

**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: **Brian Zabcik**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Brian Zabcik  
September 9, 2008

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So we just start, you tell me your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

BRIAN ZABCIK: My name is Brian Zabcik, and I am forty-four years old. Today's date is September 9, 2008, and we are in my apartment at 123 South Second Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

**SS: Okay, great. Brian, you have so much stuff here that you've prepared for us.**

BZ: Why, is this unusual?

**SS: It is unusual, and we're delighted. Thank you so much. Can we start with those amazing T-shirts? Can you give us a guided tour through the T-shirts?**

BZ: Yeah. The tee-shirts are actually – I thought I had more, and these are not all ACT UP tee-shirts, but I will be able to start with a good story, because this one right here, this is the first Atlanta. It was the first CDC action, but it was the sodomy law protest at the Georgia statehouse, and so this was January 1990. That action was significant for me because that was the first time I got arrested. I had not been arrested, even though I'd been in the group for almost two years at that point, and it was a little bit like being afraid to jump in the pool, and I tried to do a lot of other things besides getting arrested. That was how I got into marshalling, and that was how I ended up working on the Actions Committee, which were the main things that I did first.

Finally, the Atlanta trip just sounded, I don't know, it just sounded fun, and it was a twofer because it was a sodomy law protest and it was at the CDC. There

were a lot of us going down. The group was at a really good point then. The energy was really good, and so I decided to go down, and I also decided that I would go ahead and get arrested.

There were two arrests. The first was on, what was it, Monday or whatever. Anyway, it was at the Georgia statehouse, and that was a protest over the sodomy laws. The reason we were having it there was because it was a Georgia case, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, in which the Supreme Court had upheld sodomy laws. Sodomy is a word that I've always felt really uncomfortable with. It seems like an unnecessary word. There isn't a special word to describe heterosexual sex. It's just sex. Fortunately, I think we've gotten past that point, and now when you talk about gay sex or lesbian sex, you just say gay sex or lesbian sex or whatever. You don't use the word "sodomy" so much anymore. But it was still being used at the time, and it was a word that I was a little uncomfortable with because it's a loaded word. It's a word that's designed to – it's a word with negative connotations. But yet that was what we were protesting, the sodomy laws, and so we had to have it. Okay, so this was the standard T-shirt.

**SS: What's on the back?**

BZ: I'm going to get to that in a moment.

**SS: Oh, I'm sorry.**

BZ: This was the standard T-shirt that everyone was wearing at the protest. Now, I was with a group that was going to get a – it wasn't really an affinity group. We were just, I think – as I remember, we divided up into groups that were going to be arrested, and we were going to be all together. I don't remember who all was in my group, but I know that Steve Helmke was in our group, and he was from, I think,

originally New Orleans. He came up to New York after, I think, ACT UP had their demonstration at the, what was it, Republican convention in '88? He had a little bit of an artistic flare, and so he wanted to personalize our T-shirts. So this is what he put on the back of the T-shirts.

Let's see. The "Remember the Alamo," that was not something that he put on. He just came up with the stencil of the winking anus. I can't believe I'm starting my interview with this. And I can't remember if we discussed this first or if he just went ahead and did the shirts, and if he went ahead and personalized them. I blanched when he brought them back. I was saying, "There's no way in hell I'm going to wear this tee-shirt," because I was already uncomfortable enough. It was my first civil disobedience arrest ever. It was over sodomy laws, and I already explained why I had my internalized homophobia around that term. To top it off, I was going to have a winking asshole on my back, and I just said there was no way I was going to wear that.

It was peer pressure. All the other cool kids are doing it. They finally wore me down, I said, "Okay, I'll go ahead and wear it." Fortunately, it was actually pretty cold the next day, and I had to keep my jacket on the whole time.

**SS: Your black leather jacket?**

BZ: Actually, no, I didn't have that. I'm a Texas farm boy, so I had a denim jacket at that time. Mike Signorile made a comment once. He said, "You know, I really like your style. You have a really good like sense of style," and I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. But I was the one who never had to figure out which black leather jacket was mine at the end of an ACT UP party, because I didn't have one.

Anyway, so that was the T-shirt. I finally decided, okay, I'll just go with it, and so I personalized it, and so I added the – because this was actually sort of the real big pet peeve of mine, I'm from Texas, and the Texas law was still on the books, I personalized it with Texas on the front, and I'm the one who added "Remember the Alamo" on the back. I'm kind of pleased to say that Texas got its due, because it was a Texas case that eventually led to the overturning of the sodomy laws, *Lawrence v. Texas*.

I had forgotten about this T-shirt, and actually I had pretty much forgotten everything about getting arrested those two days at the statehouse and at the CDC. I remember a lot of things from that trip a lot. The actions are not things that I remember. It's funny, when I was going through my stuff, I'd be writing about the trips, I'll be writing about my observations, and we had the protest, and then blah, blah, blah, blah. So I remember nothing at all about the action itself. I know I was there because *The Advocate*, when they ran their story on this action about like a month or two later, they illustrated. I have the clip somewhere but I can't remember where it is. They illustrated it with a big picture by Ellen Neipris that she had shot, and it was of my group.

**SS: Your affinity group?**

BZ: Yeah, my affinity group.

**SS: What were they called?**

BZ: No, we didn't have a name. I don't think the sodomy protest arrest groups had names. We did for the CDC, and my group was the Awning Leapers, and I'll get to them later, because I don't know if anyone's actually talked about the Awnings Leapers, and I feel like I need to represent.

But the sodomy protest at the statehouse, I was there because *The Advocate* ran a big spread across two pages, a picture that Ellen Neipris shot at the demonstration of our group, and there's me. We're all like linking arms, and there's me next to Patrick, and I'm blanking on his last name.

**SS: Moore?**

BZ: Yeah, I think so. Glasses, handsome. If I can find the picture, I'll show it to you later. And his T-shirt, he's not wearing one of these tee-shirts. He's got one that just says in giant black letters on a white background "Anal Sex." So the first time my picture appears in a national magazine, I'm standing next to someone who is wearing a T-shirt that says "Anal Sex."

Now, as I said, I had kind of forgotten all about this action, except for the things that were important to me, like filming, my role in filming *Marta: Portrait of a Teenage Activist*. I'm credited as sound. No, I'm credited as boom on that, because I went around, holding the mic on that.

**SS: This is the Garance tribute parody film, right?**

BZ: Well, that's funny. That's really funny. Did Matt [Ebert] say he attended it? I know you've interviewed Matt.

**SS: Who talked about it? Was it Garance?**

JIM HUBBARD: No, no, Matt.

**SS: Oh, Matt. Yeah, Matt talked about it.**

BZ: Yeah, you don't have that one online yet. That's one that I really want to see.

The way that I talk is I go into a lot of digressions, and I eventually get back to the point of the story. So I actually do have a digression about that, how I got involved with that. We were at the workspace. I think we had already moved. Had we already moved into the Port Authority workspace at that point? Do either of you all remember when we moved into Port Authority? Anyway, we were meeting at the workspace. I'm pretty sure it was at Port Authority, and we were having a pre-action meeting. We were signing up for rooms, and they were passing around the list, and it was four people per room. So there was sort of like we didn't have room numbers, it was just sort of like Room Number 1, Room Number 2, Room Number 3, Number 4, and there were four lines under, for each room.

I was friends with a lot of people in ACT UP at that point, but I wasn't real close friends with anyone in particular, and that was kind of like my situation within the group in general. And so, I had always felt like all the people who were really good friends with each other, pretty much it felt like everyone had come in with a good friend of theirs, and so they always had a buddy, like somebody who was a pre-ACT UP friend that they always did things with, or then they like found a boyfriend in ACT UP, or whatever and blah, blah. I didn't have anything like that. So I was friendly with a lot of people, but I didn't have any close friends, and so there was no one obvious for me to bunk with when we were signing up for room space. So I'm halfway around the room. By the time the list gets to me, it's already been filled up quite a bit, and I'm just sort of like standing, like who do I want to room with?

I look down there, and there's one room that's got one space left available. There are three people who have signed up: Adam Smith, Matt Ebert, and Ryan Landry.

So I actually didn't really know them that well at all. I think Adam and I had had a few conversations. Matt, maybe, and I had said like a few words to each other. Ryan I didn't really know at all. But I thought, "You know, what the heck. I'll sign up for it." Of course there's ulterior motives, because Matt and Adam were two of the most handsome men in the group, and one of my friends who was in the room said, "You know, I want reports. I want reports," after he saw that I signed up. So that was how I ended up in that room.

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Actually, Adam and I ended up becoming pretty friendly after. Matt was friendly to me at the demonstration, that weekend. No, I shouldn't say that. He's always been nice to me. And Ryan. But they definitely were a little surprised. I was sort of like the unexpected roommate, I think. I don't know, maybe they were hoping to just have the room to themselves.

But Matt, to his credit, came up with a room project. He brought his camera down, and he decided that – Ryan was doing drag already, and so Ryan decided that he would go ahead and create the Marta character, and Matt enlisted Adam and me as the crew. So in the credits for *Marta*, it reads, "Boom, Brian Zabcik. Brawn, Adam Smith." So that's my connection with *Marta*.

Now, getting back to the point of the story of the T-shirt, I remember some things very vividly about that action. I remember sharing that room with Matt and Ryan and Adam. I remember *Marta*. I don't remember anything at all about actually being arrested. The second time I was ever arrested, I'm just completely blank. I didn't really remember anything about the pre-action meeting either. That was in '90.



I think that it was about three or four years later, and I was walking down Sixth Avenue, it was a weekend night, and I was in front of the Waverley Theater, now the IFC Film Center, and I ran into Charles King and Keith Cylar, and I guess Charles was part of our arrest group for the sodomy action. So he started saying, “You were just so funny about that tee-shirt, saying you weren’t going to wear it. Do you remember what you said?”

I said, “No, what did I say?”

According to Charles King, I said at that pre-action meeting, “Look, I’m just not that comfortable with my anus.” So that is the story of this T-shirt.

**SS: Okay, great.**

BZ: So to prove that I’m now comfortable with anuses and sodomy, I just spent, what, ten minutes talking about that.

**SS: There you go.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: What’s next?**

BZ: Oh, okay. In the T-shirts. This one, okay, so I’ll go ahead and show it, and then I have to read it. So it says, “Communities coming out taking pride in ourselves, Dykes/Fags/Space. We as members of sexually marginalized communities understand that race, gender, class, age, religion, geographic origin, physical, mental, emotional ability, HIV/AIDS status, and affectional orientation are construed by dominant culture to maintain power and privilege. In reappropriating the notions of dyke, fag, and reclaiming our space, we empower ourselves, creating positive identity

politics, parenthesis, the foundation of coalition building, end parenthesis, and resist/  
challenge/oppose dominant culture.”

**SS: Who made that shirt?**

BZ: I am so glad that we're past theory. I go back and I read my journal, and it's like, my god, did I actually believe that stuff? I actually talked that way?

Anyway, the funny story is about actually wearing this once, and my best friend David Gips, G-i-p-s, who was my best friend in ACT UP, saw me wearing that, wearing this shirt, and he said, “So you are a dyke fag space?” So that is the story on that one.

**SS: Who made that shirt?**

BZ: I have no idea. I think I bought that at either A Different Light or Oscar Wilde [Memorial Bookshop].

Okay. I think this is FDA. We all know and love this one. I think I wore that at FDA. [“The Government Has Blood on its Hands.”]

Okay. This one. Do you remember this one? God, I should have washed these. “Nobody knows I'm a lesbian psycho killer.” This was some dyke activist who did this for Gay Pride '91-92, I think, and this is referencing two things. One was, I think, there was Don't Panic had come out with “Nobody Knows I'm Gay” T-shirts at the time. I think that's all they said. I think maybe there were variations after that, but I think the original one was “Nobody Knows I'm Gay.” The joke, of course, being is you're wearing a T-shirt that says that.

The other half of this was Sharon Stone was in a movie in which she played a lesbian psycho killer. I think was that a –

**SS: What was it called? What's Sharon Stone's big movie?**

BZ: The one where she...

**JIM HUBBARD: *Basic Instinct*.**

**SS: Yeah, *Basic Instinct*.**

BZ: Yeah, *Basic Instinct*. So I don't know. I want to say that Heidi Dorow had something to do with this. It seems like something she would have had a hand in, but it might have been someone else. But, anyway, that's combining those two things.

Okay. This is just the first "Safe Sex is Hot Sex," and our first red hot and blue tee-shirt, which was also too interesting to wear in public.

Okay. This was, again, another T-shirt for the Atlanta demonstration, CDC, CD Atlanta, 1990, "Lick the Sodomy Laws."

Then this is not ACT UP specifically. This was *Disease Pariah News*. Let's see what it says. "More than just an HIV humor magazine." The caption on here says, "The blood of over 100,000 Americans who have died of AIDS, Mr. President. Why, you're soaking in it," which is a parody of Madge from the Palmolive commercials, which no one under the age of forty will probably know or remember.

**SS: So did you really grow up on a farm in Texas?**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: What's the name of the town?**

BZ: Zabcikville.

**SS: Oh, wow, it's your people's town.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Your great-grandfather?**

BZ: Yeah, it's our baronial estate.

**SS: Did your great-grandfather found it or something like that?**

BZ: No. There was one general store in the town. My family moved from the Czech Republic. My great-great-grandfather and his wife and kids moved from what is now the Czech Republic to Texas. They came straight through. There's a lot of immigration straight into Texas. Galveston was sort of like the Texas version of Ellis Island. So the first Zabciks came through with the first big wave of Czech and German immigration into Texas, southern and central Texas, in 1880s.

All the Zabciks, he came over with some of his brothers and sisters, they all bought farms next to each other. There was one general store, and whoever owned the store basically named the town. It's not really a town; it's a spot in the road. But whoever owned the store named the town after themselves. So it was first named Marekville. Then it was named Lugoville. Then one of my grandfather's cousins bought the store, and that was Frank Zabcik, and he named it Zabcikville. Then he sold it to Jerome Green, who still runs the store. It's called Green's Sausage House, and it has the best kolaches in central Texas. If you ever are passing through, I can highly recommend them.

But by the time Jerome Green had bought the store, the State Highway Department had paved the highway that went through there, and they had put up signs on either side saying "Zabcikville." Not even city limit signs, but just markers saying that this is Zabcikville. By that point, the Highway Department said, "No more foolishness.

We're not changing the signs just because the store got sold." So it has stayed Zabcikville since then.

That's where I grew up, on a farm. I went to a very rural country school, four rooms, three teachers, eight grades, about between five to eight kids per class. In my class, there were seven of us, six boys and one girl, which could explain something, I guess. We didn't have indoor plumbing at the school until third grade. Then state law got passed closing down all the country schools, and we got merged into the nearest larger high school, which was not that much larger. In my graduating class there was about fifty, and that was Rogers, Rogers, Texas, which is actually a town that should be known, because that's where Alvin Ailey is from. I actually have a picture on my refrigerator. They renamed Main Street in Rogers several years ago after Ailey. So there's a diptych that I want to do at some point of the street sign in Rogers, which the town looks like *Last Picture Show*, basically. Nice place, good school, love the people there, but even the people who live down there admit that the town is a place to be from rather than a place to go to. So I would do a diptych of that sign and of the Ailey Theater, which is five stories tall in Hell's Kitchen, this glass and steel building.

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Anyway, after high school, then I went to college at UT, Austin. I was there from '82 to '87, and I graduated from UT in late May of '87. That spring I had been thinking about what I was going to be doing after I got out of college, and I didn't want to go to graduate school. I was in a liberal arts honors program, which was a really good program, but it didn't prepare you for anything in the way that liberal arts degrees always do. So everyone in my program was doing graduate work. A lot of people were going to law school. A lot were going into med school. Others were getting masters in

other fields. I couldn't pick anything. There wasn't anything that was standing out, so I figured rather than go to school right away, I'll move to an interesting city.

I'd not traveled that much. All my traveling had been within the United States, except for two road trips during college down to Mexico where we just drove across the border down to Mexico City one long weekend. The biggest city that I had been to at that point was Los Angeles, and I liked it, so I thought that I was going to move to L.A. That was in the spring of '87.

I was having one of those typical collegiate conversations with my best friend Christopher Rao, R-a-o, at one of the cafes in Austin, and we were drinking coffee and staying up till like two or so. Christopher had grown up in New York, and he had a very interesting background. His dad was from India; his mom was from Irving, Texas. They met when she was a student in his father's class at UT. So he had this very interesting background, half Indian, half Texan. He had split his growing-up between living in Austin with his dad and living with his mom, who had moved up to New York to become a playwright, and she had an apartment in Manhattan Plaza. Christopher went to Hunter College High School, and so he basically talked me into going to New York. That was the only reason that – that was one conversation late at night, and okay, and I'm moving to New York.

The thing that made it possible was that my main extracurricular activity at UT, I was working on the student newspaper, which is called the *Daily Texan*, one of the best college newspapers in the country. UT is a very big school. The only college in the country that has a bigger enrollment is Ohio State University. UT's enrollment is – I don't know exactly where it is right now. It was around 45,000 when I was there, and

now I think it's around 50,000. By the time you add in the support staff, the faculty, you've got the size of a small town. So advertisers wanted to reach that by advertising in the local student newspaper, which meant that our paper was pretty rich for a student newspaper.

So we were a five-day-a-week double-section broadsheet, and the staff was all volunteer. But we had a staff each semester, daily staff, of about fifty people. So I worked about three and a half years on there. That was how I went into journalism, and that was actually how I found my career and found my paying work, was working there. A lot of my friends, mostly from the *Texan*, but also from classes, had moved up to New York because that was everyone's ambition, was to go make it big in magazine journalism.

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So Christopher talked me into moving to New York that night, but what made it feasible was just that I knew about, I think it was, ten or twelve friends from UT who had either already just graduated and moved up to New York who were going to move up, and so I knew that I had couches to sleep on. So I figured I've got a lot of couches to sleep on. If nothing happens, if I don't find any work, I'll just couch there for as long as I can, and then I'll come back to Texas and I can do whatever.

So my first plane ticket to New York City was a one-way ticket. The first time I ever came to New York, I moved to New York.

**SS: Were you aware of AIDS before you came to New York?**

BZ: Yeah, oh, god, yeah. I was like scared shitless.

**SS: How did it appear in Austin? What was your relationship to it in Austin?**

BZ: We didn't get a lot of information. Austin's a great place, and it's certainly more in the mainstream now than it was then. But I guess to give an indication of intellectual transmission; I wasn't exposed to deconstructionism in a college class until the last semester of my five years in a liberal arts honors program at UT Austin. This was in the spring of 1987, and when I moved to New York, talking about that Dyke Fag tee-shirt, people talked like that all the time. I felt like I had a lot of catching up to do in terms of learning theory and learning what everyone else was talking about. So the intellectual transmission was similarly slow for information about AIDS.

I guess I should back up further and explain my own sexual history. The first time I had sex with another guy, first time I had sex, period, was with another guy when I was twelve, and on the one hand it was like, oh, this is what I want. On the other hand, it so freaked me out. I had no way to deal with it, and I thought it was so wrong that I just put that literally into a closet, in a box in the closet on the top shelf, and I said, "I can't deal with that now." I had a very active fantasy life, but in terms of my outward activities, I didn't date a lot, but I did date two girls in high school. Again, one, not a lot. I think I maybe had two or three dates with each of them.

But I did take a female friend—I guess this is the way I should refer to her—to the senior prom, and so I didn't have sex other than with myself until I got to college, and even then I was creeped out. I wasn't dating guys. I didn't go to gay bars. I went to adult bookstores. That was the sex that I had, was in adult bookstores, for most of the first four years of my time in college.

I was getting no information. That was when the news about AIDS was starting to come out, and, yeah, I was getting freaked out. I wasn't going to gay bars, so I



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didn't have access to gay media. I did start buying some gay magazines and gay books about my third or fourth year in college. I'm trying to remember what I bought. I probably bought *Christopher Street*. A lot of the information I was getting was scary.

My mom, who's a person I love dearly and who actually is a little bit of an inspiration, even though she doesn't personally see it, for the work that I did in ACT UP. She's a conservative Republican, and she has been active in Republican Party politics in central Texas since the early seventies. The context of this at the time is that Texas was an incredibly Democratic one-party state. Like you say, Texas used to be complete Democratic, and people would stare at you. It's like talking about the Age of the Dinosaurs. But anyone who's from Texas knows this. A Republican was elected governor of Texas in, I think, '74 or '76, and he was the first Republican to be elected governor of Texas since right after the Civil War. The last time Texas had a Republican governor was during Reconstruction.

So, oppositional politics, I learned that from my mom. She believed very strongly in the conservative cause. She believed very strongly in working with the Republican Party. It wasn't even organized at that time. She was a charter member of the Central Texas Republican Women's Club. This would have been around '74 or so.

My grandma was so pissed off at her, because my grandma was a typical yellow-dog Democrat. That expression, I'm pretty sure, comes from "I'd sooner vote for a yellow dog than vote for a Republican than not vote for a Democrat." My dad wasn't happy about it either, not so much because he was firmly Democratic, as it is he was a state employee, and the state government was controlled by Democrats, and he felt like it could cause problems for him.

So she went ahead and did it anyway, and she indoctrinated me. I adopted her politics first, so I was a very eager supporter of Ronald Reagan in 1976, and I even did a poster. Let's see. It was either '76 or '80, I can't remember, she ran the local district office for Reagan. This must have been '76 because Reagan was an insurgent that year, and he was getting no support from the Republican establishment, and he was running a bare bones campaign. So Mom volunteered to run the local Reagan office in downtown Temple. But the Reagan campaign was so poor; rather they figured that it was so pointless challenging in Texas, that they didn't even send her any posters. Graphic design, as you'll see later, is part of my skills. So I made a poster for her, and I did this American flag. I tried to mimic the official Reagan campaign poster and made that for her for the window of her campaign office.

So as Reagan took over the Republican Party, the New Right became more powerful, then you had the Moral Majority. She was not a social conservative to begin with. She was a national security conservative, which was what she was really attracted to Reagan and the Republicans, like "Fight the Reds." It was all about the Cold War. But as the New Right became more powerful and started recruiting, she got drawn into that, and she tells me she only sent one small check to the Moral Majority once, and they put her on their mailing list and sent her their newspapers. I don't know if it was just one small check or not, but the fact is that she was on the Moral Majority mailing list for a while in the early eighties.

I was going to college in Austin, which was about an hour-and-a-half drive away from my parents' farm, so I'd go up on the weekend. At this point, my mom was definitely getting suspicious about me, and it was kind of maddening and difficult to

deal with because she didn't come out and say anything. She would literally beat around the bush. There was one time I remember very clearly. I came up for the weekend. I guess we were outside in the backyard. I guess it was late spring or early summer, and it was twilight, dusk, and I was outside. Mom came outside, and without even an introductory conversation or anything like that, she said, "I want to read you something." She's always saying, "I want to read you something." She's always clipping articles and finding articles in the newspaper and saying, "I want to read you something." She still does that now. So she starts reading this description of what happens to people with AIDS. This is about '82 or '83, and it's awful. Here the thing is, is the Moral Majority didn't have to make anything up. They just had to write the facts as they were about what was happening to people with AIDS. It was like a description of the disease's wasting syndrome, everything.

It was very difficult for me to deal with. I don't know if I actually said, "Mom, why are you reading this to me?" but I was certainly thinking it. So on the one level, it was just very difficult for me to deal with on many levels. I wasn't out, obviously, at that point, and so she was pressing –

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**SS: So your mother—**

BZ: So, yeah, I wasn't out, and so there was that pressure. She was basically trying to force me out, and she was trying to out me, outted by your own mother. Then there was the AIDS scare. I panicked a lot at that time. Anytime I got a sore on my face, I was just convinced that, "Oh, my god, that's Kaposi's."

**SS: Did you have any gay friends to talk to?**

BZ: No. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I remember incident one in particular. I was working late one night at the student newspaper offices of the *Daily Texan* offices, and I went to use the bathroom, and I was in the men's room, and I was looking at my face in the mirror under the fluorescent light, and I was just convinced that this spot on my cheek was Kaposi's sarcoma.

The first time I got any accurate information about AIDS—and I really want to pay tribute to her—is Susan Sontag. She wrote an amazingly great article in the *New York Review of Books*. I don't remember when. I want to say anywhere's from '83, '84, '85, and it was really a piece of journalism. It was very different, I shouldn't say from all of her writing, but it was really more a piece of reporting about this is what we know and this is what we don't know about AIDS. This was the first article that I read that really would tell me what was going on. In particular, that was the first article that told me that oral sex was definitely low risk, or lower risk, or at least not high risk. Up to that point, I was convinced that it was all the same. It didn't make any difference what you did, if you did it with another guy, it was all going to lead to death, or at least to illness. I didn't really know of anyone dying at this point. I don't think Rock Hudson had died at this point, or maybe he had. I don't know. I don't remember whether or not the deaths had started. I remember we started becoming aware of deaths in Texas, at least at this point.

The way I came out, I joined a gay men's therapy group, group therapy, therapy group that was run by the UT Mental Health Services, and there were about a dozen of us. The other guys were really processing issues, and I just wanted to meet someone gay and I did, and he was Mr. GMOC, Mr. Gay Man On Campus. I don't really

know why he was in that group, because he certainly really didn't need to be, because he was head of the Gay Student Association for a while. But we became friendly, and he gave me a call once. He gave me a call shortly after I started going to this group and invited me over for the evening to – he just said, “Come visit me over at – .” He was living over in a co-op, not luxury co-op. Co-op meaning – did they have co-ops at your school? Do you know what I mean?

**SS: I know what you mean, like a cooperative. Right?**

BZ: A cooperative, yeah, like a socialist off-campus dormitory. I realized later that the reason he invited me over, he had just broken up with his boyfriend of several years, and he was basically using me for rebound sex, but that was the first time I had sex with a guy in bed. As we were getting started, I don't remember what we were saying or what the context of this was, but he said, “My feeling is you just treat everyone like a hot potato,” which was good advice. That was like my first –

**SS: What did that mean?**

BZ: Oh, that means that, first of all, you use a condom, that you don't do anything risky.

**SS: So he used a condom?**

BZ: Well, actually, we didn't fuck. It was just oral, and we did not use a condom for that. So I guess at the time we were sort of still thinking. Yeah, I don't know. I don't want to get into that whole oral debate.

**SS: But so you didn't have anal sex because of fear of AIDS?**

BZ: No, because I wasn't ready for it. I don't know. That particular, it wasn't really on table that night. It was just to have some fun.

So that was the first time I had sex with a guy whose name I knew, let's put it that way, and I was twenty at the time. I stopped going to the therapy group because I had achieved my purpose. I had met someone. Nothing really happened with this guy Jake. He was just using me as a quick rebound, and that was it.

But then the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision came down, and I know that that was a big deal in New York. I know that there was a big angry protest here because there was some big Fourth of July celebration. I know that ended up being a big gay protest at that. It was a big deal for me, too, in Texas, and the way I first started publicly coming out.

I guess *Bowers* came out in '85, maybe '86, I can't remember, but the point is, I went to a Mondale defeat party in November of '84 where they were passing out black armbands, and I still have that in my off-campus apartment. So the day after –

**SS: Because you were still a Republican?**

BZ: No, by this point, no. I was moving out of that. The conservative Republican phase really only lasted through junior high and into my first or second year of high school. I had an amazing teacher, my favorite, the most important teacher I had in high school. His name was Robert Ozment, O-z-m-e-n-t. Not was, is, still alive. Great guy. He was a liberal Democrat, and he was very smart and he basically – I had him for four years of math, for algebra and trig and other stuff. But we always ended up talking about politics because I was really into politics at the time. I don't know how it happened, but we just started talking about politics, and basically he out-argued me, of course, because he was like thirty years older than me. But he basically converted me into, not immediately, a liberal Democrat. I supported Anderson in '80.

Tape II  
00:10:00

Then when I got to UT, I finally made the full move into the Democratic liberal spectrum. So Mondale, black armband for that. *Bowers v. Hardwick* comes down. My main social environment was the *Daily Texan* staff, which in many ways was a precursor for ACT UP for me. It was a self-contained social environment. It was both where I worked and it was the people that I socialized with. Classes were almost secondary to what I was doing at the *Texan*. That was my primary social environment.

We came out in the morning, so we always worked on the paper in the late afternoon, evening. So I guess *Bowers* came out that day. So I was in a relatively senior position at that time. I was an AME, associate managing editor, and I wore my black armband to work that day at the *Texan*. So people were asking me, “Why are you wearing this armband?”

I said, “Because of *Bowers*.” So that was how I started coming out in my primary social environment then at the *Texan*. I was pleased to find out that there were definitely other gay people on staff and there had been in the past, there had been openly gay people on the staff, but at the time when I came out, I was the only openly gay person on staff and by the end of the semester, there were seven. So I like to think I got a ball started.

**SS: Then you moved to New York in '87.**

BZ: Then I moved to New York. I thought that I was just going to be couch surfing and would come back, and I started getting work within two weeks. In fact, I got work as soon as I started looking, as soon as I started asking. I did freelance fact-checking the summer of '87 at *New York* magazine, at *US* magazine, and at *Esquire*. I was at New York for about a month, and whoever was in charge of the book reviews for

the magazine, I know this now because I edit the book review at our magazine, when you're the book review editor, the publishers will send you galleys, advanced reading copies of titles that they want you to review, and they'll just send you stuff left and right without you asking for it. So you have a huge pile of books that you're never going to review, you have no interest in them, and so if you're the book reviewer editor, at a certain point you just put them out on the table somewhere in the office and let people just pick them up. I do that now at my magazine.

Well, summer of '87, June and July of '87, whoever was the book review editor at *New York* magazine did that, and I was going through the books, and there was this one book, *And the Band Played On* by Randy Shilts. I actually had not – let's see, had I read the *Mayor of Castro Street* at that point? I can't remember. I may or may not have. But I saw that it was about AIDS. I at least knew who Shilts was, so I picked it up and I read it. I still remember I was reading it on the subway one night coming home from work, and some guy in his late twenties, in a suit and tie, he saw me reading it and said, "What do you think of the book? Is it good?"

I said, "Yeah, it's good." So he at least knew what it was.

And, god, I was so fucking angry after I finished that book. I didn't even know. My attitude was, "These mothers are going to fucking pay." I was just appalled at the lack of response. The comparison that Shilts keeps using in the book is the government's response to Legionnaires' disease, which I think is a fair play. I mean, Jesus fucking Christ, if the government had just done a tenth of what they had done with Legionnaires' disease and had done it right when GRID was breaking, oh, my god, what we could have avoided.



Tape II  
00:15:00

I think that the epidemic would have still happened, but it would have been a fraction of what had happened. If they had moved when they should, if they had moved the way they had done for other diseases, I don't know if this is true or not, but at the time I feel like the deaths or infections would have been maybe a tenth of what they could have been, and we could have possibly gotten to the point where we were containing the disease. I don't know. Maybe I'm completely wrong about that. Maybe the nature of the virus is such that it just would have spread no matter what.

But certainly, the thing that we've been talking about, the lack of knowledge that I personally did not have down in Texas. I have never read that book. I haven't gone back and reread that book, so I can't remember what he talked about most. There was obviously the medical response, but as I remember he did spend a lot of time talking about the lack of public education and the failure of public education, that people figured out pretty early on what was necessary to prevent transmission or at least slow transmission of the virus.

It was the government's function, it was the public health function that the government is supposed to do, that they completely failed to do in getting that news out. That's why I'm talking about that Susan Sontag article. I had to learn how to protect myself from the fucking article in the *New York Review of Books*. That was my safer sex education.

Anyway, the point of this rant obviously is, is that when I did find out about ACT UP, I was primed for it.

**SS: When did you first come to ACT UP?**

BZ: February of '88. So ACT UP was almost one year old at that point, and the way that I first became aware of ACT UP, I'm pretty sure I saw flyers for actions that were, I want to say taped up in the Union Square subway station, just announcements of actions or whatever, upcoming action, because I do think that I had first heard of ACT UP through the fliers that were starting to appear, not the Silence Equals Death. That wasn't on my radar, just like the Xeroxed flyers.

It was either January or February of '88, and at this point, I had a full-time staff job. I did that freelance fact-checking for the summer of '88, and then I got a full-time staff job as a cub reporter at a publication called *Manhattan Lawyer*, which was a spinoff of the magazine I'm currently still working at, called the *American Lawyer*, founded by a would-be media magnate named Steve Brill, who later went on to found Court TV, which is now called TruTV. He also, too, after he lost control of his legal publications, he started *Brill's Content*, which was a media criticism magazine.

Our offices were at 2 Park Avenue, which was between 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, and I guess it was in the lobby of that building, I was coming back from lunch, and there were two guys in front of me, worked some other floor. One of them was talking to the other about ACT UP, and I overheard them and just introduced myself. I just asked them, I don't know, what it was, and the guy who was really enthusiastic about ACT UP was a guy named Mark Carson. So he started telling me, and he said, "You should come. You should come to the meeting. It's Monday night at the Community Center." I remember two or three years later after I had established myself in ACT UP, Mark was introducing me to somebody, and he said, "I'm the one who brought him into ACT UP."

I thought, “Yeah, you are.”

So I went to that meeting, and, god, I still remember that, that first meeting that I went to. That particular Monday it wasn't in the – there was some other previous meeting and the ground floor meeting, and so we were meeting in the second floor meeting room. I could not believe the amount of information in that group. I remember Jim Eigo just gave this – E-I-G-O. Have you all interviewed him?

Tape II  
00:20:00

**SS: Yeah.**

BZ: Amazingly smart man. He just gave this amazing report, detailed report about some treatment issue, and it was just amazing the amount of information that we found out in one meeting. It was like I was reading the *Times*, but I found ten times as much at that one meeting as I had read in the *Times* for the entire previous year.

The other thing was the energy in those Monday night meetings. I don't know if it affected other people the same way, but I would be wired after I left one of those meetings. I could not go to sleep for hours. I'd be walking. I'd be wandering around. My mind would be racing, just with everything that I had taken in. It was just like overload, and it was information overload, it was cultural overload, it was social overload. It was like grabbing onto the third rail. That was what Monday night meetings were like for me, and it was amazing how long that lasted for me. I would say for at least two to three years, every time I went to a Monday night meeting, I would just be so wired after. I wouldn't go to bed until like two o'clock or so in the morning after a Monday night meeting.

So I go to the meeting, they've got an action coming up, and this is actually where I will read from my journal, because the Presidential AIDS Commission

was meeting at the Metropolitan Life Building. So this was just three blocks down from my office. I was at 2 Park Avenue. Metropolitan Life was on Park Avenue South, maybe like three or four or five blocks down.

So this is just something I want to read, because this will also, too, give you an idea. There are a few things. When I was going through my stuff, I realized that I wrote more about ACT UP at the time than I realized, like my assessment of the group, what I thought of the group. So this is what I thought of the group after the very first time going in.

“February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1988, my first participation in a political demonstration. Thursday, ACT UP held a sidewalk protest at the Met Life Building where the Presidential AIDS Commission was conducting its New York City hearings. The demo was slated to start at four p.m. I sat at the office from about three-thirty on, trying to find things to do to occupy my mind, while I was trying to figure out what I was going to tell Christy, my boss, how I was going to explain my absence for two hours. The demo was scheduled for from four to six.

“At noon, I had told Christy I was gay, and I was wondering how she’d react to this (how that came about). Christy ordered pizza from the Ray’s, Famous Original Ray’s at 33<sup>rd</sup> and Madison for lunch for the staff, because we often had lunches in the office, and asked me to come along with her to pick the food up. While walking to Ray’s, I was telling Christy about some of Heather’s Mardi Gras tales.”

Heather was my housemate at the time. She was one of my best friends from UT, worked also on the *Texan*. She graduated a year early, earlier than I. So when I moved up, we hooked up, and she said, “Do you want to get an apartment together?”

So we got a place actually in Williamsburg out on the Metropolitan Avenue stop, and so we lived there from fall of '87 to fall of '88 when she left, and then I moved into this apartment. So that place is the only other apartment I've had. So, anyway, my housemate was a straight woman. I wasn't out to a lot of people, so they thought what was for them the obvious.

Tape II  
00:25:00

“So Christy asked me if Heather and me were, quote, “living in sin,” and I said, “Oh, no, I’m gay.” Then I went on sort of confusedly to say I had trouble convincing my folks that Heather and I were only roommates. Christy didn’t say anything about this, mostly because I kept making conversation during the remainder of the pizza run, and I got the feeling that she didn’t know what to say, though she didn’t seem to take the news quite as nonchalantly as, say, Claudia, who was a fellow reporter on the staff, Claudia who was the quintessence of the broadminded New York Jew.

“So I wasn’t sure how to explain where I was going that afternoon. I composed speeches in my head, and then because Christy got on the phone, I composed notes to stick in front of her, which I kept crumpling up and starting over. Finally, it was four o’clock, and Christy was still on the phone, so I wrote a note simply saying, “I’ll be gone for a bit, but will be back later.” I show it to her, put it in front of her face, she nods, and I leave.

“I walk down the ten blocks to Met Life. The ACT UPpers are already there, marching up and down the sidewalk. I grab a poster, one of the preprinted ones, and I walk up and down in line till about five-thirty. I’m nervous the whole time. The other people get into the spirit, shouting quite loud, “We’ll never be silent again! ACT

UP!” Or “Reagan did the least of all. History will recall,” or other stock chants that I can’t remember.

“But I’m not shouting. In fact, I keep my mouth shut at all times, except at one point when someone brought out a roll of red ribbon, symbolizing red tape, and gives me the front end of it. Then a video camera eyes me, and I half-heartedly join in the chanting.” I remember I was beating on the poster. I wasn’t chanting, but I was beating on the poster. Michael Miles says to me, “You’re keeping a good rhythm. I like it.”

“Okay. Why am I nervous? Why didn’t I shout at the demonstration? One, I don’t like shouting. I enjoy arguing a position, either in conversation or in writing, but I always strive to persuade people by the sheer logic of my arguments. I don’t think I can change anyone’s mind by shouting slogans *at* them. I must reason *with* them, show them the error of their way and the superiority of mine. (Naïve in thinking this?).

“But while I don’t like demanding things — I’d rather ask for them — I have the only-child’s feeling of prerogative. Because I never had to compete for things while growing up, I still expect things to be given to me without my even having to ask for them. Maybe I need to change this notion, realizing sometimes I do have to ask, but still I can’t see how I can ever demand.”

You know, we were all about demands. Like the fact sheets, every fact sheet had to close with a list of our demands for that specific action. So what I’m trying to do with this particular entry is give you an idea of where I started at, and then you’ll see where I ended up.

“Two, my heart’s not in it. AIDS is still something I respond to intellectually, not emotionally, since no one I’m close to has come down with the disease. I can’t get mad about political inaction on AIDS, because no one has been taken away from me. As for less sexual freedom in relationships the gays have to endure, that wasn’t taken away from me because I came out after AIDS changed the rules of the game.” This obviously isn’t quite true, because, like I just said, I got very angry after Shilts’s book.

“Three, I’m not convinced that street protests of this type are effective. To achieve anything, you have to deal from a position of power, and street protesters don’t have any power. I tell myself that this is why I’m working for a newspaper that covers a subject that I don’t care about, to get power of my own in the form of credentials as a, quote, unquote, “responsible journalist” and that after I gain this reputation, then I can cover what I want.”

Then it jumps up. “Four. Let’s face it, I hate confrontation. I hate doing anything that I think might make people not like me. As I’ve said to myself many times before, one of my key characteristics is an intense desire for acceptance, a desire that goes way back into my childhood. This craving for acceptance all too often makes me do things or especially say things that I don’t want to or don’t really believe in that I do or say them anyway because I think they’re what my audience wants to hear or see. But the acceptance craving also prevents me from doing or saying things I might really want to do but which may incur disapproval.

“Because I grew up in such an adult environment –” My parents had me late in life. They were both forty when they had me, and my dad’s aunts and uncles were

actually the ones I called my aunts and uncles. I grew up with my grandparents, so everyone was older, and I was an only child.

“Because I grew up in such an adult environment, infrequently around other kids, I especially feared the disapproval of authority figures, and the paradigm of the authority figure I fear most is not Mom and Dad, I think, but the school authority figure, teacher or principal. So my nervousness about marching was partly based on the disapproval I feared I’d receive from the authority figures around me. One, my editors, since they’re my bosses right now, and I credit them with perhaps an undue amount of control over my current situation; and, two, the police. Strange that I’ve always seemed to have a not fear exactly, but intense apprehension about being around police, strange because I’ve never really had reason to fear cops and because I’ve never had a bad experience with them. But that’s the clue. I’ve never really had any experience with cops, thus I’ve never really learned through experience that policemen are people just like me and that being a cop is their job just as being a journalist right now is mine.

“Instead, I’ve relied solely on what I’ve learned about cops from whatever sources as I grew up, and I came to view them as having the right, authority, and power to do anything to me that they wanted. I’ve always figured that if I got myself into a confrontation with a cop, that he could beat me up, arrest me, and throw me into prison for a very long time if I didn’t do what he said. I guess this is culturally transmitted in that cops is good in a way.” Let’s skip that.

“Anyway, I hate myself for having this deference to cops. It’s symbolic of my deference to almost all forms of authority. Why couldn’t I have been more brash, more irreverent when I was growing up? If I had more often done as I pleased or took



what I wanted when I was growing up, maybe I would be better off now in knowing what I want and getting it.

“How this all relates to the ACT UP demo. The police were there. About twenty officers plus plain clothes higher-ups, to our 200 to 300 protesters. They put up –” And we’ve got sirens going out the windows right now.

**SS: It’s okay. We’re in New York. It’s fine. All the interviews are like that.**

BZ: There’s a fire station just down the block, so it’s a one-way street here, so whenever they have to respond to a call, they go down my window, which is a problem at two o’clock in the morning.

**SS: Right.**

BZ: “How this all relates to the ACT UP demo. The police were there, about twenty officers plus plainclothes higher-ups to our 200 to 300. They put up barricades around us about three feet out from the building, leaving a path from the sidewalk for people to pass, and about three feet from the curb on Park Avenue.” So what I’m saying is three feet in from the building, three feet in from the curb, so we were in a pen in the middle of the sidewalk.

“We marched between these barriers, and I did feel penned in at times. What was also weird was the one guy with the video camera, who pretty obviously wasn’t from the mainstream or gay media, dressed in a gray suit, white shirt, red tie. He knelt in one place for about ten minutes. The real media cameramen moved around to get to different angles. These things, and his attitudes, that he didn’t look like one of us nor did he look like a professional spectator, i.e., a journalist, made me pretty sure that he

was recording our faces for – am I being paranoid? A week after the demo, the *New York Times* ran a story about acknowledged videotaping by the police of dignity protestors at St. Pat’s.” So that was my first demo.

Let’s see. City Hall was March. Is that right? No.

**JIM HUBBARD: Yeah.**

BZ: No, City Hall was March, but it was ’89. It was Wall Street II, so Wall Street II was my second action, and I’m pretty sure Michael Petrelis burned an American flag at that action. I believe that kind of freaked me out.

So what I’m trying to say here is that my politics were liberal, but I was definitely not radical. I was not like Avram Finkelstein, who calls himself a red diaper baby. I really had had no exposure to radical politics before, to street politics, and this was all new to me. It took me a while to come to terms with what ACT UP was doing and to be comfortable with what ACT UP was doing.

Tape II  
00:35:00

**SS: When did you step into a leadership role?**

BZ: Well, was I a leader?

**SS: Yeah.**

BZ: We didn’t have leaders. You know that. We were all members. We were all members. I didn’t come into the group with anyone, as I said, so I was essentially by myself. It was a thrilling group. I wanted to do whatever I could with them, but I didn’t come in with anyone.

Also, too, very important to keep in mind at this point, the group had gelled by this point. It had already formed a hierarchy. It had already developed its leaders at that point. In fact, it was so far advanced at that point that there people who

were disgusted with the direction it was going at and who were leaving. I think it was around this time Larry dropped off and lost interest, or started to have second thoughts about the group. I remember Mike Nesline, N-e-s-l-i-n-e, saying some critical things about ACT UP that year, too, or about being unhappy about things. And these were people who had been in a year earlier.

So by the time that I got in, the group had already settled on its identity, had already formed a bit of a structure, already established a hierarchy that we denied that it was there. I was trying to find a place for myself, and I had been in other situations like this before, where I was in a new social environment and trying to figure out, okay, how do I find a place for myself. So it's basically by working, by doing. If there's something that needs to be done, you do it.

I think the first thing I started off with staying around to put up the chairs after the meeting was over. Then I realized that you needed to join a committee, and I don't know why I joined Actions, but I did join Actions. Ron Goldberg was the chairman at the time, and I learned a lot from him. He stepped down as chairman. I don't remember exactly when. It's somewhere in here. It was either late '88 or early '89. I was interested in it and I volunteered for it. Other people did, too, and I don't remember how we selected it. I think Ron may have actually designated his successor, but however it was, whoever decided it, they decided that I, at least, was too green, and Andrew Miller was also, too, interested in it. On the other hand, I was green, but I was enthusiastic, so they decided Andrew and I would be co-chairs of the Actions Committee.

So we did that for – that was, I guess, my first leadership position, and Actions really didn't last long. Actions had been big under Ron, but it didn't last that

much longer under Andrew and me, maybe about six months, I think, we chaired the committee and then we disbanded it. It was not because we ran it into the ground. It was because the group had evolved that much more by that point. Because what had happened by that point was that that's when we started forming action-specific committees or working groups or when the committees started doing their own actions.

So there was a very specific plan, which I did feel that I had finally cracked into the inner circle, and that was the FDA demonstration. Part of that plan, I had been on Actions. I was chairing it. I also, too, had gotten involved in marshalling, because as I said, I didn't want to be arrested. I was too chicken to get arrested, but it felt lame to just be walking in the picket. So the way to be involved in an action and yet not get arrested was to be a marshal. So that became one of my specialties. Hats off to Amy Bauer, B-a-u-e-r, and Jean-Elizabeth Glass, Jean hyphen Elizabeth G-l-a-s-s, who taught me everything that I know about marshalling.

Tape II  
00:40:00

**JAMES WENTZY: We have to stop and change the tape.**

Tape III  
00:00:00

**SS: Can you tell us the whole story of the NIH action? Because you were such a key figure in all of that.**

BZ: Oh, okay. Actually, I did want to – because this was an interesting story.

**SS: Okay, go ahead.**

BZ: You were asking leadership role, when I felt that I cracked into the inner circle, that was the FDA demonstration, and that was October 11, 1988, and I was a marshal on that. I was one of the marshals with a walkie-talkie, symbol of power. I was intending to go back to New York that evening after the demo was over, because I was

supposed to be at work the next day. Someone, I can't remember who it was, but suggested or said, "Hey, we're all going out for dinner after the action. Do you want to go?"

I said, "Well, I'm supposed to go back."

They said, "You can crash in one of our rooms," or whatever.

That was the FDA Steering Committee, working group, and I was not part of that committee because I was on Actions, and FDA did the action on their own. But it was the FDA Committee, so I was basically invited because of being around during the day at the demos, asked to go out to dinner, and I felt like I was being accepted in the group. I remember Maria [Maggenti] saying nice things to me, and that was, of course, a certain seal of approval.

Shit hit the fan the next day when I got – well, not the next day, because I didn't get back to work the next day. I called in and told them that I wasn't going to be back the following day. One of my editors, who was my immediate boss at the time, when I did get back to work a day later than I was supposed to, my boss said that our top editor just blew up when she heard that I didn't show up for work that day, and she said, "What does he think? Does he still think he's in school?" meaning in college that you can just sort of skip a day. And that was kind of the beginning of the end of my time as a full-time reporter at the magazine, because the idea with the cub reporters is that you would move up to a higher position.

I just really got sucked into the group and just started spending more time on it, and it was obvious that I was not as interested in working on the magazine. So it was actually in April of '89, a month after City Hall, that my bosses suggested that

maybe it would be a better idea for all involved if I moved out of the reporter position into a freelance copy editor position at the magazine, and that ended up being really significant because basically what happened was, is that from that time on I was working part-time. It was essential because ACT UP at that point had become a job for me, the amount of time that I was putting into it.

That continued. I didn't go back onto full-time staff at the magazine until '98. I left ACT UP in '91, and I tried to find other extracurricular activities to do after that, community health project, *LGNY*, the newspaper that we started up in the mid nineties, and then at a certain point, there was nothing else that I wanted to do, and so I went back to becoming a full-time journalist.

Up to that point, I thought that's what I was going to be, a full-time journalist. That's going to be my career. At that point, I said, "No. This is what I want to do now, is I want to do activism." So I did become a full-time activist at that point.

Let's see. There were some other significant actions. So in '89, like I said, I was a marshal with the walkie-talkie at FDA and then again at City Hall. The DHP demonstration in February of '89, that was a real important one for me.

**SS: DHPG?**

BZ: DHPG. DHPG, Ganciclovir, the treatment for CMV retinitis. We had a protest in Bethesda, Maryland, at an FDA hearing over expanding compassionate use of the drug. That was a very successful action. The FDA released it on compassionate use, I think, like two weeks later, because of obviously what all we did. I can't remember for sure, but I think, reconstructing, I think it was because of my work

with the DHPG action, which was successful, that I started working a lot more closely with T&D, and in particular with Mark [Harrington].

The thing about my position in ACT UP was that I was never really locked to any one committee or affinity group or faction, and for what it's worth, I feel that I had – I don't want to say unique, but I certainly had a different perspective from a lot of people who did stay within one particular specialty. I did end up over time working most closely with T&D because of my personal friendship with Mark. I worshipped everything that he did. If I had to boil ACT UP down, and this is my job as an editor, to boil things down to a simple story that you can comprehend and you have to leave a lot out. The job of an editor is really not what you put in, but what you leave out, and you basically have to leave out just about everything, because most people who aren't familiar with something, it's only going to be the ACT UP obsessives who are going to watch all 101 counting interviews.

When you boil the story down to people who don't know it, you just have to focus on just a few things. That's what I do as an editor. So the ACT UP story for me, I was thinking about it as I was thinking about how to approach this interview, and for me, a lot of people boils down to Mark and Maxine [Wolfe], which is no surprise there. Those are very obvious answers. But there were certainly other poles, but they definitely represented two of the strongest poles within the group, like Mark, T&D, and Maxine, not just women's issues but, also, too, they both work on many levels, and they actually worked against each other in some ways. Mark represented treatment issues. Maxine represented not just women issues, but the whole history of radical activism. There were other people in the group who had been involved in progressive politics besides Maxine,

but she was the one, for me, who was the most articulate and the one who was most constant in expressing a vision of what she thought the group should be.

On the other hand, they flopped in terms of their generational – and that was where Maxine was like Larry [Kramer]. Are they the same generation? I can't remember.

**SS: I think so.**

BZ: Yeah. So they had done all this before with other groups, and so sometimes they had a certain degree of impatience, because they had seen things fail before, and they were unhappy to see ACT UP making what they thought were going to be the same mistakes all over again.

Mark, on the other hand, I place him with myself, Mike Signorile, and a few others. We hadn't done anything before, and so we were like tabula rasa, starting out from scratch. Rather than taking our previous influences into ACT UP, we were shaped by ACT UP. ACT UP was what formed us.

So my ties to people in the group, with Mark, with Maxine, I'm not really sure, I know she did this to other people. She invited me over to dinner at her house several times, and so we'd have these long conversations about politics, like progressive politics and activism, and she'd give me reading lists and books to read. I would certainly say that in terms of how the group should be organized, I almost always went with Maxine's cues on that, because I generally thought that she was right on it.

Other things, though, I'm the only guy who contributed to the women. I'll take that back. Jon Nalley started out on the *Women and AIDS Activism* handbook, the first version. He started out, but he, I don't think, went the distance. So I do want to



make it clear. I did not contribute to the final book, but to the first version, which was the Xeroxed version, I did write a chapter for that.

**SS: What was your chapter on?**

BZ: It was the women's health movement of the seventies, Jane, the abortion self-help service, basically about abortion rights. That was something that was a no-brainer for me in terms of the connection between abortion rights and AIDS work. In both instances, we were trying to work for a solution that would help people avoid being punished for their sexual mistakes, is the way that I would put it. The attitude of the Right, you get pregnant, tough luck, you've got to have the baby. Same thing with gay sex and AIDS. You get AIDS, tough luck. You're sick and we're not going to do anything for you.

So I always saw a very strong relationship between those two. In fact, the last rest of my CD career, my very short and brief CD career, I had four arrests, and the last one was in '92, the Holland Tunnel, closed the Holland Tunnel action when *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* came down. So I was involved with that. Like a bunch of other things, like I said, my affinity group was Awning Leapers. Atlanta trip was big for me.

Also to give you a preview, because I want to save time for it, there were two projects that I was involved in at the end. One was doing an unofficial ACT UP newsletter, and the second was the campaign for national healthcare, and both of those things just got completely lost, because that was when the group fell part. Those were both happening when the group fell apart, and I at least want to see that they get their recognition and get their due. But NIH –

**SS: How did that action come to be, the NIH action?**

BZ: Mark asked me to plan it.

**SS: So how did he ask you? Because we've heard this kind of story from other people about other events. Did he call you up and say, "Hey, listen, we have this great idea. We want you to be the person to plan it"? How did that get carried out?**

BZ: I just don't fucking remember anymore. Christ, that was eighteen years ago. One thing I can go ahead and say is that I can tell you a little bit more about the genesis of the national healthcare campaign, because that I have documented, because I worked on that with Scott Robbe, R-o-b-b-e, and he was originally in New York, and he moved out to L.A. So the precursor of e-mail, we exchanged faxes back and forth on updates on how we were getting our respective ACT UP chapters to come along with that. Mark and I talked a lot. We saw each other a lot at meetings. I didn't go a lot to T&D. I was like a hanger-on at T&D. There was no way I could keep up with those people. They were like research scientists. They all had their dedicated field or drug or infection that they were studying and each would produce some massive sixty-page report like every couple of weeks. When I was going through my folders, probably about half of the papers that I have from ACT UP are T&D reports, and there's one manila folder where the label says "Treatment and Paper Subcommittee." Also, too, Mark and I would see each other socially and at the bars, weekend bar calls, like parties.

**SS: Which bar did you go to?**

BZ: Oh, that's a good story. Has anyone talked about that, the fact that there was always a bar of the moment? The ACT UPpers, they travel in groups, like in crowds. It was like a mob mentality. All of a sudden, someone would decide that The

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Bar on Fourth Street and Second Avenue. My friend Jeff Engel, E-n-g-e-l, had the best name for it. He called it the T-h-e Bar, because The Bar, how do you make it stand out?

I saw that you had an appreciation of Larry Mitchell recently, and Terminal Bar is The Bar. So there was a while when it was The Bar. There was a while when it was Tunnel Bar. There was a while when it was Crow Bar. The original Wonder Bar, the first incarnation of Wonder Bar. I don't think the Boiler Room had been opened at that point. But those were the bars. The two existing bars, of course, were Tele Bar and The Bar, and the two new bars were Wonder Bar and Crow Bar. That was where you'd do a lot of talking, and that's where I'd have a lot of conversations with people. So I don't remember.

**SS: When he said to you, "We want you to organize it," did you feel honored?**

BZ: Yeah. I just said, "Sure."

**SS: Okay, so what did you do?**

BZ: Oh, what did I do?

**SS: What were the issues? Why was there an action at the NIH?  
What were the demands?**

BZ: Okay. Let's go to the papers. This is the short list of demands. "Test all potential treatments immediately." Let's see. I started out doing the graphics for this. I was the one who named the action Storm the NIH, because it was all about branding. At that point, we had had Target City Hall, target, we had had Seize the FDA, seize, so I knew I had to come up with a verb, and I chose storm.

I started out doing the graphics on this, and then Vincent Gagliostro took over. So the first thing, this was the first teaser flier, Storm the NIH, announcing the date. “Federal AIDS treatment research run by the National Institutes of Health, NIH, let the record show ten years, one billion dollars, one drug, AZT.” So that was the first thing that all the NIH had to show for its efforts at this point was one drug, AZT. They were doing more tests on AZT at this point, and I remember giving a speech on the floor, trying to drum up support for the demo, and I talked about the clogged pipeline, and I said that it was like the drug treatment pipeline. There was this giant ball stuck in the middle of it, called AZT, and it was blocking everything else behind it, and we just had to blast that ball out so that this, what I thought, all these other drugs behind it could finally come out.

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Those drugs did come out. It’s worth noting, though, that most of them came out from drug companies, not from the NIH. So I don’t know if we were right about that. I did have the notion that if the NIH would just stop its sole focus, if it would stop just focusing only on AZT, that it would come up with all of these other drugs, and I don’t know that that actually happened.

But another was, study the whole disease. “Many more trials must be started which test treatments for secondary infections and cancers, which look for ways of restoring an HIV-ravaged immune system, and which study means attacking the virus differently from AZT.” So basically, this was not just retrovirals, but drugs against OIs and cancers.

“Third demand, open its now closed committees and meetings. This is basically getting activists and community people involved.

“Four, announce results immediately.

“Five, end medical apartheid. Don’t just test white, gay men; test everyone affected by AIDS.”

So here are some other teaser fliers that I did. This was a good one. “In developing new AIDS drugs, the FDA is only the last roadblock. The NIH is the first.” So I was trying to tie it directly to the FDA action. “The 3 biggest lies in AIDS treatment research,” this is, actually I stole. There was a *New York Post* advertising campaign at the time, like pretty much the same design, three biggest lies in New York. “Three biggest lies in AIDS treatment research. The U.S. is making progress against AIDS. Two, AZT has made AIDS a chronic manageable disease.” We were really hearing that phrase at that point, “chronic manageable.” “Three, government scientists have added years to the lives of people with AIDS,” which was not true at all at the time.

So those were the demands, and there’s actually a much longer list of demands. That’s the short list. Basically, my kind of relationship with Mark was simplifying and translating and popularizing his stuff. He would come up with very, very long, detailed technical proposals, reports, and I felt like my job was to translate it to the floor, and that was what I saw my job, was translating Mark to the floor. And I don’t want to denigrate him. He did a brilliant job of explaining himself to the floor himself, but Mark loves density. Again, as an editor, I knew that you have to simplify the story for people who aren’t familiar with it, so that people who aren’t familiar with the story can understand what you’re talking about. So I was constantly trying to simplify or pare down what he was saying.

I'll give a recent example of this, because you told me, you gave me an advanced warning, you said you wanted to know what did the NIH action accomplish. Quite honestly, I don't know. That was not my department. My job was to run the action.

So, let's see, what did I do? This was the training booklet that I was particularly proud of, "Storm the NIH: Your Guide to Action." "AIDS demonstration and civil disobedience, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, May 21, 1990." We had been picking up government reports, documents, booklets constantly, and so I was basically mimicking their form.

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Somewhere, I'll hold this up. So I had a checklist, so I was running the planning meeting. T&D, they were coming up with the issues and demand sheet, and I was doing the logistics, like getting buses, motel rooms, meeting with the police. That was one of the few times when we had a pre-action meeting with the police because actually I think they reached out to us, because this was coming right after FDA, and FDA caught the police completely by surprise. They had no idea that it was going to be like that. So they thought the NIH was going to be the same thing.

So that was the one time that I took the D.C. shuttle on a business trip. Jill Harris, who was head of legal for that action; John Kelly, who was head of marshalling for that action; and then me who was the logistics guy, we took the shuttle down to D.C. to meet with the police, and they were basically trying to pump us for information on what we were going to be doing. They told us arrest risk and stuff like that.

This checklist right here, this is one page. I can't find the one I'm looking for, but it had a three-page checklist of things that we had to go over.

**SS: With the police, or that you had to go with the pre-action meeting?**

BZ: At the pre-action meeting, what we had to discuss at the pre-action meeting, things that we had to cover.

This is a short one, so I can read this one. "Action logistics. Starting out with the scenario so far. One, assemble at Metro station seven a.m. Two, march en masse to building one. Three, actions in front of Building 1. Four, legal picket to march around campus if possible. Five, civil disobedience elsewhere on campus. Six, closing rally in front of Building 1."

Then it's a bunch of bullet points. "Affinity group coordination. Things for legal picket to do. Speakers for closing rally. Public address system. Rentals: vans, cellular phones, walkie-talkies, megaphones, anything else. Line up medical support. Transportation to and from courthouse and jail. Media table. Safe zone for the disabled. Provisions for storing luggage during demo. Where will buses pick up people?"

"New topic: outreach. One, send out letter to NIH employees." That's one thing that was interesting that I didn't realize until I went back through there. Both for FDA and NIH, and for CDC, I think, we sent, it was basically our fact sheet, but it was written in the form of a letter to employees who worked at those agencies, at FDA, NIH, and CDC, and we basically said, "Hi, we're coming to wreck your office building. Don't hate us. This is why we're doing it," which I thought was very polite of us.

"Outreach with ACT UP/DC at AIDS vigil. Buses and motel, status, ticket sales. Where do we do ticket sales? At bookstores. What to do about affinity groups who go down on Saturday." Because most of the buses went down on Sunday,

and the action was on Monday. “Are enough bus and motel captains signed up?” We had to have someone who was going to be responsible for all the passengers on the bus or the people staying in the motel. “Do we house non-New Yorkers?” People who were coming to the action but were not with ACT UP/New York, do we go ahead and get motel rooms for them, too?

“D.C. pre-action.” There was a pre-action meeting the day before, so we had to plan logistics for that. “Are plans okay for the teach-in in D.C. for the CD training? Set agenda for the D.C. pre-action meeting. Bring handbooks, posters, stickers, etc.”

“Last item, demo props. Production of flames, banners, posters.” So this is all bullet form, but you can get an idea. This is a condensed form of what we were doing.

**SS: I have a few questions.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: How many people do you think were at the action?**

BZ: I’ve got that somewhere. Shit. I would have to get back to you on that.

**SS: That’s okay.**

BZ: I had a clip. I want to say 1200 to 1500.

**SS: Okay. How much did it cost?**

BZ: That I do know. That was around \$60,000.

**SS: So when you’re organizing an action that costs \$60,000, did you have to go to the floor to get everything approved?**



BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Every expenditure had to be approved, up to \$60,000 worth?**

BZ: That's a good question. I don't really remember. I could probably find out. This is a surprise question. I don't know.

**SS: Let me ask you a larger question.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: So Mark asked you to organize this action?**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: You organize this action.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: The basic demands of the action were two things, to get them on a different type of research program, or different type of research path, and the second was to let community people inside.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Then when I said what was won at the NIH, you said you didn't know.**

BZ: What was what?

**SS: What was won at the NIH?**

BZ: Yeah, what was won, yeah, because, like I said, I didn't really do the follow-up for the actions. I planned them. I was a freelancer. I was basically a caterer or whatever.

**SS: Let me ask you then, because I think I'm starting to understand from our conversation. So would you say that this is part of the insider-outsider**

**strategy, that in other words, ACT UP had a huge visual demonstration of lots of people to show power and that the result was that now some people from the community were let into the NIH?**

BZ: Yeah. Yeah, because what I'm going to do is, so, first of all, after you told me that you were going to ask this question, I e-mailed Mark and I said, "Hey, what can you tell me?"

He wrote back and he said, "The short version is that the NIH demo got NIAID to establish the CCG [Community Constituency Group], put activists on all ACTG [AIDS Clinical Trials Group] and CPCRA [Community Programs for Clinical Research on AIDS] research committees, (with votes), increase the amount of support given for OI prevention and treatment research, and led to the best practice model of community involvement with AIDS research, which has become almost universal since 1990. The NIH demo was on May 21<sup>st</sup> and [Anthony] Fauci relented to ACT UP's demands one month later at the International AIDS Conference in San Francisco. The longer version from my unpublished manuscript is attached." And he has sent me the particular chapter of his ACT UP book that he's working on, which I was just – it's the first I'd seen of it. I was just staggered at the amount of detail. It's like a daily diary of everything that he did.

**SS: So you read the chapter?**

BZ: I skimmed it. So, first of all, what I was doing in terms of simplifying Mark, this long paragraph that I read, more community involvement. That's kind of what this boils down to, what he says. That's what he's saying.

Now, how I would phrase it is I would say the NIH action bought entrée for our people within the NIH process, and that was the accomplishment of the demonstration.

**SS: So it's the classic insider-outsider strategy. So you organize a demo that costs \$60,000. It brings 1500 people down there. People get arrested. There's a whole process. And the result is that people from our community become part of the structure inside the NIH.**

BZ: Yeah, some of our people, which obviously was a big bone of contention later.

**SS: So the people who did the action didn't really understand that that was the goal, because when it was achieved, people were upset about it. They weren't upset about having community input, but they were upset – you said it was a bone of contention. Why was it a bone of contention?**

BZ: I'm sorry?

**SS: Why was it a bone of contention?**

BZ: Well, I'll go ahead and tell you my personal take.

**SS: Yeah, tell me.**

BZ: It's that I think some people got in and others didn't, and the people who didn't get in were the ones who were upset.

**SS: What's the difference between the people who got in and the people who didn't?**

BZ: I think the ones who got in had been working at it longer.

**SS: But they weren't a different kind of person.**

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BZ: Oh, was it because they were the white men and they got in first?

You could say that. I wouldn't say that.

**SS: I didn't say that, by the way.**

BZ: No, no, I'm not saying you personally.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

BZ: I should say *one* could say that, and certainly several people *did* say that.

Yeah, when I was going through this, I was looking through, I was trying to avoid reading the TITA [Tell It To ACT UP], but I did see one that starts off with Tracy Morgan's complaint, because the whole thing that started the moratorium issue, and I think they might have been having an action at the NIH over women's issues. If I remember right, they were having an action over women's issues, and they were trying to do a protest. And the door opens, and then Mark comes out with Tony Fauci or something like that. Don't quote me on the details on that, because I'm not sure about the details. But that's the essence of the story.

**SS: So there's this slight puppet-master element to all of this, right? Those guys want to get in. They call you. You're a great organizer. You organize this amazing action with all these people and all these resources, and then they get in.**

BZ: Yeah, I could say that I think that that's – Sarah, you're calling me a puppet.

**SS: I'm telling you I'm just hitting on this right now as we're talking, because we have been wondering for seven years what was won at the NIH, and no**

**one's been able to tell us. You're the first person who knows the answer. Now it's all going click, click, click, click, click in my mind.**

BZ: Here's the thing is, and this is going to sound defensive, like I'm really defending these people, because they're my friends, but one is, I do want to make it clear that the reason they got in was they had been working at it longer. Two, this is really key; they spoke the language of the people that they were trying to meet with. They kept up with these guys research paper for research paper, and so I think that the NIH people were eventually willing to take them on as equals of a sort, because they had figured out what it took to win their acceptance, and I don't think that it was just because they were white men. I'm not going to say that that might not have played a factor.

**SS: I'm not saying that.**

BZ: I'm not saying you are.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

BZ: I'm just saying people said it at the time. I'm not saying that that might not have been a factor. It could have. It very well could have been.

**SS: I do want to tell you that Jim and I spoke at the NIH recently, and this woman stood up and said that she had been a librarian during this action, and she said after the action, she had gone out and collected the ephemera left over from the action for the archives of the NIH, and then she said – what was her line? “Isn't it wonderful how Dr. Fauci had the leadership to realize that we all needed to sit down at the table?”**

**And we were like, “That is not what happened. He was forced.”**

BZ: Yeah. That's one of my favorite themes about how people got transformed once they came, once they got to experience the white heat of ACT UP, which I think was a good thing.

There was one thing that I had set aside, and I can't find it right now. I actually did do a very long five-page post-NIH report, which would probably answer a lot of your questions, and I just cannot figure out where I put it. If you want to take a break and I'll look for it.

**SS: That's okay.**

BZ: There is one thing that I do remember from that report. It was late in the afternoon of that action, and it turned into anarchy. We weren't really trying to control it a lot to begin with. The whole idea with the way that these actions worked was that you set up a framework and then let the affinity groups do what they want, and the affinity groups basically had license to do whatever they wanted without telling you. So you didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't know about Peter Staley's smoke bombs, for example, the colored smoke bombs, until they happened.

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Oh, and you know the famous story about Peter, the perfect winning entrée. I'm pretty sure that I'm recalling this correctly. I'm pretty sure that this was at the NIH action. His affinity group got into one of the buildings and was doing an action in the building, and they were in the process of being arrested by the cops, and Fauci comes out of one of the meeting rooms and says, "Peter, what are you doing here?" And they just have an interaction like that.

**SS: But did he still get arrested?**

BZ: He still got arrested.

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**JAMES WENTZY: We have to stop.**

**SS: Okay.**

**SS: Go ahead.**

BZ: What was I saying?

**SS: You were looking for something.**

BZ: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. This is the – okay, a couple of things. What I did was, is I did this originally for myself. It was a post-NIH memo, debriefing, and I actually did do a polished form of it, which I think I distributed on the floor, and I can't find that one, but I at least have the draft. There's one thing that's not in here that I didn't realize until I was going over the schedule. What I did on this, I could divide this up to the four years that I was in ACT UP, and I marked the major demonstrations and/or the ones that I participated in, and '90 was a very busy year. I went back and I looked over this to see if were we really that inactive in '88, leading up to the FDA, and, yeah, there were a lot of small actions. But that was our big action for the year. And the same thing with Stop the Church. There were a lot of small actions, but there was nothing really big.

Then we have this traffic jam, going from late '89 into winter and spring of '90. We had Stop the Church on December 10, 1989. We had the Atlanta trips, which was a lot of energy and a very big expense, also, too, and that was in January of '90. One thing that I remembered at the time that I really wasn't paying attention to at the time, but then when I was going back through this, I realized that, yeah, this was a big issue, were the Albany issue actions.

**SS: Albany?**

BZ: Albany. I don't know if anyone's talked about that, but those were pretty significant, and I didn't realize it at the time. I actually felt that Albany was like – I have to admit, I thought it was a little bit of a nuisance. They were competing with our time. We were supposed to have the runway for the next big action with NIH, which was on May 21<sup>st</sup>, and Albany turned into a really big deal, first of all because it was a three-part action, there were a series of three actions, and the third one ended up being very complicated because of the arrest situation. Suddenly we were aware that we were dealing with a very large number of very complicated arrests, and so that took a lot of time and attention.

So my point is that the FDA had the runway for several months leading up to that demonstration, Stop the Church several months before that, and then NIH, we had a lot of competition. I'm not complaining. We should have just had it to ourselves. But I think that was when we started to get overextended, because that was when we started to become a victim of our own success, because we could do so many things. Because we could do a few things well, we thought we could do a lot of things well, and so we took on a lot of things on our plate.

That's also, too, when the decentralization really started to be a problem, because, again, remember, in '87 and '88 we had the Actions Committee, and then the Actions Committee went out of business, and everyone, everyone, not just NIH, but everyone freelanced their own actions at that point. And it was great because we covered more ground, but, yeah, our resources did start to get stretched thin.



BZ: Oh, yeah. Okay. This is rough, so I'm going to try to polish it as I go. "One, every action is planned in reaction to the previous action. With NIH, we were trying to keep a tighter focus on issues than we had with Albany, and we were trying not to run all day like we did at the FDA. Two, NIH was planned top-down. The FDA Committee had about thirty members or so. NIH we had about ten, so it was a smaller group. Three, was there ever real ownership of this action by the group?" We had so few comments during discussion before the action and on the last Monday before it, too. I remember my note on that was that we had ten minutes on the floor to do an NIH Committee report in the Monday night meetings leading up to the action, and I remember that we were able to fill the ten minutes, but there really wasn't a lot of back-and-forth between us and the floor. We weren't getting a lot of questions from the floor.

**SS: Was it normal that a discussion at an ACT UP meeting before a major action would only take ten minutes?**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Because it was that efficient?**

BZ: I don't know. But all I'm saying, I have no reason to think that ten minutes was short. I'm sure we ran over. I'm not saying that it was ten minutes for everything, like every Monday night. There might have been some big issues that required extended debate because they required a vote. I cannot remember what aspects of NIH required a floor vote. I just don't remember. I'm sure the proposal to have the action required a floor vote, but that's the only thing that I would know for sure that required a floor vote.

“Four, what is it that we do, and how can we do it successfully? The limitations of civil disobedience that I learned from FDA, the problems with pickets. Getting arrested is problematic. In the end it’s either what you do, a handful doing something dramatic, such as the Power Tools affinity group, or a lot doing something simple, and in the latter case, you simply have to turn out the numbers. Do you understand the distinction that I’m making there? Either you have just a few people, like eight people putting a condom over Jesse Helms’ house, or else you have, what, 2,000, 3,000 people outside St. Pat’s at Stop the Church. In the latter case, if it’s just a legal protest, you simply have to turn out the numbers. ACT UP will never be able to produce more than 300 or so CD arrests as long as we stick to affinity groups to effect to bring about our civil disobedience.” That was an important realization that I came to at that point, that we were topping out. The way that we were set up, we would never do more than 300 arrests in civil disobedience.

**SS: Let me ask you about that. So in your personal vision at that time, making that observation, were you envisioning a larger movement with more massive amounts of civil disobedience?**

BZ: When we talk about national healthcare, you’ll see where I was going with this.

**SS: But it’s interesting, because actually ACT UP was now going in the other direction, wasn’t it?**

BZ: Going in what direction? Oh, smaller? Yeah. Yeah, you could say that. Yeah. Yeah, you could say that. There was a lot of freelancing going on at that time. There was a lot of free – Power Tools, that was when they, Peter’s group, chained

themselves in the office in Burroughs-Wellcome, in North Carolina, I think. I don't know when the condom action happened over Jesse Helms' house. There were some others. There was a lot of freelancing. And that was in opposition to what we started out with, because the Wall Street actions and City Hall, the idea there was, is that you try to get as many arrests as possible. This is something that I realized over time, that it was about the numbers. You either had a few doing drama, or you had a lot doing something simple. The way that I viewed the lot, it was another form of democratic participation. It was about turnout. It was a "turn out the vote" operation, except that instead of votes, what you were trying to turn out was either marchers at the legal picket or arrests at the civil disobedience, and the higher the number the better, the more attention that you got. It was like signing names, getting signatures on a petition.

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"ACT UP will never be able to produce more than 300 or so CD arrests as long as we stick to affinity groups. That's because affinity groups require a lot of prior planning and commitment. To turn out a large number requires a form of civil disobedience that would accommodate a lot of people at the last minute, or who can't go to a lot of meetings. But then the question is, how empowering is that? Also, the question of civil disobedience left over from FDA, City Hall actions, if what you're doing isn't something dramatic, then it comes down to a question of numbers. Civil disobedience is a form of petitioning the government. Our arrests are our signatures, and the question is, how many signatures are enough?"

**SS: So the question is mass movement versus vanguard action. That's really what you were debating, about what was more strategic?**

BZ: Yeah. As you'll see, I was really pushing towards mass, and I can just give you a preview of where I'm going with this. The national healthcare campaign was my attempt to synthesize everything that I had learned in my three and a half years of ACT UP at that point, and it was going to be a multipart campaign that was going to end in a march on Washington for national healthcare.

**SS: Before we get into that, I just have to ask you one more NIH question.**

BZ: Sure.

**SS: What was the evaluation of ACT UP? How did ACT UP feel about the action, the post—**

BZ: I think I'm going to get into that.

**SS: Okay. Go ahead. Go for it.**

BZ: Okay. "The legal picket at NIH. I wish that I'd been in Chicago and Albany, because both actions had a large moving picket and would have been instructive for NIH, Albany especially. Was it empowering for people who were not participating in the civil disobedience? Was NIH empowering for the people who weren't participating in the civil disobedience? This civil disobedience was not planned because I felt it was more important to plan the picket. The CD could take care of itself. The fact that in some ways the CD did not take care of itself, that the CD was not more coordinated or bigger, I don't know what to say, since there was a pre-action meeting three weekends beforehand. I think it might have come down to the fact that a lot of people were even at the end fuzzy about what we were doing and why. It is a new target, and maybe the reasons for why we were protesting at the NIH still haven't sunk in."

So the background on this, what I'm writing about, I'm writing this actually in response to complaints, because I do remember there were complaints that the CD was not well organized, and I do remember that there were complaints from people from the floor, from people on the floor, that they didn't feel invested in the action.

**SS: That's interesting. Do you remember who?**

BZ: Maria.

**SS: Maria Maggenti didn't feel invested in the action?**

BZ: Yeah, did not feel invested in the action. Of course, she didn't plan this one. She planned FDA.

**SS: Right. But given our other conversation, it's sort of interesting.**

BZ: About what? What other conversation?

**SS: About what the purpose of the action was.**

BZ: Yeah, and NIH was a difficult one. In the end, I still think that it was a good action to do, and I think it was an important target. I think that NIH is like a good example, I don't want to say where we lost our way, but it was a straight path up to that point, and we were actually starting to have problems in other areas. Like I'm saying, like the Albany action I remember kind of getting messy. I don't want to disparage Albany, but I remember having the impression at the time they weren't as organized as we were with NIH. They staged something and then got surprised by what happened. I'm not sure that's what the case was, but that was my impression.

**SS: Let me share with you what I'm thinking right now, because I have to say this is a great conversation for us, and a lot of new ideas are coming up that haven't been on the table before. Everybody says ACT UP lost their way, and**

**people have a lot of theories about why, but nobody really understands it completely. It's always kind of a vague feeling. But now we're talking about an action where the mass of people involved in it don't truly clearly understand what the actual goal is. And that could be something that would help people lose their way, because if people start becoming a tool to reach an ending that they don't really understand is what they're trying to reach, that's alienating.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: And I do want to say that after this I hope you will go back and read Gregg Bordowitz's interview on David Barr, because FDA actually was structured the same way, and that David Barr went to Gregg and said, "We want you to organize this action."**

BZ: That's fascinating. I did not know that. Wow.

**SS: Yeah. So I'm just putting this together now, because I didn't have this other information from you before. So maybe one of the reasons that ACT UP, quote, "lost its way" is because the actual agenda was not really on the table.**

BZ: Okay. Now, there is one big thing I want to say about this, and I'm not saying that you're saying that it's wrong that these actions come up.

**SS: Right. I'm not.**

BZ: Because one person asks another, but one of the big insights that I did have towards the end of my ACT UP career is that if you wanted something done, you had to do it. There were a lot of people who had great ideas, because particularly toward the end when my visibility got higher within the group, people were starting to come to me with more ideas and they were saying, "You should do this," or, "ACT UP should do

this.” “Should do this,” I heard that so many times. Great. “Organize a committee, put together an action, you’re right, that’s a fabulous idea, and I think you’re the perfect person to do it.” That would be my biggest personal complaint is that from criticism from people who didn’t get off their ass and actually do the work, and I’m not being mean or anything like that. I’m just trying to say that –

**SS: What’s the cause of that?**

BZ: The agenda was not set. There was nothing conspiratorial about the agenda. The agenda was set by the people who showed up. The agenda was set by the people who did the work. The people who ended up being leaders within the group were the people who did the work. There were a few people who became leaders in the group because they were remarkably charismatic, and they drew attention just because of the nature of who they were, of the personality. But there were other people who became leaders within the group just because they shut up and they did a lot of the work. Mark is not a particularly charismatic person. He just out-produced everyone else in terms of paperwork. I’m not a particularly charismatic person. Just from folding chairs at the end of the meeting to I just kept raising my hand.

**SS: But aren’t there also a lot of people who do a lot of work who don’t set agendas? Aren’t there people who just are implementers? Like you say, we need this.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Because so many people we’ve interviewed were like, “I just trusted them, and they said that we need this, and so I just went and did my job.”**

BZ: Right. Right.

**SS: So actually a lot of people do work who don't set agendas.**

BZ: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's not what I'm saying, though.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

BZ: What I'm saying is that the people who set agendas work. You're right. We're not arguing about anything here. You're saying that not all of the people who work, who did the work, then set the agenda. What I'm saying is that most of the people who were involved in setting the agenda did do a lot of the work. So that's what I'm saying.

**SS: Sure, totally. Yeah.**

BZ: In terms of focus, I don't know. Within NIH, again I come back to the translation issue. It possibly does have a lot to do with the fact – Mark was not the only one who came up with the idea for NIH. There were other people. He was not the only one on that. He, however, was the one who approached me. I think it was like a T&D idea and that Mark was the one who approached me because of my record with other actions, particularly with DHPG, which was a very successful treatment-oriented demonstration.

Tape IV  
00:20:00

**SS: Should we get into the national healthcare campaign?**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Because I want to hear about that.**

**JAMES WENTZY: There were two of them in ACT UP. What year was the one you worked on?**

BZ: National healthcare? This was '91.



I want to go ahead and finish with the NIH. There's a couple of things on this. "Was this action successful? Maria's comments on the floor about how there was no one to reach out to because we were protesting in a suburb. I had a pretty clear idea from the beginning what I wanted to say and who I wanted to hear it, and in that respect, I think the action was successful. We didn't do NIH for the media, but the media was essential to transmit our message. A lot of what we do is to throw a spectacle, to scream and hold our breath till our faces turn blue till someone listens to us, which is a different idea of doing an action from Maria's and the old Left idea, which is that you do an action to get your message across and direct one-on-one communication with passersby. But these are theoretical differences. How you design an action and how you judge its accomplishments depends on how you think messages are most effectively communicated." So that's the –

**SS: I totally understand what happened, but I interpreted it completely differently, which is really interesting.**

BZ: I'm not saying – I'm not – yeah.

**SS: Let's talk about it, because I agree with you. It's an old Left idea. But I think that her orientation was towards building mass movements so you recruit other people.**

BZ: Right.

**SS: This was an orientation towards the power-that-be to get them to change, and other people don't matter, because you're using the media. So it becomes a substitute. So this is exactly what your concern about whether or not to build mass organization.**

BZ: And again, what I hoped to do with national healthcare was in reaction to NIH, because, as I said, it did end up being, to use the language of the current presidential campaign, this did end up being like an elitist. It was directed towards an elite. It was directed towards an elite. We put out a spectacle. We wanted the media to transmit it, and the audience for it were the people in the offices. With national healthcare, I tried to do something, and it was a little more democratic than that.

“Who do we do an action for? Again, not for the media, but for the people reading, watching the media, and in this case there were two audiences. One, the general public, to just let them know there’s a problem with NIH to raise the issue in their mind, and, second, the policymakers, the scientists who may change their studies and congressmen who may start holding hearings. The way to judge whether NIH was successful is to look in six months at whether, one, new trials have opened and, two, whether hearings have been held, like the ones that Congressman [Ted] Weiss or [?] had on the FDA.” So in that respect –

**SS: Wait. Can I interrupt you there?**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: Let’s talk about that. So you, Brian, you saw that what you were fighting for was to get – what were those two things again, hearings open?**

BZ: New trials and congressional hearings.

**SS: And new trials. But Mark tells you it’s a success because a month later they let folks in. So you had a different vision.**

BZ: I wouldn’t say that it’s a different vision. Again, it sounds like I’m defending Mark. I think that what Mark’s doing is he’s like working backward from

what happened. I think that he's saying that we accomplished what happened, rather than saying we – do you understand what I'm saying?

**SS: Yeah. I think it's really important to say that none of these outcomes are negative. They're all positive outcomes.**

BZ: Yeah.

Tape IV  
00:25:00

**SS: So whichever way it went, things were achieved and lives were saved. But I'm interested in the idea of youth, of some people thinking that they're working for one thing and other people thinking that they're working for something else.**

BZ: Yeah.

**SS: I'm wondering if that difference contributes to the breakdown of ACT UP later, if that's the beginning of that division.**

BZ: Yeah. I'm not going to say that it isn't. I think the breakdown of ACT UP was inevitable. I think it was just factualism as pure and simple. People had their factualism. People ended up developing their own agendas. Something that I wrote to myself when I was sketching out notes for what I wanted to say, I don't want to set myself up as some sort of perfect, but I didn't have an agenda in the group. I think that I was one of the few who did not. As I said at the beginning, I was never attached to a particular group. I worked a lot with T&D, but I never became a member of the committee. I was always on the sidelines with observer status. Because, one, they were doing things that were far beyond me. Two, because there was a little bit of there wasn't a cultural fit with some of the people who were on T&D. Mark was the only one who I had a real strong cultural fit with on T&D. One of the things I was thinking about was a

lot of it had to do with class. That's one of the things that I don't think is really discussed a lot when we talked about why ACT UP splintered the way it did. We focus on the gender, the white gay men and the lesbians. We focus on the racial split. But the class aspect is something that I just really hadn't seen discussed very much.

**SS: Do you think you and Mark were from the same class?**

BZ: Yeah. I'm not saying originally, but like in terms of our living status, yeah. He was poor.

**SS: Okay. But he came with a Harvard education.**

BZ: No, I'm not talking about class background. I'm talking about whether or not you could go to eat at Woody's with the rest of the people after the meeting or not depended on how much money you had in your pocket.

**SS: So you mean how much cash people had at the time of ACT UP.**

BZ: Money, money. Yeah.

**SS: Not what their class of origin was.**

BZ: To use the theory language again, what their economic status was at the time. As I said, I went on freelance at my magazine, and I was basically making a half salary for the time that I was in ACT UP. Mark, I don't really know how he subsisted. I don't know where his income came from. There could be a trust fund behind there that I'm not aware of. Is there?

**SS: I don't know.**

BZ: But I'm pretty sure that there isn't, because I was pretty close to him during that time, and I was over at his apartment a lot and I saw what his apartment looked like. He had a cramped East Village – has, as far as I know, a cramped East

Village walkup with not a lot of furniture, and books and papers all over the place. I also, too, know from his wardrobe.

What I would contrast this against, after T&D spun off and it became TAG<sup>1</sup>, I was looking – I don't want to say woe is me, but I was really lost when ACT UP splintered, because most everyone else had a group to go off with, and I didn't because I was not allied with any one particular group. Again, I was an observer status, hanging on with particular groups. I worked with WHAM! [Women's Health Action and Mobilization] on the Holland Tunnel action. I went to a few TAG meetings. But there was never really anything that I felt was my place except CHP. I was volunteering at CHP. That was the main thing that I did after ACT UP, and that I felt like I was doing something tangible and helpful and rewarding.

Tape IV  
00:30:00

But I did try. I went to a couple of TAG meetings, and I remember there was one at Marvin Shulman's loft apartment, which was huge compared to Mark's tiny little. Mark's apartment is half the size of mine, and Marvin, who I just want to say marvelous person, great, great person, he did a tremendous amount as treasurer to keep the group running. That's something that I don't think is really fully – that I hope is really fully acknowledged is that it's not just the people out on the streets getting arrested. It's the people – it was a business. ACT UP was a business, and the people who took care of those details, like Peter [Staley] and Marvin and Dan Baker, God bless them. They made it possible for us to go out and spend \$60,000 on an NIH action or fly a bunch of people down to Atlanta for back-to-back demos, stuff like that.

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<sup>1</sup> At first, an ACT UP affinity group called Treatment Action Guerrillas, later re-named as a separate non-profit organization, Treatment Action Group.

Anyway, I'm at this meeting. This would have been like '93 or so, a TAG meeting at Marvin's beautiful huge loft apartment. Where was it? I keep thinking the Flat Iron District or Gramercy Park, somewhere around there. There was a certain moment where everyone on T&D was a smoker, and this was at the point when the public smoking crackdown was starting in New York, and so the places where we were smoking were still allowed, you were very aggressive about that. So the T&D meeting and the TAG meeting was very much declared to be a smoking zone.

I just remember at one point it seemed like everyone lit up at once, and everyone – this is probably not true, but it seemed like everyone pulled a brass lighter out of their pocket at the same moment. And the reason that that detail is telling is, is that the poor faggots I was hanging out with at the bars, we all had the cheap Zippo lighters that we bought at the corner Bodega. I'm not saying that these were that much more expensive, but when you had a little bit more money, that is what you would do. You'd buy a nice polished metal butane lighter instead of the cheap little plastic Zippos. Mark had a cheap plastic Zippo, if I remember right. So that's how when I talk about class, that's what I mean. I mean economic status.

That actually lets me see again to national healthcare, because once again I do something because Mark asks me to, and Mark was the one who suggested the national healthcare campaign, and he was the one who said, "I think you should organize something on this." The reason that this was important to him was, again, because he was poor. I don't think he had, as I said – I don't know where his income came from. I don't know where his health insurance came from. But I do know he did have –

**SS: Did he ever have a job?**

BZ: I don't think he really got a paying job until TAG was established, and then he got employed by TAG. This whole time he did not, no. I can answer that definitively. Mark did not have a job during this time period. This is also one reason why we bonded. He and I became a group around the same time. So there are classes. We both joined in spring of '88. There were other people. Like Heidi Dorow was a later class and blah, blah, blah. Anyway, so that was another way that people associated. You became friends with the newbies who came in at the same time that you did. The people who were always on top, of course, were the ones who were there from the beginning, from the first year.

Tape IV  
00:35:00

Mark did not have a job. I don't know where he got his income from, how he supported himself, or where he got insurance from. I'm sure that there were people who liked what T&D were doing. I'm not sure. I shouldn't say that. I don't know. Maybe there were people who liked what T&D were doing who were helping him out. I don't know. Maybe he might have done some things for pay. He certainly didn't go to an office. I don't remember him doing the type of things that you would do at home to make money, like legal proofreading. I don't know. But I do know that he had a lot of poor friends who didn't have health insurance, and this was why it was a big deal for him. When I talk about the class economic status within the group, this is where, for me, where it came to a head with the national healthcare campaign and why I thought it was very much, why it was very important, because even people who started out with a job, once they got sick, they couldn't hold their job. You get insurance through your job, you lose your job, you can do COBRA for eighteen months, then you lose your insurance. In order to qualify for Medicaid, you have to spend down. It just seemed to me to be a very

natural AIDS issue, and this was one that I didn't need any convincing on, or that I didn't have any trouble understanding. This was like bright as day. And Mark's instincts, I think, were completely right on that.

So, moving into what I tried to do with the healthcare campaign. Before I go to national healthcare, my project right before that was the newsletter, and I did this for about – does anyone remember this? I don't even know if anyone even paid attention to this.

**SS: I don't remember it.**

**JAMES WENTZY: I do.**

BZ: I did this in reaction to TITA, because basically TITA – we won't have that discussion, but the problem with TITA was, is that it was done as an oppositional. It was done as an oppositional document when there was nothing for it to oppose. It was reacting against something and there wasn't - it was a place for people to say things that they thought they otherwise couldn't say when there weren't a lot of places for people to say the things they thought they could say. It was an unofficial document where we didn't have an official document, and it was kind of like a cart-before-the-horse thing. It wasn't that I was trying to put TITA out of business, but I felt before we have the other, we have the bitch paper, we need to have the report paper, the stuff that we did, our accomplishments paper.

So what I did was, again, I just decided this was something – no one asked me to do this one. I did this one on my own, and, again, because I was a frustrated journalist at this point. I had stopped being a journalist at the magazine. I was like full-time activist, but I still had these instincts. So I decided to produce a publication here. I



did it weekly, and I did not do it by myself; I did get a lot of help. Barbara Hughes wrote the minutes up for each Monday night meeting, and she was fabulous. She's one of those people that we were talking about earlier who did a lot of work who may not have done as much in terms of setting the agenda. James Baggett did a great little piece. He actually was a freelance magazine writer, and so he did a great story about moving into the new workspace.

Day of Desperation. If you ever want to know what happened on Day of Desperation, this is the single best place to look, because we actually got reports. I actually got reports from everyone who did an action on Day of Desperation.

**SS: What happened on Day of Desperation?**

BZ: You're going to have to read it. There's too much.

**SS: Oh, it's too much? Okay.**

Tape IV  
00:40:00

BZ: Yeah. There were a bunch of things. The most famous was that they interrupted Dan Rather on air, but they also, too, interrupted the McNeil-Lehrer Report. This wasn't mine, so I'm not going to. Someone else is going to have to talk about this who was involved with Day of Desperation.

**SS: Okay.**

**JW: And we have to change tape.**

BZ: Okay.

Tape V  
00:00:00

**SS: Okay. Moment of truth. Ready?**

BZ: Okay. So, national healthcare. This actually went through several versions, so I'm trying to remember. I did see at least a two-part strategy. One was, is that we were going to have an ACT UP-specific demonstration at the Capitol, because

that was the one big building that we hadn't had a demonstration yet. We had actually done outside the White House, but we hadn't done the Capitol, and so that was going to be the visual. That was going to be the centerpiece.

The idea is that in somewhere in '91 that we would have a big ACT UP action at the Capitol, and then in '92 we would have a march on Washington for national healthcare. So, two things about that. One was that the ACT UP action, at this point we were not only dealing with competition of interest within New York, but now we were dealing with the other chapters, and the other chapters around the country were wanting to be involved with the process more, too. There was ACT UP Network, which was the umbrella organization for the chapters around the country. Or national actions prior to that point had basically just been called by ACT UP/New York. ACT UP/New York had said, "We're doing this. We're going to the FDA. We're going to NIH." With national healthcare, by that point the ACT UP Network had been formed, and so we felt that we had to work with Network and that we couldn't do it by New York's fiat, that if we wanted to do a national action – and again, this is comes to ownership, but now on a larger degree, that the other chapters had to feel that they were being consulted and involved in the planning for the action.

We were working most closely with ACT UP/L.A. on this, and, again it all comes down to personal relationships. It was me and Scott Robbe. Scott and I had worked together on previous actions. He actually had one of the best comments about NIH. When I made the comment about how the civil disobedience was spinning out of control at NIH, Scott said, "Oh, you know, I think it's not a bad thing if people see an

angry screaming mob outside their offices every now and then.” I think that that’s a good rationale for what we were doing.

So Scott had moved to L.A. at that point, and so we were working. He was trying to get ACT UP/L.A. going. I was trying to get ACT UP/New York going. This was at the point when ACT UP New York was starting to fall apart, though, and it was like swimming through mud.

But the idea was, is that the first action would be a national ACT UP action involving all the national chapters and then that would lead to a march on Washington, and a march on Washington was big on our minds at the time because there had been a march on Washington for gay rights in ’87. There had been a march on Washington for abortion rights in ’90 or ’91, and I was with the ACT UP contingent that went down for that. So it just seemed like it was what you did. Whenever you wanted to get a lot of attention for your issue, you had to march on Washington. What else I also, too, realized that we had to network with people, that this could not be an ACT UP action.

Now, at this point, ACT UP had a lot of cachet within progressive circles because we were the game in town. We were the ones who were making progressive activism work again. So there were people who were interested in working with us, and so there were people returning our calls, and we did try to start out with networking with people. The trouble with it was there were a lot of problems with it. One was, is that there was feeling within the group that this was not an issue for us, and I can talk about that more later. But there were a lot of people who did not think that national healthcare

was AIDS-specific enough and that we needed to focus on AIDS-specific issues, and national healthcare was not an AIDS-specific issue.

One of the things I've got in here, Randy Shilts, who I loved like four years before, writes an article for *The Advocate* in which he basically trashes ACT UP for losing its way, and one of the things that he faults the group for is that we are no longer focusing on AIDS, that we are taking on everyone's causes now. It really pissed me off, and I wrote him my response, my letter to Shilts about that.

So, one, there were people within the group who did not feel that national healthcare was an AIDS issue. Two, people were going their own way. Three, we were trying to work with the other ACT UPs around the country, and that was really difficult. L.A. was really the only who was really organized enough to be a full partner on this, and the others would show up as long as we did the work. Then, four, that got down to the basic problem of we just didn't have enough people working on this.

Also, too, it wasn't allied with a faction, like the powers within the group. When I say "powers," I mean people or factions. No one really took this up or championed it. Mark was really big on it, and he came to the meetings, and he championed it, but T&D did not sign on. For example, T&D endorsed it, but it was not, rightly so, part of their agenda, which they had a very specific agenda.

So we had a small group. Some people really did some amazing work on it. There's a guy named Robert Padgug, P-a-d-g-u-g. He was our inside source. He worked at Empire Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and so he basically taught us about how the insurance system works, and he was really helpful. Steve Ault, A-u-l-t, he worked on the

'87 march for Washington, and so he was good for that. He was also, too, plugged in with other progressive groups, and so he helped us with networking.

There was someone that I hooked up with in D.C., a guy named Bob Himmelstein, H-i-m-m-e-l-s-t-e-i-n, with a group called Physicians for a National Health Program, and they were basically a group of lefty doctors trying to work within the AMA to advocate for national healthcare, and he was just a really incredible source of information.

So we made a lot of headway in getting the information together, and we were starting to make some headway in the networking. We were reaching out to unions. We had a NOW representative showing up at some of our meetings. That was the idea, is that the march on Washington in the fall of '92 is what we were looking at for a national healthcare. ACT UP would make the call, but we would work with other groups and we would try to put together this massive coalition.

Again, in talking about numbers, I think I actually did put numbers on it. For the march, I think it's realistic to shoot for a million, and assuming that an organizing coalition can be put together, which was not unrealistic, given the numbers that turned out, say, for the gay rights or the abortion rights marches. "For the national ACT UP action, I agree with you that 3,000 to 5,000 would be a good number for turnout. I'd also like to see a mass CD (a thousand arrests), which hasn't been done in D.C. since Supreme Court '87." So those were numbers that I was looking for.

Tape V  
00:10:00

**SS: So what went wrong?**

BZ: ACT UP fell apart.

**SS: So in other words, if ACT UP had stayed together, this is where it would have gone, in your view, in your vision.**

BZ: This is where I wanted it to go. When I finally had my chance to set the agenda, because, like I said, even though Mark asked me or suggested this to me, I didn't need any explaining on this. This was okay.

**SS: So TAG left?**

BZ: What?

**JW: No.**

BZ: No, no, no, no.

**SS: When you saw ACT UP fell apart, what happened? What was the event that made this?**

BZ: Do you remember what happened then?

**SS: No, no. No, I don't mean a big question. It's a tiny question, like you're organizing and da da da, and what was the first thing, the first obstruction that made it impossible to do this?**

BZ: We didn't have enough people.

**SS: Okay.**

BZ: We didn't have enough people.

**SS: Let me ask you something else, though. ACT UP, there never has been a large coalition in this country that was led by a gay organization, because we've always been the weak link in the coalition, and no other progressive groups have been willing to take leadership from a gay organization. What made you think that you could change that?**

BZ: Because we had a reputation. Because we had successes that no one else did. Because we were getting attention that no one else was. We were like the Obama of its day. Who would have ever thought that we would have an African American as a major party presidential nominee? Because he was uniquely successful and he pulled together things, and we had, I think, in the same way, kind of a—

**SS: Yeah, but we didn't have support of – straight people who did not have AIDS never supported ACT UP. We were successful without them, but they never took leadership from us.**

BZ: Yeah. This would have been an important test. This would have been a good test of this to see if it would have happened. I think that we could have pulled it off, based on our initial outreach.

**SS: If ACT UP had not split and fallen apart.**

BZ: This is the thing. We would not have remained in control of the march. I had no illusions about that. I think that if we had – this is what I thought could have happened if ACT UP could have issued a call for a national march. You don't just put these things out here and expect for people to come out. You do the networking and you sign people up first. It's all about personal relationships, you get someone or you're equal, you're opposite number in another group to say, "Okay, I'll do what I can to bring my group onto this." We were in the process of setting up those relationships, and I could be wrong about this, because we just didn't get very far in this, but the early results were encouraging. The people at PNHP were delighted that we were doing this, and they were –

**SS: People at where?**

BZ: PNHP, Physicians for a National Health Program, they were really excited that we were doing this. They were small. They were small.

**SS: Yeah, it's not a mass organization.**

BZ: We hadn't gotten to mass organizations, but, like I said, we did have a rep from – NOW we had some contact with the unions. The unions would have taken it over. I have no illusion about that. But we would have lit a fire on this. We would have got the ball rolling. I think it was a really big missed opportunity, because we all know what happened. The Clintons got elected. The Clintons.

**SS: But in fact, the Clintons did not get elected. Right, he got elected. Right.**

BZ: Right. Bill Clinton got elected in November '92 and immediately assigned his wife to come up with a national healthcare program in the spring of '93. If we had had our action around that time, I think we could have influenced the agenda then. Now, that's my big –

**SS: That's tragic that that never happened.**

BZ: —missed what-if.

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

BZ: I left – I saw one last action through because the national ACT UP action, the one I talked about, five to six thousand people, a thousand CD arrests involving chapters from all across the country, that did not happen because we just could not get the chapters together. That was one where we were dependent on the chapters, and we were also, too, dependent on ACT UP/New York, and ACT UP/New York just



couldn't focus at the time. We were too busy arguing about moratoriums and whether or not T&D could spin off and things like that.

The Fundraising Committee disbanded at that time, so the spigot was turned off. The outgoing people on the Fundraising Committee basically said that each action was going to have to be self-funding from that point forward. NIH was funded from the general treasury, as was FDA and most of the big actions.

So the national action never happened. So what we ended up doing, kind of like my swan song, we had an action at the White House on May 13, 1991, and there was release of an article, I think, in *JAMA*, about national healthcare. I think we also, too, targeted the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association headquarters, but we started it. The Pharmaceutical Association, which was just up the block, just up Lafayette from the White House, and then marched down to the White House, and it was a very small turnout. I think we maybe got seventy-five people down from New York. At that point, I was just burned out. That was the phrase that we used back then. I was completely burned out at that point.

**SS: Did you just decide, "I'm not going back anymore"? Did you just stop going?**

BZ: No, I kept going. I went to meetings every now and then, but I stopped participating. I stopped. I only went to meetings as a spectator, and that was really disempowering because we were in Cooper Union. God, I hated that space. People have got to have been talking about that. That was just such a big mistake. I love Larry dearly as a person, but in terms of organizational ideals, it was almost always Maxine who was right, and Larry's ideas for organization generally were not probably

what we should have done. He certainly wasn't the only person pushing Cooper Union, a lot of people were pushing Cooper Union, but I remember him giving this speech on the floor about how we had to do – he's always big on this sense of history. I remember he said, "We'll be meeting on the same place where Abraham Lincoln gave his famous speech." I mean, the energy just dissipated. That was the thing about the Community Center room, is that being crammed into that room really focused the energy, and it was really dissipated in that room. So, yeah, after this, I just hung up my activist shoes.

I do have a couple of things, closing notes, that I will say.

**SS: Go for it.**

BZ: Do you want to ask questions, or do you want –

**SS: No, just go ahead.**

BZ: Okay. So I'm just going to run through these. There are four things I'm going to run through.

One, it's my favorite description of ACT UP from Bradley Ball in his "Out of My Hands" column in *Out Week*, and I've remembered this for years and it was funny, and I thought I had the issue. Gabriel [Rotello]'s just put *Out Week* online, and God bless him, because I didn't have this issue and I could find it. This is from the December 24, 1989 issue of *Out Week*. You've got to read his columns if you haven't before. They are just amazingly brilliant. I had no idea that he was such an amazingly smart writer.

He was doing this gay David Lynch paranoid fantasy theme through the whole thing, but in this particular one, scene is set at a Christmas party of the letter writer and his friends, and things are happening at the Christmas party. "The doorbell rang and

Ray answered it, and the swarm of ACT UP members swept through the room. Within fifteen minutes, they'd located my bottle of Stolichnaya, devoured everything on the buffet except the radishes (which they threw at the Christmas tree), and then declared that I was participating in my own genocide by wearing a V-neck sweater. Then just as quickly as they arrived, they all vanished to catch a flight to an action in Palm Beach."

Now, aside from I think this being funny, it captures a few things. One, we always travel in packs. Two, we were poor, like drinking all the vodka and eating all the buffet food, and this also, too, gets to what I'm saying about the economic status. You have the people who could stock the buffet, and then the people who couldn't stock the buffet. You have the self-righteousness, the criticizing the one within your own community, the people within your own community, and then you have the fact that we were always traveling a lot. It was sort of like, "Join ACT UP, see the world."

This is a journal entry. This is a counterpart to the first one that I read about my first M.O., where I was nervous about everything that I was doing, challenging the police, confrontation, yelling at people. This is from June 25, 1990, when I still felt good about ACT UP. This was about a year before I left, so I was still feeling good about the group. "As an activist, I learned how to yell. Then I learned how to organize a demo. I learned how to wing it. I learned that I don't need to, in fact can't, know everything beforehand, but that I'll have to decide on the spot, and I've learned how to make quick decisions. I've learned how to yell at people who think my yelling inappropriate (which is much harder than yelling at someone who yells back). I've learned how to deal with the police, all within two years, but only because I did action after action. I ran like clockwork during NIH. I'm proud of myself. I was stressed because I had a lot of work

to do, but I was never stressed because I didn't know what to do." So that was my assessment of my activist skills towards the end.

Then this is a year later. This would be – this is “Notes to ACT UP on her fourth birthday,” and I think actually the date on this is March 8, [1991]. “ACT UP is a group unlike anything else. It is organic. We're making this up as we go along, a structure unlike any other group, because most of us have never been in a large unstructured organization before. ACT UP is non-hierarchical. There is no formal organization. These are our key features. Correct solutions first require correct analysis of the problem. Larry Kramer's proposals for a security council, for example, don't work because he thinks of ACT UP in a traditional organization paradigm. You have to describe ACT UP correctly as it is first before you can identify the problems that must be solved. ACT UP isn't a thing, but a means. It is not an organization, but an instrument. ACT UP is a way of getting your personal projects done. There is no entity with its own goals and priorities called ACT UP separate from you. This follows from no thing, no matter how good, will get done if no one wants to do it. We don't determine priorities and then assign tasks. What gets done is what individual people are willing to work on.

“Back to the idea of means and instrument. What ACT UP is is money. ACT UP is an office. ACT UP is phones. ACT UP is people to help with the project that you, plural or singular, want to do. Second point. The Monday meetings are places to disseminate information. My exposure at the first meetings, it was better than reading a newspaper. ACT UP is a means of communication, a forum, an audience for what you have to say. Third, cruising, the boys. ACT UP is a social environment, not just sexual,

but looking for jobs, looking for apartments. We have created a society in our own image.

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“So what are the real problems? Larry Kramer says divisiveness, factualism. We’ve always been that. We’ve always had that. People have been walking out of ACT UP from day one. That doesn’t bother me, though it has been exacerbated by our larger size in Cooper Union. Used to, you were at least in physical contact with your, quote, unquote, ‘enemies.’ The T&D section and the Maxine section used to be separated by, say, 50 feet, not 500 feet as it is now, and this physical proximity forced you to deal with your enemies more than we do now. Again, ‘enemies.’”

Okay, new thought. “Accountability, however, is also a problem. Though the non-hierarchical, informal structure is a virtue allowing for quick and varied responses to do a multitude of problems, we have no formal checks and balances. If people acquire power formally through, say, being elected, you could express your disapproval or approval of them when they ran for reelection. Mark Harrington and Maxine, however, have gotten power informally and not through defined channels, so our checks on their power are likewise informal and, hence, crude. TITA attacks are a check. The Fundraising Committee’s proposal on Jim Fouratt were a check.” Do you remember that? Okay.

“This is a problem, but solutions aren’t obvious. So how do we deal with it?”

New thought. “A corollary to the idea what gets done is what a person will do. The corollary is anyone can do whatever they want in ACT UP’s name. We refuse to endorse very, very few things. A solution, but do we want to do it, adopt core

beliefs, a credo, and thus exclude people that way. Quote, ‘Sorry, we don’t handle that.’”  
And I actually ran up with that with national healthcare.

New point. “Limited resources. We cannot do everything. We have to start picking and choosing, and that means writing some things off.”

Then I dealt with specific problems that I don’t remember anymore.  
“Revolution must be achieved through revolutionary means, man and the masses.” I don’t even know what I mean by that anymore. “If you can establish utopia by killing one person, do you do it?” Where am I going with this?

“Long term. What happens in 1993, 1995, 2001? People infected now will be sick then. I argue we have a responsibility to do something for them, too, and not just those who were sick today, March 18, 1991,” which had a lot to do with the national healthcare.

“The failure of the newsletter. People want to write their own stuff up. I now think that’s important, having one document, a written Monday night meeting, would stifle or what,” and that was how I viewed the newsletter, was that if you missed the meeting, you could pick up the newsletter and you could find out what happened on that Monday night meeting. “Having one document like this would stifle the diversity of voices. However, I keep doing it because it’s important to publish people who can’t publish themselves, which is, I think, one form of problem solving we can do (empower the disenfranchised among us). I now view the newsletter in an entirely different way than I did when I started it.”

There was one issue, and this is a bigger ball of wax that I don’t have time to go into, but one of the things I was really struggling with personally towards the end

was, is that I was not HIV-positive, and that was a real big issue. It was, again, like coming up with national healthcare, it's not an AIDS issue, and saying that we need to be focused on AIDS. That was the right that people who weren't positive had to set the agenda and determine the agenda, and that was something that I was dealing with on a personal level and never really had a solution for it.

Then, finally, I was going to actually start this interview out with this, but this is a good way to close. I want to dedicate my remarks to people who cannot give their own interviews. The one I want to say first is someone who was very much on the sidelines. His name is Rick Damiata, D-a-m-i-a-t-a, and he – god, what was it? I think it was either a marshal training or a committee meeting or something, and he came up to me. I was running the meeting, and he came up to me afterwards, and he was challenging me on some point, and he was being a dick about it, and he was being very combative and argumentative. I was, “Okay, you want to have an argument, we’ll have an argument.”

Then he said, “Well, let’s talk more about this. What are you doing for dinner next week?” He was flirting with me. Arguing with me was how he was flirting with me. I did not realize this until quite a bit later, but he had a crush on me, and so he took me out to dinner a couple times, invited me over to his apartment, made dinner for me a few times, very, very sweet man. This would have been the first year. This would have been '88, so I was twenty-four at the time, and he was in his early to late thirties. He worked in the IT department at Credit Suisse, and he always came to the meetings after work, and he was always wearing a tie. So he was typical. He actually had an apartment in Chelsea. He was on a beautiful ground floor garden apartment on West 15<sup>th</sup>

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Street. It was really funny, I mean, his persona was very straight-laced in public, and then we would have dinner or be hanging at his apartment and he was like this new-age-y guy, who he went up to this Indian reservation in Canada every summer because he had been adopted by a family in the tribe, and they had welcomed him into their circle, and he went up for some kind of ceremonies that they had every year.

The one story about Rick that gives the tenor of the times and says something about him and says something about me, again, he had this ground floor apartment with this beautiful garden in the back, and he always fertilized it with horse manure from the New York Police Department stables, a very odd connection with the police yet again. He did this once a year. He couldn't do it anymore because he had been diagnosed, and he had been warned avoid fecal matter of any kind. It was a thing like with getting toxo from your cat's litter box. So he asked me if I could help him out one day and go with him to the Police Department horse stables, and basically if you shoveled the shit up yourself, they'd provide the bags, but if you shoveled it up, you could take away as much as you want. Ironically, that was kind of my childhood, because I grew up on a farm and my big activity when I was a kid was 4-H. When you're in 4-H on a farm, you raise livestock projects, so I raised a steer one year, a lamb another year, chickens, rabbits, and that was in addition to the cattle that we raised on the farm. So my childhood was spent shoveling shit. When you're raising an animal, that is what you do, because you have to keep them penned.

So it was not that big a deal for me to go to the police stables and shovel the shit. There was a man working there. He was not a police officer; he was working with the horses. He was a stable employee, very, very handsome young blond man. Rick



got to talking to me, and he said, “That guy’s really handsome. You should go up and talk to him.”

I said, “No, no, no, no, no,” because I felt totally uncomfortable about this.

He said, “No, no, no. I think you should.”

I said, “No, I don’t want to do it. I just do not feel comfortable doing it.”

He says, “Well, I’ll go up and get his phone number for you.”

And I said, “No, you’re not going to do that. You are not going to do that. If you want me to shovel the shit, just drop it.”

So he said, “Okay.” This was a Monday afternoon. I didn’t have to work that day. So we shoveled the shit. We went back to his apartment. I dumped it in the backyard, and he fixed me lunch, and then I did something else, and then I went to the Monday night meeting.

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As the meeting was starting, Rick comes up to me and he says, “I went back to the stables, and I got that guy’s phone number. Here it is.”

I just said, “Look, I told you not to do it.” I just said, “I don’t want it.”

So he said, “Okay.” He just put it back in his pocket, and I’m just so fucking pissed at myself. Then I did not – that was the way I was. I was uncomfortable with a lot of stuff.

Another story about myself, at the second anniversary party, I showed up late for that. There was like a talent show at the beginning of it. I missed that. Mike Signorelli comes up to me when he sees me. He said, “Oh, my god, I was hoping that you were here. I want you to see my act. I was swallowing a banana, and I wanted you especially to see it,” because he knew that I would be shocked by it.

So, okay. Dave Liebhart, L-i-e-b-h-a-r-t someone else who fought with me to flirt with me. That, we actually went on one date that I wasn't realizing was a date, and basically at the end of it, he said, "Look, I've got to know whether or not I have a chance with you or not, because my time is limited."

My god, what do you say to that? I was honest. I said, "Look, I really like you as a person." He was about fifteen years older than me, and I just did like him as a person, even though he was very prickly. God, it was just the situations that we were placed in.

No stories about these people. I just want to name them, some of whom have been named before, and I'm leaving names off, but these are just people who made an impression on me and that I wish were around. Lee Schy, S-c-h-y, his photographs, that's the ACT UP history that I want to see. I'm sorry. No one captured ACT UP better for me, that whole environment, than his photographs. Jon Greenberg, oh, my god, such a sweet person. Luis Salazar, L-u-i-s S-a-l-a-z-a-r, he did not die of AIDS; He died of leukemia at twenty-seven. He and I also, too, went on a date once. He was in my affinity group in the Awning Leapers.

Ray Navarro, I do have to say this. This is my story about Ray. This symbolized what the time was like for me. He was sick in St. Vincent's, and I went up to visit him, and he was not fully lucid at that point. He was already starting to have a little bit – his mind was already starting to be affected at one point, and he had wasting syndrome. He was in his bed. He was moving around. He was only wearing a hospital gown. At one point, because he just really was not with it or totally there, he was moving around, and his gown rode up and you could see his naked body. It had withered except

for his dick and balls, and that just – I mean, that was really a disturbing thing to see. And it made perfect sense, because the dick and balls, it's not muscle mass, there's not anything to wither. It's just blood, and you still have your full sixteen pints or whatever at the end. But that was just really hard. Still, I remember him for other things.

Bob Rafsky, R-a-f-s-k-y, Kevin Smith, Robert Garcia, I'm not sure that – I hate to say Steve Helmke<sup>2</sup>, I think he died. Do you know?

**SS: I don't know.**

BZ: But, god, Steve Zabel, Z-a-b-e-l, he was the first person that I knew to die in ACT UP, and, in fact, he died in New York, and it wasn't AIDS. He was murdered, as far as I understand, as I remember, by a trick gone bad.

Tony Malliaras, he was the guiding spirit of Awning Leapers. He was the one that drove that affinity group, and his line was, "We shocked the world for you," which was a line for Maurice Villency and their advertisements in the *Times* Sunday magazine, and he would always say that. He was always saying campy things like that that I just didn't know where in the fuck he was coming from.

Rodger Pettyjohn, P-e-t-t-y-j-o-h-n, he was more at CHP. I worked with him while I was in ACT UP. I was also, too, volunteering at CHP with the PCP prophylaxis clinic, and he was the nurse administering the aerosol pentamidine, and I was the one who was cleaning the aerosol equipment for him.

Mark Carson, who, as I said, was the one who introduced me into the group. Bill Baletka, who's the one non-New York person on here. He's a cousin of mine, B-a-l-e-t-k-a, in Texas. We grew up together in church camp, and he was my age,

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<sup>2</sup> As of June 8, 2020, Steve was very much alive.

and he came out, I think, about a couple years before I did and started becoming sexually active about a couple years before I did and did not get the information in time and died in '88 or '89.

Then, finally, there are the people who died since then that not necessarily of AIDS, but that I still wish were around. Rod Sorge, S-o-r-g-e. John Gilbert, I did not find out that he died until about a month ago. Sarah Pettit, she wasn't really in ACT UP. I don't know why, but, goddamn, I cried like crazy when she died.

**JW: Can I pause you for just a second?**