

**A C T U P
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Interviewee: **Alexis Danzig**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Alexis Danzig
May 1, 2010

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

ALEXIS DANZIG: You think I can remember this?

SS: Yes.

AD: Okay. I'm Alexis Danzig. I'm 49. It's May 1st, 2010. And where are we?

SS: We're in your brand-new apartment –

AD: Yes we are.

SS: – in Harlem.

AD: Yes. Four Mount Morris Park West.

SS: Okay. Great. And so Alexis, you are a native New Yorker.

AD: I am – despite the fact that I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I claim to be a native New Yorker.

SS: Okay, but you were educated here.

AD: Oh yes.

SS: And what schools did you go to?

AD: I went to P.S. 75, on the Upper West Side; I went to I.S. 70, in Chelsea, because they needed white middle-class kids down there; I went to Music and Art High School; and then I dropped out, and I went to City College for a year before going back to the university town of my birth, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

SS: So you're like a true New Yorker; total product of the public school system.

AD: Absolutely. And I went to CUNY Law School, which is also part of the City College system.

SS: And your son is now going to the same school that you went to –

AD: Yes.

SS: – 75.

AD: God forbid he also goes to law school, but yes.

SS: Okay. And your parents; were they politically active, in your youth?

AD: Yes, I would say that they were more – active through the Zeitgeist. They were not, I was not a red-diaper baby, contrary to popular opinion. My parents belonged to food co-ops and babysitting co-ops, and they went out with garbage bags and they cleaned up Riverside Park. My dad was in ROTC — and he was a dove — but he showed up, he shaved off his beard every year, so that he could take part in Air Force exercises with ROTC. But my mom was very politically active, in terms of peace marches on the Upper West Side, and being involved as a mom and a parent in New York City.

SS: Now was your father in the military?

AD: My father was a New York City college teacher, but he was in the Air Force. He remained in the Air Force. He had taught geography to French cadets during the Korean conflict, and found homes for them during Christmas, the Christmas that they were stationed in Texas. And they all died. And that was pretty much his only foray – that was as close as he got to the military, in terms of, he never saw any active duty.

SS: Now where were they both born, your parents?

AD: My dad was born in Brooklyn; my mom was born in Liverpool, England, at home. They feared for her life. They need not have, but they did, at the time. My dad was born in '31, and my mom was born in '34.

SS: And how did they meet?

AD: They met in Paris. My dad was studying on the GI Bill, and my mom was in a year at the Sorbonne. She had a scholarship there. And they were both having a great time – Paris in the '50s – nothing to do, nothing to eat, but they had a lot of fun.

SS: So they were both intellectuals.

AD: We didn't get *The New Yorker* at home. I – on the cusp of, I would say. I don't – they read a lot. Our house was filled with books. But they weren't – they were liberals, they weren't progressives.

SS: What would you say were the values that you were raised with about community and social justice?

Tape I
00:05:00

AD: Participation. My mom moved to the United States to get away from being modern Orthodox, in England. And she never lost the sense that you belong to a community. She didn't like tribal Jewish politics. She didn't like belonging to a community that was hallmarked by hypocrisy. But she was delighted to move to New York, and become a New Yorker, and participate in local-level politics. She had already done politically active work in London; she had demonstrated against apartheid, and done a lot of different things around conscience in London.

My father was not the same way. He was, he was more underground. He was queer, he was gay. So his politics were something that he lived, but couldn't really express.

SS: Now was he openly gay in your family, or did he have a secret gay life?

AD: He had a secret gay life.

SS: Okay.

AD: He came out, and moved out, when I was 13 – 12½, 13. It was about 1974, so gay liberation had just happened, and he was riding that. And it was very good for him. It was wonderful.

SS: But he stayed in New York?

AD: He stayed in New York. He moved in with his lover, who had been his best friend, who he'd been seeing while my parents were married. My

father had a very busy sex life. And they lived just a couple blocks down from us. So my brother and I would go over there for dinner, and see them on the weekends.

SS: And do you feel that you had a comfortable relationship with them, at that point?

AD: Yeah, I would have said I had a very comfortable relationship, when he came out. As I got older, I began to have more questions about the way that he lived his life and his choices and – I also had a lot of comparisons to make with my own life. And like a lot of parents, he came up short when I was 18.

SS: Do you want to say anything about that?

AD: My dad, I think, was very comfortable being gay in private, and having a public life which was about being publicly recognized, having a kind of semi-public persona as a college professor; and he was very conservative, in fact, for a gay person. And I was not. I was much more questioning. And we had some interesting dinnertime conversations.

SS: But when did you first come into the queer community?

AD: I came out into the queer community when I was 21, in Alaska.

SS: As far away from your father as possible.

AD: Exactly! Exactly. I dropped out of school in my, what would have been about my junior year. And I left, and went to – I already had a summer

job outside of Anchorage, working for the National Outdoor Leadership School. And I just moved into Anchorage. And I had always been really, really curious, and knew that I liked girls.

So I took myself off to the gay and lesbian community center in Anchorage, Alaska, and I made myself go to every support group. If there was a support group, and it was about alcohol, I went to it. If it was a support group about bread-baking, I went to it, just to find community. And I found a wonderful community. It was a strange community, in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1983; but it was a wonderful community.

SS: So what made you come back to New York?

AD: I decided that I wanted to go to art school, and I decided that Anchorage, Alaska was not the right place to go to art school, if one came from New York City. So I was – very opinionated about where I should go, as a dropout. And I came back to New York, and I started working in a bookstore and going to school at night. And my father, who I had stopped talking to, said, if you want to go back to school full-time, I'll send you. And that began a long career. It took me about 10 years to get my BFA.

SS: So that's when you went back to Ann Arbor?

AD: No; that's when I went to school at School of Visual Arts.

SS: Oh, okay.

Tape I
00:10:00

AD: And it was during that period that my dad and I lived in Paris; but not together. He was there for a year. And that was when – I found out that he had HIV, that he had AIDS.

SS: So that was 1984.

AD: That was '87.

SS: Eighty-seven.

AD: Yes.

SS: Okay, so you came out in a community — Alaska — very far away from the AIDS crisis, at that time.

AD: Yes, exactly.

SS: And then you came back to New York; it was the height of the AIDS crisis.

AD: Yes.

SS: Now, did you know other people who were HIV-positive, before your father came out to you?

AD: No.

SS: And were you concerned about him, on those terms? Were you wondering?

AD: I was really compartmentalized. I had a very contentious intellectual relationship with my father at that point. And we did a lot of arguing about a lot of things, that were, at the time, were very valuable to me.

I'll try to put it in some perspective. I was so angry about museums and imperialism that I never went to the Louvre the entire year that I lived in Paris. I was pretty set in my ways. And this is very much in opposition to my dad, who was equally set in his own ways.

And I remember the first indication, really, that HIV had, the AIDS crisis had in my own consciousness was reading a very careful list that had been written in pencil, in my father's handwriting, on an index card, on his mantelpiece in his apartment in Paris, in the Marais, which was — in retrospect, I realized — a list of his symptoms. And that was — it still didn't really penetrate my consciousness, I think mostly because I didn't want it to.

SS: Now was he in France for treatment? Because I think this was the era where people were running to France, right?

AD: No.

SS: No?

AD: He was in France — because he knew he was dying. And he wanted — but he didn't know how quickly — and he wanted to have the experience of living in France. And he organized, with a friend of his who was on the faculty of the Sorbonne, at Paris Huit, to have an exchange professorship. And so my dad, who was an English professor, who taught mostly, “Help! Help! I can't write a thesis,” was in Paris to teach American history, which he could also teach, which was great. And I lived about as far away from him as possible, and

we saw each other occasionally. And it was great. I'm glad that we had even that contact. Because as soon as he was public about having AIDS, within the family, things got much more tenuous and much more complicated between he and I.

SS: Now were you involved, did you start to become involved in the AIDS world through your father? Were you following what kind of treatments he was getting, or –

AD: My stepfather — the man who my father was partnered with — and my father were very scared and reluctant to keep the rest of the family informed. I think there were a lot of dinnertime conversations with their friends, many of whom were already diagnosed and dying. But I got very little information. I was really treated like someone who was outside the inner circle. And it set the tenor for the relationship for the next two years. And it also distorted my relationship to information. I, in the way that my father was rejecting me, I didn't want to know about it.

And as my father got more and more ill, I took on a role of managing this information for myself, and for my own community, which was not a queer community, but which was a community of art students. And very slowly, I began to be the person that people came to — mostly straight people, mostly art students — to talk to about HIV and safer sex. And that was, I remember that being the hallmark of my senior year. Getting my projects done, and talking to people about condoms.

Tape I
00:15:00

SS: So what's the time frame between your father's illness and death and you joining ACT UP?

AD: I graduated from School of Visual Arts, I think, when I was – it was 1987? And on the basis of my art history work, I got into the Graduate Center, and I started doing an interdisciplinary women's studies degree. And – it was at the end of that year, when my father was hospitalized, that I began to realize that I didn't have a place in graduate school, and I actually didn't have a place in the straight community; and that I, in retrospect, I joined ACT UP to save my own life, psychologically. And it turned out to be a wonderful move. But it was not without a lot of – it was very hard. I felt like I was literally pushed out of the academic world, which had been a home for so long.

What happened was – I went to see a philosophy professor who had a – she did moral ethics, she did moral philosophy, and she did medical ethics. Those were her two main fields that she wrote about. And I took her Douglas Crimp's *October*, issue of *October*, which was all about AIDS; the rectum is a grave, etcetera etcetera. And it was really a kind of coming out for me, to her. I was – nobody really knew that I had a father who was HIV-positive, who was dying.

I had already been doing lesbian moral philosophy, in school – that was what I wanted to write my thesis on. I actually wanted to write my thesis about women who kill their children, but that remains to be, perhaps, a project.

In any case, I brought her this issue of *October*, not really even knowing what it meant for myself. And this professor said that she had made a categorical decision not to read anything about AIDS. And I – dropped out of school, on the spot.

SS: Good move. Oh my god.

AD: Yeah, it was really, this was my favorite professor. She was really, really bright, and had a lot of, what I thought was a lot of integrity. And when I heard that, I realized that, I don't want to have anything to do with straight academia and philosophy and – I knew Gregg Bordowitz, from art school; and I went to the very next ACT UP meeting that I could.

SS: So how long were you in ACT UP before your father died?

AD: Oh – I only started in ACT UP after my father died.

SS: After he died.

AD: Yes.

SS: Okay.

AD: My dad died in – February; and I joined in March.

SS: And his boyfriend; did he live as well, or did he –

AD: Yeah, my stepfather was still alive.

SS: Okay.

AD: He was alive for another two years. But I actually had no contact with him. It was that kind of – complicated and –

SS: Right.

AD: – yeah.

SS: Before we get into all the work you did in ACT UP — and of course you were such a key figure in ACT UP — but before we get into that, were you the only child of a person with AIDS in ACT UP?

AD: That's a good question. There are people who were sisters — Gerri Wells comes to mind — there were, Bob Rafferty was a dad with AIDS.

SS: Bob Rafsky.

AD: Yes.

SS: Right.

AD: Thank you. But I think maybe I was. I don't know.

SS: It's really interesting, because children of people who died of AIDS are a completely invisible –

AD: Yes.

SS: – population. There are hundreds of thousands of people who that describes. And they have no visibility in the culture, and their experience is not discussed.

AD: Yes.

SS: Since that time, have you run into other people in that position?

Tape I
00:20:00

AD: Only in print. Alison Bechtel. No no no. Her dad was gay. He didn't have HIV. I'm trying to think. I think of one other person. I can't, I can't remember who they are.

SS: How do you understand this; that this constituency has not been articulated?

AD: It's kind of like – it runs a parallel to dads of PWAs. GMHC was a home for my grandmother, who joined a support group for moms of men — mostly men — who had HIV. There was no parallel group for dads. Dads didn't want to talk about it. Dads didn't want a support group; and I see the same thing occurring with children.

I also think that a lot of kids were too little. I was – there weren't – I didn't have a lot of peers, I didn't know a lot of people my own age who had fathers who were openly gay. There was, like, the generation after me.

SS: Because I'm very, very interested in this question, and I was wondering if I could just put an idea out there, and see what you think of it. Is that okay?

AD: Sure. Yeah, please.

SS: I feel that — not you, because you're a politicized activist — but that many, many people whose parents died of AIDS don't understand that their parents died because of government neglect and

indifference. They think that their parents died because their parents did something.

AD: Yes.

SS: So they don't conceptualize themselves as children of people who were violated.

AD: No. There is no experience of the war that we were all part of. I think that's really true. I think that it's, there's still so much shame — not guilt, but shame — attached to being the child of somebody who is a sexual deviant, in this culture, that people can't wrap their minds around. And there's also — it's a combination of things. It's a disease that kills you, and it's a sexuality which is condemned. And that's a very potent combination.

SS: Now you also had the distinction of having your mother be in ACT UP.

AD: Yes. I did.

SS: I remember her very well. And I believe you were the only multigenerational family in ACT UP. Isn't that true?

AD: Yeah. If ACT UP had lasted, I did have a fantasy about having the boys in ACT UP do childcare. But my relationship with ACT UP didn't last that long.

SS: So what was that — what do you think was unique about you and your mother, that you were able to come in as a family unit?

AD: Well, we didn't really come in as a family unit. I needed to be separate from her, at that point. And I made that very clear. I needed to have my own adult and activist life. I was fine with her being there, and she did some really great work. But we didn't socialize, we didn't hang out together; we didn't work on committees together. And I think part of that was because ACT UP was so much the center of my world, and I didn't want to share it with my mom.

SS: Okay. So let's get to ACT UP.

So when you came into ACT UP, you said it was '88; '87?

ACT UP started in February, '87.

AD: It was '88.

SS: Eighty-eight.

AD: It was a year later. Yes.

SS: So what were your first – how did you get into the organization? What were the first things you worked on, or the people you worked with?

AD: I don't really remember. What I remember was being in the state of shock that I was in after my father's death. And I spent about a year being depressed, and being treated for that depression. It was pretty major. I didn't work. I didn't go to school. I was living at my mom's house. She had many bedrooms, so that was easy. And I would get up and go to ACT UP meetings. And that's pretty much what I did, for about a year.

And I was still living there when I got a call from an ex-boyfriend, from college, talking to me about the strip search arrest, which had been in the *New York Times*. So that was, it was quite awhile, that I was in this sort of like, not-really-participating-in-the-world state, except for going to ACT UP.

My first actions, I think, were really – to participate in the dyke community within ACT UP.

SS: So can you explain what that community was like; who was in it, and what the culture of it was?

Tape I
00:25:00

AD: I remember Max[inne Wolfe], of course, and Amy Bauer, and Gerri Wells. And my first experiences were really with people just being kind. I really showed up in a fog and didn't know how to translate my sense of loss into a sense of activity. And I felt like I didn't have to explain myself in ACT UP; I didn't have to declare myself. Just by being there, made it very, very easy for me to be – seen – seen, but I didn't have to go into an explanation. And I just felt that I was included. There was nothing that – there were meetings to talk about how ACT UP was running, and being run. And there were meetings to talk about what we could be doing, and ought to be doing. So it was very full; it was very complicated; and it certainly took my mind off my own crap.

I remember being very drawn to Amy, because I needed to have a lot of my own questions and concerns about getting busted answered. And she provided such a sane model, and I recognized that that's what I wanted to do; I

wanted to be a sane model, as opposed to being an insane model for people. And I wanted to do what she did.

I saw myself, really, as being part of the nuts and bolts of ACT UP, and not so much coming up with actions, but being able to support actions, and guide people into their own sense of themselves – to take part, to be able to take part.

A lot of what I've done in my life has been to try to help people capitalize on the sense of ownership that I have gained by conquering my own fears. Coming out; being part of a reviled community; doing things that seem to be dangerous, from the outside, like taking a bust or taking part in a big, scary action. And I really liked the idea of translating things for people, and making it easier for them to participate, and gain their own voice.

SS: Well, one of the ways that you showed leadership in ACT UP was you, John Kelly, and Amy Bauer, and some other people, were the people who made it possible for people in ACT UP to act in the way that reflected the politics as they reached to implement the politics.

AD: Yeah.

SS: And you were able to do that for huge numbers of people, over many, many years. How did you guys develop that center, and how were you – you were so persuasive; nobody ever disagreed with this.

AD: Actually, there was a lot of disagreement.

SS: Oh, really. Oh, tell me.

AD: Well, I think that it was always up in the air, whether or not ACT UP was going to be nonviolent. People actively recommitted themselves to nonviolence, and to — which I think is very powerful; to not have this be taken for granted. I think that the nonviolent aspect of ACT UP was really important, because it allowed everybody, regardless of ability, level of ability and where they were in the political spectrum, to participate.

Since ACT UP, I have participated in other people's actions around environmental issues, and they don't have the same commitment to nonviolence, and they don't create the same kinds of activities in risking arrest that we did in ACT UP. And I found that to be really, really very interesting.

But we recommitted ourselves to nonviolence, and we talked about it openly. And yet, this was a bone of contention, I think; or at least a point of discussion and disagreement – within affinity groups, and in ACT UP as a whole.

{NOISE}

SS: Okay, let's wait a minute.

AD: Yeah.

SS: Till this truck goes away.

{ETCETERA}

SS: Okay. Now it's interesting that you bring that up.

Because as far as I know, ACT UP never committed an act of violence. Is that true?

AD: No. I would agree with you. ACT UP never committed an act of violence. There are degrees within that, however, from the point of view of the civil disobedience trainer, or adherent, participant; I think that there are – is locking arms, so you have to be pulled apart, an act of violence?

Now, this is nowhere on the level of throwing a brick through a window, or hitting a cop, all of which come with their own legal penalties. But that can be construed as an act of violence, because you are – you are not participating – you are making it harder to implement your own arrest, which is what you have committed to by doing an activity that is breaking the law.

There are differences of opinion about this. How hard should we make it for the co-, the cops are not the target; the cops are part of the context of how we implement civil disobedience. But whether or not we make it hard for them means that we will also be making it hard for us, in the long run. Will the cop who pulls a muscle in his back take this out on the faggiest fag or the dykeiest dyke? Or will somebody, down the line, get held because they don't have the proper identification, and will they face extradition because they're here as an immigrant without papers?

This is the kind of stuff that we thought about, in going in to do civil disobedience trainings – violence and its repercussions.

SS: But like for example, when we had – like when Chris Hennessey was beaten, and had brain damage –

JAMES WENTZY: Hennelly.

SS: Hennelly. Thank you. Can you just recap what happened, and then what the consequence of that was, on you guys?

AD: I wasn't there; so that was an action that I didn't take part in. But what I remember is that it was an action outside a police precinct, to protest police violence. And a bunch of cops came out, and broke up the demonstration, most notably by clubbing Chris. And then I believe he was arrested.

He was never the same after that.

Funnily enough, it was my second cousin who represented him as his legal counsel.

The repercussions – that's complicated. I don't know if there were any, if I felt that there were any direct repercussions. I think that it was more folded into the experience of ACT UP. It was an anomaly, I would say, in terms of how we – that experience was an anomaly, in terms of our overall experience of interacting with cops in the city of New York. And that experience — cops in the city of New York — is also distinct from cops elsewhere.

My own experience — many demonstrations — was that cops in New York City know how to do demonstrations. They like to be handled by — by demonstrators who know what they're doing. And it's a fairly, it's a relationship typically filled with mutual respect. There are — instances that come to mind that can be distinguished from that. But in general, we, the kind of roughness — I can't say brutality; maybe somebody else could — but the kind of roughness that we experienced when we did out-of-town demonstrations was much different than what it was like in New York City.

That was a demonstration at night. That comes with its own dangers — in no way to blame Chris for what happened. But these are, again, some of the logistical issues that we would take into consideration.

SS: But wasn't it emblematic of the larger AIDS problem; that innocent people, who had done nothing, were being completely brutalized by the state? I mean, what happened to Chris?

Tape I
00:35:00

AD: Sure. I think that you can see it as being — I think, symbolic of that. What I think is much more — interesting is, how did those cops think that they were ever going to get away with that?

SS: Did they get away with it?

AD: N- I don't know if corporate counsel — typically what happens is, corporate counsel — which is the legal system for the city — doesn't admit any wrongdoing, and they pay out great sums of your and my money to make

people go away. And I think that was probably what happened. I think there was probably a court settlement. I don't recall. And in that sense, yeah, they got away with it. I don't know if there is any punishment for the cops.

But you can't beat up somebody in front of a large number of witnesses, in front of, even if you have the cover of nighttime. And that was just a really strange experience for everyone.

We did other activities at night. We did a lot of wheat-pasting. But we didn't do as many demonstrations.

SS: I have this huge theoretical question –

AD: Okay.

SS: – I'm hoping you can answer. Given that so many people died, and so many people died so horribly; and the stakes were so high; it seems really hard to understand why no one ever committed an act of violence. They had absolutely nothing to lose.

AD: Oh – I think people do have a lot to lose. I think that things – my own very minimal study of revolutions – I think that – people who are living in much more tenuous circumstances, I think that for most people – people lost their jobs because of their activities and how they felt and their bereavement; people lost their jobs because they were queer, because they were perceived to have AIDS. People quit what they were doing, people gave up a lot during those years – and not just to participate in ACT UP, but also to participate in ACT UP.

I don't think that we were anywhere near, I think it was psychologically monstrous, what we endured. And for many of us, that came with practical considerations – financial. I don't think I – the thought of a vacation didn't cross my mind for years. I think that Amy Bauer took all of her vacation time to do actions. And she had a full-time job, unlike some of us. And I just think of the amount of resources that went into the unpaid hours. But ACT UP, I think, also really saved a lot of our lives, psychologically. And that's really what ACT UP was for, on an individual level; it was for channeling our rage and despair, and creating, making things better for other people, many of whom would never know what we had done or were doing. It was the best of community service that I've been able to participate in.

SS: I have a really concrete question. Can you explain the precise mechanism of how ACT UP communicated with the police: who spoke to who, who the contacts were, how things were negotiated?

AD: This is my own take, so, with a grain of salt. The way that you'd talk to the cops is through dint of personality politics, which was how a lot of things worked in ACT UP. People were self-elected to their various positions – because they liked the job, because they were good at the job, and because other people recognized that. John and Amy were both very good — are both very good — at talking to cops. And they did a lot. They had an unchallenged role in ACT UP, in service to the greater ideas of whatever the goals of that objective, of

that particular action, were. And typically, you'd identify one of the three of us — or somebody else; there were other people who came and went — would identify the white shirt who was on duty for that action, and/or the community liaison. And there'd be a nice chat about how the day was going, and about how many people we thought were going to show up, which we never knew, because we really didn't ever know, but we also weren't going to tell the cops that, either.

So there was a kind of, like, cat-and-mouse politeness. And then the action would invariably begin. And there'd be a lot of adrenaline running, and people doing what they needed to do. And typically, everybody behaved pretty well.

Tape I
00:40:00

I think the most difficult thing in New York were the big guys who went limp, because it invariably took four cops to lift them. And that's a lot of work.

And again, everybody played their role. The cops did what they needed to do. They cleared the sidewalks, they cleared the streets. And then there would invariably be the race down to whichever precinct we either thought people were being taken to, or we told people they would be taken to. And then there would be, if you were doing work on the outside, if you were doing support, it was nicer to have a summer action than a winter action, because it was very cold outside, on Pitt Street. A lot of cups of coffee and pizzas eaten on the side, waiting for people to get out. And the idea was to make sure that people didn't

feel alone in their holding cells, and to make sure that there were people on the outside.

And this is where I think I first saw lawyers being activists, which was a great concrete reality for me, to see that lawyers could do something else than write documents and stand up in the front of a courtroom. I wasn't interested.

SS: Change tape.

AD: Sure.

SS: Okay.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: I just want to ask one more thing about the whole support, nonviolence –

AD: Yeah yeah.

SS: I mean, I've had so many experiences of being at demonstrations — not ACT UP demonstrations — where the people who are there to protect you end up keeping the demonstration controlled. In other words –

AD: Yeah.

SS: In other words, the nonviolent training becomes an impediment – yeah.

AD: Self-policing –

SS: Yeah.

AD: Yes.

SS: What were the conversations around that? You so successfully avoided that. Can you help people understand how to avoid that problem?

AD: To a certain extent. I mean, I think that that is also an ongoing conversation for people who do civil disobedience and who think about it and who dream about it – because I have dreams about civil disobedience – mostly workplace civil disobedience, where I work now, which I will not mention.

But I think that there are people who disagree with you; there are people who felt constrained.

Whom am I thinking of? Rebecca and Sally, I think, felt constrained by the way that –

SS: Can you say their last names?

AD: Sure. Rebecca Cole and Sally Cooper.

SS: Okay.

AD: Again; this is based on conversation –

SS: That's fine.

AD: – many, many years ago. So – and I remember feeling really put on the spot – which is a good way to feel, if you want to keep ideas and conversations alive. But – the way that we presented our job when we did civil

disobedience trainings was that none of us were there to do the work on the cops. We were there to make sure that people were safe; not only physically safe, but also legally safe. And it took a lot of time. It was like ACT UP meetings themselves; it was like participatory democracy, in general. It's messy; it takes a lot of time; you got to explain things three or four times; people don't get it.

So instead of going up and saying to somebody: Stop stickering that cop car; you had to explain: These are the implications of what your actions are, and – it was boring, and people didn't listen, anyway, and – there were times when people were doing more egregious things — property-damage kind of stuff; and I'm talking about, like, spray-painting — where more people could have been implicated, and we would act, I think, more firmly to shut that down. Because here is an action that one or two people were taking, that other people had not agreed to; and that other people could become implicated by. If a cop is going to grab the person with a spray can, the cop may grab the person who's got the spray paint on their clothing, as well.

We wanted to keep people as safe as possible, and not have to deal with jail time. Risa Denenberg went to jail for a long time for a spray-paint – well, she was held for a week, for spray-painting on federal property during a demonstration in Albany.

So we saw that this had real complications.

The way to do it, I think, is to have mass meetings with everybody who's going to be, mostly people who are going to be at the demonstration; and very clearly have defined what the demonstration is going to be about. As Amy always said, if you do a picket, somebody wants to do a picket and a march. If you're going to do a picket and a march, there's going to be somebody there who wants to do a picket and a march and a CD.

So you have to reiterate the understandings that the organizers have created for that particular demonstration. And then you, at a certain point, you have to let go, and you have to say, if you people want to go and do a CD in front of the — whatever; City Hall — by all means. But the demonstration is now officially over. See you at the next meeting.

And so it was sort of, it was sort of businesslike; friendly and businesslike. We tried very hard not to tell people what to do. But I think that people had the impression that they were being told what to do.

SS: Well one of things on this project — I mean, we're doing it for nine years now — is that we've interviewed people at all different levels of participation in ACT UP: people who just went to Monday-night meetings, and never did an action; people who never joined a committee; or then, people for whom it was their entire life. And you were one of those people who really was, you were in leadership, and half of my memories of you are you standing in front of the room, saying something. And I'm just

Tape II
00:05:00

wondering, from your point of view, what enabled you to come to a place of leadership; and why do you think people listened to you, and gave you that authority; and what was it in you that made that possible for you?

AD: It's funny, because I don't have the same memory. But I really wanted to be of service. I really wanted to do something. I wanted to do something that I was good at. And I really like teaching; and I really like teaching things that I believe in. And I found a niche. In as few words as possible, I found something that I could do that really satisfied me, and that I felt was helping the community as a whole. And as much as I felt I had something to give, I got a lot back from that.

SS: Okay. So like many people in ACT UP, you acted in many different capacities in the organization. So you had this training as a visual artist. And this was a very exciting time for queer visual artists in general, between – the praxis relationship was very rich. So how did you make the decision to start working in the art-documenting role within ACT UP?

AD: I had left art school. I had done a year of graduate school, to, really, to concentrate on critical writing. That had been interrupted by my own decision to not continue with graduate school, because I didn't want to be around straight people, basically. And I saw the work of Testing the Limits, and DIVA TV. And though I didn't have any aspirations for doing visual art — my own documentaries — I really wanted to support that work, too. And it seemed to be a

great way to show up at demonstrations at which I wasn't being a marshal, at which I wasn't being a police liaison, at which I wasn't being a support person; at which I wasn't being arrested, which was also quite a bit of fun; to have another role. And it turned into some great adventures.

SS: How did you get trained in video?

AD: I bought a camera.

SS: That was it; a camcorder?

AD: Yeah. One of those little tiny ones.

SS: Now, there were people there who were like video artists.

AD: Yes.

SS: And then there were people who like brought a camcorder.

What was the relationship between these two kinds of people?

AD: Friendly, I think. I think there was so much camaraderie at that time. I think it really depended on how people saw themselves.

For example, Jean Carlomusto was part of many different circles. She was part of the Dyke Dinners. She was an activist getting arrested; and she also was a video artist who was a video activist. That's a lot of Venn diagrams.

She was very approachable. We had an affinity. I didn't feel the same affinity at the time for somebody like Hilery Kipnis, who I knew through the community, but who had one role, or who defined herself, I think – my

understanding of her participation in ACT UP was more as a video artist, and not as having those other hats to wear.

SS: Right. So would you just decide to show up and shoot? Or was it predetermined? Was it preassigned who was going to come and do video coverage?

AD: You know, I don't remember. I didn't go to that many demonstrations with a video camera – just because there were more other hats for me to wear. But the demonstrations that I did go to, I knew that my footage would be useful.

SS: But what did you do with your footage? Let's say you shot something. What would you do –

AD: I think a lot of times, I just handed it over to whoever was doing the work that would incorporate – because we didn't do action-specific videos. There were ongoing video projects, and then there were sort of like promotional videos, for lack of a better word, that I knew were happening. Stop the Church, for example.

SS: Did you have footage of Stop the Church?

AD: I don't think so.

SS: Oh, okay.

AD: I got busted for that one.

SS: Oh, okay.

AD: Polly Thistlethwaite sat down next to me, and then figured out that she didn't have her ID with her. I said, don't worry; it'll all be okay. I don't know why I said that. It was all okay.

SS: How many times were you arrested?

AD: I can't really remember. I remember my mom saying that it was 26.

SS: And how many convictions?

AD: Convictions? Never! I was never convicted. I got desk-appearance tickets, and ACDs [Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal].

SS: So when it came time to take the bar and all of that, it was no issue.

AD: No. Actually, it was a little bit of an issue. First of all, there were a couple of different jurisdictions that I had to run around, and you have to actually get, you have to find out what the disposition of your case was. I had to account for all of my cases. And not all my cases, in fact, are recorded. There were a lot of out-of-town arrests that have melted into the police ether. But when it came time for my character interview, I sat down with a lawyer in good standing; someone probably in his sixties; and he was delighted that people of my generation still did things like that.

And I have to say, it was a little disconcerting when I was running around the city, trying to find all of these desk-appearance tickets and whatnot.

There were other law students who were doing the same thing; and invariably it would be a guy, and invariably it would be for quality-of-life issues, like peeing in public –

SS: Oh, oh.

AD: – because they had been drunk. So I understand why this guy from the '60s was happy.

SS: What do you think strategically was the ultimate impact of people in ACT UP getting arrested? How did that affect us, in terms of being politically effective?

AD: Oh, I think it has a wonderful role in putting pressure on the entire system. It's so visible. And part of that is the annoyance factor; why can't I get home on time, why can't I get to work on time? Amy used to say, there are two ways to do civil disobedience, and one is to break bad laws, which is very hard to do. There were very few bad laws that we could break, so we had to put ourselves – it was more of – there's probably a better way to say this, but it was the annoyance factor.. We had to be gadflies, and we had to inconvenience people, and demonstrate that, as much as we were inconveniencing them, the AIDS crisis was actually killing people, and would have the future effect of harming a lot more people. So a little bit of inconvenience to prevent a lot of harm was really the methodology.

And I think that it created a level of awareness, it helped us promote a level of awareness, for education; for change to the pharmaceutical industry.

Just recently, I was interviewed by somebody who was doing a graduate documentary, who's 25 years younger than me. So the idea that – not everybody knows about ACT UP, and not everybody knows about the work that we did, and not everybody understands the significant structural changes that were made to drug licensing laws and the way that people are tested in this country. But there are people for whom this was a significant social movement. And I think that it was internationally recognized as well.

People can't do the same kind of demonstrating that we do in this country, in their countries, because they have much more repressive governments. And yet, I think that we were a model for how to organize, and what can be attempted; and I'm very proud of that work for inspiring people.

SS: I want to talk a little bit about women in ACT UP, and the agenda about women in ACT UP, which are two separate things. There was a constant effort, I think, by feminist women in ACT UP to try to use ACT UP's resources to help women.

AD: Yes.

SS: And some of those efforts were misguided and failed miserably, like the lesbian transmission issue. And some of them were

enormously successful, like changing the CDC definition. How were those figured out? How did women in ACT UP strategize or decide what kind of projects to put forward and which ones the guys in ACT UP would support? How were those decisions made?

AD: I wasn't involved in a lot of that. I think of myself as being pretty peripheral. It was more like how I participated with documentary footage. I think that I was there for a number of conversations. But there were enough people doing the very thoughtful, considered strategic work that I didn't have to show up for those meetings. And in fact, I think that I was just sort of getting my land legs at ACT UP when a lot of that work was being considered.

I remember overlapping with Rebecca Cole in ACT UP. But I feel like her work with ACT UP was finished long before mine was.

SS: Okay.

AD: And it was just a function of who we were and when we were participating. I missed '87. I was in graduate school, and my dad was dying.

I think that – what I remember structurally and practically about those decisions were a lot of discussions, a lot of meetings; and I don't think that it was really done, really, with thinking about the guys. I think it was done thinking about what made sense with the public, and seeing that the guys were part of – if this was something that could hold the attention of the general public, most of the guys would go along.

There is also – I want to talk a little bit about the feminist men –

SS: Oh yeah, go ahead.

AD: – in ACT UP, because that was a very powerful experience for me. Until that point, I didn't have a lot of gay male friends. And most of the – I came out of a homosocial dyke community, for the most part, in Alaska and in the art-school scene. And I had fag friends, but none who were politicized. And to find gay men who were politicized, and who defined themselves as feminists, was – brave new world; it was really remarkable.

And so there was always a group of men whose support, I think, we could count on; who would say the right things at the right time, even though they hadn't been at our meetings. And I think there were a lot of men who looked to the women in ACT UP as a repository of smart ideas. And that was really gratifying.

There were men who we had to write off, in terms of support. Many times, it felt like there were two ACT UPs – just in terms of, and sometimes that was often a good thing, because we had our own sandboxes to play in. But in terms of resources, that was, that was hard. There was a group of boys who were really mobilized, and who, it felt, were very well-resourced. They had great connections. We were – I have a feeling of – in the way that feminist organizing is always done, at a little bit more of a distance from the media, from the general public. It's just much more of an uphill climb, to have your voice heard. And I

think that the ramifications of that has been that AIDS has largely become a disease of the most disenfranchised women.

SS: Okay, so now I want to talk about fun.

AD: Okay.

SS: Okay, so — as you well know — ACT UP people partied together —

AD: Really, across a broad definition of partying, yes.

SS: Yes. You had relationships with women and men in ACT UP.

AD: I did.

SS: Yes. People were in each other's lives every second of the day, in front of each other. What was it like to have romances, to have friendships, inside ACT UP, while all this work was going on?

AD: I don't think that I recognized it until it was over, that it wasn't normal. It was, it was the soup that many of us were swimming in. And I think that at that particular moment, in my late twenties and early thirties, I didn't have any aspirations for a career; I didn't, I knew that I always wanted to do what I wanted to do, whatever that might be, that might earn a paycheck. And I had a series of interesting jobs, mostly supporting myself. But the fun was, it was an extension of what we did; it was an extension of how we lived.

Tape I
00:20:00

When I left the straight world, and joined ACT UP, I really said goodbye to a lot of friendships; people who couldn't keep up, because of their own homophobia or AIDSphobia, or any phobia; lesbophobia, etcetera. And ACT UP, for me, was like graduate school. It was that totalizing. It was better than graduate school. It was – an entire ever-changing posse to hang out with and – yeah. Until I burnt out, and got a real job — which was a job within the AIDS community — I had no idea that it was anything special, because it was just what we did.

SS: But people were constantly getting together and breaking up but still staying in the same organization; and somehow it miraculously didn't hurt people's ability to work together.

AD: No. I think that there was a sense of a higher purpose. And there was a couple low moments in my own life. I remember having a fight with an ex-lover in the middle of a demonstration, and another ACT UP member had to intervene, and get in between us. But I think that even that fight was about how the demonstration was being run. It wasn't about us. It was about our dynamic, but it wasn't about us. And I think that – what was happening was so much bigger than us.

SS: Now were you involved in marshaling for any of the political funerals?

AD: Yeah, I was.

SS: Can you explain how that shift was made, from a strategic point of view?

AD: Can you ask that question –

SS: What did you have to do differently to start accommodating the fact that there were real dead bodies being carried?

AD: I don't know if there is anything logistically that was really that different. I think that when people recognized and people didn't always recognize — I remember one being held at night, and that may not have been with a real body. The only — I think in general, just a seriousness of purpose. I remember being on the street where Bobst Library is. And I can't remember whose body we were — accompanying. And an SUV came towards the demonstration, down the street. And why I was marshaling in a miniskirt, I don't know, because that was not usually my MO. But Beth Stroud remembers me body-blocking the SUV in my miniskirt. And — I think that probably wouldn't have happened at another kind of demonstration. It was the right thing to do at the time, and we always needed to keep people safe. But you didn't throw yourself in front of cars, typically. We didn't have to, either.

SS: Okay, so now I want to ask you to tell a whole story.

AD: Okay.

SS: Okay. We have footage of you at the Ashes action.

AD: Okay.

SS: And I'd like you to tell us how you decided to participate in it; what the organizing was; and just take us through the entire thing, the experience of the Ashes action.

Tape II
00:25:00

AD: Okay. I can't talk too much about the organizing because I actually, I wasn't involved in it. It was one of the few demonstrations that I really remember saying, I'm going to participate in this, because I can, and because it will be meaningful to me. And I kind of took myself off-duty, from an organizing point of view.

SS: What was the principle or the –

AD: Well, the idea was — for me; and that's the point that I have to speak from — was to have a moment of clarified anger about — anger and mourning. And these had always been together, as ideas, and they can't be separated, in the AIDS crisis, or in ACT UP. But it was personal. And it wasn't just about — the people who this is affecting, or will affect, or the people who we've already buried. This is about my dad, and about bringing him, through my experience, into a sense of — into confrontation with the authorities.

And it was something that I felt conflicted about, because my father was not particularly confrontational. My father was fairly respectful of authority, despite the fact that he was actively gay and had a very active sex life while he was alive. But for me — it was one of the last actions that I participated in. And it sort of bookends my own participation in ACT UP.

What was really painful for me, and a real stumbling block to my participation, was the fact that my father had been buried, my father's ashes had been buried, without my consent. And I was just overridden; I didn't have the status in the family to be able to challenge that. And so there was a real sense of, I can't participate legitimately in this action, because I can't do the action, I can't throw my own dead loved one's ashes on the White House lawn. And another person in ACT UP came to my rescue, and shared ashes with me, so that I could participate. And – it, just incredibly meaningful to me.

I could have used anything, right? But there was this sense of – comradeship in this activity. And I think that because at that point we had moved into these really interesting actions that were part political theater — well, a lot of our actions had always been; but they were getting really serious, with dead bodies and whatnot — that it was important to have a group of people around whom the rest of the action could organize. Because there were a lot of people who weren't bringing ashes, who were also participating.

But participating in such a central way was very – it was almost like an out-of-body experience. I can't turn off my marshal brain. But I was there to do a particular job. And I remember walking down the Mall, and how dusty it was, and that I was there with a bunch of other men who I typically didn't do actions with, whose names I can't remember at this point, even though I have some wonderful photographs. And the sense of purposeness, purposefulness, was

very large that day. And having other people to do other jobs — getting to trust other people to do the work of marshaling — made it very powerful. To be able to participate in something which is very emotional and not also have to guard yourself was – yeah, a big gift from ACT UP.

SS: Okay. So when did you leave ACT UP?

Tape II
00:30:00

AD: When did I leave ACT UP? I got promoted. I graduated. I phoned Sally Cooper – I paid a condolence call, via phone. One of her best friends had just died. And I wanted to touch base with her. And she said that she was leaving her job. And she wanted to know if I wanted the job. And I had a horrible job at that point. And I took over a city contract that had three months left on it, to do HIV/AIDS prevention/education within the adult literacy community in New York City – a potential client base of 60,000 people, of whom we were reaching, at that point, about 3,000. The agency was reaching about 3,000. And I jumped. And because of that work, I wrote my first federal grant; because of that work, I do the work that I do now, which is, I'm a professional grant-writer. But it meant that I went from being a full-time activist to being a full-time AIDS worker – prevention-education person. And I simply didn't have the wherewithal to show up.

I remember really trying to put in the time, and coming from work in sort of like my straight suits, which I had bought at the Salvation Army, because that's what I could afford; and just feeling this sense of like, oh, I can't

do this all day, and also sit through meetings all night. And at that point, I was doing things like sleeping on the floor of my office to make sure that grants got in on time, and doing the quarterly grant reporting. And it really became too much, to really keep up both aspects of my life.

And I think that that was actually – the demise of ACT UP, and the — there’s got to be a good word for this — the codification of ACT UP, in a really profound way. There was no one else to do that work, on behalf of the general population. Nobody else was going to step up and do prevention work, except for people who had been – it was this amazing creative moment, when somebody like me, who had a BFA, and no other degree, no other training, could literally step into doing federally funded work. It was remarkable.

And those days have passed. I think that things have gotten a lot more, quote unquote, professional. And that – ACT UP had an incredible, incredible run. And the shelf life of most activist groups is much shorter than what we were able to enjoy with ACT UP.

But many of us were siphoned off. And it was a function of burnout. We can’t do all that work all the time.

SS: Right. So I just have one last question.

AD: Please.

SS: So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP’s greatest achievement, and what was its biggest disappointment?

AD: Biggest achievement; that is so hard – it's so difficult for me to separate the personal from the political in this way. I'm very proud of not only the work that I directly participated in, but the general impact of ACT UP; not just in the world of queer politics, which it certainly is an enormous chapter in, and not only in the world of activism; but also very much in the world of shaping public health. I really think that that's the number-one contribution.

And what was the second part of your question?

SS: Biggest disappointment.

AD: {SIGH} It's not ACT UP's disappointment; it's the failure to get it right for future generations, and the fact that HIV is a preventable transmissible illness, and we're still dealing with it on the scale — in the world and in the United States — I think is the biggest failure. But it's not ACT UP's failure.

SS: Okay, thank you, Alexis.

AD: You're very welcome.

SS: I'm so glad we tracked you down.

AD: Likewise.