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Interviewee: **Matt Ebert**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Matt Ebert
July 13, 2007

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could just start by saying your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

MATT EBERT: My name is Matt Ebert. And today's date is July 17th – What am I saying? My name is Matt Ebert, and we're in Los Angeles. It is July 13th, 2007, and I'm 42 years old.

SS: Okay. Where were you born?

ME: I was born in Cornwall, New York.

SS: What is that?

ME: What is that? {LAUGHS} Like its name implies, it's a wall of corns, somewhere up the Hudson River, about 60 miles north of New York City. So it was pretty much like a small farming town; little vacation town, in upstate New York.

SS: But you didn't grow up on a farm.

ME: Pretty much, yeah, like a large –

SS: Oh, you did, your parents were farmers?

ME: – yeah. They weren't farmers. But they bought a farm because we had so many kids. We had, I'm the youngest of 12 children.

SS: Oh, wow.

ME: So they needed a big house and a lot of land. So when they outlived, or outgrew their home in New Jersey, Rutherford, New Jersey, they moved us there in '63. And then I was born there in '65.

SS: Oh, okay. Now did they raise you with any kind of community ethic or a sense of –

ME: Yeah. My dad was a Teamster boss. And so I guess just growing up in a family of 12, there was a huge community ethic, yeah. No – there was always a sense of, if you see something wrong, you work to improve it. My brothers used to work for the sloop *Clearwater*, which was an early environmental group, in the '70s. And they used to take us out on that.

And my family all, almost everyone except me plays a musical instrument. So we would sing and go out and sing in churches and for the sloop and for environmental causes and stuff like that. We were staunch Democrats.

So, real working class people, who pretty much – if somebody in the neighborhood was in trouble, or there was anybody who needed help or a place to stay, we always, our home was always open for that.

SS: And were you churchgoers?

ME: Yeah. Catholic, Irish Catholics. So I went to Catholic school for all my childhood, and then went to public high school. But we went to church every day. I mean every Sunday.

SS: So what were your early messages about homosexuality?

ME: Pretty bad. But I think, just because of the way, of who I am; there was no, the minute that I felt, in the church, that it was homophobic and anti-gay, I knew that it wasn't for me. That it was no longer a church; it was more like not something that I wanted to belong to.

So that was really a moment. And it was young. It was seven, eight, nine. I was just like, this is bull. Ha ha ha!

SS: You stopped going to church when you were nine?

ME: No, I kept going, because I had to, for family reasons. But I think I stopped believing in it at a really early age. Stopped looking at it as, oh, this is the high holy thing that it's supposed to be, because it was based on so much hypocrisy. And I will just say, because I'm comfortable enough to say it, that in my family also we had the situation where we were very close to priests, and we had molestation. So there was that going on as well, with my brothers and members of my family. So –

SS: When did you become aware of that?

ME: Really early. At that, probably around the same time. So a lot of that, all the stuff that was going on with the Catholic Church, was definitely happening in our house. And that set up a real shift in my thinking about Catholicism as a religion for me. I knew, on the one hand, they were preaching from the pulpit that gays were bad, and this was a sin, and all that. And then the other, and – when the lights went down and the priest was off the pulpit, he was usually in our bedroom. So it was crap, it was bullshit to me, right from the get-go.

SS: So were any of your older brothers and sisters ever ostracized by your parents because they had different ideas, or –

ME: Yeah. – the kind of, my dad was a Merchant Marine and a Teamster. And so it's the classic American pastoral thing, where, grew up all-American; had a big family; then suddenly, the '70s and the Vietnam War and all that came along, and you have children who are revolting against the Establishment and everything else.

Tape I
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So I grew up right in the thick of that. All my, it seemed like all my siblings were anti-Nixon and anti-government. And now, even my father is getting *The Nation*. It's just like they're, we kind of grew up in that environment.

But it was volatile. I think my parents wanted a lot more order than they got. They also wanted 12 kids, so what do you expect. {LAUGHS}

SS: And none of them were gay, your older brothers –

ME: I have one other brother who's gay; yeah.

SS: And did he come out first?

ME: He, no, I actually came out first.

SS: Okay.

ME: Yeah.

SS: So you had to pioneer all of that with your family.

ME: Yeah. I came out, actually, during ACT UP.

SS: Oh.

ME: Getting arrested at the marriage license bureau. And that's how I came out to my whole family. Is they saw me on the news, in the marriage license, trying to get married to Alan Klein. {LAUGHS} And I couldn't tell if they were mad at me because I was getting married to a Jew; or because I was getting married to a man.

SS: How old were you?

ME: I was like, what are they going to be more pissed about? Ha ha ha.

SS: How old are you?

ME: I was 23, I think, 24.

SS: So what did they say? Did they call you?

ME: They called me up. They were all, I have an aunt who's a nun, and an uncle who's a priest. And so they called me up, and they're like, you got to come home. Like we. It was on all the news. It was on ABC, NBC, CBS; *Daily News*, *New York Ti-*. So there was no, there I was, my name, my face, holding, giving a speech at the marriage license bureau, for gay marriage. And we got arrested, and then when we got done with that, they, my parents were like, you got to come up and –

So I sat with my mom for about 12 hours. And I remember, she had a paper napkin that, by the end of that 12 hours, she had knotted, something like 50 times. It was like this, this ball of –

But then I spent like about two seconds with my dad. And he was just like, yeah, just don't get s-, just don't get hurt or don't get sick or die or anything.

SS: Did he say “Don't get AIDS” or something –

ME: Yeah, pretty much. They had to know, I think, a little bit before that, or they just didn't – I think my dad knew; but my mom didn't know. There was some – I think my dad, it wasn't a surprise to my dad, but it was to my mom.

SS: I just want to go back to the gay marriage thing. Because this demonstration was, what year, eighty s–

ME: It was gay pride weekend, 1989.

SS: What did gay marriage mean in 1989? It was a different kind of thing.

ME: There was no – there was no gay marriage in 1989. There was no, thing. And the week that we did it, the Friday that we did that demonstration, by

Monday, domestic partnership was in the city – Dinkins put it into effect in the city that following Monday. But –

SS: What was the national tenor around gay marriage?

ME: No one believed it, bought it; even gays, even gay men, and women, didn't, and lesbians, didn't, I think, really buy into it. Nobody was really talking about it. And to me, it was an out-, it was a salient point to our lives. It was like, here we were, with couples dying, and people not able to share their benefits, or make decisions about their loved ones. So that, to me, was like, that was the penultimate — is that the right word? No — that was the, a major one for me. I really was always a proponent of gay marriage, and always wanted to see that come through. Even now. And I finally got it. We domestic-partnered last October, November, and it took me 20 years, but — it's really important, and it was, back then, there was nothing, there was nobody. And I remember even when we wanted to do it, people were like, well, what does this have to do with the price of eggs? And I was like, well, it's, it's all those reasons. You don't, here we have a whole group of people saying, you can't get married because you are immoral and all this and that. And then we're trying to create this environment for ourselves to create families and homes and to uplift ourselves into a kind of, a better way.

And I was surprised at how much people were kind of, no, we're not into the gay marriage thing. Even –

SS: Why? Why did they feel that way?

TRACY WARES: Could you scoot over this way?

ME: I think – probably because – well maybe it's because marriage as an institution, at that time, was such a failed institu-, post-'70s divorce rates, huge. And a

lot of people probably lived through that. A lot of people came from single-parent families. I came from, my parents, even though they had a really tough marriage, they stayed together. And I always thought that was, judging, looking at it now, looking at the 50 years that they had together before my mom passed away; it was a solid achievement. And I never really quite understood why people wouldn't want something – if not marriage, some variation on the theme, for ourselves. It just didn't seem – particularly when you're taking on the legalese of what was going on with people, and not able to sort of care for their loved ones during the HIV thing. But there were, I think, a lot of people against it. They didn't really – maybe it's because we had so many freewheeling, free-loving kind of folks, that they thought maybe, oh, this is just kind of a, an old-school thing. But to me, it seemed more about creating families; like really identifying not one person, and establishing families.

Now you see it all the time. Now people are all over it. And I'm glad. It feels like a real – that's another thing that's, when you think, when I think back of the ACT UP days. Something that we started, or we thought about back then; that maybe was a little before its time; when you see it come to fruition now, makes you feel like, oh yeah, that was another, we started that. That was the beginning of that.

SS: Do you think that AIDS contributed to people wanting gay marriage?

ME: Yeah.

SS: Why?

ME: I think because what we found, what we were encountering with people not being able to make decisions about their loved ones – I look at my own

situation. My boyfriend passed away, died in '92. And I had no, I had nothing. All the decisions, everything happened, went to the family. Everything that he would have wanted, all the choices about what to do. So I think this, in a way, was a way to sort of, that's where it really was born out of, was the fact that we couldn't make choices at the end of life, or for important things regarding the health and safety of our families.

SS: So when you were this little gay boy in Cornwall, New York, were you plotting your escape?

ME: Yeah. I was always pretty radical. I was out in high school, sort of, to the most part. And I was kind of always a fighter, too. People would start fights with me, and that was a wrong thing to do. You just made a mistake. Because I'm not a pushover. And I'm not going to – I don't know where I got it from, but it's that thing, maybe you were talking about it — just the thing of, I'm just going to stand up for myself. I'm not going to be in the closet, I don't want to live that way.

I had boyfriends then; I had dated guys real early. So back then, I felt really, really solid about it. And I felt like, even back then, that things weren't right. Pre-AIDS; it just didn't feel like we had any power, that people took us seriously. The image of gays — in fact it is still today — of gay men is erroneous. It's just so faulted in the way the straight world, or the outside world, looks at us and pigeonholes us.

So I always felt all those things. And also, I felt, growing up, that I had an older brother who was gay, that I knew was really gay. And I saw him just get heaps of abuse. And I just knew that I was not going to follow in that path.

I always say about my brother; he was like the cabaret gay, while I was like the Bronski Beat gay. We're kind of different in that. We're completely different,

actually. But it's generational. What he grew up with and the kind of stuff he faced is different than what I faced.

But I knew that, watching him get abused and emasculated by my dad; and all the different things; I knew that this was just not, I'm not going to stand up for that; it's just not going to be my way.

SS: So how did you get out of town?

ME: I left town at 17. I was already starting to leave town at 16, for New York City, but by 17, by the time high school was out, I never went home, I never went back again.

SS: So where did you go?

ME: I lived in New York City during the off-times, and then I went to school at SUNY Purchase. I went to film school.

SS: Oh, uh huh.

ME: Um hm.

SS: So what was that like?

ME: That was great. That was awesome. It was a complete sexual awakening. It was like, you're in a big gay, it was probably, the reason I went there is because it was like hugely a gigantic gay population. And I was, okay, perfect! Gay University, I'll be there! And it was just open. And it was such a great school. It was the state school, but it was the arts program in the state. So it was kind of like the gem in the SUNY system. And there were great people there. That's where I met Todd Haynes and Christine and where I met other filmmakers. And it's actually where I planned, I was going to school there when I joined ACT UP. That's where I really –

SS: I was going to ask you about the film side of it. So what year is that, that you went to Purchase?

ME: '83.

SS: Okay, so in '83 – what was your image of what it would be to be a gay filmmaker? What films existed for you, and –

ME: Well, I – I guess it would be the old-school guys. I was really aware of, even then, Murnau and James Whale and, I love classic stuff, so I like old stuff. So most of my language comes from that. Most of what I loved comes from that sort of period.

So I was informed by more those films than I was by the contemporary stuff. But just as I was starting in, and around that time, a new wave of, that new wave of contemporary stuff was coming out. Like *My Beautiful Laundrette*; the early Steven Frears stuff; and let's see, '80s; *Parting Glances*. I worked on that, as a parking PA.

So right away, that's, I knew kind of the two were **going to** meld for me. Somehow, I was going to get to film school and be in New York, and somehow, any gay film that was in production, I was going to go work on, That was my goal.

SS: So you're coming to New York, and you're being an artist, and you're being gay and in college. It's 1983. You must have started to become aware of AIDS around that time.

ME: Yeah.

SS: Do you remember how it first came into consciousness?

ME: Yeah, I remember exactly how. I remember exactly where I was. I was living in – this is going to sound crass. But I was living with – because, you're 18; and you're, I was living with a bunch of porn stars, in Chelsea.

SS: Oh, which ones?

ME: Uh –

SS: Brag –

ME: Dead ones.

SS: Oh.

ME: Rod Phillips was there. It was the home of a guy named David Connors. And he, every week, like another one from Los Angeles, or somebody from another town, would fly in. I don't know how I ended up with this crowd. But anyway, I ended up with this, well, I know how I ended up with this crowd; you know how I ended up with this crowd.

SS: Because you were cute.

ME: {LAUGHING} So I was 18, and there I was, in the full of it. And okay, so here I am, living with all these hustlers. And one of the guys in the apartment – it was a big penthouse apartment in Chelsea, on 20th. And one of the guys was a doctor. And I remember, he, him sitting me down with *The New York Times*, the GRID article in *The New York Times*. And saying, this is much worse than they're reporting. And we're seeing this all, all over, and you got to be really careful.

SS: Do you remember his name?

ME: I don't remember his name. But none of those, I do know that all those, everybody that I hung out with then, I watched die in the next three years.

SS: So what did “You’ve got to be careful” mean?

ME: Nn-, it meant, at the time –I remember the posters, too. I was also working at some bars and stuff. So you would go in and see those posters. No rimming, with like the circle and the slash through it. No this, circle with the slash through it.

SS: Which bars were you working at?

ME: It just meant – I was working at the Saint, which was a big club. And another place, and Uncle Charlie’s Uptown, the north one. And I just remember when all the posters came out, all the, don’t do this, don’t do that. And it just seemed like you, this is it, like what was this that we couldn’t do; what was this that was happening; what was this cancer; what did it have – it was terrifying. And also, I’d been so sexually active – probably a little earlier than most people my age; maybe not. But I feel I got started a little young. So I felt like I’d had full opportunity to become infected myself at that point. It was terrifying; it was an awful time.

SS: Did you assume you were infected?

ME: Absolutely did. Yeah.

SS: And did that affect the way that you acted?

ME: I went and got tested almost right away. I was – when I did finally go to get tested, I think it was a year later, and I had taken a job – it made me get a little conservative. I remember stepping back. I got out of the wild apartment in Chelsea, and I went upstate, and I got a job on a construction site doing demolition at an Army Air Force base for the summer. And it was then that I got tested. Because I remember I had to drive from Orange County to Rockland County. It was like you had to drive an hour to get an HIV test. And I remember the nurse, and I remember her saying to me, you look

really healthy; trying to make me feel better about it all. But I remember being just terrified, and thinking, this is it; I'm going to just find out I'm positive.

Tape I
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And I remember, when I drove home from that trip, I was crying the whole way home. Because I had already started to see people I knew – back then, it was like you would hear somebody had it — because they'd go into the hospital or something — and that was it. You didn't, within three to six months, they were gone. So it was really scary, because it was happening all the time. Every day, every week, somebody new fell out, and you would lose another person. And so that that whole group of people that I knew from 17 to 21; gone. I think I'm the only person who survived that apartment.

SS: So after having gotten tested, did that change anything about how you lived?

ME: I remember – yeah. It did, it did. It came back negative. And – I was really relieved. I just remember being really relieved. But also knowing – it changed things, but it didn't change things. Because your relief was so short-lived. Because then you're right back in it. It's a shame, because you can, at that age, it's so hard, it was so hard to maintain safe sex, and all the things, and suddenly now you're, have to wear a wetsuit, and do all this stuff. So it was really hard to know. And I remember trying to go through a period of celibacy, and just the whole struggle. You're trying to both feel positive about who you are as a young gay man; but you can't have sex because it's a death sentence, and, you're – it was horrible. It was probably the worst. It was just a horrible time.

God, I just remember – and that’s where I think all the energy comes from to make an ACT UP. Because I had all this pent-up sexual energy, and I just wanted to get arrested or do something. I want to throw something through a wall.

SS: I want to ask you about the Saint, the last few years of the Saint.

ME: Yeah. That was amazing. Because I, the first time I went there was with, before that I had gone to Studio [54] – as a teenager. So seeing the clubs pre-AIDS, and then seeing them, or coming to them right at the tail end of that, and seeing – I remember the first time I walked into the Saint, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. It was the most beautiful assortment of amazing-looking men I’d ever seen in one place in my entire life. I had never seen anything like it in my life. I was, I was 18. I’m like, whoa, this is overkill.

And then – I don’t know. The dance floor, it was the perfect symbol of just the AIDS crisis. Because gradually and gradually, it just thinned out and thinned out and thinned out, and that, the body count just rolled in, and soon, it was gone.

SS: Well, the Saint was one of the first bars where people really got hit, because there was such a, there was a Fire Island connection.

ME: Right.

SS: I remember people early saying, oh, it’s people who go to the Saint.

ME: Yeah. The Saint was – it opened in 1980. And it was totally unique and exclusive and kind of – I don’t know how I’d feel about it today. I didn’t know how I felt about it then. They had no women policies and shit that were just really wrong and fucked up. But also, I think it was more the connection with things like the baths and the

all-night thing. That there was actually within it, on the third floor, you could go up and it was like a whole bathhouse up there. You had a dance floor, you had a big disco; and all these beautiful men. You had lots of drugs. And then you could do anything you want.

SS: And the Bruce Mailman connection –

ME: Yeah, and the connection –

SS: – because he owned the baths.

ME: – because he owned the baths. So I think it was probably drugs and sex that made it. But I remember that dance floor; and I remember it thinning out over the years. Just like Christopher Street, how it went through that transformation, from being really incredibly proud and brilliant in the late '70s, early '80s; to just becoming a devastated strip mall.

SS: So you were working at the Saint while you were still going to college? Or you – okay.

ME: Um hm.

SS: So you were leading sort of two lives.

ME: Yeah. Yeah. I had about three jobs at the time. Because a lot of other stuff was going on with my family's life at that time. My dad also was indicted as a Teamster boss; he was going to jail. So I had to pay for myself through college. So I had three jobs. So I was working all the time. But it was also good. I felt like I had the energy to do it, and I wanted to do it, and I was really happy to be in that environment, with other people.

I think I was looking in the Saint kind of environment for what I eventually found in ACT UP.

SS: I see.

ME: Which is, because when I got there, it was like a job, but also, I knew DJs and I knew people and there were friends. But it wasn't really quite the same as having a purpose. It seemed a little, almost too frivolous. And I'm not a big clubber or dancer or any of that, and I don't track any of that. I don't even really like dance music that much. But it was a great job. I did video. So it was all, I got to program all the video walls and stuff like that. So that was a great thing for me at the time.

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SS: And what year did the Saint close?

ME: '86, I want to say. Yeah. About '86.

SS: And you worked there until it closed?

ME: Yeah.

SS: And do you remember Bruce Mailman; what his attitudes were about AIDS and what he thought should be –

ME: Wiley would actually remember those pretty well, because he knew him a little bit better than I did. Not so great. From what I remember, he didn't really want to close the baths; didn't really want to – but I remember seeing the posters up, and all that. I think it was sort of like – so many men, especially the businessmen, a businessman like Bruce Mailman, was just looking at it like, oh my god, how is this going to affect the bottom line, and I got this big club, and all these big real estate things.

I don't know; I can't climb into his brain. But I imagine that he was probably looking at it more like a businessman than like a personal tragedy. But I, since he himself eventually died of AIDS –

But I knew a lot of other businessmen around him who were like that; who kind of did that sort of Roy Cohn thing, where they were able to sort of schism the business angle of what they were doing with the reality of what was happening with people's lives. The Saint should have taken some, the bathhouses, everything, should have gone into high alert. In some ways they did, but I think in a lot of ways, there was so much resistance. And it's also a marginalized group anyway, who always feel like, oh, it took them so long just to get these businesses going, to get these things happening. And now this.

But I don't remember Bruce Mailman's attitude being very – great. It was kind of like –

TW: It's my call. Sorry about that. I'll just turn it off.

SS: That's okay. So what year did you come to ACT UP?

ME: The first ACT UP demonstration I saw – I want to say it was eighty – December of '87, or '86? No, it would have been '87. And it was a downtown demonstration that I just came upon by accident.

The funny thing about ACT UP is, usually you would meet – or I would meet – somebody cute, and be, oh yeah, he's cute. And then he'd be, oh, let's, what are you guys doing? I met, this – I was staying at a friend's on West 10th. And there was a demonstration right, I think it was a Cardinal O'Connor demonstration.

But actually, there's one other incident that happened before then, and this might have been '86 – is, I saw Vito Russo speak. Because I was making, in Purchase, a cinematographer named Sarah Cawley, who's a filmmaker; she was making a documentary about a guy – a portrait documentary – about a man dying of AIDS, with AIDS. So that was really my first encounter, I think, with ACT UP. Because we would go out and film stuff with him around the West Village. And one of the things we filmed was Vito Russo speaking in Sheridan Square. And it was before ACT UP was formed, but it was while all that stuff was gestating, in that '86, '85-'86-'87 period, when all that, what are we going to do with all this?

SS: Was it a candlelight vigil or something?

ME: It was a vigil – he was speaking in Sheridan Square. I don't think it was a candlelight vigil. It was more – I'll have to look at the footage again, but it was –

JIM HUBBARD: It was about the Hardwick decision.

ME: That was probably it.

SS: Oh, okay.

ME: Yeah. And – and it was amazing. I remember listening to him, and just being kind of amazed. And then seeing, by that December, there was a demonstration, and I remember seeing everybody marching around. And then I went downstairs. And there were, yeah, this is, we're demonstrating against this, that, or the other thing. There is a meeting on Monday nights. And so, wouldn't you know? I drove down that Monday from Westchester, from Purchase, and there was an ACT UP meeting.

SS: Now do you think that you came to ACT UP because the guys were cute and it was exciting?

ME: No. I came –

SS: Or do you think you chose AIDS as a – or was it other reasons?

ME: No, I came because I wanted to do something about it. I'd known a bunch of people who had died, and I had friends who were, already had it. And it just seemed like there was no, we had, something had to be done. There was, – I definitely wanted social interaction. But the cute guys; well, cute guys are always a, sort of spice on the lamb. You got to go for, there's got to be something a little bit more there to grab me. And what brought me in was really just being fed up, not really having anything, nowhere else to go. And wondering when mine was. Because even though I felt like I'd passed the test this time, I still couldn't quite believe it. And I was still sexually active; with some success at keeping safe sex, but not always. So I'd always felt, this could be anybody, when you're number's up.

SS: Can you describe for people a little bit what it was like for people with AIDS before ACT UP? For your friends? If you could pick a friend, and –

ME: Yeah. What it was like is, you went and you found out you had it, and you pretty much closed the door. That was it. You were gone in short order. And I remember – a friend. And this happened on more than one occasion. Somebody would say, come into the group and say, okay, I've got it. And he's sick, and oh, he's at the hospital. But it was even that thing of, do we go to the hospital? Can we catch it from the hospital? There was so much fear around every aspect of it. Do we need to wear things when we go in there? Do we need to – but then, within three months, that person was gone.

And I remember, I remember thinking, you had a two, it always cycled up twice. You would get it; somebody would get PCP. And then they'd survive that. But if they got it again, gone.

So I would lose people, and I just was so unfamiliar with that, at 20.

SS: Did you have people call you and say, I have it? Or did you always hear from a third party?

ME: No. Always heard from a third party. I always heard from a third party.

SS: And did you visit anyone in the hospital?

ME: Um hm.

SS: Can you describe what that –

ME: Awful. It was a tented, you were going into a tented – it was like a boy-in-the-plastic-bubble kind of thing. You just felt they got sick, and suddenly no one ever wanted to touch, they would never have contact with real skin again. It was – degrading; it was humiliating. It was agony for those people who had it, and had to deal with it.

SS: And where were their families?

ME: A lot of them weren't, had nothing to do with them. Whole families would be, I knew people whose families wanted nothing to do with it. It was just a waiting game.

SS: So did you and your brother talk about this at the time?

ME: Never. Never. When I started doing it, my brother was kind of anti my doing it. And when I started making, getting arrested and doing all that, his attitude

was, you have no right to do that, and that's – you're not being any help, and – that's always kind of been our relationship.

SS: But that was the predominant view in the gay community.

ME: That was, yeah, that was the view. Even my own gay friends were that way. What are you doing? This is going to – you're only making people hate you more, and they're going to just – that really was. People just were not – the same with gay marriage, or anything. If you tried to bring any light to any of this, or change any of it, what was happening? I don't know. It was as if – maybe it was because they felt that period in the late '70s was so brilliant. What was so brilliant about it? We still had no rights. And there was still rampant disease, and all this other stuff.

But I think a lot of guys who lived through that really good, high time in the '70s were just sort of, they just wanted to hold onto that. And they didn't want to face the reality of what was happening all around them. They just didn't want to let it go.

SS: Looking back, do you see a character issue, or something that really was a difference between the kind of people who would join ACT UP and the people who would say, don't do that?

ME: Yeah. The people who would join ACT UP were courageous. They had a little something extra. They had a willingness to stand up. And also, they had compassion for other people. There was a level of compassion that other people didn't have.

I don't even know that I have that compassion still, to this day. It was something that kind of was called up in the situation. That's really what it felt like. These were people who would lay down their lives to help other people. And that's the

difference. Some people won't. Some people just want to protect themselves, protect their home, protect their things. But this group of people that I met in ACT UP – and the first time I went, there were maybe 25 people in the room.

SS: Really?

ME: Yeah.

SS: At the Center.

ME: Yeah. Really small. Never more than two–

SS: Do you remember who they were?

ME: I remember Larry [Kramer], and I remember my little group of friends, like Howard Pope and Adam Smith and Costa Pappas and George Whitman and Christopher Sharp. And I remember, those were kind of the first group of people I met there. And then I remember — and they used to give us the nickname of the Swim Team, because we were all young and cute guys; we were like the Young Twenty-Ones. And then –

SS: Wait, we have to stop there.

ME: And then there were all the –

SS: Wait, wait, wait. How did you get the name the Swim Team?

ME: Well, we got the name the Swim Team because we ran into, Maria [Maggenti], Maria was having a party once. And we ran into Tompkins Square Park, and got naked, and swam in the fountain, and came back in our underwear. And that's how we got the name, the Swim Team.

SS: Okay.

ME: Just to clarify that. Tompkins Square Park. I don't think you can swim in that fountain anymore. {LAUGHS}

SS: How many – so that was, those were the members of the Swim Team?*

ME: Yeah.

SS: Those guys?

ME: Yeah.

SS: And how many of them are alive now?

ME: Oh, gosh, I don't even know. I know Howard Pope is no longer with us. I think George Whitman is still alive; Adam Smith is still alive; Tassos, I think, is still alive. I'm here. Chris Sharp; pretty sure he's still here. So probably a couple of us. There was another guy named David, and I can't remember his last name. I don't know if he's still with us. I don't think I've spoken to any of them in a couple of years. But they were great. It was, that was the group of people that I was looking for. That was the group of friends I wanted to make: people who had some consciousness about what was going on. And, we were kind of anarchists, too. I was all about, get arrested, now. What are we going to do? Can we do – the more extreme the demo, the better I felt. I was just, oh, okay, what, the bigger, the better, the demo – the better.

* In an e-mail message dated August 11, 2008, Matt Ebert wrote: the members of the original swim team, as recorded in my diary soon thereafter: Matt Ebert, Adam Smith, Todd Marsh, Ben Thornberry and David (?) name escapes me. George Wittman and Tassos Pappas were not there, nor Michael Goff or anyone else. There's this delirious page in my journal where I traced my hand and wrote down everything all 5 of us did, got laid that night for sure. We all jumped the fence and swam naked in Tompkins Square, then went back to Maria's party in our combat boots and underwear. Must have been quite a sight, back then, but I'm sure I was loaded to the gills. Friday Aug 12, 1988.

And I remember; I set up a demo – almost right away. As soon as I figured out how I could do it; as soon as they taught me; okay, well, this is what you have to do; I set one up for Westchester County, for the Westchester Medical Center. And that was probably '88. Or early '89.

And I remember, the Mark Harringtons, and Peter Staley, and all those guys in the room.

So there was this contingent of guys who were really s-smart and together. And then there was kind of the thuggy younger guys. And then there was, but there were a whole different. And then all the women that were so much a part of it, too. Which was amazing. And I remember it having kind of more of a commie angle. Like there was a whole socialist group, and. So it had this kind of like – this cachet about it that was sort of, it felt like you were in some kind of lefty '50s group.

And people like Maxine Wolfe. I just remember being blown over by the way these people could articulate what was going on. Because to me, I was so emotionally involved, and I just, it was such an emotional bundle of nerves about it — and I still am — to hear people articulate the arguments as well as what I really needed, too. To hear some older gay men, who weren't all wrapped up in the culture of the bodies and the discos and the this and the that; just to meet the Larry Kramers and the, the bigwigs, was really kind of outstanding for me. Because I'd never had gay role models like that. And these were the people I wanted to be. This was the belief system that I had.

And I loved those early years. Those early years, when we were just kind of sitting in those rooms, trying to come up with things; it just seemed like the sky's the

limit; we could do – I think about today, how hard it is for groups mounting any kind of campaign to make a dent. But then, it just seemed like we could do anything, we could seize the moment, we could – grab the attention of the press and the public; and we could make, we could lie down in the streets and make ourselves known.

SS: You said that people explained to you how to do a demonstration.

Can you just explain to us how to do a demonstration?

ME: Yeah. Sure

TW: Just a second it's starting to scratch a little.

ME: Well there was the whole thing of making sure that you have written material, so that people know why you're there. If you're going to do a demonstration about a particular thing, like the one I did at the Westchester Med Center, find out what it is; who are the people involved. Do your research. That was a big part of it. Go in there; don't go in there and just start screaming and yelling and lying down on the floor without why we're here.

So really, figure out your argument, and then go for it.

And then there were all the things about what to do if you get arrested.

How to go limp, or how to, what to do to the poli-, how to speak to the police, and how to deal with all that.

And depending on how you want things to go, do you need to interact with the security at the facility, or do you need to sort of just go in there and do your thing. And back then, you never had to deal with anything; you just went in. Because the point it was, you wanted to make, a statement.

Tape I
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And then support. Getting other people there with you. So that there's people not getting arrested. So that somebody can stand on the outside and take a picture, or bring a camera, bring – that was the big thing back then, too; the video element. So for a filmmaker, like me, huge. Wow. Video is a huge part of what we're doing. So to videotape it, to videotape the demonstrations, to have a video camera was like having security.

I remember, at times, holding my Super 8 movie camera, and thinking; good thing I'm here, because I can get that cop's badge number. You know what I mean? So it was, it wasn't just like you were there making a, artistic film, or doing something. You were actually there to actually record the thing because you might need it later in court.

SS: Now how was that all coordinated; all the camera work?

ME: There was a group called DIVA TV; I remember. And so that we would meet, and different people would set up, okay, well, what, who's going to bring what, and who's going to record what. So I used to always go to those meetings, too. But that was a whole arm. And I think that was kind of pretty unique to ACT UP, too, is that ability to sort of like, parse out, the work that had to be done. We could create this TV thing that was there; made sure that we had a video presence so we could survey what was happening.

I remember being in the Tompkins Square Park riot, too. And that was a big, that was another one where video played a huge part of it. Because it was the, I remember them running that video on TV all night. And our demonstrations, too. You

could submit your video to the networks, and they would have it. And then eventually they caught on, and just started sending camera people.

SS: I have some questions about DIVA TV. First of all, can you tell us the names of people? Do you remember who –

ME: Catherine Saalfeld; I'm terrible with names. I remember Catherine. Oh, gosh why, I can't remember anybody. Gregg Bordowitz. I can't remember anybody else right now.

SS: Okay, so did people have to bring their own cameras, or did DIVA TV provide cameras?

ME: No, I think you had your own, people had their own. If you had your own video camera, had access to it, then you could – and if you didn't then you could, we would figure out a way to get it. I think there was cable access channels and stuff like that where we could get – or there was kind of a phone list out there for people with video cameras, if you had one.

SS: So after a demo, would you all come to the same place and share your footage? Or how was it coordinated?

ME: Yeah, because we had regular meetings. But I don't really remember us watching too much stuff at the regular meetings. We would just kind of talk about what we had. Sometimes you would watch a little bit of something. And then – then I made that, then I made *Marta*.

SS: Oh, tell us about that.

ME: Yeah, that was really great.

SS: What was *Marta*?

ME: *Marta* was – because I’m watching the footage now. And I really realize why we made *Marta*. We made *Marta* because we needed to laugh. We were so unhappy that if we didn’t come up with a comic version of what we were doing, I think Ryan and I were just at the end of our – I was living with Ryan Landry at the time. We had an apartment on Third Street, between First and Second. And we went down. And Garance [Franke-Ruta] was indeed the, she was the spark, she was our muse. Because we thought she was great. In reality, total homage. We really truly were blown away by, – and I think that was a big part of it. The women in ACT UP – and when I look at footage now, it’s like, I’m so amazed at the women in ACT UP. How incredible they were, and how powerful they were. And how, what made ACT UP truly unique is that, for the first time, gay men and lesbians; women, men — instead of gay or lesbian or any of it — men and women — it was around our mutual rights. We have some shared, we have some commonality here. Healthcare. Huge commonality. And I just remember being, that Garance was the muse and Ryan just took off with it and was like, okay, well, I want to create this character who doesn’t really know, couldn’t possibly, at my age, at 17, know all the facts, or know how to, know what it’s like to see your boy lover die, or something like that. But with so much passion, and have so much, even tripping, stumbling, and falling through it is still, has something to say, or has something to offer the group. That everybody has something to offer, and that was the main thrust of it. That even this character – I remember we wanted to make another one called *Marta for Choice*, where you never knew what side of the fence she was on. Was she pro-choice, or was she, because you couldn’t figure it out, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that there was a human body interested enough to fight for the cause.

But in the case of *Marta*, so we went down to the – it was in Atlanta. And the name came from the bus system, the MARTA transportation system in Atlanta. And

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SS: Why were you in Atlanta?

ME: We were in Atlanta for the CDC demo, and for the anti-sodomy laws; sodomy laws. So we started, we just started filming, and I would set him up. I would be like, okay, well now there are all these guys over there holding, “Gay is not Okay” signs, and all this stuff. So go over there, and just hold up your banner and try to cover them up, and try to protest with them.

So Ryan was totally game. He’d go right in there, and do stuff. Or whenever there was press or something that we could kind of – so we sort of just created this character that was, without reading too much into it, it was sort of a way for us to kind of have fun with it; to feel like outsiders when we were really insider-, when we were really part of it; and also to bring some levity to it; to sort of make it feel like – it was such a hard time, and most video and stuff that I saw around it at the time was very straightforward. I wanted to make something where you got to see – to me, if you can – if I can create something that makes you laugh at something, and it’s funny, and you’re kind of taken away a little bit about that; by the time you do see the footage in the background of somebody holding a “Gay is not Okay” sign, and these real homophobes built into the movie; you’re going to feel a little bit more – it’s going to feel something. There’s this kind of strange thing that happens, at least to me, when I see something like that, when it’s kind of an invention. It’s kind of like the – I was watching this Haskell

Tape I
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Wexler documentary called – oh Christ, I can't remember the name of it — it's one he made in the Democratic Convention.

JH: *Medium Cool*.

ME: *Medium Cool*. And he has these actors, interacting with the riots as they're going on. And that was what I was trying to get. You create this fake character; roll him into this setting; but you really see this real stuff going on in the background.

SS: What was it like having a boyfriend in ACT UP?

ME: I didn't really ha-, I had a lot of boyfriends in ACT UP. I'm sorry.

TW: It's okay.

SS: That's okay.

ME: I was covering the mic. But then I got one main boyfriend in ACT UP. And I fell in love with him the minute I laid eyes on him. And wildly in love with him. And we were together about four years. And – he was positive when I met him; and had already been into the hospital once. He was positive, I was negative. His name was Michael Aquilone. And he was part of the fund-raising committee. And he was a great guy. And I miss him terribly. He was a really big loss in my life.

So we were together about, from about '88 to ninety-, he died in '92. We were together that time.

Having a boyfriend that, – he was, first of all, a hard one to be a boyfriend with. But then – it just made it that much more urgent.

SS: How involved was ACT UP in Michael's treatment decisions?

ME: At the time, Michael's treatment decisions consisted of AZT and heroin. Because AZT was the only thing available; and heroin killed the pain.

So – but ACT UP was extremely, he was extremely involved. He was so into it. And he did what he could with it. I just think that he was too young and didn't really have enough time. But he was with all those guys, and he would go to those meetings, and learn about stuff. And I think it was just good for him to be somewhere, to be empowered, to get arrested, or to see me get arrested. Because after about a year, he got too sick to even – he would come to meetings and stuff, but he couldn't go to demos or anything like that. So I would go.

SS: What was the provision for people who were sick when they got arrested? Was there a special –

ME: I think that they didn't. I think people who were really too sick to get arrested, we were sort of like – no one ever said, don't get arrested. But I think the idea was that there's people like me, who can go in your place, and get arrested for you. And I'll put your name on, spray-paint it on the back of my leather jacket, and get arrested for you.

I remember there being kind of a feeling that, if you're really sick, this might be a little too rough for you; so let us go in your place; let people who can go and get arrested there in your place do it.

SS: And was ACT UP involved in his care?

ME: N-. Only, I would say, yes, in that there were so many people around that he could ask questions of. He was constantly talking with the Treatment and Act-, uh, Treatment and Access Group; the Mark Harringtons and all those guys. He was always asking about stuff. And there was always information there. You'd come in and

get all those piles of papers off the table every week. What was new; what treatment is out there; who's doing clinical trials; things like that.

So yeah. That stuff was completely instrumental.

SS: And he went into clinical trials?

ME: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Do you remember what drugs he was –

ME: ddI; AZT, ddI; d4, d– d4T, or DC3?

JH: It's either d4T or ddC.

ME: I'm thinking d4T is what it, was the one he went on. And then that was probably before – but he had always been on AZT. But then other things. I remember – I don't think he got this one. I remember he did that thing where when you got KS, you got liquid nitrogen poured on your skin. Now that wasn't an ACT UP thing. I remember people in ACT UP saying, don't do that. But he went and did it anyway. And that was hideous.

SS: What happened?

ME: That's the kind of treatment that was around back then.

SS: What happened to him when he did that?

ME: It was horrible. They poured liquid nitrogen on his KS lesions, and they all turned into huge, gigantic, scarring blisters. And there was no cure. It was just, it was torture. I remember him coming out of that just in tears, and screaming, and –

SS: Well, when he was finally hospitalized, was the care group around him; was it ACT UP people, or was it other people –

ME: No, there was a lot of ACT UP people around. But there was no – there was nothing that could have been done, I think, for him at that point. He had had it for a real long time. Though I think the whole process of ACT UP in that period of time really did keep him alive. It kept a lot of people alive for a lot longer than they would have been. Because it was really great to see. I think that it just, it would have given me the spirit to kick it up for a few more years; I know that. And I know it did for him. He would not, he was really sick, and people got really sick back then. And they managed, on no T-cells, no weight, no food, no nothing, to just keep living and going and fighting and one more day, one more day.

SS: So after he passed away, did you stay in ACT UP?

ME: No. I think that's pretty much was the end of it for me; about ninety, right after he died. That was about the end. I think – I had – I had a long history with drugs; drug problem. And it started right about then. So that was probably another thing that – losing him kind of turned it up a notch, I think. And I think I just kind of dropped out. And then eventually, I moved out of New York, that same year.

SS: Saved your own life.

ME: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. Oh, okay. So I want to go back to some of the projects you worked on in ACT UP. You said that your first demonstration was the Westchester

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ME: Westchester Medical Center.

SS: What did you do?

ME: I organized a demo to, because they had –

TW: Is there some music in another room there?

SS: I think a TV is on in Wiley's room. Is that possible?

ME: Yeah. Both doors, the kitchen door, and the –

TW: I'll close those doors.

SS: Okay.

ME: – yeah, and that back door can be closed.

SS: All right; Westchester.

ME: Okay. Westchester Medical Center. That was the first one. And it was a case where a patient had been denied treatment, in Westchester Med. And I was still going to school at Purchase. So I organized a group to go there. And then I took a group of kids from the college to go there. And we held a demo there. And changed some stuff.

So that was great.

SS: What'd you do?

ME: Well, we just kind of went there –

SS: Because I mean –

ME: – and stood at the front door, and –

SS: But doing a demonstration at a hospital is a tricky business.

ME: Yeah. But we went right to the front, to where the emergency room exit was; where the person had been denied. And we just pulled out all our posters and banners, and we circled around, and we had called the press. So they were there, and they took pictures. And then, within an hour, they asked us to leave, and we left, and it was done. So it wasn't like a major arrest scenario. But we got the point across.

SS: I mean, there were hundreds of actions like that in ACT UP –

ME: Yeah yeah.

SS: So how did you interact with people in the emergency room?

ME: They were freaked out. people were just, could not figure out what this was. Why are you demonstrating at a ch-, at a hospital for? I think people didn't really see it as what it was. They thought we were just being – a lot of people just thought of it as gay right-, like a gay rights thing. They saw these kind of anarchist kind of oddballs out there, in their leather jackets and their this and their that, and they're like, if these are just thu-, gay thugs. So they didn't look at the AIDS thing right away. I think there was this visual that was just sort of like, they're demonstrating, it's, it's this thing, they're holding banners, they're saying that we're prejudiced, or whatever; we're barricading healthcare.

But then you would talk to people, and they would kind of get it, they would come around to it, and say, yeah, that did happen, and this is what ha-

You would almost find clarity, in discussing it with people there. A lot of times, in my footage, I'll look at, through the window, I'll see people looking out at us. It's always such an amazing thing to see, what we must have looked like to other people.

I remember, there was definitely a contingent there at the hospital that was just completely freaked out. They called security, and this, that, and the other thing. So we had to sit down, and we had to move around. They moved us to another part, and then we came back. So it was always tricky, you were always –

SS: Hospitals were like churches –

ME: Um hm.

Tape I
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SS: – or schools. They were like –

ME: Yeah.

SS: – you’re not supposed to –

ME: Yeah. You’re not supposed to touch this. We’re here to help. Why would you want to demon-, your demonstrating is slowing the progress of our help.

SS: Of us excluding you.

ME: Of us excluding you from help.

SS: Right. On that note –

ME: That’s what it felt like, and that was the attitude you got. And also, you got from doctors and from most of the medical community. There’s a really kind of high-mindedness. We are *so* not in need of your particular brand of lang-, of what you’re saying. We know. And they didn’t know.

SS: That’s right.

ME: Yeah.

SS: Okay, let’s change tape. Great.

How did you and Wiley meet?

ME: We actually –

ME: Yeah. There was a group that could go in, because they were sort of club –

SS: What was that girl’s name? She was in ACT UP, and she worked for Bruce, and then she worked at the Warhol Foundation. Marissa?

ME: Marissa? Oh my gosh.

SS: She was one of the 14 [women allowed into the Saint.] I’m sure.

ME: Yeah, yeah. And there was another one named Christina, who used to work the door at Palladium. She was one. And yeah. There was just, they were always there. So there was no real policy. They were just being exclusive. It was kind of crap.

SS: I remember, it was so beautiful, I've never seen anything like it, it was incredible.

ME: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. And that light show and everything –

ME: And before – yeah – the light show was amazing, the music, the sound in there was great. It was a great place.

TW: Rolling.

SS: Okay.

Y: What was her name –

SS: Cardinale. Are you ready, Jim?

So did you get into an affinity group?

ME: I was in -, I think I was in all of them. But primarily, I was really just wanting to be affiliated with anybody getting arrested on the frontline of being arrested. I was just, okay, I'll be in any groups. And usually we had to take groups, you had to be in a group. But I was never very like, the Treatment group, they were all great. I was just sort of the cheerleader, that ran around and said to every group, oh, man, you're doing the greatest work. I'm going to go over here now. But I think I was too ADD to really settle into a group.

SS: Well, what's one of your favorite arrest experiences?

ME: Oh, there were so many. But my favorite – I think my favorite has to be the arrest in the Waldorf.

SS: Oh, tell us about this.

ME: Because in that one, we – George Bush was going to be at the Waldorf. So we were all going to demo at the Waldorf.

SS: George Bush the first.

ME: The first, the first, yes. King George the First was going to be at the Waldorf, giving a speech. So we took a room, we all took rooms at the Waldorf, and our room just happened to be right smack, six floors center, of that building. And we made a huge banner that dropped down the front of it, that was, King George is a Murderer, and has blood on his hands, and all this other stuff; whatever, I can't remember.

So my favorite, just because of this one little moment. And I remember Christine Vachon was in there with me. We were both chained to the radiator. We threw out the banner, and it went down. And you could, everybody was up and down the street. So when we threw our banner out — because no one knew what room they got, like where they were — but because ours was like perfectly placed, dead center; so we were the ones who threw the banner out that went down. And then everybody was screaming and yelling and cheering and all this stuff. So we'd lock the doors and it was just really exciting. Because the police were out there banging, and everybody was screaming and yelling out there, and we're like yeah, we did it, we got a room, we got our—

So the cops come in. And they pull up the banner. And they're all like getting, screaming and cuffing us and doing everything. And I just remember that while they weren't looking, I knocked the banner back out the window. And it took them a

good few minutes to figure out what I had done. But you could hear, in the background, the crowd just roar. It was like this thunderous roar. And I don't think anybody on Broadway got a bigger standing ovation that night. Because it was just this feeling of, okay. It was just so funny. Because it was like a comedy. The cops didn't see it go back out the window. I was still sitting there, kind of holding my back to the window. do-do-do-dt-dt-dt-. And just the whole roar of the crowd. That moment was just really great, and will always like sit in my head as like one of, the finest hour.

SS: So you and Christine were arrested?

ME: Yeah.

SS: What were you charged with?

ME: Well, we were actually, I don't think we were arrested that time. I think we were just brought down to the basement and chained up 'til the demonstration was over. So I think they let us go.

Arrests; probably the favorite real arrest would have been the marriage license bureau. Because that was so important to me.

SS: So what happened there?

ME: Well, we went to the marriage license bureau. And they wouldn't give us our things. And we went to the marriage license office, which is across the street. And I remember, I had the flyer in my hand, and I just started reading the flyer. So all the news – because it was gay pride weekend; it was the Friday of gay pride. And I think all the news peeps were there, and they just recorded it, and it was out on all the networks.

And then we decided when they wouldn't give us the marriage license that we'd walk across the street to City Hall. And as we got to City Hall — and there weren't that many of us; there was 12 of us, or 20 of us; not that many — but as we got to City Hall, they were like, oh no, here they come, and they shut, and they locked us out.

So I sat down in front of City Hall, and that's where I got arrested. And that felt really great.

SS: What was the charge?

ME: Just disorderly conduct, or some stupid thing.

SS: So what would happen when you got arrested? What was the —

ME: I don't know, then it went into the other — I was just the body.

Because there was the whole ACT UP mechanism for getting the lawyers to get you out, and the people there. And I just was, okay, well, great. And when are we doing it again? What time do you want me back for — I was just the body that would get arrested.

SS: Did you ever have to go to court?

ME: I think in '88 I got arrested like seven times.

SS: Really?

ME: Yeah. I got arrested at City Hall; I got arrested at the bridges, the various bridges. I got arrested at Trump Tower. I got arrested at Wall Street. You name it, that year. There was one year where I counted up about seven of them.

SS: I was with you at Trump Tower. Can you tell that, about that?

That was a great action.

ME: That was a great action, although I wish we had thrown the blood in that. We wanted to throw blood or suds into the fountain. But then we were like, yeah,

but they're going to charge us so much money if we do that. I don't remember too much about that action, except that we went in there with flyers. And the goal of it was just like, look; there's so much money here, and here we have huge – Trump being who he was, back then, even. It was just sort of to show the disparity in housing. It was a housing demo. So we went to Trump Tower with lots of flyers, and I remember just everyone going in, and climbing, getting on the escalators and going up through that atrium. And then at the right moment, all those flyers just hailing down on people, and into the fountain, and all the, all the stuff that was going on. That was a great, those were great ones.

SS: Did you ever have to go to court?

ME: I think I did. I think I went to court twice. And you would just go with a big group of people. And it was pretty much like a lineup. I remember being in holding pens, and all that stuff. And I remember being outside of the downtown police precinct, where they threw water on us, out a window. It was either the policemen or the firemen, somebody dumped a whole big thing of water onto us once.

I remember going to the different – police precincts. And it was usually handled really orderly. They usually would just put us in a big pen. I don't remember anybody being held for any long-term thing. But they would put us in a big holding pen. I'm sure it happened.

SS: Were you ever afraid at a demonstration?

ME: Never. The only time, maybe once, is in Atlanta, when guys would drive around with shotguns, but –

SS: What was that?

ME: It was during the sodomy ones. It was actually not the AIDS ones, but the sodomy – I think the gay stuff still made people so much more antagonistic. When we would have a demonstration about a healthcare issue – because it was, there seemed to be so many different things. It was like, women’s issues, and women’s group issues, and gay men’s issues, and then there was the AIDS issues. And that was – there was always kind of a fight for what was going to take the most, – when it was really all those things, because this was really all-encompassing, to healthcare.

In Atlanta, when we were making *Marta*, I remember, we were shooting some stuff. And I look over, and there was a guy driving around with a shotgun. And he had it aimed right at us. There was two guys in a pickup truck. And they had their little rack in the back, and he had a shotgun right out. And I remember just, not saying a word to anybody, but he had it aimed right at me. And that was just, that was probably the first time where you felt like, you know what? It would just take two seconds for someone to blow a bullet and drive out of here. You’d be done.

SS: How much time did you spend at ACT UP?

ME: A lot. I would, I went to meetings every Monday. Because they had them right in – it was my social life. Then it became really my life. It was it. That was what I, you lived for those Mondays. That was where all your friends went. Then we would go out to dinner at the burrito place across the way. So it was where, it was where I met my friends. And it was where I really got a sense of community, throughout all that misery and all the crap; to actually find a community of people.

It was, without a doubt, hands down, probably one of the greatest periods of my life. Just because of how awful, what an awful time it was; but also how

empowering it was, how we were able to stand up to it. And I look at the fact that I'm HIV positive today, and I wouldn't be alive today if we didn't, if I didn't get arrested 20 years ago. That's absolutely true. That if we didn't do what we did 20 years ago, I wouldn't be here. The medicines that I take to stay alive, I would not have.

SS: You saved your own life.

ME: Um hm.

SS: Everyone who's positive, we've asked them if they would tell us what meds they're on. Do you mind telling us?

ME: No. I'm on Atripla. And I take Valtrex. Two meds. Yeah. So I was on the Sustiva combination, and now they have Atripla, one pill. So you think about that. And I remember people taking 50 pills. AZT three times, every hour. Throughout the day, or whatever it was, and –

SS: Little watch alarms would go off.

ME: Yeah, little things, and just the amount of stuff people would have to take. And it never did any real good. It forestalled it, but it didn't really quite do it. But if it wasn't for that medical access group, and the way, and all of us getting arrested, and everybody in every corner of the ACT UP sphere; we wouldn't have done that. I wouldn't be alive, and millions of people wouldn't be alive today.

SS: That's right. So I just have one last question. Let me just ask Jim; is there anything we haven't covered?

JIM HUBBARD: I was wondering, because you grew up Catholic, what your feelings about Stop the Church were.

ME: Oh, I loved Stop the Church, I grew up Catholic. But I'm the kind of Catholic who was the best moment in Catholicism when he went into the temple and kicked some ass, so, that's what it's all about. You got to just rip that damned thing down, and start all over again. That was— it was great, too, because my sisters — my sister-in-law's mom was visiting from Pennsylvania that day. There I was - poor thing. She and a church group were being shuttled from Archibald, Pennsylvania into St. Patrick's Cathedral for a visit with the cardinal, and there I was, out in the front.

So, there was always that with my family. They were like, what are you do-, you co-, I couldn't have been more, anti the whole thing. But I think somewhere, deep down, they knew; he's at least standing up for something. If you don't stand for something, you're going to fall for anything.

So — I think whether, I know some of my brothers are very, I look at my, I have a brother I'm real close to, and he was very into it. He came down to Stop the Church. And he's straight and he's married, he's got four kids. But he was proud of me. He was like, oh, way to go; this is what you should be doing.

I loved Stop the Church. I'm all for it. Break the host, smash it on the ground, tear that, blow that church up, start over. Do over. Any- --body, that — yeah. That was, I was more than happy to take part in that.

SS: So my final question is — and thank you so much —

ME: You're welcome.

SS: — for doing this. Looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

ME: Greatest achievement; saving lives. Just the amount of lives it saved. And also, giving us all something to hope for. That was huge. We had no hope. I had no hope, until then. And I had no place to go to, I was a kid. I couldn't have formulated that. It had to come from an intelligent group of men and women who said, you know what? We're going to just do this for our community, for the young men and women who are coming up behind us; and for those who have died before us; and we're going to d-, and without those people who thought that up, we wouldn't be here; I wouldn't be here. That's its greatest achievement. It gave a young gay kid — a lot of young gay kids — something to fight for. And it put it in a, helped us formulate the argument for why we should be fighting.

It was our World War II. Without a doubt. No — when my dad talks about his experience in World War II as a merchant marine, it's exactly like my experience in ACT UP. It's exactly like losing — the people I lost, the lives, the friends; the kind of courage; the standing up, the fighting. So it was my World War II.

And its biggest disappointment is that — hm, biggest disappointment. I don't think there is a disappointment. I think it — disappointment is that everything else around us has changed so much that we can't still do it today and we can't still get in the streets and create that kind of change today, because of, I think the Republicans and the people in power changed the dynamic on us. So we have to think of new ways to fight. We have to get just as vigilant in finding new ways of getting the message out. Because it's not done. The work is not done.

But I give it all to those people who invented that, for us. Because I don't know where I would have fallen in; I don't know what I would have, and probably not

something as good as where I ended up today, because of it. That gave me a real foundation for doing something in my community with my group, and making friendships and bonds with people that was outside of the realm of sexuality or this or that or the other thing.

Tape II
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And it gave me an appreciation for women that I didn't have. It gave me an appreciation for things, and a kind of dialog and discourse for things that I never had prior to it. So it gave me way more in my life than I ever could have given back in a few arrests.

And I encourage us to keep doing it, and keep finding new ways to invent that wheel for ourselves. For all of us. Because it's a human thing, it's not, it goes beyond the boundaries of gay or lesbian or men or women. It really was a human moment. It was a moment where we all came together, for a like-minded belief, and we fought real hard for a period of time, to change everything.

SS: Okay. Thank you so much.

ME: Oh, you guys are so welcome. Thank you for coming.

SS: Great.

ME: You want to look at a little footage before you go?

SS: Yeah!

ME: Okay, good.

SS: Definitely. Especially on that TV.

ME: Oh, it's going to be, unfortunately it's on my computer, in the back!

SS: Oh!

ME: Yeah, you got to tell me where I can send it to, because I'll send it all over there.