ACT UP
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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

Interviewee: **Debra Levine**

Interview Number: **128**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **December 21, 2010**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Debra Levine
December 21, 2010

SARAH SCHULMAN: So, you start out you tell us your name, your age, today's date and where we are.

DEBRA LEVINE: My name is Debra Levine. I am forty-nine years old, turn fifty next month. We're at my home in Park Slope Brooklyn, and it's December 21, 2010. It's the winter solstice.

SS: That's right. And we're all pagans here.

DL: We are pagans. We're going to dance later.

SS: Except that you have this Jewish last name with which you grew up in a small town in Massachusetts.

DL: I have a Jewish last name just like you do. {LAUGHS}

SS: Yes. What was that?

DL: My mother grew up in Dorchester. My father grew up in Chelsea, Massachusetts, which is like the Bronx of Boston. There was a mass migration out to Peabody, Massachusetts, which was kind of the Levittown of its time, small development, all ranch houses. All the Jews from Chelsea migrated there and bought tiny houses. I grew up there from when I was born to when I went to college.

SS: So is that like G.I. Bill?

DL: No, although my father was in World War II, but he graduated high school, never graduated college.

SS: So when you were growing up, were your parents involved in any kind of community-oriented or political activity?

DL: Well, community oriented was really the local synagogue, and the section of Peabody that I grew up in was heavily Jewish. It was literally sort of this mass migration of Jews from the outside of Boston to the suburbs. So there were a number of synagogues. Our community really was a conservative synagogue, and that's really how I thought of my community.

SS: So did you learn Hebrew and how to daven?

DL: I learned Hebrew. I went to an Orthodox summer camp for many years.

SS: Did that help you become an intellectual, or did it stop you? {LAUGHTER}

DL: You know, I never thought of it that way. After going through Hebrew school, I went to Hebrew high school. I think that I was around a lot of kids who valued academic learning, and I guess that really influenced me, but I hadn't really thought about it in that relationship.

SS: So what was your parents' plan for you when you were growing up?

DL: I don't think my parents had much of a plan for me. My father died when I was nine. I was pretty young. My mother, also, she had gone through secretarial school but never really had finished college. I guess that the main plan was for me to go to college, but she didn't really understand any of it, so I just sort of figured it out on my own.

SS: So when your father died, did the Jewish community help your family in any way?

DL: Yes, and I got scholarships to go to summer camp and really I was heavily involved in synagogue youth group. It was really my home after my father died.

SS: So you grew up completely with the psyche of the community being responsible for each other.

DL: It was the suburbs, and it was sort of a bourgeois, lower-middle-class bourgeois suburbs. The community wasn't fully responsible for each other. Everybody was still on their own to a certain extent, but, yes, you really sort of participated in community.

SS: So when did you decide that you wanted to be educated and go out into the world and leave Peabody?

DL: Oh, my god, I just wanted to leave Peabody from the moment I was conscious, I think. You know, I didn't know any other kids who were from single-parent households. Everybody had two parents. A lot of kids wanted to stay around the Boston area. I read a lot as a kid. I didn't want to stay there. It just seemed really constricting to me.

SS: Since you're about to be fifty, congratulations.

DL: Thank you.

Tape I
00:05:00

SS: So you grew up during the sixties and seventies, and you saw a lot of things on television and heard about a lot of social change. Do you remember your relationship to watching those events or seeing those events?

DL: Sure. I really remember watching the funerals of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy on TV. I had a cousin who's a schoolteacher in Philadelphia, and she was talking a lot about the unrest that was happening in New Jersey. She was

teaching in the inner-city schools in Philadelphia. I guess the major thing, too, is that a lot of the kids that I grew up with, their parents were – I actually knew two kids whose parents were POWs in Vietnam and returned at that time too. So the war was really present. I remember listening to the radio and they always had a count of killed and injured soldiers every single day, too, so the war was sort of omnipresent in my life. We wore bracelets for the POWs to come home. But I was also sort of interested in what was happening in the counterculture, although I was a little bit young for what was going on and really didn't have much access to it.

SS: Where did you go to college?

DL: University of Pennsylvania.

SS: So when you got there, what happened?

DL: When I got there, the war was over at that time, Nixon had resigned, and the major issue there was divestment in South Africa, and there was a strong anti-apartheid movement there too. It was small because Penn was a really conservative school. The Wharton School really dominated at that point, so it was very business oriented, venture capitalism. People really wanted to make money. I wasn't really interested in that part of it. I was an English major. I did a lot of theater and I did some anti-apartheid work trying to get the school to divest in South Africa.

I was just thinking about it today for this interview, but I think that my first consciousness of gay and lesbian issues, I was friends with a lot of gay people because I did theater throughout school. But I went away to England for a semester, came back, and served on what was called the Student Finance Committee, and it just funded all student activities for undergraduates. We all had a certain number of groups

that we were responsible for in helping to put together budgets, and mine was the Gay and Lesbian Student Association. Part of their budget, the large part of their budget, and they were asking for a lot of money, was a suicide prevention line. And I was shocked because I just didn't know the extent of the work that they did throughout the school community, and it was significant.

So I went back to the committee, and you were supposed to advocate for your student groups, and I got really homophobic responses. I was shocked at that, too, from what happened within the committee. And the one guy who was super supportive of me was the football player, which I was really stunned about, but my suspicion is that he was gay. They got some money, but they didn't get a lot. But that was sort of my first real sense of what was going on in gay and lesbian politics. I had no idea that those kinds of services were needed that badly on school campuses.

SS: Were you involved with the divestment people?

DL: I organized protests on campus and advocated for stuff with the administration. I didn't do anything major on the national level.

SS: What was the relationship between the divestment movement and the feminists on campus at the time?

DL: Oh, my god, Sarah, I don't think that I met many feminists on the Penn campus. If there was, I didn't know about them and I wasn't connected to them. I was much more involved – there were a lot more African American students, but the African American students who were involved in that were capitalists. They weren't interested in sort of feminist issues. So it's a very weird campus that way.

SS: So what did you do after you graduated?

DL: I moved to New York.

SS: With your English degree?

DL: With my English degree, and worked in theater for a while. I was an Equity stage manager, supported myself doing that. We were working with various small theaters. I wanted to be a theater director, but actually I remember that my first real job was at the Roundabout Theatre, where I met this guy name Paul Griffin, who's later Griffin Gold, who worked with me. I met just a bunch of people, and then I went back to Columbia and got my MFA in theater, in directing.

Tape I
00:10:00

SS: What year was that, that you got your MFA?

DL: I got my MFA in 1988, but I started in 1985. I think I took an extra year to do it because they had good housing up there.

SS: So you're working in a theatrical environment, you're in New York City in the eighties. When do you start to become aware of AIDS?

DL: I was pretty aware early on, because one of my best friends at the time, Derek Hodel, who later became head of the PWA Health Group – I was in the directing program. He was a dramaturge there. He was getting involved and volunteering at GMHC.

I knew about AIDS because my hairdresser in 1984 got really sick, had KS and got sick very, very quickly, and then moved back to Queens with his parents, and I visited him a number of times and spent some time with him. So I knew AIDS was happening. I didn't know the politics around it as much, but I knew that a lot of people I knew were concerned about it, and a few people were getting sick.

Anyway, but Derek pretty early on got involved with GMHC and became a buddy, and we were talking about it a lot. He happened to be the buddy for Michael Hirsch, so he was both complaining that – I mean, Michael Hirsch wasn't the easiest person to be a buddy for, but he was also really a fascinating political person, and so we were talking a lot about what was going on in the community and what some of the issues were.

SS: Can you explain who Michael Hirsch was?

DL: You can probably do it better than me. Michael Hirsch was one of the – he was an out PWA, right? And he was also – he wasn't one of the founders of GMHC?

SS: No. It's the PWA Coalition.

DL: Right. I just remember Derek talking about him in a personal level, but very articulate, really sort of critical, outspoken PWA about what was going on with PWA issues, and a good organizer.

SS: And a raging queen.

DL: And a raging queen. {LAUGHTER}

SS: So you graduated with your MFA in '88. You're there trying to get into theater, make theater.

DL: I had been doing work with Creative Time, which was a public arts organization, and I started as an intern there when I was at Columbia, because I was sort of in the middle of getting my MFA. I was much more interested in what was going on in the performance scene downtown than doing regular kinds of theater, just regular plays.

So with Creative Time, I had been working with them. I was interested in trying to stage something about AIDS and put together a proposal to do this production for them in the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage and based on *Mask of the Red Death*, and do an environmental production. I was trying to do research about how to structure it. They gave me a significant amount of money to do it, and right at the time I graduated, I just thought, "Okay, I'm going to go to an ACT UP meeting and see if I can collaborate with people from ACT UP to see if they can help me put this together and I'm on the right track."

Literally, I went to my first ACT UP meeting right before I had graduated from Columbia, and it was amazing. First of all, I had never been to the Gay and Lesbian Community Center before. I really identified as a straight woman, and crossing that threshold was really something major for me because I guess I just kept thinking, "Oh, this changes something for me." I just didn't know the gay and lesbian community well. I just felt like, "Who am I walking in there?"

Then I sat down in an ACT UP meeting and just listened. A friend of mine had been going to ACT UP meetings, Duncan Osborne, for a couple months before that. But I went by myself and I was blown away. I was blown away by that first meeting. I was blown away by the political analysis, but the level of information that was going on, by the incredible debate. It was hilarious. And then I was really chastened by the fact that I didn't know much.

Tape I
00:15:00

So I thought that my conception of this theater piece that I wanted to do was probably really off base, and I gave back the money and said, "Actually, I'm not

qualified to do this. I really don't know what the fuck I'm doing." And I started going to ACT UP every week.

SS: Where did you first plug into the organization?

DL: Oh, my god. Oh, help me. Charlie Franchino's committee, he ran the – what was it, the Greeting Committee?

JIM HUBBARD: Outreach.

DL: The Outreach Committee. Because I basically knew how to give out literature, stand there on the street, talk to people, but I didn't know much, so I figured in outreach I could meet people, find out what was going on without having to bear the burden of understanding everything in the beginning. So I did outreach for a while and just worked. I met Robert Garcia there, went to Charlie's every single week. We went to events. Any kind of demonstration, I would just leaflet. It was easy for me to do, so I did that.

SS: Then where did you start to specialize?

DL: I went to the Women's Caucus meetings.

SS: What was that like?

DL: It was a little intimidating. It was more than a little intimidating. I guess I started to do Women's Caucus right before we did the Shea Stadium event. So I remember we were at Rebecca Cole's little apartment downtown, and we were trying to figure out what to do. I was really intimidated by some of the women because of their political experience and also their adamant insistence that because lesbians had been really kind of oppressed in other political organizations, that lesbian issues would be key

and always a priority. And I felt as a straight woman, I had to figure out my own relationship to this and make sure that I was super careful.

But went to the Women's Caucus meetings, and when we were talking about an event, at that time I was still working for Creative Time and I was working at Shea Stadium, putting on an event for them outdoor in the parking lot, and when we were thinking of what to do, I was the one that suggested doing a baseball game because I was there and knew that it was a big stage to actually figure out how to put a message out. I thought I was going to be killed, so I said it really quietly, because I was terrified.

I remember Rebecca Cole shrieking, "Oh, my god! That's great!" and then people really taking it up. But I was just very concerned that politically I would be incorrect, and I guess that was actually the real lesson that I learned in ACT UP, is that it was okay to be and it was okay to be shouted down, and you could be argumentative about it, but there wasn't going to be the same kind of oppression that other people had experienced in other groups happening there.

SS: Well, also that political criticism is not arbitrary. If you actually had a good idea, people would like it.

DL: That's true. That's true. That's true. Although the Shea Stadium thing had real mixed reception at first because a lot of people – and I know that they've talked abut this in other interviews, a lot of the men experienced baseball games as extraordinarily abusive, when their parents would take them there, and frightening, because at that point, too, you were really thinking about if there would be violence enacted against you if you were out there shouting about AIDS at a very heterosexual event.

SS: So did you do recognizance for that event?

DL: Yes, because I was working inside the stadium. I was working in the stadium manager's office the entire time that we were working on the event. So Maxine and I were able to get into the stadium when we bought tickets, and we measured out seats. But then I think that I did some more when I was working there and we were planning the entire event.

Tape I
00:20:00

I remember the day before the event, I'm sitting in the stadium manager's office working on my real job, my real event, and there was a phone call. He got information about our demonstration, and he was calling up the cops to figure out what to do and how many police should be there and what kind of force should be used.

I'm listening to the entire conversation, and I think I called up Maxine and I called up Gerri Wells, and immediately Gerri Wells called the community liaison at that precinct and said, "I heard that you guys are concerned about this event that's happening here. It's completely legitimate. We've bought tickets. We are going to leaflet outside, and we're not going to hold any kind of a violent protest." So most ACT UP events weren't negotiated out with the police, but we really let them know what the parameters of the demonstration were, and the demonstration went off really well because of that, I think.

SS: Also I remember because we bought so many tickets, we got a thing up on the—

DL: Yes, so that's what I knew, too, which is that when you purchase forty tickets, you get to put a message up on the LED display. So we had purchased like two hundred at that point, so we actually had five times that we got it. And weirdly

enough, they put exactly the message, "Welcome to ACT UP. ACT UP. Fight AIDS." I don't think that they did some of our slogans, like "Don't Balk at Safe Sex," but it came up on the LED display. It was fantastic.

SS: Cool. One of the things that we're interested in is the strip-search experience.

DL: Oh, right.

SS: Could you tell us a little bit about what led up to that?

DL: Sure. It was the first time I got arrested. I only got arrested twice in ACT UP, and it was a City Hall demonstration. I think that my affinity group was La Cocina, but somehow I got diverted and was demonstrating with the Box Tops, so I was sitting in a box.

SS: Who were the Box Tops?

DL: The Box Tops were an affinity group of ACT UP, and they were demonstrating the lack of affordable housing for people with AIDS. So they had cardboard boxes that they sat in, and sat down on the street. I think it was right by the Brooklyn Bridge. When it was time for them to get arrested, they sat in their boxes, sat down, and then the police dragged them off, and I got dragged off with them. Probably – do you remember how many women got arrested? I know that twenty-one women actually went through the strip-search suit, but a couple didn't join us.

So we all got arrested that day for just disorderly conduct and blocking traffic, and we went down to the precinct that was down around Pitt Street, and they separated out men on the left – it was like the Holocaust. Separated out men on the left-hand side, women on the right-hand side, and there was a line of holding pens that the

women were sent into. But there were a lot of us that were together. Were you arrested that day?

SS: No.

DL: So there were probably seven or eight of us in each cell, maybe more, and we were sitting there, and we were in for about five or six hours. But during that time, a matron starting coming by and taking us one by one and strip-searching us. They would pull us out one at a time, take us into a separate room, ask us to lift up our shirt, shake out our bra. When Catherine Saalfield – Catherine Gund – came back, she was demonstrating how she did it, and at first when they said to shake it out, she just started shimmying, and instead they had to explain that you had to actually shake out your bra, because we had no idea what was going on. Can I say names?

SS: Yes.

DL: So this woman Camille came back and she was like, "Oh, my god, when I dropped my pants, I think that they were shocked because I was wearing boxers," and then she was just talking. The level of surprise on both sides, I think, was really kind of amazing. But they strip-searched, I think, over twenty of us, and then we were released on desk appearance tickets, and we left.

People were talking about it afterwards, but I don't think that we had the level of consciousness about it that it was completely illegal. I don't think that we knew that. I think that we thought it was much more procedural.

Then I remember several days later, I don't know what happened afterwards, but it was a weekend when most of the ACT UP people were away, I think,

Tape I
00:25:00 and so I know that he called a couple people beforehand, but I got this telephone call from David Diaz from one of the major news stations, saying, "Are you Debra Levine?"

I said, "Yes, I am."

He's like, "Were you strip-searched?"

I was like, "Yes."

He's like, "Well, can I come talk to you about this?"

I was just like, "Okay, I think so."

So I set up a time, and then I think I called up the Media Committee, but I really remember speaking to Alexis Danzig, who spoke to, I think, a cousin of hers who was an attorney. We figured out that they had illegally strip-searched us. They had no reason to believe that we had had drugs on our person, so they did it really to intimidate us. It was one of those difficult things, right? Because, (a), they shouldn't be strip-searching anyone, and they were doing it to people who didn't have access to the attorneys that we did. So I think that we started making phone calls among each other and decided to meet later.

Yes, David Diaz came and asked me the details, and they were looking for a more lurid description, and I don't think that I was really good at that. But we started meeting around it and trying to figure out what to do about it, and some people were concerned because it really took the attention away from HIV issues, and some women were really adamant, saying this is a police practice that needs to be stopped.

So a group of us decided that we would take it on as a project and sue the police department, which we did, and it went on for a long time. We also did some media around it, and Catherine went with me. We went to some Geraldo [Rivera]

knockoff program in New Jersey, too, and all they wanted to do was really talk about the sexual details of it, which we really tried to refuse and use the opportunity to talk about HIV issues.

But we did pursue the case, the city did settle with us, and apparently it was the largest major payout that they had done on a strip-search case before, and I think each woman got $8,000 when the case was over. But the thing that we were all insisting on is that they change their procedure. Getting the police department to change their procedures about anything is next to impossible, but they agreed to do it. Then Gerri Wells went in and did a number of community trainings around it, which - I don't know. The city continues to strip-search people.

SS: Who's the attorney?

DL: Joan Gibbs was our original attorney, and then we went to – I think it was Ann Vladeck, or it was Vladeck firm that took it on, because it became a big case that needed to get funded, too, and we really didn't have the resources to do that.

SS: And there was controversy about it.

DL: About?

SS: About the settlement.

DL: About the settlement. Well, some people didn't want the money, other people took the money. I donated the money. I didn't feel like it was mine to keep. But what do you mean? That we shouldn't have settled at all or we shouldn't have taken money for the settlement?

SS: That some people kept the settlement was an issue at the time in ACT UP.

DL: Yes.

SS: It's interesting, as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking that AIDS is so gendered, that whether you're an activist or a person with AIDS, your experience as a woman is so different than it is as a man, from the beginning to the end.

DL: Well, it is in many ways, but I can't speak as an HIV-positive woman, which is a whole other gendered experience, I think.

SS: Right, but just as an activist, what the stories are and what the situations are.

DL: Sure. Sure, although I have to say around the strip-search stuff, the men were incredibly supportive.

SS: Yes, of course.

DL: They were really supportive.

SS: That's ACT UP.

DL: Right. It was great.

SS: Okay, so I want to go more into the whole prison thing. How much more time do we have in the tape?

JW: Thirteen minutes.

SS: Thirteen minutes. Okay, good. So how did you get involved in prison work?

Tape I
00:30:00

DL: I started dating someone from ACT UP who was a lawyer, and he had come to ACT UP because he was a Bronx Legal Aid attorney, and he had clients who were HIV-positive and didn't have services. We were talking a lot about what the issues were in prison issues. I was in the Majority Actions Committee, which felt really pretty

comfortable for me, because I was sort of interested in doing the stuff that in some ways wasn't the sexiest easiest stuff in ACT UP, but the stuff where I actually felt like I could really contribute.

So I both did the needle exchange work. I did a lot of work on needle exchange and on the trial, but I was doing some research on what was going on in HIV in the prisons, and through Mike [Spiegel] I was also introduced to ACE [AIDS Counseling & Education]. There were women up at Bedford Hill, women prisoners, that had organized themselves into an advocacy and counseling group, and they wanted to know what was going on on the outside and have a liaison to activist groups.

SS: Let's go backwards a little bit.

DL: Sure.

SS: So ACE is the first prison AIDS organization, as far as I understand it.

DL: I don't think that that's entirely true. I think that David Gilbert was doing work in men's prisons also. I think that a lot – a lot. There were a number of activists from the 1960s who were prisoners who were actually looking at what was going on around AIDS at the time. So, yes, I think that David was either in Sing Sing or Clinton and was also organizing then.

SS: Can you go back to who these people are?

DL: Sure. You can help me.

SS: So the women who are creating ACE, Judy Clark and Kathy Boudin, and David Gilbert were all arrested in the same crime.

DL: They were all arrested in the Brinks robbery, I guess, 1981, and they were originally part of Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, and then were part of the Weather Underground, and then were doing work in solidarity with African American movements and were arrested for robbing a Brinks truck where two guards got killed.

SS: Right. So David Gilbert and Judy Clarke got life sentences.

DL: David Gilbert and Judy Clark got life sentences because they refused to participate in the trial. Kathy Boudin got a – I guess it was a twenty-to-life sentence because she negotiated. She pleaded guilty and negotiated a sentence.

SS: So the same political tendency are in these two prisons, and they are the ones who are starting prison AIDS organizing.

DL: They were one of the people that had started the organization, yes.

SS: So in terms of Bedford, do you know the history of how ACE got started?

DL: Well, I have it here with me. I worked there for a long time, but it's a long time ago. I think that Kathy, Judy, along with a number of other people, Ruthie Rodriguez, Ada Rivera, Awilda Gonzalez, Doris Moises, Carmen Royster, a lot of women noticed that women were getting sick and had AIDS, and they didn't have access to experimental treatments in prisons because historically it used to be that experimental treatments were tried on prisoners, and so that was no longer allowed.

The AIDS crisis presented a really interesting problem, right, which is that experimental drugs at that moment were the only real kind of healthcare that there was, and no prisoners could enroll in an experimental drug trial. So that meant that they could get AZT, but you also had the problem where prison healthcare was really poor and even,

people didn't get regular distribution of their drugs. A lot of AIDS drugs you have to take exactly at the right time, you have to take regularly, or it can actually decrease your resistance. And that wasn't happening in the prison.

There was also a tremendous amount of fear and stigma in the prisons, because women were afraid of transmission. There were real fears about transmission especially around issues of tuberculosis. Actually, the worst part is that if you were sick in prison, it was a place where you would get sicker faster. But because people were really afraid of people with AIDS or afraid that they would catch it from using the same toilets together or eating the same food, there wasn't a lot of education. There was a lot of violence, and people were getting beat up if they were suspected of having AIDS or they had a relative with AIDS.

So at that moment that it was happening and people were getting sick, the people who had political organization skills in the prison recognized that it was a moment to actually say, "We can actually do something as prisoners for ourselves, because no one else is doing it." Actually, the way that it happened – are you interviewing Kathy?

Tape I
00:35:00

SS: I hope to. We haven't set it up yet.

DL: Talk about the lawsuit that happened, because a lot of this came out of a lawsuit that they won against the state prison commissioner, that they had to get much more adequate healthcare, and that happened, and because of the prison lawsuit they felt really empowered to try and put together something within the prison.

They had what was considered a very sort of forward-thinking and liberal warden, too, Elaine Lord, and they approached Elaine Lord and said, "We'd like to do something around HIV and AIDS where we can hold classes so that people understand

really how AIDS gets transmitted, how to take care of themselves, and also how to treat others so that it would really end the violence."

They'd seen that kind of a program work well where there was already an organization, a mothering program, up at Bedford Hills, and it was both to help prisoners with their kids who were in foster care, but also make sure that they had relationships with their kids even while they were in prison. Because that was really a peer-run group, I think that Lord saw the potential in it, although she was very concerned about it as well, because it gives prisoners power, and that's sort of antithetical to the idea of prisons.

SS: I just want to say for the record that Mike and Marion Banzhaf and Bob Lederer were from the same political tendency as these guys.

DL: Absolutely. Right. Well, that was Mike Spiegel, who I was dating at the time, was also in Weathermen and knew Kathy and Judy Clark, and so he was the one who suggested that I go up there and visit them.

SS: So the relationship between ACT UP and ACE has a long history in the history of the left.

DL: That's right.

SS: That preceded ACT UP.

DL: Absolutely.

SS: Okay, so then you went to Bedford.

DL: So Mike arranged that – I don't remember how he spoke to Kathy, but I think that he got a message up to Kathy Boudin, who said, "Sure, a number of you can meet us in the visiting room and arrange for a visit." I'm trying to remember who went up that first time. I know that Catherine Gund went up with me and my friend

Cathy Williams and me and maybe Alexis Danzig, I think, too. We were thinking of both trying to make a film, like trying to just be liaisons for them to give them any information that they might need, and we went up to the visiting room for the first time and met with two or three women from ACE, but we didn't meet Kathy Boudin at the time because she was having a visit with her son.

SS: Who were the women that you met with?

DL: I met with Ada Gonzalez, who is probably in her early forties. She was a grandmother, a drug dealer, and completely intimidating, tough as nails. It took a long time for her to trust me. I was just like this white girl who was coming in from nowhere, and she was very wary. I talked to her. I don't remember who the other people talked to, because each of us had more of a one-on-one with someone. But she started explaining what ACE was to me, and I started explaining really the resources that we had that we could help them with.

I was really intrigued by it. I was intrigued because it seemed to be prison issues were not the sexy issues in ACT UP, and a lot of people didn't want to deal with it, although they were supportive. Then we have women's prison issues where it seemed like more of the cases of HIV were in men's prisons, although there were a lot of women coming in there, and there were women being infected by their male partners and a lot of women who got it from drug use.

JW: We need to change tapes.

DL: Is this okay?

SS: It's going great.

SS: This initial meeting with Ada, and so the women that you met with, were they all HIV-positive to be in ACE?

DL: Ada Rivera was not HIV-positive. She had a relative, a close relative, that was. A number of the other ones were. Awilda Gonzalez, super sweet woman who worked in the beauty shop, she was young and turned out to be HIV-positive. Doris Moises was HIV-positive. Katrina Haslip was HIV-positive. There were a number of women in ACE who were HIV-positive.

SS: So when you met with them, what did they need? What did they tell you?

DL: They wanted information about all of the experimental drug trials, because they wanted to know which drugs they should be advocating for. They were also interested in what was going on in other prisons. They wanted everything. They wanted literature. They wanted to build a library for themselves. Then what they told me was what was going on there, what were the kinds of issues that were happening there, and literally how to advocate for them, too, although it's a difficult dance because what you don't want to do is you don't want to offend the warden and you don't want to be banned from being able to go in there.

So we just started to maintain a relationship, but I remember early on what Catherine and I wanted to do was make some sort of a videotape with them to talk, that like DIVA TV does, to talk about the issues that were going on in the prison. We sent a letter in applying to do that with the warden, with Elaine Lord, and she turned us down. She turned us down partially because she knew that we had gotten there through Kathy, and she was very concerned that we were there to do more than do work around AIDS.

So what I did, the other women didn't continue to visit as much, and I just continued to go up there and visit with a number of the people, with Katrina, with Ada, I think at that point with Kathy, and find out what they needed.

The other thing that I was told by Kathy Boudin is that they were also writing this book about these workshops they were giving as ACE, and they wanted a publisher for that. Kathy had told me to go see Ann Jacobs at the Women's Prison Association and make a connection with her, which I did, and went to meet her. Ann said, "I know that you've been trying to get in there. Maybe I can assist you in doing it."

So I guess this is when I was transitioning from ACT UP. I really felt like this was – you go through ACT UP, and there are projects that are your projects. Like the needle exchange project was my project for several years, but then this really became my project, and I started working with the Women's Prison Association, helping them put together and support the people who are transitioning out of the prison, which is what Ann Jacobs was doing.

Then Ann Jacobs said to me, after I started working with her for a while, "Would you like to try and work with the prison to help them publish their book?"

And I said, "I'd like to do that, but the other thing I'd like to do is to try and make a videotape of what they were doing up in the prison," to distribute as well, and she said that she would support me doing that. So with the Women's Prison Association I was able to do what I wasn't able to do alone in ACT UP, as an ACT UP person.

SS: Were they able to ever get access to experimental drug trials, experimental drugs?

DL: No.

SS: Was there a real campaign, or was it just a wish?

DL: I think that it was much more of a wish, so what they did is they followed the drug trials so that when women were coming out of the prison, they could enroll, because they were also looking at issues like medical clemency. Bedford is a maximum-security prison, but a lot of the medium-security prisoners are there, too, and people cycle in and out with three-years or four-year sentences. So as people were coming out and as they were sick, we were able to channel them to the right doctors. A number of the women prisoners went to Joseph Sonnabend, and Joe was able to help them, put them on the kind of regimen that they needed and take care of their issues. He was also really well versed in the symptoms that presented themselves in women.

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: Are any of these women still alive?

DL: I think that Wendy is. I think that Awilda Gonzalez is.

SS: Can you try to get her in contact with us?

DL: Oh, god. A lot of people move away. I know that Ada Rivera moved out of New York and I think moved with her son somewhere. Ada was not HIV-positive, became a phlebotomist and still did work. I can try.

SS: That would be great.

DL: I can try. By the time you came out of ACE, you were a crackpot organizer, incredibly articulate about the issues and really good at figuring out how to organize politically. That's why Katrina was so – Katrina was special, but she was really effective.

SS: We'll get to her in a second. Did you experience people dying while they were incarcerated when you were working with them?

DL: Yes. Yes.

SS: How was that experienced by the other people in ACE?

DL: Well, it happened a lot, I mean, so it was an everyday experience. I just – if you give me a second.

SS: Go ahead.

DL: When this book was published in, I think, 1995, they said, "We give this book in memory of our sisters from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility who have died from HIV/AIDS," and there's seventy-five people listed. So it happened often for them.

The women of ACE, part of the component of ACE, was that people would do infirmary work and really they configure themselves as hospice workers for people who were dying. Then I went to a number of funeral services at the prison, and they made quilts for people too. They were doing exactly inside what we were doing outside, and that's the part that I think people don't understand, is that I worked in the prison for a couple of years off and on, and you go there and it's hard to organize them into a meeting, just like it's hard anywhere else, because they pull out their calendars and they have fourteen other things that they're doing in different programs that they're involved in. They have a life. They have organizations. They live. They die there. They were taking care of each other. So, yes, a lot of women died while they were there, and it became part of everyday life.

SS: So when ACE was approved by the warden, what does that give it? What were the privileges of an official organization?

DL: They let them have a computer, which most people didn't. They didn't have Internet access. There was a telephone in the office. They had an office so that they could actually meet and work together. You just didn't have spaces where people could organize. They also were able to have permission to go into the infirmary. They had permission to go into the other housing units, because access is always monitored and always blocked. Being in ACE was a real privilege, and you had to pass muster to be in the organization. And if you did something wrong, if you violated any other prison rule, they revoked your privilege to go and work in ACE for a while too.

Then the other thing that happened is that when – I can't tell you how many times it happened, but when there was a political concern about ACE getting attention or inmates organizing, the organization would be shut down for a while. Elaine Lord was very forward-thinking, but she was a warden, too, and there were moments where she was concerned that the organization had too much power.

SS: Can you give a concrete example?

DL: Well, she was concerned that people were going to use it to apply for clemency, and a number of the women in ACE got clemency, got clemency from the governor because of their work, but she was concerned that people would use it to their advantage in some way, or a letter went out on ACE letterhead that she didn't approve of, or there might be a political demand made on the system, like that they would advocate for experimental treatments and it's something that the prison system couldn't afford or it's something that would really disrupt the kind of incarceration that needs to happen up there. So there was always like it was super tense, and no one ever felt like the

Tape II
00:10:00

organization was always a sure thing and it would always be stable and always be there for them.

SS: Here's my big difficult question. It's about solidarity politics. I know that you weren't gay at the time, but you were very close friends with people who had AIDS, so the AIDS community was your community.

DL: Right.

SS: So when you came into ACT UP, you were advocating for your community.

DL: Right.

SS: When you go to a prison, you're dealing, it's solidarity politics. You have privileges that they don't have.

DL: Right.

SS: How do you reposition your political analysis, your political practice, when you're moving from constituency politics to solidarity politics?

DL: Weirdly, I felt more comfortable in that position, because – I think the real answer to your question is you have to listen. Right? But that was something I learned in ACT UP, too, because I didn't come in as a gay person. I didn't know the history, the political history, of the gay community. I was very conscious of the fact that I wasn't going to be a leader in that sense, because I didn't have that knowledge and I couldn't make that claim, and I really believed that the leadership, for the most part, should come from HIV-positive people, and that was an ethic that was in ACT UP already.

So it was easily transferable to the prison where, weirdly enough, the same politics operated. The HIV-positive and the people with AIDS were the ones that set the agenda, and it was an easy transferable skill to me. I didn't look at it as not my community in some ways. I actually saw it as an extension of that. They were women. They were organizers. It was finally a place where the needs of women of color were being served, and that was an issue within ACT UP because everybody was saying, "Where are the women of color?" They weren't able to come to the Community Center, but me being the liaison with that meant – and they said this to me a number of times. A number of the women there felt like they were members of ACT UP.

So I don't think it's just solidarity politics. I think that they really thought of themselves as the extension of this community, and it was all of the issues that I was looking at in the needle trial, for example, too. I certainly wasn't a drug user, and I was a terrible person to do needle exchange. I didn't know the dealers from the users. I got yelled at because I was giving needles to dealers.

SS: Okay, but I mean, there's a history in America, which was called the progressive era, although it wasn't that progressive, of white women reformers advocating for incarcerated women. This is a long American—

DL: But they weren't just advocating for incarcerated women; they were saying what was right for incarcerated women, right? And this was a different relationship, and it was the way that I learned how to be in ACT UP as well. Did I think that Peter Staley should have been taking AL-721? I thought the stuff was stupid, but I wasn't going to tell him not to. I was going to make sure that people could make their own decisions. It was really the same skill set that I learned in ACT UP that was

transferable to the prison, and it was literally all of the issues that we're learning in the abstract in ACT UP because we were all doing that kind of social analysis and it was just a concrete way of working it.

SS: Can you give an example of a decision that ACE members made or an analysis that they had that you disagreed with politically but you deferred?

Tape II
00:15:00

DL: Yes, in some ways. Actually, even in this book, I think that writing their stories, writing their narratives and what their politics are, were, is very powerful. They wanted to include an entire curricula for all of the prisons all across the country, some of which I just didn't think was necessary and I really thought that it would make the book less interesting to a lot of places that would actually read this book, and I think that had the book just been narratives and a description of what they were able to accomplish there, I think that that the book could have been maybe a much more important advocacy tool to walk around with.

I remember that a number of them were like, "Send it to Oprah. We really want Oprah to do it." And Oprah's not going to take a book with a twelve-part curriculum that's detailed about how to use puppets, and yet that's where their politics were coming from and that's what they wanted to do. So, instead, I got a grant from the Levi-Strauss Foundation to make sure that this book was distributed in prisons across the country. Did other prisons use it? I don't think so much. I think Chowchilla in California did, and that warden was much, much more conservative.

SS: So then because of your class position or whatever you had knowledge about marketing and what was realistic.

DL: Yes. Yes, but I said that. It wasn't like I was mute in these discussions too. Right? There was give and take. I said what I thought. They always had a meeting. It wasn't like anyone was making one decision on their end, too, but they had a politics around who their group was and how they wanted to be seen in the world, and they made this decision, and it's fine. It's fine. I think that it was really important for them to do that.

SS: Okay, thanks. So let's move on. One of the things that we're really interested in is the women from ACE who, when they got out of jail, came to ACT UP. Can you tell us who those people were and each one of them, whatever trajectory you're aware of?

DL: It's – can we stop for one second?

SS: Sure.

[interruption]

SS: Now the censorship is finished. Now we can resume.

DL: I'll just say the reason why I asked to stop is that there were some women who had a much more difficult time when they came out, and I'm going to reframe your question.

SS: Okay.

DL: Which is that for the first time, I think, for a number of these women, they felt pretty politically powerful and they had worked collectively. And my assessment was that ACE provided a tremendous amount of support that they didn't necessarily have when they got out of prison, not to say that they weren't connected with social services, because that's what ACE did. ACE helped people, when they came out,

find halfway housing, supportive housing, doctors, deal with probation, but they didn't have the same sort of political clout or community that they had inside.

So I think that Katrina Haslip was more of the exception than the rule. I know that, for example, Carmen Royster, who was an incredible member of ACE, really hardworking, very smart, became really politicized in ACE, came out and she was a star in ACE, but she came out and she went to a couple of ACT UP meetings, but she started using again. Because the one thing that ACT UP wasn't for a lot of these women was incredibly – it didn't have what ACE did. It didn't have that community surrounding them that gave them all the kinds of support that they needed. So you had to be really self-sufficient in some ways in ACT UP.

With Carmen, actually, I was the one that picked her up from the prison and took her out afterwards, but she went back to living with her mother, who was very harsh. She had to deal with her daughter who had not really had a relationship with her except for visiting her in prison for a number of years. Carmen was HIV-positive. I had connected her with Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, and she was his patient. But she started using heroin again, and she died in St. Vincent's. So she had every intention of coming out and being a political activist, but she didn't have money, she didn't have a job, she had a doctor, she had some support, but she had a very judgmental and difficult mother. And actually her daughter is now in Bedford Hills too.

Tape II
00:20:00

So Katrina came out –

SS: Could we just hold one second?

[interruption]

SS: Okay. This light is flickering.

JW: Special effects.

JH: I didn't even notice it.

SS: It's flickering.

DL: Ruthie Rodriguez came out, and I think she may have gone to one ACT UP meeting. She's a lesbian and an incredible activist and did a lot of writing for this book in ACE, and then she met a guy and got married, I think. People went separate ways. What was better was when the Women's Prison Association helped organize this group called ACE Out, which did support meetings at the Women's Prison Association. Then I think a number of the women from ACE stayed in that. They kept going to meetings for that, but they didn't necessarily come to ACT UP.

SS: What year is ACE Out?

DL: ACE Out was probably started in 1989, I think.

SS: So was there anyone else besides Katrina who came from ACE and really got involved as an AIDS activist?

DL: Linda – what's her name? Linda Gang was a very serious AIDS activist. I don't know if she went to ACT UP meetings. I mean, what you're asking is something that's a little bit difficult because I think that women came out and went to Women and AIDS Resource Network. A number of them worked for Marie Saint Cyr. But even though they felt that ACT UP was supportive on the inside, they were looking for groups that also provided them with some social services and some sort of a support network, and ACT UP didn't have the capacity to do that.

SS: Yes, but when we look at footage of the four-year Change the Definition campaign, there's lots of women with AIDS in that.

DL: Yes, because we put together – it was a coalition. Right? So Terry McGovern looked at – she brought clients of hers. Katrina organized people from ACE Out. There were people from Women AIDS Resource Network. There were clients who were part of Yolanda Serrano's group [ADAPT – Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment]. They came from a lot of different places, and it wasn't that they weren't political. They just really didn't consider ACT UP their core—

SS: Let me restate my question.

DL: Okay. Go ahead.

SS: Who were the people from ACE Out who became involved with the Change the Definition campaign?

DL: Well, Katrina Haslip did, obviously, but I wasn't - that was in 1992. You have to remind me. Is that right?

JH: That's when it about finished.

SS: Right, for the four-year campaign.

JH: The definition changes on January 1, '93.

DL: '93. So. Right.

JH: Three years or four years.

DL: Right. I was pregnant and working up in the prison and wasn't really working on that campaign.

SS: So if we show you the footage, can you look and see if there's anyone that you recognize?

DL: Yes, of course.

SS: So let's start with Katrina. Tell us everything about Katrina from the day you met her, who she was and—

DL: My god, she's hilarious. Right? She had purple dreads poking up all over her head, the most beautiful smile, really sort of bright eyes, and she was kind of a dynamo. She talked a lot. She was just beloved in the prison. When I was actually rereading this book, Elaine Lord, the superintendent, wrote the introduction, and when she had a problem and sort of compulsively, you know, reactionary, her reaction was to shut down ACE operating for a while, she would go to Katrina to talk to her, to talk to her about why did it and what her problems were. And Katrina would be able to analyze the situation for her in a way that the superintendent could understand and back off, which was really interesting, because it wasn't the white political organizers that could do
Tape II
00:25:00 that. Katrina could really understand both the politics that were operating around there. She had incredible empathy towards the position that the superintendent was in. She also just never minced words. She said what her opinion was and was always really direct.

She was HIV-positive. She came out as an HIV-positive woman in prison, one of the first ones. Part of their curriculum when they did any kind of workshop for new prisoners is Katrina would speak as an HIV-positive person who experienced what she experienced in the prison, and people went to her. She was just a charismatic leader. She was fantastic.

SS: How old was she when you met her?

DL: Oh, god, you know, it's a really good question. I think that she died when she was thirty-three?

SS: So she was in her twenties.

DL: So she was in her late twenties.

SS: Now, Haslip, is she—

DL: H-a-s-l-i-p.

SS: Was she of Caribbean origin?

DL: I don't know. I know that she was a practicing Muslim and what she really wanted to do before she died was go to Mecca.

SS: Where did she grow up, do you know?

DL: I don't know. I don't remember

SS: Why was she incarcerated?

DL: I don't remember that either, and I have to say something about that, which is that I never asked anyone what they were in for.

SS: Do you know what her sentence was?

DL: This is a long time ago, Sarah. No, I don't.

SS: Did she find out that she was positive while she was at Bedford or did she already know before she came there?

DL: I think she found out while she was at Bedford. I mean, that was the other thing that I think I didn't say is that ACE counseled people to get tested and were with them when they found out the results and helped them negotiate that. A lot of people found out that they were HIV-positive while they were at Bedford, because for a while there was the whole issue of mandatory testing in the prison, too.

SS: Did they oppose that?

DL: Yes.

SS: What happened with the mandatory testing?

DL: I think that it became a voluntary measure. There is no mandatory testing now, I think.

SS: At Bedford.

DL: I have to go check. I don't know. I can't tell you that.

SS: So you met her when you first got there, and then how long was it before she was released?

DL: She was released probably within the year, and she also – part of the conditions of parole is that you weren't allowed back, and she was one of the few people that Elaine Lord trusted so much that she was allowed back, and she also became an important liaison to ACE from the outside, telling them what was going on and helping women obtain social services when they got out as well. She did some work for the Women's Prison Association, I know, and worked with ACE Out. She was one of the major organizers of ACE Out when she got out.

SS: Just tell us some things about the work that she did when she was in ACE Out.

DL: Well, I was really – I did a film about ACE Out, and I did it right when they were organizing in the beginning. Katrina was still in. Then I started working in ACE when Katrina was there, and then she got out. So she became much more involved with Terry McGovern and with the people in ACT UP who were doing work on the CDC, changing the definition of AIDS to include the symptoms that women presented with. At that point she was working probably more with Maxine than with me, so I can't talk to that. I can't speak to that.

SS: It's interesting, because I've asked a lot of people in ACT UP about the women with AIDS in ACT UP, and the men, gay men, don't remember them. So it's like I think I've asked everyone we've interviewed who was in the Latino Caucus who were the women in the thing, and they could barely remember their names.

DL: Well, I was in Majority Actions. I didn't work with the Latino Caucus. Like, Joe Franco knew, but Joe Franco died. There were some people who were HIV-positive and who had AIDS and who got sick. Like Robert Garcia knew all of the women with AIDS. You're talking to a certain group of people, but there were other people who were really aware of what was going on and would always speak about women's issues. But Majority Actions, which sort of preceded the Latino Caucus, right, I think it was much more fluid. I mean, it was much more of a coalition beforehand.

Tape II
00:30:00

SS: I guess where I'm going with that is there was a lot of sexism, and I think a lot of the women were invisible to the men. But I'm wondering, did you ever talk to Katrina or anybody who came to ACT UP about, from their point of view, what it was like to adjust to ACT UP?

DL: Katrina – I mean, ACT UP was, I think, the second Mecca for her. It was difficult for other women who were stars in ACE to be able to navigate going on the outside. Katrina had a boyfriend who was a prison guard, and she also had a number of people who had made contact with her. She had a huge support system, so going into ACT UP was more seamless for her, I think, than most, and she had the right personality for it. She also had that really important relationship with Terry McGovern, and she understood the politics and she understood where she played into it too.

I'm not saying that it was all perfect for her, because I went to visit her when she was really sick at St. Luke's Roosevelt, and there was a time when people weren't visiting her. She was struggling again, so she didn't – like, everything wasn't easy. But I don't think Katrina had a criticism of the sexism in ACT UP. Katrina was really was really a super positive person who wasn't critical in that way.

SS: Is there anything else about the prison work that you want to talk about?

DL: Only that later on I got hired to do this film about AIDS in prisons in Oklahoma, in a women's prison, which there wasn't much of at all, but I encountered one woman who was a PWA. They were shipping the most sick people off to private prisons several states away, so that they didn't have to actually pay for the healthcare that they needed to get, and they weren't getting the kind of healthcare they needed to get. When this woman came back to this prison in Oklahoma and I met her, she was dying because she didn't get adequate healthcare, and she was dying, I think, of cervical cancer. She'd been misdiagnosed. I mean, it was just a nightmare. Literally, the nurse of the prison admitted that she was just shipped away rather than treated. And I contacted the ACLU.

I think that prisons are still completely overlooked as the place that the most treatment needs to happen. People cycle in and out of prisons, too. T.B. It's just ridiculous that there's not better healthcare in the prisons. It affects all of us. I know that sounds really liberal.

SS: So just to get into a—

JH: Before you do that, could you talk a little bit about making the film?

DL: Sure. Because we were turned down by the prison at first, Catherine was the one who said, "Katrina's coming out. We should do this film." We made a film about the support group that happened with women got out of prison, and Katrina really helped us map out that film. I should have said this before. Katrina really helped us map out that film in a way that she said, "Look. These are the issues that women have. They have problems with childcare, so you've got to take a look at that. This is the way women organize." So we just kept going to support - Catherine and I kept going to support group meetings and filming there.

We decided not to do voiceover narrative or anything like that, but to let women tell their stories the way that they articulated it within their support group and follow them. We just showed portraits of women who were dealing with the real issues that happened when they get out. They're HIV-positive, and they have to cope in the world with getting their medication, making sure that they don't get sick, taking care of their kids, finding healthcare and finding housing.

We made the film. It was a short film, thirty minutes long, and then that also got distributed in prisons across the country, too, because it was just about visibility for women who were coming out of prison and understanding this is the way that they can organize themselves to support each other.

Tape II
00:35:00

JH: Are any of those women still alive?

DL: You know, I don't know. I don't know. I actually know that there's one baby, her name is Punky, that was in the film, and she died soon after.

SS: So I just have one other area that I want to discuss.

DL: Sure.

SS: Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

DL: I'm good.

SS: You're good. Okay. This is like a broader political question about ACT UP. One of the things that's amazing about ACT UP is that there's so much simultaneity of action, right, and all these different people, all these different agendas, and they're all working at the same time.

DL: Right.

SS: But there's a whole group of people like yourself who are primarily about access. That's what you're doing for years, needle exchange, prison work. And then there's the people who that's really not their concern. They're about what we know, medical advancement. In the end, this became a conflict of agenda on some level. I know you weren't there when ACT UP split up.

DL: Right.

SS: But just politically, do you see a direct relationship between that and the global access crisis that we're facing now?

DL: I'm so glad you ask me the easy questions. Look. I think ACT UP was extraordinary for the different kinds of contact. Right? Some people had tremendous access and ability to write a letter or get someone else to write a letter and get a million dollars. Right? And incredible access to power. I worked on that conference that really was the conference that started funding the community-based research organization, CRI, so I worked for amfAR for a little while. But the extraordinary thing about ACT UP is that people who weren't so politically nuanced, that didn't have sort of

a nuanced political critique, could do things that people who did have a great political critique didn't have access to, and there was an incredible sharing of resources.

You know that I'm watching all these oral history interviews and reading and writing about it, and what makes me sad is that there was an entire movement, there was access, there were a tremendous amount of – there were real coalitions that were made around this, and we had the ability to really affect healthcare on a sweeping level and we didn't.

You're asking how does that stay together? I mean, why did we have to split? When people were saying, "I don't think that as an organization we should have blocked anyone from being able to get more and more access or advocate for themselves," because everybody wants to save their own life. So that's not necessarily a bad thing. So, making it difficult for people to do that is a frustrating thing, and I can see that.

On the other hand, even the people that are trying to save their own lives can't do it without a movement. Right? So it seems like ACT UP for a short amount of time, even with all of the conflicts, presented this incredible paradigm for being able to think about how all these different kind of contacts make an incredibly powerful political movement. How it actually is on a global level, like, why aren't the white gay men who were on the drug cocktails still doing what they need to do? Mostly because the cocktail is going to fail at some point too. I mean, it's a shame that there wasn't far more about vaccinations early on.

There's just a way in which it's short-sighted not to keep on going the way we were going, because all of those different kinds of contacts really just captured the

Tape II
00:40:00

imagination on every level. You've got the right financing, you've got the creative people doing it, you've got really great political analysis, and you've got a huge movement of people backing it. Why didn't we learn that lesson? I think that everybody ran scared. I don't know. It's a shame. I really think that ACT UP did amazing things, and ACT UP backed us during needle exchange. ACT UP really backed us on the prison work. It wasn't like they said, "We won't put funds towards it." They did. But when those funds went away with certain people, you disempower an entire movement and everybody gets hurt.

JH: We have to change tapes.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: So, Jim, go ahead.

JH: I just want to generally talk about needle exchange and how you got involved and what you did.

SS: Why did you decide that you wanted to work on needle exchange?

DL: Oh, because I was in the Majority Actions Committee, and part of what we were talking about is AIDS in the African American community, and drug use was a serious issue and it was a really contentious issue, right, because the conservative religious people did not want to deal with anything that condoned drug use in any way, and yet it looked like needle exchanges were a real way to prevent transmitting HIV.

So Gregg Bordowitz, I think, during – I keep thinking of it as like the Nine Days of Rain, eight, nine, how many?

JH: Nine.

DL: Gregg Bordowitz did a demonstration for needle exchange up in Harlem, I think, and that was early on in 1988, 1988, 1989, 1988?

JH: 1988.

DL: Right. So we were talking about needle exchange. Richard Elovich was coming to Majority Action Committee meetings, and we were looking at studies. We were looking at studies from Amsterdam, there was one from Geneva, there was studies coming out of Seattle, and it looked like needle exchange actually worked on a certain level. Needle exchange was needles were – you were prohibited from buying clean needles without a prescription, and so drug users would share needles. They would not clean their works beforehand, there would be drops of blood on the needle, and if you injected yourself with drugs using a dirty needle that had blood on it that had HIV in it, you were more likely than not to get infected.

So needle exchanges were saying that "If you bring us your dirty needles, we'll give you clean ones. We'll actually show you how to clean your works. We'll also give you condoms. We can give you referrals to drug treatments centers," but they weren't insisting on drug treatment. They looked at it as a steppingstone to possibly going to drug treatment, but mostly as an HIV-prevention measure. We were talking about this all the time, but there was a huge opposition, and we also didn't want to piss off all of the community members of the black community.

But, meanwhile, Richard was spearheading a lot on issues about IV drug users, and he got impatient with us. I remember it was at a meeting in my apartment on Elizabeth Street, and we were talking about it once again, and we were all just like – I think it was like a lot of lefties who were very careful about not stepping on the toes of the African American community, and Richard just yelled. He's like, "I'm going to do it. I'm doing needle exchange."

Jon Parker up in Boston had been doing needle exchange, was arrested for it and went on trial for it, and he actually was convicted for doing needle exchange. The reason to go on trial is that you say that there's a medical necessity for what you're doing, and they will actually not convict you for doing it.

At the time in New York City, we didn't do needle exchange at first because David Dinkins ran a pilot needle exchange program, and he ran it like right near City Hall, and it got closed down when – oh, I'm sorry, Stephen Joseph did it, and it was part of the Koch administration. When David Dinkins became mayor, who's an African American mayor, he hired an African American health commissioner, Woody Myers, who closed down the needle exchange. And at that point, there was no way, there was no concerted effort, to get clean needles and really do that kind of work, which is talking about HIV transmission to IV drug users.

Richard got pissed off and he said, "I'm doing it whether you guys do it or not," and then we all said, "We're in." It was really like one of those things where it was just the tipping point, and once Richard was going to do it, how could we not?

So he made contact with John Parker and started doing an underground needle exchange program. I remember going to—I talked about this before in this interview, going to Bed-Stuy and Bushwick. The other part that we did is we had gloves on and we used to pick up dirty needles off of the parks and then put them in Sharps containers, which they don't do for needle exchange anymore and was kind of dangerous. But then we would go and buy boxes of syringes from places where it was legal—I think they got them from Canada—and give them out to anyone who asked for them and asked for dirty needles in return.

Tape III
00:05:00

I was really bad at figuring out who was a drug user and who was a dealer, and I got yelled at because I was just so out of place and I really didn't understand that culture. But it was this phenomenal lesson, because Jon would take us to SROs on the Bowery, these boardinghouses that had just like tiny little rooms that people would live in, and he'd bring in a couple of big rotisserie chickens and he'd put them down on the table, and everybody would smell them and come out. Then he would ask people to do needle exchange, and he would give his talk on when he's coming back and, "Here's clean needles." It was this remarkable program for really making an incredible grassroots effort to do what was really medical intervention. So we did that for about, I guess, a year or so.

In the meantime, I did the actual needle exchange like maybe four or five times, and then what I really concentrated on was starting to get the reports from all of the needle exchange programs and all of the medical data. I gathered it together to really look at how to put together a real necessity defense, that there was a medical necessity to have needle exchange, and the results were really promising everywhere. I think there was this guy Dave Purchase, who was up in Seattle, and he was just doing it, and people were taking clean needles, and they were actually – everyone was concerned about HIV, whether you were a user or not, and so people wanted to protect themselves and were actually doing it.

SS: Just in terms of the politics of ACT UP, so ACT UP did not ever want to do service provision. Everything had to be direct action.

DL: Right.

SS: So when you were doing needle exchange, it was not to do needle exchange, right? It had a larger—

DL: This is a mixed thing, right, because there were a lot of people who did service provision in ACT UP as a living, some people who did outreach and education with kids. You can't just make that clear divide. There's always a service provision component when you're talking about safe-sex education, for example, in the high schools. Yes, you wanted the city or the government to take that on as a responsibility, yes, and that's what we were advocating for, because we knew that they shouldn't have shut down this needle trial. But on the other hand, Housing Works was a spinoff of ACT UP. The needle exchange program, which is in New York City and in New Jersey, was a spinoff of ACT UP as well. So people got interested in things. And the work that I did in the prisons, part of it was a service provision program. So there's no bright line.

SS: Yes, but you're going towards a goal of policy change.

DL: Yes, you're looking for a major policy change.

SS: So when did you guys make the decision to try to do a test case?

DL: You had to do it long enough so that they couldn't claim it was just a show. Right? So we not only had to look like, we really had to do something and show that we were taking over a service that the city no longer provided, and we were doing it consistently. So we did it long enough that we could claim that.

SS: How long was that?

DL: I'd say we started the trial in 1990, and I think we got the verdict in 1991, so we must have been doing it for probably a year.

SS: How was your legal adviser?

DL: Mike Speigel and Jill Harris were the two major attorneys on the case.

SS: So when you decided that it was time to get arrested to do the test case, did you get inadvertently arrested or did you—

Tape III
00:10:00

DL: No. We had Laurie Garrett and Catherine Woodard from *New York Newsday* came with us several times while we did needle exchange, and they saw what we were doing and wrote about it. Then when we were going to be doing it in a very public way, we let them know.

SS: So how did you arrange the arrest?

DL: We planned on where we were going to do needle exchange. We let the reporters know. I think that we were really prepared in terms of who we wanted to get arrested. The other thing is that this was a felony crime, it wasn't a misdemeanor, so there was a real likelihood that we could be in jail for at least six months, and I think that everybody had to know that and was willing to do that.

SS: So where was the arrest?

DL: It was on Orchard Street. We all met at Katz's, and then – Jim, do you remember exactly?

JH: I think it was Delancey.

DL: I think it was on Delancey and Orchard, or Delancey and Essex? But, you know, because it was announced and it became just a real circus, I could hardly get arrested that day. It was hilarious. The eleven of us or twelve of us – I think there were twelve of us and maybe thirteen, because I know that two people dropped out, two

people who Jon Parker brought dropped out, both of them because I think that they had previous drug arrests and were really looking at long periods of time in jail.

But we all had needles on us. I think I had some in my pocket, and we had Sharps containers, and we had very carefully planned on how to handle the needles, because we were concerned that there would be a lot of people around. The Guardian Angels came, and I remember as I was walking down to the site where we were going to give out the needles, I was mobbed. It's like I've never seen paparazzi in my life flashing at me. There was news media, there were Guardian Angels that were surrounding us, there were the people that were supposed to receive the needles and the cops that were converging on us. One took my needle away from me, and he said, "You don't want to get arrested, honey. Here, I'll take them from you, and it'll be all okay."

And I was like, "No, I *want* to get arrested," and I had to grab a needle from someone else and pull it back.

But later on in the trial, I was the worst defendant because I just was so terrified of saying something wrong that I said exactly what I saw, and I saw nothing because it was overwhelming at that point. There was just no way to actually do what we planned to do, which was to get a needle into an addict's hand. How many addicts were going to be there with the cops, the Guardian Angels, and the press there? I don't think that there was anyone that was going to receive those needles that day.

SS: So what was the charge?

DL: Felony possession of a needle. Felony possession of a syringe without a prescription.

SS: What was the discussion about jury trial versus judge?

DL: I don't remember. I think that we always knew we were just going to do it with a judge. I don't think that we knew we were going to get Laura Drager, who turned out to be remarkable, except in her opinion she chastised me.

SS: For what?

DL: Because I was the one that really helped Mike prepare the Clayton motion, which was the narrative and all of the data that really backed up our defense, and it was a motion to dismiss the case before we went to trial, and she didn't grant that. But she looked at all of that information, and in her decision, she used it to really back up what her decision was, except for the fact that when I was giving out needles, I said I gave out needles to an addict, and I said, "Here."

He was like, "Oh, I shared them with my girlfriend."

I was like, "Well, here are a couple for your girlfriend," and she was very angry that it wasn't just a direct transmission to the person who was receiving it, but who knows who he was going to give the extra needles to. So I was bad that way, and I got my hand slapped.

SS: But not too bad.

SS: Were there any surprises for you during the trial?

DL: I was scared. The trial was great. I mean, it was terrifying because I didn't think we were going to win, and several of the people who were the addicts didn't go to trial with us because they took, I think, ACDs [Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismisal] and dropped out as defendants. But Drager conducted it pretty honorably, I think.

Tape III
00:15:00

There were really beautiful moments when, like, this woman Cynthia, who was a nurse who just showed up that day, I think—I don't know where she came from—and joined us, and she talked about her experience about working with HIV-positive drug addicts, and she was incredibly moving and just, who knew?

Then there was this great moment with Katherine Otter, who used to be Kevin, who was sitting next to me the whole time, got up on the stand, and when they were talking about where we were doing the action, Kathy said, "Oh, it's right near these shops. I get my clothes there."

And Laurie Drager was like, "Oh, my god, I shop there, too." So all of a sudden this judge and this great trans woman were just talking about discount shopping on Orchard Street, and it was one of those perfect New York moments where there was some sort of humanity in it.

What was really beautiful is that Stephen Joseph, who ACT UP had demonstrated against when he was health commissioner and had occupied his office and had harassed him and, I think, called his home, he showed up as a witness for us because he believed in that program, he knew that it was right, and the idea that he showed up in support of ACT UP because it was the right thing to do, I mean, that happened in ACT UP a lot, where these government officials understood in the end what we were doing and, when our position was right, supported us. So it was a great moment in the trial.

SS: So what was the policy outcome? How did it affect policy?

DL: It didn't. Right? What happened is that the cops allowed needle exchange to happen, but a pilot needle exchange program didn't happen for a while still. But they did stop arresting people with syringes who were claiming that they were doing

needle exchange. Then a number of lawyers really used our case, and then there were a number of cases after ours. Other ACT UP and other activists across the country started doing trials around needle exchange, and a couple of them succeeded like ours did in getting verdicts of medical necessity. People were looking at needle exchange. I think that it really changed the attitudes towards what those kind of pilot programs can do.

SS: Back to the issue of the service provision versus activism thing. It's like activists win policy change, and then bureaucracies put them into motion.

DL: They're slow. But the bureaucracies are slow.

SS: But they enact them.

DL: Yes.

SS: They provide the service.

DL: Yes.

SS: Now we're in a situation where there are no activists. All we have are the bureaucracies.

DL: Right. Well, I'm in performance studies, so I think that when you say we weren't service providers, like we enact the ideal of what service provision should be. Right? And instead of just being kind of advocates for policy analysis, we showed the city what needle exchange should look like, and we did it. And in doing it, then I think that change can be made. But, yes, there is now the bureaucracies, but no one's showing the idea, right, what a different world could look like.

SS: So, theatrically speaking, ACT UP is constantly this facsimile of what could be.

DL: Yes, I think it always has been. That was what was extraordinary about ACT UP.

SS: So now we're at the moment where I ask you the famous question, and I'm sure you have your answer prepared.

DL: I don't have any answers. That's the most hilarious part.

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

DL: I think that ACT UP's greatest achievement was to show that a level of anarchy is really – and it's not anarchy, right? But there's a way in which if you give people enough space to imagine whatever it is, people get really engaged and participate.

Tape III
00:20:00

So I know that this is really abstract, but no one's telling anyone else what to do, and because of that, anyone could do anything. I didn't know how to read a drug study before or look at data from a needle exchange program, and I basically, with Mike, wrote a Clayton motion. It just all of a sudden you feel like it supported you in being able to do anything you had the interest in, whether you had the qualifications to do it or not. And the qualification was merely curiosity.

I could make a film. I could write a Clayton motion. I could organize a huge demonstration in Shea Stadium. I could do any of that. And no one said, "No." ACT UP was one of those places where if someone screamed, "No," fourteen people would scream, "Yes" back, and it was okay. So there's not many political organizations that allow people to do that still and support it and fund it, and ACT UP was all of that.

SS: What was its biggest disappointment?

DL: God, I wish Ray Navarro had lived. I wish Rod Sorge had lived. These people were extraordinary people. There's a generation that's gone that shouldn't be gone.

SS: Okay. Thanks, Deb

DL: Is that alright.

SS: Yup. It's great.