

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

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

Interviewee: **Tom Keane**

Interview Number: **176**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **February 24, 2015**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Thomas Keane
February 24, 2015

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So you look at me. Are we ready?

JW: Ready.

SS: So let's start with your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

THOMAS KEANE: Okay. So I'm Tom Keane, and it is February 24th, I think, 2015, and I'm forty-seven, and we're in my apartment or the apartment I share with my husband on 40th Street, Manhattan.

SS: Okay, great. Where did you grow up, Tom?

TK: I grew up in Mineola on Long Island.

SS: And what did your parents do?

TK: My mother was a teacher, a math teacher, high school math teacher at a Catholic high school on Long Island, and my dad was a banker in the City and then on Long Island, and retired kind of early and became a lawyer, graduated law school in 2000.

SS: Oh, wow.

TK: Yeah.

SS: That's interesting. So were you raised with any kind of particular view about community or what was—

TK: Oh, yeah. My parents were both very Kennedy era, you know, liberal idealist types, and we'd often go, like, with my mother to do like walk-a-thons for hunger, or my dad was very involved with one of the local village political parties. It

wasn't Democrat or Republican. They were like—what were they called? The Citizens Party, the Hometown Party. So we were also always, like, leafleting, not like ACT UP style, to people walking by, because this was the suburbs, but putting them on people's doors. So we were always kind of brought up to be aware and involved in the community and politically. I don't know too much .

SS: Do you want to turn this off?

JW: How do you do it?

TK: There should be a round knob that can turn.

JW: Yeah

SS: Okay. Good.

TK: I always had this vague notion, and I never really got details until relatively recently from my dad about that they had done some kind of civil rights thing, and it wasn't clear on the details, but I think he recently told me that it was to go—would have been early sixties, and not into the Deep South, but to Virginia and Maryland with mixed groups of white and black and sit at lunch counters and that kind of thing. So, yeah, it was—

SS: So they were like Vatican II Catholics?

TK: Yeah, they were religious. They went – we went to church every Sunday.

SS: Was your church involved politically?

TK: Not that I can recall. Some of the stuff, like these hunger things that I can vaguely remember, were, I think, church-related, but I don't think necessarily

specific to our church or our parish or whatever, and that was fine. We went to Mass, but I don't really recall identifying, like, as a community with that particular—like with the parish or anything. I know they chose to go to the next town to go to church rather than the one in our town, and I'm not sure why. Never did know.

SS: So their political investment was the secular one.

TK: Yeah, I would say so, although I think it came from, at least in part, from a kind of basic message of loving your neighbor and believing in sort of social justice and equality and that kind of thing.

SS: So did that extend to gay people?

TK: I mean, not when I was growing up. I don't think it was a big subject.

00:05:00

It wasn't something I recall. When we came to that point of me being out, it was not something certainly that my father was comfortable with initially, and my mother had kind of these classic sort of mother reactions of, you know, "I love you no matter what," but also, you know, kind of, "Was there something we did in terms of bringing you up that made you this way?" kind of. So it was sort of love, but also kind of a guilt or concern or worry about—

SS: Well, which came first for you, like, political awareness or recognition of your gay self?

TK: The political awareness. Like I said, growing up, just to me, it was—

SS: But for you personally, I mean like in high school or—

TK: It's hard to sort of separate it. I can remember in high school, must have been Mondale versus Reagan, and even just like having some kind of class project

of sort of debating that, and one friend of mine and I sort of being the Mondale people. I even remember, I think it was '76, like stuffing envelopes and stuff like that.

SS: So when did you first realize that there was a Gay Movement?

TK: I don't have a vivid, like, seeing something on television or in the paper, a vivid recollection of anything like that. I remember in high school trying to kind of find the gay community or whatever and associating it with the Village, and therefore associating that with the *Village Voice* and looking in the *Village Voice* at stuff, and that usually only led me either to sort of bars or bookstores or things like that, nothing really that connected me to anything.

SS: So where did you go, which bars or which bookstores? There weren't that many bookstores, but—

TK: I mean like dirty bookstores.

SS: Oh yeah. Which ones?

TK: I did find Oscar Wilde at some point. But I remember being in, like, areas in Times Square that were probably pretty sketchy, but I was still just trying to find something. Oh, and I even remember—I don't know, was I still in high school—the Gaiety, which was the big—

SS: Oh, the Gaiety.

TK: The gay strip club.

SS: Oh, you went to that.

TK: Oh, yeah.

SS: Okay. So, like, what other bars did you go to at that time when you were young? Did they card you?

TK: Not that I remember. As I remember, it was really very lax at that point. The drinking age was eighteen, and I would have been fifteen, sixteen. But, no, I can't remember, like, a first gay bar or anything like that. Actually, I remember one on Long Island—

SS: What was it?

TK: —that a girl I was friends with in high school, who when she realized—when we finally had the talk of, like, no, I wasn't interested in her that way, she took me to this gay bar called the Silver Lining, I think, in Floral Park in Queens.

SS: Do you remember what it was like?

TK: The only really distinct memory I have is hearing “Chain Reaction,” which is Diana Ross. But it was a small suburban bar. I don't know beyond that.

SS: So then when you were in college, were you out?

TK: Oh, yeah. I couldn't wait, really, to get to college and come out, because I was like I didn't feel comfortable coming out in Mineola, and when I was looking at schools, one of the things I absolutely was looking for when I would go visit or got literature from them, was whether there was anything about gay organizations, and I would kind of go check out what I could if there was something happening when I was there to visit. As it happened, there was a lot of gay activity that I heard about when I visited at Yale, and so I was like, “Okay. Well, this is where I want to go.” Actually

00:10:00 stayed with someone I knew whose suite included Bill Henning, another ACT UP guy. I don't know if he was actually out at the time, but I remember meeting him.

SS: So what was gay life like at Yale at that point?

TK: It was pretty established, vigorous. There were a few different organizations, the Gay Student Center at Yale, which I ended up running for a year, the Yalesbians, and then there's—I'm not sure how many other organizations, and something called the Co-Op, which was supposed to sort of coordinate all of those groups and threw these big dances, which were actually quite big. I mean, certainly the biggest gay party I probably ever had gone to until then was my freshman year at Yale. There was, in the spring, a big dance. Michael Fierman, who often would deejay at The Saint, was the deejay. I mean, it was big. The dances drew people from the City as well, not just from the campus, because they were a fun, big gay activity.

SS: Were there out professors?

TK: There were a couple. John Boswell was there at the time and was already—I think his book was already out, the big—what is it, *Homosexuality and Christianity [Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality]* or something like that. My psychology professor, Richard Gerrig, who I'm still friends with. He's not at Yale anymore, but he just teaches at Stony Brook. Richard Garner, who was a Greek professor, who I'm also somewhat friendly with now, who's the dean of, like, the Honors College or something at Adelphi. So, yeah, there were—

SS: So, a pretty out environment.

TK: Yeah, for sure, and, I mean, it was widely—it was a subject of a lot of discussion, like in the school papers, and there were some controversies on campus about somebody kind of putting up these satirical posters attacking individual gay people and lesbians and what was called at that point, I guess, BGLAD or something, which was our annual week of activities. So there was—and GLAD, that week, which started as GLAD, I think, what, my first year, became BGLAD the second year I was there. I don't know what they call it now, but it was common to sell pink triangle buttons, and it was a huge—basically anybody who kind of wanted to be perceived as sort of being supportive and not being a jerk would buy them, and that was kind of the tenor of life on campus at that point.

And actually, now that I think of it, so that big party that first year, that was GLAD Week in April, I think, and it was that night that we learned that this effort that a group of us had undertaken to get the school to change its equal opportunity statement to include sexual orientation had succeeded, so it was a big celebration on top of already having been a planned dance party. And that group included a lot of people who went on to sort of do other activist stuff, like Sarah Pettit and Kit Winter and others who maybe, I think, like, went to the West Coast. I don't hear as much about what they were doing, but—

SS: So you're a contemporary of Sarah Pettit.

TK: She's a little bit older—she was a little bit older than me. I'm not sure. A year or two, but yeah.

SS: So those were the Jodie Foster years.

TK: Yes. Well, I think she may have graduated like the year before I got there or my freshman year. I never met her. Anderson Cooper is a classmate, but I also never met him.

SS: What about the other ACT UP people, like Ira [Sachs] and—

TK: Ira, yeah, Ira.

SS: —Esther Kaplan and—

TK: I don't remember Esther Kaplan.

SS: —Donald Suggs and—

TK: Yes, all those folks overlapped. Stephen Shapiro, who is now a professor at, I think, Bennington, I think. So there were a lot of people doing a lot then.

SS: Right. It was a good crop.

TK: Bill Henning, who I mentioned.

SS: So when did you first hear about AIDS?

00:15:00

TK: Sort of vaguely aware of it in the news media, sort of mid-eighties, sort of senior year of high school, kind of, around that point, so that was '84, '85.

SS: When did it come into your life?

TK: As something that—

SS: Someone that you knew or—yeah.

TK: I think, again, for me, that sort of came into my life as a political issue first more than as a personal thing. When I was at—well, I guess—certainly my first year at Yale—and why am I forgetting his name? Well, there's Pat Santana and somebody else, who were very big on, like, kind of making sure that any kind of gay event, gay

group, they were doing, they were giving out condoms and doing safe-sex education stuff. So I guess at that point it was something that I became aware of personally, and that's probably what—I had fooled around a little bit in the last couple of years of high school, so it was college, probably, where I sort of became aware of it in the sense of, “Oh, I should be using condoms,” and that kind of thing.

SS: Was it hard to start using condoms?

TK: No, I don't think so. Not at the time. It seemed like—I think, you know, at nineteen or twenty, I'm not sure it matters that much in terms of the kinds of complaints guys have about it interfering with anything.

SS: But also did you get opposition from other people?

TK: No.

SS: There was like this cultural agreement at that moment?

TK: Yeah.

SS: So what made you decide to get involved with AIDS? Were you politically active in AIDS before ACT UP?

TK: Only to the extent that it was sort of an issue that was addressed by the gay student groups at Yale, but not beyond that. So in the spring of 1987, I was in New York for spring break—it was March—and a friend of mine who was a Divinity School student at Yale, said, “Oh, I heard that Larry Kramer is going to be speaking. Apparently, he really raised a ruckus at the Center, like, last week, and challenged people to come together to do something, and there's going to be this meeting. Are you interested in going?”

I said, “Oh, sure. Why not. It’ll be interesting.” That was really—that was the first meeting. The prior week that he’s referring to is when Larry subbed for, I forget who, Nora Ephron or—

SS: Where was the meeting?

TK: I think it was at the Center.

SS: Do you remember anyone who was there?

TK: I want to say Bradley Ball, because I know someone was taking down—people were filling out index cards. I mean, that’s how different technology was for phone-tree stuff, and I think that’s who I gave my card to, but I couldn’t swear to that. Obviously Larry. But, no, I mean, these were not people I knew at the time, so—although—yeah, no, I don’t really remember who all was there.

I remember being really impressed by the idea that this was a group that was really going to act, going to do something, which was Larry’s demand. He was like really, “We’re going to set a date. We’re going to do something. We’re going to have an action of some kind before we leave this—we’re going to make that plan before we leave,” and they did, I mean, picked Wall Street as the target and the date. So I just remember thinking, “Wow, this is very serious, very real, very intense.”

But I was a student on spring break the week—the next week when they were going to have the demonstration, I was back at school. So I kind of was aware of it and thinking, “Huh. That was something.”

And then the summer came and I lived in the city for the summer, rented an apartment with a college friend of mine and became more involved at that point.

Yeah, I think, again, it was like sort of this—I think for me it was this sort of the gay thing and the AIDS thing had merged into this being gay meant you had to do something about AIDS.

SS: But most gay people didn't feel that way.

TK: Yeah, but I mean—

SS: Well, what's different between you and—how come you felt that?

TK: I think just because I already was—I tended to view everything as
00:20:00 kind of a political issue. So to me, even some, like, picketing and things like that, I mean, I had done that. Actually, I left that part out. When my mother was a teacher, there were multiple strikes, and so even from, like, as a little kid, we were packed up to go with her to the picket line, including outside the bishop's house, because it was a Catholic school. And actually, back on that, when you were talking about the church and their attitude toward the church, because she worked for the church, she had a very jaundiced view of it as an institution. She believed in living sort of the principles, but she thought as an institution, it was a mess and didn't treat people well.

SS: So how did you plug into ACT UP?

TK: So Stephen Gendin had become a friend of mine through something called the Northeastern Lesbian and Gay Student Union or something, which had a conference at Brown that I went to where Stephen was a student, and then the next year at Columbia. He had become involved with ACT UP, and when I came to the city in the summer of '87, he was involved, and the guy who I was sort of dating at that point, Sam

Faith, was friends with Stephen and had also gotten involved. So that was sort of like already kind of my social circle was migrating into ACT UP.

SS: Because were they both—well, was Stephen positive already at that point?

TK: I think he was, in fact. I think, crazily enough, at that point he was working for the Archdiocese of New York, and by that time I know he—well, it was '87, so AZT was out, and I know he was taking—he had the little beeper pill bottle thing. So yeah. So, yes, I remember, like, '87 going—there was a protest outside St. Patrick's against Reagan's Presidential AIDS Commission and the appointment of O'Connor to that commission. Somewhere I have a picture of Maria Maggenti with a poster with Donald Duck on it that says "Hey, Ron, you forgot me. Appoint me," or something. "You forgot to appoint me to your commission," or something like that. And there was some kind of around-the-clock multi-day vigil thing at a hospital on the Upper East Side near Gracie Mansion. I don't remember—

SS: Sloan Kettering, yeah.

TK: I remember going to that, because I was actually working, like, a swing-shift job. So I'd get off at ten or eleven at night, and it was 'round the clock, so I could go. I remember being there actually at sunrise at one point, and the birds sort of coming to life in the trees, because we were up along a park, and it was pretty amazing, actually. Very strange as an ACT UP demonstration, because it was basically silent, because there was some kind of law about the amount of noise you could make outside a hospital.

SS: So did you join a committee or anything like that?

TK: I don't know if I did in that summer of '87. I went to the Monday meetings, went to actions, but I don't know that I joined a committee at that point. Then fall of '87, I was studying in Italy, so I wasn't really involved. I came back for the March on Washington, with some hassle from the—I mean, it didn't go over well with the program I was on, because I was missing several days of classes or whatever, and it was in the middle of a point when they were traveling to Sicily, so I had to find my way from Rome to Sicily on my own when I got back. But in a way, that also kind of cemented wanting to be a part of it because that march was so intense.

00:25:00 Actually, I remember being at a planning meeting for that march at—I'm not sure if it was already called Bayard Rustin High School for the Humanities or just High School for the Humanities, and again Stephen Gendin became national secretary for that march. So I sort of also was involved just in knowing what was happening through him. In a way, I think a lot of people see that as the time when ACT UP kind of became visible, really visible to the gay community, at least, because we were there with a loud, large presence at the march.

SS: And also that look.

TK: All in black with the leather jackets, yeah. I don't remember if I was wearing—I don't think I had a motorcycle jacket at that point. Oh, I might have had. I had a leather jacket that I bought in Italy, a fancy one, that got stolen later in an ACT UP meeting, sadly.

But, yeah, it was, I mean, very vivid, very intense, and a lot of people were doing the civil disobedience. I don't remember. I think it was the day after at the Supreme Court, and I couldn't because I had to get back to Italy, but I have pictures from that. I watched it. Stephen was one of them and his boyfriend, Mark Aurigemma, possibly my former boyfriend, Sam. I don't remember. If I had the picture, I could—that was also pretty amazing. Oh, Ortez Alderson. That was also very inspiring to me, I thought, just seeing that.

SS: So then when you came back from Italy—

TK: So then, yeah, I was like, “Okay, I have to sort of be more involved with this.” I was at Yale, but it was not that far, and I would come down and sleep on couches and stay for the Monday meetings. And I guess—let's see. So that would have been '88. March of '88 is Wall Street 2, which was the first time I got arrested.

SS: What was your affinity group?

TK: Wave 3.

SS: So how did you guys get arrested?

TK: At that point, literally Wave 3, I think, was the third, like, group to go sit in the street. I think that's where that name came from. So, yeah, we blocked traffic at—

SS: Who was in it with you?

TK: Kayton Kurowski, Richard Elovich. It might have been Mark Harrington. I think Russell Pritchard.

SS: Did that stay your base, Wave 3?

TK: You know, not really. I mean, some affinity groups, I think, really, really bonded very tightly, and for whatever reason, I did, like, at City Hall, which was the next year, I was in a different group. Bored of Ed.

SS: Bored of Ed? What was that?

TK: B-o-r-e-d. For Ed Koch. And that was about safe-sex education in the schools. We couldn't have had blackboards, because that would have been unwieldy, but I kind of feel like we did, though, small ones, I don't remember, with messages about the schools and safe-sex education, basically.

SS: Did you work on any long-term projects with ACT UP, like any committees or any action planning or—

TK: I did some work on fundraising.

SS: What was that like? Was it hard to fundraise for—

TK: ACT UP, I think, was pretty successful at raising a lot of money. I was involved a little bit with the auctions, more just—in general, I saw myself mostly as kind of a foot soldier, not really in charge of things, but people I knew, like Sean Strub was very involved with the auctions. I would help out if I could. We did organize—the one thing I think I really tried to organize—I'm not sure what year this was—Gay Pride Day morning, '89 or '90, I don't know, sort of a brunch before the parade for march for sort of people who had been particularly generous and having sort of little presentations from some people about what was going on, what we were doing, sort of as a way to kind of encourage them to continue to be generous.

00:30:00

SS: Now, that's interesting. Let's talk about that. So where was that held?

TK: I don't remember.

SS: Who were some of the donors?

TK: It's all a kind of a blank. Who am I thinking of? The only one I'm thinking of maybe was Robert Farber, but I don't really remember who all else.

SS: All right. Well, then let's cut to the chase, Tom, because you are—right now anyone watching this is going to think this demure man, but you are notorious in the history of ACT UP. So do you want to just tell us the whole story of what happened there?

TK: You mean Stop the Church demo?

SS: Yeah, from the beginning, from the morning. Were you involved in the planning of the demonstration?

TK: So that's December of '89. By that point I'd graduated, and so from summer of '89 to, well, really onward into about '92-ish, I was much more involved than I'd been when I going back and forth, and I was regularly going to the general meetings and variously sometimes either to fundraising or to actions. I'm trying to remember which year. It was probably right after that, after December '89. It was probably about '90 that I was—for two terms for I think it was six months each, the—what the hell were they called—the floor representative to the Coordinating Committee. So that meant I was at the Coordinating Committee meetings for a year, and the duty of chairing that rotated,

so I think I chaired one of the meetings, at least once or twice, I don't remember, the Coordinating Committee.

I remember actually being at the Coordinating Committee when the San Francisco earthquake happened, so that would actually tell us what year it was. Loma Prieta, actually that's '89, and the phone rang from someone from there saying just, "You should all know there's been a serious earthquake in San Francisco."

So back to St. Patrick's. So December '89 was the Stop the Church demo, so I was certainly going to meetings that led up to that. In terms of the planning, some of that was done in committee, I think, and that may be at Actions Committee. I don't remember.

SS: On the floor.

TK: A lot of it happened on the floor. So I was certainly there for all of that. Again, so there were affinity groups. Signorile, Mike Signorile, organized one that was going to be called Speaking in Tongues, a reference to the old-fashioned way of taking Communion on your tongue, and the premise was we would go up to receive Communion, and instead of receiving Communion, say something, whatever we were inclined, whatever message we personally wanted to deliver. Again, mine was sort of still consistent with the City Hall demo. Mine was, "Opposing safe-sex education is murder."

SS: Now, were you all Catholic in that group?

TK: I don't know if everybody was.

SS: Who were other people in Speaking in Tongues? Okay. So you and Mike Signorile, okay.

TK: I think my friend Ned, who was visiting New York, ended up in that, you know, participating with us, and he was not Catholic, although I don't know that he went up to accept Communion.

SS: When was the last time you had taken Communion before that day?

TK: Would have been '85 when I was still at home with family, unless there was like a wedding or a funeral in between or something like that.

SS: All right. So it was still part of your life.

00:35:00 TK: Because, yeah, I had stopped going to church when I went to college. It was kind of like, "Okay. Let's—." You know, I didn't identify with that and didn't feel any kind of a, I don't know, religious faith or whatever that made it seem appropriate to go, and, of course, then I had become more politically aware and more openly gay. It was sort of like, well, this organization, the church is a problem for us. So I had stopped. But certainly I'd been brought up in it. I'd been confirmed, gone through Confirmation and Catholic education and that sort of thing, although it was basically the seventies, and it was very kind of folk music at Mass and—

SS: Phillip Berrigan and El Salvador.

TK: I certainly had heard about the El Salvador stuff, and my parents, I think, had some admiration for the Berrigans. I don't think they had registered for me

until, in my mind, until later. Who's the Quaker guy who would come to ACT UP? He lives in, like, Kansas City now or something like that.

JH: Mike Frisch?

TK: Yeah. I think he went, and I think I remember talking to him about the Berrigan brothers and sort of antiwar activist stuff. But, no, it's like folk music and kind of, you know, "Love your neighbor," and not a lot of finger-wagging of, "You do this. You don't do that," kind of upbringing about the church. I was not traumatized like—I mean, some people really, I think, had a lot of really severe negative reactions, obviously, or interactions with the church. That wasn't so much the case for me. Actually, I do recall going to Confession after the first time I'd had sex with a guy, which was an unusual thing, because I never went to Confession, and it was more like I didn't know what to think about this or what to make out of this.

SS: What did the priest say?

TK: And he said, "There are some people who will tell you this is probably just a phase and that you'll grow out of it." He said, "There are other people who don't think that at all, and no matter what anybody tells you, just understand that Christ never said anything about this."

SS: Wow. You had the grooviest—

TK: Yes, I know.

SS: —priest possible.

TK: Yeah. So again, as I say, I didn't end up feeling like, oh, this is a big issue or a crisis in terms of my upbringing. So with all that, we had our affinity group at the demonstration, and when Communion came, we went up.

SS: So you went into the Mass like you were just a normal parishioner?

TK: Like we were—yeah, exactly. In fact, I think there were some discussion of we weren't going to be, like, wearing "Silence Equals Death" t-shirts and stuff. We were going to dress like we were going to church. I remember trying to pretend, with my friend Ned, that we were, like, visiting Italian tourists or something, but his Italian was so much better than mine, it wasn't very effective.

So Communion time comes. Well, so—let's see. I'm trying to remember. I don't even remember now the order of a Mass, which tells you how long it's been. Because during the homily, which I feel like was before, I don't remember, there was all—it must have come before, because I wouldn't have seen it otherwise, because I was arrested. So there had been a plan that a lot of people would do a die-in for that. So I'd seen that, everyone lying in the main aisle and being taken out.

Then Communion. So our group went up, and I think if I hadn't sort of habitually kind of done this, I mean, I hadn't premeditated like I was going to take the host or toss it or whatever, but eighteen years of going to church, I'm there, I put my hands out, and suddenly I have the Communion wafer in my hands, and the priest says, "This is the body of Christ," and I say, "Opposing safe-sex education is murder." Then I
00:40:00 sort of—I didn't really know what to do, and I think in some sense, some part of me was

sort of saying, “Well, fine. You guys think you can tell us that you reject us, that we don’t belong, so I’m going to reject you.” So I took it and I crushed it and dropped it. Didn’t spit it out. That was all over the papers that—I think afterward, like six or seven people they said had, like, spit the Communion wafer out or whatever, which I remember being sort of amused by that, and thinking if I was an artist, I was going to do, like, a self-portrait with, like, eight heads spitting Communion wafers or something.

SS: Well, how many people actually saw you do that?

TK: Very few.

SS: It’s a small gesture, right?

TK: Yeah.

SS: So how did it become this huge emblematic event?

TK: You know, I think almost by virtue of us having chosen to go into the church—I think if we had protested outside the church, it would have been local news and it would not have been a major story. I think once we chose to go into the church, it was going to be seen very differently. I never even thought about Pussy Riot in this context, but—

SS: That’s interesting. I mean, who saw you do that?

TK: So obviously the priest, and, I mean, there were—

SS: There was so much going on.

TK: —police and whatever around. Actually, I don’t remember now uniformed police. And this is also – I was, I guess, in a lot of ways kind of illiterate about, like, religion. I mean, I got that there was a lot of importance attached to the

Communion wafer, but not like to the extent—I mean, they came scurrying, a bunch of them, to kind of sweep up the little bits, and I'm not sure what they're supposed to do with them after something like that, but they were definitely going to collect them and preserve them.

SS: Did the priest say anything?

TK: No.

SS: Then what did you do?

TK: Well, I think the plan had been we would—I don't remember if there was a plan about what we would do after we said our thing, whether we were planning to get arrested or not, but I lay down and was arrested.

SS: Right there?

TK: Yeah, right there. There's an amazing New York *Newsday*, I think, cover, which you can't tell it's me, but you can see the priest stepping over me to continue to give Communion to the people in line, and that was on the cover of *Newsday*, so clearly they were paying attention. Someone was in there from the media who got that shot. So it was certainly reported immediately, and I remember it was reported and we had press clippings from, like, Turkey or whatever about it.

SS: So you're lying there now. Are Mike and the other people lying there, or were you alone lying there?

TK: I don't remember.

SS: So then what happened?

TK: So then someone came, and I don't remember if they told me I had to get up or be arrested, or if they just had me carried out and arrested, but—

SS: What were you charged with?

TK: I think it was just disorderly conduct.

SS: So what was the personal fallout for you?

TK: It was pretty minimal. I recall being—when we were sort of being released from whatever, wherever we had been taken, I have some vague recollection that we were taken way down to, like, Pitt Street or something, a police precinct, because there were, what, 111 arrests, and they were, I think, just farming them out. I never know, because I could be confusing that with a different demonstration. I remember someone from ACT UP who was involved, angry at me, saying, “You have to respect my belief,” or something like that afterward, and me saying, “No, I have to respect your right to believe what you want to believe. I don't have to respect the belief.”

00:45:00

SS: Were you criticized on the floor of ACT UP?

TK: Yes. There was a meeting where the issue came up within, like, the next week or whatever, and I got up and I said, you know, I wasn't going to apologize or something, and that actually mostly got a cheer, because I think, by and large, while there were people who—whatever reservations they had, I don't think people were—I think the bulk of the people were sort of supportive, as far as I could tell.

SS: Do you remember who criticized you in ACT UP?

TK: Well, I know Peter Staley was unhappy. He had been opposed to people going into the church at all, and the whole silent die-in during the homily was, I

think, sort of guided into being as a plan by him, and because he – he’s not Catholic – but apparently, he sort of discussed with people that, well, the homily is the sort of secular part of the liturgy. It’s the priest talking to the people in the church as a person, not doing this sort of sacramental whatever, and so that would be the least sort of contrary or least sort of disruptive to the religious ceremony to do that. So I knew he was not happy about that. But what I remember was more—I remember Richard Goldstein wrote about it.

SS: What did he say?

TK: He basically compared us to Cossacks, which I thought was a little bit over the top.

SS: Well, he always hated ACT UP actually. What was his argument, do you remember?

TK: I don’t remember an argument. I just remember essentially that “These people are disrupting a people’s religious ceremony the way the Cossacks went in and stomped on the Torah,” or something like that.

SS: What an idiot. Sorry. So stupid. What about, like, your family?

TK: So they didn’t know. My name was never connected. That’s the funny thing about the reporting. And there I was on the cover of *Newsday*, but, as I said, you couldn’t see my face, and so my name wasn’t really connected with this at the time in print. I only remember sometime—I mean, like at least a couple of years later, I remember Deb Price, who’s a syndicated columnist for—or was; I don’t know what she does now—for the *Detroit Free Press*, she tracked me down and did, like, a column

about it. And I don't know what the occasion was, why years later that she tracked me down. But as far as I knew, that was the first time my name was connected to it in print.

I mean, eventually I did talk about it with my family. My mother, I remember I explained, like, this sort of compromise that Peter had come up with, she was, "Well, I would have been all right with that. I could have done that," but she wasn't onboard with what I had done, but not—

SS: How do you feel about it now?

TK: Like I say, it wasn't premeditated, and I think if I had thought through things more I maybe would not have done it, but I don't feel any regret, really. I feel like the—as I say, the minute we decided we were protesting inside the church was going to be a bombshell, no matter what. I mean, I believe it's referenced in Sean's book, Sean Strub's book, that at least one other person, Francis Wessel did something with the Communion wafer as well. So I feel like in terms of the explosion of attention, that was
00:50:00 kind of going to happen no matter what. [Michael] Petrelis was, like, handcuffed to a pew, screaming and—

SS: He wasn't handcuffed, but he was blowing whistles and standing on—

TK: Yeah.

SS: You haven't seen the footage?

TK: I've seen some of it. Yeah, I guess you're right. He couldn't have been handcuffed, because he was standing, like, on the back of the pew or something like that or standing up.

SS: I know this is a hard question to answer, but to what extent do you think that your impulses to go into the church, to directly confront the priest, to throw the host on the ground were connected to being Catholic?

TK: I think if I hadn't been Catholic, I might have not felt as free to do that. I might have had more of a reluctance to sort of—this is somebody else's thing, this whole church, and going to be a little more respectful. So that's part of it, I think. As I said, though, otherwise it's not like I had some horrible experience with growing up as a Catholic or had some great personal animosity, but I did have hostility for the church and its policies and what it was doing, and specifically what it was doing in the City, which is why I chose to say what I said, "Opposing safe-sex education is murder," because they were very actively trying to stop the public school, I mean, never mind the Catholic schools, but the public schools from teaching about safe-sex education.

SS: But in talking to you now, it's interesting, because the myth of this action—and it's so mythic, right; so many people refer to it and all of that—is that you were angry at the Catholic Church. But what's coming out now is that you actually felt like you were in some sense part of the Catholic Church. You felt like you had a *right* to be there and to make these statements, and that's a really different kind of relationship.

TK: I think that's legitimate. I mean, I don't know that I would have by that point identified myself as part other than sort of culturally as having been raised in the church, and at this point I'm sort of a nonbeliever of it completely. But I do think there was a sort of sense of, "This is a body, a communion of people, and you guys who

run it think you're right about everything and that you can tell everybody, women and gays and everybody, how they should behave, and that you can reject us. But by the same token, guess what? We can reject you too."

SS: So when you were charged, there was no special charge.

TK: No. I do believe there was at least some discussion after that demonstration. I think there was a change in law after that about disrupting religious services, and that became some kind of separate misdemeanor or something like that.

SS: So what else did you do in ACT UP after this?

TK: Let's see. Well, FDA was before that, right?

SS: Yeah.

TK: I went to the NIH.

SS: What did we win at the NIH?

TK: I don't know, honestly.

SS: Do you know why we were there?

TK: That whole demonstration became very fuzzy for me, I mean literally, too, with, like, all the smoke. Do you remember all the smoke? These, like, strange, like, smoke bomb things or whatever. And it did feel a little bit like—everyone kept—if you remember, and I associate specifically this phrase with Heidi Dorow, of upping the ante. We have to up the ante, up the ante. Every demonstration had to somehow—and I don't mean to attribute to her this notion that the demonstration had to sort of somehow exceed what had happened before, and I think some people meant it more sort of like taking greater personal risks, although I'm not quite sure what they had in mind, and so we're

always going to remain a nonviolent organization. So it's hard, I guess, in some way to say the Jesse Helm's house condom thing was taking a greater risk.

SS: Were you part of that?

00:55:00

TK: No. But I do feel like the NIH was kind of like, "Okay, we have to outdo what happened at FDA," and I'm sure the Treatment and Data people have much more careful consideration of what the demands were, but whether the demonstration itself had much impact, I really don't know.

Actually, I mean, I kind of, by the early nineties when I—I left New York in '92 to go to law school and had left feeling a little disillusioned about whether we had really accomplished very much. I mean, that was a really dark time. There still were no drugs, really, that were making a real difference, and a lot of people were dying. I did always think we made a difference in terms of how the world saw specifically mostly more so gay men, but queer people in general, less as victims and more as people with agency and meaning and ferocity, but beyond that, I wasn't really sure. I've seen now *How to Survive a Plague* and that kind of thing, and I'm totally willing to accept or believe that, yes, we really made a difference at least in that sense. I mean, I'm on a protease and whatever else, and makes a difference, obviously.

SS: Were you positive when you were in ACT UP?

TK: No.

SS: Okay. So I just want to ask a little bit about the personal experience of being in ACT UP. So you left in '92.

TK: Right.

SS: So was Stephen still alive in '92?

TK: Oh, yeah. Stephen died in 2000.

SS: Oh, okay. So when you were in ACT UP, did you ever experience people close to you getting sick and dying while you were going to meetings?

TK: I mean, what I experienced was more people vanishing, and part of that was also in the earlier years where I was coming and going, so there'd be gaps between when I had been there. So like David Lopez, who I had had a sort of mini little kind of romance with and had seen a few times and who was a sweet, sweet man, you know, I don't think I saw him when he was really ill. I think I just had heard that he had died.

David Liebhart was a good friend of Conyers' [Thompson], and we used to hang out a lot. I remember visiting with him and his brother and sister, and I remember going then to his memorial service, but I don't remember being there with him as he was very sick, and I think, again, he may have stopped coming to meetings. Conyers would know, probably.

There were others who you definitely saw it, like Ray Navarro. Sean Strub, although this is—his health got much worse, but it was a little bit later when I was in law school where he just really had terrible KS and looked like he was going to die. So it was visible, certainly, but I don't have that experience of having been a primary caretaker or being somebody who was really there at the bedside of people.

SS: There's a lot of discussion about our generation being a certain kind of lost generation, because not only are so many people gone, but the trauma of

the whole experience is very hard to convey, and one of the things we've discussed is how we've been much better at historicizing the heroism than the actual experience of suffering and what that loss was. What do you think is the long-term consequence of having gone through that?

01:00:00 TK: It's hard to separate it from something else that I want to—I'll throw in here, which was just that the intensity of the community of ACT UP for those who really participated on a sort of regular basis, where it was Monday meetings, a committee meeting or two during the week, an action or a zap or a party, often, often a party or going out after a meeting. It was our whole lives for a period of years. It was also who we dated. It was who we slept with. I mean, it was everything like that. We had jobs, most of us, but even there, a lot of it was sort of like I'll temp here, but it was like not serious about a career. It was this is really what we're doing. And really my three years in New York between college and law school were kind of like that.

So to lose that, which effectively—I mean, I know the organization continued to meet and continues to meet to this day, but, you know, for the most part, most people drifted away around the same time as me, and I think we all experienced a *huge* sense of loss just from the loss of that community. I mean, I was diagnosed with depression in the fall of '93, and I don't think it's a coincidence.

So there's both the loss of the individual friends and people. I mean, I had my address book with the names I couldn't erase. I mean, they were penciled so I could also change phone numbers and things like that, but I couldn't erase them, so I would just put a line through it. So, yeah, there's that loss, and that continued. Just like I

say, Stephen died in 2000. Spencer [Cox], I remember the last time I saw him, he was in Beth Israel in 2008, the last time he had really kind of gotten very sick before the more recent time when he died. It's so hard to believe some of these people are gone.

So, yeah, I don't know what the effect is. I know for me there was this period of when I sort of fell into this deep depression in my second year of law school. At the time I don't think I quite connected it. I did sort of feel like it was being in California and therefore sort of removed from everyone and everything I kind of knew. But it seems like such a consistent thing that so many people went through and a lot of us too. I know, I mean, I went into a period after that of heavy drug use, which a lot of people did, and which actually almost killed me, too, you know. So it is, it's hard to sort of compute what the impact has been on all of us.

SS: Well, it's a strange perceptual experience, because I think we all knew that it was insane and yet it was the normative daily life for so long, and I don't think people really understood how damaging it was going to be to the people who lived until much later. I don't think anyone was thinking about that, because everyone was looking forward to the end of AIDS, but no one was thinking about the consequences. Only now we're thinking about that.

TK: Yeah. And it is interesting. I'm glad people are talking and thinking about it and also about sort of long-term survivor issues, physically as well as—well, I can't really even divide the physically and mentally. I went to that—there was some large group thing about that at the Center earlier this year, or later last year. So, yeah, it's good that at least people are moving on and thinking about it. And it's been very nice to

feel a little bit of this reassertion of this community at those kinds of things, through Facebook, which whatever you want to say about it, has really brought a lot of us back. I went to see Mavis Staples on Sunday night with Victor Mendolia. It's just sort of like random. I was going to go—Alexis Danzig was supposed to come, and she couldn't come because her son was sick. And I don't think either of those would have happened but for Facebook.

SS: Well, it's a real bond in people. It's like only we understand what each other experience, and that's for life.

01:05:00

TK: Well, when Robert Getso just died in December, I mean, at his memorial or wake, whatever you want to call it, it was a little group of us and then some people he worked with and his family, but, I mean, yeah, the group of us, it was sort of like, you know, in a way it was a little bit weird, because it had been a while, I guess, since Spencer's memorial, probably, to gather in that kind of context, and this was with the body, so it was a little different too.

I think Walter Armstrong, who had been putting off, as everyone does, actually going up to the casket, but he was talking to John Voelcker and Jim Eigo, and I don't know, "Okay, from the aging to the dead," as he walked past us to the casket. Which it was also very indicative of kind of the humor of the whole thing, that we—it was so much a part, too, of what kept us going in ACT UP, and I don't know how we would have managed without laughing about a lot of stuff that isn't really funny, but I mean, you know.

SS: It was absurd enough to be funny in certain ways, yeah.

TK: Yeah.

SS: I only have one more question. Is there anything else that you think we need to cover?

TK: Well, I guess I didn't finish—I don't remember timing-wise when you were talking about other things. I did go to the convention, the Republic Convention. Boy, was that a trip, in New Orleans. That was wild.

SS: What did you do there?

TK: We did a few demonstrations and a kiss-in outside of the—I guess it's St. Louis, St. Louis Cathedral, and—

SS: Who was nominated that year? Was that –

TK: That was Bush, '88. We had done a very effective infiltration of this rally they were having on like some kind of riverside promenade, and we were really pretty close to the stage, so we were really psyched, and we had, like, Republican signs over our ACT UP signs. You know. Actually, it's funny, I ran into someone from the Young Republicans, who sort of was like—he knew I should not be there, that something was wrong. And we dropped our thing, our – and we were very psyched about having gotten right there in front of the cameras and all, but it was that rally at which Bush announced that he was choosing Dan Quayle as his nominee, vice presidential nominee, so we didn't get any press at all. It was all about Dan Quayle, so that was a bummer.

I did the Montreal Conference in '89, which was—

SS: It's interesting, because all these stories, they're all about confrontation, right? Confrontation with the church, confrontation with the

Republicans, with the pharmaceutical companies. There was this way that we always wanted people to see us, see our faces and hear what we had to say to them.

TK: Yeah, absolutely. “We’re here.” I mean, that became Queer Nation, but, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.” But, yeah, there was definitely a “We’re here, we’re not going away, we’re not going to go away quietly, Silence Equals Death.” Yeah, absolutely. We did anti-sodomy law demonstrations in Columbia, South Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia, and the CDC. It was sort of tied to the Atlanta demonstration. So those were intense.

SS: Why? What happened?

TK: Well, I mean, like the Columbia, South Carolina, so you’re there, there’s a Confederate flag flying on top of the Capitol Building and a monument to the, you know, dead of the Confederacy and every sort of police unit, you could imagine around this Capitol Building, including, like, the parks and recreation, like the State Parks Police and stuff. Like they clearly had called in everything that they could possibly call in, which was unnecessary. We just picketed and I think maybe had a sit-in or something. I don’t remember if anyone—I know a bunch of us got arrested in Atlanta. I don’t remember if people got arrested in Columbia.

SS: Were you afraid of violence from the police?

01:10:00 TK: I think people were. I don’t remember personally ever really having an intense fear of that or even of getting arrested. I chalk that up, I guess, to something of a privileged white guy, and having grown up in Nassau where the police were, and their interactions were relatively, with us, with white people, were not so intense.

I remember after Wall Street 2, I remember Stephen Gendin being—we're on a bus and Stephen is carrying on this sort of noncompliance, this sort of civil disobedience to the point of he's not getting up out of the aisle of the bus, and this one police officer just pow, I mean, wham, wham, rapped him right in the face, I mean, punched him in the face and the eye. We were chanting his badge number and his name, and lots of complaints were made. Nothing ever came of that. So certainly I was aware of that possibility at things, but I don't think it ever really registered for me as an intense personal fear, although I remember after it all, we went and did, like, an extra day at, like, a beach. I guess were all sort of wiped out. So anyway, those were some other things.

Since we talked so much about the church, one very funny little vignette is that—so 1988, springtime, I guess, or February, whenever the New Hampshire primary is February, I think, some of us had gone up to Manchester or whatever, New Hampshire. Maybe there was a debate or something, so we were going to demonstrate at that.

I don't think I stayed there, but a number of ACT UP people stayed at, like, a Franciscan friary, and some of the friars, in their brown robes with whatever the tie, rope tie or whatever it is, came to protest about basically saying they should be talking about AIDS. So it was very interesting. It surprised me at the time. So I guess, you know, a reminder that there were some good people there.

SS: Right, or at least some gay people there.

TK: Well, or both.

SS: So this is my last question then.

JH: Just two quick clarifications. One is, so you were never an altar boy?

TK: No. That's a myth. Yes, that is a myth.

JH: And the other is Emily Nahmanson said that when she moved into your apartment after you left, she found a box of communion wafers.

TK: That's entirely possible. A friend of mine gave that to me as a gift, and I guess I don't know if I—I probably just didn't know what the heck to do with it. So it's very possible that I left it behind in that apartment.

SS: That's very funny.

JW: You weren't practicing?

TK: Yeah.

JW: I have a quick question, too, also related to the church, different ones. Two quick ones. Was Satan involved?

TK: Could have been.

JW: Was it an ACT UP decision to not go into the church, or was that just up in the air?

TK: No. I mean, there was a decision made that people could go into the church. As I said, the premise was there was going to be this silent sort of die-in during the homily, although clearly there were others in our affinity group was premised on something else. So I don't recall there being any sort of—in fact, I'm sure there wasn't a decision that no one could go into the church. I think that had been a proposal, perhaps, that hadn't succeeded.

JW: What do you think was gained by Stop the Church?

01:15:00 TK: You know, it's interesting, I don't know how much of it had anything to do with us or Stop the Church, but that point in time, 1989, December, Ed Koch had just been defeated, David Dinkins had just been elected. Koch had morphed from his original sort of downtown Village liberal to being someone who really depended on sort of conservative Catholic outer borough voters and has really cozied up to Cardinal O'Connor and I think had given him a lot more influence over policy and things like what were they going to do in terms of the school board. A lot of that changed, I think, in '89 and the years following as the influence of that kind of sort of conservative Catholic voter declined under Dinkins. Obviously, it sort of came back with Giuliani, but times had changed enough at that point, I think, that it wasn't quite the same thing ever again in New York.

SS: Now, if gay people are ever allowed to march on St. Patrick's Day, will you march?

TK: I might. I remember vividly—not from being there, I think, but from reading about it, of Dinkins marching and people throwing cans, beer cans or whatever at him and hitting him with things, and being just completely appalled. And certainly a lot of people I know, Paul O'Dwyer and John Voelcker and people like that were quite involved in ILGO or ILGO [ill-go or I'll-go] or whatever they called it. But honestly, I probably wouldn't. I hate that parade.

SS: So the last question is, looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

TK: I mean, you know, as I said before, I always felt, even when I was sort of at my most glum about what we had achieved, that we had changed the way America, at least, saw particularly gay men but queers in general, for the better, that it was better, at least, even to be just slightly scary than to be just sort of pitiful or worse, I suppose. I still feel that that was true, and it sort of kicked off even generally around the country more of a sort of assertiveness by the queer community. And as I say, I've seen *How to Survive a Plague*. The case has been made that we had a significant influence on drug development. I wasn't involved in the weeds of that, so I don't know, but it's keeping me alive now and an awful big number of people I know. So those are two, I guess, very big achievements.

The biggest disappointment. Certainly part of it is that we didn't achieve that faster, and a lot of people died who could have been saved if things had happened more quickly, and obviously there was always this tension of are we going to get changes that will only work for some people or that will change the world for everybody for the better, I mean in terms of particularly access to healthcare, which we're still, obviously, fighting about. I don't know what kind of miracle it would have taken for us to really make an impact on that, since, as I say, I mean, we now have a president who was elected on that idea and we're still not getting very far, but, you know, we'd have all been sainted in that case if we had somehow managed to create universal access to healthcare.

SS: Okay. Thank you, Tom. That was really good. Thank you so much.

TK: Thanks.

SS: It's great to get the real story.