

# **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: **Gabriel Rotello**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Gabriel Rotello  
April 6, 2015**

**SARAH SCHULMAN: So, you look at me. We usually start, you tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

GABRIEL ROTELLO: My name is Gabriel Rotello. I am sixty-two years old. Today's date is April 6, 2015. And we are on Third Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan.

**SS: Okay. Great. And you live in L.A. still.**

GR: I live in L.A.

**SS: So, where did you grow up, Gabriel?**

GR: Connecticut. Danbury, Connecticut.

**SS: Was that like Italian Connecticut?**

GR: No, it was WASP Connecticut.

**SS: Oh, really?**

GR: Yeah.

**SS: So, are you a WASP? No, you're Italian.**

GR: My mother. Yes. I'm from a mixed family.

**SS: What did your parents do?**

GR: My parents were teachers, and my father is also a — was a real estate person, real estate investor, and that kind of thing.

**SS: So, growing up in the sixties and you're watching the Vietnam War unfold and Civil Rights Movement, do you start to stray from your family's political values at a certain point?**

GR: No. My parents were very liberal. I remember when the little girls were killed in the Birmingham church bombing, 1963, I think, something like that, I was maybe ten, and we all dressed up and went down to Main Street in Danbury and marched in a candlelight march down Main Street with half of the town. And my parents were very concerned about that.

**SS: Why were they so enlightened?**

GR: Why were they? I don't know. They were liberal Connecticut people. I mean, my mother's a Congregational, you know, the old Congregational. We had a lot of abolitionists in our family in the nineteenth century and that kind of thing, so they were always progressive people, and the Civil Rights Movement struck a real chord with them, so that was part of my background.

**SS: That's interesting. So, what came first for you, being politically active or coming out or realizing that you were gay?**

GR: No, way before that. The first politically active thing that I did was Eugene McCarthy's campaign, 1968. I was very active in that and volunteered all over the place for that. I was fifteen years old, I guess. And then the Poor People's Campaign, Reverend Ralph Abernathy after that, after King was assassinated. And then

—

**SS: What did you — did you go there? Did you go to the camp?**

GR: No. They had things all over the country, so there was a headquarters in Danbury. Danbury was also the place where the prison was, where the Berrigan brothers and other people were kept during the Antiwar Movement. It was sort of like the — they called it the "country club" prison. It was not a country club prison, but it

was, you know, a minimum-security federal penitentiary where political prisoners were kept. So, there were always lots of politically active things going on around that, and demonstrations at the prison and so on. And then the Vietnam War became really serious. I mean, it was really serious even for McCarthy. That's why I was volunteering for McCarthy. I joined the Student Mobilization Committee and was pretty active in that.

**SS: And that's in high school, or were you in college?**

GR: No, by this time, now that's college. High school was McCarthy and the Poor People's Campaign. College was the Student Mobilization Committee. But then I went away my sophomore and junior year in Europe and my senior year in Kathmandu, Nepal, and that really changed —

**SS: As part of school or you —**

GR: Yeah, as part of school.

**SS: Oh, wow.**

00:05:00 GR: And that just completely changed my whole political orientation and kind of alienated me from American politics just in general, living in one of the five poorest countries in the world. We had to learn to speak the language. I lived with a Nepali family. And just the general injustice of the global order and realizing that people that are just as intelligent as we are and who work just as hard as we do and care about their lives just as much as we do, live in a level of poverty that no one in America even has any conception of, and that we in the West, in general, are all incredibly privileged, sort of like the pre-French Revolutionary aristocrats compared to the pre-Revolutionary everybody else in France is kind of like what Americans or Europeans are like compared to everybody else in the world.

And that kind of made me feel that all of our politics were kind of like little squabbles amongst the aristocrats compared to the really big things that were happening, which was just this vast system of global injustice about which nobody here — or not nobody, but very few people. That was not part of our politics. It was not something that people organized around. And so, I just, when I came back, was very, you know, disillusioned with the West in general and with politics, and I just sort of became apolitical for many years.

**SS: Really?**

GR: Yeah.

**SS: That's interesting.**

GR: And I moved to New York and I became a rock-and-roll musician, and I started having a lot of fun. And I went back to India frequently and hung out in Kathmandu and Goa and places like that in the seventies, and so that's what I did.

**SS: What was your instrument?**

GR: Keyboards.

**SS: Okay. I didn't know that.**

GR: Oh, yeah.

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

GR: Many bands.

**SS: Can you tell us some of the names of your bands?**

GR: Well, I was a musical director for people like Ronnie Spector and Solomon Burke, a lot of R&B people. I had a band called The Realtones in New York that was sort of the house band for anybody who was a big R&B player who was coming

to New York to play. It spun off the Uptown Horns, is a spinoff from that. And many of the people in the band ended up, people like Marc Ribot became hugely famous jazz musicians, etc. So that's what I did. That's what I was doing up until, you know, ACT UP and AIDS hit.

**SS: So, what was it like being gay on that scene?**

GR: Well, it was different. I mean, our scene was kind of alienated when I first — I moved to New York in '74, and I immediately fell into a group of — I mean, my closest friends were people like Richard Sohl from the Patti Smith group, and Steven Meisel, who went on to become a famous fashion photographer, and Stephen Sprouse, who went on to become a famous designer. And we were sort of alienated from the mainstream of gay culture at that time, which the disco thing was happening, and we didn't really like that. I think we were very snotty, actually. We thought of ourselves as just much cooler and more sophisticated than all these sort of disco queens that were doing whatever they were doing. So, I remember my friend Haoui Montaug at one point started a facetious group called — it was during the clone era with the mustache and everything — Fags Against Facial Hair. Do you remember that? I don't know. So, you know, which I thought was just great. That was right where we were coming from. So, we were a bit snotty about the whole gay thing.

**SS: What about the R&B world? How did that respond to gay people?**

GR: To me being gay?

**SS: Or to gay people on that scene.**

GR: Not well at all. I remember I had a conflict with Solomon Burke, the great, you know, King Solomon, and we were recording a live album in a club in Washington, D.C., and there was a big problem with the contract. I mean, the big problem with the contract was that he had not told us that we were recording a live album. We were just playing a gig, and then all of a sudden these huge trucks appeared, and we were recording a live album. And the nights that we kept playing, he would do his spiel. He was sort of like a preacher, and he would start talking about, “Ladies, if your husband doesn’t treat you right,” and blah, blah, blah, or “Ladies, if you find out that your husband’s a faggot,” and he would do this homophobic thing. So, we’re having this problem about the contract, and then I’m sitting there playing keyboards, backing up this — and the audience is going crazy. And, yeah, so I marched into his dressing room and said, “If you don’t stop the whole ‘faggot’ thing, I’m walking out after the next show, and I’m taking, I think, pretty much the whole band with me.”

He said, “Gabriel, let me ask you something. Do your mother and father know that you’re gay?” In other words, he was trying to sort of blackmail — he was going to out me.

And I said, “Well, as a matter of fact, yes, they do, but if you’d like to pick up the phone.” I think that I was, like, maybe twenty-five or something like that. To his credit, he stopped doing it, and we became, I think, sort of better friends after that.

00:10:00 That kind of thing used to happen all the time. And then when you would come out to people or give them a hard time about whatever it was they were doing, they would then think about it and very often you would get a better response. But it was not

easy, and most of my friends that were in rock bands, we were almost always the only gay person in the rock band.

**SS: So, there were no, like, closeted stars who —**

GR: Not that I hung out with. No. Well, I mean, there probably were, I guess, but not really. I mean, in the seventies there was that whole period when it was sort of cool to be bisexual, at least if you were a musician. You know, David Bowie pretending that he's having sex with Mick Jagger and, you know, playing with that whole sort of trope. So, no, I don't really remember that as a big thing, but I do remember always being the only gay person in every band I ever played in and that that was not always the easiest thing to be.

But here in New York, all my friends were all in that world, and there were quite a lot of us, and instead of hanging out in gay discos and dancing to disco music, we were hanging out at CBGB's and the Mudd Club and, you know, Max's and places like that, and it was always a big gay contingent in all those places, who were just not part of what you would think of culturally as the mainstream of gay culture.

**SS: Now, were you noticing gay politics at all at that time?**

GR: I was, and I was a little bit interested in it, but I had some just sort of kind of, I guess, unfortunate experience. I remember one time a friend took me to a — it was Julius', the bar Julius'. He was friends with a whole bunch of people that were in — I don't remember — the Gay Activist Alliance, something like that. And I thought, "Oh, that's really interesting. I'll come with you to that and just listen to what they have to say." And it was just one of those super contentious things where everybody was — they were all dissing people from other groups, and "Oh, we really need to get this one and we

need to — ,” I don’t remember. Whatever. It was not a pleasant thing. And I remember thinking, boy, you know, talk about the American political sensibility being kind of in a bubble. This is sort of a bubble within a bubble where everyone’s just sort of cannibalizing each other. I just was not interested in it.

**SS: So, you didn’t see it as urgent in any way?**

GR: I think I thought that from a political point of view it probably was urgent. I just didn’t see anybody addressing it in the way that I would be interested in addressing it. It seemed like it was one of those sort of things on the Left where people spend more time splitting hairs and criticizing each other for not being politically correct enough, kind of thing, rather than working to actually address the fundamental issue. So, I did think it was a big problem, but I didn’t really know of anything to do about it, and I don’t think in those days I would have done that much about it anyway. I was having lots of fun and everything was going great, so —

**SS: So, then HIV happens. So, when did you first become aware of HIV or AIDS or GRID or whatever?**

GR: Before it was called even GRID, I was in the Ninth Circle one night, I’ll never forget it, with Danny Fields and Steven Meisel and Stephen Sprouse, and a friend of Danny’s came in and started talking about a friend of his that he was worried about, and somebody said, “What’s the matter with him?”

And he said, “Oh, he’s got gay cancer.” And I laughed. That, to my sort of eternal shame, was my first reaction to the AIDS epidemic, was I laughed, because I thought he was kidding, “gay cancer.” It was just such an absurd idea. I just thought he was kidding. I thought he was making a joke.

And then he said, “No, no, no. There’s this thing called gay cancer. There’s a whole bunch of people that have it.” This was early 1981 before the CDC came out with its first thing. And it impressed me enough that I went home and wrote in my journal, “Somebody mentioned that there’s this disease that only gay men are getting, this cancer.” So, I think it was like March of ’81, and the first announcement came in June of ’81. So, it was before that.

So, I became aware of it, and I started looking for other — you know, listening about it. It worried me. And when with Larry Mass wrote his first piece about it in *The Native*, I saw that and said, “Oh, that’s what they’re talking about,” and then people began writing about it. Not much, but a little bit.

**SS: And when did it actually come into your life?**

00:15:00

GR: The first person that I knew who got AIDS? The first person I knew who died of AIDS was Tony Pandolfo, who was a backup singer in Brenda and The Realtones, which was one of my bands, and I think it was ’84. And I remember somebody told me that he has whatever it was called then. I think by then it was called AIDS already. And I went to see him, and it was very sad. He was not doing well at all, and he died just like a week after I saw him. And then Pat Clark, who was the booking guy at Tramps, which is this club on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, just like a month later, and then it just began and just never stopped.

**SS: So, when did you first get involved?**

GR: Well, my partner got AIDS in ’86, and he lived for two years. He died in June of ’88, June 2<sup>nd</sup> of ’88.

**SS: What was his name?**

GR: Hap Haddon. He was an author and worked at PBS. And while he was sick, I was his, obviously, his caregiver. He had a very, very rough time, it was really bad, and so it got to the point where we had nurses. I lived in a loft, and we had nurses twenty-four hours a day, which was not that easy in a loft, because even though it's a big space, it's really just one big room, and it was just a very, very difficult thing.

And so, I began to go to a — GMHC had these support groups, which was a wonderful thing for people who were taking — for caregivers, people whose lovers were dying of AIDS. And I applied to be in one of those, and I got accepted after a few weeks and started going every week. And it was sort of like half the people in the group were like me, where they were dealing with someone who was dying of AIDS, and the other half had already gone through it and the person already died, but they were staying in it for sort of the moral support, and it was really a great — I don't know how I would have gotten through that without that group. It was hugely important. I sort of lived every week for Wednesday night when I could get to that group and either say what was going on with me or Hap or listen to what other people were doing and provide support for them. It was really incredibly useful.

But at some point, I went to the Gay Pride Parade, the first one that ACT UP was in, and I saw them. And I was like, "Who are they?"

So, somebody said, "Oh, they meet at the Community Center on Monday nights."

So, the next Monday night I went, and it was just an absolute revelation. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, because everybody — it was the same kind of thing. It was people coming together, but instead of everybody holding each other's hands and a

lot of hugging and a lot of crying, people were — sort of Bob Rafsky-type people were getting up and saying, “We’re not going to take this shit anymore. This is what we’re going to do. There’s this demo that’s coming up.”

I was like, “Wow! This is amazing.”

So, I began going back to the support group and saying to the people in the support group, “You guys need to come on Monday nights to this thing.”

And everybody was incredibly resistant. They were like, “Oh, we’ve heard about them. We don’t want to do that.”

I was like, “Why not? It’s really great.” And I realized right away that there was this resistance. And so, for me, both things were really fantastic, but I didn’t understand why people wouldn’t want to do that.

So, Hap died.

**SS: I want to ask you something about that, because one of the things we’ve been looking at over the last fifteen years is who are these weird people who joined ACT UP and what makes them different from everybody else. And there you had that moment where you get it, and they’re not interested. How would you characterize that difference?**

GR: I don’t know. I don’t know. I really don’t think I have anything smart to say about that, because I didn’t understand it at the time. To me it was just a no-brainer. I mean, for me it wasn’t an intellectual thing. It just made me feel good. It was like this is hope. We’re angry. You need to get in touch with your anger and then do something constructive to try to fix the situation. And it’s wonderful. I would never in a million years put down something like the GMHC support group. It was vital. It saved

my life. But at the same time, it was very sad and it was very weepy, and there was lots of crying, and, I mean, there's a certain point where it's just like, "Okay, let's get out of this and let's get on and do something."

00:20:00 And why everybody didn't respond to that, I just don't know. Maybe some people were just invested in their grief or they were too overwhelmed or they weren't really political or they didn't see that there was anything that you could do about it or they were frightened by the anger. I mean, there's probably — for every person that didn't want to do it, there's probably a different reason why they didn't want to do it. But nobody in that group wanted to do it.

So, Hap died on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. So, for that first period when Hap was still sick, I never said anything in an ACT UP meeting. I just sat there in the back, usually by myself. I would sometimes see some people that I knew there, but really not too many, and then just leave and feel good that something's happening. And then Hap died, and I went the next week to the support group and said, "Hap died. This is my last support group. I'm not coming back anymore. If you want to see me, come on Monday nights. I'm going to be at ACT UP."

And then from then on, I really became an active member of ACT UP, like right away, joined the Fundraising Committee, started meeting people like crazy, and it was the best therapy you could possibly imagine. I mean, it was hugely therapeutic for me. I just felt like we were doing something. I felt like I was doing something for Hap, you know, and he had been so supportive. I mean, he could never go to an ACT UP meeting. He was way too sick. He was just in bed all the time. But he would say, "Oh, that sounds fantastic." And so, you know, so that's when I felt like I was kind of like

doing it for him. And by that time, the fifteen people that I'd already known who had died and everybody that was continuing to die.

**SS: Okay. So, let's get into some of the nitty-gritty. So, you worked on the Fundraising Committee. How did you raise money?**

GR: We sold t-shirts. We had a table where we sold t-shirts. We created all sorts of little products that we sold. But I think the main thing that we did to raise money was we held auctions and got people to donate wonderful, expensive stuff, and sold it.

**SS: So that required –**

GR: But ACT UP didn't need a lot of money. You know, fundraising for ACT UP was nothing like the Human Rights Campaign or GLAAD or something like that. There was no hierarchy. There were no paid officials. There were no offices. Well, eventually there was a small office, but it didn't need a lot of money. But it needed some money, so what we did was enough money that it got what it needed, and that was the main thing.

**SS: But also, to run those auctions, people had to have relationships to get the famous people to donate the things.**

GR: Yes, yes. So, we reached out to people. I mean, there were, you know, people like Keith Haring. I mean, there were people in ACT UP who were famous people and rich people that could donate stuff, but ACT UP was full of — I mean, just chockful of hugely wonderful and connected lesbians and gay men who, if you thought about the webs that they weaved out in the wider world, basically knew everybody. So, it

was not a hard thing to get people to donate art and donate things, just all sorts of things that you could sell at auction.

**SS: Did you ever reach out to the music world?**

GR: Well, eventually we founded an organization. Marvin Shulman and Tim Rosta — oh, god, if I'd known that you were going to talk about this, I would have looked up everybody's names. It's so long ago. But the whole sort of Music Cares [Lifebeat – Music Fights AIDS], I think it ended up being called, that became the — I think it was called that. That became the primary music industry response to AIDS, grew out of meetings that we had at Marvin Shulman's apartment with people in ACT UP who were involved in the music industry. So, I went to the early meetings of that, but by that time I was beginning to do my other thing.

**SS: Which we'll get to in a second. Did the music world show up for ACT UP in the way that the art world did?**

GR: I think so. I mean, you know, the music world was not centered — New York was the center of the art world. New York was not really the center of the music world in that way, where there's galleries and all that kind of thing, and also musically there's not things that you can sell so much. What you do is have concerts. But we did have a huge concert with Grace Jones. I mean, at the Palladium we had a gigantic ACT UP concert that raised — I mean, I think that alone might have raised — I don't really remember, but it might have raised more money from that one giant concert that was full of famous musicians than anything else we did. I wouldn't be surprised. Although the auctions did very well as well.

**SS: Because Haoui died of AIDS and he had incredible connections in the music world.**

GR: Yes.

00:25:00

**SS: I think he premiered Madonna at one point.**

GR: Yes, right. So, yeah, there was a lot of support. I mean, musicians have done — and Broadway also, you know, Equity Fights AIDS and all that. Rodger McFarlane was deeply involved in that.

**SS: So, then you became the gay Perry White. Now, how did that happen? I mean, you had no background in journalism, right?**

GR: None.

**SS: Okay. So how did you decide that you were going to —**

GR: Well, after I had become really active — so Hap died in June, June 2<sup>nd</sup> of '88, and by March of '89, I had been doing ACT UP meetings and doing all the demonstrations and all that stuff and doing the Fundraising Committee. But it didn't seem to me that it was enough. I just was wracking my brains, "What more could I do? This doesn't seem — it's not happening fast enough. There needs to be more." And I was walking down Sixth Avenue and I got to 8<sup>th</sup> Street, and just below 8<sup>th</sup> Street on Sixth Avenue there's this newsstand on the right there. And I looked over at the newsstand and there was *The New York Native* sitting on the newsstand, which by that time — *The New York Native* in the beginning of the AIDS epidemic — I don't think that it's totally incorrect to say that *The New York Native* saved my life. I mean, they were ringing the bell for AIDS, particularly Larry Mass, from the very beginning and alerted people to what was going on way before anybody else did. But that was years before. By this

time, they were complete crackpot newspaper, dedicated to the proposition that HIV was not the cause of AIDS, full of conspiracy theories and all that stuff.

**SS: And what was the reason for that?**

GR: I have no idea. I never knew any of those people. I thought they were crazy, and I deeply resented them, and I just thought it was just such a complete abnegation of responsibility to be running the only gay publication in the biggest city in the country, in the middle of the worst health crisis ever, and be doing something like that. They just lost their minds. And I just – I don't know what the problem was.

But I looked over at the newsstand, and I saw it and just this light bulb went on in my head, and I thought, "Oh, my god. What if somebody started a new publication that reflected what's going on in ACT UP, just sort of took that and just bottled it and just sent it out into the world." I don't even remember where I was going that day. I was walking downtown. I turned around. I walked uptown. I lived on Sixth. I had a loft on 25<sup>th</sup> and Sixth, and I walked back home and stopped at the Barnes & Noble on, like, around 21<sup>st</sup> and Sixth and went in, and they had some shelf about how to start a magazine, how to start a newspaper, *Magazine Publishing for Dummies*, you know, whatever, and I bought every single book on the shelf. I walked out with these two huge bags, and I just walked back into my loft, and I sat down with a notebook and a pen, and I opened up the first book and I just began reading and taking notes and reading and taking notes for, like, a week. I never even left the loft. I just sat there and did it. And by the end of a week, I thought, "Oh, I think I know how you do this." And that's how it started.

**SS: So how do you do it? How did you do it?**

GR: Well, what I did was — so after I did that, I made a list of all of what I thought were the smartest lesbians and gay men in New York that had been involved in politics the way that I had not been involved in politics for years and years and years. You know, Vivian Shapiro and Andy Humm and, you know, all sorts of people like that, most of whom I didn't even know. And also, anybody that I knew who was gay who was in the newspaper business or the publishing business, Joe Nicholson from the — I guess then he was at the *Daily News*, and Adam Moss, who was then the editor of the magazine called *Seven Days*. And I just called them all up, and I said, "Hi, my name's Gabriel Rotello. I'm going to start a new gay magazine in New York, and I would love to just meet with you, and you could just tell me everything that I need to know." And every single one of them said yes, "Come over tomorrow," kind of thing.

And I just went with my little notebook and just asked them a million questions, and it turned out that many people had tried to do this before. Nobody had succeeded. Everyone was very encouraging of me on the one hand, but very discouraging on the other hand, because they kept saying, "You know, there's been seven other attempts to do this in the last seven years, and every single one of them has failed." But I got a lot of information from everybody.

**SS: Why did they fail?**

00:30:00

GR: Well, I don't know why they failed, but one thing that everybody impressed upon me, which I did not believe in and I did not agree, was that you need to keep it really secret while you're doing it, you know, because otherwise you'll spark competition or somebody else will try to do it. Everybody else that tried to do it, you know, most people don't even know that they tried to do it because they kept it real

secret. And I was very much imbued with sort of the ACT UP, you know, “Get it out there” kind of thing.

So, I said, okay, everybody was giving me really good advice, except for one thing, which is keep it secret. I am going to broadcast this to the world. So, I began — I mean, one thing I did was I created a questionnaire of what would you like to see in a new gay and lesbian — it had little things that you could fill, little circles that you could fill out. It had, like — I don’t know, it was like a page. It had like thirty questions. And I went to the next ACT UP meeting, and I stood in the door and I handed it out to every single person. I bought a little box of those little questionnaire pencils and had them all sharpened and just gave them to everybody, just handed them all out.

Well, some people filled them out and some people didn’t fill them out, and it was very interesting. I read and collated everything that people said that they wanted, but the bigger thing was it got everybody talking. “Oh, Gabriel’s going to start this gay magazine.” So, I just blabbed it to everybody.

I created a business plan, capitalized it at \$600,000, which is, like, really cheap for a magazine, but I thought that we could do it for that, and then started. I went immediately to Michelangelo Signorile and said, “I want you. If I do this, could I hire you? Would you do this job?”

And he said, “Absolutely.”

**SS: Because he had been at *People* magazine.**

GR: He had been at a lot of things, but he was mostly a publicist. He wasn’t really so much a journalist as a publicist, but he knew — I just knew that he would be great. And he said, “You’d need a news editor.”

And I said, yes, we would. And he suggested Andrew Miller, who I knew not that well, but I knew him, and so I asked, “If I did this, could I hire you as the news editor?”

And he said, “Yes.”

And then I had to raise the money, and that went —

**SS: How did you raise it?**

GR: Well, I went for — so this all happened — I’m now — this is like three weeks after I got the idea, like literally three weeks later. And so, I start reaching out to people. I had some money, so I said, “Well, I’m going to put my money where — I’ll put this big chunk of money into it, but then I’m going to need a lot more money than that.” And I immediately began to find investors, but I realized right away that it wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought, because most investors were going to think of this as a money-making — as a profit-making thing. And although it had to make money in order to stay in existence, I just knew right from the beginning that many of the things that I wanted to do were probably not going to be the smartest things from a money-making point of view.

It was an ACT UP — I mean, I was doing this — this was my affinity group. I was creating my own affinity group, and I couldn’t do it in ACT UP, because you can’t do something that basically costs a million dollars as an affinity group of ACT UP. I had to just do it myself. But that’s what I thought; I thought of it as a form of activism.

And the investors that I got, and so after just a couple of weeks, I think I had \$200,000, but they were already making noises that it was — you know, and then we

could do this and we could make more money doing that. And I'm thinking, "Ugh, this is going to be a problem."

So, then this amazing thing happened, which was that I had a very good friend, one of my very best friends, Eric Conrad, who is a big party promoter in these days, in those days he was just a young guy looking for what to do. And he called me up and he said, "Gabriel, you have a problem. Somebody else is starting a gay magazine in New York, and he just hired me yesterday to be his assistant."

And I said, "Oh, my god. Really? I have to meet him immediately. Can you set up a meeting tomorrow? Because if he's doing this exact same thing, then I can just stop if — you know, whatever."

So, he said, "Yes, you can meet him tomorrow."

So, the next day I went over to meet this guy who was starting a gay magazine. His name was Kendall Morrison. He was the person who, more than anybody else, had invented phone sex, a form of safe sex that only really existed during the height of the AIDS crisis, where you called a number and this machinery connected you with other people who called, and you could get off on the phone. It was great because it was safe sex, completely safe sex, but it also was very profitable because you paid by the minute, I think, and so people who owned those companies — so he had started this in Boston with a couple of investors, and they did incredibly well.

He had just recently expanded it to New York City, but it was not doing as well in New York City because there was no place to advertise it. So, what he was planning on doing was creating sort of a party paper, kind of like what Marc Berkley did several years later with *Homo Xtra*, where it was a thing with a lot of listings and where

all the hot clubs are. Each week I think, he was planning to have one article about, you know, a disc jockey or a drag queen or, you know, something like that. But otherwise, it was just going to be this free thing that just had all these listings and what to do and where to go, like a *Time Out* kind of thing, and then all the phone-sex ads for the phone-sex company.

So, I was like, “Oh, well, this isn’t competing with us whatsoever. We’re doing two completely different things.” So, we both sort of relaxed, and I said, “Well, I’m just going to continue doing what I’m doing, and you continue doing what you’re doing.” And then we started talking, and I said, “So who are you and what are you all about?”

And he said, “Well, I’m a person with AIDS. I’m in ACT UP, this group ACT UP. I’ve already been arrested, like, a whole bunch of times.”

I was like, “You are? I’ve never seen you there.” I mean, Kendall, incredibly attractive guy, just sort of like this Tom of Finland. I mean, he kind of was like super gorgeous, and I was surprised that I hadn’t seen — because he’s not someone that you would not notice. But I had not noticed him there, but, sure enough, he was a member of ACT UP and he had already been arrested several times, and he had AIDS. And this is 1989. That’s not a good thing in 1989.

So, I shook his hand and said, “Thank you very much,” and I walked back over to my loft. And then at two o’clock in the morning, the second huge light bulb just exploded in my brain, and I just picked up the phone and called him at two o’clock in the morning. I said, “I don’t care if I wake him up or not.” And I didn’t wake him up; he was awake. He stayed up all night every night. But I just said, “Kendall, we have to just

join forces. Let's just do it together. Why would we do separate things? If we can create *OutWeek* the way that I — ,” because I had described to him what I was doing, “*OutWeek* the way that I envision it, and it still at the same time would be a perfect vehicle for your phone-sex ads. It would become a widely read publication. You're an activist. Why do you want to do a party paper when we can just join forces together?”

And he immediately said yes, and we signed a contract within twenty-four hours. We both had to sort of dislodge ourselves from the people that we — he had already had, like, a publisher. He had to, like, let that guy go. I had to go to my investors and say, “Sorry, I don't really need your money.” And we just did it ourselves.

And it was one of those kind of miraculous things, because Kendall and I are very, very different people, and Kendall does not fancy himself in the slightest sort of a writer or intellectual or anything like that, but his instincts were exactly the same as mine, and he was totally supportive of everything that we were going to do. He also did not see it as a vehicle to make — you know, as long as it broke even, that would be okay with him, broke even and helped end the AIDS epidemic. He had a real radical streak to him, and a sort of devilish streak, and you could not — when I think back on it now, if Eric Conrad had not called me up and told me about Kendall Morrison, I mean, I could never have found a more perfect person to team up with to do *OutWeek* magazine than Kendall Morrison. I mean it, really, he was it.

So, then the magazine, it came out six weeks later. I just immediately went to Michelangelo and Andrew and said, “You're hired. We start next Monday.” And we just started and, boom, it came out six weeks later.

**SS: Now, the fact that you had all these sex ads, did that inhibit you from getting corporate ads, or were corporate ads not yet available to the gay press?**

00:40:00 GR: We were not going to get corporate ads for *OutWeek* magazine. Look at what we were doing in *OutWeek* magazine. We were calling the cardinal a fucking pig. We had nightmares. We were outing Malcolm Forbes on the cover of the magazine, you know. We were not *Out* magazine, which came a few years later. We were not a glossy, slick magazine that Absolut vodka — I mean, the story, I think, that Troy Masters tells is that — or, no, I think it's Kit Winter, who was our first ad director, was that they got Absolut vodka to advertise in, I think, the first issue, like the back page was Absolut vodka. Then the magazine came out, and it was just this wild, raucous magazine that was filled with all this crazy shit. And the head of marketing or whatever from Absolut vodka called him up like ten minutes after it hit the stand, and said, "What did you get me into? Are you crazy? Pull the ad immediately. No more Absolut for you."

So that was not — we were not going to get that. And it would have been great, we would have had more money, but we did really well. I mean, *OutWeek* earned about \$40,000 a week. I was talking to Troy Masters, who ended up, he worked at *OutWeek*, he ended up becoming the head of advertising at *OutWeek*, and then he founded *LGNY*, and now he runs *Gay New York*. We were talking, I don't know, it was a couple years ago, actually, and I mentioned — I said, "Do you remember how much *OutWeek* made a week? It was \$40,000 a week."

And Troy said, "Oh, my god." He said, "I had forgotten that." He said, "There is no gay publication in the country that makes a fraction of \$40,000 a week today. That's, like, huge." So, it was enough for what we were trying to do.

**SS: How many copies were you selling?**

GR: We would print anywhere between 15,000 and 40,000, depending on what was on the cover and what was going on. I mean, *OutWeek* had these sort of peaks where we were doing various things, you know. We exposed Woody Myers for being what Woody Myers was. Or the murder at Covenant House or Kevin Kite on the cover, or outing Malcolm Forbes, or whatever, then we would, like, ramp up, you know, the print run to 30 or 40,000 and sell out. And then if it was just a typical week and it was the middle of summer or whatever, we would print 15,000 copies and we would sell out. But it was a combination of circulation and ad revenue.

One of the problems was that New York did not have a strong sort of history of gay businesses advertising in the gay press the way they have. If you went to San Francisco or Boston or Chicago, you open up — like, every doctor advertises in the *Bay Area Reporter* and every shoe sale, I mean, anything that you can think of, it's all in there because they have this long tradition, you know, decades of that. New York just didn't have that. So, your typical gay doctor didn't necessarily think that they needed — they'd been doing perfectly well so far. “Why do I need to advertise in a gay publication?”

I mean, one of my biggest regrets sort of along those same lines is I could never get the obituary section of *OutWeek* up and running. I wanted it to be a record of everyone that was dying of AIDS in New York. And I repeatedly said to everybody — we would put boxes in, “*OutWeek* accepts obituaries free of charge. Anybody dies, send us their obituary and their picture, and we will print it for free.” And never had more than, like, two or three a week, and most of them were famous people.

**SS: How do you explain that?**

GR: People just weren't used to that. It just wasn't a cultural thing. As the AIDS epidemic had begun in the eighties, the *Bay Area Reporter*, *Bay Windows*, the *Washington Blade*, they have this policy, they'd always had an obituary policy, and then it began to grow, and that became the place that you went to to look to see who died. And New York just didn't have that, because *The Native* was just crazy and useless, and nobody wanted their obituary to be in there. And then *OutWeek* came along, and by that time, there just was no — so it just never really happened.

But that same thing happened with ads as well, but it didn't matter, because we were making enough money to keep it going. We had a big office, we had a lot of people, and I didn't want to do anything that was going to dilute what we were doing politically in order to try to entice people. And we became, of course, very controversial. I mean, *OutWeek* became unbelievably controversial.

**SS: What are some of your favorite controversies?**

GR: Well, I mean, the things that people think about, obviously outing is a huge one. I mean, that really sparked a national conversation and really changed the press. I mean, it just changed the way that the media has dealt with homosexuality ever since. It's one thing that when I run into mainstream journalists who are friends today who were mainstream journalists, people writing for *The New York Times* or *Newsday* or *Time* magazine or whatever, people will literally say, "When it comes to gay stuff, we sort of think of it as before *OutWeek* and after *OutWeek*."

Like before *OutWeek*, you could ignore gay issues in the mainstream media, and after *OutWeek*, you really kind of couldn't. Or you did so at your own risk, or

if you did, you felt bad about it. And when anybody didn't or when there was some big story, there would be Michelangelo saying, "Tina Brown, you shit-eating piece of whatever," or "James Revson, with your tongue stuck up the mainstream media's asshole," you know, whatever, all capital letters with, like, a picture of his face with his phone number on it, "Revson zap," you know, whatever. And it just got to the point where people just had to — every week, you just had to open up *OutWeek* and see what the hell were they going to do.

Personally, I was more into the investigative reporting kind of thing and trying to break stories, and so we did. I mean, Woody Myers was probably the most famous example of that. This was Mayor Dinkins had just been elected, with the overwhelming support of the lesbian and gay vote. We had turned against Mayor Koch because of AIDS and elected Mayor Dinkins, and then as one of his first orders of business, he announced that he is appointing as his new health commissioner, who will be in charge of AIDS policy, a man named Woodrow Myers, "Woody" Myers, who was health commissioner of Indiana. He was an African American. Everybody expected that he would appoint an African American. He was the first African American mayor, and African Americans had a huge number of health issues in New York City.

So, I picked up the phone and began calling around to Indiana to find out what he was like, and discovered, to my horror, that he had advocated for mandatory contact tracing, mandatory name reporting, and the quarantining of people with AIDS in Indiana. And everybody I called said the same thing. It was common knowledge in Indiana. This was the kind of thing that I sort of felt like *The New York Times* should have done, but we did it. And in that particular case, it was interesting, because *OutWeek*

came out — and this was an example of our sort of not caring that much about money kind of thing. *OutWeek* came out on a Monday, same day as the ACT UP meetings, and I made these discoveries, I think, on a Monday, or maybe Monday, over Monday and Tuesday, and I wrote the story. And then the magazine wasn't going to come out for five more days, during which time the mayor might actually appoint — he had just announced that he was going to appoint him. He hadn't actually appointed him.

And I felt like we couldn't wait. So, I called *The New York Times* and I said, "I have a story that I think that you're going to want to put on the front page of *The New York Times*, but it's going to be on the cover of *OutWeek* next Monday. But we sort of feel like we can't really wait, so I will give you the story, provided that you credit it to *OutWeek* magazine in your lead."

And they said, "Well, let's see what it is."

So, I faxed it over, and about five minutes later, they called and said, "It's going to be on the front page of *The New York Times* tomorrow, and it's going to say 'OutWeek magazine' right in the lead." And that started this what has often been called the most bitter dispute of the Dinkins administration.

But then in typical *OutWeek* fashion, we ramped it up, because there had been a selection committee for Woody Myers and there was a very prominent gay person on that committee named Tim Sweeney, who was the associate director of GMHC.

**SS: Right.**

GR: And I called him up and said — this is before the *Times* piece even ran — and said, "Did you know about this? You were supposed to be vetting this guy or anybody for Dinkins."

And he said, “Yeah, I did know about it, but I didn’t really think it was that big a deal. You have to understand, Indiana’s a very conservative state. I actually felt that he was sort of taming even worse things that might have happened in Indiana. He was trying to keep it from being even worse than it was going to be. And he seems like a really nice guy, and I met him and he was really great.”

So, I called everybody back up in Indiana and said, “What’s up with this? Was he actually — ?”

They were like, “Are you kidding? He was the guy. Nobody even talked about contact tracing or mandatory name reporting until he came along. It was his idea. What are you talking about?”

00:50:00 So, I wrote an extremely strongly worded — I wrote all the editorials in *OutWeek*. It was like the first thing that you saw when you opened up the paper. And I excoriated Mayor Dinkins. I said, “He’s broken the vow. We regret having endorsed him for mayor. He’s proven himself to be an enemy of our community,” etc. And then I called for Tim Sweeney to resign, or, if he refused to resign, for the board of GMHC to fire him. That’s the kind of thing that *OutWeek* did on a fairly regular basis.

**SS: Let me ask you a few things about that. So why do you think Tim did that?**

GR: I don’t know. I mean, you can read the interview. He told me why he did it. I didn’t even want to begin to have it be an article about why Tim Sweeney did it. So, with his permission, I tape-recorded the conversation, and I printed the entire conversation verbatim in *OutWeek* so people could just read my questions and read his answers verbatim. So, if you want to know why he did it, read that, and he’ll tell you.

He'll say why he did it. It didn't make any sense to me. It didn't make any sense to anybody who read it. People were infuriated.

**SS: So, you think he was just out of it or he was —**

GR: I don't know.

**SS: — culling favor with the mayor?**

GR: Whatever he was, or not —

**SS: All right.**

GR: — what I felt was — and I'd felt it for a long time — was that there was no real accountability in all the other — in ACT UP there was accountability. You got up to say something on the floor, and if you were an asshole, people screamed at you and told you. It was like Parliament in London, "Get off! Sit down!," you know, whatever. But with our community, there was this self-perpetuating group of people, boards of directors that were dominated by very wealthy people. That's mostly how you got on a board, is that you were really rich and you had lots of money, and then you would sit on the board and decide the policy and elevate various people, and there was just no accountability. And I thought that sucked and thought that there needed to be accountability.

**SS: But also, it was the dawning of the homocrat.**

GR: Yes.

**SS: It was the first time that gay people in the Democratic Party thought that they could get positions in the government and —**

GR: Yes, exactly. It was all that. It was all that.

So, we did that, and it was gigantically controversial. That was when — that was relatively early on in *OutWeek*. I think *OutWeek* was only about three or four months old when that happened.

And then another of our policies came into play that I was very keen on maintaining, which was I wanted us to print every letter to the editor that we received, in full. This was before the internet, before the comments sections that you now just see everywhere. I just thought it was really important to have a conversation, and what better place than the letter section. So, the next week after that editorial, the letter section just exploded in *OutWeek* with half of the leadership of the gay and lesbian community calling, like, for my resignation, like, “How dare you? Who the fuck are you to call for Tim Sweeney to resign?” But then huge numbers of people totally supporting it. And it just turned into this cacophonous thing, and that never ended. It never ended.

And it got to the point with *OutWeek* starting right about then, about three or four months in, the way that I remember it was when we did the Stop the Church action in ACT UP, that was the only time I remember doing a thing and then coming back on the Monday and having there be this sense in the room of, like, “Oh, my god, did we just go, like, way too far?” And just have this sort of nervousness and handwringing. Otherwise in ACT UP everybody would come back from the NIH or the FDA or whatever it is, like, “Yay, we did it.” But the Stop the Church was really a handwringer afterwards. At *OutWeek* it was like that every single week. Like every issue would come out, and then we would sort of sit there and go, “Oh, my god. What did we just do? Are we going to get sued and put out of business?”

And this is where Kendall Morrison played such a key role, because he had a huge amount of money. I had all my money in it, too, but I was like sort of just doing it. He had really much more money than I did at stake, and, you know, at any moment, we could have just lost it. I mean, when we outed Malcolm Forbes, going up against the Forbes estate, the people that publish *Forbes* magazine, outing their father who had just died, I mean, just to be vindictive, they could have slapped us with a 20-million-dollar lawsuit that would have just bankrupted us.

**SS: Why didn't they?**

00:55:00 GR: I don't know why they didn't. I don't know. Well, for one thing, it was true, and I guess they probably felt like, "If we do that, then there's going to be a trial, and they'll just dredge out — they'll make it even worse," you know. But I don't know. They could have, just to be vindictive. With a more vindictive Forbes person, they might have done that, and we could easily just have been bankrupted just by the lawsuit. Even if we won, we would have gone out of business for that. And Kendall was like, "Yay! Do it! This is great! Oh, my god, this is so much fun," you know. So, it was just vital to have him there supporting all that stuff.

**SS: Did anyone ever come to you to out someone you decided not to?**

GR: Oh, yeah, all the time.

**SS: Like who?**

GR: Like who came to us or who —

**SS: No. Who did you decide not to out?**

GR: Well, we decided not to out anybody who we felt was — first all, people that were not public figures or people that were not problematically fucking with

the lesbian and gay community or the AIDS epidemic. I mean, we didn't just out for the sake of outing. That was a huge misnomer, that it was just about, "Oh, just bring everybody out of the closet," and, you know, whatever." It was very strategic.

And, really, at the end of the day, *OutWeek* hardly outed anybody. I think you can put on the fingers of one hand the names of the famous people that we actually outed. We talked about it as breaking a barrier in journalism where the private lives of public figures are fair game, not — forget about, you know, the celebrity press or the tabloid press, but in the mainstream press, the private lives of public figures are fair game if there's something about their private life that is relevant to a major news story, whether they like it or not, and whether it's damaging or they perceive it to be damaging or not, or whether they've given permission for that to be talked about or not, except for just one thing, and that was homosexuality.

And what we were simply saying was that's crazy. If you can do the alcoholism and the divorce and the children that don't speak to the parents — people were coming out with books about Nancy Reagan, she was smoking pot in the White House, you know, whatever, and people, "Oh, this is fine. What's the problem? She's a public figure. She smokes pot. She probably was sitting in the White House horrified by this, but it was, like, "Too bad," you know. But if she had been a lesbian, it would have been, "Oh, absolutely not."

And we were just saying, "No, that's wrong." However, that started, whether it was because homosexuality was the worst thing in the world that would uniquely destroy your career more than anything else, or whatever, the time has passed for that. It needs to change. And so, it wasn't about just outing anybody for any

particular reason; it was about what's the story with David Geffen backing Guns N' Roses, this incredibly homophobic band, and putting his money and spending all this money promoting this new album where Axl Rose is being an unbelievably, like, murderous homophobe when David Geffen is a closeted gay man. So, "Guess what, David? We're going to talk about that. We're not going to protect you about that." And then, of course, Michael did it in capital letters, you know, "DAVID GEFFEN, YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT," which got people's attention, you know. People read that.

**SS: Did you see Kirby Dick's film in which he claimed that —**

GR: I did, yes.

**SS: — Ed Koch sent his boyfriend out of town, who died of AIDS?**

**Did you have any information?**

GR: I didn't know about that. I did not know about that. I was fascinated by that.

**SS: Did you have any information on Ed Koch?**

GR: I don't really remember whether we did or not. You're going to have to ask Michael whether we did. Michael was the one — when the calls would come in, they would always go to Michael. Michael was the person, yeah.

**SS: So now I have some specific questions I want to ask you. In terms of your AIDS treatment coverage, how did you make decisions? Like, for example, how did you cover AZT?**

GR: We had weekly columns on AIDS health issues, AIDS treatment issues, AIDS drug development issues, women's health. That was just a regular weekly thing, you know. Mark Harrington, Bob Lederer, Risa —

**SS: Denenberg.**

GR: — Denenberg. A whole of bunch of real what I thought were the smartest men and women in New York who knew about that stuff.

We even did alternative. We had the sort of Chinese herb perspective on stuff, and there was a column about that. So, it was about just opening up the —

01:00:00

**SS: But it was controversial in ACT UP. AZT was very controversial in ACT UP and ACT UP never took a position.**

GR: Right. We wrote all about that. We covered that, both sides of that, inside and out, upside and down.

**SS: So, you didn't personally have to process a lot of information and then make a decision about what *you* thought.**

GR: No. The policy was to open it up to every viewpoint. We never — we didn't have — no, we had no policy.

**SS: You never took a position.**

GR: Never. Wouldn't even consider it.

**SS: What did you do when the pharmaceutical companies wanted to advertise?**

GR: I don't think the pharmaceutical companies ever wanted to advertise.

**SS: No?**

GR: I don't think so. I don't think that we ever had any pharmaceutical company advertising. I'm trying to remember if we did or not, but I don't think that they would touch *OutWeek* with a ten-foot pole, the magazine that's, like, outing famous

people on their boards of directors, you know, or who's perceived to be doing that, you know.

**SS: So how did you experience the founding of POZ?**

GR: Did the founding of *POZ* happen during *OutWeek*?

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

GR: I don't think so.

**SS: Because that was a tool for marketing for pharmaceutical companies.**

GR: I don't think that happened during — I don't know what year *POZ* started, but I have this — no, it didn't happen during *OutWeek* because Sean [Strub] was still in ACT UP and was still on the Fundraising Committee right to the end of *OutWeek*, and so that didn't happen.

**SS: Now, do you feel that you contributed to the antipathy between ACT UP and GMHC?**

GR: I'm sure that we did. I'm sure that we did, yes. I'm sure that we — we contributed to the antipathy between ACT UP and every mainstream gay and AIDS organization in the world. I mean, what we were trying to do — what I was trying to do in *OutWeek* was to take the vision, or at least my vision, of what the floor of ACT UP was, that energy, that anger, that whole world view, and just send it out to the world, to people that could never make a Monday night meeting because they lived in Des Moines, Iowa, or Tallahassee, Florida, to a high school kid that could never even get to New York, to read that and see that whole cacophony and power and humor. Humor was a huge part of *OutWeek*. *OutWeek* was really very funny. It was hilarious all the way

through it. It was hilarious. And that was a big focus of it as well. And just to send that out there to inspire people to believe that we could get through this nightmare, you know, with strength and positivity and power and humor and effectiveness. And, oh, and that, you know, sorry to say, at that particular point in time, that very often involved confronting the sort of more establishmentarian leaders of gay organizations that had names that didn't even have "gay" in it, you know, that kind of thing —

**SS: Human, yeah.**

GR: — and to seize the agenda away from them and make the agenda what we wanted the agenda to be.

**SS: Now what about the time – when did you criticize ACT UP?**

GR: Well, we didn't really criticize ACT UP. It was like people — it was very — here's the thing. I was always afraid that ACT UP was going to break up. From my earlier history, that I discussed earlier, in sort of left-wing politics, everything always broke up. It always just dissolved in a sort of cacophonous, you know, this one against that one. And I was very much afraid that the same thing was going to happen to ACT UP, and I felt like ACT UP was — that was not happening. It was the dream of every kind of left-wing group, that there's no head of it, there's no real power structure, it's totally democratic, and everybody had tried that for, like, 100 years and it never worked. Everything just splintered, and this group goes off this way and that group goes off that way. And that wasn't happening with ACT UP.

I felt that it wasn't happening with ACT UP because — for two reasons. One was we were in the middle of a true colossal emergency, death on a gigantic scale, right around us, and that focused the mind to a certain extent, but also because ACT UP

had a very, very specific objective. It was not a catch-all. It wasn't like when Occupy Wall Street happened. It was like such a hopeful moment, and then they came out with their list of demands, and it was like twenty pages of, like, every sort of demand that everybody ever, ever dreamed of. And I just immediately said, "Oh, that's the end of that," you know.

But ACT UP didn't have that. They would get up every day or every Monday, and it was like a — what was it? A nonpartisan group united in anger and dedicated to direct action to end the AIDS epidemic. It was like that's what we are. And people would get up to say other stuff, "Well, I want to talk about, you know, empowerment of women." That's not what we're here for. That's great. Go do that someplace else. This is not what we're here for. And so that, I think, kept it together.

But I was always worried that that was not going to last and that it would break up, so I felt like a big part of *OutWeek* was to give vent to all the different sort of groups in ACT UP, like have everybody feel that they had access to *OutWeek* and that they could say whatever they wanted to say in it, but not to allow it to be used for one group to attack another group or to participate in any way in that sort of centrifugal force that might drive it apart. So that was my thing. It wasn't about criticizing ACT UP or not criticizing ACT UP. And ACT UP was so huge and there were so many different viewpoints in it, that I don't know how you could sort of — I mean, I guess you could say, oh, the Stop the Church action was wrong. You could do that. We would never have done anything like that. But it was more about just giving voice to everybody and then disseminating that to everybody.

**SS: So, where do you see the origins of The Split? Where do you think that began?**

GR: Well, to me, it was one of those things, it was a cultural thing, it was a political thing, and, most disastrously, in my opinion, it became a personal thing. That happens. People are people. People are tribal. People are factional. So, it started out, I think, as a somewhat high-minded theoretical issue between people wanting to do direct action and being outside the system versus people desperate to get inside the system in order to, you know, effect change that way. And that was really the genius of ACT UP for the years that it was the most effective, was, you know, people like Jim Eigo and Mark Harrington and various people coming up and telling us what we needed, you know. “This is the drug that we need to concentrate on. This is the thing that we need to do,” like doing the analysis, the brainy analysis stuff, and then firing up the troops to go out and, you know, make that happen and chain themselves or do the giant demonstrations or whatever. That was this wonderful genius dichotomy. But those were groups of people coming from very different places. Everybody has egos, and I honestly think that that’s ultimately what happened, is it just became one of the typical tribal things where people’s — and then people insulted each other, people got mad, this one didn’t like that one anymore, so the ability to compromise began to dissolve.

And I began watching that happen, and I remember I wrote an op-ed against that in *OutWeek*. That was the one that I ended it by saying, you know — what did I say? Something like, “For those who want to see the split happen, it would be a pathetic redundancy to say, ‘A plague on both your houses.’ There already is one.” And I remember I wrote that on a week that we were expecting that split to happen that

Monday night, and it was a very strongly worded — that editorial talked about what had happened to the Mattachine Society, what had happened to the Daughters of Bilitis, what happened to the Gay Activists Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front throughout the history of the gay world, and the genius of how ACT UP had not done that, and now it was beginning to do that. And I ended with those words.

And I remember coming to that meeting, and everybody came to the meeting expecting that there's going to be this huge thing, and everybody had an *OutWeek* there. And people just kept coming up to me with, like, tears in their eyes going, "Oh, my god, oh, my god." And nothing happened that night, just nothing happened. It just sort of like — ACT UP went on for, I think, another four or five months after that before the split finally happened. But it was coming, and it was really unfortunate. It was an incredibly sad moment for me. That happened after *OutWeek* went out of business, and I felt very, you know, sort of helpless about anything after *OutWeek* went out of business, because there was nothing — not that I would have been able to stop that from happening, but I certainly would have tried, and I couldn't because *OutWeek* went out of business.

01:10:00

**SS: Okay, but that's how you experienced it then. Okay, now it's a long, long time after, and we're living in a world in which if you have access to healthcare, you can live a normal lifespan if you're HIV-positive, but there's a crisis of access. So, you could trace this current dichotomous reality back to those debates and see that they actually had very substantial material consequences.**

GR: I don't know. I mean, I still think that those two viewpoints would be more effective working together, working out their issues sort of in private and then

continuing using direct action on the one hand and access, you know. I mean, the brilliant thing — I mean, the reason ultimately at the end of the day why we got the drugs was that combination of things, the direct action forcing the conscience of the establishment, and then once it had been forced and they said, “Okay, now we feel really bad and really guilty, what do we do now?” along come these people with, like, “Here’s what you do, and we’ve figured it out.” That was genius. I can’t remember that ever happening before. It’s not like the Antiwar Movement that I participated in actually had an actual plan to end the war that would have made sense to both Hanoi and to Washington, and that Nixon would have read it and that Ho Chi Minh would have read it and said, “Oh, my god, we could actually do this.” We didn’t have that. We were just, “End the war, end the war, end the war.” And so, as a result, ultimately we were successful, but it hasn’t stopped a million other stupid wars.

**SS: Okay. But, I mean, when I speak in public, I say the same thing that you just said, and that is the myth, and I do repeat it, and Jim did repeat it in his film. However, we have heard some other ideas that are quite interesting. We interviewed Garance, and, you know, she —**

GR: Who was on a wonderful cover of *OutWeek* magazine, by the way, stealing drugs from the — talk about access, stealing drugs and running out the door.

**SS: She pointed out that the deregulation of the pharmaceutical industry that went along with this was very beneficial to the pharmaceutical industry and that we may not have understood that we were participating in something that may have had long-range advantages to them.**

GR: I'm sure that that's true, and I'm also sure that when you do anything really big in the world, there are going to be unintended consequences that neither you nor anybody else could possibly foresee. So, I can't imagine that ACT UP would have done what it did without some serious unforeseen consequences that nobody at that moment would have been behind if they had known that that was going to happen. But that can't stop you from doing what you've got to do when you —

**SS: No, of course.**

GR: — when you've got to do it. And I think there are other unforeseen consequences. I mean, just the fast-tracking of drugs didn't necessarily turn out to be — it got a little too fast-tracky for a while there, so that was an unforeseen consequence. And I think that there are probably many others. And it never addressed larger issues. If you wanted to create a larger group to address larger issues of social inequality and access and stuff like that, it never was able to really adequately address that.

But think about where we were at that time. People were just dropping like flies. There had to be a drug somewhere. And when you think, in retrospect, that those drugs did exist for many years before they were combined and put into people's bodies, and when you think of the people that you and I both know who would be alive today, who have been moldering in their graves for these twenty years and missing out on all of that life because we didn't even act fast enough, it's hard for me to say that we didn't — that we fucked up somehow and that we didn't — you know. We weren't thinking about this that might happen in twenty years with the pharmaceuticals. So, I'm sure that that's true, but to me it doesn't in the end mean anything.

**SS: Well, Sonnabend — I was recently speaking in London, and Sonnabend came to the audience and he said, “You have no evidence that there’s a direct relationship between what ACT UP did and what science did.”**

GR: That’s bullshit. That’s total, total bullshit. The scientists themselves — you know what the evidence is? Talk to [Anthony] Fauci. Talk to Dr. [David] Ho.

01:15:00 Talk to any of the people that created these drugs or created the administrative system to test them and get them into people’s bodies in 1996. Ask them. You should interview some of those people for the ACT UP Oral History Project. It would be very interesting, and ask them that question, if there’s no evidence. They’re the people that did it, and they will all tell you absolutely it would have been another fifteen years at the rate that we were going.

**SS: Well, Jim and I spoke at the NIH, and we were told that it was Dr. Fauci’s brilliant visionary thinking where he realized that everyone had to have a seat at the table and that’s why everything opened up.**

GR: Well, of course they would put it that way, but who were the people that they gave the seat at the table to? They gave the seat to ACT UP, I mean. And it wasn’t a brilliant vision. I mean, you could say, look, if somebody, you know, protests the war and creates a giant antiwar movement and that a president says, “Oh, guess what? We have to stop the war,” you can say, oh, that’s the president’s brilliant visionary — he decided to stop the war. But he did it because people were rioting in the streets from coast to coast for five years. You know what I mean? It’s the same thing. If he wants to take credit for it, let him take credit for it, but look at the actual history of what happened with Dr. Fauci and his relationship with everybody from, you know, Larry Kramer to Bob

Lederer. I mean, it was an endless barrage, and he finally was like, “Oh, I get it, so have a seat the table.”

But even when you got a seat at the table, what difference does it make to get a seat at the table if you don’t know what you’re talking about? If you’re just going to sit there and go, “Okay, well, I’m here, and I’m a person with AIDS, but, you know, I don’t know what to do.” ACT UP knew what to do. So that, to me, was the genius of ACT UP, and I was very sorry to see it dissolve. And I wonder if things would have happened a little quicker if it hadn’t dissolved. I don’t know.

**SS: Why did *OutWeek* fold?**

GR: We folded — oh, do you really want to get into that?

**SS: Well, tell me something.**

GR: Well, when we founded it, Kendall Morrison — we needed another chunk of money that was not going to be investors who were going to try to control what we were going to do. So, Kendall convinced some of the other owners of his phone-sex companies to make a personal loan to him of the remaining money that we needed to start *OutWeek*, which he secured as collateral, pledged as collateral, all of his stock in both of the phone-sex companies. So, he had created a situation where these three other guys, none of whom liked *OutWeek* at all — they were pretty much horrified by *OutWeek* —

**SS: Well, rumor was mobster types, but anyway, okay.**

GR: — had an incentive for *OutWeek* to meet with a little accident, because if it did, they would be able to — you know, they would lose their investment loan to Kendall Morrison, but they would reap literally millions of dollars in what the stock would be worth over the years. So, at a certain point six months before *Outweek*

went out of business, they sort of came to us and said, “We want to take over publishing the magazine directly. We’re really businessmen. You guys are really not. Kendall needs to go off and found a new national phone-sex company. Gabriel, your hands are full being editor-in-chief. You don’t need to be involved in the day-to-day business.”

And unsuspecting fools that we were, we said, “Oh, okay, that makes some sense.”

And then they took it over for six months, and during the time that they took it over, I noticed that it began spending a lot more money than it had been spending when we were privy to what it was spending, and it didn’t seem to be taking in any more money than it had been taking it. And I kept sort of saying, “Oh, just bought all these new computers, and you’re distributing in a place where we don’t — in California or some place where we don’t get any ads.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s under control. You no longer have to worry about that kind of thing.”

So, I began to worry about it and I began to harbor dark suspicions. And Kendall, unfortunately, began becoming a little unstable, began taking a lot of party drugs and becoming this sort of party guy, which he had not been at all in the beginning. So, he was not a lot of help either. So, it got really nasty.

And I went finally to a new investor, secretly, a guy named Randy Klose, who was a very wealthy gay man. He was on the board and hugely supportive of *OutWeek*. And I told him about my fears for *OutWeek* magazine, and we sat down and hammered out a rescue plan where if it turned out that this was going where I suspected that it was, he would then step in, we would remove those people, pay them back, hire a

01:20:00

professional publisher, and just continue on, and it would be his money. He was a very, very wealthy person who also had AIDS. He did actually die about, I think, maybe three years later. The Dairy Queen fortune.

So then right near the end, we went into the books and looked, and it turned out that, yes, we were basically bankrupt. They had overspent to the point where we hadn't paid our rent in a couple of months, we hadn't paid the printer. I don't even know how we were continuing. So, Kendall and I freaked out, and we informed the staff on a Friday that we were taking over the magazine and there was going to have to be layoffs. It's what you're supposed to do, is inform people that there's going to be layoffs, so if somebody's going to buy a car over the weekend, they'll hold off — you know. That's part of the whole rulebook that you're supposed to follow.

And we came in the next Monday to begin to put our plan into action. And I had an abscessed tooth and I had to go to the dentist for a dental operation. I had this huge thing, and I left that afternoon and didn't come back until the next morning, Tuesday morning. And everybody was looking at me really oddly and said, "There's a letter on your desk."

And I went over to my desk, and there was a letter that said — I still have the original copy of it — that said something like, "We, the undersigned staff of *OutWeek* magazine, hereby demand that the owners fire the editor-in-chief, Gabriel Rotello, demand that he resign, and if he doesn't resign, that they fire him. We also hereby vote full confidence in the publisher of the magazine," the very person who was responsible for the last six months of terrible financial catastrophe. "And we have all these additional demands. We demand the right to vote on anybody who's going to be laid off. We

demand that anyone who's laid off gets two months' paid," whatever, "and two months'," whatever, "that their health insurance continues to be paid," all this sort of kind of demands that you would make.

And I looked at that note, because Randy Klose, who was going to invest, he kept saying to me, "How is your solidarity with the rest of the *OutWeek* staff? Because if this happens, we're not investing — you guys don't own a building. You don't have a printing press that we could sell if this goes south. We're investing in the name *OutWeek* and you, Gabriel, and your staff and your leadership of that staff, which you have done from the very beginning, and if there's anything going to rock that, we could lose our entire investment. There's not going to be anything there."

And I looked at that letter and I just said to myself, "That's it. Suicide." Even if I got up on the desk and did like a Norma Rae, that would still get out that the staff was feeling that way, and no investor would invest in *OutWeek* knowing that the staff was in this sort of staff rebellion mode.

So, I refused to resign. The publisher fired me, I left, and four weeks later, *OutWeek* went out of business in apparently just a catastrophic — you know. People can tell you the story of what happened. I went into the office a week or two after it had folded, and the entire office was completely destroyed. Tables were turned over, bookcases were turned over. People had gone on a rampage. And they were very angry at Kendall Morrison and, I think, at me, although I wasn't really part — I mean, they had been angry enough at me to demand my execution without trial or jury. But I don't think they ever understood that the idea of getting rid of the person who founded and ran the publication or any business from the beginning at precisely the moment when it is in its

01:25:00 worst sort of financial crisis, and the person who had nothing to do with the finances — I had nothing to do with — was a smart thing to do or was a catastrophic thing to do. But that's what happened.

The sad thing about it was that many people interpreted that, the closing of *OutWeek*, interpreted it as meaning that *OutWeek* had failed from a financial point of view, that it just went out of business. It failed. It went out of business because it failed. It wasn't making enough money to support itself, and it went out of business. It put a real — this is really true — it put a real damper on anybody else's ambition to do an activist publication like that afterwards, because people would just say, "Look what happened to *OutWeek*." It became sort of an object lesson of what not to do business-wise. If you want to do a thing, all that crazy stuff, and the cacophonous activist stuff, don't do that, because you'll go out of business. When, in fact, *OutWeek* was making more money than any — I mean, Troy has gone on to run *LGNY* and now *Gay New York* on a fraction of what *OutWeek* was taking in, and it just is out every week — or, I don't know, is it every week or every two weeks? Whenever it comes out, for years and years and years and years and years. And *OutWeek* could have continued *easily* for years and years and years on the income that it was making, no problem, that it had nothing to do with it.

It was a bad decision on the part of Kendall to do the structure of this thing, because what happened was after it closed, was that those investors did indeed seize Kendall Morrison's — all of his stock in both of his companies, which instantly transformed him from a wealthy gay — successful gay businessman entrepreneur to a poverty-stricken person with AIDS, without literally a penny to his name and the ability to even support himself and have a roof over his head.

He has clawed his way back somehow to he has a decent life now, but the last time we spoke, he said there's not a day goes by that he does not think about the end of *OutWeek* and what happened, because the effect on him was just so totally catastrophic. On me, I lost all of my money, but I just sort of bounced right back and whatever. Who cares? But, anyway, so that's what happened.

**SS: Okay. Do you want to ask anything?**

**JH: Oh, yes. So, Ann Northrop tells the story about your mother's reaction to Stop the Church, and I wondered if you wanted to correct it or enlarge on it.**

GR: Well, I mean, actually I don't, but I will enlarge on another Ann Northrop story, because this has a direct bearing on — oh, basically what Ann said was that my mother said, after Stop the Church, that in her circles in Connecticut, people had thought that gay people were pushovers, basically, were wimpy, and they would never think that again because of that. And it was so controversial, people were so angry about it, but it was like don't mess with those people.

But my Ann Northrop story is this, that there was a conference of, at the height of *OutWeek* and ACT UP, which they really sort of peaked at the same time, a conference of gay and lesbian leaders in upstate New York, and I was invited to participate as the editor-in-chief of *OutWeek*, and Ann and Robert Garcia were invited to participate as representatives of ACT UP. And we got there and it was a sort of weekend-long schmooze fest of various kinds of, you know, seminars and things, like we all got to — out in the woods somewhere. And the last night of it, there was supposed to

be a big — everybody came into this big auditorium, and there was supposed to be a thing about some subject. I don't remember what it was.

And at the last minute, like an hour before, the head of whole thing came to me and Robert Garcia and Ann and said, "You know what? What we'd really like to have this be is about outing. So, could we do that instead? We think it would just be really interesting to have a real good discussion about outing. So, the way we would like it to be is that the three of you will be sitting up on the stage, or the dais or the front or whatever, and you can each give, like, a little five-minute presentation about your perspective on it, and then we'll just open it up to the leadership of the gay and lesbian leadership to discuss."

01:30:00

And we were all sort of like not really comfortable with that, not sure that that's such a good idea. And they were like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. This is the leadership. It's Tom Stoddard and it's Paula Ettelbrick, and these are the leaders. Nothing bad will happen."

So, we finally said, "Okay, we'll do it." So, we get up there and we do it, and we each give our little five-minute thing, and then it turned into the closest thing to a Maoist struggle session. Do you know what a struggle session was? Where you wear a dunce hat and "You are the worst thing that ever happened. No, sit down. You, I can't believe you." It turned into the entire room was this roiling mass of screaming fists, screaming. It went on for like an hour.

And we were like, "But — ."

“You don’t speak now. How dare you speak? You had your five minutes. Now it’s time for the community to tell you what we think about this.” And it was unbelievable. I’ve never experienced anything like it in my life.

And the next day, we got up and Ann was driving us back. She claims that she doesn’t remember this, but this is totally true. Ann was driving us back. It was me, Robert Garcia, and Ann in the car, driving us back to Manhattan. It was like maybe a ninety-minute drive. And the entire way back to Manhattan, tears were pouring down her face. She was just sobbing, and when she wasn’t sobbing, you would just look at her and just tears would — and then she would start crying again.

I was like, “Ann, you know, come on. You can’t take it so personally.”

And she was like – I mean, it was devastating to her. I’m sure that she got over it at some point. But that experience, which was really only maybe a third of the way into the *OutWeek* period, only reconfirmed my feelings.

**SS: What were they so mad about, though?**

GR: Oh, they hated outing. They thought that outing was just the worst thing that ever happened. It violated every notion of gay and lesbian everything. It was all about privacy and it was all about respecting, you know — and, you know, there’s nothing wrong with it. I mean, it clearly was going to be a controversial thing. We had no illusions that that particular subject was going to be very controversial, so there’s no — I mean, to this day, people still say, “I think that that’s just terrible, and I don’t care what the circumstances are, you know, whatever. I’m totally against it.” So that’s not the point. Whatever they were mad at, they were made in an insane reactive way that

was truly vicious. And they were calling us vicious. But it was really bad. So that's my Ann Northrop story.

**SS: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you want to talk about?**

GR: Well, I would sort of — we could end, talk about what I think that ACT UP didn't do right.

**SS: Okay, yeah. Tell us, please.**

GR: Well, ACT UP was really brilliant about treatment, and it did not allow political — its treatment protocol, if you will, was based in hard science, but when it came to HIV prevention, ACT UP had politicized prevention the way that everybody else pretty much politicized prevention. Prevention was meant to be a program, a strategy that had a dual purpose, which was to prevent infections of HIV, but only in ways that allowed the gay sexual revolution to continue in the midst of a fatal sexually transmitted disease. So, we had slogans like —

**SS: "Men Use Condoms or Beat It."**

01:35:00

GR: That's actually a pretty good one. I'm talking about the anti-scientific ones. "There's No Such Thing As Risk Groups, Only Risky Behaviors" or "It Doesn't Matter How Many People You Do It With, As Long As You Do It With A Condom" or "Sex Doesn't Cause AIDS; A Virus Does." Those are all political slogans that lay the onus of — that lay onto prevention a political dimension that is not, strictly speaking, science. I mean, no scientist, no epidemiologist would ever say, "There's no such thing as risk groups, only risky behaviors." Epidemiology is based on the concept of risk groups and all that stuff. And no virologist would say — to say that sex doesn't

cause AIDS; a virus does is the equivalent of like saying, you know, smoking doesn't cause cancer; tars and nicotines do.

**SS: I just want to interrupt you for a second. We've interviewed 179 people in fifteen years. I have never seen those slogans.**

GR: Oh, they were — go look them up.

**SS: And were they part of, what, Gran Fury or who —**

GR: I don't remember, but they were definitely — they were ACT UP slogans for sure, and they were used —

**SS: Okay. No one's ever mentioned them.**

GR: They were used to deflect — they were used for good reasons from a political point of view.

**SS: Because of stigma.**

GR: Yeah. There were two big things. One was that there was this big stigma about sex, and people were trying to avoid that. And one was that gay people, particularly gay men, had been blamed by the Right for the epidemic. "It's your fault." You know, people felt very strongly that you needed — this was the political side of it — that you needed to sort of get rid of that shame, and you sort of get rid of that stigma of being the cause of the epidemic. And so that was the political reason. But to say that sex doesn't cause AIDS; a virus does is really like saying that smoking doesn't cause cancer; tars and nicotines do. It's like that's true, but how do tars and nicotines get into your lungs? Oh, with smoking. And how does a virus — and they continued to do that. We continued to do it. I was just as guilty of this at that time, during the time of —

**SS: So, you think it should have behavior oriented?**

GR: I think it should have been science oriented.

**SS: And what would that mean exactly?**

GR: Well, the science of AIDS is that condoms on a personal level are the most effective way to stop transmission from person to person, so if you personally want to be protected from HIV if you don't have it, or protect your partner if you do have it, condoms are the way to go. But in the real world where at the most you could ever hope to get — and this would be optimistic — would be 50 to 60 percent of the population using condoms on a consistent level, the number of partners becomes, what's call the contact rate in epidemiology, becomes of paramount importance.

And what happened in the AIDS epidemic was that with very high prevalence and trying to reduce infectivity, bringing it as low as possible by getting 50 to 60 percent use of condoms, that was not going to work to end the AIDS epidemic as long as the contact rate remained as high as it was. And that's the science of it. That's just hard science. You won't find any epidemiologist that would disagree with that. And therefore, a fundamental science-based message would be, "Use condoms every single time," knowing that people won't use them every single time but make that the message.

And number of partners is a gigantic risk category, because we live in a risk group which is a group of people saturated with HIV. And yet our philosophy was, "There's No Such Thing As Risk Groups, Only Risky Behaviors," "It Doesn't Matter How Many Partners You Have, As Long As You Use A Condom Every Time," which on a personal level is true, but not on a population level. And so, it got to the point where if you were to have brought the people — well, this did happen — the people that were most concerned with treatment into a room of scientists, and the scientists said to the

ACT UP treatment people, “Tell us your thoughts about treatment,” and they did, the scientists would go, “Oh, my god, these guys totally know what they’re talking about. This is amazing.” And that did indeed, in fact, happen.

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But if you had brought a roomful of ACT UP prevention activists, you know, condom crusaders, into a room of epidemiologists and said, “Tell us your thoughts about ending the AIDS epidemic through prevention,” and the ACT UP people said what they thought, the epidemiologists would have said, “These guys don’t have a clue as to why the epidemic happened to gay men, why it’s continuing to gay men, and if gay people don’t have a clue and their largest activist group doesn’t have a clue, and is actually part of the problem rather than part of the solution, the epidemic, as far as transmission is concerned, is just going to go on and on and on, endlessly into the future,” which indeed is precisely what has happened.

And when I then finally wrote *Sexual Ecology* some years later to lay this all out in a meticulous scientific fashion, I was vociferously attacked by many of my dear former comrades from ACT UP, who were horrified by this, the very people who I would have thought would have predicted back then would have been the ones most receptive to this message because it was rooted in science and they were into science and they wanted to solve the AIDS epidemic through science.

**SS: So, did you limit your partners?**

GR: I beg your pardon?

**SS: Did you limit your partners?**

GR: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely.

**SS: So, what is a number that you felt was an appropriate number?**

GR: Well, from a population point of view, it's — you know, it's not a question of coming up with an appropriate number. It really depends on how saturated your particular little sexual ecosystem happens to be. But just knowing that that is — it's almost like saying what number is appropriate is almost like saying what percentage of time is it appropriate to not use a condom. It's kind of like, well, really you should just try to use a condom all the time, and really you should just try to have one partner at a time. You should engage in serial monogamy, should date somebody and then start having sex, and have sex with that person for as long as you want. And then when that's not working out anymore, then break up with that person and look around and start dating somebody else and then have sex with that person. And you should try to do that as much as you can.

And if everybody did that and brought in these different mathematical models, it depends on how the mathematical model is worked, but if you — they've made models where you sort of have, if the average number of partners is 5.6 per year, that's an endless AIDS epidemic. If you bring it down on the average to 3.2 per year, then you're at epidemic threshold endlessly into the future, but it doesn't get any bigger. And if you drop it to 2.1, the epidemic just goes right out of business.

**SS: I understand. What is really the obstacle? Is it hard for people to form relationships?**

GR: Well, I think that that might be an obstacle, but I think that we created — you know, gay liberation began just by a moment of historical accident, began at the peak moment of the sexual revolution. The first gay liberation, which started in Germany in the 19-teens and 1920s, did not do that. I think it loosened up after World War I to a

certain extent, but there was a very activist gay world prior to Hitler coming to power in Germany that was beginning to just spread around the world that did not see the liberation of homosexual people as equivalent to sexual — you know, the license to have five hundred partners a year or something. It just didn't happen.

But the way that happened with us, it did, and people came to equate gay liberation with a sexual revolution liberation and think of those two as the same thing. And of course, it's fun. I certainly did it. It was *really* fun. And we felt that we were striking a blow for the true liberation of the human spirit. I liken it very much to the same way that we felt in the sixties about drugs before we found out how dangerous that could be.

**SS: I mean, I do understand what you're saying. I'm just trying to ask you a different kind of question. So, are you saying that if someone's not in a relationship, that they really shouldn't be having sex?**

GR: Well, I mean, they shouldn't go out and have sex with five people a night. They shouldn't go on to Grindr every night and have sex with somebody every night. They shouldn't go to a sex party and have sex with ten people at a sex party.

**SS: And what should they do?**

GR: They should look for somebody to have sex with, and then find them and have sex with them.

**SS: So, you're talking about relationships?**

GR: Well, I mean, what do college kids do?

**SS: Different things. Depends on who they are.**

01:45:00

GR: Okay, so that. What do college kids do? They don't have an AIDS epidemic. There's no self-sustaining AIDS epidemic on college campuses in America. College kids have lots of sex. They change partners frequently. They're not locked into rigid monogamy. But their patterns of sexual behavior are nowhere near enough to amplify a very difficult-to-transmit virus like HIV into an epidemic. And we thought that that was going to happen in the eighties, and it never even remotely happened.

**SS: But that's because of heterosexual transmission is a whole other game.**

GR: No, it's not.

**JH: Talk about heterosexual transmission, because the vast majority of people with HIV in this world —**

GR: Are heterosexuals. That's exactly right.

**JH: So, what do they do?**

GR: Well, I wrote about this in *Sexual Ecology*. I have an entire chapter about it. The places in the world where heterosexual AIDS epidemics erupted were places where people had patterns of sexual behavior that were very similar to patterns of sexual behavior that gay men had.

**SS: But they have female-to-male transmission. We don't have that in North America. It's never been proven.**

GR: What do you mean?

**SS: It's never been proven in North America that there's female-to-male transmission.**

GR: Oh, sure there has. Oh, absolutely.

**SS: No.**

GR: Sure there has. There is female-to-male transmission. I mean, there's nothing magical about HIV that in Africa a woman can give it to a man, but in America that can't possibly happen. How would that work?

**SS: I mean, the U.N. feels that it's circumcision-related, female-to-male transmission.**

GR: Well, there's a lot of people that aren't circumcised. What about in Europe where nobody's circumcised?

**SS: So, what you're saying, that the reason we don't have a heterosexual male epidemic here is because —**

GR: The reason that we don't have an epidemic, according to just standard epidemiology, this is not — there's nothing radical about what I'm saying at all. This is like Epidemiology 101. The reason AIDS epidemics — the epidemics of extremely-difficult-to-transmit pathogens like HIV, that has a 1 percent chance of transmission in any instance of unsafe sex, as opposed to gonorrhea, it's like 90 percent. HIV, it's 1 percent. It requires extraordinary, extraordinarily high contact rates in order to amplify that into a self-sustaining epidemic.

You can have heterosexual transmission, which we do have here, on a sort of a one-to-one basis where somebody will get HIV from, you know, IV drug use or some other thing, and then pass it on to their heterosexual partner, etc. But for it to become a self-sustaining heterosexual epidemic, you have to have the kinds of conditions in Thailand, the kinds of conditions in parts of Africa, the kinds of conditions in the Caribbean, the kinds of conditions where people have very, very, very large numbers of

partners with people who also have large numbers of partners with people who also have large numbers of partners, creating what are called core groups, and then when the core group becomes saturated with the disease, then there has to be what's called mixing or bridging between that core group and people outside, because people — the only self-sustaining heterosexual epidemic, by the way, in the United States was among crack cocaine users in the 1980s. They actually created a self-sustaining, where people didn't get it from needles. They got it — a guy would give it to a woman, and then a woman would give it to a guy, and then the guy would give it to another woman, and then they actually created in several cities in North America self-sustaining heterosexual AIDS epidemics in North America in the 1980s because they were having huge numbers of partners with people who were having huge numbers of partners with people that were having huge numbers of partners.

Whenever you have that anyplace in the world, if HIV gets into that mix, you'll have an epidemic. And when you don't have it, you won't have it. So here, for example, gay men had it, and so we had right here in New York City this raging epidemic where people were living right next door in the same apartment buildings, whatever, surrounded by a heterosexual majority, where people were having sex, including young people were going to singles bars, whatever, but they didn't have bath houses and they didn't have sex clubs and they didn't have on that scale that you need to have it with the self-sustaining thing, and so it didn't happen. And that was predicted from the very, very beginning of the epidemic. All that stuff was all predicted, Farr's Law, all that. So, it's all in my book, and it just, you know, it unfolded just like people expected it to unfold.

**SS: Okay. I don't want to argue your theory with you. But, okay, so in our current sexual ecology in the age of viral suppression and people who are no longer infectious on PrEP –**

GR: Still chugging along very, you know, intensely.

**SS: So, what is your feeling about the current reality?**

01:50:00 GR: Well, the current reality is very bad. I mean, it's really, really bad. I think that PrEP offers potentially real hope, although there's the danger — and, again, this comes right back to the same issue again — the danger with PrEP is the same problem that happened when the drugs came online in '96 and '97. From an epidemiological point of view, it's called risk compensation. And what happens is, you know, the thing that determines a sexually transmitted epidemic infectivity, likelihood to be infected in a single instance, contact rate, and prevalence, the percentage of people that are already infected, the mathematical mixing of those three things is the thing that determines what's going to happen. And the purpose of condoms is to bring infectivity, the infectivity leg of the transmission, down so much that prevalence and contact rate wouldn't really matter, because if infectivity went down to zero because everybody used a condom, then what difference does it make how many people are already infected and how many partners people had? But you never got it down that low, so prevalence and contact rate remained huge factors and continued the epidemic.

When the drugs came along in the late nineties, by lowering people's viral load to undetectable, that, in effect, lowered the prevalence leg. It didn't actually lower real prevalence, because those people are still, technically speaking, infected with HIV. But from the point of view of prevention, it lowered the prevalence leg quite

substantially, not affecting, hopefully, the contact rate or infectivity. People would continue to use condoms just as much, and the contact rate would stay just as what it was. And if that had happened, then the lowering of the prevalence leg of the triad of risk would have been enough to extinguish the epidemic in most sort of models when they do the math and run it through the computers. But that didn't happen because of what's called risk compensation, which is that people felt that they were no longer at so much risk, so the contact rate went up. People began having sex with more partners. And the infectivity leg of the triad went up because people started using condoms less often, because nobody liked to use them anyway, and if you weren't that afraid of AIDS anymore, then why? And the rise in the contact rate and the rise in the infectivity leg swamped the benefit of the decline in the prevalence leg and led to a continued epidemic. In fact, if anything, it got worse after the drugs came online, in terms of new infections of gay men.

So now we stand at this new crossroads where now we have a new thing, which is PrEP. PrEP does just exactly what condoms does. PrEP attacks the triad of risk at the infectivity leg of the triad, tries to lower infectivity per sexual act. And if that becomes widespread, particularly among the core groups of people that have the most number of partners, and everything else stays the same, then it could have a really, really positive impact. And I think that the early evidence is that that is very possibly going to happen, because they've now done these large-scale studies of people taking PrEP, and they have not noticed that people are reporting that they're having far more partners than they were having before or using condoms far less than they were using them before. And so that's very, very hopeful, because if that holds and risk compensation does not

take hold again, then that could actually have a huge impact and ultimately do what prevention should do, which is to bring the transmission of HIV down below the epidemic threshold, below the point where one person infects, on average, more than one other person and the epidemic begins to go away.

But, if according to mathematical models right now, that will be true, even if people double the unsafe contact rate. If PrEP becomes widespread — this is according to one major mathematical model that just recently was done — if PrEP becomes widespread and people double the unsafe contact rate, meaning basically a combination of doubling your partners and/or doubling the time that you don't use condoms, PrEP would still provide a benefit. If people triple the unsafe contact rate, it'll just be a wash and things will continue the way they are. And if people quadruple the unsafe contact rate, then it'll make things worse.

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So, the question is, what's going to happen? I think it's probably going to be pretty good. I can't imagine — it's hard for me to imagine — people think I'm a big pessimist — hard to imagine people quadrupling the unsafe contact rate in the face of PrEP. I think people already raised the unsafe contact rate hugely when the drugs came online in the late nineties, and it's hard for me to imagine them quadrupling it.

But at any rate, the whole point of all of this is that the contact rate — in epidemiology, the contact rate is key. It's the reason why AIDS happened to gay men in the first place, and it continues to be the underlying thing, and we never addressed it. We never wanted to even talk about it. We were actually hostile to a logical scientific discussion of what epidemiologists all know and what is just standard in epidemiology. And they refused to talk, and they told me when I was writing *Sexual Ecology*. I was

like, “How come you guys don’t tell everybody about this all the time? How come you’re not just constantly giving speeches and harping on this?”

And they would say, “Well, you know, we tried to do that, and publish some new study, and people stood up screaming, ‘Murderer! Homophobe! Liar,’” you know, whatever. “And we said to ourselves, ‘You know what? We need the cooperation of gay people, particularly gay men to even do these studies. If we become lightning rods for controversy, nobody’s even going to enroll in the studies that we do. So, we will just do this work, talk amongst ourselves, publish our papers quietly, and have conferences, but we’re not going to get — Rotello, if you want to write a book about it, go ahead and write a book about it, we will support you 100%, we’ll give you all of our information, we’ll help you write the damn book,” which they did, basically, “but we’re not going to get up there and make speeches about it.”

So that’s where like an ACT UP could have — that’s where sort of like the Jim Eigos and folks like that of prevention could have been absorbing this material and coming to the floor and saying, “This is what’s happening. This is why this is happening. We need to figure out smart, clever ACT UP ways of addressing this.” But we never did that. And so, to me, that was a big failure because it just means that the epidemic is just going to continue and continue until ultimately, hopefully, we’re rescued by a medical intervention. But in the meantime, how many people have to suffer and die?

**SS: Well, I want to say something back to you. I mean, I think that that’s one way of conceptualizing it, but, you know, I mean, men don’t like**

**condoms, and women get pregnant all the time because straight men don't want to use condoms.**

GR: True. Absolutely.

**SS: And condoms were not the technology that was going to solve this problem.**

GR: No, they were not. It was going to be a combination.

**SS: And they never would have.**

GR: It was going to be a combination of condoms and lowering the contact rate.

**SS: But if every person in this country had access to healthcare and every person who was positive could become virally suppressed and not infectious, then nobody would get infected. So PrEP is a —**

GR: No, that's not true.

**SS: Why is that not true?**

GR: It's not true because the vast majority of new infections happen immediately upon your own infection when you have no idea that you are infected. The only way that that would work is if everybody in this country went to the doctor basically every three days and got tested every three days. But if you're like a normal person and you go every few months, every six months, and then three weeks after you went to your good healthcare with your good doctor, you get a really nasty cold, but you're not going to go to the doctor for that, and then you have sex with twenty-seven people between then and the six months later when you go back for your next good checkup with your good HMO and your good healthcare, and you just infected fifteen people in those six months,

and now those fifteen people who also have great healthcare and also go have checkups all the time, it's all about the contact rate. That would not do it.

Unless you really wanted to just corral everybody to go to the doctor literally once a week, you could actually probably stamp it out. If you spent like a year just grabbing gay men off the street and just dragging them in to doctors every single week and forcing them to be tested and forcing them to take drugs, you could probably do it. But that's not going to happen, so, no, that's not the solution. Epidemiologically, say that to any epidemiologist, and they'll all say, "Oh, that would be great. Of course, we need to do that. That's a wonderful thing and we should do that." But as long as the contact rate is high and as long as prevalence is high, they run a mathematical model, no, that wouldn't really do it.

**SS: So, what is the real reason that you can't get large groups of people to change their relationship to their sexual practice?**

02:00:00

GR: People haven't even tried to get them to change. Who's tried? I mean, we're facing a heterosexual majority that still to a significant extent is uncomfortable with us even having sex at all, and a political climate of, like, the Helms Amendment and all that stuff that forbids people to even use government money to teach gay people about sex, other than just abstinence, like just don't have sex if you're gay. So, the mainstream world isn't trying. This would be something we would have to do ourselves, and who's trying? I mean, you've asked, like, what do we have to do. Nobody — people, you know, again, I wrote a book about this, and I got nothing but total shit about it from the very people who I thought would have been the very people who would be trying to get people to try to do it.

**SS: Okay. Let's just do this one more time and then we can stop. But, I mean, people have been trying to help women not get pregnant when they don't want to for a really long time, and it doesn't work. It's not just gay people.**

GR: No, it's not, and that's a key point, because using an intervention, a technological fix, when it comes to something like pregnancy or something like AIDS, and relying on condoms or any — even a biomedical strategy, because people also try to get people to not get pregnant, you know, using pills and things like that, is not —

**SS: And implants.**

GR: Right. But there is a difference, which is that any man, basically, can get a woman pregnant. Not any gay man can give HIV to any other gay man. You have to have, basically speaking — in the larger scheme of things, you have to have lots of partners in order to find one who is just at that moment when he, relatively newly infected himself, before he goes to the doctor, before he finds out about this, is able to infect you. And that has to happen on a huge scale amongst thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of people to keep the epidemic rolling along. That's completely different from birth control, because birth control can be a monogamous couple, and, of course, the husband can infect the wife or the boyfriend can infect the girlfriend.

With AIDS, AIDS doesn't work that way. You have to find the right guy. And if you just lower the contact rate enough, then that finding would drop below that critical threshold where the average infected person infects at least, on average, one other person, the epidemic threshold, the tipping point. Once you drop below that, the epidemic inexorably begins to go the same way that every other epidemic in the history

of the world ever went, which is to extinction, to disappear. Because all other epidemics in world history have ultimately all ended because they drop below threshold.

And we have had it within our power to do that theoretically, but we simply neglected the science of epidemiology. We were hostile to the science of epidemiology. People don't know anything about the science of epidemiology. They know about the triad of risk. They don't know about contact, about the core groups. They don't know about mixing and bridging. They don't know about serial monogamy versus sequential monogamy versus having your partners, mixing them up. All of those, these are fundamental, like Epidemiology 101, and yet gay men who became huge experts in virology and conversant in the stocks of drug companies and, you know, all that kind of stuff, don't know anything about that.

**SS: And why were you able to understand this? What is your characterological relationship to this?**

GR: I don't know. I mean, I don't know. I was concerned about it, and I think one thing, for me, really was that because I was a journalist, I'm able to call — I have the time to investigate stuff like that, and then I'm able to call people up and say, "Hey, my name is Gabriel Rotello. I'm at *Newsday*," or I'm wherever, "and I'm writing an article. You did this huge study. Could you just walk me through this and explain this to me, whatever?"

And as I began writing about it, I began realizing that none of my friends or my colleagues knew anything about it. We really didn't know why the AIDS epidemic happened to us. If you asked us back in the ACT UP days, we would have said it

02:05:00 happened because of governmental neglect. It happened because the drug companies

weren't whatever. And all of which was terrible. I'm not dissing governmental neglect and drug — and the media that didn't report all of that. But if you actually, you know, ask people, yeah, but why did the AIDS epidemic happen to gay men, just mechanically? Why didn't it happen to singles in New York City, or kids and college-aged kids in universities all over the country, or whatever, people kind of didn't even want to know. I think people kind of thought that it might have had something to do with bath houses and stuff like that, maybe, but the mechanisms of why that was happening, it's, "Eh, I don't want to know about that. I really don't want to know about it."

And that was fine for me. As long as we thought that we'd solved it in the eighties, we thought we'd solved it with condoms. New infections came way down. We thought that was because of condoms and that it was a successful strategy. So why dig into the past when there's no need to dredge all that up? But that wasn't why new infections dropped, and it really didn't have anything to do with why new infections dropped. New infections dropped because when you reach saturation in a population, new infections have no place to go. Everybody who could be infected pretty much already is, and then new infections will drop down to almost nothing until a new, younger group of cows or human beings or mosquitoes or whatever enter the population that are susceptible and were not around to become infected the first round, and then they will get infected in the next round, and then it will just continue pretty much forever. And that's what happened and that's why it happened. And people, once we realized that, then we should have really gotten busy, and we didn't.

**SS: Okay. I just want to touch on one other thing. You've been very nice. We've been here for two and a half hours. We've been interviewing people for**

**fifteen years. We've noticed in the last few years a lot of people we're interviewing are showing incredible amount of trauma. The older people get, the more it expresses. When we started, it was not visible. All these people with crystal meth problems, with all kinds of depression, mania, all kinds of disorganization, poverty, I mean, most of the people that we've been interviewing have been showing extreme trauma.**

GR: That is sad. That is really sad.

**SS: Is there anyone that you know of who's looking at this or conceptualizing this or —**

GR: Well, I know that there's that study going on at Columbia. There's a study going on at Columbia about AIDS Survivor Syndrome, particularly focused on activists. I was interviewed for it. It was a very interesting interview, because I started crying about fifteen minutes into the interview. I just had no idea, and it was a very personal — and it was all about your personal experience and what happened then, and it was all, you know, Hap dying and all the stuff about — and I just started sort of crying in it. And I was just shocked at myself, and I was really kind of embarrassed in a weird way. I was saying to myself, "Why am I doing this?" And I realized afterwards that I shouldn't necessarily have been that surprised, because in all these years, nobody had ever asked me any of those things before, in all that whole, like, "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" Well, there is nobody to ask us that, really, and so nobody had ever asked. And as a result, you try not to even think about it that much. You think about the good stuff. You think about the ACT UP meetings and the solidarity and the demos, and lesbians and gay men working together, and the changes that you made and all that stuff.

But you try not to think about that stuff until somebody is doing a study and starts asking you about it, and then it was just like, “Excuse me, I have to stop for a minute,” kind of thing. I was actually afraid that might happen in this interview. It didn’t happen.

So, there is somebody studying it. They’re at Columbia, and I hope that they — they call it AIDS Survivor Syndrome. But it’s a terrible, terrible thing. It’s very, very real. And, I mean, I don’t really feel that I suffer from it. I never became a crystal meth addict or anything like that. I’ve been very busy and done all sorts of wonderful things with my life, and I’m very grateful that I’m still here and all that stuff. But I see it around me and I recognize it, and I feel very badly about it when I see people, particularly people that I really admired in ACT UP and looked up to as paragons of strength and sort of moral certitude and all that stuff, and then somebody will call me and say, “Did you hear that so-and-so is like a huge tweaker, and they found him under a bridge and he’s — ?” whatever. It’s like, no, are you kidding? Like, how does that even happen when you’ve made it to forty-six years old in one piece? And then that happens.

02:10:00

So, I will add, however, a note of caution to that, which is — and this is what I urged them, the Columbia thing, to study, which was that I have a number of friends in Los Angeles that that’s happened to, people my age or maybe a little younger than me, who were not AIDS activists and who, shockingly to me, seemed to be virtually unaffected by the AIDS epidemic. They were living in a small town somewhere. And I’d say, “Well, how many friends do you know that died of AIDS?”

“Oh, I had one friend. That was so sad, in, like, 1991. He wasn’t my best friend, but he was a good friend, and he died of AIDS.”

And I’m like, “Is that it? Are you serious?”

He said, “Yeah, well, you know, in Indianapolis there wasn’t really a big AIDS epidemic.” I’m just throwing out Indianapolis. Small town, small city, USA. “It wasn’t really a big deal. We knew about it. We read about it in New York, San Francisco, but it didn’t really affect us.” And then that guy will start doing crystal meth and will become a huge mess.

So, I then sort of wonder how much of it is AIDS Survivor Syndrome, which I’m sure it is. I’m not denigrating that at all, at all. I mean, I think that’s huge. But I also think that there’s something else going on, particularly about crystal meth, which is a sexual drug. I mean, why aren’t people taking heroin? Why aren’t people just becoming alcoholics? Or why aren’t people just snorting a lot of cocaine? Why is it crystal meth? Well, crystal meth is a sex drug that allows you to have apparently — I’ve never taken it, but, by all reports, to have like tons of sex with millions of people and have it feel like it felt when you were eighteen years old again. It’s just unbelievable. And that, I think, is very enticing to people as they get older and can no longer operate in our high contact-rate population and are feeling discarded because if a big part of the gay world is a high contact rate and cruising and picking people up, and you no longer can do that, and then all of a sudden there’s a drug where, oh, yes, you can, I think that’s very intoxicating to many people. So, I don’t know how much that plays in, but anyway, I don’t want to denigrate at all the AIDS Survivor thing. I think it’s huge. And, you know, as I say, although I have survived pretty well, I mean, I have it too. You have it, too, I bet.

**SS: Well, here we are. We’re obsessed with this. Right?**

GR: Right. I think that we all — I mean, I don't think you could go through that, you wouldn't be human, if you lost that many friends and comrades, and then just said, "Okay, well, that's in the past. Now let's just go on with our lives." You wouldn't be human. So, of course it has an impact, and it should, I guess, have an impact.

The question is what do you do with that, and what you're doing with it, with this, what you guys are doing with it, that's good. Writing about it is good. Trying to fix it is good, whether it's with prevention, writing about PrEP, or working with homeless gays, whatever, that's good. You know, subsiding into drug addiction and all that, obviously, not good, but hopefully people can get help for that.

We don't have the solidarity that we had anymore. I think that's another key thing with ACT UP. I think it's really true. I think that people feel that that was the most meaningful thing that they ever did in their lives, and that there'll never be another thing in your life that will be as intense as that and as rewarding as that, as that was. And I think that's really true for most people. I think it's true for practically everybody. How could you ever do something that great again, against that emotional backdrop of death, your best friends dying, and then going and then meeting and going out to dinner afterwards and putting your arms around each other, and people together, people taking care of each other, lesbians and gay men together, which, you know, was not the way things in my world were before. So that's tough. What do you do when you're sitting home watching *Jeopardy* on a Monday night and you think, "Oh, Monday night"? It's tough.

02:15:00

**SS: Okay. Let's end there. Thank you, Gabriel.**

GR: As you can see, I'll just keep talking forever and ever and ever.

**SS: No, thank you so much.**

GR: I'm a blabbermouth.

**SS: We really appreciate it. Thank you so much.**

GR: Cool.