

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

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**Interviewee: Monica Pearl**

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**Interviewer: Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Monica Pearl  
April 11, 2011**

**SARAH SCHULMAN: You start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

MONICA PEARL: My name is Monica Pearl. The date is the eleventh of April 2011. We're on Wooster Street in Manhattan.

**SS: And your age?**

MP: I'm forty-six.

**SS: So, despite your British accent, you actually were born in the United States.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: Where did you grow up?**

MP: I was born in Manhattan at a hospital that doesn't exist anymore, Leroy Hospital, and my parents lived in Bayside, Queens, and that's where I spent the first five years of my life, and then we moved to New Jersey.

**SS: Now were your parents native New Yorkers?**

MP: No. My dad was. He grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, and my mother was born and raised in Argentina but was born of European parents.

**SS: So, your parents are Jewish.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: So, your mother was a Jewish refugee to Argentina?**

MP: Not quite a refugee, actually. Her mother went to Argentina before there was reason to flee.

**SS: Do you know why?**

MP: I'm not sure why. There's some story about her being sent away, to avoid a bad match, as a kind of nanny to friends and their child. Later, her sister went to Spain, also, I think, not fleeing, but, nevertheless, subsequently, her family, the rest were killed, the ones who stayed behind.

**SS: Where were they from?**

MP: My grandmother grew up in Alsace Lorraine when it was German-occupied, but they were French. They identified as French. Then she married a man who was British and who had grown up in London.

**SS: So, they were French deportees, the people who were exterminated?**

MP: Yes. Well, I mean, I now learned that many of the Jews from Alsace were not killed, so I don't know the story of why they were, or if they were in a particular situation.

**SS: What about your father's family?**

MP: From Poland, Russia. My father's must be, first generation born in the United States, but there's very little we know of the stories, which I'm very sad about. But I don't know.

**SS: So, did your parents – like this particular history you're slightly vague on, so I guess that they didn't harp on it or talk about it a great deal.**

MP: I think being assimilated Americans was very important to them, I think to my mother perhaps especially. So, no, there was very little of that legacy and that story.

**SS: And you didn't grow up speaking Spanish or—**

MP: A little bit. A little bit, yes, because my grandmother lived with us some of the time. So, a bit.

**SS: So, did your parents emphasize any particular kind of value about community, necessarily?**

MP: It's hard to remember if they – I don't think they taught it. They didn't convey it in the sense of teaching it, but there was a sense of being alert to others who are less fortunate than we are, because I think my father, especially, did well from being very poor as a child, and there was a consciousness of helping others.

And I remember that my mother was involved and involved me in a – I think it was a Community Center, maybe a Daycare Center, in Newark, which was in the same county where I grew up in Essex County, and I remember a sense of bringing things that they might need, so there was that kind of sense of helping others.

**SS: But they didn't belong to any kind of organizations like a synagogue or a union or anything like that?**

MP: No.

**SS: So, it was part and parcel. So, growing up in the sixties, but you're in suburban New Jersey, so I assume you were seeing it mostly on television. Are you the oldest?**

MP: No, I'm the youngest of two.

**SS: So, you had even people who might have been even more conscious of it.**

MP: Yes, a little bit more. I mean, I was born in '64. We moved to New Jersey in '69. So, I do remember a little bit.

**SS: How was it discussed? When you first became aware that there were people, that there were social movements, that there were political movements, do you remember how you processed it?**

MP: I don't remember much about the political and social movements, but I remember personal reactions to things. I remember that I later didn't understand why as a young person I felt very personally offended by racism, for example, or my grandfather mentioning something about the homosexuals in the Village. I have an aunt and uncle who lived in the Village. Then an incident of racism at elementary school or junior high school that I felt very personally upset about. So, I don't know where that came from.

**SS: How did your family respond to those attitudes of yours?**

MP: It fit. It fit. It fit in what they felt and understood. It wasn't a clash at all. So, I must have got it from them in some ways, but it might also have been something about my own identity that I had a sense of. I don't know.

**SS: That's interesting that your aunt and uncle lived in the Village. Where did they live?**

MP: They lived on – my aunt still lives there. She's ninety. On Abington Square.

**SS: So, was that the first time you ever heard about homosexuals?**

MP: I think so. It must have been.

**SS: Do you remember what it was that they were talking about?**

MP: I don't even think it was a slur. I think it was just a reference to the homosexuals in the Village. And I felt that. I must have been eight or nine, and I felt it. I felt it as a—

**SS: Your little ears perked up.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: So, in your high school was there any kind of political activity going on?**

MP: No.

**SS: Not at all?**

MP: Very middle-class, very white. No, not at all.

**SS: And what about gay presence? Were there any kids or teachers who were out, or was it all—**

MP: No, not at all. Not that I was aware of.

**SS: And when did you start to have some kind of queer consciousness?**

MP: I guess I did in high school, and that was in public high school, and then I went away to boarding school for two years and felt it more then. It felt absolutely true and right to me, even though it felt very uncomfortable, because I didn't know how it was going to be enacted and how it was going to fit. But the clash didn't feel – it wasn't about the queer consciousness, as you say.

**SS: So, when did you say become aware that there was a gay movement or a gay community?**

MP: I think that was at college, actually. It did feel very isolated that there weren't going to be many people that I could connect with. For a long time, I felt that way. So, I think that's right. I think it felt like that wasn't going to be something that was going to be very happy for me.

**SS: So, what year did you start university?**

MP: Eighty-two.

**SS: Which is, coincidentally, the beginning of the AIDS crisis.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: So, you were still not really in a queer community. Do you remember when you became aware of AIDS, or were they separate for you at that time?**

MP: They were separate for me, because I was still in a setting where people weren't very political, but I was becoming increasingly so, in my consciousness initially, and then more in action later on before I left university, anti-apartheid work and stuff like that, which felt very good to be doing that.

I remember something about watching a speech of [Ronald] Reagan's on television, probably still in high school in boarding school, and saying something in front of the group of the people watching it, something vituperative against him, but it couldn't have been about AIDS then, because he wasn't saying it. But that's sort of the beginning of my thinking about politics in that way. So, I don't remember when AIDS became something, or GRID became something in my mind. It might have been through the *Village Voice* that I started reading sometime soon after that.

**SS: It's interesting because you mentioned the South Africa divestment movement, which was very influential on a whole generation of people who went to college in the eighties. What was your participation?**

MP: We took over the Administration Building.

**SS: At what school was this?**

MP: It was at Smith College. We took over the Administration Building and occupied it for days. And what I remember most about that, besides that it felt so right to be doing that and it felt powerful to be doing that, because although we were threatened with all sorts of, "You must leave or else," we felt that we had some power and privilege to stay there.

And in talks with the president of the university afterwards, which he agreed to, I remember someone saying in a kind of conciliatory way, "We weren't trying to hold a gun to your head."

And I said, "Well, yes, actually, we were. That's exactly what we were doing. We were trying to press you to change."

**SS: And did you succeed?**

MP: Yes, I think we did succeed, and not as much as we would have liked, but I think that there were tangible changes after that.

**SS: Now, Smith College is Lesbian Central. How could you be at Smith College and not come out?**

MP: No, by the time I was there, I was out. By the time I was there, yes.

**SS: So, the whole lesbian scene at Smith and Northampton in the early eighties, are you saying that that had very little connection to AIDS?**



MP: Well, no, there was a sense. I started at Connecticut College and then I transferred to Smith College, and so there's a real change. And I think even at Connecticut College, I was head of the gay and lesbian student group then. So, it was a very sudden coming out, I mean very strong. It was from being "in" to being very political.

So, AIDS was definitely something being spoken about, but not something that I felt. My closest friend then and now is a gay man, and I think I felt it most urgently initially in relation to him, his safety. Would he be okay? And we were both young and sexually active, and so I was very concerned. That must have been how I first started thinking about it.

**SS: So, did you get involved in gay or lesbian politics before you got into AIDS work?**

MP: Not really, no. There was some feminist stuff that I did.

**SS: What was that?**

MP: There was wheat-pasting and some rallies at Smith College about pornography, I think initially against, and then I changed my mind. So, no, there wasn't, and except for being involved in the gay groups at the university, there wasn't a strong political —

**SS: What was the lesbian group called at Smith?**

MP: I remember the initials were L.A.

**SS: Because I remember the t-shirt, "Smith College: A Hundred Years of Women On Top".**

MP: Yes, that's right. So, it couldn't have been Lesbian Avengers, but I think I remember that it was L.A. So, it was Lesbian something. [Lesbian Alliance]

**SS: So, then you graduated, and did you move to New York?**

MP: I spent one year in New Haven on my way down to New York.

**SS: So, when you got to New York, how did AIDS present itself in your life?**

MP: Well, that was '87, so I was very aware of ACT UP, I was aware of AIDS activism around me, and I didn't join right away, for various reasons that I can't quite put together in my head. Some personal stuff, maybe. But I was aware in that sense. I definitely was aware of it at that point, and I was starting graduate school, so I think there's a space where I just wasn't engaging in activism, but I wanted to, I was avid to, and then I did.

**SS: So, what was the event that brought you to ACT UP?**

MP: I'm not sure. I was trying to remember this. I do remember something that must have been pre-ACT UP for me, where I went to donate blood, and I was rejected because I admitted that I was a lesbian, and it was about that identity. It wasn't about activity. It wasn't about – it was about identity. And I was so enraged and hurt that I remembered I called up — I didn't know what to do. I called up the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League [GLAAD], and there was a little piece in the *Village Voice* about someone. It wasn't me. I wasn't named. Then I think there was a blood drive in the Center, in the Lesbian and Gay Center, because of my phone call, and I think that must have been the beginning of what galvanized me into even just proximity to the Center and feeling that I felt angry about that.

**SS: So, what was it like to walk into the Center to an ACT UP meeting when you didn't have relationships with any of these people before and everyone was unknown?**

MP: I knew some people. I knew Maria Maggenti from Smith College, so I did know. I did know. Was there anyone else? I think maybe just her. I can't remember the first time, or the first times, walking in, but I remember the feeling of being in that Center and how amazing it felt and how crowded it was and how strong it felt and exciting and directed.

**SS: Do you remember where you first started to plug in?**

MP: I can remember. It's actually a visual, like a geographic memory, it's that sort of stage left, that corner of the room near the stairwell where not all the women but a lot of the women would hang out, and I don't know if I would have known initially to gravitate there, but eventually, certainly, that's just where I would go.

**SS: I think that was the smokers' corner at the time.**

MP: Is that right?

**SS: No, I know exactly where you're talking about.**

MP: Yes. Oh, god, were we allowed to smoke inside then?

**SS: I think so. No?**

MP: Oh, in the stairwell, maybe.

**SS: Yes, the garden, and that was the entrance to the garden at the time.**

MP: Was it? I remember the garden being the other way.

**SS: Stage left in the back corner?**

MP: Stage left, so you walk in, you have to go all the way around the group to the right. And I also remember - the thing I remember is we would all kiss each other hello on the lips, and that was wonderful, and then it became normal. And then it took me a while to stop doing that with people after ACT UP.

**SS: But that was also political, to show that we weren't afraid of people with HIV.**

MP: Right. That's right. But it was also really affectionate and great.

**SS: So, did you join a committee, or did you just—**

MP: I worked with several different committees.

**SS: Let's try to talk about them. Which one do you recall?**

MP: It must have still just been the Women's Caucus before it became the Women's Committee, and I did a lot with that group, but I also plugged in a bit to media and also needle exchange.

**SS: So, let's start with the Women's Caucus. So, who was there with you?**

MP: Well, it's hard not to think of it in relation to the book *Women, AIDS and Activism* and the people who were involved in that. So, it's Marion Banzhaf and Polly Thistlethwaite and Cynthia Chris and Zoe Leonard. Well, Marie Maggenti was involved in the initial handbook and the original Women's Caucus, and Maxine Wolfe and you, and there were people who didn't end up working on the book but were part of that group. Alexis Danzig, Kim Christenson. Judith [Walker] someone, who was involved in the book, I can't remember her last name.

**SS: What was your role?**

MP: Well, eventually it was one of the editors of the book and also the resident of the apartment where we all ended up actually writing it and putting it together and editing it.

**SS: Who did you share that apartment with?**

MP: It was mine. It was my apartment on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street, and the entire book pretty much was written and collated in that apartment.

**SS: And how did that happen?**

MP: I'm not sure. I lived centrally, so that might have been part of why, and not far from the Center. It wasn't a very big space, but it was welcoming, and it was, at the end, literally people were just camping out there.

**SS: So then since you were the editor, maybe you can give us a little overview.**

MP: Along with Cynthia Chris. We were co-editors.

**SS: How did you guys decide to do this? I'm sure you had no idea what was involved when you all thought, "Hey, let's write a book."**

MP: Well, of course, everything was done by consensus because we were a women's group and feminists. Well, there was that *Women and AIDS Handbook* that was already – it was really a mimeographed packet of papers about women and AIDS, and it was all the information that the women had already about women and AIDS.

I can't believe that we thought we were going to make a book in the first instance. We must have thought we just want to update it and we want to make it more available. Then at some point along the way, maybe it was a connection with South End Press, who ultimately published it, or maybe we started thinking a book and got in touch

with them, I don't remember, but along the way it became something we thought we could publish.

**SS: What were the issues around women with AIDS? Why did you need to do that book at the time?**

MP: Well, I mean, the slogans of the time tell a lot, which is that women didn't get AIDS; women just died from it. So, the kinds of infections that women presented with weren't included in the CDC definition of AIDS, so that women weren't getting disability benefits and, worse, weren't even recognized in the doctors' office as having HIV and having HIV infection.

Then on top of that, there were concerns about women just didn't have information about what was risky for them, what kind of sex was risky for them, what kind of drug using, what kind of childcare, breastfeeding. So, there were a lot of things that were particular to women, some things that weren't, but that women might have had their own concerns about, and some things particular to women that just weren't being addressed.

**SS: I want to ask you kind of a conceptual question. I recently spoke to a group in Hartford of women with AIDS, black and Latin women. Jim had made a sixteen-minute clip about the Women with AIDS Empowerment Movement, and I brought some early documents, and nobody there knew that women had ever been denied treatment or benefits. How does that happen?**

MP: Well, I don't know the whole story, but one of my answers is that that might be a good thing that it's so changed from then that there's a generation of people that don't have to know that and who wouldn't need to know that, and I hope that's the

case, that that's one of the outcomes of revolutionary movements, is that there's a generation of people who don't know what the concerns were.

**SS: Yes, but then you develop this idea of the state as this benevolent progressive entity that, of course, is going to include you instead of understanding that all of that has to be won.**

MP: Yes. No, I know, but I do think that it's hard to both carry the idea that we need to be in an antagonistic and suspicious relationship to the state and also to try and make the state give us what we need, and I think if you're choosing which thing you're going to get, you have to go for getting the benefits, the materials that we need, at the risk of letting go of that suspicious relationship.

**SS: How many copies of the book were published?**

MP: I don't know. There was a Canadian copy and an American copy, and I just don't know. And what was great about the book is that besides having really great chapters on women having sex with men, women having sex with women, women using drugs, women and children, women in prison, there was also a great list of resources in the back, and that was very important to us that we put that together. That was up to date at the time.

**SS: Did you stay interested in women with AIDS throughout your time in AIDS activism?**

MP: Oh, yes, definitely.

**SS: Then I just want to cut ahead, since you were involved so early and since you co-edited absolutely the first significant publication on women with AIDS, we all know that the 076 trial was one of the reasons that ACT UP split up,**

**and so what was your assessment at the time of 076, and have you changed your mind in hindsight?**

MP: Well, I've been trying to remember the details of that. As I recall, it was very important that women had agency over what happened to themselves, their bodies, and that the focus shouldn't be on what happens to their offspring, which is always how women get treated or taken into the system. Either that means that they're not going to be allowed onto a trial, or if they are, it's going to be about their offspring or children. So, it seemed very important that the focus be on women all the time. But I see now that there were difficulties about treatment that might have been withheld from women if we were to sustain that kind of advocacy, that particular kind of advocacy. But my mind hasn't changed about women should have agency and women should know, be able to make decisions for themselves.

**SS: Let me re-ask this.**

MP: Sure.

**SS: What was the impulse that got all these fierce lesbians, young women together to do this project for women with AIDS in relation to ACT UP?**

MP: Well, that's a good question, and I think there are many reasons. I mean, I remember this other slogan that really was relevant and important at the time, which was that sex has always been dangerous for women, so AIDS was not the first time that sex was dangerous for women. There was unwanted pregnancy; there was the dangers of childbirth; there was the dangers of STDs. I don't know if I was involved with the group outreach, but I did a lot of workshops. I did a lot of talks on the road to high schools. There was a grammar school. There was a social workers' conference that



I went to speak about, either it was about safe sex or it was about ACT UP. Sometimes I did both of those at the same venue.

Part of the advocacy work around women and AIDS in those and also in the book is about giving women agency over sexuality and their body and childbirth choices, which has always been part of the feminist healthcare movement, so that just continued with the AIDS crisis, and ACT UP took that up.

But I'm also not remembering all the details of the 076 trial, but I think that what made women and lesbians want to advocate for women's health was part of that trajectory, but the other part of it, too, is that for whatever the real risks were for women and/or lesbians, there was this important sense of opening up sexuality and empowering sexuality, if you will, for women and lesbians, which is part of what happened through AIDS activism, and that was true of everyone. It opened up and empowered sex for everyone. That was the idea, anyway. It was anti-cautionary. It was be safe, take care of yourself, take care of the people you love, but don't stop having sex. Find out how you can have sex in a way that's pleasurable and safe. And that seemed very, very radical to me.

**SS: But there also is this interesting dynamic, because you have these guys who are, themselves, at risk, and so all of their advocacy is for themselves and the people that they know, and then there's a kind of substitutionalism because most of the women who are working on the *Women and AIDS Handbook* are not, themselves, really at risk.**

MP: I always felt that I was not doing it for anyone else, and I always felt that any of the things that put you at risk for HIV were the things that I did or could do. I

felt that very much. That I didn't use intravenous drugs was just a matter of the circumstances that I was in, that I didn't go to those drugs, and the kind of sex I had didn't particularly put me in danger, coincidentally and circumstantially and luckily. But had it been something that what I did was at risk, that I was at risk in those situations, then I think I wouldn't – I don't know how to put it. I'm putting it badly. But that I felt that it was about me.

**SS: But there's also a kind of accessing of class privilege for women who don't have that access, and also ACT UP itself accessing resources.**

MP: Well, ACT UP was this amazing confluence of privilege and resources on one hand, and wisdom and knowledge and experience of activism and radical politics on the other hand, and that combination was so powerful. So, privilege was something that was not worth denying; it was worth exploiting. And it's true that the reason that I did some of the things I did, when I got arrested, for example, and when I was on trial for needle exchange, that it was an outcome of my privilege. I thought that's what I ought to be doing because I can afford that, I can risk that.

**SS: But it's such a different experience in the men, because they are at personal risk the whole time and we weren't. So actually we were in a really different position, yet we were dependent on their resources to get our agenda forward.**

WP: Yes. Well, but it was coalition. It was a coalition. It was that's the idea and the ideal, is that people use each other's resources to get their work done. I mean, wasn't it Bernice Johnson Reagon, who said, "If the coalition you're forming doesn't make you want to throw up, you're not doing it right."

**SS: I don't think she said, "throw up," but yes.**

MP: But it was something strong like that, and, of course, it was the opposite of nausea. It was intimacy and connection for the years where we were at our best.

**SS: In that case, let's go to media, because media is all about access.**

**So, what made you decide that you wanted to work there?**

MP: I did a little bit of that. I think it was also my way in, because I guess I was nervous initially, and I remember doing media for the – did we take over City Hall? Was that the name of it, Take Over City Hall?

**JH: Target.**

MP: Target City Hall? I remember doing media for that, and I think in many ways that was my way in, and that was a good way of being involved but still sort of circulating on the outside, not getting arrested yet. Then eventually I did feel more like I wanted to do the protests and get arrested, but also doing the outreach. That felt absolutely right for me, doing the kind of workshops and the teaching, so that was less media than teaching.

**SS: I was us to demystify what "doing media" means for the modern person who has Twitter and all of that shit. So, there you are, and you're young and you've never done media before, so what concretely – like how did your start or who did you work with?**

MP: Well, I mean, it's hard to remember how *I* started, but I remember how *we* did it. Well, it was creating – part of what we did was to create a ruckus to get media attention. So part of what we did when we were demonstrating and getting

arrested was to make sure that what we were doing would create press attention, media attention, and then we were prepared to speak to the media, and we were trained on how to speak to the media and that was incredibly useful.

**SS: So, let's go back for a minute, the first part. What kind of ruckus would create media attention?**

MP: Well, just demonstrations and protests we would do, from the extreme ones where we're taking over property and getting arrested in that way or doing protests on the street, stopping traffic, to the kiss-ins that we would do. The kiss-ins were such a great – they were great actions, and they were great actions for all the reasons that, well, what we were doing mattered because it had the effect of occupying space. It also had the effect of stopping business as usual because we were occupying that space. But also, we were all kissing each other in public, and kissing everyone, in order to show that we are sexual. So, it was sort of a gay-rights advocacy, but also that we weren't scared of kissing each other because HIV was not communicable in that way. So all those things that we would do that would create media attention, to the point where one of ACT UP's strengths is sometimes we would need only to threaten an action and not actually do it in order to get something changed, because we became known for creating havoc.

**SS: So, would you say that the specific theatricality of ACT UP, that the goal of that was to get media attention?**

MP: Part of it, sure, was to get media attention, definitely. The other part was to disseminate information. So that was often done through the media, so it wasn't just about arrests; it was about why. But also, information sheets that we would make available at the demos to the people who were actually there, passing by. So, it was

always about never missing an opportunity to get out information, not just to make demands and get them met, but to get out information.

**SS: So how would they train you to speak to the media? Who trained you and what would they teach you?**

MP: You know, I don't know if I had a training. I just remember it must have been Ann Northrop who said, "Don't answer the question you're being asked. Say the thing that you need to say." And that's been useful since then as a way of thinking about how communication works and how advocacy works, and that's the lesson I most remember. And sound bites, you know, it has to be short and it has to also carry a lot in that, and that, if possible, it can't be parsed, it can't be cut, so that the media can make it into something different.

**SS: So, when you did media for Target City Hall, what did you do?**

MP: I think then I was — what I remember doing is making sure the media who was there at the action knew where the next arrests or actions were going to be. So, it was about that, I think. At least that was what I did on the day. I can't remember what happened before or after that.

**SS: So, you already knew the order?**

MP: That's funny. I don't know if I knew the order, but I think I knew whom to ask about whether they were ready to go.

**SS: So, there's an incredible amount of intimate effective communication going on between people who barely know each other, and somehow it doesn't leak. How is that?**

MP: Well, I mean, that kind of information was not – I don't know if we worried about that information leaking. I mean, I think it was known that when ACT UP showed up for something that there was going to be disruption and probably arrests. I don't remember. I don't remember winks and nods and codes, but I remember that there was a kind of camaraderie.

**SS: So, in a way, the police did cooperate with us on a certain level by allowing these things to happen, even if they perhaps knew what was going to happen.**

MP: Yes. I wouldn't say cooperate, but I think there was an understanding of what we were about and what we were doing, and depending on which police group and whether they were used to us and how disgusted or accepting of us they were, they were going to deal with it pretty innocuously.

**SS: Did you ever have an extremely negative experience with the police?**

MP: No, not extremely negative. When I got arrested for A Day of Desperation, I was dropped badly into the paddy wagon and I hurt my back, but it may have been, it was carelessness or initially not caring about me, but it wasn't malicious, I don't think. Otherwise, no. And the reason I didn't have a bad time, I think, with the police or with anyone in the system once we were in jail, is that we had such fantastic support on the outside. We had a legal team, basically, and people working with legal who knew where we were, what jails we were being taken to, were tracking us, to the point where my first arrest, I was able to be flippant to the police who offered me a phone

call, and I said, “Oh, I think I’ll check my messages,” because I was so unworried about my status in jail.

**SS: What was your first arrest?**

MP: It was for needle exchange.

**SS: Okay. So, we’ll get to that in a minute. I just want to ask more conceptually about the whole getting-arrested thing. What was the purpose of the tactic of getting arrested?**

MP: Well, I think it was to create media so that there’d be a headline in the paper that said this many people got arrested at this particular important place, like Grand Central Station or in the middle of this street or for this reason, which then, of course, had to be explained if it was, say, for needle exchange or for doing something else like disrupting Wall Street. “The protesters were angry about the high price of AZT.” So, there would have to be an explanation for why there were arrests.

The other part of it was that it was sort of a very literal enactment of our stubbornness, that we’re not leaving here. You have to drag us away. We’re not leaving here until we get what we want. Either you give us what we want, or you’re going to have to take us away from here forcefully.

**SS: But in a way you’re kind of depicting it as this logical strategic decision, but there’s a lot of emotional expression. I mean, a lot of people made impulsive decisions.**

MP: No, you’re right, and looking back at it, it’s easier to think of it as a logic. You’re absolutely right. And it was scary too. That’s the other part of it. I mean, to put yourself in the hands of the state in the guise of the police was scary. Even though

we were being tracked and we had support it was still — it became less frightening as time went on, but it was scary. But absolutely it was — I just remember the faces and the expressions and the gestures of all of us, angry, yelling. Very, very moving. I mean moving to remember it. At the time it just felt like that's what we had to express.

**SS: Because there's this – and I'm not quite sure how to say this, but, okay, so you come out and there's an oppression that a person experiences, especially in our generation. You're younger than me, but nonetheless. And there's this knowledge by the queer person that the state and the society are hurting them and against them. There's a way that these kinds of confrontations on the street make active what's actually in place or make visible what's already there.**

MP: Yes, yes. No, that's absolutely right. It's the performance of the very thing that is extant in our lives and in the world. But the most amazing thing about ACT UP in relation to other activist movements, as far as I understand, is that we were really very powerful. So although, yes, it was scary to be available to the police taking us away in that way and resisting arrest only by going limp, not fighting, there was still this feeling of how powerful we were and how much we could get done and how quickly we could change things.

I think the women's movement, for example, didn't have that feeling of immediate satisfaction. It was slower work over time, change was slower, and it was more frustrating, because even when the change did happen, it was harder to connect it to the actions that one performed, whereas in ACT UP, really it was like a phone zap, and then that afternoon there was an article in the newspaper or the price of something changed or someone got onto a drug trial that they were forbidden from before or a



definition changed. It was that quick. So more and more that kind of life-and-death urgency made the anger on the street. I think it was also convincing, I mean to, say, passersby or people who were watching it on the news, and that the police became less scary, because “This was not the worst thing I have to face” was the feeling.

**SS: I’m still on the woman thing. So, I agree with you that things were happening incredibly quickly, except changing the CDC definition took four years.**

MP: Yes, and it didn’t even get changed as much as we wanted it changed.

**SS: Right, so women were on a completely different track.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: Even though the organization supported it. So why is that?**

MP: I don’t know. I mean, four years is still pretty quickly, but not quick enough, because there are women who died and women who didn’t get benefits and all sorts of tragedy that happened because it took that long, but it did change. Well, for all the reasons that women are left out of protocols and definitions and conversations, I mean, that’s still true. We didn’t change that. I think that’s why, and I think also because it wasn’t seen as a woman’s illness for a very long time, maybe not ever in this country. So, I don’t know.

**SS: What happened when women with AIDS started to join ACT UP? How did that change the dynamic of that conversation?**

MP: Well, I don’t know if it changed the dynamic of the conversation very much, because we were already including women with AIDS in what we knew. Even the

chapter in the book that was about women with AIDS in prison was written by women with AIDS in prison.

**SS: Who wrote it?**

MP: It was the Bedford Prison – I can't remember the name of the group, but it was—

**SS: ACE?**

MP: It was ACE. That's right.

**SS: But there weren't people's names signed to it?**

MP: Yes. Oh, that's a good question. I think maybe there weren't at that time.

**SS: And who made that relationship? Who was in touch with them, and did you edit them? Or how did it work?**

MP: We edited it a bit, yes, but not very much.

**SS: Did you talk to them?**

MP: I didn't. I can't remember who was in touch with them. It might have been — maybe Marion was in touch with them. I think there was someone else.

**SS: So, you never went to Bedford?**

MP: No, no, I never went. Catherine Saalfield was also in the group. I forgot to mention her.

But I do remember becoming very friendly, close to – it must have been the Amsterdam International AIDS Conference that I got close to Lydia Awadala, and then Mercedes, whose last name I can't remember, Tony, and that's the first time that I really hung out with them, and then did more afterwards. So, my sense was not of

hanging out with women with AIDS knowing that women with AIDS at the Center so much at the meetings, but in other ways, other processes.

**SS: Can you remember some particular piece of information or understanding that you specifically accrued from those conversations?**

MP: With them?

**SS: Yes.**

MP: I remember they embarrassed me a lot because they flirted me with me, Lydia and Mercedes especially, and I was so sort of enchanted by that. I remember Lydia might have been the first person I went to visit in the hospital who was really ill, and so in that sense, I mean, we talked about AIDS and we talked about politics, we talked about activism, but we also were hanging out, so it changed things for me in the sense that this is what it's like to be a person with AIDS in the world, but not in the sense of things they actually said to me, I guess.

**SS: Do you think it influenced your decision to work on needle exchange?**

MP: No, I think I was already doing that. I think I was already doing needle exchange.

**SS: Okay. Let's hold that for a second.**

MP: Sure.

**SS: I want to go back to these workshops and talks that you were doing. So, what was your capacity? How did you get signed up for this?**

MP: You know, it must have been that Outreach had my name and number, and when someone would call for someone to go do a workshop and maybe they

wanted a woman, or didn't care, that I would get the phone call. I went to lots of different places to do that.

**SS: Can you give us just a few stories or specifics?**

MP: I spoke at this conference in West Virginia for social workers, hundreds of people, and then later did a workshop in a high school in West Virginia while I was there. They got me to do a safe-sex workshop. But I think I did this big talk and presentation about activism, and I may have also done a safe-sex workshop for those social workers who wanted to participate in that.

I remember that I was in front of all these people, and after I gave my talk, this man – and there weren't very many men in the room, because most of the social workers were then all women, and he said, "Don't you think that we should be telling our clients who have HIV that they shouldn't be," whatever, "having sex with other people or using drugs at all?"

And I said—and this was really this great moment where it wasn't later that I thought of the right thing to say; it was then—I said, "It's my understanding that social workers are supposed to empower their clients and give them enough information to make their own choices." And the room of women just burst into sort of cheers and applause. So that was what I was about, was giving enough information so that people really could make their own decisions, but also, by mentioning everything, making it sort of clear and obvious what was available, from sexual practices to drug-using practices. So, I was sort of trying to exploit the situation and suggest that "These are all the things that you can do," not just "This is how to do these things safely," but "This is what's available for you to do."

**SS: Was there anything that you said that with hindsight you realize may not have been so?**

MP: No, and even about — I always said to people, “You may think that it poses no risk to you to do this thing with this person, but your mind might change if you knew that person was HIV-infected, so think about that.” And that people are allowed to take risks. Sex is risky. It’s always been risky. Drugs are risky. When people are having sex and taking drugs, they’re already in a risk situation, so they just need the information.

**SS: Now we’re in a cultural moment where safe sex has completely broken down, right, and it’s really not part of life in the same way that it was then. And people are still giving safe-sex workshops all the time, but they’re futile to a certain degree or they’re only reaching a very small group of people.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: What was it that allowed that to be effective then, and why is it not effective now?**

MP: Well, I mean, one of the things that’s useful about safe-sex information for women is that it does a lot of other things as well. It prevents pregnancy and STD transmission. So, it may be that that was another way of suggesting that you may not be worried about HIV, but you probably are thinking about these other things. So, I think partly the urgency has changed because people aren’t dying in such obvious ways around us, in a very proximate way. They’re over there.

**SS: So, you were talking before about this feeling of power and being able to impact and all of that. How did that affect your relationships with people who were not in ACT UP?**

MP: Well, I had a lot of support from people who were not in ACT UP, my family and my friends. So, at the time, it just felt like I was the one among us who was doing it.

We haven't spoken about needle exchange yet, but there's something that happened on the day of the trial about my family showing up, which I'll get to now or whenever you want me to. But I did feel that although you asked me early on in our talk about what my parents conveyed to me about activism and about social change, I did increasingly feel that my mother was very proud of me and that maybe even I was doing something that she hadn't been able to do. And she's very political now, for example, so that feels right to me. So, I did feel a lot of support.

Now, how it's affected how I am with other people since then and now is I don't always have that kind of group empowerment, sadly, but I now know that it's possible to change things.

**SS: A lot of people report that they spent so much time in ACT UP that somehow the petty concerns of unmobilized people started to fade in importance and ACT UP became a way of life and that there was a real separation.**

MP: Yes. ACT UP did become a way of life, absolutely. More and more it was the thing I did, it constituted the people I hung out with and had relationships with, but I still had other people in my life and that still mattered to me. And I still feel that I have a – I mean, one of the things I may have learned from ACT UP, I don't know if it

was already in me, is that I'm not afraid of illness, I'm not afraid of death, of other people being ill, other people dying, and I feel very comfortable with that and with grief and with mourning. I know that's part of the world. So, I see it as part of the continuum with the things that concern us on a more day-to-day level. I think that there was a great sense of anxiety and urgency, literally life-and-death urgency, but those things are not in another world from the day-to-day concerns.

One of the experiences I had doing needle exchange was one of the guys I got friendly with who would come, I guess, weekly to exchange needles, and he offered to buy me a coffee, and I said, unthinkingly, "Oh, no thanks, I'm trying to quit."

And he said, "Oh, yeah, man, I know. That's tough." And it was sweet, and it reminded me that I hadn't said something stupid, I had said something that was just a different version of what he's experiencing. So, I do feel that connection.

**SS: Okay, but having this familiarity with mortality, is that ever alienating from other people who don't have that?**

MP: It might make me more impatient with people who are – I don't know. People can only deal with what's in front of them, and I can feel impatient with that because there's more in front of them than what their narrow focus can see. But I don't know. I'm older now. I feel more compassionate toward people and what they think their concerns are. And then I guess my role is to try and broaden that out if I care enough or if I can. So, yes, I think there's a difference in what we're dealing with, but I think it's also not fair to say, "You don't know what life is really like if you haven't dealt with—."

**SS: Mass death.**

MP: Yes, exactly.

**SS: Let's get to needle exchange. So, what made you decide to get involved?**

MP: You ask it in a way that makes – I don't know how I decided to get involved. I don't know if I decided—

**SS: Well, like, did you have a crush on a girl who was involved?**

MP: I mean, there was a lot of thinking and discussion about whether or not and how I was going to get arrested. It was my first arrest, and I must have been doing needle exchange already, but maybe not for very long before that, and it may have been part of thinking about joining that group that was going to go to trial. But I would do needle exchange on a weekly basis on the Lower East Side in various places, and then there was one park that we would end up in. It wasn't Tompkins Square, but it was further. I can't remember. I mean, I can picture it.

**SS: Sara Roosevelt or Seward Park?**

MP: There was hardly anything around it. There was one Cuban sandwich shop down the street, and that was it, really delicious Cuban sandwiches.

I also remember I did a few of the drives to Vermont to get needles, because we obviously couldn't get them in New York City, and we had arrangement with pharmacists in Vermont just across the border.

**SS: How did you make those arrangements?**

MP: I didn't make them. Someone else did, maybe Rod Sorge or Richard Elovich, I don't remember, but it was sort of arranged for me, and I knew where to show up and when and what to say.



**SS: What town?**

MP: Ludlow. Something. It was right across the border.

**SS: And how many needles would you pick up?**

MP: Boxes, boxes of them.

**SS: And you paid for them?**

MP: Yes, we paid for them.

**SS: So, in other words, Vermont allowed you to buy in bulk, or was it a special arrangement with this pharmacist?**

MP: I mean, it was a special arrangement, and the pharmacist selling it to us knew what we were doing with it and supported it, but we paid for them.

**SS: Did Vermont have needle exchange?**

MP: I don't know. Well, you could buy needles over the counter in Vermont. I don't know that they had needle exchange.

**SS: So, take us through a typical day of needle exchange. How would the days begin?**

MP: I remember starting early in the morning, and it was first a walkabout. We would go to places where we knew that people would, users were living, in the street or tent cities.

**SS: Like where?**

MP: Like over – again, I can picture them and I can't – just all Lower East Side. I mean, I remember Tompkins Square was on the route, and then there was that tent city that was way past or at the end of Alphabet City. Then we'd end up in this park that you think might be—

**SS: Seward Park?**

MP: Yes, might be Seward. Then we would hang out there, and people knew that we would show up and they would come along with their needles. I think it would pretty much be an exchange. I think that we would take the needles and give them one-to-one needles back.

**SS: Did you have a table?**

MP: Well, we had a container for the works, and we would also give out packs so that they could clean their works if, in fact, they needed to, they couldn't get a clean needle, and that had alcohol and swabs and information about safe needle injection, but also about getting drug treatment, which of course in some ways was unfair, was cruel, because it was so hard to get drug treatment. There was such a long waiting list. But it was like the sort of advocacy and education I was doing. "Here's the information. Here's what's really available." And then, of course, maybe there were condoms also in the pack. Some of the people would just come, exchange, leave. Other people would hang out and talk. That's what I remember most, is the walkabout and then the hanging out.

**SS: What about the other ACT UPpers? Some of them were IV-drug users, former, and some of them were current. Were you talking about that openly?**

MP: No, not at all. I think I was – I mean, I was both naïve and open, so I think it didn't matter to me. But I wasn't thinking about who was using, who had been using.

**SS: So, it wasn't part of their discourse of deciding how to do it or—**

MP: No. I think I must have known that Rod Sorge had been a user, maybe even Richard Elovich, because they seemed to know how it all worked. But I remember Gay Wachman was one of the people who did needle exchange early on, and then later she wasn't. Maybe she was doing a different route.

**SS: Because it kind of parallels a little bit what we're talking about earlier, that there are people in ACT UP who are themselves at risk for HIV and then they're doing safe-sex advocacy, and then people who are not risk and they're doing it, and then there's people who are using IV drugs and people who are not.**

MP: I mean, we weren't sure about whether or not and how much we were at risk, to be fair. I mean, I think we knew that there were riskier things and less risky things, but there was still concern. I mean, again, if you know the person you're kissing is HIV-infected, does that change how comfortable you feel with that as a mode of transmission? And the same thing, there's a whole list of things that you might feel more or less comfortable with depending on what your knowledge is and what your experience is. So, yes, it's true that—

**SS: I'm just trying to get at the deferred experience. I think that we had a different experience.**

MP: Yes. You know, I remember being arrested for needle exchange, and we were in these two cells, the men and the women. They were very near each other, and they were asking us basic information, our names and our ages, maybe. That's it. I remember Gregg Bordowitz was in the other cell, and I think I learned that he was exactly my age. And I just felt so much and I knew that he was HIV-infected, and I just felt so much that that could be me, so much, and in some ways that galvanized it for me.

That put it together, so I never felt that it was something – one, I felt that it was something that was my issue, because empowerment for women and safe sex for women and sex for women and agency and options to do what we want to do, that’s always been part of my agenda, and that was part of ACT UP’s agenda for all bodies, for all people. But I also felt that this was something — you know, I was a sexual being at a time of crisis, and I was young, and so there were many things that I still may do that might be risky or not risky. I hadn’t foreclosed the things that were possible for me, and I just felt that it was very much me.

**SS: What I’m interested in about what you’re saying is that there’s a profound experience of identification, and for those of us who still identify as queer women or lesbians at this point, I don’t think we’ve ever experienced that coming our way from anybody else, but somehow we are able to identify with people who are in severe need, in a way that’s very, very intimate and that produces concrete positive result. But we’re unable to receive that, to get that from other people.**

**What is it?**

MP: You mean in the world aside from ACT UP and outside of ACT UP. We did get some. I mean, there was a sense of joining in on the women’s issues, I think, early on, especially.

**SS: But, yes, that’s not us. It’s the women’s issues that we’re identifying with.**

MP: Yes, okay. Well, you know, there’s no way to transform someone into an activist without making it personal for them, without making it a selfish issue, and I still feel that in my teaching and in my life. There’s no way of saying this is something

you ought to do for these other people. The only way to make it convincing is to make it personal.

So, did we fix everything? Did we make men and straight people and all the people who are not us, I guess is how you're putting it, aware of our issues and identify with us? No. A lot of the same problems still exist. Sexism still exists. Heterosexism still exists pretty badly. Racism still exists. Sex is still not empowering or powerful for everyone. But there was a moment to make real change out of those coalitions and those identifications, so it worked then. So, I don't know. I don't know what to say except—

**SS: Yes, but I'm asking a different question. Like here we are, it's 2011. For example, certain kinds of gay male representation have expanded and mainstreamed. Lesbian representation is virtually nonexistent. Unless we're constantly motivating it, other people are not integrating us into curriculum, for example. We have to constantly run the motor, and it's never been reciprocated. So, there's an experience that you're documenting and articulating of profound human identification with other people that doesn't work in reverse.**

MP: Yes, I see what you're saying.

**SS: But what is the reason for that?**

MP: Well, I don't know. It may be that we haven't fixed sexism and heterosexism. But the other thing, the other way of looking at it, is not all of the benefits and winnings from having a successful revolutionary movement are good ones, are things we want. So, some of the outcomes of having been successful activists are things that, well, we weren't fighting for this, but we got this anyway. So not being in the forefront,

not getting all our needs met, might not – I don't want to say it's okay, "I don't need the light on, I'll sit in the dark," but maybe we don't need all of that kind of exposure. I don't know.

**SS: Okay. So, let's go back to needle exchange. So, there was always a debate inside ACT UP about service provision versus activism, and needle exchange is kind of a – I mean, it was symbolic service provision, right, but, nonetheless, it was, and yet it had this activist goal. So, at what point did you decide to do it in order to achieve a change in the law, or did it begin as simple service provision?**

MP: Well, I mean, for me it was also always everything I do is about education. So, "Here are needles, but here's also all this info, and do you want to talk?" And everything we did that was about education and service provision were always understood by us, I think, that we're doing this because the government's not doing it. Even when I would go give safe-sex workshops, it wasn't because "I'm doing it because you're not getting that information elsewhere and that's a travesty." I think we were doing – it wasn't just symbolic. We were giving actual clean needles to people who were using and returning dirty needles, used ones.

**SS: Okay, that's fine.**

MP: But it was clear that the law was unfair.

**SS: But did you know that before you started? Was that the goal of the whole thing, to challenge the law?**

MP: Not as far as I understood. Maybe. Again, it was "We're doing it because you're not doing it," so it was always a kind of in your face, "Look. Gosh, we have to do this. Again, another thing we have to do because you're not doing it." I don't

know that — I think the actual days out exchanging needles were about days out exchanging needles and giving information. Part of the understanding of that is the day that we got arrested, we knew we were going to be arrested. It wasn't a day out giving needles. It was a different kind of day, so we were making a point on that occasion.

**SS: How did that get planned? Who conceptualized that?**

MP: Richard Elovich must have been one of the main people doing it. This guy Jon Parker, who wasn't part of ACT UP but was from Boston, he became part of it. Then there were a few of us who were joining the group. We believed in it. We had the privilege, say, to go through the system in that way. It felt like a risk to me, but it still felt like something I ought to do. And, as I say, it was my first arrest, so I took it very seriously.

And I remember Marion really coaching me on it, saying, "Well, one, you're valuable because you've never been arrested, you don't have a record, and this is a good thing to do." She also said, "Maybe you want to not do it so you don't have a record. You could something even better later." So, she really talked me through it, which was great. And it was just great generally to have that kind of experience, and her and others who sort of knew what this was about, so, again, I felt very supported. But that day we knew that we were going to go to jail.

**SS: So, did you alert the police in advance?**

MP: I don't know if it was a message to the police or if we created the attention to the action in such a way that we knew the police would know.

**SS: But you invited the media?**

MP: Yes.

**SS: So, then you were arrested, and what were you charged with?**

MP: Possession. Possession of hypodermic instrument. Distribution? I think it was possession.

**SS: And what happened?**

MP: That day we went to jail.

**SS: To Pitt Street?**

MP: I don't remember. I really don't remember. Fingerprints taken, and then released after several hours, and then that was it for a while. But we were offered, I think, as we normally would be, a kind of plea bargain, and we chose not to take that because we wanted it to go to trial.

**SS: Now, who was your attorney?**

MP: Jill Harris was the attorney, and Mike Spiegel.

**SS: And all of you decided to go to trial, or did anyone—**

MP: Oh, yes. No, I think we knew that's what we were heading for, yes. And Richard Elovich represented himself, as I recall, so he was also legal counsel.

**SS: Oh, I didn't realize that. Okay. So, did you have a jury trial?**

MP: No, trial by judge.

**SS: Who was the judge?**

MP: Laura Draper was the judge. And the trial happened quite— I remember this happened quite a while afterwards, and then the verdict quite a while after that, yes.

**SS: Do you remember your testimony?**



MP: I remember that I was disappointed because I didn't get asked very much, and I wondered if that was because of the kind of education and privilege that I was seen to have, that they were not going to benefit very much from interrogating me. So, I was prepared, but I didn't get to say very much.

**SS: Whose testimony do you remember the most?**

MP: Well, I remember Gregg's partly because of that affinity and connection I was feeling to him, and he spoke about getting infected, and getting infected after there was knowledge about HIV transmission, and so trying to suggest how dangerous it was for everyone, even if there's information out there, that that's not enough for people to know. I sort of vaguely remember Richard on the stand. And I remember just how great Jill and Mike were; fantastic. I just trusted them so much.

And I think I also want to say overall I sort of trusted ACT UP a lot, that there were some of the actions that I knew very much about what it was about and I believed in it, and others that I didn't know very much what they were about, but I believed in joining. I believed, I trusted the group, I trusted that that was something that it was worth being a part of.

But it was really — in some ways it was life-changing, that trial and that verdict, because our defense was the necessity defense or what's called the justification defense, which means that we never pleaded not guilty. We only ever pleaded guilty, but that we were justified because what we did was necessary to save a life. And that was such a clever defense, I thought, of our team to come up with, the legal team to come up with.

I remember the day of the verdict, it was announced very precipitously and I had to come back from Italy, where I was at the International AIDS Conference in Florence, and I had to arrange to come back early. And I remember that my mother showed up for the verdict in a Silence = Death sweatshirt, and my sister, who's a lawyer, showed up from – I think she must have been living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, then, so she came from really far away, and it was early in the morning. And then my father showed up in his suit, and I wasn't expecting him.

The possible penalty if we got convicted, because it was a Class-A misdemeanor, was six months to a year in prison, and I saw my father, and I said – and he was always very ambivalent about my activism, very worried about my future, very worried about what it would mean for me, and I said, “Dad, what are you doing here?” And he said, “I've come to say goodbye.” And he couldn't say something supportive, but his being there meant that he was supporting me and that maybe he was proud of me, and it was very, very meaningful to me to have my whole family there in the courtroom when the judge decided that we were, in fact, justified in what we'd done.

**SS: Then what was the long-range impact on policy?**

MP: There was no immediate impact. In fact, the judge made a point of saying that this was not precedent-setting, that “On this occasion you are vindicated for what you've done, but this is not to say that this is okay now.” But eventually the law changed.

**SS: And do you know why?**

MP: Why? I guess because we were right and they were wrong.

**SS: No, like how did the law actually change?**

MP: I don't remember. That was after my time. But there was media about it. We were on the front page of the B-section of *The New York Times*, and I remember being interviewed for WBAI, and there was other press. So, besides that, we were actually fighting this law in the courts, there was also that added benefit that ACT UP always sought, which was media attention.

**SS: And who testified against you?**

MP: It must have been the city. I think it was the city, yes.

**SS: Was there any disagreement inside ACT UP about needle exchange?**

MP: Not that I was aware of. I do know that on the day we got arrested, there was an advocacy group for—there was an African American advocacy group. I can't remember if it was a more particular thing it was about that was protesting against what we were doing, through the belief that making needles available perpetuates, encourages drug use, which I think is pretty much – and I can understand that anxiety, of course, because when so little attention is paid to a certain constituency, it seems like – and there's certainly a history of dastardly things being done to disenfranchised groups of that very sort, of giving them drugs and giving them works. But I think we've now pretty much ascertained that clean needles makes it safer and not more of an incitement to drug use.

**SS: So, I just want to go to a new topic.**

MP: Sure.

**SS: Lesbian dating inside ACT UP. So, what was that all like? What was the whole lesbian romance, sex scene inside ACT UP like?**

MP: Well, it was very sexy to be in ACT UP. There's that. I mean, just the feeling of being in the room on a Monday night, and the kissing everyone hello, men and women, it was a very erotic and very empowering experience, so there was that, and a lot of flirting and a lot of – everything seemed possible. It was really – I'd never experienced anything like that, and really never anything since then like it.

So, yes, I mean, there was dating and there were encounters, and I was part of that. I had a few relationships in ACT UP and a few non-relationships in ACT UP, and it was all—

**SS: How did all that all negotiate? Because here you have this room where a lot of people have had one-night stands or relationships or short things, and they're all in the same room together all the time.**

MP: Yes.

**SS: How does that play out?**

MP: I don't know. Did people not come to meetings or sit in different places? I don't know. I really can't remember who this was, but I remember noticing something about these two women whom I knew and thinking, "God, they've hooked up." I sort of can tell something about how they were standing together, how they were. So, gosh, maybe I've wiped it out of my head, but I don't remember. I mean, certainly you're right to suggest that this was going to be volatile, but I don't remember that so much.

**SS: Maybe it wasn't.**

MP: Maybe it wasn't.

**SS: Why would that be, though?**

MP: I don't know. There's no reason for it.

**JW: Fluoride?**

**SS: Fluoride. Let me tell you where I'm leading you.**

MP: Yes, go on then, tell me.

**SS: That it's male sexual culture and that lesbians just got onboard with that construction.**

MP: Maybe, yes, and also I do think, I do believe — I remember that early on Suzanne Wright had created this poster that was about lesbian safe sex. And what was the slogan on it? That wasn't the one about Power Breakfast. That was the Chicago ACT UP, I think, had that. There was something that we were doing in our activism, but then also just infiltrated our daily lives. It was about — what was it? I can't remember the phrase now, but sex-positive, to be sex-positive, that it was just good, that sex was a good. And it didn't mean that people weren't having relationships. I don't know. Maybe there was a kind of gay male culture that seemed like—

**SS: Well, did you go to the Clit Club?**

MP: Yes.

**SS: Well, that was an extension of ACT UP.**

MP: Yes, it was.

**SS: It was run by ACT UP people.**

MP: And I did a safe-sex performance workshop at the Clit Club. I forgot about that.

**SS: What did you do?**

MP: Julie Tolentino asked me to do this. I can't remember who I did it with. And I was very nervous about it, because performing's not really what I do, but it was something on the stage on a Saturday night that was meant to enact a kind of— maybe it was an act of kind of hookup scenario that incorporated—

**SS: You can't remember who you did it with. There you go. Point.**

**So, when did you leave ACT UP?**

MP: I left in late September 1993.

**SS: And why was that?**

MP: Well, I left the country and went to England to do an M.A. there, so that's why I can pinpoint it so definitely. But I remember thinking that if I didn't go do this M.A. program in England and I didn't get in, that I was going to go to Paris. So, whether or not that was feasible, I had this idea of leaving, and I think that — I learned later that a lot of people left, the city, not just ACT UP, but left the city and a lot came back. But I was very intrigued by that, that there was a sense of kind of saturation of grief and sort of an incapacity to do any more, that really drove people away. I think that was my feeling. I think I wanted more life. And I sort of felt bad about leaving, but I think I felt like I had to.

**SS: So, I only have my final question. Is there anything important that we haven't talked about?**

MP: There are a few things that I thought of that were little actions. Like there was this very terrible book called *The Real Truth About Women and AIDS* that Singer Kaplan, someone [Helen] Singer Kaplan wrote it, and that I—

**SS: Okay.**

MP: And we came up with a sticker that, instead of fighting the actual book itself, just came up with a list of things that were true about women and AIDS, that we then would go into bookstores and stick on that book and on any other book that we felt like. So, there were a lot of things like — there were a lot of little actions that I think are going to be lost to history because they didn't have the kind of media attention that the bigger actions had.

**SS: Who did you do that with?**

MP: Well, I remember coming — Marion encouraged me to do it, and I devised it myself and I think she did the offset printing for it, because that was something she did, and then we had to get floor approval for the funds to make those stickers. Then, I don't know, whoever made them, made them.

So, I don't know if there's anything else that —

What the men were doing over in their section were singing and dancing and doing the hokey-pokey, and the women were having a meeting, and I thought, "So typical," and, you know, we're in jail. What do you want to discuss? So, there were things that we learned from each other and that we took from each other, the men and the women, but there were things that just stayed that were sort of inveterate.

**SS: Monica Pearl votes for essentialism. We've got it on tape. So, here's my final question. So, looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you consider to be its greatest disappointment?**

MP: Well, I think the greatest achievements were many of the things I've already said, how powerful we were and how intoxicating it was that we could, in the

face of really urgent life-and-death experiences and worries, that we could make change, and, as I said, even by just threatening sometimes to show up for a demonstration. So that achievement overall was incredible.

I think changing the CDC definition of how women present with AIDS and HIV is very important. Producing the book *Women, AIDS and Activism* felt sort of important at the time. It didn't feel like it was meant to be a big achievement; it just felt like we had to do that, felt exigent. So that, how powerful we were and how much that stays with one, really.

And some of the achievements of ACT UP are not all ones we might like. I think "queer" has come out of ACT UP and AIDS, which is something fantastic. I think gay marriage is also something that's come out of AIDS and ACT UP, which as a friend of mine said, "Marriage is not the cure." But I think it seems like it to a lot of people. So those are achievements in a sense of what happened, what did ACT UP do.

And disappointments is that we couldn't save more lives. We wanted to end the AIDS crisis. We wanted to make it so that people could have more access to healthcare and lifesaving treatment, and we did a lot of that but we didn't do all of it, so it was an inevitable disappointment. And that's why Day of Desperation, for example, and why people had to leave. It was just saturating, how much was impossible in the face even of how much was possible.

**SS: Thank you.**

MP: Thank you, Sarah.

**SS: See? It's easy.**



MP: Well, I mean, it's easy because you guys are good at it. You make it easy.

**SS: It's easy to talk about something you really understand. I think that's what it is, honestly.**

**JW: Don't think you that Day of Desperation arrest was kind of contrived?**

MP: Yes, it was. But, I mean, performance. It was a performance, right? And performance is contrived.

**SS: What would we do without the word "performance"? Judith Butler should get –**

MP: It used to mean just performing.

**JW: Performing for a good time, a good play. I think it was at Grand Central –**

**SS: I'm going to run to the bathroom.**

MP: So, when do I get to read a transcript?

**JH: Oh, it'll be a while. If you want a DVD, that you can have relatively quickly.**

MP: All right, I'll do that, and I also want to send you – or who should I send the footage I have from—

**JH: Send it to me.**

MP: Do you have a card or something?

**JH: Yes.**

MP: I think I have the original tape that was in the actual camera and then someone just transferred it.

**JW: What kind of camera? VHS or Hi-8?**

MP: Hi-8 sounds more familiar, and then I also have it on VHS because someone transferred it for me.

**JH: I've run out of cards.**

**JW: Sure. Should I give my address?**

MP: Yes, would you.

**JW: Thanks. Yes, I dubbed most of the conference tapes so far.**

MP: Yes, maybe it was you.

**JW: I'll just add that. No, it wasn't me.**

MP: Oh, it wasn't you at the time.

**JW: Amsterdam was my first one.**

MP: Oh, right. Okay.

**JW: Aldyn McKean was in charge of that selection process with eighty people. First I failed the vote.**

**JH: You failed?**

**JW: Walked out, and then I got fuming, and I got turned around, went back to them and said, "Hey, I'm filming this. You can't not send me." So, I got the vote turned around, Aldyn called me later that evening and said, "Look, don't upset the process. I'll get you in. Okay?"**

MP: Do you guys still enjoy doing this? Is it still interesting?

**JH: Yes, it is. I mean, it's somewhat routine now, but it's so exciting.**

MP: Good, good.

**JW: I'm putting all this online and then I can actually go this way.**

MP: I can't wait.

**JW: Those are the Hi-8 tapes in that corner.**

MP: I was just asking them if they found it interesting and exciting. Do you?

**SS: Oh, yes. Are you kidding? It's amazing, because it's a cumulative thing. It's like there's each interview, and then there's like what the trends are in what people say and what's cumulatively revealed and all that kind of stuff. Then my thinking is always changing about it. And this conversation we just had about identification, that's an entirely new trajectory in terms of asking and stuff like that.**

**JW: I find the interviews refreshing, if not borderline revisionism, but at least they're live.**

MP: Well, memory does that.

**JW: The old stuff, yes. And the old stuff kind of draining and desperate still. I mean, I like these. I get tired when I go back to the original.**

**SS: Want to have a cigarette?**

MP: No, thank you. I'm not smoking really much these days.

**JW: You trying to quit?**

MP: Yes, that's right.

**JW: Are you smoking, Sarah?**

**SS: Only when I'm near your tobacco. That's when I smoke James.**

**JW: I was afraid you'd come down here with eons of tobacco smoke,**

MP: No, no. It's very particular.

**JW: Excellent.**

MP: It sounds like fastidiousness, but it's just an allergy.

**SS: The film is going to be amazing. I mean, I was looking at what Jim was doing the other day, that section on public funerals. It's so fucking painful we can barely watch it. I don't know what people who have no idea that this ever happened are going to think when they watch this, because they think, "Oh, ACT UP, they carry their dead friends through the streets."**

MP: I need this. I need this film, I really do, for what I teach and what I try to put – you know, I need it. So, I'm so glad.

**SS: Yes, it's intense.**

**JH: But there is still something of an AIDS activism movement in Manchester, isn't there?**

MP: But you know what my students know? They know a lot about the American black civil rights movement, they know a tiny bit about women's liberation movement, and nothing about AIDS activism.

**SS: Really?**

MP: Yes. "I didn't even know that it existed." Which, it's not their fault exactly.

**SS: But that's why I brought up the thing—I disagree with you, but I dropped it—about why women with AIDS don't know their own history. It's because of the way the information is repressed.**

**JW: And kids don't either. Is that too simplistic? I mean, they don't have a clue.**

**SS: What do gay kids think is the history of gay liberation? Who knows what they think?**

MP: I don't know. I saw a Gay Youth protest yesterday through the Village.

**SS: About what?**

MP: It was just about "We're people too and we want rights," and there were pink balloons and poster boards, handwritten poster boards.

**JW: Whiners.**

MP: And mostly black and Hispanic kids, yes.

**SS: Was it FIERCE?**

MP: FIERCE was not running it, but some of the people were involved with FIERCE. But that's all that they could say, so they were just angry.

**SS: Yes, I think a lot of kids, my kids, my students, they want something, but they don't know how.**

MP: Well, the protests that are happening now in England over the cuts, the budget cuts, see, that's why. It's about them. They're suddenly not going to be able to afford to go to university, or they're going to be in debt for the rest of their lives.

**SS: Yes, but here it's the same. They don't do anything.**

MP: I know, well, because nothing new.

**SS: Oh, I see. It's new.**

MP: Yes, it's new.

**JW: There always has to be a desperation –**

MP: And occupation of buildings and, my god, it's amazing. I'm so proud.

**SS: And what are the faculty doing?**

MP: They're mostly supporting it, and we're doing teach-ins as well. There are some people who are doing teach-ins.

**SS: Do you have a tenure system? Do you have tenure?**

MP: Now quite as severe as what you have.

**JW: You can get fired for provocateur—**

MP: Very, very, unlikely. But you can get fired because they've run out of money. So, you can do what you like.

**JW: Provoke all you can, huh?**

MP: Yes.

**SS: Sara Ahmed is coming here, and I'm like—**

MP: Is she?

**SS: I'm like you're going from Goldsmith's to Princeton? You'd better adjust, girl.**

MP: Yes. Well, but the part of the adjustment means you get more resources, you get higher salary, I mean—

**SS: But you're teaching the ruling class. That's totally the other direction.**

MP: Yes.

**JW: Cost of living is more.**

**SS: And get paid more.**

MP: Exactly, yes.

**SS: It's really cushy at a certain point, you know.**

MP: Yes, yes.

**JW: I feel that way until I leave the house.**

**SS: That's why you don't leave, right?**

**JW: I can go outside and still be an introvert, though, my backyard.**

**SS: This has been really interesting experience to do.**

MP: I bet, Sarah. My god.

**SS: I mean, if you ever have a year with nothing to do, read all those interviews.**

MP: I've been reading some, actually.

**SS: Oh, which ones have you read?**

MP: Well, just selectively been reading some, partly because I was worried that I wouldn't remember things, and sometimes I've been moved to tears, I mean, just either because I've been reminded of something or because I didn't know something.

**SS: Can you give us an example of which ones have you read?**

MP: Well, I think there was something I read about—well, like the funeral stuff really moved me.

**SS: Joy [Episalla].**

MP: But then the stuff that impressed me were like how much work and strategy went into the media stuff that I didn't even know about, the press releases and

the calling people that you had contacts with. I didn't even know that was going on. So, it was really wonderful to read some of these.

**JW: Always with the media I always hear it from one side, and all my work has been from the other side, so we never get the media to represent us completely and it's safer, more thorough to make our own media, so I –**

[Crosstalk]

**JW: But when you just talk about media, trying to influence mainstream media is futile.**

**SS: You know what kills me? I interviewed Douglas Crimp. I don't know if you read that interview, but I'm still steaming over it.**

MP: Oh, really? Why?

**SS: He only read interviews of men to prepare for the interview.**

MP: You know, this is what's said over and over again about Douglas, that he just forgets about women, in his words and his—

**SS: Frustrating. Now we have created this thing, and it's so easy. All you did is click, and he still won't click.**

**JW: Do you have a click on just men?**

**JH: I don't know. But why is he writing about Agnes Martin**

**SS: She's dead. I don't know.**

**JH: Right. It's sort of a weird thing.**

**SS: You know, I never dated anyone in ACT UP. I didn't think anyone was cute. It's very strange.**

MP: Oh, really?



**JH: Really?**

**SS: I just knew all these people and they're like, "Yeah, I had 5,000 affairs." I never was interested in anybody in ACT UP.**

**JH: Oh, I was interested in everybody. How come I didn't pursue that?**

**SS: Yes, Jim, how come you didn't pursue that?**

**JW: Because you were in a "gay marriage"?**

**SS: No.**

**JW: Yes, but that's just an excuse.**

**SS: You had affairs with when you left town, but you didn't—**

**JH: Yes, and I was having some during that period. I don't know.**

**SS: It didn't come to me the same way for some reason.**

**MP: I didn't start out. I mean, I was still having my affectional connections outside of ACT UP for a long time, and then it became subsumed, and then it was all about it.**

**SS: You said you were reading the *Village Voice* coverage of women with AIDS. That was me. I wrote that.**

**MP: Yes, of course.**

**SS: And Rebecca Cole you didn't mention, but she's very important in all of that. Did you read the interview with her?**

**MP: I did, I did, yes. Some of the ones that I didn't expect to be interested in ended up really being interesting.**

**JH: Like which ones?**

MP: Like that one, like Rebecca Cole and –

**SS: Well, that was the moment when we, or at least when I started to understand what all these people had in common, was the Rebecca Cole – we spent like five years trying to figure out what all these people had in common. We could never find it. And then in her interview, I suddenly realized that it wasn't experiential; it was characterological. It was a certain kind of person who couldn't sit there and let other people suffer, and that's what all these people had in common. It had nothing to do with their backgrounds, their families, their experiences, their exposure to AIDS, nothing. It's a personality type.**

MP: I guess, but I still think it's about, "This works for me. This is going to work for me." It's wonderful to be in a group that—I mean that kind of group dynamic is very influencing.

**SS: For a certain kind of person.**

MP: Maybe.

**SS: And there are still men who say to me, "I don't know why I wasn't involved." I know why. You're a coward.**

**JW: Can you say ostrich?**

**SS: Yes.**

MP: And I was a coward too. I mean, I felt really scared and naïve at the beginning, so it was a real learning experience and feeling emboldened. Because the other thing is acting up is something that children do, which is something that I don't think we talk about a lot, and a lot of what we were doing was sort of throwing tantrums

in order to get our way, and it worked, and that's not something that works in the rest of life, necessarily.

**JW: I lived in the Midwest all the way through, Northern Great Plains, Midwest, squeaky wheel gets the grease.**

**SS: Yes, that's right.**

MP: And maybe part of why ACT UP ended is because we grew up, in a funny way.

**JW: The numbers started diminishing and then there was this loss of energy. We lost the workspace. That was a real major problem, not having a common place to meet.**

MP: And the move to Cooper Union.

**JW: Before we moved to Cooper Union, did we meet on one side of the room and then switched it to the other side?**

MP: I don't remember that. What, in the Center?

**JW: I was a late bloomer. I joined in the nineties, so I was second generation, but I heard that—**

**JH: But the meetings were still at the Center then.**

**JW: Yes, I know. Then it switched. But I thought in the early days it was actually maybe facing west?**

**JH: Oh, oh, that. Yes, there was a point where the meetings were –**

**SS: There were too many people, so people were always entering from that side, so that's why they had to move to the other side.**

**JH: It was really early on that that switch took place.**

MP: That's so interesting.

JW: It was before my time, but I thought would explain why –

SS: Right, right.

JH: Also, I think it may have switched back, now that I'm seeing the footage in my head.

JW: Switch the tape. Your head will fool you.

JH: The first time it was against that wall going out to the garden, right? And then it switched to the other side in front of the men's room.

SS: Right.

JH: Right. But there's footage, like the Target City Hall footage, there's a little stage. There must have been something going on that point, because there's actually a little stage, and there wasn't normally. But that was on the garden wall.

MP: Was it?

JH: Yes.

SS: One of the really interesting things in the film that you'll see is that there's no narration, and he's able to tell the whole story through the footage, but also that we were really pressured very early to create characters, like pick six people and follow them, and Jim decided not to do that because that's not what ACT UP was.

MP: Good for you. Good for you.

SS: So now there's like a hundred – we don't know how many, we'll have to count it, but there's so many different people.

**SS: What's that?**

**JW: We didn't know their names anyway.**

**JH: No, we don't, we still don't know their names.**

**SS: It's really a cumulative. The film tells a story cumulatively through all different people, some of whom you see repeatedly, some of whom you never see again.**