfriend, onto Christopher Street. Which couldn't have been a worse fiasco for me.

SS: What year?

JL: The end of '77.

00:20:00

SS: So why was it bad to live on Christopher Street in 1977?

JL: Because it was clone time, and it was interesting. My sweetest memory of it was coming home one night, really late. At that time I was running follow spot for *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* at the Public for \$90 bucks a week or something and tried to live on that. Which was a king's ransom then. And I came home, and I was so tired and I thought, what am I doing here? It was a gruff New York night, and it was a foggy night – and I know this sounds like a bad cliché but Rollerena came by, and I don't know what she did, but she acknowledged me. And she said, “Oh darling,” or whatever she would say. And I remember the first time I saw Rollerena at ACT UP, I was weak-kneed with excitement that this person that I had thought had really – was a wizard, was weaving magic into the way I wanted the Village and New York to be. That's such a corny cliché. But it's true for me. I was overwhelmed. So Christopher Street was good, but it was the bars and the whole thing.

SS: Boots and Saddles.

JL: Although I did love – for a long time, Boots and Saddles had this really handsome profiled guy, and it looked like it was a steakhouse. And so with any attention at all, you could easily see the tourists get off the number 1 train, nose around and walk in. You know, and then come hurdling out.

SS: What was your relationship to clone culture?

JL: I wanted them all! I objectified them –

SS: Did you have a little mustache?

JL: No, I didn't!

SS: Did you wear flannel shirts?

JL: No. Sexually, it was something that I was very excited by. I thought it was a very sexy masculinization, whatever the hell – there's part of the bear culture that I find a little bit attractive to me in that way, now. But what I liked about the clone culture was that there was a certain defiance in it. "We'll do it better than you do it," to the kind of male thing. I don't know, people can articulate that with much more thought than I am now. But it was an interesting time. It was fun to live there, but it was also quite a circus. I was also young enough and I had just lost a bunch of weight, so I was insecure enough physically in that landscape of all these buff bodies. I always felt like you had to choose your clothes to go to the laundromat. In fact in many ways, as I've said to people for years, it was every bit as strict as the most strict right-wing social culture – as it still is.

SS: What were the rules? This is pre-AIDS, so it's interesting. What were the rules of the culture?

JL: That's not fair to people, because I'm sure – people were sculpting them as they went along, but the rules of the culture as I saw them, were that you were – I don't know if I can define it. It's an interesting question, of course.

SS: What kind of places did you used to go to at that time?

JL: To go out?

SS: Did you do the piers and West Street and all of that?

JL: I went to the piers, but I only went to the piers during the day, because I wanted to take photographs of the beautiful, pensive man in the corner, waiting for someone. It was more the poetry of that to me, than anything. Back in Iowa, I was supposed to edit the football films one year to pay for tuition. So I was editing the football films, and it was the year that Iowa had its worst season – lost every single weekend. And Jimmy might appreciate this – the coach would come to me and say, “You know Jamie, you're doing an incredible job, incredible job. We've never had a better editor do this, but if you could just get a few [shots of] when they're throwing the ball, or running the ball,” because I would like to include all the clips of them having pensive discussions about their girlfriends and stuff. And I was making these art films about the football players. So I kind of did that with the piers, as well. As far as the kind of anonymous sex stuff – I wasn't as comfortable with that. I went to the Mineshaft once with a friend from England, and he was gone all night. And of course we had checked our coats together, and it was 80 below that night. And so I stayed at the bar, but I felt like I was Walter Cronkite with the CBS News team. That's what's so for me – whether its good or bad. I've always been a little more interested in intimacy. I've been in long, long-term relationships.

SS: How long have you and he been together?

JL: Way too long. 20 years. But I want to leave that for another discussion.

SS: So let's go back to public sex, away from privacy.

JL: The summer that I had my Albee fellowship was the summer of summer sex. I was with my beloved friend, Sebastian Stuart, and Sebastian would encourage me to go to what is probably still called the Bay of Pigs. That was the only time I thought public sex was great, because it was the Atlantic Ocean at night and under full moons. It was so beautiful.

SS: What's the Bay of Pigs?

JL: I don't know if it's still there, because this is pre-AIDS – but it was this cruise-y place where all these guys would wonder around in the dunes.

SS: Oh, in Montauk?

JL: Yes. It was so beautiful. To me, that was really sexy. But it was sexy. There's something that was exciting about being there, to begin with.

SS: What were you doing at the Albee Foundation?

JL: Playwriting.

SS: What year was that?

JL: 1833.

SS: No dear! Really –

JL: 1978, 1979.

SS: So, when did you start to hear about AIDS?

JL: It came quickly. It was my friend David Aurand, who had been a roommate of mine in college and he had been one of Sir Georg Solti's protégées and was

an incredibly gifted young man. And David had this mystery disease – the “gay cancer” thing. And that was followed very quickly, and he died very quickly. And then that was followed by my beloved Michael Levin’s illness, and people around the Village know Michael as both Michael Levin and, because he was a writer for a whole bunch of gay publications, as Michael Jay. He wrote for many years a wonderfully hilarious and insightful column called Cocktail Astrology.

SS: For which paper?

JL: A bunch of different. He had a whole roster of astrology clients, but Michael was one of those people who really thought that astrology was one of those sciences that never reached any level of fruition, but that there was something of value there. So if Michael did a reading for some doctor or lawyer, Michael would not make a penny, because Michael would spend hours and hours and weeks, to go and try to find all these star charts and he would go to these ancient libraries to try to find what mathematic patterns would reveal something. It was very interesting. At any rate, the long and short of this is when Michael started to get ill, that’s when all hell broke loose for me. And that’s right about the time the first ACT UP meeting had occurred.

SS: So that’s ’87?

JL: Is it that late? Then Michael’s sick. Michael was diagnosed for a while before he got sick – a year or two.

SS: Let’s start with David when he was sick, did he and you say to each other, you have the gay cancer?

JL: No, because David went back to Iowa and I didn’t see him, and I didn’t know he was going to die.

SS: So, you didn't know what he had?

JL: Yeah.

SS: Did he have KS?

JL: I don't remember.

SS: When Michael got sick, at that point were you overtly both conscious of what he had?

JL: Yes.

SS: So, how did he deal with it?

JL: He did all kinds of treatment. He did some experimental cocktails and he did a bunch of herbal –

SS: Do you remember what drugs he took?

JL: I don't, I'm sorry, that's too long ago. At the very end, we were getting close to the early inhibitors, but that's all I remember. Because Michael had this sort of alternative culture background, he was interested in having a couple of herbalists and was doing other alternative treatments for himself, to varying degrees of success.

SS: So in this six or seven years between the time that your first friend got sick and died of AIDS, and you came to ACT UP, how close did AIDS get to you?

00:30:00 JL: I'll never know, but I do know that I was on the road a great deal. I wasn't in New York a lot of the time, and I was in a relationship that was pretty monogamous at the time. So as far as virally, I don't know how close I got to being exposed, but I didn't have other friends for a while. A man who was a director I'd met when I was in Alaska got sick, so we corresponded as he was starting to get sick. I know that was before ACT UP. I don't know if you're hearing this a lot from other people too, but it's sort of a gray

zone for me of when it's – at what point in radar it was suddenly over-the-top. And as you say, there were several years in which it was on my radar but not –

SS: Did you change the way that you lived at that point?

JL: Yes.

SS: What did you do?

JL: Well, I mean there are a couple of ways to answer that. I mean many ways to answer that. I certainly started to experience, very early on, a sense of wanting to be safe. I had friends who have – as we all did, I guess – this parade of – certainly in the clone culture, there's almost a pride in having just conquered the latest sexually transmitted disease. And I didn't like the idea. I was living with a nutritionist for years, so the idea of how you hammered yourself by having penicillin too many times – those things were all in my mind, anyway. And so I was just more careful. So that's one part of the question. Otherwise, I had seen some of the GHMC stuff, and it wasn't resonating to me. It didn't feel like the kind of politics – I had always been politically active. I'd been active in some environmental organizations in New York, and some local things for recycling, and just things that felt accessible enough to me, that I felt like my efforts toward it could help a little bit. Does that answer the question a little bit?

SS: What organizations were you involved with, environmentally?

JL: The Lower East Side Organization, Audubon Society and Greenpeace.

SS: What kind of work would you do?

JL: Bird counts. Community clean-ups and helping put together a couple of East Village community gardens.

SS: What was it about GMHC that didn't really speak to you?

JL: It somehow felt a little clubby, I guess. I don't want to dismiss people's hard work though, because it's too long ago and I don't remember clearly enough, because it's just too long ago. But I remember going to some events and not feeling that it was the right fit for my own –

SS: What kind of events did you go to?

JL: My friend Billy Boyd – when he got sick – but I think I may be confusing when this happened, because I think Billy got sick a little bit later, and we were already doing ACT UP, and so then I had a reaction to – Billy had had some trouble with one of the ombudsmen at GMHC. And I remember writing a few letters and making a few phone calls, and it felt rather cloistered. But again, I don't want to go down a path of stuff that I don't remember clearly, because there's plenty that I do remember clearly –

SS: Let me just say this. We're trying to make an historical record, and we're talking to lots of different people. So any kind of facts that you can give us are really helpful, because a lot of people don't know any of this.

JL: Fair enough.

SS: So what I'm just trying to understand is – from where you personally stood, if GMHC felt cloistered, can you sort of explain to people what were the different social groups that made up – why you didn't identify with that group?

JL: Okay. I guess there's a bohemian component that I had always found that working around Peter Schumann and the Bread and Puppet people, I always felt great warmth – sorry, but that was a factor for me – and great community and great exchange. And of course remember, as the gay press was reporting things, what I was reading about GMHC in the publications that I was reading at the time, it portrayed itself as sort of a

board-like machine of people maybe some – I'm very uncomfortable talking about this.

00:35:00

It's funny, I don't know why. I just don't want to misrepresent. I didn't know a lot of the people there.

SS: Well let's look at it historically, because the gay community has had a certain historical trajectory, which was not predictable at the time. And in a way, you're talking about two possible different aesthetics and world views. And if you can articulate that – who you were, and then why you didn't identify with that one, it will be helpful.

JL: It's sort of the old Trotsky/Marx debate of, do you work within, or do you work outside? And I guess my own personality was such that I was more interested in working outside, at that time in my life. And so, the Radical Faeries made sense to me, and the activities that were on the street seemed to make sense to me. It felt like a form of democracy to me, and it felt like something I felt like I could participate in. And, I suspect that GMHC had its focus on sustaining itself. The fundraising component was a huge piece of it that is a debatable evil of an organization, and there were people who were careerists in that field. There were people who were donating great time in that field. But the fact is, it was for me ACT UP that allowed me to bring what I felt was a contribution of what I could bring. And, could I have gone to GMHC and stuffed letters and done those sort of things? Could I have done some layouts and design some things for them? Quite possibly. If ACT UP hadn't come along, that's probably where I would have gone. Did I work for God's Love and soup kitchens, and the stuff along the lines, there? Yes. So, GMHC had those community components that I participated in, mainly on – and correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe some of the hospital actions were GMHC-

originated – where we would go and do the holiday performances and holiday activities, for people who are sick. And those things I did for awhile, but I’m not sure if that’s much earlier than ACT UP, or right now around at the same time. Does that answer a little better?

SS: That helps me understand who you are. How did you first hear about ACT UP?

JL: Great question. I don’t remember. Either Michael Jay or maybe Jay Blotcher or maybe Aldyn McKean.

SS: You were friends with Aldyn?

JL: No. I knew Aldyn. I don’t mean to say we weren’t friends. I wasn’t a close friend, but we knew a couple of people in common. So I think it was Aldyn who mentioned something. And I somehow think that it was someone who was straight had said something to me. It was like someone who – can you give me a time frame reference? Where is *The Normal Heart* in relationship to the founding of ACT UP?

SS: It’s before, right?

JL: Is it two years before? So I thought it might have been someone at the Public talking about there were some meetings and there was going to be some street action, and I thought good, good, good.

SS: So, what was your first interaction with ACT UP?

JL: I don’t know. When I was getting ready for this, I got out my journal. I was there, at Wall Street. I did a couple of things before Wall Street, but I wasn’t at the first event. I was at one of the early events.

SS: Would you say your first big action was Wall Street?

JL: Yeah, I think so.

SS: And what was your participation in that?

JL: I made some posters, made some signs a couple of nights before.

SS: What did they say?

JL: I don't remember. But you'll see in a lot of the signage and signs – I was always interested in the numbers. For some reason, the numbers always – one of the things that we have throughout the Action Tours files that we've saved – is that you just see the grotesque number change, from 500 people with AIDS in New York, or 12,000 homeless. And then, you watch those numbers just geometrically go through the roof. But I guess you advertise what works for you, to some degree. So those numbers always were part of what upset me – just the large number of people hurt.

SS: So when you first came into the organization, was the first thing that you offered to do make signs?

JL: Yeah, because the first thing – a person couldn't help see that you were in one of the great centers of a movement. It was very apparent, very quickly. There were minds there of such power and brilliance that my thought was well, I want to use what I can bring best to this. Then we started to see that there were – not unlike human behavior – that there were little tribes and little cliques. People were working with people that they could work with. And so I was fortunate early on to find a couple of new friendships emerge there. And we started talking about how we might work together. In that remarkable Petri dish that was an ACT UP meeting, there was always such remarkable exchange. And then before and after it, there was always exchange. And so,

it was just this constant nucleides orbiting – this incredible spawning of activities. And so as I went along, I would just select the things that made sense, that I felt I could contribute. So, I don't recall – and again, going through some of my own papers – the date of the first Action Tours event, but I'm pretty sure that it was pretty early on and it was going to the State House and we did our first blood-in.

SS: Let's go back a little bit – Action Tours was your affinity group. How did it get started?

JL: For some reason, a bunch of the people that became Tourists – we all had become marshals early on. And I suspect because most of us had some level of previous political experience, and so we suspected that having people of reasonable level heads – that marshaling was an important component. Most of the Tourists had some marshal training.

SS: Now had you been a marshal in a previous movement?

JL: Yeah, I had been marshaling some anti-war, anti-nuclear stuff earlier, for one or two of the anti-nuclear rallies in the city over the years.

SS: So how did one go about becoming a marshal in ACT UP?

JL: Oh, in ACT UP it was glorious. There were these trainings. And they changed throughout the period of the 10 years or so. But, you literally would have marshal's training, and a couple of people – there were various people who were savvy to it or had a legal background, or a combination of people would host these events, and they would describe what some of the legal cautions were, what some of the crowd control – that was gentle and pervasive to people – would be effective. And I remember, when were getting ready to go the NIH in Atlanta – the marshal training became huge

events with, if not a hundred or so people – with many dozens of people, of young people and people of all unexposed activists really learning a lot about what goes on to make for an effective and most importantly a peaceful political rally – a non-violent political rally, if not peaceful.

SS: What were some of the specifics of ACT UP marshal training, or marshaling?

JL: How to make sure that you encouraged people coming and going from the groups carefully, how you patrolled. Everyone loves being a crossing guard – we would get to be crossing guards and just simply physically protect. And there were – depending on the nature of the event and how angry people were or if we were expecting police resistance from a particular event. If we were blocking traffic, how we would interact with a particular enraged motorist. How we were to disarm the possibility for violence.

SS: How?

00:45:00 JL: Gosh, I suspect that Maxine Wolfe probably has the many-paged documents because there were a variety of them. I had them for years. I think I've let go of them, because I'm sure that [the Lesbian] Herstory [Archives] or someone has those great archives. But there was a 20-point list of – make sure that you look in the eyes, and make sure that you never touch first, and make sure – it's just good psychology – the nature of, don't encourage a confrontation when you see it coming. And when you see somebody that was one of the activists going over the edge, to be firm. And if you need to be, to be angry with them, to bring them to a place of care –

SS: Did you ever have to do that? Do you have any memory of that?

JL: James, you were there. Sure. I mean, in front of St. Patrick's [Cathedral] a number of times. And in St. Patrick's – as things started to get crazy, the day of the wafer –the big event in St. Patrick's. There was a point in which it could have gotten violent, once people got outside the door. And then, the following rallies – I remember once Richard Deagle, a gifted and dedicated activist, was losing it. He was really, really angry, and the police were ready to beat him up. So you used your connection with people – I don't know if Richard would agree that we were effective or not. But I remember being worried about Richard – that's my point.

SS: What was the event?

JL: It was one of the events in front of St. Pat's, after something hideous that Cardinal O'Connor had done or said.

SS: So what did you do? How did you intervene?

JL: I believe we were all holding hands and keeping Richard from breaking through. I think some of its on footage. That's one in particular. Often, you would see some of the younger kids – I remember a lot of them were around the Church, because the Church was such a source of – we were so inflamed at the insidious and evil things that were coming out of that machine. And so the kids threw the paint on the back steps of the Church, and then the police caught these young activists and beat them up.

SS: ACT UP kids?

JL: Yeah.

SS: Who did that?

JL: The police.

SS: No, which group in ACT UP threw paint?

JL: I don't remember. I don't think they had a name. I don't think those kids had a name. But I think one of kids ended up being a leader in YELL [Youth Education Life Line] – I don't remember his name. But, they had written "Cardinal O'Connor Kills" in pink paint in the back stairs of the Rectory. And in the particular country I was raised in, graffiti is not punishable by violence. But in that particular time in history, in New York, it was. So that's what lead to one of the scariest events for me. It was the night in front of the 42nd Street precinct, when the pink paint was slapped up on Kelly and everybody's feet, and they charged us. And I was one of the three people that was grabbed that night.

SS: I don't understand what happened. Somebody poured paint?

JL: They poured pink paint – they kind of went through the crowd, broke through the marshals and had, I think the better part of a half a gallon of pink latex paint, and it just went whoosh – and the front guys, these police guys with their big trench coats, all had little pink fringe on their trench coats and their little pink booties. It was great but –

SS: Who did the action? I don't know about this.

JL: I don't know who did the action, but it was an ad-hoc – I don't know if it came right from a meeting? We might have come – it was a Monday night, I remember that, because I was looking after my godson that night and they were supposed to get home, and I was supposed to do an intercept because his Mom was working. And so I was supposed to be home that night that I was dragged to jail, and that was the night that Chris Henley was beat up by the police.

SS: You need to help me, because I know nothing about this. Start from the top. It was a Monday night –

JL: One of the things that happened at ACT UP that often made for great political debate for all of us which was whether we were pro-active or reactive as an organization. And in this case, we were the angry crowd with torches, as I saw it. We were furious. These kids had been physically assaulted by the police. And so, everyone decided we were going to go to the precinct where this had occurred.

SS: Now, were they in jail?

JL: I don't believe that they were held.

SS: Okay. So you were going to the precinct, but we didn't have any people sitting inside?

00:50:00

JL: No, at that point the kids had been released. It had been a Saturday or Sunday night. I wish I could give you the details, but that's enough to get the lay of the land. So everyone was enraged – keeping in mind that this was just one more thing about the police and the Church being in bed together. And so we went down there, and it was a large number of people – a lot of people, because it was back in the phone tree days. Have people talked about that in detail?

SS: No.

JL: Howard Dean, feh! We would get on the phone and everyone would call everyone they knew. And you would have, that night, several hundred or sometimes up to a thousand people for something. If it was passionate enough, or immediate enough, you would just say, "This is the one you have to be at." It was very easy to get a number of friends – and straight friends too, I think it's worth mentioning – to show up, to do

these events. So everyone went there to shout at the police and holler at the police. Well they started to corral us. We were on 42nd Street. And I think the argument was stopping traffic – although, it was back when Theater Row still wasn't a major thoroughfare of traffic, and we were beyond the Tunnel. So people weren't headed to the Intrepid at ten at night – a cross-town bus, probably – but it wasn't a major traffic jam. But for some reason, police were getting nervous and people were very agitated that night. And so then at this moment – and I was marshaling – so, we were marshaling and keeping everybody from getting too close to the police. And all of a sudden, the kids threw the paint. None of the Tourists knew these kids particularly well. That's why I don't even know their names. But that's an important component with ACT UP, is that people were given a certain possibility of being autonomous, and so the problem with that on occasion was when an action would then affect and risk the safety of everyone – as is the case with Chris Henley that night. And so what happened is, that the police grabbed three of us – and Jim, you probably remember the photographer, the camera person's name, but I don't remember her name – Diana, I think? But she had her camera taken and they destroyed her camera. I can't remember her name. I remember her face but –

SS: Why did they arrest you?

JL: Who knows? I was close to the police. And they grabbed me. They put each of us in the back of these – I was all alone, and so I put my marshaling to good work, because the minute they got me off, I just said – is this just totally obnoxious? And yeah, it is, but I just kept saying repeatedly, "Please don't hurt me!" Which I really think is like telling the fireman, "Please don't burn down my house!" I think it just plays on their image of themselves – the "I'm not going to hurt you, I'm here to protect you" sort

of thing. So, my experience of the police – the same night that Chris was getting beaten up – my experience with the police was great. They helped me off and sent me down – no handcuffs. They just said, “We just need to ask you some questions.” And there was some poor heifer of a guy, “What’s he in on?” And the cop said ACT UP, and he went, “What’s that?” And the cops burst into laughter. How could you be a New York cop and not know who ACT UP was? And so, they asked me some questions about the event. I told them what I knew, and then they released me. And then of course, one of the other great glorious things about ACT UP is that I was released at 3:30 in the morning, and there were maybe 30 people waiting outside the precinct. And that was always the case. I’m sure there are people who didn’t experience that, but –

SS: What happened to Chris?

JL: Chris was beaten up.

SS: How did that happen?

JL: You’d have to ask Chris. But Chris has suffered for many years because of it.

SS: Did you witness it?

JL: No, because it happened separately. They grabbed three of us – in fact if I’m not mistaken, we went to three different precincts, which was its own weird thing. And then, I got myself into a fair amount of trouble the next week at the ACT UP rally, because of course at the next ACT UP meeting it was – you think you’ve got angry torches outside the Frankenstein palace the week before – now people are insanely angry. And I got up and, I’m sure looking like a fool, I just said, “Look, three people were arrested and so if you’re going to vilify all of the New York Police Department, then

you're going to ignore one-third of what happened that night because what happened to me was that I was arrested, released and was treated with great respect the whole time. And so, if we're going to vilify this working class community of policemen, then I had problems with that." And a lot of people were pretty angry at me for saying that, because Chris had been hurt, and we had every reason to be angry at – you know this argument – but that the people that hurt Chris deserved our rage. But, I felt that aiming at the police – and indeed, maybe it's my own namby Midwestern-ness, but somewhere in my belief system, I think that a lot of police go to become police because they come from working class families, and they want to do good, they want a job and a school, an education that comes from being police. And so, I had a certain level of – it's not all them and us, it's a complicated system.

00:55:00

SS: What did people want to do to the police?

JL: I don't know. Yell, I guess.

SS: You don't remember what ACT UP's response was?

JL: This was right about the time they were starting to hear people talking about that we need weapons. And there was that little breeze that came through, for the better part of six months.

SS: What actually happened?

JL: Larry [Kramer] had written something. I think a couple of people had published little documents that said, when are we going to be serious about this life and death situation of people dying all around us? And, when are we going to actually not just stand out in the street and shout?

SS: Did anybody ever use weapons?

JL: I don't know, and I can't speak for everybody, but I know that one of the things the Tourists believed in with a lot of passion was non-violence. That was one thing we all shared.

SS: Did you ever see concrete evidence of anyone in ACT UP using weapons as a consequence of this discussion?

JL: No. I did not.

SS: So, that never came to be. Okay – so let's go back to Action Tours – so how did you get started and who was in it?

JL: Action Tours was a floating group of people, and a lot of people did things. We had many, many actions – from draping City Hall with a giant banner that said, “Hall of Shame” – going back to your question – but the point is, I don't want to ignore people that did things, just because I don't happen to remember.

SS: That's fine, because you're not the only source.

JL: Of course, I understand that. The core of us included James Wagner, and James was sort our Gertrude Stein, because James had this lovely salon that he would set up for us every Sunday night, and we met almost without fail for several years – every Sunday night. That was just part of our lives. And the Church Ladies for Choice and the –

SS: They were part of –

JL: Steve Quester – they emerged from the Tourists, they were part of the Tourists for a long time – and they'll tell you the details. And I did a bit of work with Church Ladies, myself, and they were wonderful. Sasha, of course – Elizabeth Meixel – Elizabeth was glorious and imaginative and a bottomless well of energy. And Johnny

Winkelman, like myself, was a visual artist. And so Johnny did a lot of remarkable visuals for the Tourists. And David Buckingham, who was doing some video production at the time – David was very active. And Dale Peck, David Zinn, Misha Tepper and Cole, and Coe. One of the great things about ACT UP was that there were men and women working together, and Action Tours had a breakdown of men and women – depending on the action – but were quite happy working with each other and bouncing ideas off each other. But we had – Bob Rafsky helped us on a couple of things, David Feinberg joined us in a bunch of them, Johnny Weir ended up our poster boy for the CBS News event – and John worked hard on that event, as well. And we had lots of other people help us. Ann Northrop helped us on several of our actions, but that’s one of the things about ACT UP, in general, is that if you had an action, you were in this huge network, so you would just plug in as was appropriate to try to realize the actions effectively as possible.

SS: So can you take us from the top, through some of Action Tours’ actions?

01:00:00 JL: Yes, I can. I just gathered everything to bring it to the camera. Be right back.

JW: I think it was Dolly Meieran with the camera.

This is just one of our rosters of early events. Over the course of our thing, we sort of tallied it up to almost 200 actions. We did many, many, many actions. So here’s a few of them. We invaded the offices of Kelly, Drye & Warren. They were counsel to John O’Connor, at the time. And we distributed memorandums from ACT UP and WHAM, and it was about the firm’s role in participatory legal activism for homophobia,

spreading AIDS and for women's deaths and a variety of health concerns. We took over the State House, and had a blood-in.

SS: How did you take over the State House?

JL: We went inside the Senate, as I recall. We were in the peanut gallery, but there were enough of us scattered about. We were all very theatrical about how – I mean, you'll hear this from a lot of the affinity groups, but we would dress for the roles, and we'd go either as tourists, or in the case of Action Tours, we would have our little Action Tours stickers. We would look the type. We would wear American Flag t-shirts, if we needed to. We had a blood-in in the White House, that several of the Ploughshares people helped coach us on. The Berrigans helped us with that by telling us about the huge underground network that if you get arrested in the White House, you get taken right into the vault and you don't see daylight again.

SS: Did you meet with the Berrigans beforehand?

JL: Over the phone, several times.

SS: That's interesting – how did you get hooked up with them?

JL: Wagner had a connection, and I had a connection to some of the Ploughshares folks and James I think had done some anti-nuke stuff, as well. They were wonderful. They were very enthusiastic about what we were doing and talked to us because they were Jesuits – whatever, they spoke to us about consequence. One has to assess the consequence of your action, so go as far as you need to go. ACT UP was so involved in that as well, that we were always getting counseled about consequences. Here's the kind of legal support we'll have. One of the remarkable things at ACT UP was the series of lawyers that were always there, always adding. So, if somebody would

have a suggestion, they would immediately Robert's Rules of Order themselves into an observation about, "Here's the limits with this action. Here's what I perceive as risk here." So, we were all training each other to be better activists. It was an astounding part of it.

SS: How do you assess the consequences of something like a blood-in at the White House?

JL: Well, what the level of arrest is. At what point do you violate property –

SS: I see –

JL: At what point – have you brought something in that could be perceived, in any way, as a weapon?

SS: What's a blood-in, by the way?

JL: A blood-in was where we would get stage blood make-up and then have bloody numbers – usually numbers – statistics of either people living with AIDS, people dying of AIDS, whatever the numbers were. But they would always generally be numbers that we would hold, and/or slogans.

SS: I don't get the scenario. So, you would walk into the White House in your tourist outfits.

JL: We were in line for hours to get inside the White House.

SS: How many of you, would you say?

JL: I guess there were about 12 of us, at that time. We took a tour of the White House, and then we had a blood-in. This was all sort of photo-op-ish, and what we did then was that we would always have the press in place, so that we would then leave

the White House, have the photography all ready to go. So that as we were leaving the White House, covered in blood, there's the photo. So it was staged –

SS: Okay, but I still don't get what you did. So, you had a tour of the White House –

JL: And then on our way out of the White House, as we were leaving the White House, we had the choice of causing a ruckus and getting arrested and taken down the chute, which is what we were thinking to do originally. But we decided we wouldn't go that route, and what we would do is let the news story be that AIDS activists emerge from the White House bloodied.

01:05:00

SS: At what point did you stop looking like regular tourists?

JL: Near the end of the tour. As this poor, sweet D.C. guide is thanking us for being such a good tour –

SS: What did you do?

JL: We get out our little vials of blood, and our folded up flyers that we always had. This was one of the biggest tools.

SS: Let's see it.

JL: It was Xerox's – then a new large format, where you could go and simply get anything enlarged to a pretty camera-ready size. This and pamphlets were the two tools – and big banners – were the tools that the Tourists used a lot.

SS: So you would stand still, open up your signs, put blood on you, and what would you say?

JL: All pandemonium would break loose, and as they're starting to haul us out of the White House, we're getting dragged away from the White House, covered with

blood for the photographers. That was a media-specific event we staged. In the case of CBS Evening News, there was a specific message. It was the night that Daddy Bush was beginning that phase of bombing Iraqi people and so we went and we had made some identification and we found our way inside CBS News.

SS: How did you get into CBS News?

JL: Statute of limitations are up?

SS: Yeah, I think so.

JL: Because we were all part of the “homosexual media mafia,” we were able to find friends to get us prototypes. And by the way, this was pre-PhotoShop, so when I was laying out all these things to make it look like a CBS official card, it took effort then. It wasn’t just a quick scan and a PhotoShop touch up. So, we would do a case scenario of what was implied there. A classic example of one detail overlooked was – one of our Tourists – the same night we were trying to get in, the Marys were taking over ABC News that night. One of our other Tourists was in NBC, and the only thing – we knew NBC Studios in and out. We knew it – a bunch of us had worked in the building on shoots and stuff. And so, we knew it. What we didn’t know is that fairly recently, GE – that great welfare mother – I don’t mean to put welfare mothers down, but you know what I mean. And so, they had just installed stairwell cameras. So people went between floors, and they were caught going between floors. Otherwise, it would have been all three major networks and PBS.

SS: So NBC was ahead of the game, in terms of surveillance.

JL: GE’s building was, definitely. So, then we staged many, many different events, including the Faceless Bureaucrats, and I think James Wagner gets credit for the

Bureaucrats, but the Bureaucrats were a wonderful thing. We made these faces that were just zombie-eyed faces, and we just kept printing them out. So for the event, we would have these different slogans with these blank faces, and would be the Faceless Bureaucrats. And that got a lot of press, and indeed there were several journalists who would just refer to – the Faceless Bureaucrats are back, in their coverage. But, one of the things that we always did is, we would always follow up whatever we did with very careful attention to the press. I suspect it was because for me, it was theater background. You knew, if you were going to get a critic to see one of your shows, you would call them before. It's just standard procedure – to try and just be thorough and to be accessible to the press. And we were always pretty respectful to the press, for the most part – just like saying, “Here's what we did.”

SS: Would you actually call them personally?

JL: We all did, yeah.

SS: So what would you do, take us through it.

JL: We would discuss what our points were – what it was we wanted to say.

We would always rehearse, as many ACT UPpers did, and as many affinity groups – we would rehearse our sound bytes, because we knew that one of the things we did not want to have happen was to be on camera going, “Um, well ...” You know, “That was the activist, now back to the weather!” We wanted to make sure we were concise and on message, at every juncture. And so, several of us would stay up ridiculously late and draft our press release before an event. And then, we would also have run them around the event. At CBS News, for example – we had people right outside to report the details of it. That was most dramatic to us the night we took over *Saturday Night Live*.

SS: Tell us, how did you do that?

JL: We went inside *Saturday Night Live* because it was at the peak of a curve of what a number of us – and a lot of the gay community – perceived as an unreasonable level of negative homosexual presentations in movies – *Paris Is Burning* and *Basic Instinct* being two that we were very focused on – and the idea of the Psycho Drag Murderer. Or the Evil Knife-Wielding Lesbian. There was a little bit too much of that going on in the popular media, and certainly, those two struck us with a lot of anger. And so, I believe that the Pegasus Room came first. Sharon Stone was supposed to be on *Saturday Night Live*. She had just made a lot of sound bytes about the *Basic Instinct* character. And despite everyone's best efforts to get her to say something positive, no one from – I don't remember who released it now, Paramount? But we contacted them and said, "Can't you please make a statement that says something, that doesn't" – and nothing, nothing, nothing. So finally, we decided to go on. And, one of the Tourists had come up with the idea of marine whistles and there's this high shrill. And we figured we all knew that there were radio mics being used. And so we knew that if whatever we did was just out of acoustical range, too bad, we're not going to be heard. It will be a moment of the person on the stage looking bewildered and then, that's that.

And we got backstage through a friend of a friend who got us passes. And then we were backstage, hanging out with Mike Myers – at the big commissary, snacking away and just acting like we were belonging there, because several of us were in shoots all the time, we basically knew what that entailed, behaviorally. How to play the part of – we are just part of the people backstage so don't pay us no mind. And so then we burst through the doors on cue, as she began her monologue, and we got in and we started

shouting, I believe, “Fight AIDS, Not Gays!”— I think is what we were saying. And at that moment – I think it was Brian Griffiths – someone’s marine whistle went off. Right after we shouted it a couple of times and they started tackling us, the marine whistle went off and it misfired made this bad sound, and kind of spritzed over the audience. The next thing we knew, we were all being tackled. And, the NBC guys – those guys were scary. They were really manhandling us. And we’re like okay – we’re peaceful. Well, we were in an office, sitting on the floor and we’re under desks because there aren’t enough chairs. And they come in and somebody tells us, “You people have really miscalculated this time, because Lorne is throwing the book at you people, and you people are in bad shape!”

Well what happened is that Lorne Michaels released something saying that he was going to press charges, and sent out – can somebody help me with this? I was going to look this up and didn’t get to it. It’s the earliest e-mail that a couple of major agencies owned, like a network of advertisers and people had this early form of e-mail. It was called ECP or something. Jim Fouratt had it, because we used it all the time. The point is you could hit go, and 80 top media people had the information. Jay Blotcher was doing media that night. So, Steve Melvin – who I didn’t mention, Steve was a very important Tourist and Brian Griffiths and I. And we’re in a couple of rooms together – and Tom Ledke. Tom and I did the *Queer Stories for Boys* for a long time at the Center.

01:15:00

We were on the floor of this office, and meanwhile Lorne Michaels was sending out this big press release that these AIDS activists had tried to attack the audience with mace. I don’t remember when we first heard this. We may not have even heard this until we got out later. But it was Palm Sunday weekend, and, needless to say, that was the one thing

that we didn't calculate, because that meant that we all went to the Tombs for a long weekend, and it was not fun. It was really Amnesty International quality raw sewage and roaches. And we were in the Tombs, but they put us in the private suites – that were these horrible little rooms, so we weren't in the big room where there's more of a sense of danger or whatever – more reported violence. And so what happened is that Blotcher – forgive me, if I'm forgetting somebody else – quickly was able to send out a response saying, "Lorne Michaels is lying. These were peaceful activists, and they were carrying marine whistles." And so, that was pretty amazing. The press was ready to run with that story, and by Monday the whole thing had spun itself into Lorne Michaels was not telling the truth. So an unexpected value came out of the action. But I'll never forget when this great gal. She was this great, tough policeperson.

SS: What did Sharon Stone say? Because she went on to become this big AIDS spokesperson.

JL: Oh, exactly. It's one of those things – I have another story to tell you – you always wonder if you actually made a tiny impact. But no, she did not make a statement. That's what we were told by the *Daily News* and *Newsday*. In fact, because we spun it, because we had people ready, most of the quotes in most of the articles are our quotes, which to me was a wonderful way to own a political action. So at any rate, there's a human story about being in the Tombs. We went to the Tombs and it was awful. And we all got out, and again, we all got out at four in the morning, with two dozen people there for us.

SS: Did you have a trial?

JL: No, charges were dropped because it was evidence that we were not doing anything aggressive, and because you had all those great legal people. Matt Foreman represented us. Matt was there for us, and really there for us in supporting every bit of the action. So, that was an amazingly odd action for me. But the biggest actions for me were when we did the big drapings. We draped City Hall with a giant banner that read, “Hall of Shame.” And it was up for a good 10 minutes. But that’s the reality of activism – it’s like Greenpeace activism. All it needs to do is be there for 10 minutes, for you to get your photos of it and start to disseminate that image. And working with WHAM doing the Statue of Liberty. That was a big banner where a lot of Tourists worked with WHAM. And we did support. We also did a lot of support with a lot of clinics, where we would go to the morning clinics. The Church Ladies sort of emerged – I’ll let them speak for themselves – out of that – gay men going to help the WHAM actions became an important component. And then, there was the Church. If I can go on to this.

SS: Before we get to Stop the Church, can you just explain what the Statue of Liberty action was?

JL: I wasn’t there.

SS: Okay, forget that.

JL: We made banners. I worked on the banner and it was a women’s health action and it was focused on abortion. But, there are people who should speak about that with great articulation.

SS: Okay so go ahead, Stop the Church.

JL: Well, the Stop the Church action, in particular, was one of many actions.

01:20:00 And I wonder, in these strategic choices that we make as any political organization – I

wonder, in retrospect – I don't think we could have held our ground. But, there was a debate that Tom [Keane] – who was the person who broke the wafer – came from a Catholic family and Catholic background. And there was some debate, right afterwards, as the Gay and Lesbian Center was getting bomb threats and everything – all hell was breaking loose because of the action. I often wonder if we had at that point said – if we had taken a slightly higher line with it and said, no goddamn it, there were Catholics involved in this, because within the Catholic Church, there's always been the argument that change does come within. And so the Carmelite nuns are within the organization. I don't know that we couldn't have owned that a little bit more at the time. But, I don't know if that matters now. But I do know that hell hath no fury as a Catholic in recovery. I was doing interstitial for a corporate commercial at the time, and I think I'd had a black shirt on for some particular reason. And I was leaving to go to an event, and I just thought to myself, I've got to do something, and I always carried my jumbo marker. That was one thing many Tourists never left home without – their jumbo magic markers – always, because that way you could correct ads as needed, on bus signs and stuff, when you saw something especially heinous. Or if you saw something on the subway. You'd see occasionally a really sweet GMHC ad up there and someone would write, "Death to Homos" on it. And then you could help your community by correcting that sort of message. And so, I grabbed a piece of white gaffer's tape, and I put a piece of white gaffer's tape on my collar. And before I got to the action, I'd realized that I had stumbled upon something that was very powerful, because the subway man waved me through and people on the subway were saying, "Oh, excuse me, father." And of course, I just had a mousey enough look or whatever that – man, it worked. And so it wasn't long after – and

of course, because we also had Elizabeth in her unbelievable Mother Superior outfit – so, you put a couple of us together in our Catholic clergy garb, and it was fairly effective, I have to say.

I'm going to preface this – I've thought a lot about this – talking to you – but I'm going to just put this at the top of the story, because you can't help it, we're creatures of our culture, and so we want ourselves to look good and we want to look like we're in the right and all those things. But I just want to say that I am haunted by the idea that the accomplishments that ACT UP made in making queer more visible, in making treatment more available, were remarkable, were unparalleled, were a piece of human history that hopefully, generations from now – if indeed there are generations from now, at the rate we're going – will look back and know this was something of importance to humanity. But, I also feel – especially at those early years – here, at the center of the epidemic, we had our fingers in the dam. We were doing everything we could to shout and scream and plead and trick and do everything we could to keep this epidemic from becoming the worst crisis in human history, as it has become. And so, I want to say that, as part of this. That to me, that's very important – the struggle for decency, and the struggle for – in this case – people to have done a simple act of right for Ronald Reagan and all those people that could have done something, to have saved the suffering of untold hundreds of millions of people's lives. We were right fucking at that point. We were the Manhattan Project. And, I have restless nights over that. And at the same time, the experience of ACT UP was empowering in such simple and wonderful and amazing ways that the community – I am so grateful to have lived through that and to have done things like the story I'm about to tell you – but, it was because of the incredible circus of – we were all,

01:25:00 or many of us – I was every day racing from losing two of my best friends. And so I would be at the hospital, with the bloody diarrhea, seeing Vietnam-soldier-quality horrors. I mean, the kind of horrors that you can't put on film, because they're just too horrible – that no one should ever witness. And we were seeing them, regularly. And then we would run to our jobs, and then we would run to ACT UP. At least, that was a constant for many years of my life. And so, ACT UP was very clear for me.

One of my dear friends who died, Ken Ketwig, was never involved in ACT UP, but he'd always been very, very open, very out, gay – a wonderful writer. He had studied with Marguerite Young at the New School. And, Kenny was always frustrated because the 2,000-page novel that he wrote about his relationship to his mother and his writing teacher never got published. But for a living, Kenny wrote grants for the Audubon Society – for Wetlands. I don't know – to me that's right, to be able to make that happen, make that real. So Kenny taught me something, because his brother had been a Vietnam vet, who had been involved in one of the real, sickening horror shows of killing a village of people – unarmed people. And Kenny's brother had published something – that's another story. But, his brother had told me at a Christmas party that once he was in action, after the horror of what had happened to him – from that point on – he took a piece of scotch tape, and he taped the photos of his two kids, and he taped it on both sides and made a kind of permanent dog-tag bracelet of this. So it was humidity proof, so that whenever he raised his rifle to shoot at someone, he had to look at the faces of the people he most loved. So, I did that. I made one for myself – I never went to an ACT UP rally without carrying Michael and David and Kenny – and then, of course, as it happened

more and more photos. But, the couple of people – without being too dramatic – the irreplaceable losses of my life, from that part of the epidemic.

Columbia University had just come forward with the numbers – that there were 12,000 homeless people with AIDS in the city. And so, you can imagine our response, when we all learned that the Cardinal Cooke Center – the former Flower Hospital on Fifth Avenue – was opening a room with seven new AIDS beds. And it was going to be a high profile event. They were going to start with a service and open up the auditorium, and the Mayor was going to be there, and Cardinal O'Connor was going to be there – just the whole circus was there. So, Ira Manhoff – Ira did a lot of work with the Tourists, as well, and was a powerful, furious, brilliant activist – and still is. And forgive me, if I get his name wrong – Charlie Conigliaro? [Franchino] He was a chiropractor. But Charlie came from a very well-mannered – he did a lot of work with Treatment and Data.

Anyway, so we all debated what we were going to do, and we were going to interrupt this event at several times. But Ira and I were going to go three hours early, and I was going to go as the character name – you've heard this from other ACT UPpers too – but my pen name was Father Achtung Torres. So, Torres was going to go, and we were going to be there for the opening of the chapel. So we got there to the opening of the chapel. And because we were in the right outfit, we were just escorted in and seated. And I saw one of the most horrible things in my life there. It was the charade of politics – a political figure. But what happened is, they brought in a bunch of wheelchairs, as is common in Catholic events. Catholic TV was there. And, they brought in the wheelchairs, and people who had various profound disabilities in the front row, closest to the camera. Then, in a grand flurry, the camera lights came on and the Cardinal entered. And the

01:30:00

Cardinal went up – and, by the way it’s important to note – there’s a bunch of witnesses to this story, because it’s an audacious story. So it’s worth the fact that there’s plenty of witnesses. The Cardinal came up, and he greeted these people. And one of the guys had a Yankees cap. Cardinal O’Connor had the kind of voice that would just naturally – a tone of fake sentiment. It makes Garrison Keillor sound like Bukowski. It was just the darkest thing imaginable to listen to this man talk. He was all, “How nice to see you, it’s so wonderful.” And then, he moves on to the second person who’s sort of pulsing in their chair with some muscular problem. And he goes, “Oh, nice to see you. Oh, a Yankees fan – well, nice to see you.” And then he got to the fourth person, and the lights went off and he just goes, “Whoops, sorry!” And I thought okay, cool. They proceed to whisper in his ear. He proceeds to fucking leave. They turn the lights back on again and he enters and does take two! “Oh, nice to see you.” It was like a rehearsal. “Oh, Yankees fan?” And then he got up – the light went off, and he goes, “Boy, it’s just not your lucky day!” to the last person sitting there. Now, needless to say, Ira was almost like a screaming banshee at that point, because what we’d seen was just too ugly. It was so grotesque.

Then, we were all – because we were with the religious corps – we were ushered in the front three rows of this big auditorium to sit with all the priests and nuns. Charlie went first, and he went during the President of the New York Medical Association, I think – or leading medical official, who said, “We are so proud today. We are proud to be here.” And Charlie just said, “The homeless situation” – it was a sound byte about the homeless situation – “how can we possibly be here, when the crisis is so much worse?” Then Ed Koch comes up on stage. Ed Koch starts his routine and Ira is ready to stand up

and Ira immediately goes, “It’s a campaign ploy. You’re a fraud. You’re just here to campaign, this is a joke!” And of course, Ira was dragged away. So now I had the misfortune of being number three. And by the way, while they were dragging Ira away, everyone’s going, okay – these are medical professionals, to a large degree – and they’re like, “Okay ACT UP, we got it. Thank you.” So now in my priest garb, I’m supposed to go next. From my own fears of getting it wrong, I was just scribing and scribing and scribing. I just kept writing and writing and writing what I was going to say. My sound byte was going to be the number of beds. That’s what I was going to do – get the number of beds. Remember Fellini’s *Roma* when the cameras come on the Vatican show at the end, and all the camera lights are on so bright that the papal fashions just blur to a bright blossomed white? It was like that. And I remember rising and standing and as I stood, I remember just seeing this wall of white lights, as all these fucking cameras turn to me, and all I could see was that face of Cardinal O’Connor glaring at me. And you know, Catholic in recovery – I started with a prayer. And I said, “Heavenly father, let us pray that we will use love and not cruelty to guide us here today, and that we will be true to family values and may we please find in our hearts to exclude, not include” – well, what happened is silence came over the room, because you don’t interrupt a prayer in a Catholic get-together. And I said something about, “and may people who would take advantage of this epidemic for their own benefit – may they find compassion, and may they please – and, in a city of 12,000 homeless people, may the people that open a hospital with 10 beds realize that they are not doing something great to help people,” or something to that effect.

01:35:00 Well, needless to say, it was the lead news story that night – that sound bite got it, it nailed it. But at that moment, I felt the arm. I couldn't believe how long I went on. It went on too long. And, no one's hissing. And I'm like, oh my God, I'm going to get beaten to a pulp! And this great big cop grabs me and I come away, and I realize that how he's holding me is not like the NBC guys. He's holding me and escorting me. The minute he gets me out – and I am wimping, I'm shaking like a leaf – and the second I get out, this cop says, "Oh Father, now we've got to sit you down and calm you down." And I was like, what? "No, no, Father please, let me get you a glass of water, but we can't let you go back in there." It was like this sweet Irish policeman. I didn't know what to do. I was like, "I have my ID right here." He said, "I'm not arresting you, you spoke your piece." So he sits me down, and then he walks over and brings me a glass of water and goes, "Oh you know Father, you think those two up on the stage – you think they know what's going on this city? They don't know what's going on. They've never seen a hospital ward." Whatever – the only weird part of the story was when the poor sweet man took me to the front door in the hospital and opened the door, and 500 activists started cheering. That's a story of many. But it was an amazing experience to have lived. And to have seen that that number then got play, and then was quoted for some time, made us all feel that we had, that little tiny moment had been of some value.

And then, the other great one for me was our great action with the New York Film Board. The New York Film Board was an amazing event for us, and a bunch of people can talk about it. It was in some ways an unfocused event, politically, and one of the things that we always did as ACT UP and as Action Tours was try to make sure that our

message was very clear. But from a gay perspective, I was really furious about *Paris Is Burning*, because Venus was sick –

SS: Venus Xtravaganza?

JL: Yes, the young drag queen that ended up dying, and Jennie Livingston was certainly working the media to tell the story of it, and her incredibly gifted cameraman, Paul [Gibson] – I’m forgetting his last name – these were good people that had worked on this film. So, to see Hollywood doing its *Silence of the Lambs* to tell the story of a drag queen was to a lot of us, just insidious.

SS: Can you be really clear, and tell me what your critique is of *Paris Is Burning*, so that we can understand that?

JL: Yes, the critique that a lot of us had and I had, about *Paris Is Burning* is that it was endemic of a long time Hollywood tradition of gay invisibility except in the role of a villain – that the occasional *Tea and Sympathy* came through the history of American film, but the usual gay figure in the film was a demented character. And so, we were seeing a fresh crop of these coming along. The argument in *Silence of the Lambs*, of course is that Jonathan Demme said, “I had never imagined this would be perceived as a gay character.” And to all of us, that was big news. And our action got him to come forward with that, and he made a number of press statements saying, “I don’t want to do that with my films. I don’t want to hurt people with that kind of a stereotype.” And of course, his next film was *Philadelphia*. We’ve always wondered in the backs of our minds – but what happened at the event was a marvel to me. I thought it was a wonderful event and the Tourists all had different responses.

SS: What was Jennie Livingston’s response to your critique?

JL: At a couple of social events that I saw folks around that film – they were very happy. Because what we did was we made a flyer that said the myth and the reality. And it was a nicely laid out flyer that looked like a little program.

SS: What was the myth and the reality?

JL: It had statistics for the numbers of transgendered people that get beaten nationally. Someone used some national statistics about violence against trans-gendered people as a central focus.

SS: Let's slow down, because I'm totally unclear. You had problems with *Paris Is Burning*?

JL: No.

SS: Okay, that's what I'm not understanding.

JL: No – that *Paris Is Burning* was telling, I personally thought, a very beautiful story of the complexities of several communities that are filmed.

SS: So you were contrasting *Paris Is Burning* with *Silence of the Lambs*?

JL: Bingo. Sorry to be unclear.

SS: Okay.

01:40:00

JL: So we staged an event for the New York Film Board, where we made a flyer that said, “Here’s the reality, here’s Hollywood’s messages about gays and lesbians and trans-gendered people. And, here’s some real” – and using *Paris Is Burning* as an example of what filmmakers can do to tell an honest story about communities of people. Clear? So we met at the ice rink, and we all came to Jamie’s house to borrow some drag outfits, because I had some really nice sequined dresses that I made over the years. And so the women that were with us wore my drag outfits, because they were really nice

eveningwear. And then we all put on our tuxes and we all got dressed up and we all went, and we ordered drinks – I don't remember what it was called at the time – in the little place by the ice skating rink that's down below, and we knew where we were going. And even if there's cameras on us – the NBC thing – I don't think it happened yet, so we didn't know if there were cameras or not – but we knew we were going to take the elevators to the Pegasus Room, where this New York Film Board event was. It was an all celebrity dinner. We were all dressed up. We got our cocktails and got on the elevator like lost paparazzi, lost celebrities, or people in the industry, and so we got off the elevator and sort of indignantly said, "Where are we supposed to go?" And they very politely helped us get to the room. And so we got inside the room, and we all had packed our brochures with us and so, we very graciously just went table to table to table, saying thank you – please and thank you – handing these all out to everybody, as though they were programs to the event. And, we gave them to the entire room. And at the time that we were getting ready to leave, somebody came up and said, "Who are you? Are you with the organization?" And we said, "No, we're AIDS activists." And they all sort of freaked out. And we sat our drinks down. We got in the elevator – they kind of paraded us out of the room, but all very discretely. And we got down, put our drinks back and left. Well, the press fallout was remarkable and it was because we immediately had the press going on about what the text of the flyers that were given to everybody. And so we had a number of celebrities including Jonathan Demme make some statements in the press. Let me just read you one.

"Jonathan Demme who, after all, had had a large hand in creating the Buffalo Bill character" – the psychopath in his film – "that was being protested as a callous caricature,

came up with this introspective response to the invasion of the dinner by the tuxedoed pamphleteers. ‘I thought that was exceptionally gracefully achieved. The information contained in this leaflet is horrifying. The human animal is a vicious beast sometimes. We never saw the Buffalo Bill character as being gay, just someone who wants to change himself. That’s why he dresses up. It all makes me realize the absence of gay characters in American films’”

SS: So what did you feel when you saw *Philadelphia*?

JL: Well, I saw *Philadelphia* after Larry [Kramer] and other people had made some very angry statements about it. So, coming from the Midwest, I wanted to separate myself from it, because I knew that the Film Forum wasn’t its audience. This film was made with big stars with a reasonably big budget. And so I saw it in Mall of America. I made a point of seeing it on a Saturday afternoon at the Mall of America in Minneapolis. And, I saw an audience full of Midwesterners completely devastated by it.

SS: And what was devastating them?

JL: They were devastated. They were sobbing all the way through the last half hour. And I thought to myself, this film isn’t for me, but if this film is humanizing people to the point where they’re feeling and expressing, then this is not a thing of something I want to scorn. Even if it’s not, creatively –

SS: Tell me, really specifically, what was the information that they were getting from it?

JL: I can’t project that.

SS: What were they crying about?

JL: A humanism about people struggling with this epidemic is what I saw occur to that audience, and gay characters that were presented in a way where they were the identifiable characters to the audience. They were the protagonists of the story. And there's not a lot of that out there.

SS: Would you say that – because a lot of your work has been about representation – would you say that seeing a gay character, no matter what the specificity of the representation, has a positive consequence?

JL: No – *Silence of the Lambs*, certainly not –

SS: If they're presented in a "positive" light, even if it's not realistic?

01:45:00 JL: I can't answer that, generally. The larger answer to that question is to me that there is in the arts, the idea of is your art for a mass audience or is your art for other artists? Or, where in the spectrum does that art exist? And so, we in this room really may delight at a great gay villain. Would I be happy if one of the Hollywood factories made a great gay villain? Probably not. But do I want a homogenized, kiss-free, sex-free gay character to be the only gay character? Of course not. I hate that. But in the case of this, I also think that Jonathan Demme is a filmmaker of some integrity. I thought that his work previously – that there was an artist working in a giant business, who was interested in doing work that was as good as he could make it. It didn't feel – if there were things there that we might have done differently, creatively, I don't think that they were a conscious choice to make a slur.

SS: Okay. So, I have some general questions that I want to ask you that are sort of like thematic questions, and not about specific actions. Abortion – you've mentioned doing a lot of stuff with WHAM, and Stop the Church was a joint action

– abortion seems to be, really, the only non-AIDS, non-gay issue that ACT UP got behind. Can you explain how that happened?

JL: Wow, great question. I'll just tell my story. As Maxine Wolfe and so many other people came forward, I as a white, middle-class male – I was sickened to my heart to learn the history of western medicine ignored women. I didn't know that, I wasn't taught that. I hadn't read it. I'd been to Mary Daly lectures years before, but I had never heard that said, or come upon it in alternate literature. So to hear that the whole deep well of treatment ignored women was, to me – I was flabbergasted, astounded. So to me, that made such a clear link to the fact that there was no AIDS research that was going to address women's needs. And then the perfect comfortable fit of, but the one medical thing that men are determining for women – and so to me, I felt and I still feel that men have got to be present in discussions about a woman's right to choose. It sounds like a pat answer, but –

SS: Was there any tension inside ACT UP, about ACT UP getting behind issues that were not AIDS related?

JL: Sure, of course.

SS: Can you remember any specific kind of conversation?

JL: Sure, getting involved with Hollywood stuff – because there were people who didn't like that. We tried to do issues about nutrition. For myself as a vegetarian, at least an armchair vegetarian, the idea that as I said to you earlier, when we were talking about the sexually transmitted diseases – that I was very concerned that there's a whole nutritional discussion. We were all talking about all the pills we take to survive the epidemic, but I personally felt that it was almost impossible to get into a discussion about

– there were alternative treatments, but alternative nutrition – it was very hard. There was just no interest in that discussion, and I felt it was important, but there was no room for it.

SS: Wasn't the split partially about the question of being AIDS-focused versus having a general left agenda?

JL: Yes. I also think that there was a dynamic that occurred about just the general cycle of how street activism throughout history – be it the Blue Blouses in Russia, street activity, street theatrical involvements have a certain life span. There's a certain curve. So towards the end of huge rallies – as I saw at ACT UP – it was harder and harder and harder to make our message stick, to make our message clear, to get folks – It's the problem with liberalism – it's that liberalism considers things. And so, if you're consider things, that consideration is going to mean that you've got eight candidates on the democratic platform – many of them saying really interesting, valuable things, but it's not like one big Republican wall of ignorance.

01:50:00

SS: Do you think that there's a relationship between the fact that you don't have AIDS and that you were willing to embrace a broader political agenda?

JL: Probably.

SS: Was that ever discussed overtly, when you were in ACT UP?

JL: Sure. I know a lot of us, as Tourists, talked a lot about it. I will say though that I had a very big AIDS scare. I was misdiagnosed at one point – through a double blot test. I had a bad pneumonia and the test came back that I was positive. So, I had a week of being – the only reason that this may matter at all is that I experienced, in

that tiny minute of that week, of the full wake of the complexities and terror. But that's not the same as being sick.

SS: What was the dynamic inside Action Tours between people who were positive and people who were negative?

JL: I felt it was very good. I think people who were in varying levels of disease or illness – we would bounce against them, “Does this make sense to you? Does this feel like an effective thing to do?” Also, the limits of safety for people getting thrown in jail in a small action is not the same as a giant action, where there's all kinds of support. So, somebody that needed to get their medicines was at risk.

SS: Did you ever have tactical disagreements along those lines?

JL: You mean about how broad to open the aperture?

SS: Between positives and negatives. There's that famous speech by David Feinberg, “You can't wear a red ribbon if you're dead. You can't march in St. Patrick's Day, if you're dead.” Did you ever have those kinds of discussions inside ACT UP?

JL: Sure, David was with us a lot of the Action Tours stuff.

SS: Can you think of anything specific?

JL: I don't think that we had conflicts. I think if the conflicts came up, they were about us discussing – if somebody disagreed it was about, well here's why I think it's worth including this. Or, then okay, we'll do this part of the action, and we won't expect you to be part of the action. If you don't want to go to the abortion clinic, no one's going to make you, and the Tourists aren't going to expect you to do that. I was a little uncomfortable – talk about my sequined gowns – but I was in theater and young in

theater, when I had sequined gowns. I did Church Ladies a couple of times, and I felt some discomfort in it. I felt some misogyny. I don't think what Brian and Steve were doing – it was hardly misogynous, but there was something about the role playing that I was uncomfortable with. So, I did Father Achtung Torres a couple of times, because Elizabeth would go as well, in costume. So we would be clergy there. That was a supportive role.

SS: I have two more questions, and then we're done. You've talked a lot about the laissez-faire attitude inside ACT UP – that whoever wanted to do something would just do it. Can you explain how that became acceptable to everybody?

JL: It didn't. People got very angry. On the floor of ACT UP, it was not at all uncommon for a particular action to be – to have someone really go at it, if they felt that it was way off focus or too self-serving.

SS: Can you give a specific example?

JL: I knew you'd ask, that's only fair. I guess I pick on some of the folks who got very involved in some of the marijuana issues where it became – I will say, I felt a very strategically sloppy application of some of the things I understood about NORML [National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws] in particular, because I had been on the West Coast a couple of times where there were NORML conferences. I wasn't attending those conferences because I was working on other projects, but I saw and read enough about the NORML projects that I saw people thinking very carefully and strategically about, how does this particular lobby – marijuana for medical uses – make itself look like a serious, valuable thing to society? And then I saw the party marijuana

01:55:00 presentation. And so I saw people in ACT UP get scorned because they were frivolous – or, what I would perceive and what others perceived as frivolous, in their presentation of something that – our friend’s mother who needs marijuana right now, because of the terrible effects of chemo. This is a reality, that we still have this 1950s drug comedy about. And so it needs to be seriously, strategically thought out. And sometimes – and certainly, in that part of the left crowd of ACT UP – those things were, I thought personally, thought about rather recklessly. That kind of avoided your question.

SS: That’s OK. You gave a lot of examples when you talked about your actions about interruption – that you were a person who would stand up in a room of people who had a particular goal, and try to stop them from completing their goal – that you were willing to stand up alone and disrupt. Now that you’re not in the ACT UP context, is that something that you’re still willing to do?

JL: Yeah. The other night, a schizophrenic man put his hand on a young woman on the subway train, and everyone was sitting there scared out of their wits and quiet, and I was the one that said, “Get your hands off her.” And, I said it gently. And of course, then the man went ballistic against me because of it.

SS: So, what kind of person are you? What is it about you that brought you to that choice, to that role?

JL: You know, this is an old argument that any activist thinks about – the tiny line between the right and the left – that tiny line between people that tell people what they can and can’t do, and those of us that holler against the herd, as it were. So you just try to use good judgment, and you try to think of what will be – I did a lot of volunteering against the war before it happened. And here again, I think this comes from my theater

background – that when you finish a production, you need to have a sunset meeting. You need to have a post-mortem that says what worked, what failed, how do we build on this? Probably who I'm always going to be is do that.

The peace rallies were big – a lot of internet, we used e-mail to get people there, to get people out. And because I'm in that sector, work-wise, I used the tools that I had available to me to help with websites. But, that's not standing up in a room – that's more making more of somebody in their late 40s, who's working inside the tools as they understand them. So I suppose both is what matters – if the person is willing to take a particular risk, then do so, as you can.

SS: Okay, thank you Jamie.