

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

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

Interviewee: **Andrew Miller**

Interview Number: **056**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **October 4, 2004**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Andrew Miller
October 4, 2004

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so to begin, can you just say your name, today's date, how old you are, and where we are.

ANDREW MILLER: I'm Andrew Miller. And today's October 6th, 2004. And we're in my apartment, in Little Italy. And what was the other question?

SS: How old are you?

AM: I'm gonna be 40 in five weeks.

SS: Yay. So you know, I know that you, I remember you as a very important person in ACT UP that did a lot of important work. And we're definitely gonna talk about that. But I want to start a little bit before that, so we can get a sense of where you were coming from before you came to ACT UP. So where did you grow up?

AM: Well, I'm from New York. I was born in Brooklyn. I'm very proud of that.

SS: Oh, which neighborhood?

AM: Well, that's kind of a long, convoluted story. I was born in Carson C. Peck Memorial Hospital, on President Street, in Crown Heights. And then I was whisked away to the suburbs. My parents are both from Williamsburg and they grew up there during the Depression. And then they, then they got married; they moved to, so they're from a generation of Brooklyn Jews who felt like escaping Brooklyn was – mandatory. So they moved from Brooklyn to Greenpoint, and then, once they were married and had their first kid, they moved to Ocean Avenue. And then, after they had their second kid, they moved to 160th Street, between 16th and 17th Avenues, in

Whitestone. And that's when I came along. And after they'd lived there for a long time. And I was the excuse to get the house in the suburbs. So they, as soon as I was born, they moved to Long Island. Nassau County.

SS: So did they make sure you had a Jewish education?

AM: My father did, yeah. My father, it's funny you should ask about that. My father was an Orthodox Jew. Or at least he grew up – I mean, Williamsburg then was not what Williamsburg is now. I mean, it, it was, it was essentially an extension of the Lower East Side and so there, it was not full of Hasids. It was a, basically an immigrant Jewish community.

And my father was from the, was very much from an immigrant Jewish family. His, he was the first member of his family to be born here. His three older sisters and his parents all came from the old country. And so he grew up going to an Orthodox cheder and, and was very much culturally, if not religiously, steeped in that tradition.

Tape I
00:05:00

My mother not so much, at all. My mother's family, and especially on her father's side, had been in Brooklyn for year-, for generations. And –

SS: Did your father change your name to Miller, or was that changed before?

AM: {laughs} That's a really good question. I asked him about that. And the story that he used to tell was that on El-, on Ellis Island, when his father came over, the name got changed from Millman, which is what it was in the old country, because his paren-, his father was a miller. Millman 'cause they spoke Yiddish — to Miller. And even when I was a little kid that didn't make much sense to me. So I recently did some,

genealogical research of my own, and looked on, and there is no record of his father having ever come through Ellis Island. So I, you know, I don't know.

My father changed the rest of his name. My father's name, on his birth certificate, is Easy, E-A-S-Y. Easy Miller. Because that's how green his sisters were. They wanted to name him Isidore. And so they said, Izzy. But it sounded like Easy, and that's what the recorder of births wrote down. And he never liked Isidore anyway, so he changed his name {laughs} like a good assimilationist from Isidore to Irving.

SS: He thought no one would know.

AM: And, out of the frying pan into the fire, I, you know. So his name was Irving Isidore Miller.

SS: So did you grow up kosher and that kind of thing?

AM: Well, I grew up going to a conservative synagogue, at his behest. And he was very involved with that. I mean, he was president of the congregation, and, and yeah, my mother kept kosher. I mean, she grew up kind of culturally Jewish, but never went to synagogue. And you know, I once asked my mother if she believed in God. And, and she said, it's not that I don't believe in God; it's that I don't think he's done very well by me. And I think that that sort of, that kind of sums up my mother's theology. I mean, she wasn't, she isn't a religious person, and she never really, I think if it hadn't been for my father, she would not have insisted on this kind of religious inculcation that her children received. But I grew up going to synagogue five times a week.

SS: Five times a week?

AM: Sure. I went to Hebrew school; you know, Monday, Wednesday and Sunday. And then we went to services Friday night and Saturday morning.

SS: So you grew up with this very strong sense of community. Your father was in leadership in the synagogue. I mean, this, this was obviously a big family value.

AM: Yeah, I don't know how much of a sense of community it was, to be perfectly honest with you. I, I grew up with a sense of obligation to it. It never penetrated. I mean, I never believed; I always had a huge problem with it. I mean, I grew up immersed in the culture. But, I never, I, I didn't, when I was a little kid, I believed in God.

But I never understood, I was never comfortable with even when I was very little, even, like I remember being 8, and 10, and being very uncomfortable with the idea of public prayer. I never understood why – I never understood all of the ritual. I never understood why God needed to be praised, or wanted to be praised and worshiped. And I didn't understand why that had to happen in a specific place, in public. It always embarrassed me. And I never liked it. I never liked reading these things out of a book. I always hated Yom Kippur, because I always felt that there was something ridiculous about reading, confessing to your sins in alphabetical order, out of, you know, out of a predetermined list.

So you know, and then, after, after a certain point, I stopped believing there was a God. And then, it didn't work for me at all.

Tape I
00:10:00

I never got a sense of community from it, ever. Ever. So, no.

SS: So when did you start to become politically aware?

AM: Mm. You know what? Until, you know, maybe a little bit in college. My senior year of college. I went to Columbia. Somehow. And I got involved with the group of students that took over the Administration Building, and demanded that the university divest from its dealings with companies that were doing business with the South African government. That was a very big issue at the time. It was, it was 1984. And the university was heavily invested in those companies, as were many universities across the country, as was the United States government. And the government in South Africa was still the apartheid government at the time. And the United States government's policy under Reagan was one of – I forget what it was called. But it was, it was some kind of cooperative engagement, the hope being that if we continued to engage with these people that somehow we could, you know, change their minds by being a friendly example of – I don't know – how to be democratic racists.

But anyway, so I became very involved with that movement on campus. And kind of by accident and I had been involved with the gay student group on campus. But the gay student group on campus didn't really actually do anything political, particularly. I mean, we threw dances once a month. And that was pretty political in the early '80s, just sort of being visible. Even though at a place like Columbia, was being out and being visible was a statement, still, certainly. But it, it wasn't like it is now.

SS: Were you out in high school?

AM: No.

SS: Okay, so you waited till you went to college.

AM: Yeah.

SS: But those dances were notorious. Gay People at Columbia.

AM: Yes. {laughs}

SS: Yeah. They weren't tiny little dances. The whole city –

AM: They were not –

SS: -- went to them.

AM: -- tiny little dances.

SS: Yeah.

AM: Yeah. Thank you for reminding me of that. And I used to work the door. I mean, I was a member of Gay People at Columbia, and I helped throw those things. And I, yes. And so they did not take place without me, and I was there every Friday, when we had them.

And we had them at Earl Hall, which was where our office was, which was one of the big build-, it was the religious center at, at Columbia, but that's where we had our office, and it was a big building with a rotunda. And kind of this fabulous space for dances.

And they were notorious. They were known all over the city, and people would come from far and wide. There were often more non-students than Columbia students at those dances. And they had a reputation all during the '70s. And we carried it on.

SS: Let me ask you this. I know it's hard to remember this type of thing, but in that historical moment, when you're an out gay student and you're doing, you're in the gay organization, and then you participate in the South Africa stuff, were you there as a gay person? Or was that not, was it seen as a coalition, in some way, or?

AM: Yeah there, it was a coalition. My recollection of it was that the leadership of that group, of which I was not a member, was certainly black student, but there was, it was a coalition, and it sort of formed itself.

Tape I
00:15:00

What happened was that different groups of students came together, sort of on their own, and even the school newspaper started making fun of it. Because what they would do is they would, they would come, and they would put up their own poster on the front of Hamilton Hall that would say, you know, 76 business students, you know, from the business school, support divestment. And then, you would get another poster that said how many architecture students, and students from the Chinese Students Association, or from whatever. So yeah, it did sort of form this odd coalition of leftist or radical students on campus that way.

SS: Were there any openly gay people in leadership, who were out in their leadership?

AM: I don't remember. I don't remember.

SS: Okay.

AM: Steve Quester was very involved with them. And I don't remember how involved he, how high up he was in the hierarchy of the leadership, but they certainly were not gay-unfriendly. It just wasn't an issue.

SS: Okay. And what were you studying in college?

AM: {laughs} Something terribly useful to me, later in life.

SS: What was it?

AM: I was studying Medieval [and] Renaissance literature.

SS: Okay, so you were a scholar.

AM: I don't know how much of a scholar I was. I have a degree in English – from a major American university. And I can say that I was never required to read a piece of American literature. Columbia was quite a place to go to school in the early '80s. It was still all men.

SS: Did you choose a men's school on purpose?

AM: I had no idea it was a men's school when I applied. {laughs} I didn't mind, once I got there. But, yeah, I didn't have a clue. I was completely clueless.

SS: So what was it like to be an out gay student at an all-male school at that time?

AM: Columbia was a very different place in the early '80s. It was what was it like? I imagine that it was, I mean, I don't know; I only have my own experience. Certainly, coming from where I did, I had a miserable, miserable time in junior high and high school. And I actually dropped out of high school; I never graduated.

So I went to high school in one of these kind of white-flight towns, on Long Island. So I basically went to a ghetto high school. Although interestingly enough, it was – I never really had any trouble with the black kids in school. It was always the other white kids that I had a lot of trouble with, just in terms of their picking up on my being gay and hassling me about it.

I imagine coming out at Columbia was probably easier than doing it at many other places. Certainly there were lots of other gay people around; there was an organization in place. There was, but there were problems inherent in it, too. We used to put up posters for our dances; they used to get tear – torn down all the time.

I remember, once I did an interview with the *Spectator*, the newspaper at Columbia. And after that, I got threatening phone calls and was just harassed for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks. And then it also happened to another woman, who was in the article as well, at Barnard.

So, I mean, it's not like it was, it was, what I imagine it might be like today. It was still a risk to do it. But –

SS: And what year did you graduate?

AM: '85.

SS: '85. Okay, so when you got there, like two years in, in your second year of college is the beginning of the AIDS crisis.

AM: Yeah.

SS: And when did, do you remember when you first became aware of it, or when you first heard about it?

Tape I
00:20:00

AM: I first heard about it my very first year there, actually. I went to Columbia. I don't know why I went to Columbia. I went to Columbia, basically, because, well, I went to Columbia because I wanted to get the hell out of my parents' house, and I knew that if I tried to do what I really wanted to do, which was to go to Juilliard, that it was going to be the path of most resistance. So I picked a path –

SS: To do what? What did you want to do at Juilliard?

AM: I was a viola player and I was studying at the Manhattan School of Music. And, and that's what I wanted to do. But I knew that, if I tried that, there was just, it was just gonna, it was gonna cause all sorts of problems. So I picked the path of least resistance. And I figured somehow I'd figure out a way to like keep studying music.

So, I'm sorry; what was the question? {laughs}

SS: How did you first hear about AIDS?

AM: So I already knew people in the city. Because I'd been at Manhattan School of Music for two years, and I'd been going to these chamber music festivals in, in the summer, to play. Up in Maine. So I knew lots of older musicians. Some of whom were gay.

I remember one of them, who I was madly in love with at the time — his name is Fritz — coming up to meet me at Columbia, after I'd gotten there freshman year. And I remember this so clearly. He, like, was giving me a lecture. 'Cause I was 16, too; I was 16 when I was a freshman in college.

And he said, he told me, he said, now, you be careful, you know, where you go. 'Cause I think he thought I was gonna like go down to the piers or something.

And I was like completely green and naive. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, like where any of these places were. But he was like, if you go to the Spike, or you go to the Anvil, or you go down to the piers, there are these guys out there, they're gonna get off on the fact that you might not be into it, or that you might, you might put up a fight. And after, years later, I thought what made him think I wouldn't be into it, but —

And then, but I remember, then he said and there's this new thing out there that these guys in California are getting. You know, you could get herpes. And then there's this new thing out there that these guys in California are getting. And that was the first time that I heard it, about it.

So I'd already heard about it in 1981.

SS: Is he still alive?

AM: Yes. I just ran into him, actually. He was the first guy I ever slept with. I was determined to get him in bed. He was this tall, lanky, Swiss-German violin player. Gorgeous. And, yes.

SS: So he warned you.

AM: He warned me. And yes. And he is still alive. Magically. Doing very well. He has since hooked up with a cello player that I knew from back then, who is actually younger than I am and they're happily ensconced, with, a couple of puppies, and, it's disgusting. {laughs}

SS: So how did AIDS become more, I mean how did it enter into your daily consciousness?

AM: Well, a couple guys I went to school with got real sick. Even during school. And nobody really knew what it was. I remember, I was going to school, and I worked as a cataloguer in the library, too. And so I was always friends with older guys. And this one guy I worked with turned yellow one semester. Which was weird. He got like, he must, I don't know, it must have been hepatitis or something. But, and finally, it became clear, there was, something was up.

And I remember, I remember one day, Michael Sovern, the president of Columbia University, sent around this e-, this mail, this letter, to everybody on campus, talking about AIDS. And saying – or whatever it was called at the time. And acknowledging that it existed, and saying that, that no one at, in the Columbia community had been directly affected.

But clearly, people had. There was a guy upstairs — I lived in John Jay Hall and, even in my freshman year, there was a guy upstairs who lived on the 15th floor, which was the gay floor. And he was this crazy, drug-addicted party queen. And was out every night, and used to wander back to, for his 9 a.m. French class at, after a night at Studio [54]. And he was getting sick, and —

So it, it kind of, and I remember, I went to this health forum that was sponsored by Gay People at Columbia. Just to learn more about it. And I remember sitting next to this guy. And there was a nurse there, and she, her big thing was, and there was no information; that was the other thing. I mean, it wasn't like there was any information to — Her big thing was, well, we can empower gay men by teaching them how to inspect for swollen glands, the way we empower women to examine their breasts for lumps. That was the level of discourse at the time.

And I remember sitting next to this guy. And he was hysterical. 'Cause he was like, I think I might have this thing, and no one has any information for me. And he was like, I could just feel how hysterical he was. At the time, people had no idea how you got it. People didn't want to sit next to him. And it was freaky.

So even in college, I remember it just kind of like seeping into my consciousness that way. I wasn't, and I remember starting to get concerned for myself. I remember — I remember thinking — I wonder if I have it. I wonder if I'll get it. If I, yeah, I remember that. I wonder, I remember thinking, I wonder if I have it. I wonder if I get it, if I'll get it if I sleep with this guy.

SS: But you slept with him anyway? Or you didn't?

AM: Well, I didn't sleep with, no, not with that guy —

SS: No, I mean the person that you were thinking this about.

AM: Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't.

SS: Do you remember how, what your instinctual criteria were at the time?

AM: {sigh} Oh, I don't know. I'm sure I – it made me really crazy. Do I remember my instinctual criteria? I guess I thought maybe, well, if he's young, if he's my age, he probably doesn't have it. If he hasn't slept around with a lot of other guys, he probably doesn't have it. If we only do this, but not this, then I probably won't get it. Stuff like that. But I think that very early on — and, and I think this has to do, frankly, with this, this has to do with AIDS, but it also has to do with kind of my mental state in general back then — I, it, it made me really withdraw. I had only just come out. And so I was out. And I was sort of processing being gay. And I still did all of that. But I kind of withdrew from the sexual aspects of it. A lot.

SS: So where did you get information? Like when did you first hear about AIDS being sexually transmitted, or about safe sex, or any of that kind of stuff?

AM: Well, I volunteered at the Gay Switchboard. Another community relic.

SS: Where was it at the time?

AM: It was down here, on Bleecker Street. It was on Broadway, between Bleecker and Bond. And so I had access to a lot of information, through my volunteer work there. So whatever information there was, we had. And then, but there wasn't very much information, and I remember, at the time, we weren't even advising people to get

tested. Because there wasn't anything that you could do with the information once you knew. There were no drugs. And there, so there was no real point in getting the information. That's how early on that was. And I think that was in, probably '83, '84.

SS: So at the same time that you are withdrawing sexually, you were actually entering more deeply into the gay community.

Tape I
00:30:00

AM: Yeah.

SS: You were going off-campus and being an activist at the Switchboard.

AM: Absolutely. And the sexual experiences that I did have tended to terrify me. I remember – I remember this one guy that I met at a chamber music festival. I continued to play while I was in college, and I went away, and I did a chamber music festival over the summer.

And I met this one guy. And he turned out to be like this crazy kinda guy, and I was very, I mean, you have to understand; I was very naive. In a lot of ways, I was a very kind of weird, sheltered little kid. And I went to college very young. And I'd had kind of– my brother and sister were much, much older than I was. They're 12 and 11 years older than I am. And maybe 11 and 10 years older than I am. But anyway, and so I grew up this kind of squirrely, hypersmart, bookish, musical, isolated kid, with, who was gay.

So I wasn't, like, particularly savvy about the world, or other people. And so I wasn't a good judge of character for a really long time. And so I got involved with this guy. And he turned out to be really crazy. And so that experience really freaked me out. And I remember like I got involved with him, and then, I don't know, the breakup

was really ugly, and I remember calling Fritz, and Fritz saying, oh, why'd you get involved with him? I know him; he's got this past, and blah blah blah. And that's where I got more information about it.

And I remember, that was like the first year that the GMHC Hotline was in effect. 'Cause I remember calling them from Maine. Where I was at the time. And saying, look, this is what I did; am I in danger? Blah blah blah. That kind of thing. They were really unhelpful at the time, actually.

SS: Why?

AM: They were completely overwhelmed; they were understaffed; I don't think they had a lot of information. It was 1984. It, it – people, it's funny. If you – I've tried to explain what it was like. And I've written about this, actually, recently, in *Gay City News*.

If you try to explain that to younger gay men now, like men in their thirties or their twenties, they don't, they can't grok that; they can't, and it's hard. It's hard to explain to, to give them a reference about, I think that for a lot of them, they kind of understand intellectually what was scary about the AIDS crisis, and they understand that, yes, it was scary because we lived through a time where lots of our friends died. And, and how disturbing that must have been. And of course, that was terrible.

But there's so much that came before that. That kind of slow unraveling of the fabric of our community, through lack of information, and fear, and not having answers, and being sick, and not knowing what to do, or having somebody else be sick, and not knowing how to fix it, and not knowing if you were gonna get it, and not having

anybody that you could ask about it, or not wanting anybody to know. Not wanting anybody else to know; not being able to tell anybody else.

Tape I
00:35:00

It's very hard to explain what that atmosphere was like: that there was actually a six- or nine-month period of time where, I remember rushing out to get my passport, because there was a six- or nine-month period of time when Bush and the Congress was actually considering making an HIV test a requirement for getting an American passport. And was it ever gonna happen? Well, I don't know. But I didn't have a passport. I thought I should maybe go get one. And it was – it took its toll on me.

SS: In what way?

AM: In a lot of ways that I'm only just beginning to discover, now that I'm about to turn 40, I think. But I think it, at the time, it took its toll on me in making me very, well, making me very sexually phobic, and making me, at the same time, kind of desperate to seek out a community. I think. I mean, what I didn't do was go back in the closet. That never seemed to be an alternative for me. I had had it with that. I knew I never wanted to do that. That was never an option or an answer for me. But what I wanted to do – but I knew I wanted to do something. Those are the short-term effects. Long-term, it really had an effect on the way I lived my life. In a lot of ways. We can talk about that later.

SS: Let's talk about it now. Like how? It affected all of us

AM: Well, I used to think, you're – my father died when I was 19, while I was still in college. And I used to think that, that his death was sort of, the reason that I had this kind of security fetish, in a way. Because I made a lot of decisions in my life

that involved making sure that – I made a lot of decisions in my life that involved forgoing taking chances for a steady paycheck and health insurance. And I always thought, oh, well that has to do with the fact that my father died suddenly, and left me in the lurch, and yada yada yada. And I don't think it does. I think it has more to do with the AIDS crisis. And I'm only now beginning, being able to kind of break away from that. And realize that there are different ways to, that I can take care of myself, and that working a job that I hate and behaving in a way that is – conforms with society's model of responsibility, is not the only one.

SS: I'm gonna challenge you. Okay, let's change tapes. After we change tapes, I will challenge you.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: Okay. I see it completely the opposite. 'Cause I look at you, and I see this guy who's teaching poor people, who's writing for *Out* magazine, who's writing for *Gay Community*, for, what's it called?

AM: *Gay City News*.

SS: *Gay City News*. I mean, that, I mean you're describing, I'm seeing this person who's still committed to the gay and lesbian press; who's a do-gooder; you know, who's still in the community. I mean, that's the opposite of what you just described.

AM: I know, but Sarah, those are all – that's all new. From 1990 until 2000, I ran a consulting firm that handled systems integration projects for the largest newspapers and magazines in the country. And that was a pretty conscious decision that I made, after *OutWeek* folded, and I found out that the mainstream press didn't have room for the former news editor of the premier...

SS: The greatest gay –

AM: – newsweekly...

SS: – magazine –

AM: – the greatest –

SS: – that ever existed.

AM: Right. Thank you. And I headed right into my version of corporate America. The company that I ran wasn't Fortune 500. But our clients all were. And there was something very comforting about having the great health insurance plan and never having to look at the prices on a menu when I went to a restaurant. And having a closetful of really beautiful suits and ties. And, and it worked for me for a while, and then I really hated it. And I guess all that I was saying was that I thought that I did that because the death of my father left me feeling insecure and not taken care of. But in retrospect, I think that AIDS left me feeling insecure and not taken care of. More. And I felt, because AIDS was kind of ongoing. The death of my father happened. But the further and further I got away from it the more I became an adult, the more I was able to handle it. But that certainly was not the case with the AIDS crisis. The longer it went on, in some ways, the less you were able to deal with it. And so, in some ways, it was harder to get away from the initial decisions that you made about your life, to deal with it.

SS: Okay. All right. Let's take a break. Okay.

Okay. So we left off [in] 1984; you were at the Gay Switchboard.

AM: Yeah.

SS: And you graduated from Columbia in '85.

AM: I did.

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: And where did you move to when you left school?

AM: Not far. I moved to 85th Street between West End and Riverside. I had a fabulous duplex apartment. I lived in the basement.

SS: So how did you first hear about ACT UP?

AM: I thought about that actually, when I knew you were – when I remembered you were coming. I think that I was either at the March on Washington? Or a gay pride parade. And I saw — 'cause I was not in on the founding of ACT UP. Which was what? In '87?

SS: There was a march in '87.

AM: So, I must have been either at the March on Washington — that must have been what it was — and I saw the ACT UP contingent. And I thought who are these people? 'Cause they look fabulous, and they look angry, and that's how I feel. And I want to check that out.

So I did. And I guess maybe I had heard a little bit about what ACT UP had been doing before that. And I kind of maybe hadn't paid attention 'cause I was maybe a little intimidated. 'Cause I had never really, in spite of my activities with the anti-apartheid demonstrations at Columbia, I hadn't really been a part of anything like that — gay — any, and so I hadn't gotten involved.

SS: What were you doing for a living at the time?

AM: I was working as a typesetter.

SS: Okay. So how did you check them out?

AM: I think when I got back from Washington, I went to the next meeting, at the Community Center.

SS: And did you use the Community Center before? Was that a place that you used to go?

AM: Yeah. I knew about the Community Center, and I went there on occasion.

SS: Okay. So what happened at that first meeting?

AM: I don't – the only specific memory that I have of the first meeting wa-, is meeting David Robinson. 'Cause he was very nice to me.

SS: Did you meet him casually or was there like an orientation for new people?

AM: I ran into him afterwards, because he had asked from the floor if there were people who were interested in being involved in a specific project, and it was something that I was interested in. So I went up to him and volunteered.

But other than that, I don't, I don't remember. But I certainly must have liked what I heard, because I came back.

SS: So how did you start to integrate into ACT UP? Do you remember?

AM: I don't remember specifically, except all of a sudden, it was a huge part of my life. All of a sudden that's just what I did on Monday night. And more often than not, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday night, too. But certainly, you didn't miss a Monday-night meeting. I guess I don't know. I guess I sat and listened for a while. And I went to the first anniversary demo; I remember that, the Wall Street demo. So I must have. I know I was there. And I know that I must have gotten involved in the planning of that, because I was a member of the support team that helped people get out

Tape II
00:10:00

of jail. And I remember that specifically because my support team was assigned to the 1st Precinct, downtown, on Ericsson Place. And that's where Duncan Osborne wound up, getting arrested and jailed. And he and I had already struck up a pretty close friendship at that point. And I was real impressed with him. And I had already met Deb Levine. And I remember, Debbie and I were together that day, running around, making sure that everybody got out of jail from the 1st Precinct.

I actually have this apartment because of ACT UP, because Deb lived here. And that's Deb's old cat. And when she got together with her husband, Mike Spiegel, who she met in ACT UP, they moved in together, and I got the lease to this apartment. And the deal was that I could have the lease if I kept the cat, too, because she had become allergic to it. So, that was a pretty good deal. {laughs}

SS: So for the very first time that you're doing something like support. How did you find out what to do? How did you learn how...

AM: There was a training and it was conducted by Amy [Bauer].

SS: And what kinds of things did she tell you?

AM: Oh gosh. I don't, you know, I don't remember offhand. But I, I'm sure, it, I remember and I don't remember whether it was – I don't remember whether she did this specific training — I'm sure she must have, 'cause she did all of them.

It's interesting that you're bringing this up. Because I, back in March, well, what I'll say is that the way ACT UP handed on knowledge was very graceful and very beautiful, and in a completely kind of hands-on oral tradition. There were a group of people who had been through it before. And, and who were experienced in the task at hand. And they sat down with a new group of people, who were going to have to face

that same situation and told them what to expect. And mentored them. And then were there with them, on the big day, to make sure that everything went okay. And then the next time, those people had that experience, and shared it with the next group of people. And it went on like that.

And so I think that that's what must have happened. Somebody sat down with me, at a big training, and with – I'm pretty sure it was Amy — but whoever it was. And said, okay; well, this is what's gonna happen. These people are gonna get arrested; this how the cops are gonna behave. This is what you can expect; this is, these are the kinds of notes you should take; this is what you should watch out for. When they get to the police precinct, this is what you should do, this is, on and on and on.

And it was very enduring. And the community, you know, that's the essence of direct action. Well, it's not the essence of direct action; it is the backbone of direct action; is having a community in which knowledge like that can be passed along in a manner like that. And the community is so desperately in need of that today. Whether or not it wants to use that knowledge to do direct action or to do something else, there's no mechanism for it.

But the really wonderful thing is that in March, when I got, when my friends got tired of hearing me bitch and moan about the fact that places like Chicago and San Francisco were kicking New York's ass in terms of what, of the level of dialog that was happening around same-sex marriage and I decided that something needed to happen in New York in order to raise the level of dialog around it, even though I'm personally, I could not be more ambivalent about the whole issue, I decided that I would organize a demonstration. You know, I had retired from this. {laughs}

But what was kind of fabulous is that I sat in my apartment, and I sent out — I don't know — I sent out 40 emails, most of which went to people that I hadn't spoken to in 10 years. Honestly. And I called Robert Woodworth, down at the Community Center. And I said, I need a room. And a week later, there were 400 people in it. And Alan Klein and Ron Goldberg and Duncan Osborne and Drew Beaver, and, and Ann Northrop, and I, and Richard Deagle — most of whom I had not palled around with. Duncan and I are best friends, but I had not connected with these people in a really long time — pulled it off. Really well. Like, international press. And completely kicked the level of the dialog about same-sex marriage up several notches.

And I'm not saying that because I'm such a — this story is not about what a brilliant activist I am at all, 'cause I'm not. I didn't do anything. It's more about the fact that I was able to rely on a network that had been created 15 years ago, and that that knowledge base still existed among people like Brian Zabcik and John Voelcker, and I could call them, and, grudgingly or not, they were still willing to do it. And knew how.

And I didn't even know what that meant, until afterwards. I don't think that I certainly didn't understand the value of ACT UP at the time. And I didn't understand what it meant to me, or to the community, at the time. And I don't think a lot, well, actually, that's not true. I'm sure that other people, who were not as naive and goofy as me, understood it much better. But the real story there, that no one wrote, the real story about that demonstration in March was not about same-sex marriage. The real story was about the fact that the kind of grassroots activism that was — that gave birth to ACT UP is enduring. And that community still lives somewhere. But more than that,

that the larger gay and lesbian community is desperate for it, and needs it now more than ever and it's there to be tapped into. It's there for the next generation to have.

SS: Well, that's why we're doing this. Let me, I just want to get back to the support issue. And then we'll move on with that. But just, you explained really beautifully how someone who could know nothing about it would feel comfortable that they were gonna find out, and just confident that they would be able to do it. Can you just tell us a little bit about what someone doing support for something like that, what exactly you would do? You'd just show up at the police station? Why would the police talk to you?

AM: I don't remember if the police talked to us or not, actually. And I don't think it was about, although you'd be surprised, when you have 75 activists in the street, how quickly the police start talking to someone who looks reasonable. Will start talking to the one who looks leaderly, and like the most reasonable of the bunch. Gerri Wells was very good at that. Because you'd have Neil Broome and Michael Petrelis screaming, and acting like lunatics. And then Gerri would calmly step to the front of the demonstration, and extend her hand, and say, officer?

We were, I think in some ways, in retrospect, before the era of Homeland Security, we were there for a real purpose. We were there to make sure that nobody got hurt; that if anybody did get hurt, that somebody was there watching them. That's watching what happened. That's certainly what legal observers did. I never did the legal observer thing; I was always sort of too involved with things.

But that first demonstration, really, we were there for ourselves. We wanted people to know that if they got arrested that there would be somebody waiting for

them when they got out. It was kind of a self-empowerment thing; we wanted people to know that they would be taken care of. I mean it. It seems kind of, I don't know, a little, that's why we were there.

SS: Well it makes it easier for people to be activists if they feel like somebody cares about what happens to them.

AM: I think that that's true. I think that back then, the likelihood that something bad was going to happen to them was pretty small.

SS: Because of the numbers?

AM: No, because of the political climate.

SS: But what if they were individuals? Are you saying because the political climate created by the movement of ACT UP?

AM: I'm saying that it was the late '80s, and we had yet to see things like the kind of behavior we saw from the police department under the Bloomberg administration, reacting to far less passionate and far less disruptive demonstrations during the Republican National Convention, when people were treated much more harshly and violently.

SS: Okay. Now, how long did it take you to get into the Media Committee?

AM: I don't think I was ever in the Media Committee. I was on the Actions Committee.

SS: Oh, okay. So how long did that take, from that first demonstration?

AM: Well, I was only involved. I would have to disagree with your characterization of me; I don't think I was ever a very important member of ACT UP, and I was only ever, I was only involved with ACT UP from 1987 to about 1989. And then, I think I experienced, well, then I started *OutWeek* magazine. But, but even before that...

SS: The *Pravda* of ACT UP.

AM: {laughs}

SS: {laughs}

AM: But even before that, I had already begun to work for – I had already begun to work as a stringer for out-of-town gay weeklies. I was writing for the *Bay Area Reporter* and *Windy City Times* and most of all, for *Gay Community News* up in Boston. Donna Minkowitz got me my first gig there. And that's how I became a reporter.

Tape II
00:25:00

And so I was already experiencing the kind of tension and cognitive dissonance that, that even advocacy journalists experience when they are trying to be part of a movement that they're also trying to write about.

SS: Okay, let's put that aside for a minute, 'cause that's a very key part of all of this, but I just want to talk a little bit about ACT UP actions.

AM: Yeah.

SS: Before we get into your journalism.

AM: It must have been about six months in.

SS: And which actions did you work on?

AM: The biggest action that I worked on was the bed sheets action at City Hall.

SS: What was that?

AM: We were protesting the way, we were protesting the policies of New York City as they regarded the homeless popu-, population with AIDS, under then-Mayor Ed Koch. And to show our displeasure with them, we decided that what we would do is all bring bed sheets from home and stake them on the lawn in front of City Hall. And we did. So City Hall was covered, if you can imagine. See, that's the thing: I can't imagine that this could even happen today, because you would start to do this, and there the paddy wagons would come. But somehow, in time for the six o'clock news, there were bed sheets all over the lawn at City Hall. So that was one thing that we did – me and Brian Zabcik.

SS: And was that linked to a demand, or an –

AM: Oh, I'm sure. We had endless demands. I mean, we had, for every action, we had a, a sheet that was filled with demands.

SS: But can you explain a little bit the dynamic relationship between the demand and the action? Like what the strategic idea was?

AM: Well, the, I, I think that, I think that we were savvy enough to know that our actions were not going to cause the Koch administration to acquiesce to our demands. ACT UP was all about the media. And using it for its own purposes. And so {meow}, and my kitty cat agrees. And so the reason that we came armed with so many fact sheets was two- or threefold. First of all, we got a lot of attention from passersby. So we wanted people who passed by to be able to educate themselves about what we were talking about. We also provided them to the media. Because we wanted the media

to know what we were demanding, and what our issues were. So we gave our demands to the media, in bite-size, digestible chunks.

And that's really what it was about. It was about – it was about creating an event that the media would eat up, and then hopefully letting them use that news hook to talk about some of the issues that we'd essentially fed to them. Or maybe go up to the public officials that we'd accused of things that we didn't like, and say, what about this, Mayor? What about this, President?

SS: And internally, what was the relationship? So if the Actions Committee was doing an action about homelessness, what would that come from? Was there a – would a housing committee go to you and say, we need this action? Or how was it, what was the internal structure?

AM: {meow} [to cat] You're gonna turn me into the cat lady of ACT UP. Come on.

I'm trying to remember the specifics of exactly how it worked. I think that basically anyone could propose an action from the floor. And then it was voted on. And if it was approved from the floor, I think then we had to go off and make it happen. I think is how it happened.

SS: And who was on Actions with you, at the time?

AM: Well, Ron Goldberg had just retired as its chair, but continued on in the, as emeritus head of Actions. And Brian Zabcik and I co-chaired it. And, oh gosh, you're gonna embarrass me, but tons of people were involved in it.

SS: Like, would you say 20 people?

AM: Oh, yeah. Sure. Twenty regulars. Sure. Don't hold me to it. But I, that's my recollection of how it worked. So I think that, you know, if there was a Treatment and Data Committee, or there was a Women's Issues Committee, or there was another committee that had a specific issue that they thought warranted a particular action, they could bring it to the floor, and ask the Actions Committee to act on it. And if the floor voted it down, they could go ahead and do something about it themselves, too, as an affinity group. So, which often happened as well. Sometimes they didn't want the Actions Committee to work on it; sometimes they wanted to do it on their own, for whatever reason.

SS: And why is that where you chose to put your focus?

AM: That's a really good question, because I was so ill-suited for it. In a lot of ways, 'cause I'm not a yeller. In a lot of ways, it would have made much more sense for me to be kind of the media guy. I wasn't very good at it. It really, I found it very stressful.

SS: 'Cause I remember you, this kind of ruddy-faced, young guy.

You had a ponytail –

AM: I had a ponytail and a beard.

SS: Yeah.

AM: I have a picture of myself from that time, yeah.

SS: Yeah. Stand-, you were up in front of the room a lot.

AM: Well, I was also on the Coordinating Committee.

SS: Oh, okay.

AM: I was the Actions Committee representative to the Coordinating Committee. So then I was going to three meetings a week, at least, 'cause –

SS: And who was on the Coordinating Committee with you?

AM: Bradley Ball. The late, great Bradley Ball. Robert Vasquez; Deb Levine; John Molineaux, who never broke a sweat; he came to every meeting in a tie and a button-down shirt. A few others as well, I'm sure.

SS: So you were on three maj—, so you went to meetings three nights a week.

AM: At least.

SS: At least. And what happened to the rest of your life?

AM: What rest of my life?

SS: What happened to your other friends, your music friends, and – ?

AM: Well by then I wasn't playing anymore. So there weren't any music friends so much. But ACT UP pretty much was my life. That was, I mean, I did, it's funny. I did have other friends, but I would often drag them into ACT UP with me. I remember Steve Quester came back from Israel where he'd been living for a year. And he was living with me until he found his own place. And he swore up and down he had had it with politics, and he wasn't getting involved. I coerced him into coming to his first meeting. And of course, the rest is history. He became one of its most active members. I think he's still a member of ACT UP. And still very active with, with them.

So I got a number of my straight friends involved with it, and, and they came to demonstrations, and the people that I met in ACT UP, like Duncan, became some of my most enduring friendships. It became my community. And that's what I wanted.

It was the, in some ways, it was the first time since I'd come out that I experienced the gay community as a community. And in a lot of ways, the last time. Sadly.

SS: Okay, now let's talk about *OutWeek*, and all of this. Because here you are, you're writing for all these papers out of town. And some of them are very well respected papers –

AM: Yeah.

SS: – at this time: *Gay Community News*, and, but what was the situation in New York with the gay press?

AM: Well, the situation in New York with the gay press was dismal. The only game in town was the *New York Native*, which had broken the story about AIDS and had some wonderful writing in it, originally, including by Larry Kramer. But also some really solid reporting. But by this time, they had gone the way of swine flu? Or something. Anyway, they were just in some sort of closed loop. And were basically going the direct-, they, they were becoming Holocaust deniers. They refused to believe that HIV was the cause of AIDS and their reporting was getting very bizarre.

And they were, they had become also very kind of hostile to ACT UP. Their mentality had become very good Jews. Just be nice to the government, and it'll all work out.

And there weren't doing a lot of reporting. And often, and my frustration was that often, there were better stories about New York — often by me, but also by other people — in the papers in Chicago and Boston than there were in New York. And I hated this.

SS: What about the *[Village] Voice*?

AM: You know, the *Voice's* coverage of gay issues over the years has always been spotty. And was then, and continues to be. The *Voice's* politics are good. But the *Voice's* politics doesn't translate into consistent and meaningful coverage of the lesbian and gay community. Certainly not today.

SS: Now, did you ever try to reform the *Native*? Did you guys ever try to be part of it?

AM: Well, I knew Phil Zwickler, who was a reporter for the *Native* and a really good reporter. And he became a friend of mine, actually. And at a certain point, he gave up on them. I mean, I didn't personally try and get a job there, or anything, no. I don't, I don't remember why.

SS: So if there was no New York paper, how did information, ACT UP information, get circulated in New York?

AM: Through ACT UP. ACT UP had a wonderful — before e-mail, even — you would walk into ACT UP, at a Monday-night meeting — and don't forget, there were a lot of people who came. I mean, there were 350, 400 people who circulated through that room every Monday night. And there would be an information table. And you could pick up stuff. And I would Xerox my articles, and Ann Giudici Fettner would Xerox her articles, and Phil would Xerox his articles, and you'd put it out.

But the problem was, there wasn't a way to circulate meaningful information. And that was part of the problem. I can't remember when things like *AIDS Treatment News* started. I think it had started already by that point. So there were other venues for that kind of information already.

SS: But those were not newsstand. You still had to —

AM: No. That was subscription, I think.

SS: So how did – oh, we need to change tapes? Okay. Whatever happened –

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: Okay, so how did *OutWeek* get started?

AM: Well, I think that I was not the only one who was fed up with the fact that there was no place to read about New York's community that, in New York and I had met Mike –

SS: Signorile.

AM: Signorile and he was talking about the same thing. And he had been talking to Gabriel Rotello who felt the same way and, apparently, had told him that he, I think, had access to some funding that might yield some sort of newspaper or magazine.

SS: What was the source of that funding?

AM: I guess it must have been Kendall Morrison, because sooner rather than later, we were sitting in a meeting in Kendall's apartment, on Lexington Avenue talking about doin' this thing.

SS: And what was the source of that money?

AM: Kendall's phone sex lines. Kendall owned 550-TOOL, I think. {laughs} and probably a few others. And this was before the Internet. So that was the game in town, was phone sex. And it made a lot of money. And so, he made a lot of money, I guess. And so he was interested in – I think that he was involved with ACT UP at the time. And he was interested in doing something more with his money than, I guess, buying more phone sex lines. He was interested in doing something political with it and liked the idea of putting together a newspaper or a magazine.

It was also a way for him to have a vehicle in which to advertise his phone sex lines. So, he was a smart businessman.

SS: Let me just ask you something. Was this at the time when the *Advocate* was dropping their sex ads?

AM: I don't remember. Did the *Advocate* drop its phone sex ads?

SS: Well I remember, when the *Advocate* first got Absolut, which was their first commercial advertiser –

AM: They dropped –

SS: -- they dropped, they made it into an insert.

AM: Ah.

SS: And I was wondering if this corresponded with needing a different venue to advertise phone sex.

AM: Maybe. Although certainly *OutWeek's* circulation wasn't national, the way the *Advocate's* was.

SS: Right.

AM: At least not at first. Not ever, actually, I don't think. I don't know.

SS: Okay. It's just a theory.

AM: I'm trying to remember what bar rags were around at the time. I think Kendall was from Boston? And Kendall – I don't know, Kendall might have owned some other bar rags? I can't remember. Honestly. I don't know. I don't want to misspeak. But. – there might have been some bar rags in New York; maybe there weren't; I, I don't know. Anyway, this seemed like a good idea for him; it seemed like a good fit. We wanted to do this project; he wanted to have this, what turned out to be a

magazine. He thought that a glossy magazine was gonna be better than a newspaper, or at least a magazine with a glossy cover. I didn't really care, as long as there was gonna be news in it. And *OutWeek* was born.

SS: So what was the origin-, who was the original staff?

AM: Gabriel [Rotello]; Michelangelo [Signorile]; me.

SS: Wait, what were your titles?

AM: Gabriel was the editor. Mike was the features editor. I was the news editor. We, at the last minute, hired an art director/production manager, because I convinced them that somebody had to actually produce the thing. You can't imagine. It was like Judy and Mickey, let's put on a show. It only happened because everyone was so incredibly naive about what actually went into doing this. In terms of experience, I can't speak to Kendall's experience, 'cause I actually can't remember. I think that he did have some background in owning some sort of publication before. But in terms of actual experience, I don't think Gabriel had any.

I had been a stringer for these little out-of-town weeklies. So, I sort of knew how to write a news story, maybe. And Mike had been, Mike had a degree in journalism, at least. And had written for gossip columns. And had actually had a byline in some serious magazines. So he was by far the most experienced.

SS: But your art direction was very important, because the look of *OutWeek* was crucially important.

AM: Yeah, well, you should see some early issues, because that came later, when we actually got somebody who knew what she was doing.

SS: Maria Perez.

Tape III
00:05:00

AM: Maria Perez. That came much later. After the first art director, and after another very troubled art director, we finally got Maria. But that wasn't until almost a year into things. So that was the original staff. I hope I'm not forgetting anybody. I'm sure –

SS: Did you have an arts editor?

AM: Not right away. We hired Sarah later. Sarah Pettit.

SS: Sarah Pettit.

AM: We hired her; I can't remember maybe four months, five months, six months into the project.

SS: So what was the first cover story? Do you remember?

AM: No, the first cover story was, well we came out for Gay Pride Day. So the first cover story was an old picture of the Gay Liberation Front, with Jim Fouratt. And it was the history of Stonewall. And because we very much saw ourselves allied with that spirit. So that was our first cover.

SS: So *OutWeek* really was the publication of ACT UP. Honestly, Wasn't it?

AM: {sigh}

SS: You all were in ACT UP.

AM: We all were in, had been in ACT UP.

SS: Right. Not Sarah and Maria. But you guys had all come from ACT UP. And you covered everything from ACT UP's point of view.

AM: [Pause] Well, what do you mean by that?

SS: Well, what was your relationship to ACT UP?

AM: Well, [to cat] you gonna let me move? {meow}

Advocacy journalism is what it is. And certainly we had a point of view.

SS: What was your point of view?

AM: Gay is good. AIDS needs to get cured. And I'm sure we had a point of view on lots of other things as well. But that was my point of view in the news department. Having said that, I was very proud of the way that I covered news in the community. I don't think it was, we could have a whole conversation about journalism. But I don't think that we covered – we covered ACT UP a lot. But then, ACT UP did a lot of stuff. We were often critical of ACT UP.

SS: Can you give an example?

AM: You're asking me to go back 15 years. There developed rifts in ACT UP, and we covered them. We didn't paper them over. There were times when people critici – other community organizations criticized ACT UP; and we covered those criticisms.

So, if ACT UP went somewhere and criticized a public official, we always called the public official, and asked the public official to comment.

SS: Well let's look at some key – ACT UP never came out against AZT. Did *OutWeek*?

AM: I can't remember, actually, Sarah.

SS: Okay. Well, let's go through a few things. ACT UP was –

AM: And I have to say that *OutWeek's* AIDS reporting was maybe not its most stellar achievement. We had, for awhile, a really good AIDS columnist named Paul Rykoff Coleman, who died shortly after the magazine folded. And before the magazine

folded, kind of got too sick to write. But our coverage of AIDS wasn't – our coverage of AIDS as a medical issue wasn't our crowning achievement.

SS: And now, as I'm remembering *OutWeek*, the cultural framework of *OutWeek* was the same cultural framework as ACT UP.

AM: Absolutely.

SS: You covered art that was made by people who were in ACT UP. You reviewed books by people who were in ACT UP.

AM: Well you worked for *OutWeek*.

SS: Yes, I know. That's how I know. And you started outing – that came out of *OutWeek*.

AM: Yes.

SS: You took this position that homosexuality was normative; that it should be completely and fully represented in the culture.

AM: Yes.

SS: This was the ACT UP aesthetic.

AM: Yes.

SS: And even your design was in the ACT UP mode. It wasn't the same font. But it was this forward-moving graphic strategy, and –

AM: Well, that's a compliment. Actually, I don't think our design was as good as ACT UP's. But –

SS: And you tried to be outrageous. I'm just saying that I know that at the time, this was a very tough question, because you were supposed to be objective. But ACT UP always experienced *OutWeek* as its publication.

AM: Did it?

SS: That's what I recall. What do you remember, Jim?

JIM HUBBARD: I'm sort of surprised that it's even a question.

SS: I'm surprised that you're taking, I know that in the day, you guys had to argue this. But I'm surprised that you feel this way now.

AM: I don't know that I feel one way or the other.

SS: Yeah.

AM: See, you feel like ACT UP felt some ownership of *OutWeek*.

SS: That's why I called it *Pravda*. It's like ACT UP was the Communist Party and *OutWeek* was, was *Pravda*.

AM: Yeah. I think –

SS: I mean, the head of the Media Committee was Mike Signorile.

AM: Right.

SS: And he was an editor of *OutWeek*.

AM: Right. No, I guess that's true. I had a different experience of *OutWeek* than I think Mike did.

SS: Hmm. Tell me. That's important.

AM: Well, I was trying to do something very different from what Mike was trying to do. In a lot of ways. In many ways. I also have very different ideas about journalism now than I did then. Maybe then I was – I thought I was trying to be objective. I don't know. I certainly don't believe in objective journalism any more, for anybody. I don't believe there is such a thing. I don't teach that to my students. I teach them just the opposite; I teach them why that doesn't exist.

Tape III
00:15:00

But I was really trying to present the news in a way that would be respected by its readers. I don't know; maybe that's a fantasy that I had. But that's what I was trying to do. And you know, I had a lot of competition, from what Mike was trying to do. Because he was often being as outrageous and provocative as possible, both in the features that we presented — and we all voted on those, so it was not just Mike; it was Mike and Sarah and Gabriel and I who voted on, and agreed to, the kind “Gays With Guns,” I think we did once, and —

SS: Well that was after Larry Kramer's speech —

AM: Right.

SS: — right?

AM: And —

SS: So that was a direct —

AM: And “I Hate Straights.” And —

SS: Which came from ACT UP. That was —

AM: Right.

SS: Yeah.

AM: So, I'm not trying to be disingenuous. I'm not, of course it was culturally part of the same movement. I'm not trying to be disingenuous about that at all. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't think that that made it impossible for us to write news in a way that was appropriate.

SS: Okay. Well, I mean *Gay Community News* is the forerunner, because that was the other publication that was part of the movement.

AM: Right.

SS: Of the earlier movement.

AM: Right.

SS: In *OutWeek's* day, was there any other publication that was part of an activist movement, in the gay world?

AM: Not to the extent that we were.

SS: Can you, I can't think of any. What was your relationship with the *Advocate*?

AM: Very antagonistic.

SS: And what were the terms of that antagonism?

AM: Well, we didn't like – I don't know that it was. I mean, it wasn't – we saw them as competition.

SS: You did?

AM: Sure.

SS: But they were on a completely different trajectory. They were going the opposite direction from where you were going. For example, did you endorse candidates?

AM: Sure.

SS: Oh, you did?

AM: Oh, sure. All the time. We helped Deborah Glick get elected. We helped Tom Duane get elected.

SS: Gay candidates.

AM: We, I think that we endorsed other candidates as well.

SS: Okay. And did you have sex ads?

AM: Oh, yeah.

SS: Yes, because that was your money. Right.

AM: And hustler ads, and, sure.

SS: Okay. There was something I just wanted to ask you. So you don't recall what your conflicts were with the *Advocate*?

AM: Well, I think that, look: I think that we saw them as competition. And we also looked down on them, right? At the time. And I think that we had some good reasons for doing so. We were also very full of ourselves. But you know, one of the things that I'm most proud of, in terms of what we did at *OutWeek*, was we really raised the bar for gay journalism across the country. Because what it forced other gay papers to do, including the *Advocate*, and including the *Native*, was it forced them to sort of come up to our level, in terms of some of the things that we were doing.

So the *Native* had to start covering real news. Even if it was just running AP copy. They also started to have to send reporters to community events and press conferences. And that's something that, that was the kind of advocacy journalism in the news department at *OutWeek* that we did that wasn't necessarily apparent to its readers or to ACT UP. And it's a way that it's one of the reasons that *OutWeek* had political clout well beyond what it deserved for the circulation it had.

SS: What was your circulation?

AM: I don't know, but I doubt it was ever larger than 10,000.

SS: Okay.

AM: It was small. But the point is that we often had a reporter at City Hall, badgering the mayor. Now, that wasn't a lot of fun for the mayor, but it also wasn't

a lot of fun for us. Because when you're at a press conference with the mayor, and you have a whole bunch of mainstream reporters who want to ask the mayor what they want to ask the mayor about, and then you stand up, and say, "Mr. Mayor, what about this gay issue that nobody else in the room wants to talk about or has even heard of," you don't make yourself really popular. But it served a couple of purposes. It put the mayor on the spot. But it also let every other reporter in the room know that that issue existed.

Between me and Nina Reyes and Duncan Osborne, and a couple of other people that worked for the news department regularly, you know, we did that. And it forced other publications, like the *Native*, and I think the *Advocate*, which got a lot better about covering news at the time to come up to that level. The other thing is that I don't know if you remember this, but gay people weren't out in publishing, to the extent that they are today, before *OutWeek*. *OutWeek* made it possible for there to be a national lesbian and gay journalism association. That didn't exist until after *OutWeek*.

SS: Really? Did you guys start that?

AM: We didn't start it. It got started after *OutWeek* brought to the fore the existence of gay people in journalism. Gay people started coming out on their jobs in journalism around that time. I don't think that it's an accident. After *OutWeek* folded, a lot of the people who worked for me there went on to jobs in very high-level capacities in mainstream and gay journalism.

SS: Well, wasn't ACT UP also trying to identify who the gay people were at different publications, and trying to set up a kind of mole relationship –

AM: I don't know.

SS: – at the time? You don't know? I kind of say, historically, I was the *Native City Hall* reporter in 1981 and '82.

AM: Wow.

SS: And for the [*Native*], I covered the bathhouse closings. So they did have that earlier. But by the time –

AM: It was a great paper.

SS: – by the time you came along, it had disintegrated. I want to get back to, okay: now I understand a little more clearly about what –

AM: No, we, Sarah – in '82, I remember asking my sister, who lived in Chelsea at the time, to mail me copies of the *Native* up in Maine, when I went away to chamber music festivals, so that I would know what was going on.

SS: Now, this is what I want to get back to about the difference between the *Advocate* and *OutWeek*. ACT UP was not a majoritarian movement. There were many, many people in the gay community who did not support ACT UP.

AM: Well, I didn't know any. {laughs}

SS: {laughs} But the *Advocate* was not a pro-ACT UP publication.

AM: That's probably true.

SS: So in a way, *OutWeek* was, in a way, the only publication that totally supported ACT UP, except for *GCN*, probably, because it was so far on the left. A lot of these, like *Bay Windows*, there was a whole bunch of sort of middle-of-the-road, regional –

AM: Right.

SS: – gay papers at the time.

AM: That were ambivalent?

SS: That were ambivalent about the strategy of direct action.

AM: Yeah.

SS: And also about the closet as a necessity. *OutWeek* put the closet on the table. As something that was no longer gonna be tolerated or protected. And that was extremely controversial.

AM: Well, apparently it's still extremely controversial.

SS: Yeah, it still is. Okay. Also, the covers. This was an issue.

AM: Yeah.

SS: You put women and people of color on the cover of the magazine, which the *Advocate* never did.

AM: Yeah.

SS: Now –

AM: Is that true? The *Advocate* never did?

SS: Well, I remember, in the day, they claimed that every time they did, they would lose sales.

AM: Yeah.

SS: Did you lose sales when you put women on the cover?

AM: Probably.

SS: So you think that your readership was mostly male?

AM: No. I actually think that we had a pretty decent balance between women and men. It was, there were probably more men who read it than women. But it was probably not so gender-imbalanced as, say, *Out* magazine is today.

SS: Now, what was the relationship between the decline of *OutWeek* and the decline of ACT UP?

AM: There wasn't one.

SS: So what year did *OutWeek* fold?

AM: Ninety-one.

SS: And so what year did ACT UP start to fall apart?

AM: I'm the wrong one to ask.

SS: Okay.

AM: It might have been around the same time, but I don't think so. I think ACT UP stuck around a little longer.

SS: Okay, so what made *OutWeek* go down the tubes? What was the end of that? *OutWeek*?

AM: It went down the tubes when something else went up someone's nose, I think. {laughs} I don't know.

SS: So it was just like personal dissolution, is what made it fall apart?

AM: I think what happened is that I don't – I think it ran out of money. I think that it, I don't know. I was, I don't know what actually happened. But I suspect it had something to do with money, because I'm still waiting for my vacation pay, and the last two weeks that I didn't get paid for. So are all the freelancers and everybody who else who worked there. And one day, there was a lock on the door.

I think that it, it suffered from tremendous financial mismanagement and I don't think it ever was really particularly profitable, for some reason. And there was lots of drama at the end.

SS: Now, were you involved in the, what was the next magazine that came after that? I forget.

AM: *QW*?

SS: *QW*. Were you involved in that?

AM: No. After *OutWeek* I decided I'd had it.

SS: Okay. And you did not go back to gay community politics, or AIDS work after that.

AM: Well, no, I decided that what I wanted to do was be a journalist. And I didn't want one of the, let me just say, before we go on with that, let me just say that, quite possibly, *OutWeek* magazine was the best job that I will ever have. Okay? And it's the kind of thing that can only come along when you're young and stupid and have no idea. It was a tremendous opportunity. Who knew? And it was a lot of fun; and I did it for a hundred and four weeks straight.

And you never get a chance to have that much fun, and that much power, and that much exposure, and work that hard, and be in the middle of that many personalities, and that many self-created tornados, or created tornados created by Mike Signorile. And I just, I learned more in those two years than I had ever before. And it was an incredible experience.

And I think that we – I think that we accomplished a lot of things. I think that we changed the gay press. For the better. I think that we changed the mainstream

press, in terms of how it was forced to cover gay people. And I think that we changed gay people's position in the mainstream press. People from *OutWeek* were able to go on and get jobs in the mainstream press with *OutWeek* on their resume. And that is something that had never happened before.

Tape III
00:30:00

Apart from all of that, apart from what an important part of the cultural tapestry of the movement that was ACT UP it was. And all the important work that Mike Signorile and Sarah Pettit did there, too. So.

But you know, after two years of it, I decided that what I really wanted to do was cover fires. And be a beat reporter. And not write about gay people anymore. But what I discovered was, interestingly, that it was 1991, and there was a recession. And every single magazine editor in the city wrote me a lovely note saying, I loved your work; I loved *OutWeek*; I'm so terribly sorry that it folded; but I don't have a job for you. And every newspaper in the country wrote to me, and said, no way. That, they weren't ready for. They were not ready for the openly gay news editor of Faggotry Central to come work for them.

SS: Well, I was hoping, can you just hold up these two publications, that you're currently writing for?

AM: Yeah. My story is on the front page of this one this week.

SS: Now, can you tell us how *OutWeek*, where the influences in these two? 'Cause these are the two diametrically opposed gay publications.

AM: Well, yes, except interestingly, they're both grandchildren of *OutWeek*. *Gay City News* is – one of the publishers of *Gay City News* is Troy Masters, and he was an old ad rep from *OutWeek*, who then went on, and was involved with *QW*,

and after *QW* folded, he went on to be involved with something called, or there was another paper before *Gay City News*; I think it was called, *LG* –

SS: *LGNY*.

AM: *LGNY*. Right. And then when *LGNY* was sold, it became *Gay City News*. And *Out*, of course, was started by Michael Goff, who was involved with *OutWeek*. He used to write for it.

SS: And was on the swim team –

AM: And was on the ACT UP swim team. And he decided to start a magazine after *OutWeek* folded. And I talked to him about it, because I was interested. But he very much wanted to work with a woman on it. And so he got involved with Sarah Pettit on it, who was the arts editor at *OutWeek*. And they started *Out* magazine. And so they both had something to do with *OutWeek*, yeah.

SS: Right. But they're both so different. I mean, there's a straight person on the cover of that issue of *Out* magazine.

AM: There is a straight person...

SS: So what is the difference here? And which one is in the tradition of *OutWeek*?

AM: Well, certainly politically, *Gay City News* is in the tradition of *OutWeek*. *Gay City News* is a great paper. And its competition in New York City right now is politically far to its right. So, I mean, *Gay City News* has an activist editor; understands what advocacy journalism is about, is interested in publishing, almost exclusively, original news stories, would rather publish original news stories than stuff that comes off the news wire. Because he understands that his readers can read that stuff

on the Web. In that way, is very much in the tradition of *OutWeek*. Would rather do enterprise reporting, or report things that can't be found elsewhere, or would like to report things because in reporting them can move an issue forward.

SS: So in other words, the *OutWeek/Advocate* split is still, basically, being played out today, between these two different types of publications.

AM: No. Because these two publications don't compete with one another. And also, *Out* and the *Advocate* are owned by the same company. And also, I don't – just because *Out* magazine has somebody straight on the cover. It is what it is. Magazines exist to sell ads. That's the purpose of a magazine, is to sell ads. So after you get over that hurdle, and if you can accept that, even alternative press magazines. In this case, the gay press is alternative because it, it caters to an alternative market. But it's – even *Out* magazine exists to sell ads. Does that mean that there isn't excellent journalism in it? No. There can be. And we're fortunate in there are editors at *Out* magazine who want there to be good journalism in it. I don't, I do think that that divide exists; I just don't think it, it's illustrated by these two publications.

SS: Okay. Well, what is the legacy of ACT UP today, in our, in our moment?

AM: Oh. That's a big question for me to answer. You should ask, you should ask a philosopher.

I think for me personally what I'm realizing about my experience in ACT UP, ACT UP changed my life. ACT UP, I've thought a lot about this. Because I knew you were coming. And I've thought a lot about it since that experience in March that I had, where I put together this demonstration and realized that I just sort of instinctually

knew how to do that. And was glad that I knew how to do that. That felt very powerful. Especially now. Especially in 2004, when we might be looking at four more years of the Bush administration, and our civil liberties are being blatantly taken away.

In some ways, I learned the wrong lessons in ACT UP. It's funny, but the lesson I learned when I was in ACT UP was if you fight the system on its own terms, you can make it work for you, and prevail.

SS: What do you mean, its own terms? You mean manipulating the media.

AM: More than that. I, I mean –

SS: 'Cause breaking laws is not being on their own terms, right?

AM: Look, I think that ACT UP was – you asked me before about the demise of ACT UP. I think that ACT UP was in some ways a victim of its own success. ACT UP does continue on. To this day. But I think that the, I think that the reason that you don't see 500 people in a room every Monday anymore is that people don't feel the kind of terror and urgency and fear in their day-to-day lives that they used to. And the fabric of their gay communities is slowly being knit back together, somehow. At least around the issue of AIDS.

You're starting to see it again around the issues like crystal meth. Where you'll see 750 people in a room, all of a sudden, and a community forum about that.

Because –

JAMES WENTZY: I'm sorry. We're just at the end of the tape.

AM: That's fine. 'Cause I gotta –

Tape III
00:40:00

Tape IV
00:00:00

SS: You've brought up crystal meth. Why has crystal meth made people wake up to each other in a way that AIDS did, or approaching that?

AM: Because it's destroying people's lives and their community in a very similar way. It is something that is very tied up with people's sexuality; it is very much out of their control, after a certain point; and there isn't any way, any easy way to fix it. I think. And there's also, I think, a tremendous amount of guilt and shame around the issue, the same way there was with AIDS. Because, I think, that there is, there has to be some residual feeling of it being self-inflicted, in the same way that I think a lot of people felt that AIDS was somehow, wrongly, felt that AIDS was self-inflicted. Or told by the media, or homophobes, or Christians, that it was self-inflicted.

So now guys who were just taking drugs 'cause they always took drugs to have a good time are all of a sudden looking at their lives being destroyed, and their communities being destroyed. And no one's quite sure how to fix this. And I think that's why. And it's frightening.

But to get back to what I was saying about ACT UP, I think that it was almost a victim of its own success, in that in a lot of ways, what we did worked on perhaps the most superficial level. But the level that affected most of the people who came to those meetings. So for the guys in that room, most of them now have access to — the ones who aren't dead — most of them now have access to drugs that are making their lives more manageable, if not comfortable. Drugs that are keeping them alive.

Tape IV
00:05:00

And so, I'm not living in a community anymore where every other week, I hear about another friend who's sick or dying or dead. I hear about that rarely, at least from AIDS. And did we solve the problem of access to health care for everybody? No.

Did we solve the problem of AIDS in communities of color, or AIDS among straight women, or AIDS among the homeless, or AIDS in Africa? No. But did it get solved for the guys who used to come to those meetings? Well, no, it didn't get solved. But the crisis level went, to quote Donald Rumsfeld, we went from red to orange to yellow to whatever. Taupe.

And so the lesson I learned was you can, ultimately, the system will work for you, right? Because yeah, we broke a few laws. But ultimately, what we did was civil disobedience and there's a long, valued legacy of that in this country. And we learned to turn the media against itself, and use it for our own advantage. I was very optimistic about that. But I think – so I learned the right skills, but I think the wrong lesson. {laughs} Because I don't believe that anymore.

SS: What do you believe now?

AM: Now I'm not so sure. Now, I think that our American democracy is very much imperiled. And what frightens me most about that is that it's not a conspiracy. It's not a cabal, and it's not a junta. That it's happening right out in the open, and the ways in which it is imperiled and the grabs for power and the way our civil rights are being undermined are right there on the front pages of the *New York Times* every day. And it seems to be okay with a lot of people.

And I guess that I've realized that I always expect, I always sus-, I always thought that when the bad guys came to power, there was a struggle, and there was a brutal show of force. And I guess now what I'm realizing is, as often as not, bad guys come to power because people hand it to them. And I think that that's where we're in this country.

Tape IV
00:10:00

Not that I have, not that I feel like there's such a difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. But I feel like we're at a real turning point in this country, and I'm very afraid for the future of our own democracy. And I don't know that anything that I learned in ACT UP has prepared me for how to move forward with that struggle.

What I miss most of all in my life right now is the sense of community that I had from ACT UP. And I don't know how to get that back. But I feel like that would be a good place to start, in order to find the answers for how to move forward with the larger struggle. I'll tell you that. [Pause]

SS: Should we end there? Okay, thank you. Well said.