

A C T U P
ORAL HISTORY
P R O J E C T

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

Interviewee: **Amy Bauer**

Interview Number: **048**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **March 7, 2004**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Amy Bauer

March 7, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are?

AMY BAUER: Amy Bauer. I'm 45 years old. We're in my apartment and today is March 7, 2004.

SS: Amy, I just want start with full disclosure, which is that we went to high school together –

AB: We went to high school together.

SS: from 12 to 17, right? And, we were both gay in high school, but we didn't know about each other, I believe.

AB: You knew about me, because you cast me in our senior play in the role of a gay teacher.

SS: I did?

AB: As Marie Russo.

SS: That's right, that must have been instinct.

AB: Or Marian Bernstein, one of the two. I forget which. You knew something.

SS: Right, but our school was so oppressive on those terms that the gay students didn't know each other.

AB: I don't think in the mid-'70s – it was so soon after Stonewall I don't think there was any gay student high school stuff at that point anywhere.

SS: No, there was not. We're from the dark ages. So, what part of the city did you grow up in?

AB: I grew up in Stuyvesant Town, on 18th Street and First Avenue, in Manhattan.

SS: Did your parents work for MetLife?

AB: No, my parents didn't work for MetLife, it was just cheap, safe housing, and they always complained about it, because it didn't have air conditioning, which it has now.

SS: How did they get in there – was it G.I. bill?

AB: No, they just got in in the early '50s and stayed.

SS: What did they do for a living?

AB: My dad worked selling small brass plaques for a company called U.S. Bronze. So, he worked in a factory and then he worked in sales for them. And my mom stayed at home with me and my older brother.

SS: Where did you go to elementary school?

AB: P.S. 40 in Manhattan. And, then I went to Hunter High School – 7th grade to 12th grade.

SS: Right, when it was still all girls. Did you family have any kind of political involvement or did they ever talk about politics?

AB: They talked about politics because my mother was a Republican and my father was a Democrat. And so, they would argue a little bit at the table, and my dad was active in local school politics, because that was the time when they were starting bussing, and there were a lot of changes going on in the public schools, and my parents had a big commitment to keeping me and my brother in the public school system and not taking us

out of public schools into private schools. So, there was some of that going on, but that's the only political activism.

SS: You mean Ocean Hill-Brownsville – that whole thing?

AB: Right, but there was this thing called Compact of Manhattan which was, I think, formed – it was not progressive, but it was basically formed to make sure that the public school system stayed rigorous and to keep some control over it.

SS: Is you mother Jewish?

AB: Yeah.

SS: And she was Republican?

AB: They were Republicans because of Roosevelt, because Roosevelt wasn't good for the Jews, and that was about as far as their political analysis went.

SS: I never heard this. How come Roosevelt wasn't good for the Jews?

AB: Because he didn't let the European refugees in. And because of that my mother and her mother – my grandmother – were both very staunch Republicans. Even during the Vietnam War, and even when my brother was draft age.

SS: Did your brother go?

AB: No, he had a high lottery number, so he lucked out. He would have gotten college deferment anyway, but it sort of became a non-issue, because he just lucked out.

SS: So before you got to Hunter, did they discuss the war?

AB: They discussed the war, but they were not at all politically active in fighting it. I think they were ambivalent. But, they were definitely sort of straight, middle-class conservative, so they would not have associated with the anti-war riffraff, or

even the Parents Against the War kind of stuff – they wouldn't have gotten involved with it.

SS: Were they involved at all in the Jewish community?

AB: My dad was involved in our synagogue, which was Rodeph Sholom, on the Upper West Side, because that's where he was raised. And, he helped out in the synagogue, and volunteered there. But, we weren't heavily into –

SS: Did you go to Sunday school?

AB: I went to Sunday school until I dropped out, because I refused to be Bat Mitzvah-ed.

SS: That's interesting. Bat Mitzvah was a brand new thing in those days.

AB: Right, but I really didn't want to be – I mean at that point, I would say between the gender stuff and the I don't want to settle down, get married, have Jewish kids and be like a Jewish woman in the way I was sort of raised, that that's what you would do. I just couldn't see any part of that.

SS: That's interesting, because I remember in that era, Bat Mitzvah was seen as a progressive thing, that was making women equal, inside Judaism.

AB: Right, but I was sort of atheistic, and it just seemed – the thought, at the time, I wouldn't have worn – I haven't worn a dress in a gazillion years, and at that time in my life – 12 and 13 – I wasn't wearing dresses. It was probably partly the thought of having to get dressed up and have a party that was as unappealing as becoming a Jewish woman.

SS: And you knew that you didn't believe in God?

AB: And, I knew I didn't believe in God.

SS: Was that upsetting to you parents?

AB: No, I think they were sort of upset by how they would have to explain to all the people who would have expected me to be Bat Mitzvah-ed that I didn't want to do it, without actually telling them the truth. So, I think they just said that I didn't think it was relevant.

SS: So, then you came to Hunter. How did you evolve, in terms of being a political person?

AB: I don't think I was really political at Hunter, but I think that it gave me a way of looking at the world and of trying to find one's place in the world and of thinking that you're here to contribute to society as a whole, and to certainly question the government, to question authority, to be critical in your analysis of things. And so, it gave me a way of thinking that I hadn't gotten at all, previously.

SS: Did that come from the teachers or the students?

AB: I think it just came from the environment. It probably came from some of the teachers, but I think it just came from being in a very highly charged academic environment, where you were taught to think. And, that's not something in the United States that we do – is really teach our kids to think. So it really made me question a lot, so that when I came out and I started questioning, that's really when I began to get politically active.

SS: So, why don't you talk a little bit about being a lesbian in high school and what it was like.

AB: Well the thing is, I didn't really self-identify completely as a lesbian in high school. I was pretty sure that I was gay from, maybe, 10th grade, but I decided to put

off making a firm commitment about it, until I went away to college. But my senior year in high school, I had a very serious relationship with my friend Stella, that was sexual. But she was not – she didn't identify as gay, so it was all sort of done without talking a lot about it, and without putting it in the larger context of the gay community. And then as I got closer to graduating, it became clearer and clearer to me that I wasn't straight, or that the idea that I would get to college and make up my mind sounded good, but in reality, I'd already made up my mind. And so I started to come out the summer before my freshman year in college.

Tape I
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SS: At that time, were you aware of other political movements even though you weren't participating in them?

AB: I was aware of the feminist movement, but I had so much conflict about gender identity and being gay, that I wasn't really comfortable being part of the women's movement. And at that point, the Vietnam War was over, and there wasn't a lot of peace activism going on that I was really aware of. And, I didn't have an economic analysis to sort of fall into the Worker's World kind of political thing – although I think had I, that I might have, at that point. So, I wasn't really political. I do have a political head. I sort of had a somewhat anarchist/libertarian head.

SS: Because when we were there, it was all smart girls from the working and middle classes, primarily, from New York City, in the '70s. And, abortion becomes legal in '73, when we're in ninth grade.

AB: Not an issue for me.

SS: Right, but it's in the air, and there are CR groups in our high school. So, you just didn't check into that?

AB: I just didn't check into any of that, partly because I didn't want to have to deal with the gender and the sex issues. And so, I really avoided – I knew that I had no interest in dating boys. I knew that I was sexually attracted to women teachers and to women students, but I really didn't want to start talking about that, openly. So, I really avoided anything where you had to talk about your feelings.

SS: And what about this lesbian teacher who you had to play in our school play? We had this openly lesbian couple as our faculty, right?

AB: Right, but I at that point was not really ready to self-accept and to make any contact with anybody. So, I really waited until I got away from home, out of New York, and made sort of a break to do that.

SS: And then you went into a very different kind of environment.

AB: Then, I went to MIT, which was one in eight women to men ratio. And, although it was very academically charged, it was so boring compared to Hunter, because it was very smart, but not very intellectual. Very rigorous, but not very interesting. Although they had a smattering of a gay student union kind of thing, it was all guys. On the other hand, it was in Boston, which had a huge lesbian community. And so I did come out pretty quickly and start making some connections into the mixed gay movement and into the lesbian movement, which was somewhat separate, at that point.

SS: So, at this point, did you start getting involved with organizations? Or, did you go to bars?

AB: I had some friends. We went out to bars. We went out dancing. We went to whatever demonstrations were going on. But, I didn't really get politically active in organizations.

SS: While you were at MIT?

AB: While I was there.

SS: What were you studying?

AB: Civil Engineering, Architecture and Urban Planning.

SS: So, did you come out to your family at this point?

AB: I came out to my family midway through my freshman year in college.

Just to my mom, my dad died when I was in high school. So I told my mother, she freaked out. But when I came out, I sort of came out with a vengeance. So the day I decided that I really was gay, basically by the end of the day everybody knew. And at that point, I never kept it from anybody. So, once I decided I was going to be out, I was like, out.

SS: Did it change your relationship with your family?

AB: My relationship with my mother has always been very bad, and a lot of it is because she wanted a really feminine daughter, and I had been butch since I was old enough to say, "I don't want to wear that, I want to wear that." And she sort of knew, but I don't think she was really prepared for me to tell her. So we have – we really have had a very bad relationship since the time I was a kid.

SS: Well you've had so many years to think about this, so maybe you have some insight into this. Okay – I can see that somebody wants their child to be feminine and the child wants to wear this instead of that. But, why is it that that can keep a parent from loving and accepting and having a relationship with their child for 20 years?

AB: There's a psychological concept called Narcissistic Injury which is that, whatever you see in me that you think is wrong, reflects back badly on you. So, she felt that a lot of her world was constructed about what other people think about her and her child raising skills, and her family. And, I was a stubborn, truculent, not particularly friendly kid. I never liked small talk. I never had any daintiness about me, whatsoever. And, I think my mother kept hoping it was a phase I was going to get out of, and that I was going to change. And as I didn't change, she couldn't change. And so, we sort of stayed in this battle with each other, to this day.

SS: So, having had this conflict with homophobia on the most personal level, and also on the social level, parallel for 20 years, what is it that makes people be so cruel, when it comes to something like this? Which to us, is just so right?

AB: I can only speak from dealing with my mother. I think that she thinks that there's something wrong with me and that however I turned out it was somehow my fault. And, she doesn't want it to be her fault. But, for her to say well, there's really nothing wrong with me, that how I am is fine, she can't quite do it, because she sees it through other people's eyes. So, she has that conventionality that just won't allow her to say no, the society is wrong, times have changed, there's really nothing wrong. But, you know, I think she just has certain expectations of exactly – that she wanted her relationship to me to be exactly like her relationship with her mother, which is very close – and was not able to give up on that.

SS: Okay, consequently for our generation – what you're describing is very much like my life, and it's true for a lot of people our age. You then end up – theoretically, the family is supposed to be the refuge from the society –

AB: Right.

SS: and if you happen to have a really, terrible family, you're supposed to enter into the world as a way of having refuge from the family. But when the family and society are pathological in the same way, how do you negotiate that?

AB: You create your own community, or you live your life very much alone. I guess it's one or the other and I think that I did start to do political work, so I could be with people I felt like I could be myself with. And, I've really tried to find ways to live my life that let me live it with the fewest number of compromises possible, which I think I've done. So, I'm out at work. I have a job where everybody sort of knows my business. I've done political work that I feel comfortable doing and I don't spend any time with my family. I don't spend any time with people who I feel are hostile towards me. But, I am sort of envious of people who do get completely included in their families. Donna gets completely included in her family, and I also get included in her family – so, I get a little bit of that.

SS: Donna is your girlfriend of 21 years and we're sitting in your apartment that you share. So, I think your first political movement was the anti-war – was the peace movement, is that true?

AB: Well, I got involved in a little bit in the late '70s with the first gay march on Washington – I think it was the first gay march on Washington – and did a little bit of organizing in Boston, for that. And organized on campus for that. And then was doing some lesbian, feminist, separatist kind of things.

SS: Were you a separatist?

AB: No, but it was more fun than working with the guys. And the women were really interesting. And, I wasn't formally a separatist.

SS: Let's talk about that period, because I feel like it's one of the most maligned and misunderstood periods of the women's movement. How did you fit into that? Who were some of the people you were working with?

AB: There were points when I think women separated – I don't even remember the names of the groups that I would have gone in or out of in Boston. But, I think women got fed up with working with men and were into discovering each other and each other's lives and setting up CR groups. I don't know what to say about it.

SS: Well, there was stuff around the bookstore, right? New Words?

AB: Yeah, there was stuff around New Words. There was a Cambridge women's center that I hung out in. At that point, there were lots of women's concerts and women's arts things – many of which were like, no men allowed. And so there was this whole thing about creating women's space, which was important because there was no place else for people to really talk about their lives – what their life experience was. I think a lot of women at that point had left heterosexual marriages, after realizing that they were lesbians and really needed to be, or to have a place that could be women's only. And I think very few women expected to live lives totally separate from men, because unless you go off into a commune, in the middle of nowhere, you can't live that way. But, to be able to have some space in their life – and some time in their life, where they were just with lesbians – and for me, being at MIT, it was really nice to have a space, where I could be with some women, because there were so few at MIT, and they were mostly straight, and they got coupled up with men really quickly for security reasons, so

that they wouldn't be hassled by other guys. So, there really wasn't a lesbian core group at MIT to hang out with, so I did go into the Cambridge women's community for that.

SS: In that era, most gay people who were in colleges had to go into the gay community to be gay. There wasn't this town/gown split like there is now. Did you go to graduate school?

AB: I got my Bachelor's in Civil Engineering at MIT, and I stayed on in their Master's in Transportation Program at MIT, and got my Master's degree, and then opted out of pursuing a Ph.D. so that I could see the real world and earn some money.

SS: So did you come right back here?

AB: So, I actually tried to get a job in Boston at the MBTA – the Transportation Authority there, but they weren't hiring and the only other place I was willing to live was New York City. So, I sent my resume out to all the Transportation Agencies, and I got an interview from New York City Transit, and I figured, well, I'll just take this until something better comes along. And that was in November of 1981, and I'm still there. And, I've made a space for myself there. Right now I'm the Director of Subway Schedules.

SS: So we can blame you.

AB: So, you can blame me. You should be happy about the Manhattan Bridge finally re-opening. But, I was out my first day on the job there. Everybody – even though it's a big agency, everybody knows everybody else, and I've managed to make my peace with all the people there, so I can be myself and I can pretty much dress the way I want to dress when I go to work, which is important to me, and they know my

politics, and they know I take days off to go to demonstrations. And they don't get freaked out when I get a couple of phone calls, when something big happens.

Tape I
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SS: So, once you came back here, how did you start getting involved?

AB: I checked out a couple of different groups, to see where I wanted to find my place, and I had heard a lot about Women's Pentagon Action, but I hadn't been active in the Women's Pentagon Action sub-group in Cambridge. And so I went to a couple of their meetings and I got hooked, because these women were so interesting and so smart and creative, and knew so much. And I just thought – well I'm just going to sit here and hang out and absorb this.

SS: Let's make record about who some of these people were.

AB: Grace Paley, Vera Williams, Eva Kollisch, Donna Gould – I'm trying to think of some of the other –

SS: Well, wasn't Sharon Kleinbaum involved?

AB: Yeah, Sharon Kleinbaum was in the Barnard group. Toni Fitzpatrick, Laura Flanders – and then there were – Harriet Hirschorn –

SS: Lydia Pilcher, who's now a big film producer. Yeah, there was a whole –

AB: I was in awe.

SS: Explain this. I don't think anyone has ever written about this event and it was so important for so many people. Explain what the idea was of the Women's Pentagon Action.

AB: The group came together to make the connections between war, the patriarchy, women's oppression, the military industrial complex, and sort of saw the

Pentagon as the root of all evil in this country. And it was an anti-nationalism group – did not believe in borders, flags, patriotism – and believed that basically, women, by bonding together with other women, could save the world. And at that time in the group – when I joined in '81 – although, probably 60 to 75 percent of the group were lesbians, it was not talked about. I mean, people knew who were lesbians and who weren't, but it wasn't part of the dogma of the group. We were women – which I found a little hard to stomach, because it was so clear that so many women were lesbians anyway, but they didn't want it to be a lesbian group. They didn't want to exclude straight women. And because it was so focused on militarism, or anti-militarism, lesbianism sort of had a hard way of getting tied into that politically, I think. But, I learned so much about organizing, about dealing with the police, about insisting on your right to take space, about – just everything about doing street politics or doing politics on the street from them.

SS: Can you explain the cell structure?

AB: It was sort of a loose affiliation of groups – urban and rural – not all of which were called Women's Pentagon Action. And then they would have meetings where each group would send a couple of people, and it worked on at that point what was called Feminist Process, which was sort of like Consensus Process, where you talked at interminable length about everything until everyone agreed on a particular solution to whatever you were discussing. So the meetings went on and on and on, and very little got actually resolved.

SS: It's interesting because all these things that you're bringing up – these are things people make fun of, but actually I think they're really important historically.

AB: One of the problems with AIDS activism was people are dying, we have to do something now. And so I think a lot of process got chucked aside, because it is very time consuming. On the other hand, if what you're trying to do is end militarism in the world, it doesn't have to be done – it doesn't matter if you take an extra two hours to talk about something. But, the good thing about the process is I think it gives you a lot of respect for the other people in the group, and it teaches you to really listen to people's concerns and to let yourself change your opinion about things, which is really important.

Tape I
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SS: Also, it was a constituency of people who had never been listened to.

AB: Right. Well, some of them couldn't stop talking, but it's an interesting process to go through. It can be very frustrating for organizing, and I don't know, if you said to me well, what's the process to organize about, whether I would say consensus process. I think when you're making decisions about personal safety, or about political arguments that are critical, that consensus can be very good, because it really does force you to slow down and to not do things quickly, that might, if you really thought about them, seemed stupid. So, when we did a lot of civil disobedience, we tried to get people to use consensus process in the affinity groups in the civil disobedience in ACT UP, so that – or in any other groups – so that people wouldn't say, well let's just like, rush the fence. How do you feel about it? Does this really make sense, and to question it. And, I think it does – it keeps you from being persuaded too quickly to do something.

SS: There are many differences between Women's Pentagon Action and ACT UP, but one that comes to me immediately is that a lot of people in ACT UP were very entitled and had a lot of privilege and access and a lot of people in the Women's Pentagon Action had been excluded from power all of their lives.

AB: I think that's critical, because I think a lot of men initially came to ACT UP because it was the first time in their life that their white male privilege wasn't working for them, and they thought that – they were outraged that the government wasn't taking it seriously, that they couldn't get the drugs, that this wasn't put at the forefront of the whole medical establishment. And they couldn't believe that. They couldn't believe that other people didn't think their lives were worth saving, or taking extraordinary steps to save. And, they had a hard time making the connections to other people who sort of felt they didn't have that privilege. But, I think – it's also the difference between working on something that is theoretical and anti-militarism is sort of – it's real, but it's theoretical. Whereas, watching your friends die before your eyes, quickly at that point, is a very different experience. And maybe if I lived in a – if Women's Pentagon Action was in a country that was in the middle of civil war, and you were seeing people shot and disappeared in front of you in that moment, that it would have been a different organization with different ways of dealing with things. But I think in ACT UP – I mean, everyone in ACT UP knew people who were sick and dying, and, particularly in the beginning, when a lot of people didn't know their status – their HIV status – no one knew who could be next. So there was a certain emotionalism about it that was very different from Women's Pentagon Action.

SS: Was that where you were first introduced to non-violent civil disobedience?

AB: Yeah – I think non-violent civil disobedience – particularly the writings of Barbara Deming. And also into street actions that weren't pre-arranged with the police, and the whole concept that we have a right to free speech and freedom of assembly, and

we don't have to ask permission for it. And if you want to arrest us for it, that's your business, but we're not going to ask your permission. And if you don't grant us permission, we're going to do it anyway – and that whole way of dealing with things. So it was both non-violent civil disobedience, but also the insistence on you using your rights, and protecting your rights by using them, and not giving up – not letting the government take those rights away from you.

Tape I
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SS: Did you already assume, in Women's Pentagon Action, that kind of leadership role around marshaling and training like you did in ACT UP?

AB: No, because most of Women's Pentagon Action – everything was a little more anarchistic and – it was very well-organized in some ways, but anybody could do anything. So, it wasn't like you had people whose job was to talk to the media. And, it wasn't like you had people whose job it was necessarily to marshal. Everyone sort of took responsibility for it. And it was a very small group. So maybe no more than 50 people at meetings, and several hundred people at demonstrations. Maybe the largest demonstration in New York was 2,000 people. So, they were sort of anarchistically kept together. On the other hand, there were many fewer people who were likely to do the kinds of things that you need marshals to help with. So you didn't have the people being sort of out of control with anger. You didn't have demonstrators on the sidelines, wanting to throttle you. There wasn't as much police conflict. So, the need for that kind of marshalling was much less, but everyone took responsibility for it, really. Lots and lots of people in the group took responsibility for it.

SS: Can you describe the actual action at the Pentagon?

AB: I was not at the actual – I got involved right after it. So, we did a lot of demonstrations in New York. And we did one called Not in Our Name, which was one of the early sort of anti-globalization demonstrations, trying to tie together corporate greed with the military complex, which is probably 1983. But, I was in the process of moving from Boston to New York to start my job in November of 1981, for the second Women's Pentagon Action.

SS: The thing that you mentioned before about it being seen as like, a women's movement. I think that's very much of that era. I was in CARASA and it was the same thing. It was last gasp of the women's movement, of gay and straight women together. And then it all kind of fizzled. How did you step out of the Women's Pentagon Action?

AB: Well, I think most political groups that are strictly – not really volunteer, but, don't have staff, don't have funding, sort of implode within about two or three years. I think it's really rare to get a political group that that doesn't happen to, because people burn out. It's very hard to keep it going. And so, Women's Pentagon Action – we were involved with the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment. And at the end of Seneca, everything sort of fell apart.

SS: Can you explain what that was?

AB: The Seneca Women's Peace Encampment was in Seneca, New York – upstate New York. It was a missile-type base area, and a group of women set up a 24-hour a day, 7-day a week Peace Camp, based on the Greenham Women's Peace Camp from England. And during the summer of 1983, they invited thousands of women to come and camp on the land and hang out, and do civil disobedience at the base. And so,

Women's Pentagon Action helped organize one of the weeks, I guess, of women, and we went up to Seneca and we decided we were going to have a peace walk, like the peace walks they had had through the South during the civil rights movement, and we were going to walk, maybe, 10 miles to the peace camp. And we didn't realize that this was a really controversial thing to do there. And while we were marching to the peace camp, our way was blocked by the locals, and because it was the safest thing to do, we sat down in the street, expecting that the police would disperse the crowd.

SS: Explain what blocked means, because it was scary.

AB: It was scary. There were people with pick-up trucks and rifles and they sort of hemmed in on us and sort of corralled us while we were in the street, so we sat down to diffuse the tension – not expecting to be arrested – but eventually what they did was arrested the people trying to walk – about 54 of us – also known as the Waterloo 54. And we were held in jail and eventually we were seen by a Justice of the Peace, after several days, and we were released on our own recognizance under Jane Does. And, we went to the peace camp. It probably took four or five days for us to get out of jail and to make –

Tape I
00:40:00

SS: They had enough room in the Waterloo jail?

AB: They put us in a junior high school cafeteria, with cots. And, it was the same building that they had the National Guard in, to help protect the Seneca base from the peace camp. So, we shared quarters with them. It was, essentially – it was jail. I mean, it felt like jail.

Tape II
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SS: And that was your first arrest?

AB: I think my first arrest was before that. It was at the Gay Civil Rights hearing. The last time the Gay Civil Rights Bill failed in the New York City Council, there were a bunch of us who were arrested, and that was my first arrest.

SS: We sat in the chairs of the City Council people.

AB: I don't remember sitting in the chairs of the City Council people, I just remember –

SS: With Maxine?

AB: I don't remember who was there. I only remember Donna was there, because it was really early on.

SS: This was this interim organization called Women for Women that Maxine and I had, and I remember all of those people sat in the chairs of the City Councilmen. That was '82 or '83. Thank you for reminding me about that. I forgot about that.

AB: So, that was my first arrest.

SS: So you're still up in Waterloo. Can you tell – I just want to say – this little crowd, the Waterloo 54 – many of these women were in their 40s, 50s and 60s – right?

AB: Yes.

SS: These were not bare-breasted, mud-wrestling Seneca peace-campers.

AB: They were life-long political activists, and they were people who had a lot of experience through different movements – the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement. So, they really knew how to try to diffuse a potentially violent situation. And I still think it's amazing that none of us were hurt. But, they really got everybody to

sit down of our group, and if people felt like they couldn't get arrested from that situation, we were able to negotiate for them to get up and walk outside to the mob. But, it still amazes me that no one was hurt.

SS: But also, that it was so intergenerational.

AB: Well, one of the great things about Women's Pentagon Action, and why I was in awe of the women there, was that when I started there I was 22 or 23, and there were women who were a couple of years younger than me from Barnard, but, all the way up through their early 70s, and they were people who had been active in a lot of different movements and who were really clear in their analysis and their understanding of non-violence and using non-violence for social change.

SS: Were any of the older people open about having been in the Communist party?

AB: Yeah, Eva Kollisch – she was very open about being a Trotskyite, and having been an organizer in the '40s. And there weren't too many sort of, hard core former Communists, but there people who would talk about it a little bit.

SS: Do you think that there was influence from that tradition in the Women's Pentagon Action?

AB: I think the sort of, "We're all brothers and sisters throughout the land," – the soft part of Communism – that was definitely there. Anti-nationalism – that you don't self-identify as an American or as British or as French, but that, we're all the same kind of thing, certainly comes from that. You know, there wasn't a lot of class analysis in Women's Pentagon Action. There wasn't a lot of your traditional sort of '70s Marxist analysis of things. So, there was very little sectarian left type –

SS: Besides Barbara Deming, who were the other theorists who were influencing you in that period? Who did you look up to?

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AB: I think everyone read Emma Goldman and some of the anarchist writings. It wasn't a big theory group. Part of it is that a lot of the women in the group were artists – either visual artists or writers. So certainly some of the – probably Barbara Deming was the person who was talked about the most, because she was really one of us.

SS: So then after Seneca did you start to move away from that?

AB: That stuff sort of began to fall apart, and I got involved – the first time I remember hearing about AIDS was at a Gay Pride rally in 1981 or '82, when it was still Gay-Related Immune Disorder. But one of the guys I knew at the Transit Authority – who was one of only other openly gay people at that point – was Sal Licata, who was David Summers' lover. And so Sal and I picked each other out, like, the first week I was at work and chatted. And David at that point was active in the People With AIDS Coalition, and Sal knew a lot of the people who organized what's now called GLAAD – Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. But, in its original format was the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League, before they got sued by *the* Anti-Defamation League. And they started to combat some of the stuff – the homophobic backlash about AIDS. So, Pat Robertson and William Buckley saying people should get tattooed and all that kind of stuff. And so I got pulled into that, and worked with them for a while, but I found that to be very unsatisfying. I did it and I helped them organize some demos, but it was not very satisfying work.

SS: Who were the original organizers there?

AB: Vito Russo, Robinson –

SS: Marty Robinson?

AB: Marty Robinson, Gregory Kolovakos, Marsha –

SS: But his friend –

AB: There was Darrell Yates Rist.

SS: Darrell Limp Wrist.

AB: And Marcia –

JIM HUBBARD: Pally.

AB: Oh, you guys are better at this than I am – middle age sucks.

SS: All these people are dead. Jewelle Gomez was involved at the top.

AB: Right. So, they had a little rag-tag arm of it that did – Buddy Noro – that did direct action, and so I worked with them for a while.

SS: Was that the Lavender Hill Mob?

AB: The Lavender Hill Mob was a subset of that group – that whenever the people in GLAAD would say, “No, no, no, you can’t do that,” they would do it. And, that was –

SS: The Lavender Hill Mob – Marty Robinson –

AB: Bill Bahlman and Buddy Noro, I think.

SS: So, you were working with them?

AB: I didn’t really work with Lavender Hill Mob, but they worked with this little group in GLAAD that tried to do demos, but it was very frustrating.

SS: What was frustrating, do you remember?

AB: There was a split between people who wanted the group to have a certain amount of shirt-and-tie prestige – and also they make their livings from being

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spokespeople for the gay community – and people who really wanted to tar-and-feather anybody who said anything bad about anybody with AIDS. So, I was part of the tar-and-feather part. It's not good to have people doing political work who are afraid to do anything, because it's going to affect their ability to earn their living doing their gay and lesbian other work. So, that was really sort of a conflict.

SS: It's interesting that you bring this up. I've never really thought about it that way, but in some ways you can say that the people who – what we used to call the homocrats, the professional homosexuals – in a way they've won. Because now, they're CEOs of these – I don't know if that's what they're called – Executive Directors of these national organizations with pretty good salaries. But, these are the very early days of that.

AB: Right, this is '85 or '86, probably. So, I was doing that for a while, and I found that very hard, to work with them. And then they started to organize for the '87 march on Washington, for the Bowers v. Hardwick Supreme Court demonstration, and I worked with a group organizing the civil disobedience at the Supreme Court. And that's how I got involved with ACT UP, because I went to ACT UP to try to get them to sign on to the civil disobedience. So, I got into ACT UP that way, and I got into ACT UP because when they first called their first Wall Street action, they needed people to help marshal it, while the 19 of them got arrested with police participation by giving them a list of who was going to be arrested. And Jean Elizabeth Glass and I organized on the sidelines and kept the picket part legal from the CD part.

SS: So, what was it like when you first walked into ACT UP to ask them to come to – what was ACT UP like at that time?

AB: It was very Larry [Kramer]-dominated. It was very exciting. It wasn't packed, but it was almost all men. There were less than a dozen women I think, at that point. It was very exciting. I mean, people were so charged up and they just wanted to demonstrate, demonstrate, demonstrate. They would schedule five demonstrations in a week, and then go to all of them. In that way, it was very exciting. But, they didn't know anything about demonstrating.

SS: How did that make itself obvious?

AB: Well, like at the first Wall Street demo, when they gave the cops a list of the 19 people who were going to be arrested, and each person who was going to be arrested wore an armband so that the police wouldn't accidentally take the wrong person, but, it also made it impossible for anybody else to try to jump in. And it was very orchestrated, in that way. And it was sort of like, what I would call Celebrity CD. They didn't want 300 people, at that point, necessarily doing CD. They wanted a couple of name people, with recognition so that would be what would be in the press.

SS: Who were the celebrities?

AB: I think Larry was a celebrity, in his own mind. But, that was the kind of actions that they were thinking about initially.

SS: So, how did you plug in? Did you just say, I'm going to organize this?

AB: At some point – I forget when – I had already gone to the War Resisters League for training for trainers of civil disobedience training, because it was something that I liked doing. So I'd already had that background, and I got hooked. So, I started out thinking I was just going to go and sit through the meetings and make my announcement about the CD in Washington, and I got hooked in and there were a lot of

people there who I liked and respected. There was a small smattering of people who had come from similar – even the guys, but they came from sort of an anti-war perspective or leftist perspective and I connected with them, and I felt not really at home there, because I was very critical of it. But I felt like at least these were people I could work with, and I could argue with them and I could struggle with them. But I felt like I had to do something, and it seemed like the place that made the most sense to me.

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SS: So, did you enter into the relationship conceiving of it as a coalition relationship?

AB: Well, like a messenger – that I would be the go-between between ACT UP and the organizing body working on the Supreme Court stuff. But, I felt too connected by the end of it to drop out when the CD was over. I didn't do the CD with an ACT UP affinity group. I did the CD with my sort of women's peace buddies. But after that, I started to regularly just go to ACT UP to be part of ACT UP.

SS: I know this is really hard, because it was so long ago – but, can you try to tell us how ACT UP's philosophy and action around doing civil disobedience evolved? What the conflicts were about it, which things shook out in its methodology?

AB: I think that part of it was the group trying to figure out how to use its anger, because it was group with a tremendous amount of rage and anger at the system. And, you know, how much can you march around in a circle and yell at the top of your lungs and blow whistles? Well, we did it a lot, but I think sort of like when you're taking addictive drugs, you have to keep taking something a little stronger and little stronger. One of the problems of being in New York City is that, although we were the epicenter of

the AIDS epidemic in a lot of ways, all the decision makers were not in New York. Most of them weren't. They were in Washington. So, it was very frustrating to go out into the streets of New York and demonstrate, because you were demonstrating against buildings that people in power weren't necessarily there. So I think people felt that they had to do something more serious than that. And what does that mean? You know, not knowing how much of a long haul we were in for at the time – not knowing how long people were going to live – and everything seemed very – you talk like, '87, '88 – there were really very few prophylactic drugs at that time. People were still dying of pneumonia. So, things seemed very, very critical. In terms of civil disobedience, I think people saw it as a way to make – that civil disobedience is an American tactic that people understand, in some ways. And, that they understand when you do it, the seriousness of it – both the press and the people who you're demonstrating against. But, there are also people who wanted to do – not crazy things – but, you know, who didn't understand issues of public safety, personal safety, the safety of the people around you, taking responsibility for your actions and all that kind of stuff. And so, we really began to talk about civil disobedience as a safe tactic for making a stronger statement, making a very direct personal statement, and as a way of getting media attention. Because civil disobedience really does get you – or, at least it did at that point – get you some attention. So we really talked about trying to get everybody in the group trained for civil disobedience, because you don't always know when it's going to happen, or when you're going to want to do it. And just a lot of stuff about taking direct action and doing it as safely as possible – not that you can guarantee – we used to say, “You can't guarantee people's safety” – and you can't. But,

there are a lot of things you can do that make it physically safer for the people doing it, than if you just run out into the street and sit down.

SS: Well, in a way you were extremely successful, because not one ACT UP person ever hurt another human being, in all of the years –

AB: There were some ACT UP members who were injured pretty seriously, like Chris Henley.

SS: But I mean, from our side –

AB: But from our side, right. And there were a lot of things I think that people – I think the hard part came with property destruction, because it's easier to convince people that if you're in a movement that is about saving people's lives, that you don't want to take any action that puts people at that kind of physical risk. So, you can't talk about saving people's lives, and then shoot the Health Commissioner. Yes, the Health Commissioner may be evil, and yes, you may want to sit-in in his office and raise that point to him directly, but – not that anybody really said shoot the Health Commissioner – that your message had to be somewhat consistent, both in terms of saving people's lives and what the political message you were putting out was.

SS: Well, this is something that people have asked me so much, and I don't know the answer. With so many people dying, why is it that gay people in general – and ACT UP people particularly – were never violent? I mean, gay people get beaten up all the time.

AB: I think that the group made a formal decision to not be violent towards other people. We were violent in some of our language. But I think because we wanted to come back and do it next week and saw the need that we were going to have to come

back and do it next week, next month, the month after, that there was no heroic action someone could take by blowing something up that would have made any difference whatsoever. And I think people sort of – even the people who are really desperate, sort of understood that. There was some property destruction that created a lot of controversy.

SS: Is there something in the condition of gay people in this society that renders us non-violent politically, or just personally? Gay people don't beat up a straight person on the street.

AB: I don't think so, because gay people can certainly be as nasty as all hell. But, physically, there were some situations I saw in ACT UP, where I saw people lose it. But, the group had enough mechanisms to pull them back in before it got out of hand, I think. In a less disciplined group, you would have seen some violent actions. This is people kicking over police barricades, or people jumping through a line of police officers to join a demonstration. Or someone, in one case, actually sort of shoving a cop, not really violently, but things that could get you felony arrests, and we were able to –

SS: What was your mechanism when something like that happened?

AB: To surround the person and get them back in. To physically get people to engage the person who was in the process of losing it and sort of calm them down.

SS: What would you say?

AB: Well, like in the case where the guy pushed the police officer, I turned to the police officer and I said, "He's with us. I saw what he did, we'll talk to him." And I turned around and was like, "What's going on?" And you just talk to the person and try to get them to engage with you.

SS: But, that presupposes a relationship of trust between you and a large number of people.

AB: Right, and even in situations where you might have hecklers, what we would try to do is get some marshals to talk to the hecklers, so that the people protesting wouldn't stop protesting to focus on the hecklers, and that would diffuse some tension. We tried to get people to not be provoked into doing things that they would regret. And part of that – like, we were talking before about affinity groups and consensus process – and we were trying to get people in doing civil disobedience – that if someone in a group stands up and says, “Let's charge the barricade!” that you don't get up and charge the barricade. You say, “Well, why should we? What's the pros and what's the cons? I don't really feel like charging the barricade,” to diffuse the situation, because you don't want a police provocateur or anybody else be able to lead a whole group into doing something like that. And in the group, we talked about that all the time – about people being responsible for their actions, about no running, no throwing things. And just things that you can do to try to keep people from panicking, about sitting down to diffuse potentially violent situations. And all of that – you know, when the police would bring horses into a demonstration, that you don't run away and that there are a lot of reasons why you don't run away, but one reason is that running away creates panic and not that bringing horses into a demonstration doesn't create panic, but there's less panic if you sit down, which is counter-intuitive, than if you run away. If you sit down, everyone is safe together. If you run away – well, who gets left behind? Well, the people who can't run fast – the people who are older or sicker or are just too dazed to figure out what they should do. And so you leave your most vulnerable people behind, to the police. And

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constantly talking about things like that I think really made a difference in the way we were able – the cohesion we had at our demonstrations.

SS: How many people did you personally train?

AB: Over a thousand, probably. We did trainings for trainers in ACT UP, so there was a corps – I wasn't the only ACT UP trainer. We had a whole corps of people who could do CD training.

SS: About how many?

AB: At any given time, probably around ten or twelve. But probably like, 20 or 25 people over the six or seven years that we were most active.

SS: Did you have a name? Were you a committee or an affinity group?

AB: No, we just knew. Every time there was a going to be a large action, one of us would say, well, I'll handle getting the CD training together, and you'd talk to the other people, and you'd say, okay, can you do one, can you do one?

SS: Actually, you were one of the least organized of the structures inside ACT UP.

AB: Right, because at different points there'd be an Action Committee, but it wasn't like Treatment and Data that stayed together from the beginning through the end. We would generally pull together – each large demonstration would be one small group of people who wanted to work on it.

SS: So it was you, Alexis [Danzig] –

AB: John Kelly, B.C. Craig. At different points – Mike Frisch, Steve Cordova, Jean Elizabeth [Glass]. I think Joe Chiplock did some trainings. We had an amorphous group of people who knew how to do it, and we would do it when –

SS: That's interesting, it's one of the most anarchistic structures inside

ACT UP –

AB: Again, part of that's because – well first of all, you can't meet every week about CD training. And we had all the Monday night meeting to go to every Monday night. And then if there was an action going on, you'd go to that meeting. Well, you don't want to go to a third meeting. Some people did, but if you want to have a life. So for me, I had a two meeting a week maximum, with maybe a poster party thrown in. But, three days – unless it was right before a major demonstration – then maybe like, a couple of extra days. But, in general, I really tried to keep it to two nights a week.

SS: So the fact that you, personally, were involved in training a thousand people – so, all these people saw your face, and built some kind of relationship with you around non-violence.

AB: Right. I did civil disobedience training. I did a lot of marshal training, and I also was a facilitator at the Monday night meetings for a while, so people saw me a lot.

SS: So, when you would turn to someone who's losing it at a demo, they knew who you were.

AB: Absolutely.

SS: So, there was a trust there. What was the largest demonstration that you worked on?

AB: Well, there were a couple. I worked on the City Hall demos. I worked on Stop the Church. I worked on taking over Grand Central Station. Those were pretty much the major –

SS: So, more than ten thousand people?

AB: I don't think any of them were more than ten thousand.

SS: You don't think Stop the Church was? Maybe seven thousand?

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AB: No – I mean, it was several thousand, but none of them were so big that they were unmanageable.

SS: Okay. How essential is the affinity group structure to keeping a large demonstration peaceful?

AB: For civil disobedience, I think it's absolutely critical to do an affinity group structure for safety. I think it also helps you a lot, in terms of the staging of the CD, because you can go in in waves. You don't have to have it be one large mass of people all doing the same thing at the same time. And people always jumped in at the end anyway, whether they were planning – they weren't initially planning on getting arrested. People who weren't in affinity groups would come in. But the most important thing about affinity groups is the support structure around affinity groups, so that someone – in theory, at least – knows who you are, what you're wearing, where you were arrested, who to contact if anything happens. They know that you were in – went into police custody, and they know when you came out of police custody, so you don't lose anybody, and everyone is tracked. And that is really important – so, if anyone gets injured, or if there's any brutality. And the other thing about affinity group actions is that I think they are much stronger in terms of the solidarity of the people doing the action together, because you have much more connection to the people there. So, I think you're less likely to do things that are stupid. And, if you do have a question about what's going on, or something feels like it's getting out of control, you have people, who you're in it

with, to talk to about it. They can calm you down, or you guys can decide to get up and move and do something else – or, in a worst-case scenario, to try to leave the demonstration.

SS: How did ACT UP realize that affinity groups were going to be the core of these large civil disobediences?

AB: That was something that a couple of us introduced. I wasn't the only person who introduced it – Mike Frisch also – that that was a good way to organize people, and that what we would do is try and form affinity groups out of our CD trainings. So, people would come to a CD training – twenty people would come. Fifteen of them would decide to get arrested, a couple of them would decide to do support, and they would become an affinity group. So, there were some long-term affinity groups in ACT UP that stayed together for a couple years, but there were also pick up affinity groups, formed by new people who came to a training. And then other times, people would sort of do like an A list and B list of affinity groups. So, you tried to get affinity groups with your friends.

SS: What was the coolest, hippest affinity group?

AB: I was never in a cool, hip affinity group.

SS: What were they? What were the really A list affinity groups in ACT UP?

AB: I'm drawing a complete blank, because I don't want to remember.

[LAUGHS] Because I wasn't invited to be in it.

SS: You had to be invited to be in an affinity group?

AB: If it was an A-list affinity group, it was by invitation only – so, I was always in pick-up affinity groups.

SS: That's interesting. So even though you were the leader, you were still feeling alienated?

AB: You know, I didn't like excluding anybody. So, the idea that you would have – I didn't want to be in anything, organize anything where people were hand selected and it was closed. And, I had a lot of arguments with people who wanted me to do stuff with them, and I was just like, that's not how I work. And, there were some really obnoxious, difficult people in ACT UP, and I didn't want them in my affinity group, either, but I didn't just – I couldn't do it.

SS: It's a really interesting impulse – this is something Jim and I have been talking about a lot, lately – when you grow up in a situation where you're kicked out of your family or there's no place for you. You can either become a person who's all about creating inclusivity, or you can become a person who wants to create the most elite category for yourself. How come you became one of these open-armed people?

AB: Because I wasn't cool enough to be in the other group. I don't know.

SS: Can you explain what cool means, in ACT UP terms?

AB: There were different varieties. There were the Swim Team boys group.

SS: Who was on the Swim Team?

AB: I don't even remember the names of these people. But, there was a certain look. The other thing that I should say is that, from the beginning when I was in ACT UP, I was already in a relationship. And so, I always had to balance my commitment to

ACT UP, and my commitment to the ACT UP social aspects, with the fact that I have a girlfriend. So, I always had one foot in the social part, and one foot out of the social part. And I'm not the world's most social person to start with. And, I think that probably also had a role.

SS: So it was more of your choice?

AB: Could I have worked at being more social there? Probably. Was I really interested in it? Not really, and I had my role.

SS: How did you have to adjust civil disobedience techniques to accommodate very sick people?

AB: I don't know that we did. We would talk about people about bringing their meds with them. We would talk to people in the affinity groups about –

SS: To get arrested with their medication on them?

AB: Right, right. And, we would talk to people about respecting – about not leaving people behind, and about staying with people. But, I don't think that we really adapted what we were doing in that way. It was something we talked about, but –

SS: Do you ever remember a very sick person getting arrested?

AB: There were people who were ill who were arrested. Not so sick that you really thought that they were doing something stupid.

SS: Do you remember when Larry Kramer made a speech about people should take up arms like the Irgun?

AB: No, but I probably just blanked it right out. I was never a big fan of Larry's.

SS: Why is that?

AB: Because of his ego and his self-promotion. I mean, not that in a lot of ways he didn't have the best interest of people at heart, but Larry is so larger than life and so – always Larry first – that I was just like, oh, there he goes again. And I felt that he crowded out a lot of people.

SS: Let's talk about times when the CD training didn't work. I'm thinking particularly of the Chris Henley situation. Can you sort of describe what happened?

AB: What happened with Chris Henley was not – it wasn't supposed to be a CD. There had been a demonstration where there had been some police problems. I forget exactly what happened, but we went up to the police precinct at night – a bunch of us, after a meeting – and we were just demonstrating and there were a couple of guys in ACT UP who looked similar and one of them was sort of in the cops' faces about police brutality and blah, blah, blah. But, it wasn't Chris. And, I think what happened was the police mistook Chris for this guy, and at the end of the demonstration, they grabbed – the police used to take a hostage to end a demonstration, and they did that at any number of non-CD pickets and demonstrations we did. And so they sort of took Chris hostage to end the demonstration, which it basically did – and then beat him up.

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SS: In public?

AB: No, he was not beat up in public. But, what happened – I remember Chris at that demonstration. I was at the demonstration, and Chris was not doing anything that was any different from – I mean, he was quite a pacifist in general. But he was wearing I think a white T-shirt, blue jeans and a black leather jacket. And, he had blond hair, and there was another guy there who – you know John Nalley?

SS: Yes.

AB: I think the police mistook Chris for John Nalley. And John had a way of being very obnoxious and getting in your face – not that what he was doing was illegal or bad, but I think the police made an error, and thought that Chris was John.

SS: So what did they do? They just took him in the back room?

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SS: Chris. They took inside –

AB: They took him inside and he got a head injury, and I don't think it was clear whether he was either thrown against a wall or – I know I heard that he was hit with a police radio on the head. But, he definitely suffered nerve and brain damage – epileptic seizures, trouble talking – very, very serious impairments. And he was really the only person in ACT UP, while I was there, who was seriously injured physically. There was some psychological damage to people, I think, from other things. When we were strip-searched after one of the demonstrations –

SS: Were you one of those people?

AB: I was one of those people who was strip-searched.

SS: I want to ask you about that in detail, but I want to ask you about the Chris thing. So, on your watch, when someone gets that badly hurt –

AB: We didn't know until we went down to try and get him out. So, we went down to night court, and it was that point that we knew he had been injured. And, I don't think we realized how seriously, even – that it was long lasting, permanent thing, until later. I don't want to say that people didn't take it seriously at first, but I think people would have dealt with it differently if they had realized, really, how seriously injured he was.

SS: So you didn't feel it was anything ACT UP could have prevented?

AB: No. I felt very badly about it, but I don't think it was the wrong thing to go demonstrate against the police, and I don't think that it's your responsibility if you demonstrate against police brutality and the police beat you up, that it's your fault. So, should it have happened? Absolutely not. Were we responsible for it? No.

SS: Let's go to the famous strip search. So, what was the situation?

AB: So we had been arrested – I think it was one of the City Hall demonstrations that we were arrested at, and they brought the women down to a precinct, and we thought we were going to be put through the system, which means being held in police custody for 24 to 48 hours. And so, we were trying to conserve our energy, and normally when we were arrested, they would just sort of pat you down, have you empty your pockets and ask you a bunch of questions and maybe fingerprint you. But in this particular case, they asked us to shake out our bras – things like that – and drop your pants and shake out your underwear. It was at a time during the crack epidemic, when they were concerned about people bringing drugs and weapons into jail, and there was a protocol that they didn't follow about under what circumstances you should strip-search someone, and under what circumstances you shouldn't, and we were clearly under the shouldn't – but, they did it anyway. And, some of the women – particularly women who had some history of sexual abuse in their background – were really totally freaked out.

SS: What is a strip-search, what do they do?

AB: There are invasive strip-searches, and this was not an invasive strip-search – this was just a humiliating strip-search. Basically, you drop your pants and open your shirt in front of a woman corrections officer. And you know, there was absolutely

nothing that any of us were going to bring into jail. Most people who get arrested don't know they're getting arrested. They're not planning on getting arrested. We were planning on getting arrested. So, there was no reason to suspect that we would have had drugs or weapons on us. So, I think most of us felt like – well, that was stupid and humiliating.

SS: Did they make you take off all your clothes?

AB: I think we had to take off our shirts, but not take off our bras.

SS: Did they pat you down?

AB: Not once all our clothes were off, but they went through our pockets and stuff. We had to take off our shoes. Because a couple of the people were right and said, not only should they not do this to us, but they shouldn't do this to anybody else – and the only way to make that happen is to go public and sue – we went public and we sued.

SS: So, what happened? What grounds did you sue on?

AB: We sued on that they violated on their own rule on when strip-searches were supposed to be done, and that it was done sort of as a punitive measure, not a safety measure, and that it was done without proper authorization. And it turns out that they were doing it – at that point, they were doing it to like, everybody – without proper authorization. And so, we got that process stopped, and in the long run we won \$8,000 each in a court case.

SS: Who did the case?

AB: Ruth –

SS: From the ACLU, that Ruth? What's her name?

AB: Yeah, Ruth Harlow I think was the person who did it. At that point, she did it pro-bono, as part of a company that she was working with. I'm pretty sure she's the one who did it.

SS: And, how many people?

AB: Maybe thirty.

SS: You each got \$8,000?

AB: Yeah.

SS: So, what did you do with it?

AB: I donated it back to different progressive causes and took it off on my taxes – because they were all 501-(c)3 type donations.

SS: Was there discussion in the group about the money?

AB: Some people used it to go back to school or to pay off debts or to buy new equipment. I think a lot of it depended on where you were financially. I didn't need the \$8,000 to live on, because I have this very nice-paying job from the New York City Transit Authority that gives me a steady paycheck and health benefits. But other people were freelance, and a lot of people had sort of taken hiatus from working really hard while they were doing ACT UP stuff. We had discussions about it, but there was no party line.

SS: It's a really interesting contradiction, because on the one hand, you have this constituency that has no legal rights – gay people, and people with AIDS – who are just being bombarded with cruelty. But on the other hand, you had so many more rights and entitlements within the prison system. How do you explain that?

AB: Because sometimes your white skin privilege works for you, and sometimes it doesn't. And different institutions treat you differently, and you know, I think the point with the court case for the strip search was that we thought that no one should be strip-searched, and to use the court case – not just to get us money because of the wrong done to us – but to get them to abide by the rules they already had in place about how strip searches should be done.

SS: How did race play out in terms of civil disobedience? Were people of color in ACT UP less willing to do civil disobedience?

AB: Well, that's like a subset of a subset of a subset. I mean, ACT UP didn't have a large group of people of color in it. A lot of the people of color were not necessarily legal in this country. So for that reason, some of them did not feel comfortable getting arrested for immigration reasons. There certainly were people of color who got arrested with us, and, I think because of the history of civil disobedience and so many of our methods having come out of the civil rights movement, that there is a connection.

SS: Did this come up in your training? Did people ever say, I'm afraid?

AB: We talked about that the police like to pick on people who stick out. So, the only woman in all-male group, the only person of color in an all white group, the faggiest fag, the dykiest dyke, but, with the police it really was just – or picking on, in some cases, the most obnoxious person, who in some cases you almost want to be picked on because they're so annoying, but you still have to protect them anyway. And, about how to work with the police to make sure that they don't single people out.

SS: What was your personal relationship with the police? I mean, here you are, this big dyke.

AB: My goal – in those cases, where I was the chief marshal in a demonstration, my goal was to let the police know why we were there, what the parameters of the demonstration were. We're going to be setting up a legal picket over here. No, we do not want barricades. No, we are not going to take barricades. To try to treat them – respecting their person, but not necessarily their authority. So, I tried to be friendly with them, to assure them that we were perfectly capable of maintaining our own demonstration without their help, that they, you know, in a lot of cases, that they didn't really need to be there. But, to try not to give them a lot of information about what our actual – whether there's going to be civil disobedience, where it was going to be, whether we were going to march, and where we were going to march.

SS: So, you wouldn't call them beforehand?

AB: No, I was really a proponent of, we don't need the police to do our demonstrations. We don't want them there. It's better off if they don't come. You know, it's 100% legal to do a picket without telling the police you're going to do it. You do not have to be behind barricades; you just have to leave enough space on the street for people to walk by. And we were pretty careful when we were doing demonstrations – that if we took up more than a block to go to a second block or across the street and set up other pickets, and to try to keep everything moving.

SS: And you never asked for permits?

AB: We really tried to organize demos where you didn't need a permit, which meant not to have rallies, not to have sound systems, because sound systems you need a

permit for. A lot of the time, the police would let you use a bullhorn without a sound permit. At a certain point, they stopped, and we just stopped using bullhorns. You can call for a march and not ask for a permit. You have to be satisfied with negotiating on the spot either to march on the sidewalk or to get a lane, or to do a whole street closure. But, I always felt like we did – you negotiate from more strength when you have a thousand people trying to march with you, then you do when you go down – two of you – to the police precinct, to ask for the permit. So, we tried to do a lot of negotiating on the spot. And there were some people on the PD who got us. I mean, they understood that we were basically non-violent. They understood the parameters of exactly what we were going to do, and they didn't feel a need to assert their authority in our doing what we were doing, and those were the ones we worked the best with. And there were other ones who were just like – they just couldn't stand the fact that we wouldn't tell them ahead of time, we wouldn't ask for permission, and we didn't want to talk to them when we got there, and it drove them crazy.

SS: But how can you can say, “No, we refuse barricades,” and they come up with barricades?

AB: You move the demonstration to the other side of the street, and you just play cat and mouse with them.

SS: So, you would just move four hundred people, and they would just listen to you?

AB: We would say, come this way – yeah.

SS: Because everybody trusted you?

AB: And people knew that you try not to take the – if the barricades were set up when we got there, we would just set up in another spot, and everyone knew that. And, if when we were demonstrating they would try to put barricades up around us, we would try to get people to move, and then –

SS: How did they treat you personally, the cops?

Tape III
00:15:00

AB: A lot of them just didn't get it. They didn't get why you didn't want to be behind barricades. You know, why we were doing civil disobedience. I didn't have any personal clashes with them, I don't think.

SS: Did they treat you with respect?

AB: Not that I want to toot any horn for any cop, but Captain Frye was very good and always treated us with respect, and we never had any police problems because he always instructed the police to pretty much lay back. And he was the Captain and Commander in a lot of the early demonstrations. And you could go to him and say, "We're going to set up a legal picket over here." And he was like, "Is there going to be civil disobedience?" And I'd say, "I don't know," and he'd go, "All right." But, he was very professional. He knew what he was doing. He didn't have a big ego about it, and he let us do our thing.

SS: How did it effect you, personally, to be this person who isn't feminine enough for your own family – to suddenly have New York City police people have to listen to you because of the people you're helping?

AB: I was more concerned about getting people in ACT UP to listen to me, than about getting the police –

SS: Explain that.

AB: Although I think a lot of people had a lot of respect for me, a lot of people just didn't want to be told what to do, nor did we really want to tell them what to do. But I was more concerned about not letting the demonstrators get so revved up that they got out of control, than about the police.

SS: Did you have trouble getting ACT UP to listen to you just because people were the way they were, or did it have something to do with you?

AB: I think, in the beginning, it was hard to get people to listen to me, and to really think about personal safety and about – that there was a method to setting up a picket, that there was a method to setting up a CD and that things – we would do a lot better as an organization to find a way to fit those to our demonstrations. And part of it was that there were very few women in ACT UP at that time, and people were so angry. And I think after the first year, I was already well enough established that I didn't feel like people were questioning –

SS: Do you think that the men gave more authority to women who were more flirtatious or more feminine?

AB: No, I think a lot of what my function was, was to – not to hold back, but to say, "Let's think about what we're doing, let's look at" – about being responsible to each other, rather than let's just let our anger run its course. And so, I'm not a very passionate person in that way, and I think that the people who were listened to most, were the people who have that fire and have that passion. And if they're cute and sexy, it sure helps, but I think – I mean, I don't know if Maxine [Wolfe] felt that people really listened to her, but I always felt that people really listened to Maxine, and Maxine, no offense, is not that young, vibrant, sexy – she's not Maria Maggenti. So, looks and charm have something to

do with it, but I think Maxine is very passionate, and I think passion has a lot to do with it.

SS: Looking back, in terms of your own self-criticism, do you think there was any time when you were overly concerned or too restrictive?

AB: I think that there were things that I held back from working on, because I had a lot of conflict about them – like, some of the Stop the Church stuff. I didn't want to go into the Church.

SS: Why?

AB: Because I felt like we could make a really strong statement outside the Church, and I was worried about what people would do in the Church. I mean, I never dreamed that someone would, like, spit out the communion host. I really thought that people would take it as an attack on the institution of the Church rather than as an attack on the Cardinal. And being Jewish, I sort of felt like it was not my place to go into the Church like that – and so I didn't. I was one of the people who was arrested outside the Church, in the street. And, I felt like it's okay to – I felt at the time like it was okay to protest the Church, but – I mean, I think I might have been wrong on that. I think it was okay for them to go in as long as they understood what they were doing.

SS: So now, since you've changed your mind – I'm interested in this thing about, as a Jew going into the Church. Why do you now think that that would have been okay?

AB: Well maybe not for me, but personally. I was not raised going into churches, and so it's still sort of a taboo thing, to go into churches. I mean, it's one thing to go in to look at the architecture or the art, but to go in for a service, I'm still

uncomfortable with. And, to go in and disrupt a service – I just felt like, you know, maybe the people who were raised Catholic have a different take on this, but it's just something I can't do. And I also thought, well how would I feel if people went into a synagogue and disrupted it, and that would have really upset me. And so, I think I probably made a parallel there. I would have no trouble if someone was protesting outside a synagogue or protesting a particular rabbi, but not doing it in a synagogue while a service was going on.

SS: Okay. One of our feelings is that a lot of people really want change now and don't know how to do it. And, we're trying to detail as many tactics and strategies as possible, so that whoever in China watches this interview can learn from the things that you've already said – so many helpful things. Is there any way you can sort of just take us through what a CD training is?

AB: I think what's important is to talk about direct action, as opposed to indirect action – and civil disobedience is a component of direct action, but I think what you want to do is – if you believe that people can change – and I really believe that anybody can change. They can change because they want to change, or they can change because they have to change. And, first you try to persuade people to change because they want to change and, that's not really why you do civil disobedience. When you want to get people to come over to your side, you talk to them, you write to them, you confront them. But there's a certain point where they don't want to change, but you can force them to change, and that's where civil disobedience, I think, really comes in – is to either make it impossible for them to do what they're doing and not change, or to make them really have to face you face to face, if you can't get into them through some other

direct methods. Civil disobedience also makes people understand the seriousness of what you're doing. And, I think CD that is the most direct is like taking over someone's office, is a very powerful CD, as opposed to blocking traffic in front of their office building. So, the more direct the action is and the closer it gets you to the person you're trying to change, or the institution you're trying to change, the better off you are. And the hardest thing in organizing any demonstration, whether it be a picket or a CD is, how do you get across to the people who are outside your demonstration, what it is that you are doing? Because there were many ACT UP demonstrations where if you walked by, you would see that there were a whole bunch of angry queers, and if you knew anything you would probably know that they were from ACT UP, but you would have no idea what they were protesting. And so, I think the most important thing is the clarity of why you're there and what you're demanding, and that that has to be really simple and crystal clear, both to you and to – using props or signs or banners or whatever, to make that crystal clear, to the people you're confronting and the people walking by you. If that's what you want.

Tape III
00:25:00

SS: That's great, that's really helpful. What about when you're going into someone's office? Someone who has power over you, and you've written to them and you've asked them to do the reasonable thing, and they experience it like, you are violating them, and you are stalking them and you are abusing them – that they see themselves as neutral.

AB: I participated in Campaign '92, where the initial decision was that every presidential candidate who came to New York City – and this was before we knew Clinton was going to be the candidate – we were going to go after them, and make them

talk about AIDS. And so, we did stalk them. The great thing about Clinton was that he was such a people person, that he had to go through a crowd and shake hands. And so, it was just a matter of getting enough people out there. And, we're very good about worming up to the front. And, sooner or later, he was going to come around and shake hands, and you knew that you could grab on to his hand and talk to him and not let go. And that was what we tried to do. It's different than going and sitting in people's offices, but we really got to him, so that he knew that he could not show up in New York and not have people from ACT UP in his face, and that he was going to have to do things to get us off his back, and to talk about –

SS: Did you talk to him?

AB: I talked to him and there's a segment of *Nightline* of me bellowing at him, outside some fundraiser on the Upper East Side in a brownstone. "You're a coward! Why don't you come over here and talk to people with AIDS?" And, he actually came over and spoke with George Catravas, which was really great. People have to accept that we're there on a mission, we're there for a purpose, we are disrupting their work day, we are disrupting business as usual, but we're only doing it because that's the resort that they've left to us, you know? They haven't given us the answers we want. They haven't let us resolve it through other means, and that – if the only way to get someone to talk to you is to occupy their office, you do that.

SS: It's really interesting, because you really come up against the psychology of dominance – of people who feel like they have the right to shun you, to exclude you, to ignore you, and that that's neutral. And that if you say, "No, I'm a human being, I can't be treated that way," you're offending them and violating

them, when all you want to do is negotiate with them. How do you deal with people who are so outraged by that?

AB: I think they realize – and again, it’s making them change even though they don’t want to change, which is that they better find some way to deal with this so it doesn’t keep happening. And, you know, I think you can wear bureaucrats down.

SS: Was there anyone who just absolutely wouldn’t give, no matter what?

AB: I think there were people who said they didn’t give, but the policies changed anyway, to save face. But, I think the Koch administration changed. I think the City Health Department changed. The Democratic Party changed. Ronald Reagan, you know – no. But – I don’t even want to say that George Bush, Sr. changed, but he did have to mention AIDS in the debate, and the only reason he had to mention AIDS in the debate in ’92 was because of our going after him. So, did that change what he did? I don’t know. Did it change the debate? Yes. I really can’t think of a time when we were totally unsuccessful in getting people to listen to us. But, you know, we had the ability to have a lot of people spend a lot of time, going after people.

Tape III
00:30:00

SS: I wanted to talk a little bit about the interior culture of ACT UP. How many years were you in ACT UP?

AB: Probably from ’87 until ’94 or ’95 – a long time.

SS: Seven or eight years of your life. And, did you really stick to your two meeting-a-week rule?

AB: I almost never missed a Monday night meeting. So, I always went to the Monday night meetings, and when I was working on a demo, which was a lot of the time, I would go to whatever meeting was for that demo.

SS: What were the relationships between the women in ACT UP?

AB: It really depended on the – I think we tried to support each other, and we didn't formally always have a women's group. I think we had an informal network. There were some women in ACT UP who did not identify with women's issues. We had the *Women and AIDS* book that came out of ACT UP that a bunch of us worked on, and we sort of had some informal dinners every once in awhile. And, there were some women who were active in ACT UP, but strictly in the Treatment and Data part, and they sort of stayed off. You know, there weren't a lot of things that we did separately – like, just the women – because that just wasn't the way we interacted with each other.

SS: How did women's issues get raised in ACT UP?

AB: Mostly indirectly. I think most of the focus in ACT UP all along was Drugs into Bodies – getting the drugs out, getting them tested, getting them into people. And, there wasn't a lot about – not like we didn't talk about safe sex, but ACT UP didn't really focus on safe sex messages. It didn't really focus on – I mean, some things did, but it wasn't, like, the major focus. It didn't talk a lot about heterosexual transmission. There was a lot of stuff about clean needles, but not a lot of stuff about heterosexual transmission amongst IV users. These things would be raised periodically, but it was never a huge – I think it was more raised almost to keep reminding people that these issues are out there, and we should be talking about them, but the group, actively, never really focused on them, or at least that was my perspective. I mean, I'm sure, for some guys, all we did was talk about women's issues, but it all depends on where you're sitting.

SS: It's clear that from your political history and all your experience, you were one of the numbers of people who was able to have a huge influence on the way ACT UP behaved and was structured. How did that feel?

AB: It was always satisfying when an action went off well. And at the same time, a lot of the times I just felt that we just managed, barely, to pull it off safely. I liked doing what I did. I liked the satisfaction of getting people trained and of having – I mean, ideally, I wouldn't have had to – my goal was to get people to do stuff so I wouldn't have to do it. There were a number of other people who did what I did, but I guess my goal would have been to have ACT UP sort of naturally do all that stuff organically, without having to have it repeatedly beaten into people. But there was so much turnover that I never felt like we could do that. My girlfriend will say that I'm naturally bossy, and in any situation where I'm given an opportunity to tell people what to do, I will take it. And there is some truth to that – that I would rather be in control than be controlled. And even now when I go to anti-war demonstrations, I get bent out of shape when they're badly run. I think, damn, I could do better than this. Or, why are they – don't take the barricades, you know? It was a very powerful feeling, very powerful. And, some of the demonstrations – particularly against the powers that be – were very satisfying. You know, Kennebunkport was – in a weird way – really satisfying. Going after Clinton was really satisfying.

SS: Thank you for your work, Amy.

AB: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]