

# **A C T U P** **ORAL HISTORY** **P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Andrew Vélez**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Interview of Andrew Vélez

February 26, 2004

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

ANDREW VÉLEZ: Hi, I'm Andrew Vélez, and I will be 65 in just slightly less than two weeks, and we are in my apartment in the West Village, in Manhattan.

**SS: Today's date?**

AV: Today is February 25<sup>th</sup>. 25<sup>th</sup>? 26<sup>th</sup> – it's my age – 2004.

**SS: Okay Andy, so nice to be able to have this conversation with you, you have a lot to tell us. Where were you born? Are you a native New Yorker?**

AV: I was born in the Bronx. My dad came from working class people. My dad was native Puerto Rican. My mother was born in Warsaw, she was Jewish. And I was raised both in New York and in Puerto Rico – learned to speak Spanish when I was really young and was bi-lingual and I still am.

**SS: Now, is your mother a war refugee?**

AV: No, my mom was – I'm old enough now so that they were – she came here with her family pre-World War I. And my dad, who died around his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday, was in the occupation of Germany after World War I. He was a teenager then.

**SS: Now, were there a lot of Jewish-Puerto Rican couples in that era?**

AV: There were none. Her parents did not attend her wedding and completely shunned her, until she had my older brother, and then there was some kind of rapprochement. But, it was a big *chanda* that my mother married out of her faith, even though she didn't come from a particularly religious family.

**SS: So, you knew your grandparents?**

AV: No, I didn't. I never had any grandparents. I always felt very deprived

about that. I envied kids, because grandparents gave them money to put into the bank every Friday at school, and things like that. I had no grandparents.

**SS: That was because they were staying away from you?**

AV: No, they were dead – by that time they were all gone. I grew up with very little family life, actually.

**SS: So, were you more in a Puerto Rican community or in a Jewish community – your neighborhood?**

AV: I was more in the nowhere community and always felt very much an outsider, actually. Neither parent was religious, but there was a lot of friction. They were divorced shortly before their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. My father married twice after that. And neither one of them cared very much about their religion, as long as we didn't take the religion of the other. I briefly – because we were solicited by a Presbyterian Church worker – attended Presbyterian Church, in my early teens. Then they started telling us about hell, and I was so busy jerking off all the time and stealing from the donation plate, that I knew that was not the place for me, so I headed right for the theater, and that's where I found my first tribe.

**SS: How did you get into the theater?**

AV: I auditioned for something and got into some off-Broadway play, when I was in my teens.

**SS: Were you still in high school, or did you drop out?**

AV: No, I had skipped two years in school, so I actually got out of high school when I was 16, and could have gotten out when I was 15, and I went to college.

**SS: Which high school did you go to?**

AV: Taft, in the Bronx. And then, I went to City College and dropped out because I desperately wanted to get out of my family home. And, I'm still in my teens and got a job, saved enough money, got myself a studio apartment on Third Avenue and 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, which I thought was just terrific, because it had windows that opened out – which I thought was so European – and proceeded to go on the town, big time, and do all the things that I'd imagined I wanted to do, which were variously satisfying. Eventually, I went back to City College at night, graduated, eventually did a Master's, which was connected to my training. I got into book publishing, which was going to support me. By then, when I was married. But I had actually put myself through college, by being a bookkeeper. I learned how to do that in high school. Then, I eventually got a Master's in Modern Psychoanalysis and got trained as an analyst and was in practice for quite a few years as an analyst, and I also had a substantial career in book publishing.

**SS: My goodness. That's a lot.**

AV: And a family life. I have two sons who are now young adults, and everything was set up so that my private office, my publishing office, home, were all within a close radius. And, in the time that people spend commuting, I was able to either be with the family or seeing patients. It was a very full life.

**SS: What years were you studying psychoanalysis?**

AV: Let's see it started in – my older son was born in 1971, and my then-wife was pregnant with him then, so it was around that time that I began studying at a school here, which is here in the Village, actually.

**SS: What school?**

AV: Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies.

**SS: What is that?**

AV: It's a sort of updated Freudian. And, one of the key people is someone named Dr. Hyman Spotnitz who, in fact, studied with Freud. But, one of the important aspects of it was that people from this training were willing to work with schizophrenics, which many others would not – and considered that schizophrenics needed to be medicated and could not be worked with otherwise.

**SS: Is this like the Frieda Fromm-Reichman thing?**

AV: No, it's a completely new school that began – the first series of lectures were the ones I went to in 1970, I think, that were held then up at the Academy of Science. And, I had always – I had no idea how I was ever going to grow up or support myself. My parents did the best they could, they just couldn't give more than they had, and weren't prepared to do. And they weren't well equipped for certain things, and so, there wasn't too much of a certain kind of guidance that I think is important. And I remember, when I was getting ready to graduate high school, someone said to me, "Well what are you going to do?" Which was my least favorite question, at the time, because I had no idea what I was going to do. And I said, "Well, I'd like to do something connected with books and something connected with psychology." And, lo and behold, I ended up doing both.

**SS: Now, how many years were you in practice?**

AV: About 20.

**SS: Wow. Always through this institute?**

AV: I had my own office and I did see patients at their clinic, too. I actually first began seeing patients – what lead me into getting trained, as a matter of fact – was,

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there was the St. Marks Free Clinic, in the East Village, and that was when Methadone had just come out, and my then-therapist – I was in group therapy – had told me, “You would make a better therapist than I am,” and encouraged me to go into training. So, I heard they needed people, and just out of my experience of having been in therapy – I started in analysis when I was a teenager. My parents didn’t know I was in analysis. I was paying for it myself.

**SS: Where did you go for analysis?**

AV: I had a teacher in college – a wonderful man named John Bauer, and I had a course with him, and in my final paper, I slipped a note in and I said, “I think I need help.” And, I got home that night, and the phone was ringing and it was John. And I was about 17, at the time. He made an appointment with me. I wanted to see him. I was sort of in love with him, I think. And he said he did not see students of his, but he sent me to someone, and I went into analysis with her and stayed with her until I left because I was getting an apartment and I needed the money.

**SS: When did you bring up homosexuality in the context of your analysis?**

AV: Early on, because I was attracted to both men and women, but I became pretty active with men in my teens – somewhere 15, 16 – and that continued pretty consistently until a year or two before I got married. And, although people sometimes shake their heads in disbelief, my now ex-wife and I were together for 14 years, and another five years that it took to get divorced. But, I was monogamous during the marriage. I’m very old-fashioned about certain things. I like to ruin one relationship at a time, and I believe that God has a long white beard. I was the kind of kid who would have questions like, “Well, if your wife dies, or your husband dies, and you get married

again, then what happens in heaven, when they are two of them? What do you do?” This was serious for me. I was really concerned. How do you sort that out? I’m still not sure how you sort that out.

**SS: I just wanted to talk about the gay world that you were in before you got married – the early part.**

AV: Well, I can tell you things that come to mind. The first time an older man, who was in his late 20s, who I had met in a movie house, up in the Bronx – the Loew’s Paradise – took me to the Court Club, on West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, and I was so shocked to see men dancing together. It was just like a little hole-in-the-wall bar, in one of those brownstone buildings that are still there. And I remember his using the term “gay,” which I didn’t like. I just thought it sounded so silly, and I still don’t particularly like it. I don’t dislike it, but I like “queer.” That’s why I advocated for that, when we had Queer Nation. And, the whole language was strange to me, then. And also, everything was so furtive – whether you could look at someone or not look at them. Remember, you could be – that was a time when people could be arrested in their very own apartments, here in the Village. If a neighbor was homophobic, they could call the police, and did, and said, “There are a bunch of fairies doing things in the apartment next door,” and the police would come and break in and arrest them for disorderly conduct and other stuff. I mean that’s how outrageous –

**SS: How do you know that?**

AV: Because someone told me it had happened to them. So, people who are growing up now, with the kinds of experiences they have now – it would have been like science fiction to ever think there would be a conversation about gay marriage. And

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someone in fact e-mailed me yesterday, who was very upset. And I said well, don't call me Pollyanna, but I have to say that I think it is such incredible progress for there to even be a discussion on this level of gay marriage. I mean it is something – there was nothing ever seen positive about gayness. Forget lesbian – I mean, that was nothing but a joke word, if anyone even dared say it.

**SS: Well, in that early part – what years are we talking about, before you got married?**

AV: We're talking in the '50s to – I had my own apartment by the late '50s, and we got married in 1968.

**SS: Okay, so where did you hang out? How did you meet other gay men?**

AV: It was a mixture of relationships. I was very promiscuous – laid everything but the Atlantic cable – and mostly men, but not exclusively and was very drawn to women, but I just didn't know how to sort things out. I was much more afraid of relationships with women. And I think – not to be clichéd – but, I think – I really didn't understand about intimacy, and I certainly wasn't well educated for it. So, I was in therapy. I went through therapy, and that was very helpful, in getting me to be more open. It's only now, with hindsight, that I realize how much further I had to go in my life, and that I was really just at the beginning of being able to be with you, or be with anyone in an intimate way.

**SS: Was your early therapy – was part of it towards making the heterosexual transition?**

AV: I think so. I certainly knew I wanted a different life than I had, and I didn't seem to be very good at forming lasting relationships with men. I was pretty good



in the romantic obsession department, and I had had all kinds of – sometimes, really quite wonderful, loving situations, sometimes with straight guys.

**SS: Where did you meet men?**

AV: On the street, mostly. I mean, New York was loaded with men who were cruising at that time, and I lived on Third Avenue, which was super cruise-y. There were office buildings already, but there were lots of not office buildings, so in the evening, there were just hundreds of men in every direction. And I was a cute, young kid and I always looked younger than my age, which seemed to be a plus to a lot of people.

**SS: How could you tell that some guy on the street was gay?**

AV: You had to be really careful because you could get busted. And, it was all about eye contact, but it was scary. When you ask me that, I can remember my heart beating in my chest, and I will tell you that in 1964 – I don't remember exactly – I was arrested in an entrapment situation, in a gay bar.

**SS: Which bar was that?**

AV: It was on 19<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue South, and I had gone out – I was never a bar person, because I never felt comfortable in them. I still don't. It just doesn't bring out – I want to be able to talk with someone the way I'm talking with you now. I want to be able to hear what you're saying. I want you to hear what I'm saying. So, it was one of those very rare nights, when I went out to a bar, and I knew this bar was there. You could sort of tell some of the places, sometimes – or, maybe someone had told me about it. Anyway, I went in and sat down. I was sitting by myself at the bar, and a guy came over to me. And he was just an average looking guy, which was fine, because super looks has never been what the thing was for me. And, he started to talk to me, and he

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seemed nice, and very ordinary, which was cool. And I must have had two, maybe three drinks, and he's sitting with his leg against mine, and I said, "Would you like to come up to my place?" Nothing had happened in any way. It was a fairly well-lit bar, dark glass in the front. So he said sure, and we walk out and some guy comes walking along, and they say hi to each other. And, I didn't think anything of it. I think I'd had maybe three drinks, certainly not more than that, but I was like, easy casual. And he says, "Oh my friend asked me to give him a lift, is that okay with you?" I didn't think a thing of it. We cross the street, get into the car. I'm sitting between them, and the guy at the wheel turns to me and says, "You're under arrest." And there was an instant when I thought it was a joke, and then I realized it wasn't, and my heart nearly stopped. There was no way for me to leap out of the car. It was a nightmarish night. I was taken to the precinct over on 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> Street, between Second and Third – every cop in the place leering and pointing at me, making cracks. I'm put into an open cell; it has bars. Everybody who walks by is snickering at me. And I remember someone had a black and white TV on, and *The Good Earth* was on, with the locust thing – unforgettable. I always associate it with that, now. It was really, really lonely to be there, entrapped. And then, taken in a paddy wagon down to another precinct, where they were just gathering people from different precincts – finally ended up downtown at the Tombs, with guys checking me out, very hostile in the Tombs. I was this skinny white kid, and a lot of black guys – not all black guys, but a lot. It was nightmarish night, and then I was called up before the judge, in the morning, who was utterly contemptuous when the charges were read.

**SS: What was the charge?**

AV: Disorderly conduct. And I don't know if it also was lewd behavior or not

– it may have been. I supposedly have all the papers. Anyway, eventually I went – I was working at the Housing Authority at the time, where they thought I was going to be one of their stars. And, in the way that things dovetailed, their investigation of me for moving onto the next level, dovetailed exactly with my getting arrested. I was called in. I was totally dissed and treated like I was beyond a leper and demanded that I resign. I don't even remember whether I did resign or not, but I certainly was fired. I went to court – and I have all kinds of friends – oh, a Mafia lawyer approached me in court, when I was hauled in that morning, and offered her services. She was a weird piece. So, I said, yes. I guess I knew I had to have a lawyer. I found out later that she was a Mob lawyer. So, went to trial. She told me to have only women witnesses come down for character. I had 10 women down there – close friends, who were already to testify. I don't think they even called anybody. But, the cop who'd arrested me said that there had not been a second cop, because I told the truth, exactly as I knew it. And, this is not to say – I put myself into the situation, but I also told the truth about it, at the time. And, he insisted that there had only been one cop. So, I was convicted and I was given six months, a suspended sentence, because it was a first conviction. And, the disgust on the part of the judge was so evident – this lowlife that's in front of him. And later, the cop came up to me and said, “Are you going to try and tell me you're not” – I don't know if he used homosexual or queer or gay. And I said, “If you were so sure you were right, why did you have to lie?” And, he didn't say anything to that. At the time, I was so humiliated and stunned by the whole experience. My lawyer then said to me, “There are some people who are interested in your case, so, you should appeal this.” And apparently, they paid her part of her fee, and we appealed the case. And, long afterwards – maybe a year

or two – without my ever going to court again, we won, and my conviction was reversed. Of course, by that time, I was in a different job. This was the amazing thing to me – the reason we won the case was because the police were required to tell me the minute I left the bar that I was under arrest. And, considering that he'd lied about other stuff – it's amazing to me that he didn't lie and say, "Oh, I did tell him he was under arrest." But, he didn't. So, supposedly I was entitled to get all of my paperwork back, and files, and everything. And I went down to the old Police Headquarters, eventually, and I have all that stuff. I don't believe that I got everything back. I'm sure there was a file somewhere.

**SS: But who were these other people? Was it the Mob, where entrapment was hurting business?**

AV: Yeah, exactly, they were the ones who owned the bar. They were backing the bar – because, they could lose their license for that kind of thing. I was told later that, even though John Lindsay, who was Mayor at the time, was not anti-gay, he was anti-Mob, and that's why he was allowing that to go on, because he did know about it. So, it was a really terrible injustice, and a soul-searing experience that really haunted me for a long time.

**SS: Do you think that that was a contributor to you getting married?**

AV: I think what contributed to my getting married was that – first of all, every therapist I've ever had – and I've had several – has told me – sometimes in these words, and sometimes in other words, that I'm not gay. And, I do know, definitely, that I'm queer, which is why I love the word queer, because I really believe that every person is queer – if they are exactly, truly, who they are, they're queer. And, it goes beyond

gender preference. It's just simply being exactly and peculiarly, exactly who you are.

That's what queer is to me. I've been with many men, and I've been with a few women, and in some ways, had the greatest experiences with women. But, I've done what I've done, and I don't bother my pretty little head about it much, anymore. I sort of just see what the universe provides.

**SS: Let me ask you about politics, now that we've talked about sex. Were you parents at all politically conscious people?**

AV: Not particularly. My father was one of those, from the working class, who ended up identifying with Republicans. Also remember, he was Latino – macho, which is almost by definition right wing, for starters – all that rigidity and men together kind of thing. So, he was very Republican inclined – voted for Reagan, all of that stuff.

**SS: What about on the question of Puerto Rico?**

AV: He loved Puerto Rico, but he wasn't even sophisticated enough to be thinking in terms of statehood or whatever. My mom was a very unstable alcoholic, whom I adored, and had lots of difficulty with, but loved her very much. The closest there was ever anything political with her was when we heard over the radio, when she was on her way to give birth to my younger brother – but it was a false alarm that night – came over the radio, that Roosevelt had died. And, my mother said – she cried, and said, “He was a good man.” That was one of my mother's highest accolades that she could say: “He was a good man.” That was as political as she got. So, neither one of them were very involved, and my leanings were always to the left – from pretty early on. And, I was always interested. My idea of a great thing to watch were the McCarthy-Army hearings or the Republican Convention, when Eisenhower was nominated. I loved

watching all of that stuff. And the first thing that I really became active in at all was the anti-war movement.

**SS: You got married in 1968, so did you and your wife do that together?**

AV: No, because I'd done it before I knew her. I started going to anti-war marches when there were very few people, and it was really scary. And the police were clearly hostile and there were way more people on the sidewalks, screaming at us, than there were in the street.

**SS: Were you in any organization?**

AV: No, I would just hear there was going to be something, and I would go. And, once – and I also used to wear a jacket and a tie, because I thought it was really good for people to see that people who, at least, looked mainstream were against the war. And, once the marches became huge, I didn't go anymore. I never became involved, even remotely, to the depth that I did with ACT UP. But, I knew from the very beginning that we had no business in Vietnam, and I was absolutely against it. And, in fact, at the time, I was working for an advertising agency, where I'd always had a great relationship – it was a small agency. I was their bookkeeper, because that was a skill I'd learned in high school, and that served me very well. And it really unraveled my relationships there, when they learned that I was going to anti-war marches. One of the owners was a World War II vet, and the other owner was an Irish Catholic woman from Long Island, and as far as they were concerned, I was spitting on the flag, by doing this kind of stuff. As it turned out, I got myself a really good job at a film company, and that was around the time I met my soon-to-be wife, so life just took very different turns. And, during the time she and I were together, there was really no political stuff going on. I mean, I

loathed Koch from early on, but my involvement then was – we had our first child about two and half years after we got married. Also, she'd been ill, so there was a lot of attention needed.

**SS: Where were you living?**

AV: Living in my bachelor apartment in Manhattan. Then, we moved up to Riverdale for a year – what I call a year in exile. And then came back to the city, to the Village, where I've lived.

**SS: So, you raised your kids in the Village?**

AV: Yeah.

**SS: Which schools did they go to?**

AV: P.S. 41, I.S. 70, and one of my sons went for a while to the [Bronx] High School of Science and then he transferred back downtown. And then Ben, my oldest son, went to Vassar, and my – Abe went to Wesleyan.

**SS: Okay, so you're raising a family in the Village in the '60s and '70s.**

**You are seeing the gay liberation movement in front of you, on some level.**

AV: Yeah. I remember standing out on the corner – coming out, one Sunday morning, and it must have been one of the very early Gay Pride marches. So, Ben must have been maybe three at the time, and this very small group comes marching up Sixth Avenue. At that time, the march used to go up Sixth Avenue to the Park. And, they come with this huge dick, that's about 15 feet long – I can't remember. I think it was a blown-up one. And Ben looked at me, looked at it and looked at me, and said, "What's that?" And, I don't even remember what I said to him. But I remember feeling embarrassed – like, how do I explain this to him? And I remember when Stonewall

happened, because we lived only blocks away. I didn't know it as something that I was immediately involved with, but I knew it had taken place, and of course had no idea it was going to be the catalyst for what followed. And, in fact, once I was married, all of the stuff associated – my wife knew my history, but I was really careful to keep my distance from things gay. I also learned that if you want to turn on both men and women, get married and all of a sudden, you are like catnip. It was just amazing to me. Being as old-fashioned as I am, I was amazed that women would come on to me, because I thought – guys are dogs, we know that – but, women, you know – I'm married. And, women who even knew my wife would be – I think it would still shock me.

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**SS: This may be hard to recall, but do you remember how you felt about gay people, as they were beginning their movement? Did you feel like, thank God, that's not me?**

AV: I was loaded with homophobia, which actually – my experience, among other things in ACT UP, was an enormous education about that and freed me tremendously from that, which I'll mention later, if we head in that direction. But, I just wanted to be distanced from anything that could associate me with being gay. I mean, I would never do anything disparaging or any of that kind of stuff, but I would just be quiet. And, I was real concerned that I not, in any way, be interpreted as being gay. So, I wasn't thinking so much about people's rights, particularly, at the time. But, I was also laboring under – coming from that background – of, even though I knew that it was wrong, how people were being treated, it was, well, this is the way life is. Now, for us to be gathered here, as we are today, is such worlds away from what the world was like in the 1950s and 1960s, growing up. That was out there, and that was not the life that I was



leading, in any way. And I knew some gays, but not many. I mean I would meet people in publishing. By that time, I was working in publishing as well as beginning to see patients. And, my psychoanalytic training school, definitely, at that time, was homophobic.

**SS: Did you ever try to help patients make the heterosexual transition?**

AV: Never, no. That was not my – I never had that. My goal always with patients was to understand them, find out what they wanted, and resolve the resistances to accomplishing that.

**SS: Okay. So, you got divorced in 1982?**

AV: We separated in 1982, and it took five years to get divorced, because I wanted joint custody of my children. In New York State, you cannot have joint custody unless both parents agree. My ex-wife was, and is, a highly unstable person, emotionally, and that's a very low-key description. It was a terrible, terrible divorce for everyone involved.

**SS: And were you consciously thinking, I'm gay, I want to get divorced?**

AV: No. She was the one who wanted the divorce. I would not have left the marriage. I was not happy, but to me, to finally have a family that had some stability to it meant everything to me. And I was totally crazy about my kids and completely devoted to the home, even though she and I had really gone very divergent ways and she was just getting nutsier and nutsier. One of the biggest expressions of it was becoming more and more super Jewish, religious, and demanding that I participate in that, which was totally against – I mean, I had made it clear to her when we first met that, I'm not Jewish. "Your mother's Jewish. That makes you Jewish." When people tell me that, they're lucky I

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don't have the power of the death penalty. I haven't lived all these years, and I have no freedom of choice about defining myself here? So, we had a terrible divorce that was awful for – there aren't a lot of things in my life that I could say, I wish there had been a different way to do it, but the cost to my children was really awful. And, that's painful to me to know that and accept that, and I do. And, I just was talking to my younger son the other night, and I said – that's one of those things. But at the same time, even now, looking back, I don't know what I could have done differently. So I agreed to leave, although later, in her court papers, she accused me of abandoning the family. And included in the court papers that I had told her I was having a change in lifestyle, that no longer included women. That was complete fabrication – it never happened. So, there was implicit in the court thing that the gay issue was going to come up, and that was very, very frightening to me. And, I was constantly being advised at the time by my peers – professionals – don't come out to your kids. And, I wouldn't have even known how to come out.

**SS: But, you weren't out yet. You were still –**

AV: I wasn't, and that was part of the problem that I wasn't out, and how do I tell my kids I like men and women?

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**SS: So, as all of this is happening, you're having this traumatic experience – the AIDS crisis is beginning. What was your awareness of it, in the middle of all this?**

AV: I'd begun to hear the word – I certainly wouldn't have heard HIV, I would have heard AIDS – and, it really didn't penetrate, at all, to my mind, until my then-still wife and I had separated, and I began doing a little bit of socializing, that took me to gay

bars. There was someone who worked at a film-related store, and I published a lot of film books, and he and I hung out together for a while, as friends. And so, he took me to a couple of bars. One of them was Uncle Charlie's, and there was someone there who he said, "Oh, he has AIDS." And, I couldn't see him particularly clearly in that lighting, but he may have had KS. At the time that Fran and I separated, I never thought about HIV. First of all, it was AIDS. People didn't talk about HIV. But, I didn't think of it as something related to me, because I didn't go to bathhouses. I wasn't going to do that. I was much more concerned about herpes, which was the thing of the day that everything was concerned about. If you got a cold, and you had a cold sore, people would say, "Oh, he's got herpes" – that kind of thing. So, seeing that guy was probably my first – oh, he has AIDS, and it had a kind of Dorian Gray – like his face is melting or something like that. It was also the experience of I'm here and he's other, and scary. There was something scary about that. And then, somewhere around that time – well, it wouldn't have happened right away – I began to hear about people being ill. But I was also very caught up in the divorce stuff, in establishing a new home for myself. I was doing a lot of traveling for my publishing work, around the country – flying back and forth to Europe. So, I was very caught up in that. And then, when the real change came for me was in 1987, when my ex-wife got custody of our children, because I knew how abusive she was going to be of that power, and she was. And just before that time, I saw on a lamppost down in the Village, something about a demonstration on Wall Street, against the high price of AZT. And I didn't even know quite what AZT was. I just knew it was one of the drugs, or the drug. And, somehow, and this may have been because of what I was living through, with the divorce, I'm sure it had something to do with it – I thought,

this is so terrible, that people are sick and dying and they're dying alone and ashamed.

Yeah, I definitely had a lot of identification with that. So, even though I was really scared and I didn't know anybody, I went down to that demonstration in Wall Street. In fact, the decision hadn't been handed down yet, about the custody of the children, and I was really afraid that I was going to be photographed there.

And, I didn't know anyone. Later, I came to know that Peter Staley was one of the people who was there, and there were probably other people, I came to know later.

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And, we were all on the sidewalk, in front of the church down there. I don't remember if it was Trinity, or which one it was. And, I still have one of those fake dollars that on the back it says, "Fuck your profiteering." So, we were standing there with signs and stuff. Nobody spoke to me. It was not friendly, which was sort of a precursor of how things would be, at least initially, when I got to ACT UP meetings. So, I was there, supporting the thing. I didn't get arrested. I don't even remember if people did get arrested that time or not. The following year, for our first anniversary, then there were definitely arrests, but by that time, I was already really well into being part of what was going on.

And then, I must have gotten some information, and I started going to the meetings. Now, the one thing I remember now, before that is, I had become part of something at the Center called – first of all, when I used to the Lesbian and Gay Center, as it was called then, I literally was looking over my shoulder, to see who's watching me go into this big fag building. It was huge thing for me to take that step and go in there. So, I got involved with a group called Gay Circles, which was, really, a consciousness raising group, for men who were all in different ages and various stages of out and coming out, or not out. And then I actually became one of the leaders of it, and ran the

groups for two, three years. And, that had been in the period before my ACT UP involvement. So, it was moving me in the direction of being out and more comfortable with that and on one of those nights, I heard this nut screaming at these guys, and it was mostly men – it looked like all men to me – down in that main room on the first floor. And I thought, who the fuck is that maniac? Which of course was Larry Kramer, screaming at these people that if they didn't do something, they were all going to be dead. And, I didn't know what it was about, or what he was talking about. After that Wall Street demo, I started going to the ACT UP Monday night meetings, and I remember begin terrified sitting there, because it was wild yelling and then there were all these young, good-looking guys, and everybody screaming. It seemed chaotic to me, but I also got the sense of what it was about, and I remember thinking, I'm getting out of here.

And, I can remember, just like we're sitting here today, where I was sitting and, I think we had benches, not just chairs. I think we also had some benches, if I remember correctly. And, I thought, the thing that brought me here is more important than my fear, and the issue about AIDS is more important, and I'm going to stay. Or, I'm not leaving now. And I very sort of timorously began speaking to one person or another. And, one of the people I spoke to was Jay Blotcher. We became quite good friends. And then, he and I and Mike Signorile became involved on the Media Committee together. And then, I also became involved in the Actions Committee – which I, pretty soon, not long after, began chairing. So, before you know it, I was just in it all. And, I can remember – on the Media Committee, one of our big, big goals was to get the fucking *New York Times* to write about AIDS. And we would have these meetings at Vito Russo's place – different places, but often there, because Vito was already quite ill. He was also kind of a diva and

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wanted it to be convenient for him, but it was also illness. We would spend time at every meeting. Who do we know? Who knows someone who can get to the people on the staff at the *Times*, so that Max Frankel or whatever – I remember Mathilde Krim's name coming up, so and so might be able to talk to her, to talk to him, because that was the goal. Get the *New York Times* to write the truth about what's going on.

**SS: Okay, why wouldn't the *Times* cover it?**

AV: The feeling was they didn't take it seriously. And remember, at that time it was still pretty much considered a gay disease and gays were still, essentially, disposable. That was the feeling. And maybe that's still the feeling, for all I know, at least to some extent. Certainly, there was never anything – I mean, the anger and outcry that you saw after Stonewall was small potatoes compared to what soon happened out of the ACT UP experience. And, there were also – we had people in ACT UP who worked for the *Times*. And would say –

**SS: Like who?**

AV: I'm trying to remember – Clark – I can't remember his second name – but, when he died, he left his insurance policy – \$40,000 – to ACT UP. That was one of the very first big donations we got. And, we were also told that that had really had an effect at the *Times* – that someone on their staff had died, who clearly had AIDS and whom they admired. And, that seemed to cause some kind of shift. I don't know if there were other people who worked at the *Times*. I don't remember if Charles Kaiser was around very much, but he seemed to be in that milieu of having contacts. There was sort of this waspy bits and pieces that would turn up in ACT UP who seemed somehow connected. And, lots of stuff was hearsay. We launched a major, major campaign that went on for

quite a time, to get the *Times* to really cover the epidemic. And of course to this day, we have never, never gotten them to write ACT UP all in caps. I remember once, when I spoke at Aldyn McKean's memorial service, I made some reference to the fact that maybe someday, when this epidemic was all over, that paper will finally write our name correctly.

**SS: Can you try to remember, as much as you can, about the *Times* campaign? What the strategies were, and what you did?**

AV: Oh yeah, that was one I was really involved with.

**SS: Did you call them and say, we want to have a meeting?**

AV: I didn't, but others did and that didn't happen. We did a lot of work here, literally, in my apartment and in my back yard. We would cut stencils and make sure that they worked and so there were always these patterns of stencils in my backyard. And we made stencils about "All the news that fit to print. Not." I can't remember all the phrases that we used. And what we decided – when we couldn't get them to respond – it was very difficult, but we were able to get a photograph of the *Times* owner – Sulzberger. It was very hard to get a picture of him. And one of my achievements that I'm still proud of is that I photocopied it and then I did, like, an Andy Warhol treatment of it in color, but with a toilet plunger on his head and wrote, "Cut the crap. Punch." And so, we reproduced that and we decided we were going to have the demo outside his apartment building on Fifth Avenue. It's right across from the Metropolitan Museum. And the night before, a group of us – Eric Sawyer, I remember, was there. And what's his name? The guy who was totally, gratuitously burning flags – Petrelis. Michael Petrelis was there. There were maybe like, 10 of us. And we went around all the blocks near his

apartment building, and stenciled both the sidewalks and the streets with whatever was on our stencils. And, we always knew that there were, in fact, police informers or spies or whatever you call them, at our meeting, even though we always demanded that we were legally entitled that they identify themselves. They never did, of course. One night, I caught one of them – a very handsome black guy, who just stood out like a sore thumb. And, when we were going to leave for one of our sudden – if you remember, there'd be an action suddenly, that would be decided on the floor that night, and we would head right out. This is pre-cell phones, and there was a phone, just down the street – not on the corner, but just past the building, and he was on the phone. I'd caught his eye during the meeting and checked him out, and I was sure he was police. And when we had made the decision and the plans were just about to take place and go into action, I ran out, and there he was, at the phone. And he was furious at having gotten caught. He didn't say anything to me, but I thought man, you would really love to bust me, but he couldn't.

**SS: Did you ever see him again?**

AV: No, never saw him again. He was so distinct. He was very good looking and very tall and black, and there weren't a lot of blacks coming to our meetings, at that point. Let's see, where did I – oh, the *Times* thing. It was a very hot day – it was during the summer – it might have been August – that this particular action took place. If you ever doubted the power of the *New York Times* in New York, they had a police communications truck. They had more police surrounding Sulzberger's apartment building than I've seen for almost any action, ever. I mean, it was amazing, the number of cops and cars and a huge communications truck. Later, they denied that this had anything to do with our action, but the sidewalk in front of Sulzberger's house had been



broken up, so there was no place for us to picket. And so, what we ended up doing was picketing right across the street, in front of the Metropolitan Museum. And I remember – it was a huge picket and there were lots of people who were there who hadn't been at our actions before. I remember, Joe Papp and I were talking, and I don't know if his son had died of AIDS yet or not, but his son did die, eventually, of AIDS. And he was just marching along in his white suit. And the cops were just pushing us a little too much and tempers frayed. Nobody was busted yet. But, it was unsatisfying. We're not in front of the house, or whatever. So, we kept stepping out into the street, and they kept telling us we had to be back on the sidewalk. And, I remember Marvin Shulman – I don't know if you remember Marvin, who was ACT UP's treasurer at one time – Marvin – here he is, this bald, white, fringe of white hair. Again, someone who – I don't what his history was before then. God knows, in ACT UP, you could work with people for a long time or short time in very intimate ways, and you wouldn't know zilch about their lives.

And Marvin, I remember – God bless him – was one of those magic moments in ACT UP, when he said, "Let's take the street!" And, he went out. So, we went out into the street, and then the cops were starting to threaten us. They were going to arrest all of us. Then, everybody went into the street, and we started marching – this is roughly, four o'clock in the afternoon, 4:15, something like that. And we start marching right down the middle of Fifth Avenue, and stopping traffic. We didn't give a shit. It was great, it was exhausting, too. But, it was great. And the cops went nuts. What they kept doing was – they kept trying to cut us off, but they couldn't move as quickly as we could. We had no idea at first where we were going. We just knew we were marching down Fifth Avenue. So, they would always have to be three blocks, grouping ahead of us, like they were

going to cut us off. And then we would just make a left, over to Madison Avenue and we'd go down a block. And they would try to catch up, and then we'd make a right, over to Fifth Avenue again and we'd get further down. We were always ahead of them. So, then we got down to 59<sup>th</sup> Street, near the Plaza, and I think we turned right there and went down to Seventh Avenue and we ended up – we walked all the way to 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. This was one of those times when we had runners – people who turned into runners – and they would run to the group and back and say, we're turning left on 62<sup>nd</sup> Street or whatever, and it just went back and forth with suggestions about what to do. And so, by and by, we were on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Broadway at rush hour time, and we sat down and blocked traffic. And that brought us into contact with the precinct down there, who are really Cossacks. They were the ones who, on another occasion, really charged us and beat up people. There was a case, and it was eventually settled. Some guy I just ran into recently, who's name I can't remember, had gotten something like \$300,000 from being brain damaged, which they didn't realize he was brain damaged long before we did that action, but nevertheless, God bless him.

So, we sat down and just didn't give a rat's ass about blocking traffic at five o'clock. Bob Rafsky, God bless his soul, was still alive then. And so there was some negotiation with the police, and they finally agreed, because they wouldn't let us get onto the block, in front of the Times building. It was agreed that they would let us have a mic, and Rafsky was going to speak, and we would agree to not block the traffic anymore. And that was one of the few times when there was that kind of negotiation, because most of the time, a lot of people felt very strongly about never negotiating with the police. But that grew totally out of their stopping us from just picketing in front of Sulzberger's

building. That march would never have happened otherwise. And, it was a perfect example of spontaneity and just the strong feeling and Marvin igniting the situation, just by doing that one thing. So, it was wonderful, and exhausting. I don't know how it was for other people. There it was marching in very hot, humid weather I remember. But even when it wasn't like that, after an action was over, if I hadn't been arrested, I was so exhausted. I would come home and almost pass out on my bed for maybe two hours. It was like this incredible generator going inside of you, to the max. And, whether you were being arrested or not, you were just so highly charged, when something like this was going on.

**SS: In terms of the *Times*, did you guys make contact with gay people who worked at the *Times*?**

AV: I have to remember now. I did not stay on the Media Committee for a long time. I did do work with them for a while, but Signorile and Jay really got into that. I was much more actions oriented – planning things. So, I would not have had that. Later on, I began to do negotiations and other kinds of things, but that was often related to the international conferences, which I became very involved in. In fact, when I was thinking about our conversation today, I was thinking how much karma there is in this very room – that people, some alive, some not, who have sat here and yelled and talked and negotiated about all different things, through so many meetings that we had here. This was a very busy space.

**SS: If you could talk about the international conferences. Let's go into that a little bit. What was the first one?**

AV: The first one that I went to was the one in Florence, in 1991.

**SS: Who organized these conferences?**

AV: There were actually international conferences for STDs, including HIV, but of course, over the years, now, it's become more and more emphasis on the HIV aspect. And, up until then, ACT UP had never participated on that level. There were already ACT UP chapters – particularly, in Paris, which was a very active, powerful, and terrific one. But, that was the first time we had ever sent people. And, I think we raised the money to do it ourselves.

**SS: Who called this conference? Who would organize it?**

AV: It was scientists, researchers. There's always a sponsor. For instance, the following one was to be held under the sponsorship of Harvard in Boston or Cambridge. And, in fact, was not held there, because of the US restrictions on people living with HIV, not being able to travel freely. And, so, we raised that issue in Florence. We were a little leery of this.

**SS: So, these conferences were called by research institutions?**

AV: These conferences draw a wide range of people. They are, in part, sponsored by pharmaceutical companies who have big exhibits there where they're promoting their latest dope. And, it's a chance for researchers to present papers. It's a trade show, is what it really amounts to. And as ACT UP became more sophisticated, we wanted input in more things, and Florence was the first one where we got our feet wet.

**SS: How many people from ACT UP New York went to Florence?**

AV: It wasn't a huge number. There must have been – it could have been under a hundred.

**SS: We sent almost a hundred people to Europe?**

AV: It could be, because some of them came through their jobs. I remember, Spencer Cox was there, Moises Agosto. We did some fundraising. We did some significant fundraising. And, it was a big thing, about who's going to go, and the proper balance. That political correctness definitely played a part and increasingly, actually, through the years. And of course, from my point of view, there's a real validity to some of the things behind political correctness, although many people abused it to get righteous, which was really a drag, and very destructive, ultimately, in ACT UP.

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**SS: Do you think that people went to Florence who didn't deserve to go?**

AV: I'd have to think about who the specific people were. I can remember one guy who was there, who was notorious. There was a fair amount of sex going on. You know, the baths in Florence. And, I have to say, that was never my thing, but there was a lot of musical beds going on, definitely. And that's okay, you can still do work and do that, too, and a lot of people did. But, some people were careerists, and I really don't want to mention names, in some cases. But I remember one person who, before that even happened, when there were hearings down in Washington, I think when Everett Koop was Surgeon General, and this guy used to represent himself, as speaking for ACT UP and was actually getting some money from ACT UP, but all he was there to do was to gather information and bring it back, but he represented himself. And, he later worked for all different companies in different ways, and took money or whatever. But, he was not the only one, there were others.

**SS: But, I'm asking about your statement about political correctness. Did you feel that there were women or people of color who went to Florence because of political correctness, who didn't deserve to go?**

AV: No, that was not an issue so much then. I can remember, it was more about someone's boyfriend getting to go, who, I don't know how many T-cells he had, but I think he had fewer brain cells. He got to go to several conferences, simply because of whom he was connected to, at the hip, at the time.

**SS: I just want to get back to the fundraising question, before we get into the substance of the thing. Sending 100 people to Florence is a lot of money.**

AV: If it was 100, it may have been less. Later on, we definitely sent –

**SS: How did you raise that amount of money?**

AV: First of all, ACT UP had money at the time. We had begun to have money. So, some of it was authorized from the treasury. Some of it was from selling T-shirts, having all kinds of things that went on. We did flea markets, we asked people we knew to donate. So, it came in all different forms. And then, there were people who had jobs that – and that happened increasingly, with the passing years – where they were doing work related to it, so they got to go through their company, or through their government job that they had – state job. And, the composition of who went became more rainbow-ish with the passage of time. When we raised the issue in Florence, about that the conference had to be changed from Harvard to another site, the assembly seemed to react – or the ones who got up and spoke – as if that was impossible, couldn't be done – not at such short notice. And mind you, this was when the conferences were held every year. So, it was a relatively short time for planning a big conference. But in fact, ultimately, that is what happened. It was not held in this country. Instead, it was held in Amsterdam, and that conference was chaired by Jonathan Mann, who sadly died in a plane crash just a few years ago, with his wife. And Jonathan was a terrific guy. I'd

never known him before the conference. He was connected with the Harvard Institute, was a researcher. He was a very dapper guy, wore bow ties. My first meeting with him, he came to New York and had a meeting at P.S. 41 to talk about the forthcoming conference. And, a group of us from ACT UP approached him with some very angry stuff. And to his credit, he was really outstanding this way – he didn't back off. He said he was very interested in having a meeting with us. He came here, subsequently, and began a real, true dialog with us. And, one of the things that we wanted to be sure, that had not existed up until then was, real access for people living with HIV to the conference, as participants, so that they could attend and get the information and also as participants, that they could speak and be heard, because one of things we learned early on in the epidemic was that it was people who were living with HIV who knew, in a lot of instances, much more than the so-called professionals. They knew what was going on with the disease.

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Jonathan was – to his eternal credit – incredibly receptive. We got, as a speaker – it was at either the opening or very soon thereafter, Marina Alvarez, a wonderful woman from the South Bronx, formerly addicted, HIV-positive woman, who completely turned her life around and has turned into a really important community leader, and beyond her community. She spoke at the Amsterdam conference. I doubt if she had ever been out of the country, maybe, not even out of New York before then. And she was just great. And that was the beginning of people with HIV getting to be spokespeople at these international conferences. Then, there was a very angry group of people who had become infected through blood transfusions – the “innocent victims.” And they were very angry that there was a whole group of HIV-positive people – largely from England –

who had come over, and were demanding access to the conference and were blocking entrance to the conference. So, Jonathan asked me to – asked us, and asked me, to sit down and talk with them, and see what could be worked out, because they had raised money and come on their own, and were paying for it. And here, these people were demanding waiver of the fee that you have to pay for admission. And, we had talked with them for a few hours, and I was greatly complimented later. Jonathan said, “I’m really impressed with what you could do there,” because it ended up – what I essentially said to them was, we shouldn’t be fighting each other. We need to be working together. And, I told him a little bit about who some of the people were, who were there. And I said, “You’re absolutely right to be angry.” I said, “You’ve worked very hard to get here. You’ve paid all this money. But, the real issue is about dealing with HIV and the needs. In the future, we’ll have to find a way to work this out better and more equitably.” It calmed the waters, and the people were admitted, and the conference went on. So, there was a major turning point.

**SS: How would ACT UP get its message across at the Amsterdam conference? Were they on the agenda, or what happened?**

AV: There was a range of things. First of all, we met every night. There were a few people who were off just getting stoned all the time. But a lot of the people who were there were really serious. And, there were also demonstrations that were held. I think it was during that conference that they first dedicated something to gays in Amsterdam. I believe it was during that conference. And, there was a small, but very active Dutch ACT UP chapter. We were having our demonstrations. At any one of the conferences, we would be at – there would be the pharmaceutical object of the day that



we would be mailing. It was interesting, over a period of time, many of the people attending the conference – the scientists and such – it was sort of, like, they kind of enjoyed – it was like, “Oh, they’re going to do something again.” But, it was a gradual evolution, where it went from – and we always continued to do the actions, although they changed and evolved through the years – in that, eventually we were on panels. We were speakers. We were presenting things.

AV: There were great people in ACT UP Paris.

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**SS: I want to get back to Marina Alvarez. So, you’re bi-lingual, and you’re Jewish Puerto Rican. What was your relationship to Latinos in ACT UP?**

AV: I became involved with the Latino Caucus. I’m trying to remember who I was first friendly with. I think Juan Mendez and Moises Agosto. Moises was the one who got me into it, because he felt that I could bring certain things to the group that they did not have. And it was a strange mix, because in a sense I’m a very gringo Latino. Even in my appearance, although my dad, who was completely Puerto Rican, was even more Caucasian, Irish-looking than I am. And, that’s a very particular kind of Latino look. It was mostly – I have to stop and think if there were any women, and there’s only one that I can remember – Lydia [Awadala], who eventually passed away, as did her son, from HIV.

**SS: Was her son in ACT UP, also?**

AV: No, he was a little boy. She was a very beautiful woman, and very, very nice. She was active, but there were not many women who were in the Latino Caucus. And it was a very disparate group and angry and really screwed up, from my point of view. I literally heard one of the members say – I think he was from Argentina – who

was HIV-positive – that it was okay to screw ACT UP because they were just more of the power establishment, blah, blah, blah. There was one guy from Puerto Rico, who I think was communist, but I'm not sure. If he wasn't, he was certainly a nationalist, and very angry. And, there were several people in that caucus who had, clearly, other agendas beyond the HIV issues. And, there were some incredible angry meetings. And it was a very, very divided group. I think it largely came to a head when we were going – one of the people in the group – the guy who I think may have been a communist – I think he's still alive. I think I saw him on the subway not long ago. He had said that there were people down in Puerto Rico, who wanted us to come down and help form a chapter there. So, there was some discussion about that, and who would go. And, how many of us finally went? At least two dozen, maybe more. And, some of them were guys who had never been, not really been active in ACT UP before, but, when that Latino Caucus came into being, the floor would give them just about anything, because it was part of like, well, we have to. And, also, there was a real genuine desire for inclusiveness. I mean, that was part of it – a desire that I must say, I thought that caucus really abused. But, it was very dangerous to speak out about anything like that. I did speak out about it, in the context of caucus meetings, and made some enemies of people who just spoke so hatefully to me. No cop who ever arrested me ever treated me that way. One of them, interestingly, who was doctor – who's still a doctor – is totally different with me now, and greets me like an old comrade. But he and I were so open in our disagreement and our anger about issues that I think there was underneath it some respect. And I, in a way, didn't take any of it personally. I just thought they were way out of line, and I really loathed and resented the idea of their thinking because of real or imagined injustices that

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they could exploit ACT UP for money or whatever. They got ACT UP to finance several thousands of dollars, maybe as much as \$15,000, for some event, and the guy turned out to be totally bogus and a crook, but there was no accountability.

**SS: What was the event?**

AV: It was something that had to do with – whether it was in the South Bronx or unionizing – I wish I could remember the details, but there was a significant amount of money – maybe \$7,000 – that ACT UP advanced and never got a cent back. And in fact, the guy absconded with the money.

**SS: Okay, let's try to be really specific, so we understand what the issues were. When you say, you felt like people had another agenda, can you say specifically what you felt that was?**

AV: Well, part of it was the personal thing – and it was openly expressed – a lot of anger at being a minority group, and this is a big white organization and I think, to some extent they felt like they were angry at T&D, Treatment and Data, which a lot of people in ACT UP resented, in part because T&D people were not good at representing themselves and giving the information to the floor. So, there was this sort of white boy, exclusive club about it. They really did themselves an injustice to a certain extent, and that is not to say there wasn't arrogance, there was. But, often – like, when I would be facilitating a meeting, I would say to them, "Speak slowly and clearly." Just a simple thing like that. It was so difficult to get people to do that when they were talking to the floor. And then, you would get these very bright guys in Treatment and Data who would use phrases and terminology that most of the floor didn't know what any of it meant – technical terms – and it would confuse and then ultimately anger, and just cause all kinds

of bad stuff.

**SS: Why did they do that?**

AV: Well, they're human beings, in spite of the fact that they didn't always seem that way. And, they were frightened. They were not good at communicating. They were smart, and they were good at getting educated about certain things, although a few of them – some of them were bogus, too. There's this floor – a very intimidating body – and none of them came from a background – that I know of – of public speaking, which is to speak clearly and slowly, look in people's faces when you're talking to them. So, they weren't good at connecting to people, and they became very alienated. So, they became more reinforced in their ways, which played a big part in why they ultimately left ACT UP. And the people on the floor, on the other hand – well, we want to know, what's going on? What is the information about this? And remember, we're talking about people in some cases were either fighting for their own life or the live of someone very close to them, and this a group they're depending on, to come up with the information that is going to save lives. So, it was a very fraught situation. And into that came the Latino caucus and later – I don't know that it ever really got started – the Asian Pacific group. But, they were the different groups that were playing into the conflicts that really were built into the situation. And the thing is, the longer ACT UP survived, the more the fissures and cracks began to appear, so that the things that were really crappy in our society were evident. For me, at some point I thought, it is amazing that we have been able to hold together as long as we have. And, the reason I felt we did is that it was so urgent.

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In those beginning days, and for the first few years afterwards, people were dying

every week. If they weren't ACT UP members, they were related to ACT UP members. And, if you remember what the meetings were like, it got to be that the memorials were the first thing that were put on the agenda after awhile, and that ritual of "ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS." After awhile, it began to ring pretty hollow and horrible. But, we were able to hold together for awhile, because – I remember, someone who was the dumbbell, that I actually referred to, who got to conferences because of his boyfriend, said something I've never forgotten, that was really useful. And this is really one of the key things about being in ACT UP, you never knew what was going to be helpful, or where it would come from, or what someone would be able to contribute that was useful. And, one of the things that I absolutely learned in my ACT UP experience – and my ACT UP experience is something that transformed my life – is that, everybody has something to contribute. And, it comes out of their being exactly who they are and being truthful and being willing to put themselves out and use their own history, their background – whatever it is they know how to do, whether it's photocopying, lying, getting into a place – some piece of information they have. This particular fellow – I remember one night, sitting on the floor in somebody's apartment on the Lower East Side, he looked up and he said, "Where is the urgency here?" And it just struck me right to my heart, hearing that, and I have never forgotten that. And to me, everything related to the epidemic is urgent, and I have never, ever lost that – since that night. Even though I kind of disparage him and everything, that was a great thing that he said, for me. And, that has stayed with me. And, I have heard through the years, different people – they'll say, "I'll never forget what so and so did," and sometimes they would be talking about someone who I thought was a schmuck, but it didn't matter. That person somehow said something or did something

that inspired them and what more can you ask? So, the fact that I make some judgment about someone that he's a jerk or whatever is totally irrelevant. We're all jerks, we're all who we are and, nevertheless, we manage to create and do amazing things.

I'll give you another example. I don't know if I'm going too far off for you here, but we'd heard there was something at Cabrini Hospital that was going on with patients there that shouldn't. And, about seven or eight of us went over there one afternoon. This was roughly around 1993 or so. Barbara Hughes was one of them, Kevin Frost. I can't remember who else. And, there was something about – that a person with HIV was being treated badly. So, we went up to the desk and asked to see the administrator of the hospital. So, she called his office – “Well, I'm afraid he's in a meeting. If you'll call and make an appointment.” And, one of our people got on the phone and said, “You can tell him he can either meet with us now, or he can read about this on the front page of the *New York Times* tomorrow.” Now, that was the kind of ballsy stuff that – there was no foundation for it. But, you say that, and quick as white on rice, we were in the conference room with the hospital administrator and discussing this. And, he was giving us this damage – suit and tie and everything, of course – and he was giving us this very nice, polite, bogus friendly kind of thing. And he looked at me, because I was older than most of the people in it – so, they mistook that to mean that I would be less radical, when in fact, I remember one of the best compliments someone in ACT UP – when we flew out to Minneapolis, to set up a chapter there – coming back, he said, “You know, you are so much more radical than I am,” and he was like, half my age. And I thought that was a great compliment.

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So anyway, this guy, the administrator, turns to me and he says, “Well, I know

that a lot of people think that you ACT UP people are crazy.” And I said, “Stop. *We are* crazy. You have no idea how crazy we can be.” I said, “You need to pay attention to what we’re talking about.” That stopped it right then and there. It got down to the issue, was discussed. He said, this will be handled, blah, blah, blah, and that was it, and then it was over. So, we didn’t have to throw ourselves down or chain ourselves or do any of that kind of stuff. By that time, we were known enough so that people didn’t want to see their photographs on posters, with blood on them. People didn’t want to see us walking around their office building, chanting their names. It doesn’t matter how powerful someone is, in terms of what the world calls power. People do not like to be embarrassed. They’re afraid of that. And, that was one of the things that we learned that really works. And, one of the most powerful tools that ACT UP had was, we had no shame. There was nothing we couldn’t do, as long as it was non-violent. And that was so powerful, that we were prepared to sit down, we were prepared to chain ourselves. We were prepared to literally throw stuff into the punchbowl, smear ourselves with fake blood, throw ashes on the lawn of the White House. There wasn’t anyplace we weren’t going to go. So, when you have lunatics like that on your hands, you know – unless you’re willing to just mow them down and kill them – you’ve got a real problem on your hands. It was great. It was a blast.

**SS: Okay, I want to get back to the founding of ACT UP Puerto Rico.**

**Can you tell the whole story of how that happened?**

AV: Ironically, in Puerto Rico, some of the pharmaceutical companies were making the drugs there, the ones being used at the time – I’m blanking on what’s used for PCP –

**SS: Bactrim?**

AV: Yes, and they were also manufacturing AZT. And ironically, the drugs they were manufacturing there were not available on the island. So, you had a burgeoning epidemic and people on the island not being able to get treatment and the drugs, in fact, were being shipped from there to the States – mostly to the States, I guess. And, there was some fellow who – Pentamidine, that was it, that was one of them – who had HIV and had formed a hospice of some kind, and was very, very seriously sick himself. He had pneumocystis pneumonia, and was at that point, had maybe days to live. So, there was this crying need for some kind of support, and a few activists – but there was nothing officially organized or anything like that. So, this one fellow who I mentioned to you, who was kind of a leftist, maybe commie, was in regular contact and had been going back and forth, and he said, they want us to come down and form a chapter there. So we presented a budget, put together a budget from the Caucus, presented it to the floor, and a range of people were selected to go. I remember one person, in particular, who identified himself as being knowledgeable about alternative and holistic treatments. And it turned out, when we got down there, there were several Puerto Ricans who were really, really into that and told us, “He’s full of crap, he doesn’t know anything.” And he’s also a Stonewall veteran, and has variously presented himself as a spokesperson, and just been kind of, I don’t know – maybe, again, it’s not for me to judge. But I know, in that circumstance, there was nothing to contribute there. But, it was a really interesting experience, because we did do several demonstrations. I, literally, flew down there with a piece of machinery on my hand that was used by the fellow who was dying of PCP – that saved his life. It was a very humbling experience to

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know that you just did this little thing. You carried this thing down, and this guy used it for his treatment, because I saw him a few days later, and he thanked me. The gift was to me, not to him, that I was able to help him. It was very humbling – and a lovely man. But, even if he had been a shit, it doesn't matter; he was entitled to proper treatment. So, we did a number of things while we were there. We went into La Perla, which is the high, intravenous drug using area in San Juan and did free needle exchange there. One of our members fainted, because he was so shocked at – one of the Puerto Rican guys – seeing somebody using a needle. We really did some stuff – teach-ins about basics about treatment, about how to do actions. How viable the group remained, how long they remained viable after that, I don't know. Some communication continued, but there was a lot of homophobia, and a lot of – gay bars and gay clubs in Puerto Rico – and we handed out fliers there and did stuff. It was not a friendly response. Puerto Rico, then – I don't know how much changed now – is a lot of closeted – Ricky what's-his-face is not an exception.

**SS: Ricky Martin?**

AV: Yeah. He's not an exception. You can be gay, but it's like being in Italy, you know. You have your boyfriend, but you go home still and sleep at your parents' house. Or you're married and you have a boyfriend, but you're married – same thing in Japan, too. We've run into it everywhere, at least in certain countries. So, there were some very specific actions. There seemed to be great enthusiasm, but I don't know how lasting the effect was. And, no small part of that was because there is so much homophobia in the Latino community, and that is still true. In the Latino community – as is true in the black community – it was much more acceptable to get HIV, if you were a

drug user, than if you got it sexually – particularly from sex male to male. And I remember, I did a piece with Cristina [Saralegui], who's very popular and well known in Latin America, on television. She's like the Oprah – who's been a really terrific figure, and very, very active. She's on Telemundo and really did and does wonderful work. And she said that's part of the problem. People don't want to deal with the fact that Latino men sleep around, and sleep around with men, as well as women, and that's one of the reasons that we see the kind of figures that we do, in terms of the increase the high rate of infection in those two communities – it's the leading in New York City.

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**SS: We got into this topic because of Marina Alvarez and also Lydia – what was her last name?**

AV: Lydia [Awadala] – it was an odd name – it was almost Middle Eastern.

**SS: At any rate – there were a whole group of women who, I think, came from Bedford Hills right into ACT UP, and then brought in friends. And at one point, there were quite a few straight women, who were predominantly Puerto Rican, who came into ACT UP. Did you have any kind of interaction with them?**

AV: They did not come to the caucus. Lydia did. She was an exception, and there were one or two others. There were a couple of others, but they were more connected with the guys in some way -- not in a sexual way, but in a friendship way. There were some lefty-type women. But, that was different than the women that you're talking about. I remember there was – someone who died, whose name is escaping me, who was really a terrific activist, also and, I had some contact with her at the AIDS in Prison Project.

**SS: Katrina Haslip?**

AV: Katrina, yes. And, I don't know whether I – I think I met her, first, at ACT UP, at a meeting. But then, we worked together at – I used to supervise the hotline at the AIDS in Prison Project, so that's where I met a few of them.

**SS: I just asked you because all of those people have died, except Marina. I wanted to ask you about the informer question. What you described was a police agent coming from the outside into a meeting and observing. Did you ever feel that there were people who were participating in ACT UP, in an ongoing way?**

AV: There were people – I know people where others were suspicious of. One person in particular comes to mind, whose actually still active with ACT UP. I never felt that way, but call it naiveté – I just never put any energy into that. That guy was so outstanding, I made him the minute I saw him – I thought, cop. I know that on other evenings – they were so obvious, they just – it reminds me, I think one time we learned that they had a signal on – like, at an action, they were all going to wear some – they had a little orange something, so we knew about that in advance and we were all wearing orange stuff. So, it was great. But from my outlook on this, at the time – and I still feel this way – let them be there, let them hear everything. We did have our CD groups, we did plan things very carefully and secretively, and were pretty cautious about how that information got out, and it never got leaked, to my knowledge, when we were doing special kinds of actions. I did not want to put the energy into looking over my shoulder, and I didn't. I feel like, and I still feel this way, they do what they do, and we do what we do. And, just exercise a certain amount of caution, and you're going to be fine.

**SS: Were you in an affinity group?**

AV: Yes.

**SS: Which one?**

AV: CD-918.

**SS: What was that?**

AV: It was formed on September 18<sup>th</sup> – and that was for the FDA action, although I was later in other affinity groups that I can't remember the names of.

**SS: Who was in CD-918?**

AV: CD-918. Gedali Braverman was in it. A wonderful, lovely man named Oliver Johnston, whom I didn't know well, but when he died – that was when people were just dying all the time – and when I heard he died, I remember saying to Maxine Wolfe – not Oliver. He was just so clearly this decent man who just got caught up in that terrible wave that washed people away. David Lopez, who was another sweetheart, a guy who had beaten drugs in his life. He was a young man. I think he was only 27 when he died. So, he had cleaned up his act. He just had the bad luck for it to be at a time when it raced through his body and there were no treatments, and then he was gone. Who else was in that? Greg Lugliani, who later worked for GMHC. I don't know if he's still in New York now or went back to San Francisco. There were about a dozen of us. Were there any women? There might have been one woman in the group. I know I have all my papers on that stuff. I just came across the listing of the group, because we had to have that so that the legal person would know everybody's name. As with many other situations, you really often never knew whether someone was HIV-positive or not. And, several of the people have died, since then. One of them was this big, handsome guy, Richard – I can't remember – I remember how shocked I was, because he was so -- he looked like a football player. And, I ran into him one time at some occasion and he was

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in total drag, and I was so shocked. And the thing was it didn't detract at all from his masculine appeal. But I had no idea that he was, not only positive, but was seriously ill, and suddenly, he was gone – just like that. He was a big, beefy guy. But, that's the way it was. It's still true, that you cannot judge by appearances with people.

**SS: What was your affinity group's action at the FDA?**

AV: We had – several of them were – the guys were dressed in medical white coats and they were holding capsules with the names of different drugs, and we were struggling to break through, to get the drugs out of their hands. And, then, the other thing was – at that time – someone was dying of AIDS, every 28 minutes or something like that. So we had a very loud horn, and every 28 minutes the horn would go off, and we would all do a die-in. I still have a newspaper clipping on my refrigerator. I'm laying on the ground with my Gucci loafers. That was the first time I got busted, was at that one. And I remember, Peter Staley climbed up on top of the entrance of the FDA with a banner, and Peter said – someone called out, "Peter, you're a top, at last!" The only thing that happened that was at all violent on that day was that some glass got broken accidentally, when someone got pushed against it. But, other than that, it was totally non-violent. I remember Richard Deagle – not uncommonly – there was always someone who was hyper, hyper about either the Church or the police – who, you know, were ticked and ready to explode. And he ended up – I think he got busted before the action even started because, I don't know, some cop looked cross-eyed at him or something, and Richard just went berserk, and ended up getting busted. That was our first major, major action, and people came from all across the country and there were people doing stuff all over. So, we had our spot, and then we were eventually arrested when we wouldn't

leave. And, I remember getting really jabbed – there was a black cop, who had a very angry face. And I knew – man, I thought – he just wants to give it somebody. And, when they charged us, he really gave it to me, with his billy club.

But very interestingly, when we were on bus, and it was long wait – there were so many of us arrested, that it took a long time to process. So, I'm in this bus and I don't remember what I was wearing – but again, I'm older than most of the other people there. So, the guy – the cop who was in charge – started engaging me a little bit in conversation, and asking questions about what we were doing, and was really interested. Now, this is in Maryland, in 1988. So, we had a long time sitting on the bus. And, I'll tell you, I hate being handcuffed. I mean, other people may get all kinds of thrills out that – I'm not one of those. And, it was really hard for me to tolerate having my hands in those plastic things for such a long time. And then we got into the processing part, and I remember – I don't know the cop's name. I do remember that he was a gorgeous looking guy. And this was an amazing thing that happened – another one of many unforgettable moments. He had to process my paperwork, before I would be discharged for the day, and I didn't do any proselytizing about why we were there or anything like that. I was just very simple and matter of fact and answered the questions. At the end of his doing that, he stood up and shook my hand, and he said, "Well sir, I hope you win your fight, because it's a fight worth winning." And I was amazed. I didn't know what I had done, that he had understood something, and had that tolerance. And, I have sometimes told that story, because I want people to understand – and believe me, I'm not romanticizing cops, but be aware that cops are human beings, and you never know, you never know who is going to be the person to respond. Just stay open to possibilities. But, I was thunderstruck when

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he did that.

**SS: When you changed your life entirely, how did the other people from your life respond when you became Mr. ACT UP?**

AV: I remember my younger son, when I first became active. One morning, I was going to a demo that was early in the morning somewhere, and he was going to school at P.S. 41, and he was old enough, at that point, to cross the street by himself. And I had his lunch prepared and told him it was in the kitchen, and I had to leave very early for a demo, which I told him about. And I remember him sitting up – before I left in the morning, I said, “Abe, I’m leaving now,” and he said, “Don’t call me if you get arrested.” And it did change my life. And, it actually pretty much took over my life. Nothing was more important to me than what I was doing in ACT UP and once – yes, there was something more important, and that was, my schedule with my children – that, on the nights of the week when they were here, or the weekends when they’re with me – that always took precedence over everything, and I worked around that. But, other than that, ACT UP was what I was doing. And, by the time I got really deeply into ACT UP, I had pretty much given up my private practice. I’d lost my publishing job. I’d been President at the company. It was sold, and after 16 years, I was out of a job, couldn’t get a job, so I had to create a new work life for myself. And, I managed to get a job with a public relations agency, where I went in very early in the morning, and I was finished by early afternoon and then, my day and my evening were ACT UP. So, meetings were here all the time, or in my backyard, or I was going to them. And that was it. The only other thing that kept me from that were my kids. And, one of my sons became very estranged from me, not because of ACT UP, but because of divorce-related stuff, and I think,

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sexual issues. I did not know until maybe, two years ago, that within two weeks of my moving out, my wife had told my sons I was gay. I never knew that. And, I was struggling for years about what to tell them and when to tell them, and they're walking around with this secret. It was an awful, awful thing for them to carry. So, my older son became very estranged from me, which was the worst thing I ever had to live through in my life, and it went on for years and years. And then my younger son did, too, as he approached adolescence. It was of a shorter duration, but it was almost three years. I'm talking about them not coming here, not talking to me. It was terrible. So, whatever I gave to ACT UP, ACT UP helped save me, too. One of the biggest things that I learned very early on in ACT UP and, boy it's as true today as ever, if someone had told me, you know, everybody has something to contribute, what boring fruitcake stuff, don't even bother me with that, but that's exactly what I learned about. Everything of who you are and what you know, and everything you've experienced in your life ends up being useful, in ways you couldn't have possibly imagined, and that's the way it was for me.

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AV: It makes me think of the whole subject of homophobia, because I was so full of that crap – not to say that none of the vestiges remain in me. But, I definitely was. I knew I like to suck cock. I knew I liked being with guys; there was no problem about that. But, I wanted to be with “real” guys. Well, what I found out in ACT UP is that real guys come in all kinds of shapes, sizes and behaviors. And the courage that I saw from big faggots and little faggots totally turned me around about it. And, there were times when it was actually a turn-on that someone was really very gay or femme in their style, when in fact their behavior was so courageous and so powerful and so totally no-holds-barred about doing the work. And I think more than anything else that totally turned me



around about that whole issue. I'm still attracted to whoever I'm attracted to, but there are times when I can think, hmm, pretty cute with that sissy voice there, or something. So, I totally got that out of my system.

**SS: What about other guys your age? I know Bob Rafsky had been married and had a daughter. Did you relate to those guys? Did you talk to them about your experiences?**

AV: Well, not a lot. Bob wasn't around for a long time, because he went from becoming active – I don't think it was hardly more than two years – maybe three, at the most, between – it was shocking, Bob was one of those who went early on from being sick to being very sick, and then gone. And, often – now I know a lot of people did a lot of sleeping around in ACT UP. I didn't. And, I don't say I didn't do any, but I didn't do a lot. I was very focused on the work, I have to say that, and the longest involvement that I ever had with someone in ACT UP, came towards the end of the most active period in ACT UP. It actually grew out of our being compatriots in this situation and having a mutual respect for each other. Bob – in fact, I just ran across something that he'd left for his daughter, and I thought of his daughter recently, because she would be well into her teens – maybe even late teens, by this point. And, I wonder what she knows about her father. One of the many remarkable things in ACT UP was how much work you can do with people, and you knew, in many cases, very little about their life – about their life before and even their life during. You knew, sometimes, their phone numbers, because you had to be able to call each other. It was really about doing the work. And, there were groups like the Swim Team, that a lot of people salivated –

**SS: Who was on the Swim Team?**

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AV: There was what's-his-name, Smith – I can't remember his first name, a big tall guy, and his sometime boyfriend Benjamin, who's a photographer, who had a show of ACT UP photos about a year or two ago. And, there was another sort of Neanderthal-looking guy, who lives up in Boston now, who I ran into – Adam Smith.

**SS: Who's the guy in Boston?**

AV: One of the guys on the swim team, who had kind of this very rough hewn face, and Adam told me that he has taken over raising either his brother or sister's child. That was maybe two years ago. I ran into him on the cross-town bus. There was an architect. There were several guys who were sort of on the edge of the group. The Swim Team was referred to – I remember once, as many bodies in search of a brain. There was a good example at Wigstock, I think the second year of Wigstock, they all came in pigtail wigs and dirndls, and these handsome guys in drag were the cutest thing in the world. It was really fun. How did we get on the Swim Team? Oh, you were asking me about my age. There were very few people my age, very few. Even Rafsky was younger.

**SS: What about Marty Robinson or Mark Rubin? Larry, Bill Snow –**

AV: Dan Baker and I became, and have remained, very good friends. Dan is also divorced and has a grown daughter. And Dan and I really hit it off and have stayed very close friends. He is now working for the United Nations in East Timor, if you feel like going to East Timor. I would say that he was probably the closest, in terms of peers. We both had a kind of – a different perspective on things. And, he was willing to do a lot of boring stuff. He was a great treasurer, super responsible. And, he was willing and capable of doing things that not everybody else was able or willing to do, for that matter.

**SS: I just want to change gears here. You participated in two offshoot**

**organizations – Queer Nation, and the Pink Panthers.**

AV: Right. More in Queer Nation than Pink Panthers.

**SS: But could you just tell us whatever you remember about the Pink Panthers, and how it came out of ACT UP?**

AV: Gerri Wells was a leading figure in that. And, something had happened to somebody over around Christopher Street, I think. And, all of a sudden, there was this thing – and it was almost like a joke, at first. And then, they became a real thing for a while. I don't remember the correlation between that and Queer Nation, because I may have gone to one or two Pink Panther events – you know, like, walking the streets or whatever. But, I really didn't get into that very much.

**SS: Weren't you in that cover photo of the *Village Voice*?**

AV: That was Queer Nation.

**SS: How did Queer Nation come out of ACT UP? What was the relationship?**

AV: It came out of ACT UP, as I recall, because the issues that – there was always a struggle – well, not always – once we were formed and had gotten rolling along, other things began to come out of the woodwork, like, should be reaching out to this group? Should we be supporting this union in their struggle? Should be dealing with gay issues? “Our focus is on HIV and AIDS” – and this was a very potent struggle and battle. Queer Nation was really a group of mostly, but not exclusively, ACT UP members, who felt very strongly about gay and lesbian issues, and visibility was their concern. So, they formed this – I wouldn't call it a breakaway group, but another group, a parallel group, in a certain sense. And, I remember going down to Washington, perhaps two years before

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Queer Nation existed, and Maria Maggenti and some other woman – it may have been her then-girlfriend, Heidi, I’m not sure – were sitting in front of me. And, I overheard them saying – I think Maria said to her, “Wouldn’t it be great if there was a queer nation?” And that phrase stuck in my mind, and when the early meetings were taking place, there were a lot of people – quite a few people – and, in particular, some really angry lesbians, who had not been in ACT UP, who didn’t want the organization to have any name, and who were accusing – very angrily accusing – men there of being fascists. It was hilarious – not hilarious, but it was such a paradox that their behavior was so fascistic, and they were just laying this on to other people. Anyway, I said, “The purpose of this group is to raise visibility of lesbians and gays, you cannot have a no-name group.” You have to give the media something they can call you, and I liked the word queer, and I think we should we should call it Queer Nation. I didn’t tell them the story of how I’d heard that. I said I like that, because queer includes everybody – the same thing I said to you before, about queers. And, there was finally a vote, and it passed. And Queer Nation became the flavor of the week for a few months, maybe even a year. But we did a lot of fun stuff, and a lot of good stuff. I remember Lauren Morrison and I and a few others – what was the name of the guy? He went out West – David something –

**SS: Robinson.**

AV: David Robinson came with us one time. We went to the Newport Mall, which was brand new then, and we’re here, we’re queer, we’re going shopping, and handing out fliers. And, David went to the make-up counter and requested to have a make-up. David had very beautiful, long, narrow eyebrows and the girl was a little

shocked at first, but then she got into it, and she had a blast with it. And David, of course, was in seventh heaven. And, we didn't get arrested, but we got thrown out. That was just very benign and sort of fun.

Then, we started going to bars. There had been some report that at the White Horse, there had been some sort of homophobic situation or whatever. So, we had this mass of queers just surrounding the place – practically levitating the block. And, we went to McSorley's – another one that we did that at. And then, there were a couple of bars uptown that we went to en masse. It was great. They were mostly just fun. We never really had any serious problems that I can recall. And I can't remember if it was around that time that I was on the Geraldo show with some guy – it was one of those, "I used to be gay, but now I got clean" –

**SS:** Oh, an "ex-gay."

**AV:** An ex-gay. He sometime after that got arrested in a bar in Washington, in DuPont Circle. It was pathetic, and there was this bogus shrink on there, just screaming all this negative stuff. It was sad, sad, sad. And, Geraldo is such a piece of dreck. How low could you get to go on Geraldo show – even a media slut has to think, there's better than this. But, the Queer Nation thing was, at the time, very powerful. And, I remember our coming down the Saturday before Gay Pride – I guess that same year – and somewhere around 35<sup>th</sup> Street, I got this idea – I don't know if you ever had this experience, but often a chant grew right out of the situation. You just thought of something. So I started, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it." I had said something else first, and it didn't roll off the tongue that easily. And I thought, we're here, we're queer, get used to it. And that was when we started doing that, and that became a

standard kind of thing. We had come down Fifth Avenue, and we were ending up at Union Square Park, where there was going to be a pre-Pride rally, which is what they used to – I don't know if they still do. And it was a wonderful time, because it was very – it allowed an outlet for something people felt very strongly about, without taking anything away from HIV. And, ACT UP was about HIV, and as long as we stayed on that, then we could do our work, and I felt very strongly about that.

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

AV: I've never left ACT UP. I still consider myself a member of ACT UP.

**SS: Do you go to the Monday night meeting?**

AV: I haven't been to a meeting in over year. I go to one every once in awhile. I am in touch with some people. I've run a couple of flea markets for them. I may do one again this year. My heart is always there, but it reached a point that – I won't say something broke, or something wore down, but around 1995, I sent a message around and calls to people, to have a meeting, to try and do something about what was breaking this organization apart. Larry came. Most of the regulars came. It was a good-sized meeting. And we just couldn't do it. It had become too fractious with people and the PC stuff – I'm talking 1995, roughly – '94, '95 – I'd have to look in my notebook, to see exactly.

**SS: Do you think it was political correctness that caused the demise –?**

AV: I think it played a large part.

**SS: Please be explicit, and explain –**

AV: So much energy got spent in talking about, "You're not including this, you're not respecting women's rights, you're not doing this" – there would be this fighting that would go on, and we couldn't focus on – and it wasn't that any of the issues

weren't issues that matter, but they were willing to get into verbal battles, that ended up delaying being able to do work. And also, people would end up having to be on the defensive about how they had negotiated, or a meeting they had gone to. Well, why didn't you do this? There was a lot of micro-managing going on. And by that time, it was before the big change in drugs, but there was – the first great wave of people dying had essentially slowed down. So, there wasn't the immediate sense of catastrophe on our hands. And once that lifted, people began to be able to indulge in this kind of fratricide, and it was very painful, and so discouraging.

**SS: I'm actually surprised to hear you say that you locate the source of that with women and with, like, the Latino Caucus.**

AV: It was more than that. Those were things that happened at different times, but the Latino Caucus was before this. This was – I have to think – well, for instance, you mentioned Mark Milano. Mark Milano is a prime asshole example – incredibly disruptive, huge ego, and just riding over people, very paranoid, and extremely difficult to work with. It was exhausting. Man, before you'd even start to commence to begin what it is we want to work on, we're dealing with all this other stuff – very provocative kind of behavior. No one is impervious to that. And, although I would say that, to some extent I may have been known as a good negotiator and a peace maker of sorts, I just got really tired of it. It was so funny, there were people who had gotten away with thousands of dollars – I can't even remember his name, one of the treasurers of ACT UP, who happened to be black, who had a drug habit, it turned out had absconded with many thousands of dollars. Another treasurer of ACT UP, who – and by the way, I spoke in both these cases against our pursuing them legally, because I said, you know what? It's

only going to give ACT UP a bad name, and we'll have a harder time getting donations, because they're not going to suffer. We'll never get it back, and people won't want to donate, because all they're going to know is, oh, it's a crooked organization. But, the other guy – the one who's HIV-positive, from Texas – Scott [Sawyer] – I always thought that Scott was a loose cannon, but I didn't realize that drug use was connected with that. I just that he was, whatever he was. But again, I spoke against pursuing it, because it's done. We just have to create a system that corrects the problem and be more judicious about who we pick. And, I remember someone saying to me, "Well we couldn't do anything about him anyway because he's an HIV hero." And that was part of that lunacy – that just because someone is HIV, they've done something wrong, they've done something wrong. Period.

So, what ended up happening was that there were – this is sort of bringing it back to me – by the time we were going to go to Yokohama, Aldyn McKean, Eric Sawyer, Kevin Frost, Jay Blotcher and Jim Aquino and I had decided we were going to form our own group and raise money and get to Yokohama ourselves. And we did. It was harder for me to come to that decision because I was and am still very committed to inclusiveness. In fact, I really learned about inclusiveness in ACT UP and the importance of it, and that you do make allowances for a lot of things so that your group is truly inclusive. But, one of the people whom I've just mentioned said, "I'm not going through that again, and if you're not going to make this a closed group, I'm not going to participate."

**SS: You mean an all-male group?**

AV: It wasn't a matter of all male – it was, they happened to be all men, and



the only woman who specifically asked to be in it was one of the people that the group came about, because of her very wiggly behavior. So, we took a lot of heat for doing that, and we formed a group called the Yokohama group, raised the money and got there ourselves, on our own money. And, there were some other ACT UP people, but by that time, there was much less money available, and some of the people in this small group felt they weren't prepared to put out all the effort to raise money for people who, in some cases, when they got to these conferences, disappeared. And, Aldyn in particular was very concerned about the long-term non-progressor issue. We each had things that we were working on. Then Aldyn died in February, and I took over, to some extent, for awhile, working that issue and chaired a panel in Yokohama on long-term non-progressors, and came into contact with some terrific people. I was able to get a recovering IV-drug user from Maryland to the conference to speak. And, she was a lesbian who was an education for me. I'll tell you one thing specifically that she taught me, and she did this in such a non-judgmental way. At some point in conversation, I used the term "junkie," and she said, "You know, I'm a person, I'm not a piece of garbage" and she just clarified – now, I've heard people who are drug users refer to themselves as junkies, but I'm not a user, and I'm not in that category, so to speak. And, she taught me about the need to be sensitive to somebody, and I've never used that word since then. Someone who's black can use the word nigger, but it's not coming out of my mouth. So, that was really good and she made a very impressive presentation.

Tape IV  
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**SS: Who was that?**

AV: Bert McQueen is her name. She was just terrific and she was thrilled. She'd never been anywhere in her life, and she could hardly believe that. But I had

gotten her name – I had called around, because I think I had gotten the idea I wanted to get an IV-drug user who was recovering and living with HIV. And so, I made various calls and was somehow connected up with her and asked her if she'd be interested and she was overwhelmed. And we had to come up with the funding somehow, but we did. And it was great. It was really good.

**SS: Andy, I have one last question for you. Looking back, what in your mind is ACT UP's greatest achievement?**

AV: The ability that individuals can make such a difference. We changed a lot about the way medical treatment is done – not just in this country, but internationally – the idea that people just don't go to a doctor and say, this is my body, do with it whatever you want. That it should be an active partnership, in which the person is treated more respectfully, and can even be a source of useful information, in developing treatment. We changed the whole system of how drugs are processed. I mean there were some very specific things that we accomplished that way. And, our greatest failure was that we thought it was all going to be over in maybe five years. In the 1930s, if someone had said, "This is what the Germans are going to do, and this is what is going to happen," you would have looked at them and said, "Are you nuts? You *are* nuts." You wouldn't have even taken them seriously. In that same way, if someone in 1987 had said – well, Larry did, in a sense – "This is what is going to happen," it was unimaginable that you and I, that all of us, would be here in 2004, with absolutely no end in sight, and if anything, bigger and worse than it ever was, except for a lucky few. So, we did make a difference. We raised the image of the power of individuals working together and using their own particular qualities, and we didn't get what we really wanted, which was a cure. But, we

did some wonderful stuff.

**SS: Okay. Thank you, Andy.**

AV: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]