

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

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

Interviewee: **Chris Cochrane**

Interview Number: **110**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **January 27, 2010**

**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Chris Cochrane
January 27, 2010**

SARAH SCHULMAN: You say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

CHRIS COCHRANE: And I still have to look at you. That's the trick. Chris Cochrane – what?

Chris Cochrane. You want my age – I'm 51. Today's date is the 27th of January, 2010. And we're at Gay Men's Health Crisis.

SS: But it's no longer called Gay Men's Health Crisis.

CC: That is correct. There was a lot of money spent on rebranding, since branding seems to be a new business. It's been around for a while. But people spend a lot of money rebranding. And so now the name is GMHC, not Gay Men's Health Crisis. But I think some of us still hold on to that name, because for many years – as this conversation went on, and the demographics have changed around the epidemic, we thought it was really important to hold the name Gay Men's Health Crisis, because it had some legacy attached to it. But clearly, people above the line workers felt differently.

SS: And what's your position here?

CC: I'm Assistant Director for Prevention Services for Men here.

SS: So where were you born, Chris?

CC: Summit, New Jersey, in Overlook Hospital. I think that's really very poetic. I love that. It's not as poetic as – the place itself doesn't look as nice as the name would be.

SS: And where did your parents grow up?

CC: Interesting, because my mother just passed, so it's interesting – so I've been spending a lot of time thinking about that. My mom was an army brat. So she was born in Tacoma, but traveled all over. Lived in Panama for a while. A lot of time in State College, Pennsylvania, where they sort of sat for a bit, and the kids went to college. My father's family was from Pittsburgh, so he was born in Pittsburgh.

SS: And how did they end up in Summit?

CC: We actually lived in Chatham, the town next door. My father worked for a pharmaceutical company, which was in Summit – baby boomers. So they moved around. They lived in Levittown for a while. And then this was a really good job, and they decided, or my father decided, that moving to an all-white town was where he wanted to bring us up, in the suburbs. We later had an argument about how I felt that was an awful decision, and how it sort of – reinforced some racism that I feel like I have to rework through every day.

It was a lovely suburb. We had a house, and there were woods behind us, and I have a brother and sister. And in some respect, it was an idyllic place to grow up. My parents' marriage was very rocky. My father was violent and alcoholic. My mother divorced him in 1966, even though her family said she needed to stay in the marriage.

The classic story I tell is she went to our Presbyterian minister and said, my husband is sleeping with other women and he's beating me up. And the minister said, you just have to get used to this.

SS: Did she stay in the Presbyterian Church?

CC: She did not, after that.

SS: Um hm.

CC: And so pretty ballsy, for my mom to do that; because she really didn't get any support. And I think it was actually a really empowering thing she did.

SS: So did you stay with her?

Tape I
00:10:00

CC: Yes. And the thing – I stayed with her in New Jersey, but my father moved in here. So I always would come into New York, as a little kid. So I felt like a New Yorker basically all my life, because I had access from age seven on. So I would visit him a lot.

SS: So in that era — since we're exactly the same age — every time you'd turn on the TV, there was the war in Vietnam, there were riots, there were civil rights marches. What kind of discussion was going on in your family about those events?

CC: Well, interesting, because my mother's brother went to West Point. Again, because it was an Army family – my grandfather was a colonel in the Army, and when we liberated Europe, if you will, he was an engineer, and

went and rebuilt bridges in Germany, right after World War II. So very much an Army family. So my mother's brother went to Vietnam.

I didn't really know what that meant, as a kid. Sort of several different conversations, if I can talk about them. There were riots in Newark. And so Chatham, New Jersey, being 25 miles away from Newark, I remember people in Chatham being really scared that the rioters were going to come to our town. So there was a fear of people of color, if you will. And we had a cleaning lady that was African American. So there was some discussion of what the riots meant.

Very interesting: my mother had to get employed after they got divorced. She became a schoolteacher. She worked in a parochial school for a while — and lost that job, and couldn't find a job — and eventually found a job in Plainfield, New Jersey, which was a 95-percent African American urban area in New Jersey. And all these neighbors of my mother's said, you can't go there. You're going to get hurt. Aren't you afraid? And my mother was like, what are you talking about? I don't really understand.

She also had written an article — she was a writer — she wrote an article about when Martin Luther King was assassinated, and how the flags were at half-mast. And someone in Chatham said, how dare they have the flags at half mast for some nigger? And she wrote an editorial talking about how outrageous that was.

So there was some consciousness about the civil rights discussion in my house; but I don't remember that. I don't remember conversations with my mother. But I remember those stories.

Also, in hindsight, her brother going to Vietnam: he went the first time, and came back, and did not – thought what he was seeing there – it was clear that the war was misguided, if you will. But he was asked to go back a second time. And when he went back a second time, he was commanding a platoon there – that might not be the right term. And worked with these men — they were South Vietnamese men — for a couple months. And they went to a battle. In one afternoon, the majority of them were killed.

So my uncle still holds a lot of trauma about that. I didn't know that at the time. My mother was very antiwar; that was a discussion. My father was very antiwar. I remember, in fourth grade, I decided Nixon was a good candidate, because I was just revolting against my parents, and I had to say I think he's a very interesting candidate. My mother was just appalled that I thought that Richard Nixon was something to get behind.

That – sort of messy – I don't know if I can get more articulate about that.

SS: And what kind of information or messages did you get about gay people?

CC: Well, interesting. My mother's uncle is gay; Uncle Herb. Her favorite uncle. I remember my uncle — so I called him Uncle Herb — I remember Uncle Herb coming with his lover — I don't know; I was probably seven or eight. And I loved Uncle Herb, and I loved his boyfriend, too. They had like a blue Cadillac convertible. And they came, and we got to drive around in that. So there was a lot of love shown to Uncle Herb. Never an overt conversation that he was a gay man. Though somehow, I remember in my teen years, he came and visited. And I said I was going out to hang out with some of my friends. And he said, oh, your boyfriends. And I was like, oh, boyfriends, no no no. You have it wrong; they're not my boyfriends.

Tape I
00:15:00

And I also learned later that my father had kicked — I wish I could remember Uncle Herb's lover's name; I can't — had kicked Uncle Herb and his partner out of the house we had at the Jersey Shore once because he accused my uncle of molesting my brother. Which is, as far as I know, not true.

What's also interesting, though; 10 years later, one of my father's best friends — his name is sort of ironic, if you will — his best friend's name was Larry [Seaman], and he was a gay man. And Larry used to come down to the Shore and visit all the time.

So there were these weird mixed messages; not overt conversations. But there were clearly gay people in my life. My mother was also — her first job was at a parochial school. She became friends with some nuns.

And the nuns left being nuns because they were lesbian. And again, my mother's best friend, Alice [Carey], who came to her funeral: we used to visit Alice and Marsha, who were ex-nuns, but were lovers.

And I remember visiting them in Paterson, New Jersey. And Alice had this beautiful big room with a double bed. And Marsha had this small room, with this bunk bed. And I was like – I was always, Marsha, why do you have the smaller room? It seemed like they wanted to put on this illusion when we visited that that's what was going on. Though somehow I felt like I knew something else was going on.

So again, not an overt conversation, but clearly, queer people were in my life.

SS: Right. So what came first for you: being an artist, musician, performer; being queer; or being politically involved?

CC: I think they all sort of hit at once. Interesting question. I was playing music in high school, and I fell in love with this younger guy. And that was really confusing for me. I kind of didn't know how to make sense of it. And also, a lot of drug use in my story. A lot of the ways I think I was dealing with my attraction to boys was drinking. It was very uncomfortable for me. And Charles, this guy who I had a huge crush on, became really good friends with me, but we never had sex, and I didn't know how to express that. And I think that – it would be interesting, that sort of thread in this story.

But I was playing music there; not so politically active.

Go to Bard College. A lot of classes – my first exposure to sort of Marxist thinking. Some of the people on campus were fairly politically active. I went there as a poet, because I was writing a lot of poetry in high school. And throughout my process at Bard, stopped writing, because I felt — this was a very conscious decision — I felt like writing was a very isolated activity. And I had started playing music a lot. And music really seemed like — kind of went along with my sort of Marxist thinking at the time — sort of collective art-making. And I thought that was – felt — and again, conscious decision — felt more politically engaged than writing alone in my room. So there was some sort of, at Bard, getting conscious of the world more, besides just the struggles that were going on the United States. Thinking about collective political action, but thinking of it more sort of in artistic terms, if you will.

This is sort of a funny story about that. My friend Nayland Blake and I, and actually, Gerry Pearlberg; the three of us started the first gay and lesbian organization at Bard College. Which was funny: years later — I can't remember; it was probably 10 or 15 years later — I was having dinner with someone. And this woman was going to school at Vassar, and talked about, that old gay and lesbian organization, at Bard College. And it was like, wow, that “old.” It just made me feel old all of a sudden, because she had a knowledge of it being this ongoing thing, and we were the people that started it.

Tape I
00:20:00

SS: What was it called?

CC: Mm, can't remember. So very out in college. Sort of out in high school, but sort of drinking around it. But really, at Bard, it was easier for me to establish sort of a new relationship in how I, what my identity was.

SS: Let's just say for the record that you were a sort of centerpiece figure in the downtown improvisational new music scene, for, I dunno; 15 years?

CC: Probably so, yes.

SS: Yeah. So were you getting into that kind of music when you were at college? Or did that come later?

CC: Uh huh. No – hm. Uh – a friend of mine — again, also a downtown musician, who now lives in Berlin; Doug Henderson and I — went to Bard together. I don't know the — it's interesting that you're doing this. I wasn't even thinking of all this.

My freshman year, I meet this guy who's really very interested in a lot of sort of avant garde rock that's going on in Europe. Find out – he puts on this band I really liked. They're called Henry Cow. I'm like, I want to meet these people someday. And they actually had – they considered themselves a collective, as musicians. And what was interesting also; they were men and women. It wasn't – you're so used to seeing these boy bands. And actually, here was a band that were men and women; they wrote music collectively. But they

also started an organization called Rock in Opposition, in Europe. And the idea was to really go to different countries, and find out what kind of music was happening there, and create these collectives in different countries. And sort of, the response was – there's a lot of culture here. We don't need music from the U.S. We went to support different jazz and rock and improvisational music that's going on there.

So sort of learned about that my freshman year. And then, interesting; find out somebody at Bard knows the people in Henry Cow. Invites several of them — a guy named Fred Frith — to come do an improvisational concert there. And Doug and I went to the concert. And I think it was concurrent; we started improvising around that time.

So I meet these people that are doing very interesting sort of, again, musical and political work together; and then sort of discover that, at the same time.

So the summer I graduate from Bard, I move into a building – I just happened to move into this building where people like John Zorn and Eliot Sharp live. And I move into the apartment of this woman that's doing something called Improvisers Network. And it's a network of –

SS: What was her name?

CC: Her name was Leslie Dalaba. She now lives in Seattle. I'm actually going to play with her in Seattle – there's an improvised festival that's

happening soon. And Improvisers Network was a collective of improvise musicians throughout the country, and it was a network of those musicians. And she was tired of running that organization, and I took over that organization. Again, the same stream of, like, music and politics. And so very much, as soon as I got to New York, started organizing shows. We got a basement we could play music in. Any place we could find a place to play, we would play. And I created a monthly schedule, so people knew where these gigs were going on.

SS: And what was this building that you and Elliot and Zorn were –

CC: Zorn still lives there. It's on Seventh Street between B and C.

SS: Oh, okay.

CC: I think John owns like three floors now, or something.

SS: You know, it's such an interesting movement, culturally. Because it was so way out, and so far ahead. But it was really straight.

CC: Um hm. Very.

SS: I mean, I can't even think right now of another gay person who was as involved in that scene as you were.

CC: Well, that's where I think ACT UP will come in, too. So it's sort of interesting: in college, being really out. And I come here, and get involved in that music scene, and somewhat become closeted, and somewhat not vocal about being a gay person. It's really, it sort of shifts, and it's really about music.

And go and have sex in a lot of places, like movie theaters and such. And I was a bicycle messenger at the time, so Times Square was something, you know, I rode to every day, so could take breaks, and go have sex in booths, and – but wasn't – I would say, for a long time, didn't really have any gay friends here. Again, so sort of a switch from college, where I had some kind of community. The community shifted, and I wasn't having an overt discussion about my gay identity at all.

Tape I
00:25:00

SS: Why do you think that scene was so straight? And it also was surrounded by queer art movements.

CC: Surrounded – I'm not sure. Again – I think it's, it's sort of a weird analogy, but it's somewhat like professional sports. I still feel that the music industry is predominantly a straight industry. It really promotes that. It's a little different now, it's a little queerer. But it historically has been that. If you go back – like Billy Strayhorn. Here's this gay, incredible composer: but it's Duke Ellington that really takes, in some respect, the fame away. And oh, Billy's just a helper here; he gets dismissed, right?

I don't know the reasons of why it's such a straight scene, but it still very much is, I think.

SS: On the other hand, when those musicians — you, Zena, Shelley Hirsch, all these people — started to collaborate with the dancers; then there was a lot more queer mixing.

CC: Um hm. It's true.

SS: Can you tell us about some of the people that you've worked with?

CC: Well, interesting again, because you and I talked about this briefly; and it came up because – and I was trying to remember when I got involved with ACT UP, as compared to when this show that I did with Ishmael and Dennis, called “Them” –

SS: Dennis Cooper and Ishmael Houston-Jones.

CC: Yeah yeah. When we did this show — because we were talking to the New Museum recently, and so they asked us sort of the origins of the show, and why the show was so important for me — it was the first time that I had worked with two other gay collaborators. I remember just feeling like really awkward, and like not knowing how to talk, but at the same time, just thrilled that finally, I was working with two people that were very gay-identified, and the work we were making was about that.

SS: What year was that?

CC: First version, I believe, was 1985. And then we got more funding, and in 1986 we did a bigger production. And then we also did a production in Toronto in '87.

SS: And that was at The Kitchen?

CC: No, it was PS 122. And I wondered, too; I don't know when I started going to ACT UP, as compared to that. So that history is a little messy for me.

SS: Well, it wouldn't be 1985, because ACT UP started in '87.

CC: Interesting. So then that's a precursor to that. When we started, Zena and I and a lot of other people started doing music-dance. So we would meet at PS 122 every Saturday morning, and people like Jennifer Munson, Linda Austin, Jennifer Miller, Jackie Shue, Donald Fleming, Bob [Flynt] –

SS: Jeff McMahan?

CC: – Jeff McMahan; and probably – oh, god, I'm going to not remember his name — John –

SS: John Bernd?

CC: – John Bernd. Because he was so significant, because he was really, in some respect, the first person in our community that got ill. And so there is a whole story around that. I'm sure he showed up a little bit around that. And that was really important. Again, through doing this collective work; we'd get together, and we'd improvise. We'd improvise, and then we'd talk about it, and improvise more. It was a very – you know, PS 122 felt like our living room. It was just where we hung out and sort of experimented and did work. And some people would pair off and do a show together. And other people, Circus Amok happens. All these things kind of came out of that.

SS: Wait, what year did you move to New York; '79?

CC: I started Bard in the fall of '77. So every summer, I came here and lived and worked. So 1982 is when I come here full-time, the summer of 1982.

SS: Now, had you already heard of AIDS by '82?

CC: No.

SS: No.

CC: At all. Not on my radar, at all. At all.

SS: And when did you first realize it existed?

CC: It might have been when John got sick.

SS: So you didn't know there was this thing out there? No.

CC: Again; so imagine, I come out of college, and get very involved in music, and somewhat closeted. So don't really have queer friends. Have these sort of queer colleagues where I dance and, I'm starting to feel more comfortable there. But the majority of my time is spend as a bicycle messenger, and also in this very straight music scene. And that's what I'm involved in, because it's at the time, so exciting for me. So yeah, not on my radar, at all.

Tape I
00:30:00

SS: So what do you remember about John and his illness?

CC: I remember being really terrified and scared, and not understanding it. It's interesting. Not understanding how people were responding to him. Since I had no relationship to him — I wasn't a friend of his — I

remember being sort of stunned at the care that people – basically, a lot of his friends, his peers, created this support group for him. And I was quite amazed by that.

I remember running into John at, I don't even know if that Korean deli is still there; it's at First and A; no, it's not First and A, it's Seventh and A. And there used to be that club, A7, and there was nothing on Avenue A, and then that big place opened. And I remember running into John there. And I remember, I was scared, I didn't want to touch him. I was like, I just had no knowledge of it. So it was like – and I was nervous, I didn't know how to talk to him.

And then I remember Jennifer Munson, I think, and Ish made a show with John? And there was this amazing scene where he was sort of in a tub, and people were bathing him. And I just remember also just being really, I don't know how to respond to it, I don't know what this is.

Interestingly, I'm just having tons of anonymous sex at that time, and – protected sex; none. And not talking to my partners at all. It was just about me, again, being in this place of being really closeted, and not overt about my sexuality and what that meant.

So surely not aware of, like Richard Dworkin's whole trajectory with Michael Callen and stuff; not aware of that at all.

SS: So when did that start to change?

CC: Well, I was trying to remember, because I knew you'd ask the question. I don't know where I heard about ACT UP. I really don't. Like, how did I end up at The Center, at my first ACT UP meeting? I –

SS: You know what? I just remembered something that I had totally forgotten. I organized the first fund-raiser for ACT UP at PS 122.

CC: So maybe that.

SS: I wonder if you were in it.

CC: I don't remember.

SS: I don't remember, either. But anyway –

CC: Yeah, because –

SS: – that would be like '87.

CC: Right, because – the West Village was not a place I went. I hung out in the East Village; that's just where my community was. So I don't – because I remember the feelings of getting to that first meeting, but I don't know – ah, what I heard, or how I knew about it.

SS: Okay, so you came to The Center –

CC: Um hm.

SS: – and then what did you – did you know people when you walked in the room?

CC: I did not. And it was packed. It was the downstairs room. And I just remember — I won't get up and do this — but I remember being

jammed against the back wall. And I was like, my god. I just remember being stunned. Like – I was like, are all these people queer people? I don't know what I was calling – gay people? I don't, I – I was just overwhelmed at a room full of gay people. I had never imagined that. Really, honestly, had never imagined that; that a bunch of queer people could get together, and there would be this thing.

Basically, such an introvert, even though I'm a musician and do things; so I felt really sort of intimidated and shy. I don't know if I even stayed the full meeting the first time. Just being overwhelmed, and at the same time, pretty excited and inspired by. So much so that – so it must – I bet that was the spring of '88, would be my guess. Would be my guess.

I was so excited, I went and told a friend of mine that I thought might be interested in this, and who could accompany me to my second meeting. And so I went to this performer named Richard Elovitch, and said, I really went to this amazing thing. I'm feeling a little shy. Would you come to this?

And he was like: I don't know why Richard. Maybe we had had conversations around politics before.

SS: Well, he was in John's care group.

Tape I
00:35:00

CC: That too. I don't know if he was working for Movement Research at the time. I can't really remember. But we surely had had some conversation that it made sense for me to go talk to Richard, that I just went to ACT UP, and I thought it was interesting, and he might find it interesting. But

more, my impulse was I needed sort of a pal to go with. And I knew if I had a pal, I would feel more comfortable.

SS: And interesting; I remember our walk there, the second time. And we stopped and talked to a friend of his that was sick. And I remember having a similar response that I had to John, like, oh, who is this person; how do I interact with someone that has AIDS? I don't know what this means. I remember that guy was just a lovely guy, but sort of having that trepidation.

I remember Richard and I got there, and I did my usual thing of being in the back row. And Richard was like, no; we're sitting in the front row. And I was like, what? We are not.

That was really great. Again, he sort of functioned like I wanted him to. He was, I want to be here and participate. And of course, as soon as Richard got there, he was writing down everything, and got very involved very quickly. And I didn't.

He really just took off. It was something that made a lot of sense for him. I think I was sort of intimidated by a room full of queer people; people that were really articulate about sort of political action. Again, it's my first experience of a really big group of people, not musicians, actually doing work that's related to civil rights, really; related to people's bodies, related to people's health; related to people's sexual identity. So I'm sort of like drinking it all in,

and not – like him, being much more, like, engaging, and wanting to get in the organizing. I felt like I was sitting and learning a lot. Again, Robert’s Rules of Order? What’s that? I have no idea what that is. How is this functioning? So sort of more of a curiosity about how it’s functioning and what it’s about.

SS: So do you remember some of the personalities who stood out for you in the meeting?

CC: I think at the time, Maria Maggenti and Greg Bordowitz were the two people I remember a lot as – is the term “facilitators” –

SS: Yeah yeah.

CC: – who would facilitate the meeting. Also Robert Garcia, I remember. I think I looked on your Website recently, and there was a picture of Robert, and god, he just looks so young, and I remember – he didn’t seem young at the time. And to see – he just looks like such a baby.

Jim Eigo; I’m so bad with names. The woman that lives in Park Slope.

SS: Maxine.

CC: Maxine. Jim Fouratt, for whatever reason. He and Richard would always sit next to each other and argue, sort of. Mark Harrington. Vito. Robert Vasquez. Those are names that sort of stick out to me.

SS: So how did you plug in, or how did you get involved?

CC: It was very hard for me. I tried. And that's why, again, I was joking before we started this, that this would be short. I really – looked for my place there, and couldn't really find a place so much. I went to a couple of demonstrations. At the time, and maybe still, feel that; that I have some ambivalence about it. The notion of getting arrested; I don't know if I thought that that was necessarily – the most advantageous way to get people engaged. Clearly, historically, it did mean a lot, to have these people doing it. I also have a lot of friends that still believe that that's a smart political action to do, and have seen changes happen because of that. But at the time – I think there was also some fear for me about getting arrested, and what that was. I didn't know what that meant.

SS: Do you remember what some of the demos –

JAMES WENTZY: I'm sorry. We just have to change tape.

SS: Just change tapes? Change tapes.

CC: See, I thought you only do one tape.

Tape II
00:39:39

SS: So do you remember some of the demonstrations?

CC: It's funny; I only remember two, which is surprising –

SS: Oh wait, we're not going. Okay, go ahead.

CC: I only remember two, which is surpris-, actually three.

Because I can imagine I went to more. But I remember, it's funny – an ex-partner of mine, that I was with for nine years, happened to be in the same meeting, where this came up – and this relates to demonstrations. And I remember – they were gathering affinity groups for some demonstration, and it was going to happen at two in the afternoon – I'm making up the time. And I remember, I raised my hand, and said, I have a full-time job. I can't make that.

And someone said, well, if you can't get out of your job, you're not committed enough, and we don't know if –.

And I just remember being, like – wow.

SS: Who said that to you?

CC: I wish I could remember. And Mark remembers — we didn't know each other at the time — Mark remembered that comment, too. And I was like, oh, well I guess this isn't a very working-class organization, then. If you're really not going to try to accommodate – because I didn't say, I think I remember saying, there might be people here that have jobs. What are we supposed to do? And the response was, well, if you can't get out of your job, you're not committed enough. And I remember just going – eh, that doesn't sit well with me. But I

didn't have the agency at the time to go actually protest that, make a conversation of it. I just remember being sorta dismissed and shut down by that.

SS: Okay, let me ask you a tough one.

CC: Okay.

SS: Like, ACT UP, there were like 800 people in ACT UP, right? Anyone could have said that. But do you think that that was just like a weird person being an asshole, or a very sick person being angry? Or do you think that that represented an organizational point of view?

CC: It's probably more what you're talking about; someone that just was saying that; and I took it as, the whole organization is this way. Right? And again, being pretty honest about that, being intimidated about – not feeling like I was articulate enough to kind of, form my own affinity group, of people that were workers, that could show up at a different time. Because I could have done that, but I didn't. Right?

SS: Well, what was your general perception of class dynamics in ACT UP? Because all the people you just named are all from different classes.

CC: Huh. Again, I don't know if I – I can think in hindsight, but at the time, I don't know if I thought that way. Other than that one moment, going, oh, this is weird. I can't get out of work. That would be detrimental to me. And just not – that, so that was just a moment where I was like, mm, this is weird.

So I remember one demonstration down, the court buildings. I'm not going to remember specifically. But I also remember going down to — I think this, sort of very telling — the demonstration at the FDA, but I didn't go to the FDA. I only stayed — the Quilt was there. So the day before, what we did, many people did, is we went and handed out fliers and cards for the action the next day. And so I remember doing that all day.

SS: And do you remember how people responded? Because the Quilt was such an intense experience.

CC: Well it's funny, I bring up Robert Garcia, too. I remember — I went up to him, and said, god, I just feel so overwhelmed by being here. And I hugged him. And he just started crying. And I was like — I felt removed from it. So my own response was odd. I felt overwhelmed but sort of muted by it. I remember people being really appreciative that we were handing these things out; that there was something that they could possibly do that was in response to what they were experiencing. I don't feel like any people were dismissive about it, at all.

But interestingly, people took buses down there. It was a huge thing, right? And I stayed with this straight musician friend of mine and his girlfriend. And I felt uncomfortable talking to them about what I was doing there. And I got really nervous. And I was like, well, I don't know if I want to get

arrested; I don't know if I believe this is a really smart action. And I went home. I retreated. I retreated.

And I remember, after the weekend, I remember talking to Richard, and I was like, god, I really – I retreated, I couldn't show up for that.

And he said, you did what you could. And it's true; I told people about it, so I did something. But I think I was really disappointed that I couldn't show up, especially because there's all this footage of the FDA thing, and I actually that – my memory of that, and the aftereffects of that; it was probably, in my memory, the most important demonstration that ACT UP did. I also remember, before the FDA, Mark Harrington and other people were doing these teach-ins. Those were incredibly important to me, too; to go to that. And I don't know if I had ever sat and been told this medical information, and how it related to being politically engaged, and how people – how are we going to get people to respond to this?

Tape II
00:05:00

So again, I felt like there was a lot of education that was happening, but it was difficult for me to kind of engage in the demonstration part of it, if you will. I mean, so the irony of that day is, I go home, and — I wish I could remember the name of the movie — there's some movie about John Lennon. And I went and saw this movie about John Lennon while people were demonstrating in the FDA. So what's interesting about that; that movie is sort of very cynical about John's political involvement; sort of very critical of that.

So didn't get very involved in the demonstrations. Tried to get involved in Gran Fury. Went to a meeting of Gran Fury. Thought what I contributed was really great. And I remember talking to Richard and saying, well, I'm a musician, I really want to get involved. He said, we don't have any room for musicians in Gran Fury. And I was like – well, you brought up Avram, is that his name?

SS: Avram Finkelstein.

CC: Avram's a hairdresser. I was like, well, he's a hairdresser, and he's in Gran Fury. Why can't a musician be in Gran Fury? I don't understand.

So I felt like there were a lot of roadblocks to where I tried to get engaged, but then I was sort of pushed back. So what ended up happening was, I really made a choice to — and I think it happened concurrently — I came out as a gay musician. I became very vocal about being a gay musician, in that scene. I became very vocal about AIDS and HIV in that scene, and really took it on that I needed to inform the community that was such a straight community that this was actually going on. So instead of staying in ACT UP, I went back to my community, and got engaged in that way.

SS: Was that when you guys started your band Gay Nation?

CC: Gay Nation happened later, really. Zena and I started this band No Safety in the fall of '86. And again, I became the lead singer of that band, and I wrote the majority of the lyrics. And so the lyrics were very much

about me being a gay man. Conversations about HIV and AIDS are surely there in the lyrics, too. That became really the major platform. Gay Nation was an idea of Scotty Heron, who I met in Music Dance. Very much – I’m sure he would — I don’t know what he’d say — very much a gay-identified performance artist.

SS: I think the word is “fag.” Is that –

CC: Yes! A big ol’ fag. Scotty is a big old fag. And he asked me to play music. See, because I think Queer Nation was happening, so I think it was later. And that’s why we called it Gay Nation. And it was Scotty and I both playing drum machines, and me playing guitar, and Scotty wearing a torn dress and a wig. And I remember doing some ACT UP event at Movement Research, and all of them were like, oh, what is this, what are you doing? So again, trying to show up and do something, and not feeling supported in that community. Again, as I perceived it, I felt like it was sort of this weird West Village–East Village difference, right? That, if I can use the word, the East Village being sort of more bohemian. I didn’t feel, or couldn’t find, the people that I felt were — I never use this word for myself, but — bohemian in ACT UP. I couldn’t find those alliances. So again, it felt more – I felt like I had more agency, and it felt more important for me, to be talking about it over here, instead of over here.

SS: Well it’s interesting, because certain art forms were very well represented in ACT UP. Like novelists; filmmakers. Other art forms were almost not represented, like poets –

CC: Right.

SS: – playwrights. No one from that music world was there.

CC: None.

SS: Yeah.

CC: None.

SS: And I don't know why that was so, but I guess people bring their friends, or something.

Tape II
00:10:00

CC: Right. Also, again, graphic arts; huge in ACT UP, right?

SS: Right.

CC: That was really important. This visual, this intellectual-visual approach to things was incredibly important. Again, I remember Gran Fury, and they were talking about fonts, and I was like, what's a font? Who cares what kind of font? I just didn't care. It didn't seem immediately important to me. Though again, in hindsight, I think ACT UP's had huge rippling effects; some of, like what we're sitting in right now, is part of that. But again, I found it hard to – I didn't have so many alliances there.

SS: So let's go back to the East Village then. So in that era – so now, were there more people in your life who had AIDS?

CC: No. No.

SS: Because a lot of East Village people died of AIDS.

CC: Right. Well, again, sort of – maybe, in some respect, sort of closeting myself in the music community. I think it was also a safer place for me to be. I wasn't, at the same time, I get in a relationship with Mark, and so I have this gay relationship; and meeting Radical Faeries and such; and then staying in the straight music scene.

There's a story there, too. Didn't feel so supported in the music scene. Like a lot of people, why are you always political? Why are you always talking about gay politics? I remember a band after No Safety was Suck Pretty, and I did this U.S. tour. And interesting: in New York, a lot of people in the music scene; why are you talking about this? As soon as I went on tour, I went to all these radio stations, and they're asking me, well, what's going on in the gay community in New York City? And I was like, god, I don't feel like a spokesman here. But all of a sudden, here I am, in Alabama, talking about what's going on in the gay community in New York. So it's funny; I kind of wanted to be a spokesman, but felt ambivalent about that role.

SS: But the person you chose to be your boyfriend, Mark Leger, was totally from the community.

CC: That's true.

SS: Like his previous boyfriend had run Outlook magazine; he was gay, gay, gay, gay, gay. So there must have been something there that made you choose him.

CC: Well, I think Mark was really politically engaged; but again, didn't get involved in ACT UP. He got very interested in community gardening, as an idea of collective action, particularly when the Giuliani administration was happening, and Giuliani was trying to get rid of community gardens. Mark really felt that they were community centers, and that Giuliani was trying to close them down because they had some political agency that he was threatened by. Mark, very much a community organizer. But Mark often critiqued me, that he felt like I wasn't into political organizing; that I was sort of being this spokesman that wasn't so informed. So there was that critique that was going on in the relationship, that I think ultimately sort of led me to my work here.

SS: So that's the next question. So after decades of ambivalence, how did you end up being an AIDS professional?

CC: AIDS professional; so horrible, so horrible. Because I felt, in the music community, that I was often asked to not – or responded to in a negative way, that my songs were always political, that I was always out; I didn't feel supported there, as a gay man. And my relationship, through Mark, and through some Radical Faeries, and meeting Richard Dworkin, and him becoming my best friend, and sort of his history with Michael and such, and sort of learning that, and meeting people through him; meeting people like you; meeting a lot of, and people through Dennis and Ishmael and Nayland; my life became much more

gay-identified. So much so that even now, I don't have that many straight-identified friends. The majority of my friends are queer.

I was also turning 35; I was a successful musician, but I was starving. Sort of like thinking about my future, what am I going to do here?

The story that's being left out here is my drug use also was increasing. I would go on these tours, and clean up for these tours, and then I would come home, and do a lot of drugs, have a lot of anonymous sex, and/or just watch a lot of pornography, because I would go on these straight tours, and then I needed something to affirm my gay identity. And that became bankrupt. It seemed very empty, right? I wasn't getting supported. AIDS was in the background, but there was always this conversation of HIV and AIDS.

Tape II
00:15:00

Richard Elovitch was working at Gay Men's Health Crisis at the time, running a harm-reduction program. And the programs that I run currently are harm reduction. It's very much something I believe in. I think it's a really important philosophy. Again, that the U.S. government's not necessarily supported. The Obama administration gives lip service to it. A bit better than George Bush.

But so, get sober through a harm-reduction program that's here, at GMHC. And a volunteer opportunity becomes available. There's a program called Beyond 2000 –

SS: I want to stop you for a second. What's the difference between getting sober through a harm-reduction program versus getting sober through detox, rehab, and NA?

CC: It's complex, how I think about that now. Because I really do believe – I do go to Crystal Meth Anonymous meetings. I go to a couple meetings a week. I believe that 12-step programs are one modality. It's not a dichotomy here. I'm trying to describe this. The way people often think of it is there's 12 step and there's harm reduction. I actually believe 12 step is harm reduction. The attrition rate in 12-step programs is huge, right? So people come in and get clean for a couple weeks; they go out. That's harm reduction, right? They come in and learn some social skills, and then they go out, and then they use again. But it's harm reduction. I don't think it's so different. But I think how people latch on to 12 step programs as, – you need to be clean and sober, you need to use no drugs at all. So that's sort of the detox-outpatient-rehab approach to things.

I think harm reduction is really looking at people's behavior, and not demonizing it; looking at everything that's going on in their lives, and trying to get them to make some informed decisions about changing. What does change look like in your life? Why is drug use so important? What do you value there? You don't hear that in a 12-step meeting, talking about that. I think it's really

important for people to be able to identify what they liked about something if they're going to try to change things.

And again, drug use has been around forever. I think it's ludicrous to just have one point of view that's like, you can't use any drugs at all. That's a modality that works for me, but I don't think that works for everyone.

SS: Do you think that crystal is part of AIDS trauma, the crystal phenomenon?

CC: For sure it is. I think very much so. I think also the whole response in sort of Chelsea about, like, looking really buff is really very much a response like, I'm not sick. I know a lot of people that are HIV-positive that go the gym all the time, and really want to look a certain way. It's really, in my mind, a response to not wanting to look ill at all.

So don't get supported; get a volunteer job here; and there's harm-reduction counseling going on. Never heard about harm reduction. It makes a lot of sense to me; a way to engage people around a change process.

Eventually get offered a job here, being a harm-reduction counselor for substance users. So in some respect, it's a place I feel like I'm giving back, all of a sudden.

SS: Is that standard? Do they hire a lot of people from client base? Because Housing Works does that –

CC: They used to. The professionalization and the way grants are made now, lesser so.

SS: Okay.

CC: GMHC used to be very much; people got jobs like I did. That happens less here now. You have to have a degree now. I went and got a degree. That wasn't my reasoning, but it was a smart thing ultimately, because they're only hiring people with degrees, in some respect.

SS: With MSWs –

CC: Right, correct. Or CASAC, or something. You have to have some level of expertise before they're going to hire you here. And I felt, once I got here, and through being a volunteer and doing this substance-use work; I felt really engaged in the gay community in a way that I had never felt before. And it was a conversation I could have. It was much simpler for me. I was a drug user; I was sitting across from a drug user. I could identify with that person. I could help them identify things. I could run groups here, and have conversations, and educate people. But I also felt like I was being educated back by the people I was working with. It felt like a really important dialogue for me.

Again, somehow didn't feel that in ACT UP at all, but somehow got here, and that felt – it made more sense, somehow, intuitively.

SS: I want to ask you — this is a weird question — is there any prevention policy or program that actually works?

Tape II
00:20:00

CC: Well, I think that's a really – important question, and we don't really know that, do we? Because if we take away all the prevention programs that are here, in the world, let's say, I wonder if infection rates would go up? I think they're having some effect; but I think it's really hard to know how effective they are.

I think there's a problem, too – when the Bush administration came in, which I had just started working full-time here; it was a very interesting time, and you and I talked a bit about this at Veselka. It was very interesting. They started having random audits of our programs. And it really felt like – they were harassing us. It felt like harassment. It was like really intense. Like, that had not, from the people I knew that had worked here before, that had not happened before; the level of audits; checking the effectiveness of the program. How are you spending your dollars?

I think it was awful. But I think it's also made, in hindsight, has made this agency much more accountable to the clients they serve. But you have all these programs. The CDC now has these programs called DEBIs, which are – Diffuse Effective Behavioral Interventions. What does that mean?

So you get funding, you have to do a DEBI. A DEBI is a curriculum-based intervention that the CDC has decided is effective.

Well, it's very interesting. So you do a survey with the person that's entering the intervention, and ask them about their risk behaviors. And then

a month, six weeks, or 90 days later, you ask them, after they've finished the intervention, if their behavior has changed. I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's fine. It goes back to your question. A lot of people say that their behavior hasn't changed at all. Though the CDC has decided these are effective behavioral interventions.

SS: And why are they invested in it?

CC: Good question. Not quite sure.

SS: Someone on the other end, though, is –

CC: Right. I'm not quite sure. And, and GMHC has to, you have to buy that package. You can't just get funding to do a prevention program. They're going to give you money to do this specific type of prevention program.

At the same time, the majority of programs I run are for men of color. I actually think there's – it's a bit subtler, but I think there's a community, these interventions create community, which I think is really important in communities of color, particularly queer communities of color, where people aren't out a lot. They come here, and they can actually talk about the sex they're having. They can actually begin to have relationships with other gay men, and be really open about what they're doing. Whether this changes the sex they're having? Maybe a little bit. Maybe a little bit, because then, again, they can be explicit, and there's a place they can come and have these conversations.

I mean, it's the thing that keeps me coming to work. I believe there's some value in having these groups, and having men gather, because of how the epidemic has changed. I think it's really important that there's places for men of color to come and talk about these things.

SS: This building is like a hangout, basically.

CC: It functions a lot like The Center. At nighttime, I'm really surprised that no one has knocked on this door. Particularly in wintertime, there's a lot of youth of color that come in the building, and because they feel safe here, use these rooms. They hang out. It's a lot of the ball community comes in here, and different houses come in, and just feel comfortable here. And GMHC has basically decided that it's really okay that they're here, if they follow certain guidelines. We've had some trouble with that. But if they're going to come here and be in a safe environment, we'd rather them be here.

Tape II
00:25:00

SS: Right. So why do people continue to seroconvert?

CC: Well, go back to your question around crystal, too – how do I want to answer this question? I think in communities of color – one of these DEBIs, which is called Many Men, Many Voices; one of the things I think is really valuable that's in that curriculum is to get African American men to talk about dual identity, and what's it mean to be a gay man of color; how do you define that; are you a man of color, or are you a gay man, or are you a gay man of color? And particularly too, I live in a neighborhood that's a lot of West African

and Jamaican people. I know from other friends of mine that live in the neighborhood, there's a lot of men there that are on the down low, don't identify as gay, right? I think when the conversation becomes less explicit and you're having sex and you're hooking up, I believe you are not, maybe, engaging in safer practices, because you don't care as much. The conversation isn't explicit, so you're not – you're just not negotiating as a way – where if you're more informed, you might be.

But at the same time, people using crystal, I think, a lot of people – there's a real — I can never think of this word — exhaustion with prevention messages. I don't think we know what a prevention message is now. I don't know if we know the answer to that question that you're asking.

Because I also – we've seen this repeatedly, and it's really awful: if you're HIV-positive, there's a lot of services you can get. You can get HASA, you can get housing, you can get on Medicaid, you can get a lot of things. You get ADAP. We've had people come in here that are negative and come back a couple months and are positive, and they've talked about, because they couldn't get services, and now they can get services. Even if it means they're going to be on meds for the rest of their life, it doesn't matter to them, they don't think about the consequences; but they can actually get services.

So there's some cynicism on my part, that I think that happens. And again, drug use, I think, makes it really difficult to start negotiating and, hm,

how do you protect yourself; what kind of sex do you like? I think crystal makes people — and people have talked about this, too — can forget about HIV, can forget that they need to protect themselves. They can feel like, wow, I can really have the sex I've always wanted, I don't need to care. And there's a huge community around people that use substances, and they can really feel part of that. Again, the consequences kind of go out the window.

And then there's a very strong community around people that are HIV-positive, and have AIDS, too, that you might not have as a single gay person. But as soon as you get positive, there's these huge support systems.

SS: Do you think that people do drugs because they want to have unsafe sex; or that they have unsafe sex because they're doing drugs?

CC: Part of my own experience — it might be easier to talk about it that way; and it's sort of what I just said, too — I think I used drugs because there was a community I could connect to. Wow, I can connect to all these gay men, and we can have the sex we want to have.

I believe that crystal, in some respect, is a response to HIV and AIDS. Like, I don't have to think about it. I don't have to think about this. I can do whatever I want here. Fuck that. And again, not thinking about what the consequences may be.

SS: What you said about hooking up; this has been a huge controversy for as long as this has been going on: about do people get

infected in anonymous sex, or are people more likely to get infected in relationships? Because there was a time when people said that most people were getting infected in relationships.

CC: Yeah, I think it's both.

SS: It's both.

CC: Well also because now — not that it's any different — I think the way people are hooking up now is really so much the Internet. I know several people — we had a conversation with someone today — bathhouses, there's not really people there anymore. The culture has really changed. It's really about hooking up with people online. I don't know what that does. But I think it's very different.

SS: Okay. I just want to ask one more question about this, and then move on. Our generation, we're so used to saying "people with AIDS, people with AIDS." But very few people walking around today will say that they have AIDS. Because so many people are on meds, and become undetectable, or their viral load is low. Are we living in the past, when we say "people with AIDS"?

Tape II
00:30:00

CC: No, there are still a lot of people with AIDS, but people talk about being HIV-positive: I have HIV.

SS: Is that a euphemism, or —

CC: Yes, it's a —

SS: – or is it really that fewer people actually –

CC: – it's a eu-, well – I don't know. Of the clients I see – an AIDS designation is because your T-cells are below 230 –

SS: But then you can get, those bad T-cells go up –

CC: Some –

SS: – sometimes.

CC: – some people. Some people, meds don't work. People still die. It's a much smaller amount of people. There's no doubt. But people still die.

SS: So there are still people who actually have AIDS –

CC: Yes, but they still call, those people, I — those people — I have talked to people, and they identify as being HIV-positive. AIDS is almost this dirty word you don't talk about. It's –

SS: Interesting.

CC: – it's shifted: I'm HIV-positive.

SS: Do you feel frustrated?

CC: At, in what capacity? Yeah, really.

SS: That we can't seem to move forward in prevention.

CC: Yes. It's funny, we had – I have some cynicism. This is a good job for me.

SS: Um hm.

CC: How effective I'm being; pffh. I don't really know. There's been a lot of meetings, which happen in big organizations like this: where these dollars are going. Again, I think GMHC gets bashed by a lot of people. And rightly so. I think it's, in some respect, it hogs a lot of the money that comes into the city. We don't play well with other people: even though a lot of the staff tries to make partnerships with other organizations, it doesn't happen as much as we want it to. Again, I think, in my cynical moments, it's a good job to have. I don't know how effective I'm being. That's being a little too harsh. Again, I do believe, like, one-on-one sessions, and some of the groups that I run, there is some change that comes out of that. But we have meetings all the time. What's prevention mean?

Also what happened with the Bush administration: funding really changed, and it became about prevention for positives. Now, I think that's really awful. So what happened is, you're really stigmatizing positive men. And they're the people that have to change and protect themselves, so negative people don't get infected.

Well, that's just fucked up. That's not looking at it as complex as sexual relationships are.

And so what ended up happening is, if GMHC is about HIV prevention, a lot of what happened; we have mostly HIV-positive people in the building. And again, there's good things about that. There's community; there's

food; they get case management. There's a good thing about that. But what's happened is, people that are HIV-negative have sort of been left out of the equation for the last 10 years.

And so people don't know what messaging means. How to get those people in; how to even have those conversations with people. I think none of us know, and we're trying to figure it out.

SS: Also, are there prevention programs for white men?

CC: Um – I talk about majority of men of color coming in. The substance-use programs I run are not geared towards men of color. So – white men still come here; lesser so than when I started. So it's not like that's – those programs don't exist. It's just – seemingly, there's more of a need from these communities of color, because that's who's coming in the building.

SS: Okay. Wow. That was just, I just learned so much. That was an enormous amount of information for me. Thank you.

CC: You're welcome.

SS: So the only question I have left goes back to ACT UP. And it's so interesting, because you have this comparison to where you are now. This is the thing that we ask everybody at the end of the interview.

So just looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

CC: I think that there are a lot of achievements, really. Besides my own involvement, I – there's a couple ways I'll answer this question.

Tape II
00:35:00

I really believe ACT UP was hugely media-savvy. And someone brought up the other day that it was one of the last — I don't know if they use this term — civil rights organizations and movements that happened before the Internet. I think that's just interesting to ponder.

So really, media-savvy. I think it brought – to the surface HIV and AIDS, but it also brought to the surface in this country, and made it a more explicit conversation; gay and lesbian identity, in a way that was not there before ACT UP. I think hugely, hugely, hugely impactful. So much so, when I work with a lot of people that are in their twenties and thirties, people I supervise, they don't talk about ACT UP, but I think ACT UP affected their lives. I think it really affected the conversation in the country in a very big way, around all of those issues. And how can you say: if ACT UP wasn't there, that wouldn't have happened? I don't know. If AIDS hadn't happened, that wouldn't have happened. But I think there's huge value there. I think it also, for me, as a gay man — and I know this from other people of our generation — really taught me, and a lot of others, how to advocate for myself around health issues; how to talk to doctors; how to talk to medical staff. And I get straight-identified peers – I run into a lot – don't know how to do that. I am stunned by that. I feel like I got that from ACT UP. I got the notion that I need to educate myself around my own

health, and what I want. But the only way I'm going to get that is if I'm very vocal to the people where I access healthcare from. So again, sort of making a conversation explicit, but also, I think, teaching individuals how to advocate for themselves.

SS: And the disappointment?

CC: Again, from my own personal experience, what about people like me? Why couldn't we get involved? Because I believe in relationship: part of it was my ambivalence, for sure. But why – why weren't there more artists involved in it, as you talk about?

Somehow — and I don't believe this fully — but somehow this felt elitist, and didn't reach out to some people. I don't know how to talk about the disappointment so much, because I actually still hold it in some esteem. Maybe not so critical of it, in a way.

SS: Okay. Thank you. Oh, go ahead.

JW: Did you get laid in ACT UP?

CC: I did.

SS: There you go.

JW: Success.

CC: But that might have been the disappointment, is that I didn't know how to hook up there. And maybe, maybe, if I was having sex with more of

the people there, I might have been more engaged. Right. Exactly. That might have been true. Because I did – yes.

JW: But you got laid.

CC: Once, yes. Maybe it was twice.