

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

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GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Maria Maggenti**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Maria Maggenti
January 20, 2003

MARIA MAGGENTI: Maria Maggenti, 40 years old, January 20th, 2003, and we're in Los Angeles.

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. Maria, do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS.

MM: Yes. I was in college, at an anti-apartheid protest, and somebody had a copy of *The New York Times*, because I actually have a photograph from that day. And, while we were reading about the news, on the back of the page that's in the photograph, it says, "GRID now considered Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." And that was the first I'd heard of it.

SS: And who were you at that moment?

MM: I was 20 years old, at a woman's college – feminist, lesbian, loud, passionate person.

SS: So, when did AIDS start to enter your life?

MM: When I graduated from college and came to New York, my roommate and I really wanted to do something. So, we explored every possible kind of volunteer thing that you could do in New York, that was along the lines of what we cared about. So, the first thing we did was we volunteered at the battered woman's shelter in Harlem. And, from there, we – it was really the first time I'd heard about AIDS, because some of the women were there – not only had their husbands been beating them, but we'd heard about some of them losing relatives to this disease, AIDS, which didn't have a big impact on me. But, we had to have an HIV test to be volunteers there, and – which I thought was very strange, but I didn't really question it. This was 1986, I guess. And, we

volunteered there for about 6 months, and then my roommate came home from her job one day and said, there was a guy at my job talking about this new organization called Gay Men's Health Crisis, and they need buddies. And so, maybe we should do that. So, I said, that sounds good. So, we met to a meeting. It was very small then. And, met with some people about what did it mean to be a buddy and what was AIDS? And, we volunteered to be buddies. And, that's how I got involved in AIDS.

SS: What was your relationship with gay men at the time?

MM: I didn't really know any gay men. I had been in almost an almost exclusively female environment – very feminist oriented, very lesbian oriented. I didn't have any real sense of gay men at all, actually. The first man that I took care of as a buddy was an old flamer who worked for Fortunoff, and his lover in a highly decorated apartment on, in Turtle Bay, and he was really bitchy and really funny. And that was, that was kind of, that was my first really introduction to a certain kind of gayness that I was not familiar with – which was a gay man who had his own sense of humor, and his own sense of anger and was so not concerned with the things that I was concerned with.

SS: So, why do you think you chose gay men as the place to do your work?

MM: Well, that's a really good question. I mean, I didn't know – I didn't know where I could go as a young feminist, lesbian person. I used to go to the Community Center all the time and try and look on the bulletin board and go to different meetings, and – everyone felt really old. That was the first thing. And the second thing was, is, that a lot of the – a lot of the activities were very social oriented. I mean, they were country dancing, or A.A., or – all these things – I didn't have any – I didn't what – I was

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not interested in that. And – but, I was searching desperately for somewhere to put a lot of my kind of political, emotional energy. And, remember, too, I didn't have a good job. I was not career focused. I didn't have – I didn't have any money. And then, I was at the Community Center one night for a lecture about AIDS, when a young man stood up at the end – really good looking – Frank Jump, actually – and he said, hey, there's going to be this meeting of this new group called ACT UP – AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power – and the first thing I thought of was the Unleash Power sounded like a feminist phrase, because my girlfriend at the time, a couple of years before had a t-shirt that said, unleash the power of women as a mighty force for revolution. So, I thought, oh my God, there's an unleash power! That's great! That should be a feminist thing. And he was so young and so cute and I thought, that must be a good group to be involved in. So, that's how it started.

SS: What was your previous experience with illness and death, before you came to GHMC?

MM: Well, I had been very sick as a child and had been hospitalized a lot. So, I actually had a pretty good relationship with it. I was not afraid of hospitals, was not afraid of physical deformity or things being wrong with you, or, you know, with a person. I had a lot of experience with doctors. I'd had a lot of experience with doctors telling me that nothing was wrong with me, as a child. So, I was familiar with that. I was not really familiar, I have to say, on a personal level, with death. But, I had lived in West Africa, growing up. So, I was surrounded by people who died easily from malnutrition and horrible civil wars and things like that.

SS: Okay, so then did you go to the ACT UP meeting?

MM: I went to the ACT UP meeting. It was at NYU Law School. I dragged a friend with me because I didn't want to go by myself.

SS: Who was your friend?

MM: My friend, Laura Chapman, who was my roommate. We sat in the back. There was a big guy named Steve [Webb], who was Avram Finkelstein's boyfriend at the time, and ultimately ended up committing suicide – big, burley guy – very sexy, I thought. And he was the – what is the word? It's part of Robert's Rules of Order – not Master of Ceremonies, but he was keeping order. And my friend, Laura, who was sitting next to me said, I'm not going to make it through this meeting, this is way too macho for my taste. And I said, well, let's just stick it out and see what they have to say? And, they were organizing all these things, and they were going to have zaps, and they were organizing committees. And, she left halfway through and just said, this is way too much testosterone for my energy. And I actually found it very stimulating. And, before you knew it, I was signing up for everything. I was signing up to be involved with the float for Gay Pride. I signed up to be on the zap committee; something about the energy of it – that made me stay. And, I decided to go back the next week.

SS: So, the next week – was it still at NYU?

MM: Yeah, we had two meetings at NYU, and then, I guess – did we go to the Community Center after that? Can you turn that off for one second, so I can –

SS: So, who are some of the people you remember from the first –

MM: The very first day?

SS: Yeah.

MM: Okay. Frank Jump – gorgeous, young, wearing bicycle shorts – I’ll never forget him. Avram Finkelstein – gorgeous. I remember everyone as being gorgeous. Rebecca Cole – lively and loud and – another blonde woman – I don’t know whatever happened to her. She was only there at the beginning, for a very brief time; Gregg Bordowitz and that was really – those were the ones from that very first meeting. After that, Maxine Wolfe and Amy Bauer. God, so many men – Oliver Johnston, David Robinson – yeah, those are the ones that come to the – just right now, at the top of my head.

SS: So, when you came in there and you saw – you had all this energy –

MM: Yeah.

SS: All this excitement – do you remember, at that moment, who you were at what kind of life you wanted for yourself?

MM: Hmm... I wanted a life of meaning. I wanted to change the world. I did not want a conventional life. I guess I was a self-righteous person. I was a deeply optimistic person – really believed that anything could happen. And, I was also a person who was really trying to figure out how to be with women and like them. What did I want? Or where did I think I was going? I had no idea. I knew I wanted something bigger than a job or a career. That was, that was primary.

SS: So, did you get really involved right away?

MM: Totally. It became my whole life – every single week, signed up for every single committee. In fact, it became so much of my life that – as I said, I had no real job or career or anything. Every job I got, came from people in ACT UP – temp jobs – it was always temp jobs. Oh, and another really important person was Phil Zwickler – who was

a film maker, documentary film maker, and – God, I can't believe it, I haven't thought about Phil Zwickler in years. And he was working on a documentary, and I said I wanted to volunteer, and he had an editor – and I'll never forget this because she was about 32, which I thought was really old, and she always wore red lipstick, and she was so tough. She was a dame. And, they were working out his apartment in Brooklyn, and I was so fearless – he was in a really shitty neighborhood. I would go, stay there until midnight, carry all the tapes, bring them home, bring them to the lab or the other editing facility. I mean, I got very involved in that. And, I mean, when I look back on it, Sarah, I guess I was interested – I mean, when I think about why did I do all that stuff? I mean, I really was interested. I was fascinated to be in a world that I knew nothing about – gay men, AIDS. First of all, just the world of men, which, I hadn't even grown up with men. So, that was kind of fascinating to me. But, I had come out of a tradition – being at a women's college – very self-consciously feminist, very happy to be surrounded by all woman, to, I guess, on an unconscious level, have a lot of my prejudices challenged by the actual experience of being with real people, as opposed to men.

And, yeah – so, I worked with Phil Zwickler, and then I got very involved with ACT UP and I remember my friend, Lindsay, Laura – the one who was at me at that first meeting, kept saying, I can't believe you're doing this. It's all guys. I said, I know, but maybe more women are going to get involved. I mean, it's really – it's a great group; meeting on midtown corners, in between temp jobs, with Frank Jump and the boys who were in the zap committee; and Rebecca Cole, I think, was involved; doing the flyers – all this concrete stuff that you could do, which was very exciting to me. And, also organizing for civil disobedience and protest – which I seem to have a natural – like,

maybe it was the theatrical part of my personality; maybe it was the physical aspect of being on the street, but I responded to it as if, as if I had always been waiting for it, you know?

SS: Were you involved in policy at ACT UP?

MM: Yes.

SS: Do you remember some of the projects that you worked on?

MM: Well, I remember the fights that we had. [LAUGHS]. I remember throwing – actually, literally throwing a book at Alan Klein, in coordinating committee one night.

SS: What was coordinating committee?

MM: Coordinating committee was our answer to, kind of leadership structure, so that – we had a series of committees – outreach committee and research committee and the group that was doing zaps and the group that was doing media. And, each person in that committee would vote to have one person represented, and then go to a coordinating committee meeting, which were on Tuesday nights, I remember. And, they were held upstairs in the Community Center. And, this was also – we also – Bradley Ball was in charge of our money. We started making money, actually, quite rapidly. And, big fights about whether or not to be a 501(c)3 status, and deciding we didn't want anything to do with the government and if you want to make a contribution, you shouldn't have to get a tax exemption. It was a huge fight. So, on Tuesday, the coordinating committee would get together and present things that would happen from the week before from each committee. Then, if you had something that had not been dealt with, on the floor, at a Monday night meeting, you could come to coordinating committee, for instance, with a

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proposal and say, you know, I really think that we should consider shutting down Wall Street, and I've got a bunch of people that we've talking about how we can actually do that, and we want to present it to you now because we'd like to bring the proposal to the floor. And, the ethos of the group – which I have never seen since in any, either political or work environment, which is truly astonishing to me – was that we really, really believed that we could function without one person being in charge. And, there were – ACT UP naturally attracted a lot of people with very strong leadership skills, but it also depended on people who were not like that – they did not want the limelight; they did not want to stand up in front of a room. They really wanted to be part of something without having to be the one that thought it up. So, there was a rank and file kind of feeling, but at any time, that could change. You could go from being the person who was in charge of a committee, and then decide, you know what? I can't make it to the meetings, I can't do this, I'm going out of town. Or, I just need to just sit in the back of the room for a little while. And, somebody else, who had been sitting at the back of the room for, God knows how many months – finally got the guts to stand up and say, I have an idea, and I want to be in charge of it. And, in fact, that's how it always happened, and outreach committee was my first very involved committee, with Oliver Johnston – Oliver Johnston and David Robinson and, oh, my God – he's dead now – that black queen, he lived on 10th Street. God was he a character. Gregg Bordowitz probably remembers him.

SS: Ortez?

MM: Ortez, oh my God, he was a great character. Oh, my God, he had all these kitty litter boxes in his apartment. Ah! He was so fabulous – Ortez Alderson! Oh, my God. Yeah, because one of the first things that we wanted to organize was this kind of

summit with the drug community. This must have been pretty – I can't believe that we were already dealing with that in '87. I couldn't have been – it must have been '89. I don't know. But, we decided that we really wanted to investigate what the relationship was between AIDS, of course, and people who were using intravenous drugs, because it was starting to shift. We were realizing more and more, wow, it's not just gay men – there are people who are IV drug users. And, we had, from the beginning a strong feeling – though, not always a good praxis – about wanting the group to expand its boundaries, and its demographic, because it was always, largely, a white, middle class group of men – gay men – who –

SS: Can I ask you question?

MM: Yeah.

SS: Why do you say middle class?

MM: Well, I guess, only because when you think about the resources that the group had at its disposal – not only in terms of just fund raising, but in terms of being able to parcel out jobs like Xeroxing, or telephone trees or faxing or – and those are the kind of things that usually you have access to if you have a job. And, I'd say the majority of the people in our group, did. It did not necessarily attract – though, you know, kind of, I mean, there were surprising – I guess that – I think of – in terms of being middle class, because of the sense of entitlement that a lot of the men in the group had that was challenged by the experience of AIDS in the medical institution – something that some of the women in the group felt like, well, wake up, this has been the case for women and people of color since time immemorial. And, the fights about that meant that there were core values that were being challenged.

SS: Did you experience – because this is something that people always say about ACT UP and it's a question I have, did you experience gay and white men from working class backgrounds as being less entitled in ACT UP than the ones who are from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds?

MM: Hmmm -- Well, that's where I guess I would say that there were surprises, because what I found is, if you were to do it on sheer numbers, indeed those people who were college educated and who had a sense of some professional stability or who were college educated and young, but had a strong sense of I can do something in the world, and I should, and the world can give me things, were naturally people who were organizers. However, there were also people for whom this was the most liberatory experience because – Golly, that one guy, I'll never forget, he said to me – I don't even know his name, now, but he was a skinny kind of nerdy guy – kind of guy that bar boys would never take a second glance at, and he got himself very, very involved in outreach committee. And, I remember saying to him at one point, where do work? What job do you have? And he said, I'm in transportation. And, I thought, what, he's in transportation? And then, I ran into him in the subway and he was a token booth clerk. And, I remember thinking, thinking that's so genius. He's in transportation, he works as a token booth clerk, you know? And he – I know that this experience of being with all these people who said, you want to do that? Go ahead, organize it. He did, you know. He came up with his, his idea of something – whatever outreach thing was that month, and he pulled it together.

SS: What did you do in outreach?

MM: We did everything from wanting to – and we used Kendall – what the hell was his name?

SS: Thomas.

MM: Yes, the black professor at Columbia – law professor. We did Sundays at black churches to talk about AIDS.

SS: Did you do that?

MM: Yes, I was a part of that.

SS: Which churches did you go to?

MM: We went to four different churches in Harlem – one of which had a woman preacher, which I don't know the names. We stood on the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to pass out AIDS flyers, and I was with Tim Stannard. There were four of us, and Tim and I had one corner, and two other boys had another corner across the way. And a woman came down the street, and she was extremely angry when she saw us. And she knocked Tim's glasses off – I'll never forget it – and was screaming at him that he should get out of the neighborhood, as a white man, and everything. And, there was a gentleman selling socks, behind us, on the street and he said something I've never forgotten, because he said, you know, she's known in the neighborhood for being kind of crazy, but the thing you have to understand about racism is that it makes people crazy. And, I had never considered that before – that you could go mad from hatred, from being hated or feeling hate, which is an interesting thing to consider, because the perception of ACT UP within the gay community – especially at the beginning, was that we were hateful, and that we hated people. And, I think that we did have a strong sense of us against them, but Maxine Wolf had said once – and I've used it many time, from a

strategic point of view, it's always good to have an extreme, because then it makes the middle look that much more middle. And so, we were serving that purpose, because there were so many fights with the lesbian and gay community itself, in terms of things we wanted to do. The mayor would want to have something for Gay Pride week, and then we would protest it instead of saying, Thank you, Mayor, oh, we're so happy you acknowledged us.

So, there was a perception – we were all so angry. And I tried to get across that, yes, there was a lot of anger, but there was so much fun. There was a lot of food. We used to eat after those meetings and drink. God, there was a lot of drinking, too. Did I just get off a topic? [LAUGHS].

SS: So, on the outreach committee, you went to black churches –

MM: Yes, we did the black churches thing. Golly, I thought we got a pretty good response, you know, talking about AIDS, and certainly very polite. I think that there was a naïve presumption that people would want to come to ACT UP meetings, which they did not. And, but, we passed out our flyers and our condoms and, and, you know, our whole thing was to be as without judgment about sexual behavior, which was a very interesting thing for me to consider, having come from a somewhat strict, or somewhat orthodox way of understanding sexuality from a lesbian feminist point of view. What I was learning in AIDS was not necessarily what you called yourself, but just what you did. And, that there would be people who did not call themselves gay who would engage in homosexual sexual behavior that might put them at risk. So, it wasn't about saying, okay, all the lesbians or gay men in this black church right now, please stand up. Instead it was, in case, you know – hey, you're put in a situation where you

think that maybe the sex you're having could be risky – here, some condoms, some information.

Oh, we did the Shea Stadium thing – that was an outreach thing which was, No Glove, No Love – the only time I've ever been to a baseball game my whole life. Wait, that is baseball, right? Shea?

SS: Yeah.

MM: Okay. So, I went there – that was an idea from the women's committee, I think. I think women's committee – now, that's a totally different committee, because now, how – I don't know why I can't remember everything we did in outreach. We did the palm cards.

SS: What are palm cards?

MM: Palm cards are hilarious. And this is, like, what I mean by a middle class notion. Okay, the idea of a business card, okay? And Oliver Johnston came up with it. He had his own graphic design firm, and he was part of Grand Fury and came up with the came up with the ACT UP logo, at the very beginning. And, he's also – and I wish, I hope some people have this poster, because he hadn't gotten it right, when we said that the FDA and – the lines at the first Silence Equals Death poster – and he called the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Drug Administration. That's a classic – whoever has that poster. I mean, we had to get rid of them, because it was wrong.

He wanted to do a palm card, which is basically a business card saying, we are the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. And, I'll never forget it, because we had huge fights about this, because I was against this – which is we “liaise” with public officials. That's one of the things it said. And, having done Latin and Greek, okay, and being a grammar

fanatic, I said, I don't believe we can say we liaise with public officials. It doesn't make any sense. We meet with public officials. We don't liaise with public – we're usually challenging public officials. We had huge fights about this palm card. And, ultimately, Oliver went behind everyone's back and wrote, we liaise with public officials. I'm sure I have one of those cards somewhere in my boxes. And, so the idea was, is that, anytime we had a protest, we could just pass out these cards and say, this is who we are. Or, you could go to a bar and pass them out. Or, you could drop them places, when you were shopping. I mean, they were to raise consciousness about this group called ACT UP. So, that was a big outreach project. Yeah, the palm cards.

SS: Now, were you on coordinating committee from the outreach committee?

MM: Yes, that's when I was on coordinating committee was –

SS: Did people come to coordinating committee with their proposals first, and then bring it to the floor?

MM: Yes, usually. Or, you could bring it right to the floor. It depended on whether or not – how much money it needed, you know.

SS: So, what would happen if someone brought a proposal to the coordinating committee and they didn't like it?

MM: We would bring it to the floor for a vote.

SS: And what if you did like it?

MM: We would bring it to the floor for a vote.

SS: So, why would they come to you?

MM: Partly, because they had to make a presentation about how much money they were going to need. They would say, do we need money for this? Or, they would do it to refine the idea. You know, sometimes, you'd come in and you'd say, well, I have a vague plan that we're going to take over the FDA, what do you guys think? And then, sometimes, people from coordinating committee would say, well, I know that we can get media committee, I know – so, that they were – the function of it, really, was to kind of think tank it, I guess, a little bit, before bringing it to the room. And, also to create some kind of organization, when we had those Monday night meetings, because they burgeoned to about a thousand people, and it would be very difficult to just stand up and then have a big discussion about something that no one had heard of, without any of the details being worked out. But, now that I think about it, we also – you could go up ahead of the meeting, go to Bradley Ball and say, I have an idea, I want to bring it up, put me on the agenda. And then, you would have your three minutes, and you could get up and pitch your idea, and then the idea was, okay, that sounds great. Those people who want to do that or who want to develop that idea, please go meet on the other side of the room, at the end of the meeting and work it out. And then, come to coordinating committee or come next week and present the whole proposal.

SS: Do you remember any of the big discussions of coordinating committee or any proposals that were controversial?

MM: Well, certainly, the 501(c)3 status was very controversial. Keeping notes of what happened in the meetings was somewhat controversial, because people didn't want us to – the idea was that if we were keeping too many detailed notes, there was a certain kind of paranoia – like, who would have those notes? And, so, I remember

talking about that at length. Bradley Ball kept fantastic notes. You know the other thing – I know I'm going off the topic, but people who, in their jobs did not have their full potential realized, often found their full potential in the group. That's what was remarkable to me. So, let's say you're working as an administrative assistant, which you can gain certain skills from that, but it's not everything that you feel you're capable of doing. But, then, in ACT UP, you are in charge of the finances, for instance. So, all the skills that you've used in your job, you can use. But, even – you're more important, in a way, because the context in which you're doing that work is – it's so valuable, it feels so valuable. And, that was true with a lot of people. Like, I never knew what people actually did for a living, and sometimes I would find out and I'd find out that they were very successful at something, and they made a lot of money and I was surprised. And, other times I found out that people I thought were so successful – and, they must be really important in their jobs, because, remember, I was in my 20's, so I kind of didn't know anything about that – I'd find out had very ordinary jobs, but in ACT UP, were very, very important. And, so, I'm trying to think – okay, so the 501(c)3 status thing. I wish I could remember why I fought with Alan Klein, because I remember hitting him with a book. I threw it at him. I can't remember off the top --

SS: What was the first big action that you worked on?

MM: After the Gay Pride thing, which was a float in which – it was a float of people incarcerated behind a barbed wire fence, because at that time, our biggest concern was quarantine for people with HIV. So, I was very involved in that.

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SS: That was Gay Pride '87?

MM: Yeah, '87 – and, that was the first Gay Pride we were involved in, actually. And, then, the next big one that I was involved in was Wall Street – which was the Wall Street one.

SS: Who organized that?

MM: Peter Staley, because he worked on Wall Street, so he had a lot of inside information on that.

SS: What was the action?

MM: Well, the action was, that action was that we would be outside protesting, and then they – there were four of them that were going to lock them – handcuff themselves to the floor of the New York Stock Exchange to delay its opening. So, we coordinated with both their inside action and our outside action, and that's what happened.

SS: What was the goal?

MM: To bring attention to the AIDS crisis. It was always the same. It really was, always – at the beginning, the focus was always to get as much press as possible, and be as disruptive as possible, to try and get people to think about AIDS and to talk about AIDS.

SS: Now, at what point does it shift from getting attention to AIDS to winning certain specific policy changes.

MM: Well, that's interesting. I think that it started to shift from getting attention to direct proposals for change, once we began to educate ourselves in, really, what had been a very hidden kind of – the minutia of drug protocols. We had so many teach-ins about that. And, as our group became more and more educated, the strategies

and the idea that actions should have a specific focus became more central to the way that the group was organizing itself. So, for instance, I think one of our first big ones was the Food and Drug Administration.

SS: What was the demand?

MM: Well, it was to get rid of double blind placebo trials – that was one thing I remember. And it was to approve – have a much faster approval process for drugs for people that had life threatening illnesses – namely AIDS. And, that became almost a national – that became national, I guess. We got people from all over to come to the FDA.

Oh, that's the other thing, you know. ACT UP started sprouting. That was the other thing that had to be covered in coordinating committee. Do other groups who call themselves ACT UP, do they have anything do with us? Are we like a franchise? What do we do with those groups? Do they have to follow our rules? Should we give them t-shirts and they can use those for fund raising? Should they have their own t-shirts? You know, we had, really we made all of our money off of those damn t-shirts.

SS: What did decide about other groups?

MM: Well, I think that everyone – they were ultimately allowed to have their own t-shirts and their own fund raising. However, they had to abide by certain principles and that was that – what was our phrase? The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power – not, we liaise with public officials, it was, basically, that we use civil disobedience. We wanted to end the AIDS crisis. They had to have a philosophy that was exactly the one that we had.

SS: We're committed to direct action.

MM: Exactly, we're committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. They had to have that, otherwise they couldn't be in ACT UP. They could be something else, but they could not be ACT UP. I remember that was a big discussion. That was a very big discussion. I think that everyone was kind of surprised that there would be, even that much interest. It went so fast – God, it went fast. But, you see, the other thing -- and this is what made ACT UP so great – ACT UP was very sexy, and I think that's one reason people wanted to be, wanted to be in on it.

SS: And what made it sexy?

MM: The loudness of it; the theatricality; the fabulous graphics that weren't just hand-made marker posters; the media savvy aspect of it. It's lack of compromise, I think, was very sexy, at a time when people were just hovering around a certain kind of – I think we're doing okay in the gay community, I think they like us. And, ACT UP said, well, so what? Like what? Why do we even need to be liked? We need certain things, as human beings. And the reason we're not getting those things is because they don't like us that much.

SS: When you would take on a huge action, like the FDA, how was it paid for?

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MM: We fundraised. We had parties. We sold t-shirts. People donated money. We did have a number of – like, a Larry Kramer type – it wasn't him, but other wealthy, older gay men who gave us \$1000 contributions. And, golly, we really took care of our own, I must say, because we'd get on a bus, and you didn't have to pay for anything. God, did we even pay for our hotels? I certainly never had any money, so I can't imagine – I think we always had a little bit of scholarship funds or something for people who

couldn't pay for stuff. But, we – and, did each committee? No, I don't think that each committee raised its own money, it was always the group at large. We had a lot of money, actually. Sometimes, we had \$50,000.

SS: In one year or in the bank?

MM: In the bank, yeah, just, you know a fair amount of money. There were always the poster costs. And, in fact, the other – that was another coordinating committee discussion, should we use snipers for our posters, or should we do it ourselves?

And, it sounds like a minor kind of discussion, but it was about this larger thing which was, how much do we want to reach people? Because, if we do it ourselves, we're usually going to be limited to certain neighborhoods. And, snipers are professionals, and they can get it out fast. And, I think we switched off – and, snipers are expensive, as well, so, and then, somebody had to have a connection to snipers. So, that was a big discussion. We did end up using snipers a lot for the big posters – the Reagan's Gate; AIDS GATE I, with Reagan's face, and ACT UP, Silence Equals Death posters. And then, for our own flyers and things, that's when we had teams that went out and wheat pasted.

SS: When did you become a facilitator?

MM: I don't remember? I guess it must have been within six months, maybe? Or, eight months.

SS: So, how did that happen?

MM: How did that happen? Did somebody vote for me to become facilitator? I don't remember how I became facilitator. I feel like I just started standing in front of the room and started talking. I can't remember. I think we had to vote.

SS: What were your duties?

MM: Okay, well the duties were that you had to get there early. See, I loved all – everything about it, because you always had something to do. So, you had to get there early, and you had to get the agenda organized. So, people had to come to you and say, this is – I'd like to be on the agenda. Okay, great. And, we followed – loosely followed Robert's Rules of Order, which we also had big fights about, because Robert's Rules of Order was considered very male and masculine, and maybe even sexist. So, but we did ultimately use Robert – I read Robert's Rules of Order, when I became facilitator, because I thought it was fascinating. So, you had to get there early, and then you had a partner – It was me and David Robinson, for a long time. And then, you had to introduce everyone to the group. And then, basically, you just had to kind of keep things moving. People would get up, they'd start talking, you had to keep them to a limit. You'd call on different committees for their reports, and they would get up and give their reports. And then, you'd make announcements. Oh, God, it was so fun. It was great. And, I did that for a really long time. And, it appealed to that part of me that was not being well taken care of in other aspects of my life. It was an ego thing, and I felt important, like I was a part of something bigger than myself. And, it appealed to the performer in me – the theatrical aspect of my personality. And, gosh, you know, I had a lot of energy, so I could be there from 7:00 until 11:00, and still want to go out afterwards, until 1:00 in the morning, which I couldn't do now. So, yeah, that's how it went.

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SS: When did you start working on –

SS: How often were facilitators rotated?

MM: Every few months, I guess. I can't really remember, because I remember that we would switch off. And, I don't think it was – I think some of it was self-selected, though. Some of us would – like, people would say, I think I should be facilitator for a while, or something like that. I don't remember how we did it.

SS: So, you were in outreach and when did you start working in women's committee? Or, when did women's committee start?

MM: Okay, well, what happened was, with women's committee, is that we had these dyke dinners, a bunch of us. You were there, weren't you? And, then from these dyke dinners – we would talk about a lot of things that had to do with ACT UP, and a lot of things that didn't have to do with ACT UP.

SS: And where were they?

MM: There were at my house and Maxine's house and Jean Carlomusto's house. We never went to Amy Bauer's house; we never went to Gerry's house, I don't think.

SS: Gerry?

MM: Gerry Wells, isn't that her name? She has a red-headed child. And, who else was in there? Rebecca Cole. She was, she's – this isn't helpful to the archive, but she's like the – she's the ACT UP version of Tamara. She is like Tamara, okay?

SS: I think she's on TV now.

MM: Oh, golly, all these lives that people lived. God, it cracks me up.

SS: So, let's talk about Rebecca Cole – so, what was her story?

MM: Rebecca? I don't know what her story was. I tried to seduce her, I know that much.

SS: You didn't succeed?

MM: No, not at all. I was so – I was very unlucky in love in ACT UP, very unlucky in love, very unlucky in love.

SS: We'll get to that later.

MM: Rebecca was – well, she was really one of the first – she really, I think, was the very first woman in ACT UP. And, she had a very powerful personality. She was a former actress, so she had a very strong sense of stage presence, which was excellent for facilitating, because she was one of the facilitators, I remember, at the beginning. Very funny, self-deprecating, but, unlike myself – and the reason I bring it up is because I found it notable that she had a lot of experience with gay men. She understood gay humor. She – perhaps, it's maybe because she'd been in theater for a long time. Things that I found strange or didn't know about or questioned or challenged, she found – you know, she fit in. She considered herself a gay man, which I never considered. I always considered myself a woman and a lesbian and a feminist. I never, ever thought of myself as a gay man. And, Rebecca kind of did. And, she was a very charismatic individual, and had a lot of energy and was a good bullhorn person. But, she wasn't in on the dyke dinners, but she was in on the Cosmo –

SS: Was she a lesbian?

MM: No, no, she was an indeterminate sexuality. And, but that didn't stop me. I mean, I was like, well she's – I just wanted to throw her down. [LAUGHS].

But, I think she was, she was – I felt that I could tell by the way she was handling gay men, that she definitely could not be a lesbian. She felt very straight to me, you know what I mean? Culturally straight, which sounds, perhaps out of context, like a very unfair thing to say. But this is the other thing, is that there was such a sub-culture in the world that we were in. It's hard for me to describe, only because it was such a sub-culture. It was just – it was a very tiny world that we were in, because it was within the gay community, but it was not of the gay community, because it was – to have decided that you were going to spend your time protesting, even your brethren, which we did, was a very challenging thing to do in the mid-'80s. And, to get on the street – all of those things. Anyway, so, but, Rebecca was a key component, and she was involved in the women's committee, actually, but she was not involved in the dyke dinners. And, the women's committee formed, partly, I guess, as a reaction to the fact that we were often bringing up topics in the general meeting about women, and it's not that they would get ignored, but they were not – I think that from a strategic point of view, we decided it might be better if we have our own committee, and we organize things, and we have some solidarity. And, I think that's why we organized the women's committee.

And, yeah, oh, gosh – and then, there were some really funny things that happened in there. Wait, was that women's committee? Yeah, because then women's – it was so weird, we're starting women's committee. All these women from ACT UP wanted to come to the women's committee, and then the immediate first thing that a lot of them wanted to do – we were thinking maybe we can start this volunteer thing with kids with AIDS in Harlem. And, I remember Maxine, myself and you and a couple of people said, look, we're not a service organization. Why do you keep bringing all these

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service – all these stupid service ideas, which now, when I look at it is so fascinating, because there was something kind of quintessentially feminine in that impulse – like, let's help. It wasn't like, let's get some issues together, and then let's think of a really good action that we can do to bring the house down, you know. Instead it was, there's babies, and then there's these women and they're poor, and they don't have a house and we want to go help them. It was totally – it was not at all what we'd imagined – those of us who were the loudmouths and the real – had more of the kind of powerhouse personalities. And that caused some friction, definitely. Because, I ended up leaving women's committee at one point. Remember that?

SS: Why did you leave?

MM: Yeah, because I felt like, yuk, everyone's turning into a wimp.

SS: But, what were they doing? Did they actually do anything?

MM: No, I don't think so. And that was the other thing, well, where's the action? You know what I mean? Oh, we had Action Committee, don't forget that – that was, like, where you thought of all the actions, yeah.

SS: Were you on Action Committee?

MM: Yeah, was I on Action Committee? Yeah, I think I drifted around, because I didn't stay on outreach for a really long time, Sarah. I moved. I moved around. I was a mover.

SS: You were a networking ... So, when did the Cosmo – did that come out of women's committee?

MM: Yeah, that came out of dyke dinners first, then was expanded to women's committee. And, that was the – that's because we had read this article in Cosmopolitan

Magazine about this guy who said that the vagina was so resilient that you, if you had sex with an HIV positive man and he came inside you, oh, your vagina was so resilient, there's no way you were going – this guy was insane. I can't even believe that they published this. And, P.S., he wasn't even a medical doctor. He was a psychiatrist, therapist psychiatrist – not even, like, doing research on anything. And, so then we decided we were going to protest him, personally, first. And the, protest the Cosmopolitan Magazine.

SS: Now, was that the first action of the women's committee?

MM: Yeah, I think that was our first action, now that I think about it, yeah.

SS: So, what did you do? How did –

MM: Well, first, Jean Carlomusto, myself, Rebecca Cole, Maxine, looked this guy up in the phonebook, called him and said we would like to come and speak with him, we were part of the women's committee of this AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. He had no idea what we were talking about. We said, we'd like to come to your house. We went to his house, and brought our camera, and then tried to interview him on camera.

SS: This is Robert Gould. Where did you –

MM: Yes, he lived on the upper East Side. I'll never forget it because we were all in there and I kept saying to Jean, do you think he knows that we brought a camera? And then – and he was a slight man, you know. He was slight. I mean, I probably would have more compassion for him now, but I hated him then. And, he was a slight man, wearing a turtle neck, and he had gray hair and he was quite gracious, and then as soon as we – he sat down, we began to challenge him immediately, and how could he possibly – what was he talking about, that the vagina is resilient? Where did he get that research?

Well, I read it. Well, how could you read something that is not even corroborated scientifically and then put it in a magazine that millions of women read and, and allow them to feel safe, when they have no reason to feel safe.

So, we challenged him. And we wanted him – I know! Tell me if I'm wrong, you might – other people probably have a better memory, but we went because we wanted him to write a retraction. We had a very specific goal. Dr. Gould, we would like you to write to Cosmopolitan Magazine, admit that you were wrong and tell the public that you were completely wrong. And, he refused to do it. And, made a rather hasty goodbye out of the interview. We were all hustled out very fast. And then we said, all right, fine, we went to him, we tried to have a normal conversation, we tried to treat him like an intelligent human being. He's not, we will now have to shut down Cosmopolitan Magazine. It was so excellent.

And then, we immediately started organizing. Now, this is the funny thing – remember I said that thing about the posters and the magic markers? We did have a lot of posters with magic markers at the Cosmopolitan demonstration. We did have some good graphics. And a lot of the men showed up. Of course, they did, because it was an ACT UP action. But, I will say, it was 7 and a half degrees that day. It was one of the coldest days that we had ever had, and – but it was a very successful demonstration, excellently successful.

SS: What happened?

MM: Well, we got there early, and they had already set up barricades. They heard ACT UP was coming. And we had a very definite plan that we were going to try and get into the building, go upstairs, speak to the editors at Cosmopolitan Magazine.

They immediately shut down. Now, was this Fairchild? I think it's Fairchild Publications that does Cosmopolitan, or maybe, maybe – no, it's not Hearst – I can't remember what, but it's a big company, and it's there in mid-town. And, they immediately shut down and started asking people for ID's, would not let us inside, and we, we were doing our quiet little march, and then they started pushing us farther and saying that we couldn't be on that part of the sidewalk. And then, we had our big banner that we walked down the street in the freezing cold. And, then, did we get arrested? Some people, I think, got arrested. And Maxine kept poking that guy, I'll never forget it. Maxine – she would poke with a crooked finger. She had her little cap on and she had this, these mittens on and she was poking, saying, I'm going to take down your name [LAUGHS]. This police officer...

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And, Jean was photographing the whole time with her video camera. And, I don't think, I don't think we got arrested, because I know that we finally went to have lunch at some point. It lasted a long time, maybe 3 and half hours, that demonstration. And, we had great flyers. That was another thing – just to get off the topic, but, there was a big discussion about when we had to, when we decided that we would do flyers in English and Spanish. That was a very – I want to bring it up because it was part of some of the tensions that sometimes would exist in the group around what was considered politically correct, and what actually made sense, in terms of wanting to reach different kinds of communities. And, sometimes the women in the group were accused were being too politically correct.

SS: Were you accused?

MM: Me personally? No. I was accused of other things. Like, when we did the big FDA demonstration, I was accused of having too much testosterone.

SS: You were accused by the women?

MM: Yeah, yeah – the men couldn't keep track of what they were supposed to be thinking. They would say, wait, we were supposed to do it in Spanish? Or, we're not, or black people or people of color.

SS: Did you think it was a bad idea to do it in Spanish?

MM: I think I was probably mixed. I always had somewhat of a, of an orthodox way of approaching – I always felt like, well, do we really think – is this more than – is this going to really reach people, or is this just us wanting to make ourselves feel better because we're trying to be inclusive. I mean, these challenges existed in the group all the time. Because the fact of the matter is, it was hard to bring in people from different worlds, you know. And, as the, as the nature of the illness changed, and as more and more people in the group got very involved in the NIH and in AIDS Treatment Group, which was moving in one kind of direction, the crisis itself was affecting people that were not in the room. I mean, there were still people in the room being effected, but – and then, there was a lot of tension – well, how are do we – are we supposed to have, you know, HIV positive single black moms in this group? Or, how do we get them here? And what – are we helping, in what we're doing? And – so, trying to coordinate with different communities was – I think it was challenging. I remember it being very challenging. It brought up a lot of emotions in people. And, and, not all of them pleasant.

SS: Because we interviewed Moises Agosto.

MM: Who's that?

SS: He was in the Latino Caucus, and one of the things he mentioned was the Latino caucus doing a lot of translations of –

MM: That came later – Latino Caucus, right?

SS: That's after –

MM: Definitely after women's caucus, yeah, definitely afterwards.

SS: This was before there was a Latino presence in ACT UP.

MM: Oh yeah, totally. That's one reason that that would have been a discussion, you see? I mean, there were a few people who, like, probably spent the summer in El Salvador, and they wanted to do translations. But, it wasn't like we had any really – a strong Latino group in the group at the beginning.

SS: What was the outcome of the Cosmo demo?

MM: Well, I guess good news coverage. Cosmopolitan magazine ultimately, I guess, a couple of issues later, writing a retraction, and an explanation that that was not the full story of HIV transmission for women, and encouraged women to have their male partners use condoms. And, a wonderful documentary came out of it, it's *Women Say No to Cosmo* that Jean Carlomusto and myself made that made the rounds to different activist groups.

SS: Was that your first video project?

MM: Yes, that was my first one.

SS: So, that's the beginning of your whole life in film and video?

MM: It kind of is, yeah, it really kind of is. The excitement that I had, staying up with Jean Carlomusto, who had real job at GMHC making documentaries – which to

me, seemed like the most elusive of goals. Like, how do you get paid to do something you really want to do, and that you really like? And, I'd always been a writer, and I was writing for the gay press. I wrote for the Windy City Times, in Chicago, even though I lived in New York. And then, I wrote for Outweek, when it started. And, oh, golly, for so many little magazines. And, but, Jean had a real job. She worked at GMHC. She had a paycheck and everything and she had access to all this equipment. And, I stayed up really late with her, cutting this piece. And, it was really one of the most exciting nights of my life. It truly was. I'll never forget it – making the connections about how you could use the pictures and the sound and, of course, ours was somewhat towards – it wasn't just, this is what happened, it was creating the narrative of what happened, and it had a real strong point of view. It was advocacy journalism, in that respect. And, I was out of my mind with joy with that experience.

SS: Had you ever thought of making video?

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MM: I always – actually, let's put it this way – what did I want to do? What did I want to be? I knew what I didn't want to be. I knew that I didn't want to go to an office, and I knew that I didn't want to dress up. That was pretty much it. I didn't have any goals after that. I had no material goals. I had no interest in property or clothes. As long as I could get books. So, I'd always worked in bookstores – those were the first jobs that I got out of college. I felt like I would be fine. And, I'd always written my whole life. So, I assumed it would have to do something about living by my wits and writing. And, I didn't know – I wasn't like a little girl Spielberg, with her super-8 camera or anything.

SS: At that moment, this is what I'm going to do?

MM: No, no – I thought, this is really exciting, I would love to do this, but it was for – it was in a larger context, and the context was, is that I was doing ACT UP. See, that was the most important thing. It was not about what I was going to do personally.

SS: Right. So, when you worked with the actions committee, what big actions did you work on?

MM: The FDA.

SS: So, were you in the – one of the main organizers?

MM: Well, one of the things – oh, golly, and how can I forget the other big things that I did which were the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention. Golly, that was a big thing, that was a really big thing. Well, the thing is, is that – the first thing was, when the group began to – we began to get very formal about our civil disobedience, which meant that we were having affinity groups. We had teach-ins about civil disobedience. Amy Bauer, I'll never forget, was one of the teachers for teach-ins. You were one of the teachers for teach-ins. You had done civil disobedience, hadn't you?

So, we were learning about civil disobedience, we were learning about pulling together an affinity group. All of these things were new to me. I did not know what they were. And, we had gone to, gosh, one of the big things I was involved in, where they protest that we were planning down south for the Republican National Convention, the Democratic National – so, that was New Orleans and Atlanta – two places I had never been before.

SS: Let's start with the Republicans, what happened?

MM: Well, first of all, let me just tell you that we drove these vans – oh, God, that was so damn funny. There were two big white vans that our groups were going to take. And Lee Schy was in one and – you know, I wish I could remember every single person, but we were in another – Ellen Neipris, David Gibbs, Heidi [Dorow] – Heidi and I were girlfriends then, I guess. And Marion Banzhaf and Maxine. Anyway, so we had these two vans, and we would drive along the highway from New York. And then, when we would pass each other, one van would do something that the other van then had to compete with. Like, one time, we were driving and we passed by Lee Schy's ... and everyone was wrapped in toilet paper. And then we had to think of a really good competition. So then, then, we would pull over or something and we would let them pass us and then we would come up, and then, we totally got them. This was the best one, because then we drove by, just calm as can be, everyone was completely naked.

[LAUGHS].

And then we stayed in all these hotels. Oh, my God, it was so fun. But then we went to New Orleans, and of course, Maxine knew of a friend of friend of a friend – it was some little bed and breakfast type of a place. I had never been in such a hot place in my life, and I was terrified of everything about New Orleans. Well, I was terrified, in general, about everything, if you want to really know about the truth. I was a highly paranoid, terrified person, but not when it came to doing things with activism – just, in my head, psychotically, I was.

So, we go there, and we had – Marion Banzhaf, I'll never forget it, she gave us – there was this special thing that she had learned and it was a way to protect yourself if you are doing civil disobedience, where you basically create a little circle around another

circle of people around another circle of people and it was called the – she had some name for it. It was the Korean something or another. Oh yeah – so it was the outside group would be facing outside. Then, the other group would be facing in, and the other group would be facing outside. But, it was like a circle. And then we would all be practiced in this conference space. I don't really – I guess we thought there might be violence. That's why. We thought there'd – and there was, because when we got – what we were planning was, we got as far with our little, fake passes to get near the viewing stand, where –

SS: Where did you get passes?

MM: Oh, graphics committee. Oh, yeah. Oh God, they were brilliant. It's incredible. And, becoming friends with somebody at Kinko's, for instance, so that you would get a deal and not have them report the fact that we were faking our Republican National Convention badges. That's where sex is actually really good, and having cute boys, because then they would connect with another cute boy – it was, like, sure, I can help you out. And, so, we had our passes and our whole thing was to be – when George Bush was coming to say something horrible, probably, and he was announcing his presidency at the convention and we were outside, and we had our posters and we were going to hold them up, that said, something – I can't remember now – about AIDS and – AIDS Kills. And we really had planned it out beautifully. And, at the exact moment when we were ready to put our posters, George Bush decided to announce that Dan Quayle was going to be running mate, and I'll never forget it because we had just held up our posters, and all the huge – all the press, all the cameras went towards us, and then George Bush made this announcement about Dan Quayle and all the cameras went back

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towards George Bush, and we were being hustled out so fast, that I don't even remember how we – I remember just kind of being thrown out on our asses. God, when I think about how the security is now, compared to then, we really did well. And, we got thrown out. And then it was the young Americans for Freedom, who were the scariest people at the Republican National Convention, and this old man who came up to me wearing a Madras suit – I'll never forget it – with an umbrella, who was trying to hit us on the hit.

See how these things come flooding back? And, so that was at the Republican National Convention. And that was our big, big action there – was that George Bush – the George Bush action. Then, we moved from New Orleans – and, also, we had teach-ins there. It was so profound and we did the same thing in Georgia and Atlanta, and it was the first time that I met people – like, this girl came from somewhere in Georgia, and she came with her pick-up truck and her gun in the back, and it was the first time that I was presented with the idea that you should not have to leave your hometown to be safe. I mean, I'd always had this idea that, well, if you don't – if you're having a hard time being gay in, you know, Monrovia, Georgia, why don't you just come to New York? Come to New York, you'll be free! It will be so fun. And, it was the first time that I kind of was presented with it would, what it feels like to come from a specific place, and want to be in that place and be yourself, and how important it is that you didn't have to go to New York. You should be able to be in your 10,000 person town, and be who you are and be safe. And, we had a lot of meetings in churches – MCC would often host us, and teach-ins – we showed the Cosmo tape, I remember that. And, we had kiss-ins in Atlanta, and we had – I'm sure somebody already told you this – okay, we were staying in this hotel in Atlanta, and at that time, all of us knew that Dominos Pizza was owned by

a right-wing fanatic and that he gave all his money to anti-abortion and horrible things. And, we were really, really hungry. And, we had been out all day, protesting and being our activist selves, and we really wanted pizza. But, the only delivery was Dominos. So, we had this big discussion – were we going to order from Dominos or not? And, I was on the side of, absolutely not, we'll just have to wait until breakfast tomorrow.

So, there was kind of a rumbling, but, basically everyone one agreed – yeah, we're going to stay strong, we're going to starve, we're not going to order Dominos. And then, we went to bed. And then, the next morning – I'll never forget it – I go down the hall, and it was one of those southern motels that had an open hallway, you know? And I go down, and I knock on – I guess it was Ellen Neipris's door – and I can't remember who she was with. There were so many, like, musical chairs and people always running around other people's rooms. It was very college, when I think about it. And I knock on the door, and there's this stumbling, and like all this activity I can hear in there. And then, she comes to the door – yeah? And I said, we've got to get up, we're going to go get some grits or something. And, you know, to make up for last night, and what I see behind – in the little corner, sticking out from under the bed – Domino's Pizza. They had broken down and ordered from Domino's. That caused a huge controversy. But, I mean, we did laugh about it. But, I remember thinking – I can't believe that they broke our vow and they ordered Domino's pizza! That's the kind of thing we would – you know, like, it was so of a piece. You had to be – everything was connected.

And, also in Atlanta and traveling on that trip, was the first time that – it was before we got to Atlanta, I guess. We were going – was it from – yeah – and we – yeah, it was before we got to Atlanta, I guess, and there were about eight of us or nine of us,

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and we needed a place to stay for the night, and we pulled into this motel – it was near the beach – Myrtle Beach, maybe? And, you know, we had some very queeny kind of guys with us, and we went in, and we said we'd like a bunch of rooms, and the sign had said vacant, vacancy out front. And then, when we came in and they saw us, they went behind the counter and there was some chat and they came out and they said, we don't have any rooms. And we said, well, what are you talking about? And, of course it's true, we had all our ACT UP posters outside of the van – the Keith Haring one that had been done. And we said, what are you talking about? We just saw that you have a vacancy sign. I'll never forget this – it was me, Michael Nesline and Maxine. And they said, well, we were wrong – sorry, we don't have that. And then, Michael Nesline said, are you saying that because of our AIDS posters that are outside? And they said, well does anyone in your group have AIDS? And we said, yes. And they said, well we definitely don't have a room for you. And then, there was this big fight, you know – you're discriminating, and some people were just so tired and they just – I don't want to stay in a hotel where there are going to be prejudices against us anyway, and let's just forget it and there must be some local gay group that we can call. And, actually, we did end up finding two gay guys and we ended up staying at their beach house – all of us, sleeping on the floor, because no one in the town would take us in the hotel. Yeah, that was a very big action. That was a good action. And let me just say one other action, okay, that happened in Atlanta at the Peachtree Mall, because I'll never forget it.

We had little cards that said – we had made them up special for this trip, and this was outreach committee – you have just taken money from a lesbian, it said. I think this – maybe it was women's committee, now that I think about it, because – but, everyone

got excited about it. You have just taken money from a lesbian. You have just had an interaction with a lesbian, but you didn't even know it, and now you know that lesbians are everywhere – something like that. And, the goal of the action was simply to go to the mall and then buy a little something, or pretend to buy something, and then, when you gave the money, then also give this card, so then they read it and go, oh my God! you're a lesbian. Oh my God, we had such a good sense of humor. So, so – of course, none of us had any money. I definitely never had any money. I was always borrowing money from people. And so, we go to this one store, and this chick was following us around, because I had the pierced nose – I've had it for, what, 18 years of something. And, this girl is following around, and she's thinking I'm really cool, and I don't know why, because I was wearing this ridiculously insane outfit, but she thought I seem like a cool chick, because I had a pierced nose. So, I'm trying on different things, knowing full well I won't be able to buy any of them, and then I think I've decided maybe I would buy a belt, because I really wanted to give this card. And, Gerry Wells was with me, and Maxine, and Maxine's daughter – the younger one –

SS: Amy?

MM: Amy. And, so we get to the cash register and this girl's looking at me and she's like, where are you guys from? We're from New York. Oh cool, I want to go up there. That sounds so nice, New York and blah, blah, blah. So, I buy my little belt and then I give her the card, and she looks at it and she goes, Oh, my God, you are a lesbian? And I said, Yup, I sure am. Proud, happy as a clam – proud, proud, proud. She goes, are you a lesbian? to Maxine, and Maxine says, yes I am. And she says, Are you a lesbian? to Amy, and she goes, no, but I'm her daughter. And she goes, Oh, my God! Everybody,

there are lesbians in this store! I knew you were so cool, I want to go to New York! This is fantastic! Out of her mind. Oh my God! We wanted to have an effect, but she was just so excited. She was like, there are lesbians in this store, and they're from New York! This is so great! I am so glad you came in here! She just was waiting for an exciting thing to happen, and it was us! Oh my God, it was so fantastic. She said, give me more of those cards, I want more of those cards. So, I gave her a whole bunch of cards. I said, but you really should be a lesbian to use this card, but if you just want to use it to shock your friends, that's fine, too, actually, when you think about it. It's fine with us, we're not going to take it personally. That was so fun.

SS: What about that Republican women's event?

MM: That! was one of the all-time great events. Okay, so this was the whole thing. Alphonse D'Amato was going to be speaking at the Republican National – Republican Women's National Club – something like that.

SS: In New York?

MM: In Manhattan. And so, the whole goal was – this is when we came up with Mimi Holligher, which was my little passing – that was my alter ego, that we used in ACT UP a lot, for any kind of, like, passing things. And – so, this was what we were going to do. We were going to go into the Republican National Women's Club, and – I don't know how we – somebody had kept – got themselves on a list – God, we were so smart. They got themselves on a list, so we would always know what the enemy was doing, you know? And, then the idea was to infiltrate, and then, when we got in there, to – because we would have a nice concentration of powerful Republican women and men,

because Alphonse D'Amato was going to be speaking, to bring out our protest thing – our posters, and scream and yell and flyers, and that would be the whole thing.

Tape II
00:30:00

So, two things that were notable about it – first of all, there was this queen who had been a radical fairy – I forget his name now, but Gregg Bordowitz went out with him at one point – who's name I forget, it began with a "T" I think -- well, he was dressed up in drag, as were two other men – full drag, okay? Gloves, long dress, wig – so obviously in drag. And, we were meeting around the corner because it was mid-town. This was very – there were so many things that happened on that day – we were meeting around the corner first to – we had these big buttons made up that said, Lesbians for Bush, and they were huge. So, it said, Lesbians for BUSH – really big. And, we had a box of them. And, so, we were standing on the corner – around the corner from the thing, and we were all gathered, and the idea was, we'd take these – and we had them under our clothes, okay? And you either hold them or something, and then at the last minute you say, Lesbians for Bush! And you would scream, when we got in there. And, only in New York – people started to gather and say, hey, what are you giving away? Is there somebody giving away something? And so, I looked over and I said, well, it says Lesbians for – I'll take it. Is it free? It said, Lesbians for Bush, and he said, is it free? Is it free? I said, well yeah, it actually is. I'll take it. People started gathering around. We're, like, no, this is for our group. This is for a special ACT UP group, this is not – people thought, hey, they're giving something away over on 37th Street. We were besieged with people who wanted Lesbians for Bush pins because they were free.

Finally, we get rid of them, and then we file in – and I'll never forget it – I was wearing a little shift, and we decided – okay, I was going to go under a fake name, and

the name we came up with was Mimi Holligher, and the whole thing that I was going to come up with was – because we were trying – we were going to fake our way, like we were Republicans. So, my whole thing was, I was Mimi Holligher, and my father was Richard Holligher, who had worked in the Nixon administration in India – why? I came up with this whole elaborate story, because I knew people were going to be thinking, why does she have this huge ring in her nose, you know? So, I thought, I'll just pretend I was in India, and my name is Mimi. And, I said, my father is Richard Holligher. I have no idea who that is, but he, you know, he worked in the Nixon administration. And I carried that off – I want to tell you. Anyway, I was wearing a little red shift, and these really cute Papagallos shoes, and we had my hair done and everything – we go in there – hi, hi. There was a big staircase, I'll never forget it – grand staircase, up to the conference room, where they had a piano, and somebody was tinkling away and they had hors d'oeuvres. And, they were waiting for D'Amato to come, and we all made our way up. Gregg Bordowitz was there. God, what was that queen's name, who was in the radical fairies? It began with "T" – Timmy? Tim? Gregg Bordowitz would know, because he went out with him. They were hilarious. They were saying, hello, hello, pleased to meet you, and these men were looking at these drag queens like, hello, do I know you from somewhere? And they would say, well, I'm not sure, do you? [LAUGHS].

And we all pretended like we didn't know each other. So, I'm just mingling and I'm having conversations with these older men, saying, yeah, my father was in the Nixon administration – Richard Holligher – he worked in the embassy in Delhi. And they were, like, oh, yes, I remember. I was incredibly how easy it ease to fake people out. And then, after we had lots of mingling time, actually – and, you know, I talked to quite a

number of people – two things happened. One was, they got up – God, it’s shocking how people – they got up and this black man who was, I guess, called in for the job, was there to talk about how the Republicans were, during the election now, they were going to be doing a lot of entrepreneurial stuff in the black community, and they were going to bring a lot of black people in, and it was a weird recruitment thing.

But, there were no other black people there, except for the one – I think it was Ortez, who was in full drag regalia – he was the only other black – because he was saying to me, yes, because he said he had a conversation with that guy, and that guy kept saying, you should really consider what the Republicans are going to do for us. And Ortez would say, ummm hmmm, oh, I’ve considered it. Oh, these guys weren’t discovered. Then they – he made this little speech. Then, this woman – right out of a New Yorker cartoon – that kind of Upper East Side, Republican matron, stood up and said, we would like to announce the wonderful senator Alphonse D’Amato, who’s going to be speaking to us about the wonderful Republican party, and that was our cue to start our action – which, I can’t even remember what we had to scream, but I guess we were screaming ACT UP.

So, everyone’s kind of costumes came off, and those big Lesbians for Bush pins came out, and then we unfurled our little banner, and the most amazing thing happened – we had, maybe, six and a half minutes of having our impact, and then this big fat lady sat down at the piano and started singing “God Bless America” – God bless America, over our voices, as they called the police and the police came and were escorting us out. And then, when we got outside, this guy tried to hit us and spit on us – this old man who looked real conservative, on his way into the club yelling at us. And then, in the middle of all of it – I had to go to a temp job, I remember that very clearly – and I kept saying,

please don't arrest me, please don't arrest me. This happened to me a lot, because I have to go to a temp job, and we were being pushed, and there was all this chaos outside, and this girl walks by, and she has all this dry cleaning and she goes, Maria? And I said, yes? And she said, don't you remember me? We went to Smith together. And she was this girl who had taken the path that a lot of girls in the mid-'80's had taken. She'd gone to Wall Street, she'd become very successful. The dry cleaning was the thing that I'd never forgotten because I didn't own anything that could be – I was still sleeping in the same clothes. You could just get up and go the next day. And she had dry cleaning. And she said, what are you doing? And I said, I'm in the middle of this protest, here's our flyer. And she said – and this became kind of interesting theme for the rest of my time in ACT UP. She said, wow, I really envy you, you're doing something important. And, meanwhile, I had defaulted on my student loans. I never had enough money to pay my rent. I did not have a job, or I didn't have any kind of career path. I have a lot of self-doubts about these things. And she had all those nice, adult comfortable things. But, she thought that I was doing something really important. And that made that day – aside from the fact that all those things happened – an interesting day, because it outlined the difference between how I was living and how other people of my age and generation were living.

SS: How long did you stay in ACT UP?

MM: I was there '87, '88, '89, '90 – and I think my last action was in the beginning of '91, when Sarah Pettit and I started seeing each other. And, I think my last action was the end of '91 – yeah, because then I went to graduate school, and I didn't have the time anymore.

SS: Why did to decide to leave ACT UP?

MM: Well, ACT UP was a chosen family, and – well, it's – a lot of people died – one after the other – that I'd become close to.

SS: Like who?

MM: Well, Vito Russo was one, Oliver Johnston was one – some other people, who's now, all of a sudden I can't remember, but it seemed like a lot of people were dying – even after everything we'd been doing. And, I really, really believed when we started that people were going to live. And then, when they didn't, it was kind of shock to the system. Bradley Ball died. So, I started to worry about that, and I was 27, and I still didn't have any way of making a living. And, I felt like I had spent all my twenties doing very important, very difficult work, and a lot of the things we asked for, we started to get, which changed the nature of the group.

SS: Like what?

MM: Well, for instance, being – people in ACT UP now were working as consultants for the NIH, you know? The development of an AIDS industry, which was not there in '87, but by '90, was. So, you could make a living in AIDS – whereas, before, you had to have a job, and then your AIDS work was something outside of your job. So, people were able to make careers out of it. That changed things.

People drank a lot in ACT UP. There as a lot of drinking. There was a lot of grief that was not discussed. In fact, when I was interviewed by that other woman she said, did you guys ever have grief counseling or anything? And I said, are you kidding? We tried, and we all scoffed at it, and said there's nothing to talk about. But, there really was. But, we didn't know how to talk about it. And, after –

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: You never dealt with it?

MM: They don't make me run in the opposite direction, you know? You were asking me –

SS: So, you said, like, nobody dealt with the grief – why was that?

MM: Nobody dealt with grief because, well, we kept ourselves very, very busy. So, you were always on to another action. And, because the kind of prevailing attitude in the group – and these are the tacit agreements people make – there was never a statement. And by the way, don't cry. Instead, it was – the understanding was that you would take your grief and you would turn into rage, and you would take that rage and you would do something with it. And, therefore, grief or grieving did not really fit into that idea. The idea was that you would do something with that grief. But, the underlying presumption is that grief was always rage, you see – but it's not, really. I mean, grief is also sadness, and just loss. But, a lot of people, when the group started and when they came into the group, had already experienced that, and did not want to feel those things, and were tired of feeling sad and alone and defeated. So, it made sense that this was not the group for that. But, on a personal level, after three full years of doing it, that one would feel tired and tired of being angry. And, I know I started to feel that way.

I started to – well, I think – I remember trying to write about this. As I said, and I don't know if other people – we drank a lot. I look back on it now – a) because so many people I know now don't drink; and the fact that they don't drink is interesting to me. It's not just kind of a cultural shift of people cleaning up and everyone wanting to be sober and all that – it was also that there was an almost a desperate quality of, we drank a lot, but we partied a lot, we stayed up late, we worked really hard, we danced all the time.

I mean, there was a certain – there was a kind of intensity, an energy that was, on the one hand, very life affirming, and on the other hand, I see now as an almost suppression of the, perhaps more, somewhat private and not so lively reactions to sadness, you know? But, I don't remember ever – no, I don't remember ever dealing with –

SS: Years later, did you have a moment when you suddenly started to take certain things in or do you just feel like they'd just been put in a special place? Being surrounded by so much death ...

MM: I am still trying to understand what that means. I think it's had a huge impact on me. And, sometimes it has an impact in that I pretend it never happened, okay? Which is one way of knowing that it did. And, sometimes I think that I am overwhelmed to consider that the majority of my twenties was spent dealing with death and dying. Because, in fact, in the moment, I didn't feel I was dealing with that – I felt I was dealing with trying to find a cure for AIDS. And, the death and dying part was – there was no real language around it. We were almost even, I think – I remember people being somewhat even dismissive of the Kubler-Ross stages that one went through in grief. I mean, people somewhat laughed about it. So, there was a toughness that was created.

The most painful thing – if I were to characterize it as painful, and I don't know if that's completely accurate – but, let's put it this way, the most interesting thing about talking to you about ACT UP and AIDS is that the – there is a turning point, for me personally – where, once I stopped being involved in ACT UP, and went into this other path in my life, of which there really were three major paths – Smith, ACT UP and then

my film work – I stopped knowing people who were sick; I stopped having to go to memorial services, because I didn't know people who had AIDS anymore.

Tape III
00:00:00

I stayed friends with a very tight and small group of people from ACT UP – all of us in our twenties who, then – it was an interesting developmental time. We were also finding out who we were going to be, and what we wanted to be. And, some of them left New York. And then, it was as if – because I didn't have a bridge between that past and that present – it's as if the past just stopped existing.

SS: But, also, you got together with Craig and that makes a big difference, doesn't it?

MM: Well, by that time, I was not involved in ACT UP anymore – though, that had a huge impact on my relationship with the lesbian and gay community, certainly. I fell in love with this man in graduate school. It was unexpected. And it really tore my life apart.

SS: So, now when you work – say what you're doing now.

MM: Working in television, as a writer.

SS: Okay, so when you're working in television or in film, and you come into contact with people who you know are gay and you can see that they have AIDS, do you make that – do you let them know that you come from that world?

MM: Well, it's funny you say that – I would have to say an acquired modesty would not allow me to, now. But, I did have an encounter recently. Some people came to the television show I work on from the –

SS: What show is that?

MM: It's called *Without a Trace* and it's an FBI, missing persons – you know, drama – and some people came to visit us from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, because in March, they're doing – excuse me – some – they wanted to bring it to the national consciousness, how many people are uninsured in the United States. So, they were meeting with different television writers, to say, can you build in anything about people who are uninsured in your TV shows. And, the executive producer brought me in – of course, knowing that I'd had this activist background – somewhat vaguely, you know – I was always talking about politics and stuff.

So, they brought me in, and this gentlemen and his partner – a woman – made their presentation. And, he seemed very familiar to me, but I didn't make any kind of connection. And then, when the executive producer said, and this is Maria Maggenti, and he said, the Maria Maggenti? And I said, what do you mean? And he said, you're from ACT UP aren't you? And I said, oh my God, yes. And he had come to ACT UP meetings all those years ago and had remembered me from that time and – which I was mercilessly teased at work afterwards, about that. But, we were able to have a certain kind of shorthand about health insurance, because I knew a lot about it, and I knew a lot about what he was talking about and how I felt we could actually even work in a story about someone who goes missing because they can't pay their medical bills. So, sometimes I can make connections around that. But, you what else is weird, Sarah, is that – well, first of all, I haven't met a person with AIDS in a long time that I didn't already know. But, let's say I did. There are people who were not part of ACT UP and who don't really know about it. They know it vaguely. So, how do you say, I know what you're talking about? Or, I might even know more about what you can be dealing with or

how to deal with it? But, the nature of the illness changed, too. So, people that would die very quickly in the mid-'80's, now lived, and lived for a long time. So, that changed a lot of things, as well. I left ACT UP, because I had started graduate school and also – and I started –

SS: Can you tell about your speech on the floor of ACT UP about going to film school? It's like ACT UP legend.

MM: You mean the one about how when I asked everybody for a dollar? Is that what I did? And then, I put the little flyer out, and then Michael Musto was really mean and wrote about it in the Village Voice? That one?

SS: Yeah.

MM: Well, I don't even remember – that's the thing. I think – what did I do? I mean, I guess I stood up in front of the room and said, Look, I'm going to go to graduate school – I don't know what I said, because I know what I said when I applied to the graduate school and I, and I said that I wanted to be a lesbian Spike Lee – I remember saying that, and that I wanted to be able to bring all the experiences that I had, that all of us I'd had, and try to make them into story, and make them into movies. And then, subsequently, when I got into NYU, there were people that used to tease me and said, the only reason they let you in is because they were afraid you were going to have a sit-in – that you would bring your crew, you know – to the school and, like, have some kind of a demonstration. But, I don't remember – what did I say?

SS: You asked for money.

MM: I did?

SS: You said, I'm going to make lesbian films. And I gave you money.

MM: You did?

SS: **Yes.**

MM: Did you give me \$10 dollars?

SS: **Yes, I gave you \$10 dollars. I remember, I was so excited.**

MM: Did I give you \$10 dollars back?

SS: **No, you made a lesbian film. Did Larry Kramer give you money to go –**

MM: He gave me \$1000 dollars for my first semester at graduate school. Yes, he did.

SS: **And what was your relationship with Larry?**

Tape III
00:10:00

MM: My relationship with Larry is difficult and complicated. I, I have never been good at having a “mentor” – though I’ve always wanted one. I always was waiting for someone to kind of say, yeah, I see something in you and I want to nurture it. But, either I was too stubborn or arrogant or – then, I realize, oh, I don’t really need your help. I don’t know what made it difficult. Well, he’s also very difficult. But, he did something that I’ve never forgotten and that I have used many, many times. I brought him my very first script that I had written in graduate school – my first sync sound script, and he – I dropped it off in his apartment, then I came back the next day, and I looked at it, and it was completely ripped up. I mean, he had red pen over the whole thing. But, then he sat very patiently with me and went through every page. And he said something I’ve never forgotten. He said, your unconscious came up with all of these things, and now your challenge is to use your conscious mind to make them make sense.

And, I had no understanding of what my unconscious mind was. I didn't know how to use what was in my imagination consciously. I didn't know what the skill part of it was. I knew what the feelings were. And that was a very powerful shift for me, and, in fact something I've used many, many times. So – because I felt like what he was saying is that you can be free and let everything out, and write anything that you want to write, and then you have to figure out how to make it make sense. And that's where another part of you have to take over – the writer part of you. And, he was very helpful in that respect. But, then he went off on his own travels, and I was not included in that.

SS: Let's get back to sex and love in ACT UP, which was something that – I mean, everybody says ACT UP was sexy –

MM: It was.

SS: But, what was your actual experience of sex and love in ACT UP?

MM: Really difficult – ha ha. For a group that had so much sexual energy – and it had a lot of sexual energy, I think, that in a way that's important to understand in context. The context that I would want to mention is – so, here are all these people who are coping with an illness that is transmitted sexually. So, to be sexual in defiance of that – happily sexual, using condoms or other forms of safe sex, was extremely bold. And, it was especially bold to say that you were still going to have sex and fuck and be a cocksucker and all these things, when there was so much shame attached to the fact that this disease was sexually transmitted. And, so you would have guys in there, who weight 92 pounds, with a cane. So, who – under other circumstances were being used. And, remember, in the larger, societal sense were used as almost like a poison – don't go there, you know? They were proof. Look what will happen to you, if you have sex. And the

fact that the people said, well, it doesn't have to happen. And, even if it does happen, I'm still going to be a sexual alive person. And to see sex as a very positive experience, was truly radical.

So – and it wasn't a button down group, you know. It was interesting, because there were a lot of boys who looked like club boys, and yet they had a really extraordinary consciousness raising in the experience, and became very politically right-on. And there were boys, too, who still felt a lot of pressure. I know, because I remember them talking about it – you know, to be a certain kind of gay man, even in ACT UP, and feeling unattractive and feeling like, could I compete with the swim team, which was like –

SS: Who was on the swim team?

MM: Adam. Well, Michael Goff, Adam, what's his name? Who was is boyfriend, who was so gorgeous. Tassos, and some other boys whose names I've forgotten. And, you know, they got that swim team name because, because – I used to have these gay pride parties. And one time, I had a gay pride party in my little apartment on Tenth Street – it was so boiling hot, that people literally were sprouting – I mean, they were sprouting sweat. They were schvitzing, from the top of their heads. And, a bunch of boys left my apartment, ran across the street, jumped into the baby pool at Tompkins Square Park and then came back, half naked and dripping wet. And then, they got the nickname, the swim team. And you know, they were all gorgeous – you know, buff kind of gorgeous. And, so, the public image, I guess, of young, physically healthy boys, is part of what created the idea that it was a sexy group. There was a lot of sex. I can't say I had a lot of sex.

SS: Were most of your lovers in that time from ACT UP? Or, were they from outside.

Tape III
00:15:00

MM: Oh, only from ACT – I didn't even know anyone from outside – yeah, I mean, I didn't – I don't think I even talked to people from the outside, if you want to know the truth.

SS: So, if you're sleeping with somebody or you're having a relationship with somebody in ACT UP, how is it viewed by other people?

MM: Oh, that's a good question. How was it viewed? I mean, Heidi was my big girlfriend when I was there, and I think that maybe people saw it as – I don't know, like we were the little cute couple of ACT UP, maybe? But, I never really thought about how people would see us.

SS: Would you want to be sure you were serious about someone before you showed, publicly, that you were involved with each other?

MM: Me, no.

SS: Yeah.

MM: All I needed was a few kisses and it was, like – yeah, I think I'm with her, you know. But, I was so – aw golly, I was in so much conflict. I mean, I wanted a girlfriend, but I didn't want a girlfriend, but I wanted a girlfriend, and I was just such a mess – golly, when I look back on it, I mean – you know, I was very much – I was not an easy person to be involved with at all.

SS: But, also, you were one of many lesbians who was involved with Gregg Bordowitz.

MM: I know, isn't that great.

SS: How do you understand that now?

MM: Well – how do I understand it? You know, he was really smart, and he was a very sensual person and he was a really good kisser, and I don't know – he was really brainy. You know, I got my apartment on Tenth Street because of Gregg Bordowitz. I would not have that apartment without him – if it had not been for him, because I got kicked out of my apartment on 77th Street, and then I stood up at ACT UP and I said, does anyone have an apartment? And he said, I do – I know of one, and it's on Tenth Street and we can share it, and then he never unpacked, for the first six months, and then I kicked him out and then I kept the apartment. It's so classic New York. Anyway, it wasn't even a legal apartment. It was a totally illegal sublet, but that's a whole other story.

SS: Do you think that people could have real relationships in ACT UP? Especially, romantic relationships?

MM: Well, I think people did. I can't really tell you who, now – well, Avram and Phil, who are still together. I definitely think that they could, but there's something about the energy in the group that made it, maybe, a lot easier to be single and just have lots of flirtations and – I think for me, as a lesbian in the group, it would have been so much better to have a girlfriend, you know? I just felt, sometimes like that would just affirm me in a way and, and I wouldn't be – I wouldn't feel so freakishly alone, or I might not feel so different. Because, I also felt so different than a lot of the lesbians I was meeting.

SS: Why was that?

MM: Well, I guess I felt younger, because a lot of the women I was meeting were older. And, I guess, on a style level, I felt really different, because – and this was true, even when I was at Smith, you know. I always had long hair, and I liked wearing dresses and I stood out in that way, I guess. I mean, I didn't wear that many dresses.

SS: But, was there a lesbian flirtation going on? Because, men always talked about constantly cruising?

MM: Oh, the cruising, constant cruising. With the lesbians, not so much. No, unfortunately. There were flirtations between gay men and lesbians, though – which is interesting. I know, it caused a lot of anxiety for some people. They didn't like that, and it was not proper, in a way. But, you kind of couldn't help it.

SS: Do you think that women joined ACT UP to get a girlfriend?

MM: No, I don't. I think they might have stopped by, to see if there was anyone cute. And, sometimes there were. And, sometimes there were more than other times. But, the majority of those people who stuck it out were women who were really deeply affected by AIDS, and really wanted to be involved in ADIS work. And, that's very different than showing up to find somebody cute, you know. And the cute girls didn't seem to last as long. You know, they had other things going on, I guess – you know, bar culture or – I don't know, actually, where they went, but – because I never really saw seem to meet any of them.

SS: You had some cute girlfriends.

MM: I had some cute girlfriends, and then, when I met P – that's really when I started to get out of ACT UP –

SS: Sarah Pettit?

MM: Sarah Pettit. I feel in love with her. I was writing for OutWeek Magazine, and I fell in love with her. And that's somebody I did not want to announce to anybody. I just wanted to see her and see – I felt like the group had become kind of a fishbowl, so everybody knew everybody and I wanted not to have that. I did not want to have everybody saying, who's Maria going out with? So, when I started seeing her, we didn't go out together around anything, until we had – came to the St. Patrick's Cathedral protest. And, we were together, and we were kissing and everything and that was kind of my announcement that I was with this new girl. And, you know, and then I was with her for – that was '90, '91 until '92, I guess, until I met Craig, basically. But, I had Jill Harris in between there. And, she wasn't really involved in ACT UP. I mean, she knew about it. She had come by. She thought it was too macho, and she left. She did not want to AIDS work. And, so, I was kind of fascinated by her, because she didn't know all the inner workings of it, and she didn't know all the people. So, I thought that was a good thing. And, then that made me not want to be as involved in ACT UP, actually, because I wanted to be with her, and she didn't want to be involved with ACT UP.

Tape III
00:20:00

SS: Well, I just have one last question for you, Maria.

MM: That's it?

SS: Is there more you want to talk about?

MM: No, no, go ahead.

SS: Looking back, what would you say were ACT UP's – if you could really say clearly, what ACT UP's greatest achievement was? And, also what its biggest disappointment was – looking back?

MM: Well, I do believe that ACT UP's greatest achievement was that it did change the course of the public debate around AIDS – which is astonishing to me.

SS: In what way?

MM: Well, through it's public civil disobedience, by using non-violent civil disobedience, by using the media the way that it did, by having a relentlessly, curious, hard-working interested group of people – we actually became smarter than the people who were supposed to be telling us what was happening with AIDS. And, that had a huge influence on the course of the public discourse around the illness – even just trying to get the word person with AIDS into the vernacular – which I really hold ACT UP responsible for – happened because of the way that the group had a public impact.

SS: Just personally – extrapolating from that – how do you respond now when you enter into a system, and you actually know more than the people who run the system? I'm sure, ACT UP isn't the only time you felt that way.

MM: I try now to approach situations like that with humility. Whereas, before, I would have not done that. I would have immediately moved in and said, you don't know what you're talking about, and I'll tell you why, and this is how you should be doing things. But, that's very hard to do as an individual – it's much easier to do with a group, and I exist, almost exclusively now, as an individual in the world. I do not have an affinity group, you know – that I can do things with. So, that makes a very big difference in my approach to those kinds of challenges.

SS: Are you comfortable with that?

MM: I've gone through very very sad and dark moments not having something larger than myself to be connected to – very, very difficult moments – extremely painful

– feelings of loss, after leaving ACT UP were very pronounced. They weren't immediate, because I was very involved in this new thing, which was making movies. And then, I made a movie, and I was in the movie business – *Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* – and then I started writing these Hollywood movies, and I was making a good living, and felt terrible, terrible loss of community. Yeah, I miss it. I miss being part of something bigger than myself – with like-minded people. I sometimes miss the insularity of that, you know? The comfort that it brings to be different and then – but, then, have other people who are different but we're together, as opposed to just being different all by yourself.

But, I also know that I could not have sustained that level of anger for an extended period of time. It was absolutely too difficult. And, I began to want to see – and this is why I went into fiction writing – I began to want to see the world as gray and not so black and white. And there was a period in ACT UP when you really – to sustain itself, to do the things we were doing – it was not a gray matter. It was the right thing to do, or the wrong thing to do. And that was very, very helpful. But, I began to feel like I needed – I couldn't make that decision anymore. I didn't know what was completely right or wrong. And, sometimes, it occupied a strange place in the middle. And, perhaps that was reflected, Sarah, in my personal life, when I had gone from being a lesbian, and only being involved with women, and only loving women, and only having sex with women, to falling in love with a man, which turned my whole life upside down. So, perhaps those two things are related. I'm not sure. But, I knew that I was at a place where I wanted to – I wanted to retreat into gray, and that felt all right with me.

Tape III
00:25:00

In terms of disappointments of ACT UP – well, the disappointments are personal, they are not really political. I – with hindsight, of course, I don't know how a group like that could have gotten any bigger, and had any more of an impact, except to have been able to cure the AIDS crisis. Or, at least to have stopped something that has happened, which is that AIDS is now a “manageable” chronic illness, which, I can tell you, having nursed my father through his last two years of life, in which he was a diabetic – which is also considered a chronic manageable illness – which is a hideous, hideous disease – diabetes – that that was – we always said, we did not want it to become that; and it has become that. And that's really unfortunately.

To have pushed, instead, for a cure – absolutely, only a cure – not being okay for seven or eight or nine or 10 years on drugs – not letting that be the end of it, I think, is very unfortunate. And, I don't know if ACT UP – I don't know if ACT UP could have changed that. But, I wish that that were the case.

SS: Thank you, Maria.

MM: You're welcome. Thank you for talking to me. Gosh.