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Interviewee: **Charles King**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Charles King
January 20, 2010

SARAH SCHULMAN: As we start, if you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

CHARLES KING: Sure. My name is Charles King. I turn fifty-five next month, and we are in my offices at Housing Works in Brooklyn, New York.

SS: You're the executive director?

CK: I'm the president and CEO. We've upgraded our titles here.

SS: So where are you from initially, Charles?

CK: I was actually born in Wilmington, Delaware. At the age of two, decided to move to Texas, and moved to New Haven, Connecticut, to go to divinity school.

SS: What did your parents do?

CK: My father was a fundamentalist evangelical minister, missionary, saving the heathen, and my mother was a housewife. We grew up on a five-acre farm.

SS: What church were you raised in?

CK: Independent Baptist. My father thought Jerry Falwell was a liberal.

SS: So when you were growing up in Texas, what was your family's value about community, helping people in trouble?

CK: We had a very strong value of that, but it came out of a very evangelical self-help, "pull yourself by your own bootstraps" kind of mentality. So we were very opposed to anything associated with public welfare, but strongly believed in individual charity that helped people help themselves, I guess would be the best way to describe it.

SS: But when you saw images of Vietnam War protests or Civil Rights Movement on television, how did your family react to that, and do you remember how you felt about it?

CK: Sure. So I was kind of conflicted as a kid, because my parents strongly supported the war. We are very opposed to integration. We were raised to believe that John Kennedy was next to a communist and that Richard Nixon was way, way too liberal. {LAUGHS} So that was kind of the culture. I grew up reading John Birch Society literature, and South Texas was a very strong hotbed of anti-communism. When I was growing up in the late fifties, early sixties, there was a real fear of communists taking over in Mexico and putting the threat right at our border, and so that was kind of our bread and butter.

SS: Was there anything in your upbringing or your religious upbringing that contributed to you being where you are right now?

CK: Oh, sure. You know, it's very funny because I had nine siblings. I was right in the middle. I was the very, very defiant child and didn't even realize until I was a senior in college that I was abused as a child, unlike the rest of my siblings. It was when I was thirty and came out to my father that he sent me a letter telling me that he'd seen that in me when I was five years old and that he'd done his best to beat it out of me and he'd clearly failed at doing that. So being queer, before I even knew that I was queer, made a big difference in who I was. That kind of propelled me out of the community I grew up in, propelled me out of the religious and cultural values that were a part of my life, sort of forced me to find my own way.

In the early years, my engagement in ministry, in helping people, as I look back on it, in the first ten years after I left home, was all about doing my own personal healing by working with marginalized folk, with street people, with abused children, that sort of thing, I think ultimately as a way of healing myself.

SS: So that started in college or in high school?

CK: That actually started my first year in college. I started running a bus outreach program for First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Texas. The church had bought the bus, ostensibly to do bus ministry, but probably more so they could take their high school students on ski trips and things like that. But bus ministry was the justification, and my mentor was the minister of education. He asked me if I would volunteer on it, and we quickly went from bringing in eight to ten white kids from middle-class areas to church, to going into the *barrio* right next to the state penitentiary system, and we were bringing in 150 black and Latino kids. It was actually my first experience at social change, without even realizing what I was getting into, because this was the big proper in East Texas Baptist rule. So the First Baptist Church was the big proper church where all of the elites attended, and, of course, they were mortified at what I was doing, but it was a very difficult thing to fight.

SS: Were there any other gay people in Huntsville, Texas?

CK: To be perfectly honest, I didn't know that I was gay. {LAUGHS} I actually had my first sexual experience. I was working/living at a motor hotel and was seduced by a guest at the hotel, and immediately wrote off to this fundamentalist radio program asking for prayer and counseling because it was clear that there was something very wrong with me and I needed healing.

Some years later, I guess a year after I graduated from college, I was doing street ministry at First Baptist Church in San Antonio, and I started this support group for male prostitutes, male street prostitutes, and it was only in the context of working with them, saying to them, “God made you who you are, God accepts you, God loves you,” that I was able to come to terms with my own sexual orientation.

SS: And that’s when you decided to leave Texas?

CK: No, actually, I didn’t. I was at First Baptist Church in San Antonio for three years, ran this really amazing guerilla street ministry, not the sort of thing that the church would have necessarily signed off on if they really knew what we were doing with it. My mentor there, the minister of counseling – this was a pre-mega-church. This was an 8,000-member congregation and fifteen ministers on the staff. My mentor, who was a renegade, he was my supervisor and let me get away with all kinds of crazy stuff, turned out, was having an affair with the deacon’s wife. So when he got sent out, his whole program was basically dismantled.

Tape I
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I bounced around waiting tables for about six months and then went and spent three years working at Texas Baptist Children’s Home in Austin, Texas, running a relief center for abused and neglected children, which was actually in many ways a wonderful, enriching experience. I had a farmhouse. It had like bedrooms, and I lived there and took in up to ten kids right after they were pulled out of their homes for abuse or neglect. I had a housekeeper come in a half day three days a week. The kids weren’t in school, so we played, took care of the house, cooked, and I tried to make them as happy as possible while they were with me. They could stay with me for up to ninety days.

So I did that for three years and then decided I was ready to – I actually wanted to go into academia and decided to go to divinity school, ended up choosing Yale.

SS: That's a really significant choice. That's like saying, "I want a whole different kind of life."

CK: Yes. No, it was. I guess what I was really frustrated about at the Children's Home was seeing how much you could do with a child in ninety days, to just see the kid totally torn up again by the system, or the kids who should have been reunited with their parents weren't, and the kids who shouldn't have were, and the system just tore children up. At the end of the day, what burned me out on it wasn't seeing abused children; it was seeing abused children get re-abused by the system.

So, yeah, I was headed into academia. That was my goal. I was from South Texas, so I didn't know anything about Ivy Leagues. I thought I was going to this bucolic New England town. It does have the nice town green, but it wasn't the lovely, quaint town that I imagined it to be.

SS: William Sloan Coffin and those types of people, were they on your radar?

CK: No, I'd never heard of any of that, and, as a matter of fact, probably if you'd pigeoned me from a religious perspective, I was Southern Baptist, not independent fundamentalist Baptist, so I'd moved to the mid-right instead of the extreme right. I was pretty radicalized about social issues like homelessness and death penalty and stuff like that, but things like what went on in the early sixties or in the seventies were still in my mind. I hadn't put it together in some compelling way for myself.

That actually happened during my first year of divinity school. I was taking a course on urban ministry, taught by Letty Russell, a Presbyterian liberation theologian who had been a missionary in Korea, and she taught a course on urban ministries that I took. One of the things that you had to do was you had to do some type of organizing project during this yearlong course, and I ended up organizing a rally on the New Haven green—this was Reagan’s first year—against his social service budget cuts. It pulled together the local Central Labor Council, the local Association of Black Clergy, and student groups. Three thousand people came to the rally. It snowed on April fourth. Walter Fauntroy was our keynote speaker. He got blown out to sea. We flew him in with Yale Aviation. {LAUGHS}

Tape I
00:15:00

That experience was what helped sort of define everything for me. It also brought me to the attention of the pastor of Emanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, who in a somewhat deceptive way ended up drafting me to be his assistant minister. So I was then on his staff for three years as the associate minister there.

SS: What was their position about gay people?

CK: Well, it was, I think, as progressive as one might have imagined a black Baptist church at the time. I very much remember when AIDS became an issue in the community, and ultimately when the pastor spoke publicly from the pulpit, his statement, it’s interesting, the first person with AIDS was a female sex worker who we dealt with as a congregation, but it was pretty obvious at the time that it was a disease that was mostly taking out gay men. His position from the pulpit was, “Homosexuality is a sin. We are all sinners. The role of the church is to welcome and heal those who are in

need.” At the time I was actually incredibly gratified that he was making such a progressive statement.

SS: So were you living as a gay man, even if you weren’t out to your congregation?

CK: No. I guess what I had reconciled after, in my experience in San Antonio, was that while God had made me who I was, God accepted as who I was, that didn’t mean that God’s people would do the same. So if I really wanted to live my calling as a minister, then I couldn’t be out. This may sound warped in retrospect, but my view was that as long as I was celibate, that there was nothing hypocritical about me being in the closet. So I wasn’t out to anyone, with the exception of my defiant letter to my father that got me completely ostracized from my family for twenty years.

SS: So you came out to the perpetrator, but you weren’t out to other gay people?

CK: That’s right. That’s right. In fact, I remember organizing this march, and in other dealings there was a gay organization and there were gay people in my dorm at the divinity school, and I was very careful not to associate too closely. I spoke out for gay rights, I supported their participation in the march, but didn’t want them to be too outrageous or cause too much trouble, kind of thing.

SS: Did AIDS challenge you theologically?

CK: AIDS was what actually brought me out. Literally, my first awareness of AIDS was picking up the *New Haven Register* and seeing a headline that was something very much on the order of “Street Prostitute Transmits HIV,” and it actually had a photo of this African American woman. Yale New Haven Hospital clearly

had no concerns about giving up all of her information, and the whole thrust of the story was about how she was knowingly selling sex to innocent men from the suburbs who were then running the risks of transmitting the virus to their even more innocent wives and unborn children back home. She died shortly after that story, and she used to eat in our meal program. The Stroll was right across the street from the church.

So I pleaded with the pastor for us to bury her, and after that, about two dozen men in the congregation who died of AIDS, either active in the congregation or members of families that were a part of the congregation, and every effort was made to keep it secret that the person had died of AIDS. If word got out, family members would spread rumors that their cousin, nephew, son, brother was an IV drug user rather than have it tainted with homosexuality. Typical to a lot of churches, but especially to black evangelical churches, more than half of the men in the choir were gay, and they were clearly part of the scene. It was funny, Pastor [Curtis] Cofield [II] always used to caution me about associating too closely with them because I was single and the congregation might read that the wrong way.

So it actually wasn't until our minister of music was terminally ill that I really was forced to grapple with it, and he'd been ill for a while. I had visited him in his home several times. Everybody knew what was going on, but you didn't talk about it, till I went to see him one day. Every Thursday afternoon I did hospital visits, parishioners at Yale New Haven Hospital, and I went into his room. This is early eighties, '84, I guess, and I went into his room. Clearly wasting syndrome, thrush lining his mouth, he was gaunt, blisters, the whole classic image of somebody dying of AIDS that we really don't

see anymore. He was laying in his bed, his eyes half open, and I went over to him and I said, "Richard, it's Reverend King. Would you like me to pray for you?"

He mumbled something, and I wasn't sure I heard him, and I repeated my question, and then he very clearly said, "It won't do any good."

And I responded, "What do you mean, it won't do any good? Why? When would prayer not do any good?"

And he said, "God's punishing me because I'm a homosexual," and that broke the dam for me.

I said, "That couldn't possibly be true. If that were true, I'd be in the next bed."

He started crying, which then made me start crying. He couldn't even lift his head up from the pillow, and so I just climbed into the bed and took him into my arms, and we prayed together. We cried together.

I rode back to the church and went into the pastor's office and said, "Pastor Cofield, I just came from visiting Richard in the hospital. I need to start talking about AIDS, and the only way I can do that is come out and tell you that I'm a gay man, and I'm going to tender my resignation."

Tape I
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Pastor Cofield was actually very much a father to me. He wasn't shocked at the news that I was gay. Again, he'd kind of figured it out, and that's why he was steering me away from associations. He actually made an amazingly generous offer. He offered to go with me to the Board of Deacons and ask them to affirm me. I was ordained at that church, and I had only been ordained because he had insisted on ordaining me so that I would have what he called black walking papers. It sort of seals

you. Your ordination goes with you for the rest of your life. So I was the first, and I'm sure still, the only white person ever ordained by the Connecticut Missionary Baptist Convention. It was highly controversial for them to ordain me and even more controversial when the church chose to put me on salary, as opposed to a number of other candidates, all of whom were African American. So when Pastor Cofield offered to go to Deacons with me, my response was, "Look, it was one thing going to bat for me because I was white. At least then people knew what they were getting into. It would be completely unfair to the church to do this afterwards."

So he negotiated a deal with me. He asked me to stay at the church for another six months and he asked me to start an AIDS ministry while I was there. During my last six months, and in exchange for my agreement to do that, he offered me the pulpit at the main service the first Sunday in June to give a sermon on AIDS and come out to the congregation, which was just an amazing thing. The Baptist church, unlike other Christian denominations, only celebrates what we call the Lord's Supper, others call the Eucharist, the first Sunday of the month. So that is the Sunday when the church is just jam-packed, and, of course, June is absolutely *the* best month. The church is only fuller on Easter Sunday than it would be on June. So it was just incredibly generous of him to give me the pulpit to do something as controversial as that.

So I served at the church through June, and then I went and drove. Well, I went to tractor-trailer school, but the Reagan deregulation had kind of killed jobs in the tractor-trailer industry, so I drove buses for a year.

SS: In New Haven?

CK: Out of New Haven, a lot of Atlantic City, but drove charter up and down the East Coast for a year until I decided to go to law school.

SS: So then you had to start the process of having sex and relationships and connecting with other gay people right at the hot point of the AIDS crisis.

CK: Exactly.

SS: How did you deal with that?

CK: Well, I'm probably not the most socially adept person anyway. I should say that actually during my last year, I actually kind of had fallen in love with this guy who was struggling with his own sexual orientation. Blond-haired kid, grew up in New Jersey. He actually ended up converting to Orthodox Judaism and made *aliyah*, moved to Israel and married an Orthodox Israeli woman as a way to save himself from me, I guess. {LAUGHS} So what can I say? So that was my first stab at a relationship. It was emotionally very intense and incredibly painful, and I only had one short relationship after that until I moved to New York.

I first came to New York somewhat egotistical about law school. I decided I was going to go to law school, but I only applied to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and NYU. To this day, I don't forgive NYU for rejecting me. All the others were kind enough to wait-list me. But Cardozo here in New York, Yeshiva University's law school, was a fairly new school. I think they were only fifteen years old at the time. So they used to go around and buy up wait lists from the premium schools, and out of the blue I get a call from the dean of admissions at Cardozo, offering me a full scholarship if I would come there, which I did.

I then had another very tortured relationship with a man who ultimately decided he was straight. He was terrified he was going to flunk out of law school, and I was desperately in love with him, so I tutored him every night. We had all the same classes. Even with getting a very bad grade in legal writing, I came in second in the class and he came in third. So my bad grade in legal writing was because I had refused to – we had a legal writing instructor who was determined to teach us that lawyers are hired guns, and so he loved putting us on the bad side of assignments. So I did all the elements of the assignment, but basically writing a memo about why I wouldn't represent this particular client. We got kind of into a head-butting, so he refused to give me a grade, and I argued that I had completed all the elements of the assignment and that if he didn't like the way I'd done the job, he should just give me an "F." He insisted that I hadn't done the assignment, he would give me an incomplete, and the result of that would be, of course, that I would get an incomplete for the course, which would mean that I couldn't graduate. So this was his "I've got the big club."

The school didn't have a grievance process, so I started fomenting, which brought me to the attention of the dean, a really wonderful man, who granted my grievance. I got an "F" for the assignment, ended up with a "B-plus" or something like that for the course, and the dean hired me to work for him for the rest of the school year. He was very good friends with the dean of admissions at Yale.

I was off in Tennessee clerking at Tennessee Valley Authority, and I get a call from the dean of admissions at Yale asking me if I'd be interested in transferring. So I ended up back in New Haven to complete law school, but summering in New York, and that's actually when I got involved in ACT UP, was my first summer in New York.

Tape I
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SS: What year was that?

CK: Gosh, would have been ACT UP's second year?

SS: '88?

CK: Probably, yeah. Probably '88.

SS: Had you ever had any contact with gay liberation or been in a gay meeting or organization?

CK: No. Actually, in law school at Cardozo was when I started being very out, and it was very funny because it was this gay Baptist minister. I always used to joke to the dean that if they didn't treat me right, I was going to go get a cross and stand on it in front of the school.

There was a gay group there, and that was the first gay group I ever joined, and it was this very competing – there was this more conservative orthodox students' group that would bring in rabbis to give lectures on the evils of homosexuality, and we would do our own lectures on gay rights and liberation.

Then, like I say, I was in this relationship with this guy who ended up deciding he wanted to be straight. I lived right across the street from the Pink Pussycat on West Fourth Street. What's the piano bar down the street, the Monster?

SS: The Monster.

CK: The Monster. That or there was a jazz bar, 55 Club, right next to—

SS: Marie's Crisis, right?

CK: Yes. So that was my sticking my toe in the water. I guess I marched. I can't remember whether it was in Washington or just the Gay Pride march in New York that I marched the first time, while I was in Yale law school, and I went with the Yale

LGBT group. At the time, the big fight was whether or not we recognized B.

{LAUGHS} So that was kind of my exposure. I went with ACT UP. I'm trying to sort this out. I got involved in ACT UP. I was at the anniversary demonstration at City Hall.

SS: Did you go by yourself or did you go with a friend?

CK: That summer, I started coming to ACT UP meetings. Then later I went to New Orleans for the convention, and that was actually sort of another big conversion experience. I can't quite fix whether that was one summer or two summers, but I do remember that New Orleans was—

SS: That was the Democratic Convention?

CK: The Republican Convention. It was where Bush's – Bush and Quayle. I remember getting spit on in the face. I remember spray painting in the fountain in the French Quarter, a kiss-in in front of the cathedral, going to our first demonstration at seven o'clock in the morning at a pharmaceutical, coming back, having a beer and beignets and then going and doing kiss-in at the cathedral. It was just like a wild, wild time. We were staying in this beautiful apartment in the French Quarter, and we were sleeping like five people to a bed and that sort of thing.

It was actually New Orleans that got me engaged in homelessness and AIDS, because there were two homeless guys who ran around with us doing everything with us, and so at the end of the week confided that they were homeless and they both had AIDS and wanted to come back to New York with us.

SS: We have to change the tape.

SS: So prior to meeting these two guys, were you aware at all of AIDS and homelessness?

CK: I guess I was primed for it, because that summer I remember walking down like Sixth Avenue and seeing homeless people sitting with signs that said “I’m homeless, with AIDS. Please help,” and I always dropped a buck in their can and walked on, but I hadn’t really, really thought about it. So it wasn’t until, when these guys said, “Can we come back with you?” Of course we could do anything back then, so we said, “But of course.” We passed the hat, raised the money to get them tickets, brought them back to New York, only to very quickly discover that there was a two-tiered system here in New York that was deliberately intended to keep homeless people out of systems of care for people with AIDS, and that there were other people who were more aware than I, people like Eric Sawyer and Rich Jackman and other folk who had actually that very month had the first meeting of what was called—ACT UP wasn’t known for short names then—the Committee to Demand Housing Now for Homeless People with AIDS and HIV.

When I got back with these guys, I very quickly found out about this committee and joined them, and even though I was going to school in New Haven, started participating in there with them. Ginny Shubert had that very same month started the AIDS Project at the Coalition for the Homeless, filed *Mixon versus Grinker*, which was a landmark case on behalf of homeless people who are living with AIDS and HIV. I guess it was in October that she got an injunction on behalf of one of the named plaintiffs, ordering that he be moved from the city shelter system to an SRO. The city appealed and got the injunction stayed. This was actually our first action. We took over William Grinker’s office—he was the commissioner of HRA—handcuffed ourselves to

his desk, demanding that he house a gentleman by the name of Wayne Phillips, and we got him housed. So we had a quick win.

Our second action was Black Friday, where we did a homelessness and AIDS sleep-in in the Donald Trump Tower. We covered ourselves with sheets that were painted “Homeless with AIDS.” That launched my engagement in the issue. I specifically sought out a job that would allow me to work on homelessness and AIDS, ultimately got hired to work for Ginny on the AIDS Project, didn’t even bother to study for the bar because I was going out, getting arrested, but passed the bar, decided I didn’t want to be an officer of the court, refused to pay back my student loans, and even more foolishly refused to allow Yale to pay back my student loans for me. By then I was in it full bore. It was the whole of my life at that point, much as it was for so many people who were involved in ACT UP.

I graduated in ’89. Two days after I graduated, I had moved to New York and was deep in – I was essentially case-managing a group of eight to twelve plaintiffs in the lawsuit, organizing them, and doing ACT UP sixty hours a week. Actually, that was how I met Keith, who was really the first true relationship that I’d had. These two painful relationships with straight guys and—

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: Was Keith already in ACT UP?

CK: Keith was in ACT UP.

SS: We’re talking about Keith Cylar, just for the record.

CK: Yes. And nobody gets his name right because it’s spelled with a C, C-y-l-a-r.

So the way I met him was that the government was sponsoring the first-ever Minorities and AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C., and I was really determined to get some homeless people to that conference and get them a speaking venue at the conference. The coalition didn't have any money, and the person who ran the coalition at the time, he had started the AIDS Project because he thought it would be a real moneymaker and bring lots of grants and individual support, and discovered to his chagrin that probably only pedophiles were lower on popularity polls than homeless people with AIDS/HIV. So they weren't going to give me any money to do this.

So I wanted to go to the floor of ACT UP to ask for support. The Housing Committee endorsed it, but the politics of ACT UP, the Housing Committee was not – we weren't like Treatment and Data. {LAUGHS}

SS: Why not? Can you explain that?

CK: Well, yeah, because I mean, ACT UP had its own fascinating politics. You had the Peter Staleys of the world, who came from places of tremendous privilege, and AIDS had outed them and taken away their privilege, and for them it was all about drugs into bodies, and that was the chant, "Drugs into bodies," or the slogan. So for us to muck this up worrying about homeless people was just, "What's that got to do with AIDS? We can't solve all the problems of the world." There was sort of no real appreciation by probably a minority but a powerful minority within ACT UP of the socioeconomic factors that were really drivers of the epidemic. It wasn't so much sexual. It never was about sexual orientation. It was all about social and economic factors, sexual orientation just being another one of those factors, discrimination, marginalization, and what that does to people.

So Housing Committee, we were a hot, active committee. That year, '89, June of '89 to '90, I got arrested over forty times, so we were—

SS: Doing what?

CK: I like to give us credit. We didn't have Peter Staley's access to giant condoms for Jesse Helms' house, but we did drive around the Lower East Side one Sunday night and pick up abandoned furniture, furniture that had been set out, and we filled a sixteen-foot truck with couches. My favorite find—I personally found it—was a toilet, all of these things. We drove to 100 Gold Street, where HPD was headquartered, and we unloaded the furniture, nine o'clock, as people were streaming in for work. We unloaded all the furniture, had a big demonstration. HPD was refusing to allow any of their in rem inventory to be used for housing for people with AIDS. Basically, the idea was, "We have the furniture. Where's the apartments?" kind of thing. So we actually tried to deliver the furniture, got it all jammed up in the revolving doors, and then we had to safeguard our assets, so we handcuffed ourselves to our furniture trapped in the revolving doors. That's actually, to this day, one of my favorite arrests. There I was, sitting handcuffed to a toilet. {LAUGHS}

SS: Were these arrests processed by the ACT UP legal team?

Tape II
00:10:00

CK: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It was completely willy-nilly. We were just constantly – literally, it was we were going to jail once a week kind of thing. We were also doing all of the other ACT UP stuff.

But, anyway, Majority Action, which was a committee of people of color within ACT UP, had much more clout than Housing. They were probably disdained as much as Housing, but they always had the white guilt factor. So I decided that we

needed to go to Majority Action and get their support for this trip. I remember going to that meeting. I had two of my clients with me. We presented on why we needed to go and why we needed their support. And this big black guy gets up and starts challenging my cred, like, “Who’s this white guy coming to us, and what’s he doing here?” The committee was split, and, ultimately, they made a very Solomon-like decision. They decided that they would support going to the floor of ACT UP asking for the money, on the condition that Keith and I work on organizing this trip together. So that’s how we started working together. I didn’t realize that he was a coke addict at the time. The floor gave us a little bit of money, not much.

Lei Chou actually was then at – what’s the design school on Astor Place?

SS: Cooper [Union].

CK: Cooper. Gave us his whole meal allowance for school, and that’s what paid for the trip.

Going down on the train on Sunday, I remember Keith had stayed up all night doing coke while Xeroxing all of these materials, and we had this huge box of materials that fell apart on the platform. So the train was pulling out of the station, Keith jumps in with my clients and leaves me, says, “Catch the next train. Bring all of our stuff.” So I had to go dig through the garbage to find boxes, re-box everything, get it down there.

We got there, and this woman—oh, her name just went out of my head and I feel so bad—she was so angry at me because I insisted that she write out her story. I had gotten her on a women’s panel. She wrote out her story, and it was such a powerful story because she’d lost her children to the Children’s Protective Services, three children.

Her youngest daughter was named Siouxchie. Her youngest daughter was positive. First it was that she couldn't get her children back till HRA gave her allowance for an apartment big enough, and then HRA wouldn't give her—Phyllis Sharpe. HRA wouldn't give her the apartment until she had custody of the children. Finally got through all of that, got her the apartment, but Children's Protective Services would not give her her youngest daughter Siouxchie back, because she didn't have a crib, and HRA wouldn't give her a crib until she had the baby. It was this horrible Catch 22, and she was still right in the middle of not being able to be reunited with her daughter.

So she wrote the most powerful fifteen-minute speech, even if she was mad at me that I made her write it all out, was on this panel and so moved people that the organizers of the panel set it up for her to give her speech again two more times to packed rooms. Then she and Keith got asked on *Nightline* and were just amazing.

Tape II
00:15:00

So it turned out to be an amazingly successful action. I think Keith gained respect for me. I gained respect for him. I still harbored a grudge. He was going to stay with family in Virginia, and he was living at the time just off of Gramercy Park, and it was a very fortunate thing that he didn't come straight home, because while he was in Virginia, there was a manhole explosion that blew out the windows on his apartment, filled it with asbestos, just really horrible.

He actually showed up at my office at the Coalition for the Homeless, and he hadn't been diagnosed at the time. I'm sure he knew his status, but he hadn't been diagnosed at the time. So he comes into my office and tells me he's homeless, asks me for housing, and so I said, "Well, do you have AIDS?"

He says, "Well, I've never been tested."

I said, "Well, unless you have AIDS, you're not eligible for housing," and I handed him the standard Coalition for the Homeless shelter referral form, which I still feel guilty about. It was like a really, really mean thing for me to do. But I remember just a few days later was the Wall Street action where Peter Staley and folks went in and stopped Wall Street, and we were marching around out front, and all of a sudden, there's Keith with his black boots marching beside me, and he's like, "Con Ed had to put me up, and I got a job with the Minority AIDS Task Force." And he's just behind me, like just all up and hip.

The very next ACT UP meeting, I have no clue what the issue was. I have no clue what it was, but they needed somebody to write a fact sheet, and you know how ACT UP would call. ACT UP was like going to church, and they were constantly calling for people to come forward to do something. So they called for a volunteer to work on the fact sheet, or volunteers to work on the fact sheet. I remember I was the only person to raise my hand. I'm forgetting which moderator it was, but one of them said, "Okay, we have Charles King. Do we have someone else to work on the fact sheet?" Keith's hand went up. I was always over here in the back of the room, and he was right here in the back of the room. His hand went up. So said, "Okay, Keith Cylar is going to work on the fact sheet. Do we have anybody else to work on the fact sheet?" And Keith says, "I think two is quite enough to do this fact sheet."

So he comes over to me about five minutes later and says, "I think we should go ahead and knock this out right away. You want to come over to my place and do it?" He'd been put up at this beautiful apartment on Twenty-Third Street that Con Ed was paying for for six months.

So I said, "Sure." We walked over to his place, and I sit down on the couch and pull out my note pad out of my book pad, and the next thing you know he's kissing me and seduced me, and that was it. We were partners for life. {LAUGHS} So that was a digression.

SS: That's a beautiful digression.

CK: So that's how I met him.

SS: Can I ask you a couple questions about some things you mentioned?

CK: Sure. Sure.

SS: First of all, what became of Phyllis Sharpe?

CK: Ultimately she died of AIDS, but she was with us. She came over to Housing Works with us. We were able to help her get a really, really beautiful apartment in the Bronx, a three-bedroom apartment. I used to go over there every year for Thanksgiving dinner. She would make a big Thanksgiving dinner. She was in an abusive relationship with this Trinidadian guy, but I give him points because he could do the best pickled pig feet in the world. She went through our job-training program, worked at our bookstore for a while. I actually just a couple of months ago received a call from one of her daughters who wants to have dinner with me. Siouxchie, the youngest one, is still alive, doing well. The older one, who then raised Siouxchie after her mother died, wants to have me over for dinner with her and Siouxchie. So I'm very much looking forward to that. Just having this conversation is bringing back a lot of memories.

SS: Because we have a lot of footage of Phyllis. We just didn't know what had become of her.

CK: Okay.

SS: I want to ask you kind of a big question, and this goes back to the Trump action. This was right at the height of gentrification, and the city was giving all this money to luxury developers at the same time that they were fighting any effort to try to get housing for homeless people with AIDS. Yet when you ask people about the role of gay men in gentrification, there's a profound perception that white gay men at least were major players in advancing gentrification. Yet you have ACT UP, or at least the housing component of ACT UP, fighting the consequences of gentrification. How do you understand the role of gay men in creating gentrification and homelessness?

CK: First of all, I think in many respects gentrification is an organic process. What makes it perverse is the incentives that favor it. It's like how forests regenerate, or anything else. Urban communities go through cycles of vitalization, revitalization, and then falling apart and people bringing those communities back to life. There's nothing inherently right or wrong about it. It just is. What becomes inherently wrong in sort of the natural cycle is if you introduce some foreign species that is able to overtake what is a more organic process. So the idea of gay men moving into a particular neighborhood, say, whether it's Williamsburg or now it's even as far out as East New York, and being a part of that gentrification, I see as reasonably organic. What disrupts it is these huge infusions of capital supported by government that end up tearing apart the organic process and just ripping communities up.

So it's interesting. We opened a facility in Harlem, and I moved there just a year ago, and it's kind of an amazing thing because I remember when Central Harlem was overwhelmingly, overwhelmingly black. If you get off the train during rush hour in the evening now at 125th Street, it's like what 90th Street used to be. There's probably more white people getting off the train, the northbound train, than there are African Americans. Some of that is probably organic and some of it is the infusion of capital from government through tax credits or whatever that allow for these luxury housing units. So I'm on 130th Street between Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell. The block we're on, we own three brownstones, and otherwise it's a typical Harlem brownstone street. There's probably three or four white families who've moved on the block. I don't see that as the disruptive force to the neighborhood, and we're right across from the projects. What's the disruptive force is right on the corner is a luxury high-rise. Right down the block is another luxury high-rise, then there's two luxury high-rises across the avenue, and that's what ends up changing the complexion of the neighborhood. I was actually kind of gratified to see that the luxury auto dealership failed. {LAUGHTER}

SS: But in terms of the conflicts within ACT UP about poor people and poverty, I mean—

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CK: So part of my problem with answering that is I never thought that ACT UP itself really was about poor people and poverty. ACT UP, at its core, was gay men and their allies fighting for their lives. I think there were more conscious and politicized people within ACT UP who saw the relationship to poverty and classism and racism, where I think the core of ACT UP saw homophobia, and that was all they saw, and they never saw the other connection. At best, it was the sort of thing that Larry

Kramer might give lip service to, but really not even that. The number of times Larry went to the floor and made some, if not racist, at least racially insensitive statement, often referring to Majority Action or to the Housing Committee, that I think ACT UP was clueless about that. So, yeah, in terms of socioeconomic issues, I don't see that as being ACT UP's—really on its radar screen.

So are white gay men conscious of the rape and pillage that they purvey on communities? Well, hell, no. And, in fact, I actually gave a speech World AIDS Day two years ago at the Memorial Grove in San Francisco where I called the LGBT community to account, because I really truly believe that the LGBT community officially abandoned AIDS with Sullivan's article in the *New York Times*, and the reason they abandoned it was for them it was over. It was now a black disease, not their disease. You can almost see the mark of that article and sort of the handoff, "This is no longer our problem. We're going to move on to gay marriage and other things that pull us in towards the center," with the presumption that everybody wants to be in the center instead of at the margins.

SS: I agree. Thank you, Charles.

CK: Sure. {LAUGHTER}

SS: So let's get back to the founding of Housing Works. So, because you and Keith had a productive relationship in which you were working together with the same goals, and, of course, when people are in relationships, they're always talking about things and making plans and all that. Do you think that the relationship contributed to the conceptualization of Housing Works?

CK: There was no question. So there were a lot of things that went into Housing Works. There was no question. I think the conceptualization of Housing Works would have happened. I don't know if its actualization would have happened if we hadn't been in a relationship. There was this whole thing at the time, AIDS organizations wanted absolutely nothing to do with homeless people. The whole reason Bailey House was founded was because GMHC didn't want to touch homeless people. And Bailey House wouldn't take homeless people who were using drugs. I can't remember whether it was 120 days, 90 days, something like that, that you had to prove sobriety to get admitted into Bailey House.

And homeless organizations wanted absolutely nothing to do with people with AIDS. I went to my first board meeting at the Coalition for the Homeless, the National Coalition for the Homeless, and there was this Catholic sister on the board. After Ginny and I had made our presentation about the AIDS Project, she gets up and makes some remark about how, "Well, I'm fine if we have to take this project on, but I think we should be very careful to make clear that we recognize that these people did something wrong to get infected. Otherwise, we'll lose all of our support." {LAUGHS}

Tape II
00:30:00

I got up, not being recognized, and I was very much in ACT UP mode. I got up and I said, "Well, actually, I think the majority of people get AIDS by having sex, which is a very natural human thing that at least most of us in this room engage in," getting in my little dig.

So homeless organizations didn't want to touch people with AIDS, and then you had this whole city policy that had a double standard where if you were

homeless, you had to prove you had an AIDS diagnosis to get services, as opposed to house people who only had to show they had an HIV-related condition.

Mixon versus Grinker, which we ultimately lost at the Court of Appeals in '95, I guess it was, but, really, that case is responsible for all of the AIDS housing that exists in New York City because as it winded its way through the courts, the city and state kept putting more resources on the table to make the case go away. Koch had come out with a plan in response to a court order in *Mixon versus Grinker*. His plan was literally they were going to segregate the public shelter system and have people with AIDS, like Fort Washington Armory. The idea was to run a curtain down the middle of this huge armory, and have people with AIDS on one side and everybody else on the other. Like, oh, boy, that's going to really help folk.

So we wrote position papers on this, Ginny did, actually, giving credit where credit's due. We wrote position papers on this and ended up through Dennis DeLeon, who was at the time David Dinkins' deputy borough president, getting to—

SS: Who just passed away.

CK: Yes. Then candidate Dinkins. Our position papers, which he adopted as part of his platform, which was an apartment with a private bathroom for everybody who is HIV-positive, it was like the ideal position paper, and he made it a part of his platform. They were going to move forward with the Koch plan, and, again through Dennis, we persuaded Dinkins to implore Koch to delay implementation and allow him to be inaugurated. But then the day after his inauguration, the Dinkins administration endorsed the Koch plan.

Mixon versus Grinker came to a hearing with testimony, first of many hearings in the case, and his name escapes me, but an HIV-positive gay man was deputy commissioner at HRA, testified that homeless people with AIDS were all better off in the mass congregated shelter system because they were all either mentally ill or chronically chemically dependent, and in the shelter system they would be less of a menace to themselves and others.

I had had a client actually beaten to death by the guards and left in the snow in January of that year. So this was in February. In January, because HRA guards had seen this man showering. He went in the shower after midnight so no one would see him because he had KS lesions. They beat him and threw him out naked into the street. He was found four or five hours after he'd been laying out there in the freezing. It's right across the street from St. Luke's, from the hospital emergency room. He never came out of his coma.

So I'm listening to this testimony, and we just happened to have a Housing Committee meeting that night, and we were all just totally disheartened. I said to the group, "Look, if we're going to get the people we care about housed, we've got to come up with a way to do it ourselves." And that was it. It was, by the end of the meeting, we'd even come up with the name Housing Works. We were good to go. It took us another five months to write our mission statement and bylaws, because, of course, typical ACT UP, we had to process everything.

Tape II
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SS: Who were these people, these ACT UP members who started Housing Works?

CK: So, Keith was there. Eric Sawyer was there. Eric Galloway was there. Blanking on the guy whose apartment we met in, and then you may remember this Israeli guy whose parents were in jewelry. He ended up moving to San Francisco.

SS: Oh, yes. G'dali [Braverman].

CK: G'dali, yes, was there. That was kind of the crew, and there were probably maybe ten of us who were like diehards. Richard Jackman. That was kind of the crew.

So we were off and running. I came in the next day and said, "Well, Ginny, we're starting Housing Works, so I'm going to be leaving the AIDS Project soon."

And she said, "Well, no, you're not, because I'm coming with you," and that's how we got our start.

SS: Change tapes.

SS: So you guys decided to form Housing Works, because you decided that you were going to start providing housing. So what was the first step?

CK: Well, other than the gory endless fights over what the structure was going to be, what our mission statement was, our mission statement ended up being two pages long, if you can imagine. Other than all of that, our first step was to use court, the hearing process, to basically throw down the gauntlet and issue the city a challenge, and basically it was that if housing active drug users is so difficult give us a contract, and we want written in our contract a requirement that at least 50 percent of the people we house be people who are actively using drugs or people who are mentally ill. So the judge ordered them to invite us to participate in the process. We put in a proposal. We were

awarded it. It was for forty units, twenty scattered site apartments in Lower Manhattan and twenty in Brooklyn. As I like to say, it was the first housing contract in the nation that required us to keep 50 percent of our residents using drugs at all times. {LAUGHS}

SS: Why were you able to successfully house active drug users when the city could never do it?

CK: The city had never tried. There was always an assumption, broadly in the field of supportive housing, that drug users were unhousable, and they had to hit bottom, get cleaned up, and then you could help them. That was the philosophy. Of course, our slogan, which was with the needle exchange folks, was dead addicts don't recover. The whole name, Housing Works, represented the idea that before somebody can deal with addiction, with mental illness, with medical problems, anything else going on, they needed a safe, secure place to live, that that was the threshold to anything else that anybody might need. Now there's actually really great research that bears that out, but to us it was just very much common sense that people couldn't see because of their prejudice against drug users.

I think that's actually where Keith added in so many ways his greatest contribution to Housing Works, because not only was he out, by the time we started Housing Works, he had been tested and actually had an AIDS diagnosis, but he was very open about the fact that he was a drug addict, and, in fact, he went into drug treatment. I kind of twisted his arm, and he went into drug treatment right before we actually officially opened Housing Works for business, but probably six months later had relapsed, and there was at no point during the time that he was the co-CEO of Housing Works that he was still using drugs, and he didn't hide it. He used that experience to help

us understand what we needed to do if we were going to serve people who were active drugs users.

SS: Can you give a concrete example of some kind of information?

CK: So, yes, I remember wanting to get somebody into detox, and Keith's going and buying the guy some heroin so that he could get a last—because Beth Israel wasn't admitting him that day, and rather than losing him to the streets, buying him some heroin so that he could calm his nerves to stick around for this long enough to get into treatment. Supporting people's drug use when they were dying and saying, "You know what? Not only should we not be trying to take their drugs away from them, we should be helping them get them. What's the point if somebody's dying? If they want to smoke crack, let them smoke crack. Help them die as well as they can. Help them die happy. Help them die with whatever they need."

Appreciating the whole business of drugs and the players and the problems getting caught up with loan sharks, because Keith, himself, had been caught up with loan sharks. So he just had a real understanding for the depths of that. And also helping us to recognize the fact that somebody was addicted didn't mean they couldn't contribute. There were days when Keith was totally dysfunctional and couldn't come into work, but when he was on, he was on, and he made an amazing contribution to the organization. That always stood as this powerful thing for us, that we weren't ashamed of who we served, we weren't ashamed of who we were. It was a part of creating what we then called and still call a healing community that recognizes that every single one of us comes to this experience in need of healing. It's kind of like I was telling you earlier about my childhood and the work that I did after and recognizing that my helping abused

Tape III
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children, yes, I wanted to heal them, but if I wanted to heal them, I had to admit that doing that transaction was healing for me.

SS: They were healing you.

CK: They were healing me. Exactly. It was amazing. We held a service of prayer last night for the healing of Haiti, and one of our staff, clinical director in our Women's Health Center, came up to me afterwards in Haitian, and she was expressing to me just how much healing and support she had gotten from the clients. I said to her, "You see, this is what I tell you all the time." We always come to this, like we're the ones to help and heal, and we completely forget that there are human beings on the other side of this transaction who have just as much capacity as any one of us to offer healing. I think that was what Keith's – Keith really lived in a big way that helped all of us learn.

SS: So when you started to get city contracts, when you started to actually create housing for people with AIDS, you became a different person because now you're into management. You're managing.

CK: Sure.

SS: How did that affect you?

CK: Well, first of all, I do have to tell you one key story to Housing Works.

SS: Tell me.

CK: David Fish was a realist painter who was involved in ACT UP, and I came to know him really well because he had a loft right across from HRA headquarters. In fact, I had smuggled him into the Fort Washington shelter so he could do a painting called "Homelessness and AIDS" that we still have. So when we were starting Housing

Works, he agreed to help us raise funds, and we had no real resource. We sold sodas at Gay Pride and raised \$500. {LAUGHS} So, you can't just go get a city contract, because you've got to lay out money. You have to have significant money. So David calls me up one day in June and he says, "I'll tell you what, Charles. I think I've got our money to start Housing Works."

So I was like, "Okay, what's this?"

And he says, "I have a friend who's a sculptor, and her husband was convicted of federal tax fraud, and they want to keep him out of jail. She said they've got to come up with the most horrible community service that anybody could think of, and so I suggested to her that we have him work with homeless people living with AIDS."

So Ginny and I talked about it. We agreed that we would sponsor his community service. I remember driving around in a limousine with a chauffeur, giving this guy a tour of homelessness in AIDS, going off the platform in the Broadway Lafayette station into the tunnel to see homeless people, into the salt mines to see homeless youths, the transgender folk in the meatpacking district, and I gave him a tour of Fort Washington shelter and said, "This is what you're going to be working with. If you're willing to do it, we'll sponsor you."

Well, this guy was desperate. Allen. What was his name? Rhonda Rollenshire was the wife, and Joe Allen. So I then partnered him with a couple, both addicted to crack, both severely mentally ill, and they were living in this horrible HPD [Department of Housing Preservation & Development] building that had no locks on the doors. Ultimately, the ceiling collapsed on her. They slept on a bare mattress on the floor, and the collapsed ceiling put her in the hospital for the last time. But I had him

buddy this couple and had to stay with them for four hours every Friday. It worked. After two months, he came to me, said he can't do this anymore, "I'm not helping anybody. I want to help you do what you want to do, and I want to get out of doing this what I'm doing."

So I said, "Well, I told you about Housing Works." I hit him up for \$50,000.

He said, "Yeah, but I want to do more." I wasn't quite getting that he wanted to be a completely different assignment, that this really was the most horrible assignment. So I was sort of being a little bit stupid, probably a little bit on purpose and probably a little bit just being dense. He says, "So what else can I do?" {LAUGHS}

And I said, "Well, \$50,000 is enough for us to open an office and get started, but we've got this government contract, and you've got to lay out the money in advance. Can you give us another \$50,000?"

He says, "You'll get that check next month. What else can I do?"

So I said, "Well, Joe, I can't put you on the board, because you're a felon, but I've never started an organization. I've never done anything like this before. I don't even have an office."

He said, "You don't have an office? Come with me." Marches me over to his wife's sculpture loft studio, which is this big loft on Fifth Avenue and 14th Street, takes me over there, says, "Honey, this is Charles. He's the one who kept me out of jail. Would you mind moving up to the house for a few months and let Charles have your office?"

So all of a sudden I had this office and all the rest of this, and we were off and running. Actually, that gets back to your question, because that was my first experience at what it takes to fundraise and start administering a program.

I think the deepest core issue that has continued to be a part of Housing Works was realizing that we had gone from being these pure activists who could do no wrong. We were always on the side of right and justice, to even back then realizing that we were becoming part of an industry. So the biggest challenge for us at that moment was how do you keep yourself honest. So one of the things we very quickly decided was that a third of our board had to be consumers elected by consumers, but that also led to a commitment in our mission statement that we were going to be creating jobs so people with AIDS, and especially homeless people with AIDS, should become a part of the job creation.

I'd actually done a little bit. Part of my job at Emanuel Baptist was administrator, so I was aware, more or less, with bookkeeping and that kind of thing, but it was more with how you integrate people, and we didn't like to fire anyone early on. I was always the person who had to be the bad guy and fire people because I was the only one who was nasty enough to do it. Keith and Ginny could never bring themselves to fire somebody. But, really, it was how do we keep the organization true to the values that the Housing Committee had established that gave us the biggest bother, that and putting in the kind of financial systems that would keep an organization from falling into chaos. I think those were the two biggest.

SS: So where are you at now? How many housing units do you administer?

CK: Well, we were at one time the largest provider of housing in New York City. We had an inventory of over 350 apartments, and we were adding 100 more. That's when we got into our little pissing match with Giuliani. We sued the administration over their plans to eliminate the Division of AIDS Services. We won that lawsuit, but they put us through hell. They yanked six and a half million dollars in contracts, so we pretty much lost all of our housing. However, we have continued to grow in many other ways, in large measure thanks to a decision we fell into accidentally, but very early on became committed to being entrepreneurial and as independent as we could from government contracts as a way of being able to maintain our advocacy voice. So today, we ended up last year with revenues of 58 million dollars. We have over 500 people employed at any given time. We're serving about 2,500 clients on a very, very deep level. We're providing them with primary care, intensive case management, psychosocial services, job training, legal services, so just a comprehensive integrated care system.

Tape III
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We only have an inventory now—we've built our inventory of housing now back up to maybe 170 units. What's different about this is we own the lion's share of our housing units, instead of pissing away rent money to private landlords, and so that's a positive thing. But we've always regretted that we haven't been able to build housing that keeps apace with our consumer base. I'm very proud of the fact that for many years, at one point graduates of our job training programs, so all formerly homeless people with AIDS, represented over a third of our staff. As we've moved more and more into healthcare and had to hire a lot more doctors and medical professionals, they still remain 25 percent of our staff.

SS: So you provide healthcare right here on location?

CK: Oh yeah. Right down in the lower level of this building is our Women's Health Center. We have a three-chair dental clinic. We have comprehensive primary-care center as well as AIDS Adult Healthcare. We have four centers, two of which are co-located with housing, two of which are freestanding. We'll probably open a fifth center in the Bronx. We're still very true to our mission. Our clientele is people with AIDS, people at risk of AIDS, who other organizations either cannot or won't serve.

SS: So does the city rely on you to provide this service? How have things changed in terms of city policy?

CK: Look, Bloomberg is Giuliani with a nice face, not a pretty face, but he's not as hateful in his public manner, but in terms of a serious commitment to AIDS, ranks no better. In terms of his view of poor people, of people who are addicted, it's pretty much a continuation of the same. After the change in administrations, the city decided to settle our suit against it for the loss of contracts. We got a five-million-dollar settlement, which significantly advances us as an organization. And we now have contracts with the city, not nearly to the scale that we once did. I would say that in the care system we're clearly an indispensable component, and certainly when it comes to state and federal advocacy that the city wants to see happen, they rely on us hugely to be the radical outsiders who are making the case. But let's say we're not fans of theirs and they're not fans of ours.

World AIDS Day this last year, this last December, a group of us went to jail for blocking entrance to the mayor's World AIDS Day reception at Gracie Mansion, and took me back to the Dinkins days because, of course, we spent many more hours in

jail than we would have for another arrest, simply because we had tweaked the mayor. So, it's the same old same old; we're just in a different place. We're the largest AIDS organization in town, and we have really one of the few direct action voices still in town around HIV. Not the only. New York City AIDS Housing Network is still fighting the good fight. There's a very tiny ACT UP that moves more around international concerns than what's happening here in the city. But we're a different kind of force to be reckoned with now, I guess, than we were before.

SS: I only have two more questions.

CK: Sure.

SS: So when Keith passed away, did that change the way you related to the organization?

CK: Yeah, sure, in a big way. We had started out with Keith, Ginny, and I as the three co-CEOs, and then it became Keith and I. The very good thing is that two years before Keith passed, our board required us to put in place a succession plan and restructure the organization, which is how the titles got changed to president instead of executive director. But the division of labor was that Keith was our outside spokesperson, champion, and internally not only was he the person over the service provision, but he was also the father figure of the organization. So he was the one who walked around nurturing people. I was the administrator. I was over everything financial. I was over fundraising. Anything back office as well as all of the businesses, that was my purview.

I actually seroconverted just a few years before he died, and it's interesting, being HIV-positive wasn't something that I – it was stupidity on my part not

to be more careful than I was, but I have to say I never could have taken on the role that I was left to take on if I hadn't been HIV-positive. So one of the things the board and I agreed was that trying to bring in a co-CEO just wasn't going to work when you still had a founder sitting there. So all of a sudden, I was the public face of Housing Works, the person who's flying around the country. I also had to take on the role of being the father figure to everybody and the whole thing. So, yeah, it completely changed, and the really wonderful thing the board had done was made us put in a tier of senior vice presidents who could run the day-to-day, so that like this last week, I've been totally consumed with Haiti, and I can run off down there and do what I need to do, knowing that the organization is going to run. Many ways, I've become much more ceremonial, showing up at things, leading a service for the healing of Haiti. That is really what keeps the organization a community and not just another nonprofit business.

SS: Are you still a Baptist?

CK: I'm still an ordained Baptist minister. Unfortunately, I don't perform nearly as many weddings as I do funerals. But actually I do a full service in our Women's Health Center every first Sunday. For ten years I did a Bible study at Cylar House every Sunday, and that's been just a totally rich, rich, rich experience, because people who've been very alienated, coming to understand the Bible in a different way, coming to understand their relationship with the Divine in a different way, and being able to find a level of spirituality that offers healing, whatever their circumstances, is just a wonderful thing to be able to give. Then, frankly, in many ways, my experience as a minister sort of prepped me for this job. I guess I view my job as much as being the pastor of Housing Works as it is being the executive.

SS: So the final question is something we've asked everybody. So looking back at ACT UP, in your view, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

CK: ACT UP's greatest achievement was that it really started – well, I think there were two significant achievements. It really started a powerful healthcare reform movement that came from an ideology that the people impacted need to control the direction of the disease, and that was absolutely amazing. But right up there with it, it really was in so many ways the culmination of gay liberation. It created a way for people who would have gone their whole lives in the closet, or at least semi in the closet, certainly not in the fight. It channeled what AIDS forced. AIDS forced them out, and ACT UP gave them a vehicle to fight. So, if you look at the LGBT accomplishments of the last twenty years, I really credit that to the trajectory that ACT UP gave people. So I think those two things combined are its greatest achievement.

I think I've alluded to its greatest failure, and that is that ACT UP never really understood the deep, intricate link between homophobia and social and economic injustice writ large. It was all too often about us, our loss of privilege as gay white men, and how we could find ourselves back into that circle of power, and never realizing that where AIDS had forced us, in terms of the margin, was where the epidemic was and it still is, and it's there because of oppression that we really don't want as a society to address.

SS: Thank you so much, Charles