

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

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Interviewee: Victor Mendolia

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Interviewer: Sarah Schulman

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Victor Mendolia
August 15, 2008

SARAH SCHULMAN: Hello.

VICTOR MENDOLIA: Hi.

SS: Hi.

VM: Hi, Sarah.

SS: Can you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are?

VM: My name is Victor Mendolia. And my age is 47. The date is August 15, 2008. And we are in the East Village, on East 14th Street.

SS: Right, in an unreconstructed East Village apartment.

VM: Right, a period piece.

SS: Where were you born?

VM: I was born on Long Island, in Huntington. And tried to escape Long Island as quickly as possible, and moved to New York when I was 19.

SS: Now why in the world would you want to escape Huntington?

VM: Well, I grew up further out, in a town called Selden. And it just was a cultural wasteland; really nothing for kids to do.

SS: But how did you know that?

VM: I started going to New York when I was about 14, and realized that I was missing a whole lot of stuff.

SS: Did your parents go with you? Did you –

VM: No. My parents were divorced. My mother was in school. She was a social worker, and was going to school for her masters in social work. And so she was

really not in the home at all. I was the oldest, so it was, a lot of whatever went on in the house was kind of my decision, and how I chose to do things.

But I just loved New York, and wanted to be there.

SS: What were some of the things that you were chasing?

VM: Certainly the openness and acceptance of everybody, particularly – back then, it was a lot different than it is now, and it was certainly – the freakier and the more different that you were was celebrated, rather than today, where it's all about muscles and looks and position, and things like that. Whereas I think back then, you could really make a mark just by being different. And I love that.

SS: Was your mother political at all?

VM: She was. She was always very liberal, and from the time that she divorced my dad, she only went out with black guys. And she was a social worker in a predominantly black community that was just very close to where we grew up. So we, because of having black people living in our house, in an all-white neighborhood – it was a blue-collar neighborhood but all-white, nonetheless. And we were kind of pariahs in the neighborhood anyway. And so we kind of, rather than run from it, we kind of went full-steam into it, and really immersed ourselves in black culture and the black community, and most of our friends, like the family friends, were all black. And my friends in school were listening to Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith and things like that, and I was, I had an 18-inch Afro and was on Stevie Wonder and Ohio Players and stuff like that.

SS: And did you guys discuss that overtly? Did you and your mother talk about that overtly?

VM: I wouldn't say overtly; it just was a matter of fact. It wasn't anything that we sat around and planned, or anything. It just – I certainly felt more comfortable in the black community than I did in my blue-collar, redneck high school.

Tape I
00:05:00

SS: So what about gay people? Were there any gay people around you?

VM: Certainly not openly. My last year in school, I had a boyfriend. And so a few close girlfriends knew about it, but it wasn't, we weren't really completely open or out. But I knew where I was going.

SS: Did you guys do things together? Did you have a relationship or was it just a sexual relationship?

VM: Did we, did –

SS: Did you go to the city together?

VM: Yeah, yeah. Not very often. He tended to be more comfortable living there, and I was more comfortable not living there. So I think that, ultimately that was kind of what broke us up, in the end. I wanted more, and he was fine living there.

SS: Do you know what became of him?

VM: Well, I know that shortly thereafter, he moved to Fire Island and became a drag queen. But other than that, I don't. I lost touch with him.

SS: So what about all the political movements that were going on at the time?

VM: Well, with my mother being in school, and me hating my high school so much, I would very often accompany her to school. She went to school at Stony Brook. So whenever I could, I went to school with her, and often I either sat in the class

with her, or I'd go to the student union while she was in class. That was some of my first connections, political connections. And then I remember — I guess I was probably about 14 or so — and I went to a program that the Girl Scouts ran, called Interns in Community Service. It was coed, but it was — there were different speakers on different subjects; on seniors and on — I don't really remember most of it. But one of, the main one that really clicked for me was there was a speaker from the United Farm Workers. And I, in short order, had set up a picket line in front of my local grocery store, to boycott lettuce and grapes. And I was, I guess 14 and a half. So —

SS: What was the chain?

VM: It was Hill's Department Store, and — there was another one — don't remember the name of it. But it was, one was in my town, my local town, in Selden; and then I got connected with the group that was at Stony Brook, and then we did another one over near the university there. And made the front page of the local paper. And it was sort of my first jump into left or radical politics.

SS: How long did you stay working with UFW?

VM: Quite awhile. I guess a few years, two or three years.

SS: And were you able to be out in that environment?

VM: I wasn't out to myself quite yet. But it certainly seemed accepting. I just didn't, I didn't quite know what I was about yet.

SS: So did you graduate from high school?

VM: I did, yeah.

SS: And then you moved to New York right after?

VM: Shortly thereafter. I bounced around Long Island a couple of, to a couple of places, but all heading west.

SS: So where did you live when you arrived?

VM: The first place I lived was in Jersey City, briefly. And then in Chelsea, 23rd and Seventh.

SS: And what year was that?

VM: I think '81, I think, was when I finally made it full-on, and –

SS: So can you just describe what Chelsea was like in 1981?

VM: Well, it was certainly not anything like this, like it is now. I mean, it was predominantly black and Latino, I would say. And – see, for me, I was always – I quickly became an East Village boy. I – when I first moved in, I didn't really know my way around, and I would just sort of do the Christopher Street strip, and stuff. But shortly after moving in, I went to the Pyramid Bar, and immediately was, oh wow, this is where I belong, this is home.

SS: Why? What was it like?

VM: It was, came from a, it was gay-centric, but it was a completely mixed crowd. The straight people that were there were completely open to everything that was going on. Most of the shows tended to be either gay or gay-oriented. But it was a very accepting, open community. And for me, I always believed that gay liberation was about being able to go anywhere and be anywhere, with anyone, and not necessarily segregated in a gay bar.

SS: And where were you working at the time?

VM: My first job here was, I was a banquet waiter at Windows on the World, which is a very weird place to work. It's like working in a plane, basically. And it was at the top. So often, it was above the clouds. And so it was very much like working in a plane. I was –

SS: My mic just came off. Sorry, Victor.

VM: That's okay.

SS: Okay, so you were a stewardess.

VM: Yeah, I was a stewardess. A friend of mine had, the best friend of some guy that I was dating at the time worked there, and I bluffed my way through it. And it was all French service, and I didn't know what that was, even. But I bluffed my way in, and it was a fun place to work. There was – there were four different factions of guys that – it was a huge place. There were, I think, almost 200 waiters, just in our section. So it was Chinese straight guys; Hispanic straight guys; American straight guys; and gay guy-, mostly American gay guys. So it was – it was a fun place to start, that's for sure.

SS: What was sexual culture, gay life, in New York City like when you moved to Chelsea?

VM: Well, as I said, I lived in Chelsea, but I didn't associate at all –

SS: Okay. What was happening in the East Village sexually?

VM: It was, it was very exciting. There literally was art everywhere, and it was the start of the gallery boom there. My best girlfriend that I had met on Long Island was living in the city. And we started producing events, or doing club events. And our first one was in the East Village. It was at a place called the Lucky Strike. It

was where St. Marks Video is now, on Ninth Street. And Madonna was the bartender. And from there, we kind of, we started doing events at Pyramid, and from there, kind of got, went to bigger clubs, particularly at Danceteria, we did – for awhile, we were doing two or three parties a week. And – loved it. It was always – for all our events, we didn't just throw a party. There was always some sort of art installation; there was always some kind of performance, and usually heavy on the performance. So it would be like two or three shows a night.

SS: What names did you use? This is coming back to me.

VM: Well, I was called, we were Anonymous Productions. And it was me – I was Victor Anonymous, Jeanette Anonymous.

SS: That's right, Jeanette.

VM: Right.

SS: Oh, that's right.

VM: And – after we were, when we had become involved with Danceteria, we were, we were making a lot of money. We were doing a lot of shows. And then we got involved in the Limbo Lounge. We did it, we did a couple of events there. And then wound up becoming partners in it, which is one thing that I wanted to correct about –

SS: Go ahead.

VM: – Michael Nesline's interview. Because you asked him: so who else was involved in the Limbo Lounge? And he said, oh, no one important to this conversation. So – we, Jeanette and I became partners at the Limbo Lounge just before it hit its peak. So all of the Charles Busch things that happened there, and *Vampire*

Lesbians of Sodom started there, and all of his shows. We gave Karen Finley her first show in New York, there. So it was a little correction that needed to be made.

SS: Okay.

VM: {LAUGH}

Tape I
00:15:00

SS: So since you were doing party promotion and being one of the people building East Village culture: how did your recognition that AIDS existed impact on what you were doing every day?

VM: I think for a while, we were able to not deal with it. I think that it – for most people in the East Village at the time, it was something that was happening to older guys that went to the Mineshaft and to the Anvil. And while I went to those places occasionally, at the time, I was very shy about any kind of public sex, or hooking up, and things like that. I rarely hooked up in those kinds of situations. So I think for awhile, most people there just didn't feel like it was about our issue – it wasn't our problem, and wasn't something – it wasn't something that we readily wanted to address or deal with.

But I remember specifically what it was that got me involved with ACT UP. I was at Uncle Charlie's, on Greenwich Avenue. And there was a poster that said — and I don't remember the number — but it was like, 1500 AIDS deaths: haven't you been silent long enough? And I was like, you know what? I'm going to go to that meeting. I'm going to go to that meeting this weekend. My boyfriend at the time, and another friend of ours went. And I never stopped going after. I was in it.

SS: Before we get to that – there were some key deaths in the East Village club scene that affected a lot of people. One was John Sex –

VM: Right.

SS: That was your scene, right?

VM: Yeah, I wasn't close with John. He certainly was, we were contemporaries, but I just – Jeanette and I were kind of – part of what we did – we called ourselves Anonymous Productions on purpose, because we didn't really know people, and we didn't, we weren't really involved in the scene in the way that others had been in it, for a very long time. We kind of, we had ideas, and we had things that we liked to do, and that we wanted to do. But we didn't – we were sort of separate, and not really intentionally so or anything.

Well, part of it was that neither Jeanette nor I wanted to be onstage. So that was one of the major things. Most of the players were somehow performing or were MC'ing or were promoting, but they were bigger than life. And in a way, what we liked doing was producing the events, but we didn't really want to have the public attention of it. We were both kind of –

SS: So you didn't know anyone who died of AIDS personally before you went to ACT UP?

VM: I did, I did. And it was a mutual friend of Jeanette and mine. But he was very young, and he died at, I mean, he probably died at 23 or something. But it was one of these things where – he kind of scared himself to death. He had a lump in his lymph node, and then he just was convinced that he had AIDS and he was going to die. And then he died, in very short order. So it was – and he, when he did die, he was on Long Island, and we didn't see him. So it was – it was sort of out of – out of mind – out of sight, out of mind. And again, but – and for a very long time, I didn't have a single friend, or person that I knew, who got sick or died.

SS: So did you personally feel that you needed to change your sexual practices? Did you feel that you needed to use condoms, or were you concerned about dating a lot of guys? Dating: that's not a word from that time, that's a word from now.

VM: I – I'm not sure when the condom thing happened for me. I know that in the East Village, early on, it wasn't an issue. I can't – my guess is that it mostly was once I had been involved in ACT UP, that I was sort of – properly aware of it.

SS: So it wasn't part of your group – the nights that you – did you do backroom nights also?

VM: No.

SS: Okay, so you –

VM: I went to them, but I didn't –

SS: Right.

VM: – I didn't produce any, no.

SS: Because we talked to Aldo about his and that was kind of interesting. Okay, so you arrive at ACT UP. And what did you find, when you walked in the room?

VM: Well, for me, again, it was a similar thing; that I was inspired by the diversity, I thought that it was; for me, I've always had women in my life. When I've gone out, my friends, my friendships; women have always played a big role, especially lesbians. And I was friends with Jeanette. Jeanette was my, really, my best friend. We owned three different businesses together. So – and she managed the Clit Club for years. And so women had always been very important in my life. And when I walked in, and

saw – I was always, I was particularly drawn to Maria Maggenti. I thought that she was just so incredible. I thought that she always held the room together properly, she always had the right – I always thought that she was usually right on. She could always cut right to it. And I was always really impressed with her. In a way, I was inspired particularly by her, for some reason.

SS: So what was going on in ACT UP when you first entered? What was the big issue?

VM: Well, it was after the Wall Street action. So it was – and it was before City Hall. So it's somewhere in there, and I haven't really been able to pinpoint it exactly. The City Hall demonstration was the first big action that I participated in.

SS: First of all, what was the demand of that action?

VM: It was particularly aimed at Ed Koch. And it was just that services and – basically, that the crisis hadn't been handled properly. It was just that – and – I think it was right.

SS: So what was your experience of that action?

VM: I saw the way that affinity groups worked, and I saw how a small group of people could make a difference. And I really liked the covert nature and planning of things, and pulling them off. For me, it's very similar to what we did producing events. I love the idea of pulling off the event and blowing people away with it. But for me, it's not about, it's never been about getting the glory of it, or standing up and saying that I did this. But I love just doing it, and seeing it happen. So for me, seeing a big action like that come off, and really be planned completely covertly, and –

not covertly; openly, in the meetings, but then for the little secret things to happen, I think, I was always really impressed with that.

SS: Can you give an example of a secret thing you were involved with?

VM: Well first of all, I'm just thinking – the timelines are hard. I'm thinking that I actually – I messed up on the timeline. The first big action that I participated in was the FDA action. So that was before City Hall, I believe, right? Do you know? Yeah. And that was particularly a lot of covert stuff, because we were trying to access the building, and do different things. I thought when Peter Staley got on top of the door, the entrance canopy or awning, whatever it's called; to me, that's, that's it, right there, because it's the picture. It's the picture that everybody will run with, and that makes the press, and I love that, I love that kind of stuff. It's theater, it's performance.

SS: What was your affinity group for FDA?

VM: I forget the name of it. I remember pretty much everybody who was in it.

SS: Who was in it?

VM: It was Adam Rolston; god, I can picture that face. Gedalia Braverman; I can remember all their faces, but I can't remember everybody's name.

SS: So what did you guys do?

VM: Good question. I can recall what – I think ours wasn't visually the best. I think there were other groups that stood out better than we did.

SS: Like who; who impressed you?

VM: I loved the lab coats with the blood all, bloody hands on them, and – it's – I think that's the group that stands out for –

SS: Did you stay in that affinity group?

VM: No, we didn't – it didn't really, it didn't go on, really. I think for a lot of us, it was our first action, so we were sort of a group of first-timers, in a lot of ways. And after that, many of us kind of found our places.

SS: So where was your place?

VM: Well, just after that, I took over as a chair of the Outreach Committee. Liz Tracey had had it. And I took over from her. And then, and Vincent [Gagliostro] started coming to the meetings, and then we just sort of just became co-chairs. We never even discussed it or voted on it; it just happened, it just was that way.

SS: So what was the job of the Outreach Committee?

VM: In many ways, it was to put together ACT UP's propaganda. And Vincent is so genius at art direction that it was just really, it was – we would just, each week, we would just try to come up with some new, great propaganda. Or of course, if we were working on an action, then we would be working on specific stuff.

SS: So what was your goal in the Outreach Committee?

VM: To bring in more people, and to – it depended. If we were working on an action, then the stuff was intended to add to the action. But ultimately, the goal was to reach out, and to get more people to join the group.

SS: So can you give me some concrete examples of things that you guys did?

VM: There was the – well, I mean, as far as supporting actions, the thing that came out of – when we were trying to – not really boycott, but to, when we were pointing out Gina Kolata’s misreporting in the *New York Times*; the stickers that said, “Buy Your Lies Here,” and went on to the machines; that came directly out of the committee.

SS: Let’s talk about that. Can you explain what the issue was; what she was doing, what the problem was with the *Times*?

VM: Well – I can’t speak to the actual specifics of it, because I really don’t remember. I just remember that there were – that people who knew more than I know, I would say; people who knew more than I did about the reporting felt that the reporting was inaccurate or misleading. I think that mainly that information came out of the Treatment and Data Committee, and – basically, I always thought that everyone at T&D was so smart that all they had to do was say it, and I’d believe it. So –

SS: So what did ACT UP do to try to correct that?

VM: Put pressure on the *Times* to create a situation where she either had to – certainly to put pressure on the *Times* to make sure that the reporting was correct. And when – I think by doing that kind of action, where we were saying that there were actual lies in the paper, I think created an atmosphere that the *Times* had to address it. It was, they couldn’t just leave it alone. If the charges are correct, then there’s a serious problem at the *Times*.

SS: So you guys made up stickers and put them on the newspaper boxes?

VM: And passed them out.

SS: Now we need to say that, first of all, newspaper boxes were a brand-new thing. And so were stickers.

VM: Right.

SS: So the idea of making up stickers and putting them around was also a new thing. People had them on their jackets, right? It was part of the style of ACT UP.

VM: Right.

SS: Because to a modern ear, it doesn't sound like – putting stickers on newspaper boxes –

VM: Right.

SS: But how does that bring people into an organization?

VM: Well, in that case, I was saying that this was, that outreach was supporting a specific action, and that was the case. So it was not necessarily, that was not necessarily outreach to bring in people, into the organization, but it was to support an action. ACT UP as a whole had decided to start this campaign against the *New York Times*, so therefore we were supporting it with our own campaign.

Tape I
00:30:00

As far as outreach goes: we certainly continued on – again, I told you that one of the reasons that I came into the organization was the “1400 AIDS Deaths: Haven't You Been Silent Long Enough?” Well, we kept that going; Richard Deagle and I did the Koch one, where it said, I think it was, at the time, 14,000 AIDS deaths. And then we said, “How'm I Doin'?” because that was one of his, he would always say, “How'm I doin'?” when he was out on the street. So we, and we made those specifically so that they would fit in the overhead subway ads. Which I always – for me, I always loved

putting up stuff in places that looked like they were real, looked like they were supposed to be there.

SS: So you would go onto a subway car, and get on the seat, and put it up? And what did people do when you were doing that?

VM: Well, in that case, most of the time people would be cheering and laughing and clapping and stuff. We also – moving ahead a little, we also did the same thing with the Stop the Church thing, where we did the “Know Your Scumbags” poster the exact size of the ad that’s at the door; where the doors are, just to the right, there’s a sort of almost square one there. And we did it to fit that size.

SS: Do you remember how many you guys put up?

VM: More than hundreds, for sure.

SS: Okay, so let’s talk about Stop the Church.

VM: Okay.

SS: So how did that come to be?

VM: Vincent Gagliostro had a lot of it correct. I lived on 43rd Street, not 34th Street, so he was a little dyslexic, maybe. I remember specifically; the impetus was that O’Connor, Cardinal O’Connor had been meddling in the public schools, and lobbying against two things: the Children of the Rainbow curriculum, which was about to be implemented, which was basically trying to teach kids about differences, and tolerance of different communities, including the gay community. And also, there was the issue of condom distribution in schools. And it was me and Vincent Gagliostro and Robert Garcia were hanging out. And we had had more than a few cocktails. And I said, if he’s

going to go meddling in the public schools, then we should just shut down his cash machine, and close the church down. So that's how it came about.

SS: How did you sell it to the floor?

VM: There wasn't much selling that was needed, honestly. We proposed it to the floor, and it was almost immediate support. There was a couple of, a couple of people spoke against it, just about people's right to worship, and things like that. But in general, I remember Bob Rafsky just going on and on, and saying that we need to do this. Any resistance we got mainly came later, when we tried to reach out to other people, particularly when we reached out to Dignity to see if they would join with us. And they did – they did, but they were always, they – their big concern was about nothing happening on the inside. And we didn't plan anything officially for the inside; but we kind of knew that things were going to happen anyway.

SS: Well, what was the official plan?

VM: The official plan was just to do a picket outside. And when it became clear that people were going to do something on the inside anyway, what we tried to do is to steer it so that whatever happened on the inside would happen during the homily, which is the non-sacred part of the mass. It's where the priest or the bishop or the cardinal says his own opinion to the congregation. So it's not classified as part of the sacred liturgy –

Tape I
00:35:00

SS: Now how did you find out that something was going to happen inside?

VM: Oh, people made it very clear that they were going to do it.

SS: Who? Who made it –

VM: Petrelis; I want to say Neil Broome was very vocal. I could be wrong about that, but I'm pretty sure. Michael Petrelis was screaming about it at every meeting, basically, that he was going inside. And other people – made it clear that they were going to go inside, but that they planned on remaining silent, and that it was going to be a silent thing, and that they were going to do it during the homily, and –

SS: And how did you feel about that?

VM: I've got no problem going – as far as I'm concerned, the Catholic Church has caused more death and destruction and more chaos and problems on the planet than anything else. So I don't have a problem challenging them, or anything. But my concern was just that we wouldn't lose the message, because we didn't want it to be seen as just having, throwing a tantrum at the Church; we wanted it to be about specific issues, and to counter them.

SS: So how did you build the coalition? How did WHAM get involved?

VM: I went to WHAM! directly, and explained what we were doing. I guess I should explain what WHAM! is?

SS: Yeah, sure.

VM: So WHAM! was Women's Health Action and Mobilization. And they were a group of people. There was some overlap between members of ACT UP and members of WHAM!. But they were, at the time, supported mainly by the Catholic Church. Operation Rescue was going to women's clinics that do abortions, and shutting down the clinics, and blockading them, and harassing women on their way in. So WHAM! was escorting women past these blockades into the clinics.

So it was a natural coalition for us to do. And again, I went, explained the idea behind the action, and they immediately said, let's do it. Convincing the groups to come along was never the problem.

SS: Who else was in the coalition?

VM: Well, it was Dignity. But Dignity was the only – the tough part. But on the other hand, we didn't really care if Dignity did it. We invited them in as a courtesy, really, to be a part of it. They had been protesting the Church since they were excluded from – Dignity was a gay Catholic group, and they had been meeting regularly in Catholic churches. And then, under Cardinal O'Connor, he booted them all out, and said there was no place in the Church for them. So my personal opinion: if the Church says we don't want you, you go and make your own church. But, they seemed intent to fight their way back in. I have respect for that, but it's not what, I wouldn't do it.

SS: Are you Catholic?

VM: I was raised Catholic. But sort of that hippie Catholic, with nuns with guitars and things. {LAUGHS}

SS: So how did you build for the action?

VM: We just started – we really did a major media – mainly posters and things. But we really did a big campaign for it. And from the beginning, we always said it would be a massive protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral. And as it developed, it just, it did seem more and more that it was going to be huge. And it was.

JAMES WENTZY: Can we change the tape.

SS: Okay, change the tape.

SS: So what was it like for you that day?

VM: The day of the action?

SS: Um hm.

VM: Well, we couldn't believe it. We were just, we were beside ourselves, we couldn't believe how many people showed up.

SS: How many?

VM: It was probably around 5,000 people, I think. From very early — even before whatever the announced time was — Vincent and I were looking at each other, and we would go, oh my god, it's going to be huge. And it just kept getting bigger and bigger. It was bigger than we thought it would be, yeah.

SS: So what happened? What did you do that day?

VM: Again, I really was just, I was coordinating. So I didn't go inside. And most of the actions that I ever was involved with, I really didn't — wherever the most action was, I wasn't there, because very often, people — that's where people always want to be. And so I always felt a sense of responsibility that we had to be on the outside, to make sure that we took care of the people that got arrested. And very often, that was the piece that nobody really wanted to bother to do.

SS: How many people got arrested?

VM: God, I think it was — I don't remember exactly, but I think it was a hundred and twenty, or something; a hundred and thirty. And I think about half were outside, and half were inside.

It's one of the things I'm the most proud of that I've ever done, there's no question. The situation with the press, after the fact, was really, after the action had happened, I felt like it was a failure, because I felt the message got lost, because of the

whole Tom Keane throwing the host on the floor thing, and everything. And I do wish – I love Tom, and I don't hold anything against him. But I wish that it hadn't have happened, because I felt like that became the focus, and it was not, that's not what it was about. But on the other hand, had it not happened, they probably would have focused on something else.

But the thing that really got me — and I guess this was about two — well, leading up to it, the night before the action, as usual, Ann Northrop gave one of her speeches on sound bites. And her advice was that we're not trying to convince people to change religions, and we not trying to say that their religion is no good, and we're not trying to convince them of anything other than we're trying to get the public to understand that we are the ones fighting for people's lives, and they are the murderers, and they're the ones who are fighting against it.

And so after the fact, at the follow-up action, and I think that people were really, that the organization was very beaten down – because this was a whole week of press. It was not, it wasn't just that we got bad press out of it for a day. This was an entire week of press where every mayor and governor and everybody weighed in on it, and they were all against us. No one stood up and said, no, well what they're saying is right. We were universally condemned, universally despised for having done it.

Tape II
00:05:00

But about two weeks later, the Catholic Church was opening another hospice for people with AIDS. And Gabe Pressman, who's – is he still on here now? He was the old, crusty news reporter on NBC here. And he asked Cardinal O'Connor: Don't you think it odd that you continue to open up hospices for people to die, yet you oppose condoms and safe sex education?

And that question would never have been asked – in New York, the press did not ask questions of the cardinal. They only took what he said, and reported it, and they never questioned him. They didn't treat him as any other political figure. He had always been completely unchallenged. And it was the first time, ever, that I had seen it done.

And then I knew that we won. It was the time that made everything change. And to this day – now you talk about the cardinal, and they're like, well, who is the cardinal? The Church does not hold the power that they once had in this city. And I believe that it was our doing. I think we did that. We did do that.

SS: And what was the impact on you personally?

VM: Certainly – certainly pride. I talk about this all the time. I'm proud that we did it. I talked about this yesterday with a woman. She grew up in Ireland, and she had all kinds of problems with the Catholic Church, and her mother was a devout Catholic, and would invite the priests over. And they'd always say, now, Father So-and-So's coming over today, and I want you to be on your best behavior. And she said, well, as long as he's on his behavior, I'll be on mine.

And it's, the thing is that for me, it's – I don't believe in untouchable and unquestioned authority. I believe in questioning authority. And in this city, at that time, there was no higher authority that was unquestioned than the church. Politicians were always questioned, and any kind of leaders — business leaders and civic leaders and everything all were questioned — but the church was hands off. And they are responsible for so much misery in this world, that for them to say, how dare you question us; how dare you not let me question you? It's just outrageous.

SS: What were the consequences for ACT UP of the action.

VM: Again, I think it was short-term condemnation, but long-term respect. I think it – we did what we set out to do, in that respect. We set out to minimize his power, to minimize his influence with politicians; and we succeeded in it.

Certainly, as we continued on, people and corporations and institutions understood that we were serious, that we were going to, and that if we were going to go after you, there were going to be serious problems for you. As we started targeting the drug companies more specifically, they really grew to fear us, for good reason. Because we'd go in there, and – the Stock Exchange action, where Burroughs Wellcome lowered the price of AZT, 20 percent the next day, or whatever it was, and said it had nothing to do with it. Come on; clearly it did.

SS: Let me ask you a kind of larger spiritual question. What was it about the type of person who was in ACT UP that enabled them to see that these structures were false, and that it was right to stand up to them, when most people can never do that?

VM: Well, I think that for gay people, especially people raised Catholic, they understand the hypocrisy of the Church unlike anyone else. I think a large number of people have had, if not been abused by priests; had been in the realm of this hypocritical structure that clearly –

Tape II
00:10:00

And I don't completely blame – well, I can't say that.

For years and years, for probably hundreds of years, the Catholic Church was the dumping ground for gay people. It was really the only – if a family sensed they had a gay child, well, what did they do with them? They made them a nun or a priest, so

that they were celibate, allegedly celibate, so that they – and of course they were held in extremely high esteem, rather than being the town fag.

So there's no question that the Church was a dumping ground in this way. But the secrecy and the lies and the duplicity that came along with that — because of course, their desires didn't go away, and didn't change — and they had no outlet for adult connections. So these connections between children, or vulnerable people in the church were their only sexual outlets.

So I see it as a much bigger, complicated mess of self-loathing and self-hatred. Not to make light of it, or to think that it's okay. It's just that I think that it's part of the complicated thing of why there is so much self-loathing and so much hypocrisy in the church, because it clearly was the place that people were dumped.

SS: Well let me ask you a little bit of a different question than that. Because you were saying that ACT UP also brought this to the *New York Times*, brought this strategy to pharmaceutical companies. Most gay people were not in ACT UP. In fact, most people involved in AIDS were not direct-action activists.

VM: That's right.

SS: So what was it about the kind of person who joined ACT UP that enabled them to stand up to the most powerful institutions in the country? What was the characterological issue?

VM: I think it was the fact that we were together in it. For instance – also, slightly off the subject, but I think it speaks to it.

I had not been tested for HIV until around the time of the Church action. I had been tested, but I didn't go back for my results, three times. And I finally had the

nerve to do it, and did it, because I had all these fierce people around me who were positive, who were living, who were going on, and were powerful, and getting all these powerful things done. And it gave me the courage to go and do it.

And of cour-, and I tested positive, and, and, and I've been completely healthy; relatively healthy since then, in 1989.

I think it's the same thing. It's that we had all these people with us. We were doing it together. And we had some of the most incredible minds and talents with us as well, who knew these – who could do these incredible things. And it just was empowering. It was that we were together in it, and we were together, united, on a mission.

SS: Would you mind telling us what medications you're taking?

Because we've asked everybody who's positive.

VM: Sure. For years, I've had much more trouble on medication than not. I had kidney stones, I used to have chronic diarrhea. And I was relatively unmedicated since around 2000. But recently, my numbers were not as stable. So I now take Reyataz; Reyataz, Norvir, and – I have them with me. There's one other one. It'll come to me in a moment.

SS: So were you involved in getting any drugs released when you were in ACT UP, now that you're taking?

VM: In a support role, I would say. Certainly, we would – if a committee came to us and wanted us to put something together for them, we would do it. But in general, I wasn't – it was not – I didn't see it as where I worked best.

SS: So testing positive; it didn't change your activist trajectory?

VM: Not to the point of emboldening me, or the opposite. I'd say it was – sort of interestingly not important. It just didn't – I had already assumed I was positive. I didn't really expect – I certainly didn't expect to be negative. And I – not much changed. I didn't cry, there was no drama over it. It was just like, all right, well –

SS: So did you go to other people in ACT UP for information about how to proceed; about what kind of decisions you were going to make?

VM: At least then, I was extremely – now I'm overwhelmed; I can't even keep track of the drugs. There are so many – I was just in the doctor's office, and I was looking at all the names of the drugs, and I was just like, wow, this is completely overwhelming. I have no idea what half of these things are.

But at the time, I knew about almost all of the drugs; mainly because of Treatment and Data coming to the floor, and talking about it. Also, at the time, I really believed in enrolling in drug trials. So I was in a Department of Defense vaccine study for almost five years. It turned out that I was on placebo, and that the drug didn't work anyway. But in the end, it was probably a good thing, because now the more standard of care is to not treat early, and to treat later. So it basically kept me treatment-naive for a long time.

I also was one of the first eight people in the world to get Ziagen, which worked pretty well for me as well, at the time.

SS: Did your experience in ACT UP help you become one of those eight people?

VM: Yeah.

SS: It got you access?

VM: Oh, definitely.

SS: Can you explain how that worked?

VM: Well, again, it was just the information that came to the group every week. And often, it was – I know a lot of people sat there, and just, their eyes would glaze over, and everything. But for me, especially after testing positive, A) I wanted to know what the most cutting-edge drug was. And I also wanted to be a part of collecting the data that would prove or disprove it.

So the weekly reports from Treatment and Data were key in getting –

And newsletters, like *Treatment Issues*, or Project Inform as well. I used to really absorb as much information about drugs as possible.

SS: So do you think it's fair to say that people who were in ACT UP had better access?

VM: Oh yeah. Definitely. Ultimately, we knew more than a lot of doctors. I would go in – I remember specifically two separate times, when I went in to my doctor, and I said, look, I want to get this drug. And he would be like, all right, I'm going to have to do some research; I don't know what you're talking about.

So we definitely knew a lot more than the average doctor.

Of course, doctors, especially at that time, were completely overwhelmed with the patient caseload that were overwhelmingly getting ill and dying. But on the other hand, they really should have been further up on the new drugs.

SS: Did you ever have a hospitalization?

VM: No.

SS: Okay, so now you're the head of the Democratic Party in the Hudson Valley?

VM: :{LAUGHS} Well, in the City of Hudson.

SS: What was your relationship to the Democratic Party at that time? And what was ACT UP's relationship to the Democratic Party?

VM: Certainly I've always been a Democrat. I've always been a liberal Democrat, a socialist Democrat, or whatever you might want to call it; with a little libertarian thrown in.

ACT UP's relationship with Democrats in general, I think, was that of – a natural – alliance; yet we were not afraid to challenge them when we felt they weren't doing the right thing. We had certainly a better relationship with Democrats than with Republicans.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: Did we ever endorse any Democratic Party candidate?

VM: I don't think we endorsed anybody, ever.

SS: What was the Democratic Party's relationship to AIDS at the time?

VM: It was a time when the Democrats – we had a – we went from the days of Reagan to the days of Bush with very little congressional support for much of anything. So whatever we were getting, we were getting because we were screaming to get it. I wouldn't say that the Democrats were completely supportive, because they weren't. But they were more supportive than Republicans, but still not overwhelmingly so.

It was also a different time. Now, we're talking about gay marriage in New York. To be perfectly honest, I never thought I'd see the day. I just didn't think, in this country, that it would happen. At the time, sodomy was still – that wasn't overturned until just a few years ago. But sodomy was illegal in 38 states at the time. It was a very different time. Things changed when Clinton took office, but certainly not to the extent that we had hoped.

SS: Can you explain what that was like for you, when Clinton got elected?

VM: Well certainly, after, I guess it was 12 years of Reagan and Bush, it was a breath of fresh air. It was the first time that we even had a chance at having some of our issues heard. It was such a change that people were just thrilled. We also had a big – I guess around the same time as when Dinkins got elected here, as well? Is that right?

SS: I don't know.

JIM HUBBARD: He got elected in '89.

VM: Right.

SS: Do you think – did it pay off?

VM: I think so. One thing that I think is surprising is the way that [George W.] Bush has dealt with AIDS in Africa. It's almost shocking, and it's something that Clinton didn't do. While Clinton focused a bit on the domestic AIDS crisis, Bush has surprisingly dealt with the international AIDS crisis, which is to his credit. I can't, I don't have anything else good to say about him, but that's one thing that I can say.

SS: Do you think that Clinton's election had any impact on the demobilization of ACT UP?

VM: I want to just try to understand the years. I'm really bad at this stuff. So Clinton was elected in '92, then.

That's probably part of it, yeah. That's probably a big part of it. I think that people – of course, it's multiple layers. There's no question. The availability of drugs, and the break in the incessant death rattle was clearly a big issue in the demobilization. Certainly burnout and – I did six or seven meetings a week, and was – and we all were, we all, in our different ways, were working in that kind of hyper mode, because we did believe it was a matter of life and death, and it was a matter of life and death.

I think it's multilayered; I think that you're right; I think that Clinton's election had a piece of it. I certainly think the availability and the development of new drugs, and the slowing of people dying probably had the biggest impact, I think.

SS: Okay. Now to what do you attribute the high infection rates that we have right now?

Tape II
00:25:00

VM: {SIGH} I've thought about this a lot. I have a book in my head that I've been toying with for the last 10 years.

Again, I think it's extremely multileveled. I think that culturally, as the AIDS crisis got worse and worse, and people wanted to hear less and less about politics and about problems in clubs and in the ways that we socialized; I think that it got to the point where having a party in a club was putting three very muscle-bound guys on a box,

and they were healthy because they were big and strong, and therefore – you couldn't see AIDS there.

And I think that as we moved further along, the hypermasculinity, the hyper-muscle-bound steroid vision of men, gay men and health, I think is the direct result of this thing that happened.

And it also was, when we look at the way that the club scene was at the time, before — what we were talking about with the Pyramid, and the places where I felt the most comfortable; Danceteria — were complete integrated. Everybody was with everybody, and there was no segregation. But during AIDS, people tended to go to their own corners. Straight people didn't really want to hang out with gay people, and gay people were just tending to their own, and dealing with all the problems that were around it.

And I feel like – can you repeat your question, though, because I want to give you –

SS: To what do you attribute the high infection rates of today?

VM: On a different – so – and like activists at the time said, when they started closing down bathhouses, and started shutting down sex clubs where information was readily available; condoms could be readily made available; it did drive all of that underground, because it didn't stop, it never stops. But now, there are no central locations to access people there. I certainly think that the rise in crystal meth has clearly made a major difference in it. I see a lot of young kids become infected; and of course, the treatments being there make it less important to them.

And then I think the discussion that happened — and I'm torn about it, of course — but the discussion that happened with groups like Sex Panic and with barebacking; with positive guys saying that they feel it's okay to bareback with each other; by extension created an atmosphere where people felt less and less — there was less and less peer pressure to use condoms every time.

So like I say, I think it's multileveled. I think there's a lot of different reasons behind it. And I don't think that they're easily attacked, because there are so many different pieces of it.

SS: Okay. When did you leave ACT UP?

VM: Well, I'll tell you a little bit about what got me so disheartened, and why I got so beaten down.

Whenever we would do a demonstration — so in addition to Stop the Church, I also proposed and then organized the Day of Desperation. Larry Kramer and I had proposed originally that we were going to shut down all the bridges and tunnels in a single day. And that became Day of Desperation.

The biggest problem that I would have, just on a psychic level, and just a personal level, was that when we do these very successful actions; and then we'd come in the following Monday, and people would just tear us up, over the fact sheet not being translated into culturally sensitive Spanish; even though we translated it into Spanish, it was translated by somebody who speaks proper Spanish, and not street Spanish. And, and things like that. And it was always the same people that criticized. And they —

SS: Do you want to say who they are?

VM: Well, particularly, I would – Dan Williams was one, was one of the major, was always one of the major people who would go after me particularly. I’m the kind of person that it’s like – I say “thank you” to people for doing things; I tell them how great, how much I appreciate things. It’s just who I am. But when you pull off a demonstration of, whatever it is; it was 600-people at so-and-so; and we got great press and everything. And instead of a pat on the back, instead of a thank you, it was always some nitpicking over – and it was particularly over minority issues. And the thing is that – and I told you earlier — I grew up in the black community; I grew up with a black stepfather. I’m very attuned to the problems, and I understand, and I really am sensitive to them. But on the other hand, do something! Instead of the constant criticism, then help! Help us translate it! I don’t have anybody who can translate into culturally sensitive Spanish. Will you take it and do it? No, they wouldn’t do that.

Those are the kinds of things that really, really got to me. And I think for a lot of people, when, I think it’s the pivotal moment. When Dan Williams got caught stealing all the money and everything, and then just stood up and said I’m a crack addict, and I’m a black man, and da da da da da; and basically walks away from it. When, if it were me, I would have gotten strung up. Let’s just be, let’s just be real. And that kind of – this kind of — playing on liberal guilt, and using it to – and not correct advantage – it just was really unacceptable.

SS: Let me ask you a really tough question. Because I just want to say that almost everyone who was in ACT UP felt persecuted at some point.

VM: Right.

SS: It's very, very common. And so I've been asking a lot of people the same question. When you come in, and you've done a really productive action, and you've really done your best, and you've had a great result: and you're coming into a room of 200, 300 people; and one to five people are saying negative things to you; why does that dominate the experience of being in the room with all those people?

VM: Because often, the room goes along with it. It isn't only the five people. It's very often – very often, the room would go along with it. Because they didn't know how – I think not in a mean-spirited way; because they didn't know how to maneuver the discussion in order to say what needed to be said.

I'll tell you: I use this kind of stuff all the time now. I learned a whole lot of lessons in ACT UP. Where I live, in Hudson, and in the city that I'm Democratic chair; it can be very divisive. We have a very poor, mostly black and Bangladeshi community; and then a very rich, white area, on the other side; and a more mixed, straight section on the other side. And something that I used, even just this past week: we were talking about how the mayor of the city often uses divisiveness like this in order to split us and keep us divided. And I was just like, we have to stand up, and we have to say, No, that's not what's going on here! He's not a racist; he didn't do this because he's racist. And you have to stand up, and you have to fight against it. Because people can play to unconscious stuff that you've got going on. And unfortunately, I think not enough people stood up and said, no.

This wasn't a racist thing. This may have been thoughtless, and they may not have covered every single base, and we have to do better next time. But this was not

a bunch of white boys being racist. And I feel that's a piece that was missing at the time. There were not enough people that felt comfortable enough to do that. Because they knew that if they spoke up, that they would be attacked as well.

SS: I want to –

Tape II
00:35:00

VM: And often – really meanly; really not – we can disagree on all kinds of different levels. But the level of dialogue sometimes wasn't correct.

SS: I want to go into Day of Desperation, but I want to ask one more thing about this. Do you remember a time when things that happened in ACT UP that were racist got addressed?

VM: I can't really name a specific time or specific incident that was racist. I can think of things that might have been racially insensitive; maybe not thinking. But mainly because they were – that's about people's experience. That's about me not considering what it might be like for a black woman, mainly because I don't know a lot of black women, or I haven't been around a lot of black women, or in my case – this was a constant sticking point for us, was these translations.

And my boyfriend at the time was Puerto Rican, grew up in the Bronx. And he was doing the translations. But it was like – he was too educated, or something, for what they were looking for. And I am clueless as to the nuance of it. I don't get it.

So – was it racially insensitive? Yeah. I guess, because I didn't, because I don't come from that experience. But on the other hand, no one stood up and took, no one who comes from that stood up and took that role.

I remember, the one person who actually solved the problem was Roger Black, and I don't know whether he was – from his name, I can't tell if he was – he spoke

Spanish – he was able to translate things into culturally sensitive Spanish that people would accept. Whether he was Spanish or not, I don't know exactly what his story was. But he was the only person, really, who I recall ever standing up and trying to correct the situation, rather than point a finger at it.

SS: Okay. Let's get to Day of Desperation. So how come you and Larry – were you and Larry hanging out and having cocktails? Is that how it came up?

VM: No, no. I mean, Larry and I are not close. We've never been close. But it was during the first Gulf War. And we – and I felt like the organization was at a roadblock, and we couldn't get past it. We couldn't get any press; no matter what we would do, we couldn't get any press. We were dead in the water. And I asked Larry for a meeting, and I went over to his apartment, and we talked about it. I told him my idea, which was to blockade all the bridges and tunnels.

I'm like, look; we'll get press for that. If we have to up the ante and we have to do that, that's what we have to do.

And I think he was really happy that somebody had sort of come up with something that maybe we could break through this. And the following Monday, we proposed it to the organization. And over the course of several discussions and reality checks, basically – it was not going to be possible to do what we had originally proposed. So we kind of focused in on Grand Central Station instead; with the idea of affinity actions happening elsewhere.

So one of the things that I was, I'm still most proud of that happened, and I had been encouraging — at every meeting, I was saying, we got to ramp it up. We have

to do stuff we haven't done before, like break on to the sets of television shows, and da da da da. So then at one point, somebody came up to me, and said, look: we have, we're working on it, so stop talking about it. And I did, and then the rest is sort of history, as far as that goes.

SS: So how did you build for –

JW: Hold –

SS: Oh, we have to change tapes? Okay.

JW: Hold that thought.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: Okay. So, the idea of taking over Grand Central Station: did you keep that a secret? Or how did you handle something like that?

VM: No, we planned it openly. It was the affinity actions that were separate, that were quiet. And I wasn't there, as well. I was back at the office the whole time, because no one would do support. So me and Vincent were back at the office, and we received death threats, and bomb threats all – ever since the – the night before the action was when they busted onto the sets of the MacNeil-Lehrer and CBS Evening News. And from the minute it happened – we didn't even know it had happened; none of the affinity groups told us in advance that it was going down. And then we started getting calls from people. First, just angry calls, and then death threats and stuff.

But the affinity action where they – they look like they were delivering balloons, and then when they got into the main hall, they let the balloons go, and it had a banner on it, and things like – stuff like that, that stuff was all planned secretly. Covering up the train boards, and all that stuff; that was all affinity groups.

SS: But when you announced that you were going to take over Grand Central Station, did the police contact you?

VM: They did – we'd always get calls. But we just would ignore it. They would say, so, what's going to happen, Vic? And I would just say, and I would say, look, what's going to happen. We're planning – you're at the meetings, we know you're there. So what are you asking me for?

At the time, we believed our phones were tapped. But – the reality was that we just, almost everything was planned openly, except for the affinity group stuff, and there was no way for them to really infiltrate that anyway, unless they were in an affinity group. They could be, too, but how many people could they possibly assign to the organization? That's really what it came down to.

SS: So how many people showed up at Day of Desperation?

VM: I think it was around 3,000, something like that.

SS: And how many people were arrested?

VM: That I don't remember exactly. But it was quite a few. I don't think it was – I think it was maybe around 70, or something like that. It wasn't as much as the Church, I think.

SS: And how long –

VM: But they put them through the system, it was a big deal. That was, I remember specifically that it was a much more severe treatment than we'd received before.

SS: I was arrested there.

VM: Were you?

SS: Yeah.

VM: Did you go through?

SS: I can't remember. How long did we shut down Grand Central for?

VM: I don't know that it was that ever really like shut-shut. But – it was – let's just say, very disrupted, and we clearly made the front page the next day, of everything. So it was a, it was – we accomplished what we wanted to do, which was at least just get AIDS in the news for awhile.

SS: Well, the message was more complicated at that point.

VM: Right.

SS: Because there was Money for AIDS, not for War –

VM: Right.

SS: Fight AIDS, not Arabs.

VM: Right.

SS: Which is much more complex.

VM: Right.

SS: And so do you think that that message actually got conveyed?

VM: Certainly it got in the press. Whether we got, whether it matters. Whether it was at a time where we weren't getting anything through. So it was a – it was like a scream in the, in the middle of the desert, really. I remember how frustrating it was. It was just like, no matter what we did, we couldn't get anything through. So it was like – it wasn't that – Money for AIDS, not for Arabs wasn't really –

SS: Not for War.

Tape III
00:05:00

VM: –Not for war – wasn't – it wasn't the official line, or anything. It was mainly the line that was used when they broke onto the CBS Evening News, and it sort of got carried through, but – because if I remember right, the big sign that they put over the train schedule board was also about AIDS deaths. It was only about the number of AIDS deaths again. So – I think it was mainly the affinity group, again, that sort of –

SS: Did that bring us closer to any kind of peace groups? Because this is around the first Gulf War.

VM: The – ?

SS: Peace groups.

VM: I'm sorry?

SS: Peace, antiwar groups.

VM: Oh. I don't recall it ever doing so.

SS: Was ACT UP ever to really be in coalition with non-gay organizations, or non-AIDS organizations?

VM: Except for the Church demonstration, I don't think so. But I think that it was – I think, for a lot of it, we were often fending off other groups trying to infiltrate. Because we were the only ones getting anything really done. If you remember – when I first joined, one of the big things was that International Socialist Organization, right? And then the New Alliance Party made a big play for it as well, for awhile. Sharpton tried to get in as well, at one point. And he was in coalition with Lenora Fulani at the time, as well. Because I remember specifically, we turned down a meeting with them. Vincent and I were contacted by Sharpton's people, and Fulani's people, separately, but they were trying to get us to a meeting together, and we kind of rejected it.

Yeah, I don't think that we ever really, except for WHAM!, successfully worked with another group, but a lot of people didn't want to work with us anyway.

SS: Right. So when did you leave ACT UP?

VM: It was shortly after the Dan Williams thing. I recently — and this sort of blew my mind — there's like a gay and lesbian studies textbook out — I think it's called *We Are Everywhere*¹ — and there's a whole piece on ACT UP, and a whole piece on me, that I had no idea — I can't even say if it was true or not. But it has the ring of truth.

It was basically — I ran for administrator, against Tom Cunningham. And according to this textbook, Larry [Kramer] and Peter Staley and the groups that they represented, basically, had drawn a line in the sand; that if I lost the election, that they were leaving. And they did leave. And Peter formed TAG, I guess, right?

SS: Okay, we need a lot more background. What is “administrator”?

VM: Well, the administrator was the closest thing to a CEO that ACT UP had. And Tom's platform was basically more inclusion, and more — and more — he somehow became the candidate of more inclusion. That's all I can say, really, about it.

SS: But had there been a previous administrator? Or this was a —

VM: Oh yeah.

SS: — newly created position?

VM: No no no no no.

¹ *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (1997), Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, eds., pp. 563-711

SS: Who had been the administrator?

VM: Jason –

JW: Office manager, you mean?

VM: No.

SS: No?

VM: It was administrator. It was – and Jason Heffner was the long-time administrator before that. And was administrator while I sat on Coordinating Committee most of the time. I think that Tom took over from Jason when Jason left, and worked for the National AIDS Commission. I think that Tom took over from there.

And my platform was basically, more actions, more radical, and let's get, and let's get serious here. And it somehow got turned around that Tom was the candidate of – minorities, or the Majority Action Committee, basically; and that I was the white-boy candidate. And, I'm not –

SS: Well, your platform doesn't sound like the T&D platform. More actions? That's not their platform.

VM: Well, no. But I suppose the way that Peter – at least according to this textbook – okay? – And –

SS: Who wrote the article? Do you remember?

VM: No – it's like a standard gay and lesbian studies textbook now; called *We Are Everywhere*. According to the textbook — and it's probably true — that Peter and Larry were looking for a somewhat more centralized organization; that certain more mundane discussions and decisions could be made by the administrator and the Coordinating Committee, rather than having everything go to the floor. And I don't

know that I necessarily was that candidate. But I guess I was more that candidate than Tom was, or something. Tom wanted to continue the situation as it was, and I think that – I was probably advocating more streamlining of some stuff.

I was really surprised to read all this, though. Because I really didn't – at the time, I didn't see it in that way. I didn't see – I certainly was not putting myself up so that I was – it was like, vote for me, or we're leaving. I didn't present that.

SS: Did you lose?

VM: I lost.

SS: And then you left?

VM: It wasn't right away, or anything. I wish I understood the timeline better. But it wasn't that much longer after that, yeah.

SS: So what was the final straw?

VM: Well, again, I think it was this – I mentioned the Dan Williams thing. It was just feeling that no matter how much you did and how much work you did, you were going to get cut down.

SS: What do you think should have happened with Dan Williams?

VM: I don't think that bringing him to the police necessarily would have been the right thing, either. But it was the white guilt that was the problem. It wasn't the result. It was – and it was the fact that this was the person who was constantly criticizing everybody else; that was constantly picking apart everybody else; that was constantly – nothing was ever good enough for. And then – it should have been more of a vindication of the people who had done all the work. And instead, it was just – not even a slap on the wrist. It was just like, oh well; he's a black crack addict; we'll just have to let him go.

SS: And you thought that Tom was the candidate of the – the false anti-racists.

VM: What's that?

SS: You thought Tom was the candidate of the false anti-racists of the organization.

VM: I have a hard time putting it that – I don't think that Tom's motivations were bad, or anything. I just think that it was – I think it was – we just came from different places. He was HIV-positive and was somewhat ill at the time. And he – he certainly was coming from a, we're all in it, and we all have to take care of each other, and – I don't, it wasn't – he wasn't coming from a bad place. I don't fault him at all. I don't think that he was wrong; I don't think I was right. I don't think either of us were right or wrong. I just think that it was just different perspectives. And I felt like he pandered a bit to the community that – could feel left out a little bit.

SS: Okay.

VM: But –

SS: When you left, did you go to TAG, or did you just step away?

VM: No.

SS: Stepped away.

VM: I was whipped. I was really whipped. And just – I needed a break.

SS: All right, well, we're down to the last question.

VM: Okay.

SS: So looking back, what would you say, in your estimation, was ACT UP's greatest achievement; and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

VM: Well, the greatest achievement is what I went back – the original goal of ACT UP was to get drugs into bodies. And when I said earlier that we, I was just looking at the number of drugs, and the zinc finger fusion inhibitors, and all these different things; they just didn't exist. And they still wouldn't exist to this day if it weren't for ACT UP. We completely changed the way that drugs are approved in this country; we completely changed the ability of people affected by an illness to stand up for themselves, and to demand the access to treatments, and also to experiment on ourselves; to allow us to make the choice; I'm okay with this not being a hundred percent approved, and it not being – maybe it will hurt me, in the end. But I'm willing to take that risk. And I think that that's a big step in the right direction, in this country.

And speaking truth to power. And not allowing us to be afraid of making the statements and making – and forcefully demanding what we think is right.

As far as the biggest disappointment: it's disappointing that we haven't figured a way to maintain the struggle, and to morph it into the continuing struggle for what we have yet to accomplish. But I think things are very positive. I think as far as the struggle for rights; we are clearly moving in the right direction. I think that the saddest thing is the wreckage and the dysfunction that the community finds itself still as a result of what was a holocaust. And we still have not figured out how to get out of that yet.

SS: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Victor. Great. That was really helpful.