ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Interviewee: **Duncan Osborne**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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

DUNCAN OSBORNE: My name is Duncan Osborne. I'm fifty-seven years old. We are in my home in Brooklyn, New York. It is May 5th, 2015.

SS: Okay, where were you born, Duncan?

DO: I was born in Massachusetts.

SS: In where?

DO: Lexington, Massachusetts. Well, technically Arlington, but I grew up in Lexington.

SS: And what's the difference?

DO: Two different towns. The hospital was in Arlington.

SS: So, it's not Arlington, like a district of Boston.

DO: No, it's a town. It's a town.

SS: So, what did your parents do?

DO: My father is a professor of — was a professor of physics at MIT. My mother was, for most of her marriage to my father, was a homemaker, and then was eventually the editor at the MIT *Press*.

SS: Oh, really?

DO: Yeah.

SS: How interesting. Oh, so this is in your blood.

DO: What is in my blood?

SS: The printed word.

DO: Sure.

SS: So, when did you start writing?

DO: I started writing in the late eighties. My first article was for *OutWeek* magazine, titled "Midtown Cops at Gay Porn Flick."

SS: Oh, what was the story?

DO: A friend of mine called me and told me that — he was aware that I was participating in organizations like ACT UP and Queer Nation, and so I got a call from a friend of mine who said that he'd been at a porn flick in Midtown Manhattan, and that in the middle of this movie, some police officers from a nearby precinct arrived and went marching through the audience and shining their flashlights on everyone's faces. They were clearly looking for someone. And he said this went on for several minutes.

So, I called Andrew Miller, who was a friend of mine that I met in ACT UP, and Andrew, at the time, was the editor of *OutWeek* magazine, news editor of *OutWeek* magazine, and said, "Write a story for me." So that was my first story.

SS: Oh, okay. So, you didn't start out in journalism. I didn't realize that.

DO: No, no.

SS: What was your first interest?

DO: Well, I came to New York to be an actor. That didn't work out very well.

SS: Did you train beforehand?

DO: I did. I got a Bachelor's of Fine Arts from the University of Colorado.

SS: In theater.

DO: In theater.

SS: And then you came to New York.

DO: Correct. In 1984 –

SS: Okay.

DO: – right after Bernhard Goetz did his thing in the subways. This is completely perhaps irrelevant and unrelated, but I was traveling on a 2 Train one day right after Goetz had done his thing, and he had not yet been captured, and I got on the train and there was a plainclothes officer who was distributing flyers with a picture of the suspect, the assailant. And he started to look at his picture and he looked at me, and he looked at his picture, and he looked at me, and I was thinking, "I've been in New York for less than two weeks, and I'm about to get arrested for a crime that I did not commit, so."

SS: How weird.

DO: Yeah, weird. Discomforting.

SS: Yeah, absolutely. But so, by the time you got here, AIDS was already happening. So, when you were in Colorado — is that where you came from?

DO: Yes, that's where I came from.

SS: So, was AIDS present in your reality there before that?

DO: No. I had a roommate at the time who was also gay, and I can recall us having one conversation. This was after the *Times* article came out, I believe, in '81. And he said to me — he just was sort of talking about something that was happening with

gay men, and it didn't register at all with me. I just had no awareness of it or consciousness of it.

SS: So then when you decided to move here, it wasn't on your mind that you were coming to AIDS Central?

DO: Not at all.

SS: So how did it first present itself in your experience here?

DO: As I met people, as I got to know people, as I made friends, some of my friends were HIV-positive, and so that's how it came into my life. Derek Hodel, who I'm sure you know, was my first roommate and was a good friend of mine.

SS: Was he already active?

00:05:00

DO: What was he doing? I actually moved in with him on Sterling Place, and I'm trying to remember what he was doing at that time. I don't think he was yet active, but he pretty quickly got active. His first job was with the Buyers Club, but I think that was a couple years, two or three years after I arrived in New York. But it was hard once I arrived in New York. I mean, you just — if you were in the gay community, it was unavoidable. I mean, it was a topic you could not miss, unless you were a complete idiot, I suppose, but.

SS: Were you afraid?

DO: Yeah, I think somewhat, somewhat. I mean, I guess I always believed that I had the means to avoid becoming infected, and so I wasn't terribly afraid. So, I had a sense of feeling empowered that I didn't — so I didn't have to be afraid, terrified, right? So, I mean, I used condoms when I had sex with guys.

SS: Yeah, but a lot of people that we've interviewed over the last fifteen years have talked about how difficult it was to suddenly adjust to condoms, how strange it seemed, and maybe even almost impossible at first, when they first got here.

DO: I didn't have that experience. I mean, one of the first guys that I had a relationship with in New York City was HIV-positive and was not – we didn't have any problem negotiating that. It was not — somehow it just didn't seem to me to be — it seemed to me that I had the ability to avoid becoming infected, and so I kind of felt like fear is not something that I have to kind of deal with. Obviously, it was not — I didn't want to become infected. I had no interest in doing that. But I didn't feel like — I didn't feel terrified. I didn't feel terribly afraid.

SS: Okay, so when did you get involved with AIDS beyond the personal realm? Did someone you know get sick, or did you join any organizations?

DO: Well, by the personal realm, well, the first organization I joined was ACT UP.

SS: Oh, okay.

DO: So that was after the '87 March on Washington, when I saw them and I was just struck by the group. I was struck by the energy and the commitment to a cause, I mean the very serious interest in a cause, and so I found that very powerful and very attractive.

SS: And had anyone in your life died at that point?

DO: I'm trying to remember when — I had a couple of friends. I'm not one of these people who's got a big long list of friends.

SS: Right. But two people can be just as devastating.

DO: I think that a friend of mine died prior to that. I was part of a fellowship, a twelve-step group, and so I'd actually stopped using drugs and alcohol in 1984, which I should say I think contributed to, to an extent, my ability to avoid becoming HIV-infected, given the role that drugs and alcohol play in that. And so, in that organization, the guy who was my first sponsor in New York City, he died. I believe he died before '87 when I saw ACT UP, and so there was a group of us who were sort of the caretakers for him, and it was a struggle, I mean, it was and it was to confront kind of a healthcare system, the hospitals, and trying to get him into care and trying to get people to respond to his condition was frustrating, trying to get his family to recognize the seriousness of what they were dealing with. He had dementia. He had pretty serious dementia. That's really like the first thing that happened to him, and so there came a time — he lived in New Jersey, and there came a time when he was arrested — I can't remember what it was he did — and he was in Hudson County Jail. And so, we called — we found a defense attorney who was known over in New Jersey, and he said to us, "The first thing you have to do is get him out of that jail. He can't stay in that jail."

And I can remember calling my friend's father and saying, "We have to

00:10:00 put bail together here. We have to get him out of jail. He can't stay there."

And the father said, "Well, you know, this might be an opportunity for some tough love, you know. He'll learn a lesson here."

And we – I had to have this sort of long conversation and explain to him, "See, you don't understand. This is not — he's not misbehaving. He's not being a bad person. His brain has actually been harmed by this disease. He does not have the ability

to make the judgments that you and I make about right and wrong, and he can't stay in this jail." And so, there was that kind of struggle.

And then there was another time when we'd been sort of taking care of him during the day, and, like, one day I would go to work and he would be parked in my apartment, and we hired — we got a homecare healthcare attendant to come. The attendant's job was just to sit there and make certain he didn't hurt himself or leave the apartment.

We became concerned that we weren't sure how much longer we were going to sustain this, so we went to Cabrini Hospital, and we took him into the emergency room in Cabrini, and we explained that we needed to — we had to find a way to help him, right? We had to find a way to put him in an environment in which he was not at risk of hurting himself or, you know, hurting someone else. And the doctor in the ER saw him for a period for time and then came out and said to us, "Well, he knows his name, he knows the date, he knows where he is. I don't think there's anything wrong with him."

It's like, "What the hell are you talking about?"

So that was – eventually we got him into St. Vincent's, and I've got to say they were fantastic. They put him in the psych ward first, and then when a bed opened up on the medical side, they moved him over to the medical side, and that's where he died. That was a very rapid deterioration on his part.

SS: Yeah, that's a lot. I mean, that's a lot of responsibility.

DO: Well, it was a — we did it right. There was a group of us, and everybody sort of took on responsibility for taking care of one part of his life, right, or on

a day or a set of days, you would be the person who's responsible for taking care of him. And that's how we worked it out.

SS: So, when you came to ACT UP, did you have any friends there already?

DO: No.

SS: You just walked into the room.

DO: I did, a Monday night meeting.

SS: And how did you start plugging into the organization?

DO: Well, it was pretty clear when you first arrived that you have to affiliate yourself with a committee, that if you want to be engaged, you've got to join a committee. So, I joined Actions.

SS: So, can you explain to these viewers that we're fantasizing, what Actions Committee was, who was on it, how it was organized?

DO: The Actions Committee was responsible for developing the — where the group had decided it wanted to target a particular issue or a particular institution or person, the Actions Committee was responsible for devising how that would be done, what would the theme be, where would we go, how would we execute the protest, what would it look like. So, every Friday night, I believe it was, the Actions Committee would meet in the old Gay Community Center on 13th Street — it was an old school — in the shower room. And we would sit there and we would devise these actions. I met Ron Goldberg there, Alan Klein, Andrew Miller. I mean, that's where I met those people, was there.

SS: Your crew. But that's an early structure for ACT UP, right,? Because later didn't these proposals come from the floor? Or did they always have to go through the Actions Committee?

DO: My memory is that it — I don't understand your question.

SS: So, you're saying the Actions Committee would generate the specifics of what was going to occur, the event. What would happen if somebody stood up on the floor and had an idea like, "Let's go to the," I don't know, "FDA," or whatever? Would they have to go through the Actions Committee first?

DO: I don't think they would have to, but my memory is that we were responsible for devising a lot of the actions, the sort of the form and the look of the actions. Like we did, I remember, the bedsheet demo in City Hall.

SS: Can you explain what that was?

DO: We were protesting. We wanted housing for people with AIDS, and so the way we illustrated that was we had bedsheets with messages painted on them, and we essentially paraded around in the City Hall area with these bedsheets. And the bedsheets represented beds for people with AIDS.

00:15:00

SS: So that was your concept. Who would make the bedsheets?

DO: There would inevitably be some gathering. This seems like a long time ago. But there would inevitably be some gathering where people would create the signs and create the bedsheets, create the material that would be used. There was always some group that did a flyer, and over time those flyers got longer and longer and double-sided in multiple languages. And so, my memory is that there were various components that would all come together organized around a particular action or a particular theme.

SS: What was an action that you were particularly proud of?

DO: I can remember being particularly very proud of the bedsheet demo, because Bob Rafsky complimented us on the bedsheet demo. And so, whenever I would get — whenever you'd get praise from someone like a Bob Rafsky or Avram Finkelstein or one of the people who, to me, were particularly notable in the Monday night meeting, that always made me very happy.

I can remember when we went – we carried a protest to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Washington, D.C. when Clarence Pendleton was the chair and had made some particularly idiotic comments about people with AIDS and HIV, and they were having a hearing on AIDS and HIV. And when we got back from D.C., that was on a Monday, and we arrived and marched right into the meeting. And Bob Rafsky, again, stood up and talked about watching that on the news. And I was like, "Yeah, Bob liked it. Okay."

SS: Was there anything you worked on that was a disaster?

DO: A disaster. Not a disaster. I mean, I can remember committing a disaster at one of the Monday night meetings.

SS: What was that?

DO: We got a call – I got a call from some group in Pennsylvania — I can't even remember who this group was anymore — inviting ACT UP to come to a meeting in Pennsylvania. And it seemed like a good idea to me that we be represented there, so I took it to the Monday night meeting and proposed — I can only remember that we proposed – I proposed sending Debbie Levine to represent ACT UP. And I can't remember who else I proposed. And Ortez Alderson stood up and denounced me

because I had not included people of color in the group that I was proposing to send to this meeting. And so that required, you know, that I then go visit the — what was the name of his committee that he was on?

SS: Majority Action?

DO: Majority Action Committee. And straighten it out with them, you know, get it —

SS: What do you think about that now?

DO: What happened then, or generally the principle that Ortez was making?

SS: No, what happened then. Like, do you feel the same about it now as you did then, or have your feelings changed?

DO: Well, what I should have done is thanked Ortez for volunteering to go to this meeting in Pennsylvania. That's what I should have done. Thinking about it, that's what I would have done at the time. But, yeah, he was right. He was right.

SS: Because there was a lot of this, like, politics of confrontation inside ACT UP, right? That was like people who were HIV-positive, women, drug users, people of color, there was just a lot of like, "Hey, you don't get it. What about this kind of thing?" But for many years it didn't hurt the organization. It helped it in some way.

DO: Those points of view, in my experience, were correct far more often than they were misguided or mistaken. Ortez was correct to say you can't send a bunch of white people to a meeting on HIV and AIDS. You've got to have representation of the populations that are affected by this disease. That's the correct position to take. But,

again, I should have volunteered him to go. I'm sure he would have objected to that strenuously. I mean, as it turned out, the meeting was a bit of a bust. I can remember Debbie Levine coming back and reporting that it was more annoying than anything else.

SS: That makes sense. So, then what did you do after the Actions Committee?

DO: Actions Committee is where I remained for my entire time in ACT UP, which was not long, I have to say, about a year, year and a half. I soon sort of started moving into other things. I got involved in Queer Nation, got involved in Pink Panthers.

SS: So how did Queer Nation get started? What was its relationship to ACT UP?

DO: Queer Nation was constituted by a number of folks who were very

00:20:00 active ACT UP members, like Alan Klein, for example, Ken Kidd, Andy Vélez, I'm pretty sure, and I think they felt that the interests, the issues of the LGBT community were not sufficiently represented in ACT UP, and so they wanted an organization that could specifically address those issues. And it began after the bombing in Uncle Charlie's on Greenwich, a small little pipe bomb that was set off in Uncle Charlie's.

SS: Was anybody ever charged with that crime?

DO: Well, we know who it did, but I don't believe anyone was ever charged.

SS: Who did it?

DO: It was the crew that was responsible for the first World Trade Center bombing.

SS: Really?

DO: Yes.

SS: Why did they pick a gay bar?

DO: To this day, I do not know, but when they were put on trial for the World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef and that bunch, when they were put on trial for the 2003 — not 2003 bombing. 1993 bombing. Am I getting that right?

JH: Yeah.

DO: Yeah. So that information came out as part of that trial.

SS: That's amazing.

DO: And I have no idea why they picked a gay bar.

SS: And you've never asked anyone?

DO: Well, I'd have to ask them, but they were never charged, and those guys are in prison for a long, long time, and I don't think the U.S. government has any interest in revisiting that issue.

But Queer Nation formed then, and there was a gigantic march that came at that sort of the first action of Queer Nation that at the time I remember them saying it was the largest march, other than a Pride march, of the LGBT community in New York City. Must have been about five thousand people. It was huge. So, a very impressive action, I thought.

SS: Five thousand seems small. I mean, St. Patrick's was seven thousand. How many people march in Pride? Like a million, right?

DO: Yeah, but this was before St. Patrick's, I believe.

SS: Oh, you mean, to date it was the largest.

DO: At the time.

SS: Yeah.

DO: At the time.

SS: Okay. That's interesting.

DO: Since then I'm sure it's been eclipsed, but —

SS: So how was Queer Nation structured that was different than ACT UP? What was different between the two?

DO: Well, to be honest, I was not as involved in Queer Nation as I was in ACT UP. I'd started writing for *OutWeek* magazine, and so that notion that somehow you're supposed to be uninvolved kind of controlled me to an extent, and so I was more interested in writing about these things than I was about being involved in these things. Now that's completely changed in my life, so now I'm back involved with Queer Nation again.

SS: Queer Nation still exists?

DO: We revived it in 2013 when Russia passed it's, that antigay law.

SS: Do you meet regularly?

DO: Irregularly. We meet when we need to.

SS: And how many people are in Queer Nation?

DO: Oh, very small number. When the stuff in Russia was happening, we could get a hundred people, over a hundred people to a town hall meeting when that issue was really hot and current. But since then, I'd say, we'll get six people, ten people together to talk about actions that we want to do, and mostly what we do is we plan stuff online by communicating via email, that kind of stuff.

SS: Okay, so let's talk about the gay press. Now, I had a lot of experience with the gay press before your time, *Gay Community News*, *WomanNews*, all that kind of stuff. So, when you came to New York, the main paper was the *New York Native*. Now, did you have anything to do with them?

DO: No. I read it.

SS: Do you know anything about them?

DO: Only — well, yes, because I read it, and by the time I started reading the *Native*, they were pretty ridiculous.

SS: Because they're very mysterious. Like we all read it, and we all thought, "Oh, someone's crazy over there," but I have yet to have been able to interview anyone who knows what happened to them, what the problem was.

DO: John Lauritsen won't talk to you?

SS: Well, he wasn't in ACT UP.

DO: Oh, okay.

SS: Have you ever talked to him about the *Native*?

DO: I've had less than handful of conversations with John Lauritsen, and mostly they've been very brief because he continues to hew to the idea — to my knowledge, he continues to hew to the idea that HIV is not the cause of AIDS. And so, it's very hard to have a conversation with him because he persists in that position.

00:25:00 The last time I saw John was at the — was it the forty-fifth — the fortieth anniversary of the Pride March, and Gay Liberation Front members, including John Lauritsen, were being featured on a panel at the Community Center. And he was still talking about it.

SS: So, as a journalist, how do you understand HIV denialism? Like, what is it really?

DO: I don't think I spend any time understanding HIV denialism. I think I just ignore it.

SS: You ignore it. Okay. So, we had the *New York Native*, which was basically nothing, and then we had *Tell it to ACT UP* and this type of thing.

DO: Yeah.

SS: And then suddenly there's *OutWeek*. So, you explained how you first got involved. So, you knew Andrew and all these people from ACT UP.

DO: I knew Andrew. I knew Andrew through ACT UP, and he became the news editor there. And so, as I told you, I wrote that first story for him, and I have to say I enjoyed it tremendously. It's not like they were paying a lot of money. None of us were getting rich. So, on a certain level, for me, that became a kind of activism because I felt like I was asking questions and gathering information for the community that other people might not necessarily have access to or they might not have access to the people who need to answer those questions, and so that I was able to do that. And to be honest, I tend to like working on my own much more than I like working in groups, and so, for me, it was attractive in that respect, because I didn't have to go to a committee and negotiate something with a committee and then go to some bigger group and negotiate the same thing again with a bigger group. I could just kind of do what I wanted to do, and the only person I had to negotiate it with was my editor.

SS: So, you weren't in the office. You were freelancing.

DO: I was freelance, correct.

SS: Okay. So, what was your beat at *OutWeek*?

DO: I don't know that we had beats, generally. I was covering city, state politics, some health stuff, cops and courts.

SS: And this was in the era when the city was really opposing people with AIDS in a sense. They were, in a sense, our enemies or our major opposition.

DO: Yeah, I think that's true. Sure.

SS: So, with retrospect, and since you covered it, what do you think was the problem? How come we couldn't get anywhere? Because when you look at the history of San Francisco, for example, there was so much cooperation between the city government and people with AIDS. What was the real problem in New York?

DO: I think the real problem in New York was a political problem, and I think that government responds to those populations that it perceives as politically powerful, that are moneyed, that can deliver votes. And I think that at that time the LGBT community was just beginning to become politically powerful. We hadn't yet seen things like exit polls in which the question was asked, "Are you gay or lesbian or bisexual?" And so, we hadn't yet been able to quantify how many voters, how many gay, lesbian, bisexual voters are there in New York City, and so I think it was easy for government to ignore us.

We were just beginning, to an extent, to get organized as well, and then the demands being made at that time were inevitably demands for money, right, money in a government budget. And politicians hate to spend money, right? One of the reasons why lots of politicians endorse marriage today is because it's politically cost-free

anymore, and it doesn't cost them a cent. Literally they don't have to spend a penny in their government budget to implement marriage.

SS: Wasn't the closet a big problem?

DO: The closet was a problem. I mean, back then, yes, there were not a lot of gay guys out and a lot of people out of the closet.

SS: But also, we had a closeted mayor who was personally very obstructive. We had major politicians who died of AIDS. We had Carter Burden, Antonio Olivieri. All of that was in the closet. I mean, there was a certain point of power in which after that point, everyone was in the closet.

DO: Yeah, I can see that, but I would imagine that in their private conversations in City Hall, that they understood who they were. They knew who they were talking to.

00:30:00

SS: But Koch was particularly pathological. I mean, do you have any insight into him?

DO: Well, I have to say that I never spent a lot of time with Ed Koch, and I personally did not know Ed Koch, but I assume that, like many elected officials, when you go to them and say, "We need money, and we need to use this money to do the following things," their first answer is almost always going to be no, they don't want to spend that money. And it doesn't matter how serious a problem this is, right? They just don't want to spend the money, because for every year that they have to make a budget, the dollars coming to them is *x*, and anything you take out, anything you spend in *x* on some other project is not getting spent on something else, and that has political consequences for them. They're quite venal, these people. I mean, they're quite cynical

in this kind of stuff. And I suspect that in the end, that was a significant motivation for the Koch administration and even later for the Dinkins administration in terms of resisting granting the demands that ACT UP was seeking and other groups were seeking later on.

SS: What were some of the stories that you did for *OutWeek*?

DO: I'm sorry.

SS: What were some of the stories that you did for *OutWeek*?

DO: I wrote about the first time gay folks marched in the St. Patrick's Day Parade. I wrote about —

SS: And the last time.

DO: What was that?

SS: And the last time.

DO: And the last time. I wrote about law enforcement engagement, spying on — you know, the extent to which law enforcement might be spying on organizations like ACT UP and other groups.

SS: Oh, so tell us about that. A lot of people are interested in that.

DO: Andrew Miller and I decided to make a whole host of Freedom of Information requests to the FBI. I don't remember the year. We must have named two or three dozen groups. And so, we wanted to see to what extent was — we knew that historically the FBI had spied on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community as part of its surveillance of the Left in general in America, so we wanted to see to what extent is that still true. So, we made all of these Freedom of Information requests, and we got back some pretty paltry number of documents about ACT UP, about two hundred

pages divided among a bunch of different files. So, we couldn't reasonably conclude that they had an investigation into ACT UP.

And, in fact, there was one file that we got from the Cleveland field office, and there was some agent who said, "ACT UP is doing something here in Cleveland. Do we want to monitor them?"

And his supervisors said, "You know, insofar as this is an exercise of the First Amendment, it's not of interest to us."

SS: You shared some of those documents with me, and some of them are heavily redacted.

DO: They are. They are.

SS: Doesn't that imply that there's an informant?

DO: Well, yeah, but informant could be not — the FBI is notorious for not releasing information. Notorious, right? It took them — in my other room I've got a stack of FBI records on NAMBLA, North American Man/Boy Love Association. The stack is about this tall. It took them more than ten years to process those documents and give them to me. So not only is the FBI notorious for redacting information, they're notorious for taking forever to process their records. So, I hesitate to reach a conclusion that there was an informant in ACT UP, simply because at the time the records did not suggest to me that there was even an investigation.

Now, the Center for Constitutional Rights, after we made that Freedom of Information request, did its own thing, and if memory serves, the number of records or pages went from about the two hundred we found to six hundred and something. So, I haven't seen those additional records, so it's possible between the time we made that

request and when CCR made its request, that there was some additional activity there that I'm not aware of.

SS: It's interesting, because during the time of ACT UP, people in ACT UP — I mean, and this is a matter of record — Tracy Morgan, for example, made the claim that she felt that she was being followed. There were people who made claims having to do with accusations or presence of informants. But you have never found any evidence for that?

00:35:00 DO: Well, look, when we did the bedsheet demo, I don't know where — a photographer appeared, with cameras hanging all over him, and he took his camera and he would just go — he would lean on the — I don't know much about cameras, but this was apparently a time when you could just press down the button, and it would just keep taking pictures, and he would do this, and he would sweep the crowd. And it was very clear to us that he was working for the police department. We didn't hire him. He was not wearing a press tag, right, and he was intent on getting everyone's picture. And so, we said, "Okay, he's working for the NYPD, and he's come to get all of our pictures."

Now, on a certain level, I think most of us sort of said we meet in public, we talk about our work in public, we do our work in public. If they want to take a picture of us, we don't care, you know. Right? I mean, they can't disrupt us.

SS: We weren't worried about our reputation.

DO: Right. Then there was another time, it was a Monday night meeting, and Michael Petrelis — I can't remember why he demanded this, but he demanded that we all march over to the Sixth Precinct in the West Village to protest something. I can't remember what it was. And so, we started to have this fairly heated debate about whether

we should leave the room and go protest over at the Sixth Precinct. Out of nowhere, a plainclothes police officer arrives in the room, and I can remember Maria Maggenti — I'm pretty sure it was Maria — going to the front of the room and repeating — you know, we always said at the beginning of the meeting that if you're a police officer, you have to identify yourself. So, she goes to the front of the room and she says, "Just wanted to remind everyone that if you're working for law enforcement, you have to identify yourself."

And he stood up, he came out, he walked in front of the room, and he said, "Well, we just want to know if you've got anything planned for tonight."

It was like everyone's sort of scratching their head saying, "How did you end up here? How did you know to come here?" To my knowledge, no one ever asked him. I never asked him.

So, there were always glimmers, right? You'd say, okay, they're there, they seem to be interested in us, but other than maybe watching us on occasion, they don't seem to be terribly interested in doing anything more than that. And if they're going to take our pictures at a demonstration, they probably shouldn't have done that, they probably were not allowed to do that, but, you know, how upset are you going to get?

SS: Okay, now, this is a diversion, but I want to talk about NAMBLA and these files that you've got, because I'm quite interested in NAMBLA. Actually, very early I signed a petition opposing NAMBLA being excluded from the Center, whatever year that was.

DO: Oh, were you one of those people?

SS: So, did Maxine [Wolfe]. Very early. There's a bunch of women who signed it because of the age-of-consent laws. That was the concern. But they always attracted a huge amount of energy and attention, and there weren't very many of them. So, what was the government's interest in them, really? Was it because people like David Thorstad had long histories on the Left? Was that what –

DO: No. It was because there were FBI agents who were obsessed with an organization like NAMBLA, who were obsessed with going after pornographers, who were obsessed with going after anything that they felt deals with sex and sexuality. In fact, there's an FBI agent — I can't remember his name, but I've got it stored somewhere — who was, for a time, pursuing NAMBLA and then later on was the agent who was responsible for busting the owner of Gay Treasures, which was a bookstore that was operating on Hudson Street in the West Village. And apparently the owner was kind of involved in a little sketchy stuff, but the pretext for making this arrest turned out to be — I've got the file in here somewhere. The agent is writing in his file, he's saying, "I went into Gay Treasures and I went through a box of loose photographs, and I was reviewing these two thousand loose photographs in this box, and I came upon one of this young man that I know who was sixteen at the time when this picture was taken."

And I can remember reading that and thinking, "Oh, come on. Come on. You expect me to believe that, that you just happened to have discovered a picture of a kid who was underage?" So that's the mindset, right, that you, that these guys in law enforcement think this organization is a threat.

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SS: But I also remember from my own youth that there was a lot of kids from Gay Youth who had a positive relationship with NAMBLA because of the

age-of-consent law, which was constraining them. And when we just interviewed Aner Candelario like a few weeks ago, he had been in that group.

DO: Yes. He participated in one of their conferences at the Disciples Church in Chelsea.

SS: Right. Exactly. And he reiterated exactly how I had remembered it, that it was a positive relationship between the two groups.

DO: Well, it's interesting, if you read some of the NAMBLA files, you will here and there will come upon — and perhaps I've only seen this once in the NAMBLA files — an FBI agent who admits that the NAMBLA members treat kids better than their own parents do, and says, "You have to be careful about this, because these NAMBLA members, they're really sneaky. They treat these kids very well." It's like, that's a bad thing?

SS: Right.

DO: Right? I mean, you know, but that's the mindset. If you read the files, if you look at what they write, they're absolutely convinced. The thing that makes it so bizarre is that at any given time in NAMBLA's history, law enforcement had informants in NAMBLA members, at the very top, undercover NYPD, undercover agents from other law enforcement agencies, state agencies in other states. They knew. The FBI, almost from the beginning, the FBI was receiving copies of the NAMBLA bulletin every month, so they knew exactly how big NAMBLA was, they knew how much money they had, and they knew exactly what NAMBLA was doing. Despite being in possession of all of that information, they were convinced that this organization was doing something nefarious that they hadn't discovered.

And you sort of scratch your head and you think, "You can't know any more about this group. Why did you continue to pursue them for years and years?"

SS: Or what they didn't know is what they couldn't conceptualize. They couldn't understand familial homophobia. They couldn't understand the multigenerational necessity of the gay community when — and they couldn't understand that there are gay kids. They couldn't understand any of that.

DO: Correct.

SS: So, they had no idea what they were dealing with.

DO: Correct. Correct. The files are also — I mean, there are other places in the NAMBLA files. There was an agent who was operating here in New York, who got permission from D.C. to rent a van to use for surveillance for NAMBLA, and D.C. clearly was worried about the money being spent on this van, so there's this whole series of memos going back and forth between New York and D.C., where D.C.'s complaining about, "Why are you still using this van? What are you using the van for? It's very expensive."

And then New York writing back and saying, "Well, we're actually not looking at NAMBLA at the moment. We're investigating these pornographers over here, and we think we have a case, and we're going to do — ." And it's like, it's these sort of mindless bureaucracy at work of they start down this path and they cannot stop. And so, you've got this mix of these zealots who think anything related to sex is suspect. Like the guy who busted Gay Treasures is the same FBI agent who went after Father Bernard Lynch. I wish I could remember his name, but he's the same FBI agent.

SS: How interesting.

DO: And so, I mean, that's a guy with an obsession with the kind of sex and sexuality that he's seeing here and just won't let it go and keeps pursuing it, despite all evidence to the contrary that there ain't no "there" there. I mean, this is a tiny organization, relatively powerless, unpopular even in the LGBT community, never mind in the wider society, has zero chance of implementing its goals, and, frankly, it's just a bunch of guys who want to get together and talk about their common interests and their common concerns. As far as we can see, the organization, while individual members have broken laws, the organization has never done that. And, in fact, the organization's commitment is to openness, because that's what protects them.

SS: I do have to say, though, those guys were creepy.

DO: Who?

SS: The NAMBLA guys.

DO: Some of them were very creepy.

SS: Yeah.

DO: Did you ever speak to Renato [Corazza] — what was his name?

SS: No, I don't know that one.

DO: He was this Italian guy. He was a painter, he was kind of interesting, and he was the contact for NAMBLA. So, you would call his answering machine, and

00:45:00

you would get this accented voice that was a very sort of stereotypical — pardon me — child-molester voice on the answering machine. And I would think, "Oh, please, just pick someone else. I mean, this is just a disaster for you. I mean, this sounds like exactly the kind of person you would never let your kid get near."

SS: I remember when Maxine and I went to this meeting with them, about them being thrown out of the Center, and we finally saw who they were, and they were like creepy, icky, childish, unsocialized guys. They weren't a great bunch.

DO: Did you ever meet Bob Rhodes?

SS: I don't remember.

DO: Bob Rhodes was a big member of NAMBLA and used to have an apartment on West 13th or 16th Street, must be 16th Street, I believe, in Chelsea. And there came a time when his apartment was — the FBI, at the behest of Rudy Giuliani and Stuart GraBois, executed search warrants on his apartment, and you'll see these pictures of the apartment, right? And I can remember when I first looked at the pictures, I thought, "Man, they wrecked the place. They tore it apart. There's, like, stuff everywhere. It's unbelievable."

So, I asked Bob Rhodes about it. He said, "Oh, no, no. That's me. I'm, like, kind of a slob."

SS: Oh, my god.

DO: He said, "No, you really can't blame the FBI for that." In fact, he was unaware that they were in there. The place was so messy, that they could come in and look around and leave, and he didn't even notice that anything had been disturbed.

SS: Wow. That's hysterical. So, let's go back to ACT UP. Thank you for that. So, when you're covering New York City politics, did ACT UP have any impact on any city policy, from your point of view?

DO: I think so. I think so.

SS: Do you have any examples?

DO: Well, it may well be that its greatest impact was in the creation of private resources that started to do what the city should have been doing, right? So, you talk about an organization like Housing Works that really grew out of ACT UP. I credit Eric Sawyer, for example, and obviously later Charles King and Keith —

SS: Cylar.

DO: Cylar — thank you — with kind of launching that organization. So that, to me, is an example of sort of ACT UP doing what the LGBT community had always done in its history, which is seeing a need, recognizing that, and responding to it by creating an institution that responds to that need. And so, in a very real way, that might have been, in terms of city politics, ACT UP's greatest contribution.

SS: Now, during the time that you were on this beat, the first gay liaison was appointed, Marjorie Hill, by David Dinkins. And she was Stanley Hill's daughter, right, so she came out of the Democratic Party machine and all this kind of stuff. How did that affect anything? What was your experience of —

DO: Not much. The liaisons' jobs were always to sell the mayor to us. They were never to represent us to the mayor. And if you actually spoke to Marjorie about what she spent her time doing all day long, she wasn't fixing parking tickets, but it was sort of the equivalent of that, getting phone calls all day long from some kid who needed advice on where to go, about coming out, getting a phone call from someone who said, "Where do I go to get an STD test?" "I just learned that I'm HIV-positive. What do I do?" That's what the liaison spent the vast majority of — that's what she spent the vast majority of her time doing all day long is kind of fielding those calls, directing people to

resources. But in terms of representing us to the mayor, I don't think so. I don't think the liaisons were ever meant to do that.

SS: Did you ever interact with Dinkins directly?

DO: Some. Some.

SS: And how did you find him?

DO: A little distant, a little out of touch, I think, meant well, well intended, but not a real hands-on kind of guy.

SS: Okay, so *OutWeek* had this strange relationship with ACT UP where everyone was from ACT UP. It was like the ACT UP newsletter. It covered ACT UP's issues. It didn't really ever attack ACT UP. So, what was the difference between *OutWeek* and ACT UP?

DO: Well, there were things that we covered that weren't ACT UP. That was, sort of, first of all. And I think that we felt that we were, at least in New York City for the first time, covering issues in a more substantive way for the broader community.

00:50:00 So, we stayed on, say, the Julio Rivera story for a very long period of time. Certainly, we stayed on AIDS for a long period of time.

OutWeek was willing to attack significant figures who had been attacking the community, so, for example, Bruce Ritter, right, Father Bruce Ritter, who founded Covenant House. Mike Signorile is well known for going after a whole bunch of closeted LGBT people, mostly LG. So, I think we had a broader perspective than ACT UP did, though I think clearly AIDS was a significant portion of what *OutWeek* was covering.

SS: And why did *OutWeek* go under?

DO: Money. It was all about money.

SS: So then were you involved with the next magazine? Wasn't it called *QN* or something?

DO: *QW*. Kind of –

SS: What was that? Who was involved in that?

DO: That was Troy Masters, who was involved, I think, briefly with *OutWeek*. And – let me give you this comparison to contrast *QW* to *OutWeek*.

SS: Okay.

DO: If you remember the cover — I believe it was the cover of the "I Hate Straights" issue, which was a gun aimed at you, right, like this, *QW*, a year, maybe two years later, did sort of a similarly themed cover that was a cartoon of a club kid with his little baseball cap on backwards, shooting two guns like this into the ground. I think that tells you the difference between the two publications. I mean, it was not nearly as serious and certain not as impactful as *OutWeek* was.

SS: And what was your role there?

DO: Again, I was a reporter.

SS: And so how did you get into your current position?

DO: Well, Troy Masters has continued in the gay press since *OutWeek*, and so as Troy has continued, I've sort of followed Troy along. So, he – after *QW*, he launched *Gay City News*. There was a period of time where it was sort of barren. There was no real gay press in New York City, or news, I guess, news outlet is probably the best way to describe it. And so, then he launched *Gay City News*, and I continued to work for him, and I still work for him now, though it's now part of Community Media, which is this giant conglomerate of neighborhood papers in New York City.

SS: Now, what about the split? How did the media respond when ACT UP split?

DO: If memory serves — and I didn't cover that — the split in ACT UP happened at just about the same time *OutWeek* fell apart, roughly? So, I don't know that there was any real coverage dedicated to it.

SS: What's your take on it now, with hindsight?

DO: I think that a group of guys who were pretty powerful in ACT UP decided they didn't want to do that anymore. They didn't want to have to negotiate some of the issues that they were having to negotiate in ACT UP, and so they decided to take their ball and play somewhere else. And, you know, I think, to me, that's what it really, really came down to, which is that, you know, ACT UP did have a way of operating, that was trying to be inclusive, that was trying to say, "There's a whole range of issues here that we have to address, right, and to do that, we have to include voices that may make us uncomfortable, that we may not want to include." And I think that those guys decided to take their toys and play somewhere else. That's why we have the Treatment Action Group now.

SS: Right. So, I only have one more question. Anything you guys want to ask?

JW: I remember one issue, I forget which magazine now, the cover "ACT UP Is Dead."

DO: "ACT UP Is Dead"?

SS: I don't remember that.

DO: I don't remember that.

JW: Yeah. I have it in my editing room.

SS: That was a dream. That was a wish fulfillment.

JW: No, I read it. I'll admit years later I looked down at a newspaper and I saw the same thing, big headlines, "ACT UP Is Dead," and I groaned and said, "Oh, not again." And then I took another look, and it said "Tupac."

SS: What's your question?

00:55:00 **JW: If you don't remember it, there is no question.**

DO: Well, we can look at *OutWeek.net* and see if that —

JW: But Tupac *is* dead.

DO: He is, though I think some people believe that that's not the case, right?

SS: Right. Just like HIV is not the cause of AIDS.

SS: So, is there anything we haven't covered that you think is important?

DO: No, I don't think so.

JH: What about Stop the Church? Did you have some –

DO: Well, at the point of Stop the Church, I was out of ACT UP. I mean, I'll tell you, I was a much more rigid person when I was younger, and I can remember believing that there was a very specific definition of civil disobedience, and sort of wanting the group to move towards the definition that was embraced by Gandhi and by King, right, and certainly meeting resistance to that. And so, I found that frustrating.

And there was a sense of — the word "wildness" comes into my head. I mean, there's a point of, you know, I can't get that angry anymore, right? It just doesn't

— you know, I don't know that I can do that. And then I can also remember — I was thinking about this this morning, in anticipation of talking to you — there was a meeting, there was a Monday night meeting, I can't remember the year, Jim Eigo was talking, and it was when people were starting to talk about what do we do to rebuild the immune system, right, because that's what we're going to have to do. And I can remember sitting in that meeting and kind of looking across the room and thinking to myself, "Jesus, these people think this is going to be over soon. I mean, how can they think that? This is not going to be over soon. I mean, how much longer do they propose to sustain this level of anger and energy? I mean, it can't happen." So, there was this sense of, you know, I wasn't sure that I belonged there anymore, kind of like, "I don't know that I can keep this up."

SS: But they were right.

DO: What do you mean?

SS: By 1996 there was protease inhibitors.

DO: Well, but we were thinking cure at that time.

SS: Oh, okay. Yeah, I see.

DO: I mean, everyone was talking about cure. No one was anticipating that.

SS: Right. We couldn't conceptualize it.

DO: Now we're talking about ending the epidemic, and it's actually not — it is doable. The science is there. There's no question about it.

JW: The March on Washington when you first saw ACT UP, what was the main theme of the March on Washington that year?

DO: I have no idea. I can't remember.

JW: Because that next one, I think, was gays in the military.

DO: Was that the one that HRC organized?

SS: This one was before Clinton, and the next one was after Clinton. Okay. So, final question. So, looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

DO: Well, I don't think it had one greatest achievement. I mean, I think it had multiple greatest achievements. Again, I think that a number of organizations came out of ACT UP. Housing Works is the one that I really point to. I think that's really an extraordinary achievement.

I think ACT UP moved the conversation on a number of issues. I think it moved the conversation on safe sex in particular, safe sex, condom distribution in public schools. We're not anywhere close to perfect on that today, but the insistence that that be done, I think ACT UP moved that conversation.

I think ACT UP most assuredly moved the conversation on — and not only the conversation, but actually moved the way in which drugs were studied and approved in this country. We can have a debate today about whether we've gone too far in the other direction, and maybe we might want to slow it down a little bit. We can certainly have that debate, and it's a reasonable debate to have. But I think that absolutely was a very important conversation.

01:00:00 I think needle exchange, at least in New York City, was an extraordinary accomplishment, and I won't say that ACT UP originated that idea in New York City, but without question, it was ACT UP that made that happen. And if you look at the number

of people who were being infected with HIV via shared needles, going back fifteen, twenty years, we were talking six, seven thousand people a year. In 2013, we were down to eighty-nine. That is an unqualified success. It's extraordinary, and I would credit ACT UP with that, and, again, not with the original idea, but with making that happen in New York City.

I'm sure there were others, and if I had an hour, if I could, like, go through all of these records, I could tell you about more. But I think that ACT UP was tremendously influential. Controversial, but tremendously influential.

SS: Well, those two things go together.

DO: Yes, they do. They do.

SS: And what about in terms of disappointments?

DO: I don't think I have any disappointments with ACT UP. My leaving ACT UP had much more to do with me than with ACT UP. I mean, even to this day, I'm always less interested in working in groups than I am in working on my own. I'm not quite as rigid as I was when I was a young man. I'm much more – I'm better able to do that today than I was, say, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years ago, thirty years ago. But, you know, ACT UP was pretty wild. It was a pretty hard environment to operate in. In retrospect, it was fun, but at the time it could be intimidating, and you'd say, "Do I want to go through that again? What am I going to get out of it?" But on the whole, I'd do it again.

SS: I think we all would. All right. Thank you.

DO: Thank you.

SS: That was great. I learned a lot. Thank you.