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ORAL HISTORY
P R O J E C T

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Interviewee: **Ann Northrop**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Ann Northrop

May 28, 2003

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, how old you are, today's date, and where we are?

ANN NORTHROP: I'm Ann Northrop. I am 55 years old, and we are in my apartment on May 28th, 2003.

SS: Ann, where did you grow up?

AN: I was born in Hartford Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, and lived the first few years of my life in Windsor, Connecticut, my mother's home town, just north of Hartford. But, my father worked for United Airlines, and we got transferred around a lot, so I grew up in the suburbs of half a dozen cities – Hartford, Washington, Boston, Denver, Chicago.

SS: When you were growing up, was your family involved in any kind of social activism or any kind of political movement?

AN: My family were all rock-ribbed Republicans. And the most political involvement they had was sitting around the dinner table, complaining that Richard Nixon got a raw deal, and you know, my mother, very happy that she went to Mamie Eisenhower's tea pouring somewhere. Actually, that's not giving her full credit. She once told me – and I found this almost unimaginable – that when we lived in Washington, in the early '50s, she used to go to the Army McCarthy hearings and sit in the front row and glare at Joe McCarthy. This was entirely out of character for her, and I can only imagine it was because he was Catholic. I was raised in a very Catholic-hating household.

SS: What church did your family belong to?

AN: My parents had a mixed marriage – an Episcopalian and a

Congregationalist. I was baptized a Congregationalist myself – a very old line, but surprisingly liberal religion – mostly New England.

SS: When did you first become aware of any kind of rights movement or movements for social change?

AN: Well, I very vividly remember sitting at home in the early '60s and watching the civil rights movement on television – watching demonstrators in the south, being attacked by fire hoses and police dogs. It was an extremely formative period for me to watch that – but there I was, sitting in my suburban home, watching that. And, also watching the early Fulbright hearings on the Vietnam War a little later in the '60s. I went to college in the fall of '66, and I did come from a very Republican household, and much as my mind was playing with a lot of this, I still was sort of indoctrinated in a conservative point of view. So, when I went to college, I was going there, ready to wear a button saying, Bomb Hanoi. I remember that very vividly. And I remember my transformation in college. I'm one of those very dangerous converts – someone who discovered a radical, leftist point of view, in my late teens and sort of traveled that road, ideologically, since.

Tape I
00:05:00

SS: Were there some particular individuals in your life who really were key in opening those doors for you?

AN: There was, in fact, a *New York Times* columnist – I'm going to forget his name – who gave a speech at my college.

SS: What school?

AN: Vassar. Who was it? I can't believe I've forgotten it. I'll remember it at 3 AM. He came to the school and gave a speech about the Vietnam War, and this must

have been the spring of '67, maybe the fall of '67, but sometime then. And he read letters from servicemen in Vietnam, about what they were doing to the local population, and how they were killing people right and left, and how they felt about it. And it just devastated me. It just ripped my little heart right out of my body and transformed me, virtually, overnight. It was also the late '60s. There was an SDS chapter on campus; there was a very active and militant black group on campus, and people were becoming extremely anti-war. The Vietnam War certainly was the most important political movement of my youth – but building on what I had seen in the civil rights movement, too, which also resonated with me.

SS: So, how did you express those feelings?

AN: Well, ultimately, I became a demonstrator against the Vietnam war. I graduated in 1970 from college when everything happened with the invasion of Cambodia, the killings by the National Guard, at both Kent State and Jackson State. Mine was one of several hundred colleges that were on strike that spring. Classes were cancelled, exams were cancelled. We all wore peace signs on our mortar boards when we graduated. I was instrumental in getting Gloria Steinem to be the graduation speaker, who got up and quoted Huey Newton, I think, in her speech. It was a tremendously fascinating time, and I was enormously compelled intellectually and emotionally by what was going on at that time.

SS: That's interesting that in 1970, the person you would choose would be Gloria Steinem.

AN: It was a time when all these colleges were on strike, and nobody would go to campuses to give graduation speeches. Politicians wouldn't go near campuses, and

everyone had turned down their invitations to speak. She was writing for *New York Magazine* at that time, still. This was before *Ms.* She was going on the “Tonight Show” and defending the Black Panthers, and she was a very radical looking figure to me, and quite fascinating – and, beginning to talk about feminism. I had, I think, just seen her on television, doing something like this, and I ran into the president of the college one day, and I said to him, “You know who you should have as a graduation speaker? Gloria Steinem.” And he said, “And am I supposed to know who that is?” So, I marched myself off to the library, got a stack of *New York Magazines*, with her columns in them; marched out, without checking them out, in my own, little, anti-authoritarian way, and made an appointment with him, and put them on his desk and said, “This is who she is and you really ought to have her.” He preceded to take them home and give them to his wife to read, and she said, “Yes, you should have her.” So, they invited her. She was compelling to me, as a radical figure.

SS: So, which came first, you working in television and media, or coming out?

AN: Working in television and media – not that I hadn’t known for a long time, that my interest was in women – that that’s who I was attracted to – but, I was very scared. And I have found since, that people who think they have the most to lose are the most reluctant to come out, I think, and I think that was partially my story. I sometimes say that I just could not imagine myself actually achieving a relationship with a woman. It just seemed impossible to me, for some reason. And, I’m not sure I can articulate why that was. But, I just couldn’t imagine actually doing it. And, I don’t know if it’s because I am a certain age. There were out lesbians at Vassar in the late ’60s, who were friends

of mine, who I knew. But, somehow, I couldn't bring myself to join them, or be associated with them, maybe because they were too stigmatized, and I was afraid of joining that stigmatization. I tend to think that people who don't come out now – men in corporate jobs, for instance – are people who are afraid of assuming minority status, and I think that was a lot of what I felt. So, I decided that what I would do was have a big career and no social life. And, in fact, that did happen through most of my 20s, and I didn't end up coming out until I was about 28.

SS: So, where were you working?

AN: At that time?

SS: Well, tell us a trajectory of your –

AN: I looked for a job in New York when I got out of college. I'd been an art history major. I did not want to spend my time cataloguing paintings in the basement of the Met for the rest of my life. I was fascinated by war correspondents and by the media and by what I was seeing on television, in news. News was very important, in those days, unlike today, when it's become total garbage. And, I wanted to be part of that. That was what looked exciting and intellectually challenging and all of that. I couldn't get a job in New York. I ended up finding a job in Washington, at the *National Journal*, which covers the Federal Government. I spent about a year and a half there, learning basic journalism. It was great. I went to the Supreme Court for the hearings on the Pentagon Papers case and went to the White House for press conferences and covered Capitol Hill and Congress and the agencies and everything else. It taught me a lot. And then I got a job in New York, working on a local feminist talk show on Channel 2 called "Woman" in the fall of 1971.

SS: Who was the host of that?

AN: A terrible woman named Sherry Henry. But, I think the third show we did was how to get a good gynecological examination. We did some pretty wild stuff there, on commercial television, local TV. But, of course, the show was cancelled after six months. I then worked in local operations at Channel 2. I worked freelance for ABC Sports on a lot of stuff they did – boxing and track and field and golf, and ice skating and stuff. I did freelance writing. I had worked on the first issue of *Ms.* I had become friendly with Gloria through this whole thing and did some work on the first issue in 1972, and then started doing freelance writing for them in the late '70s. And through someone there, I even did a piece for *Ladies Home Journal*.

And, it was while I was doing freelance work for *Ms.*, that I met the first woman I became involved with – Linda – and came out. When I finally did achieve a relationship with someone, I was out to the entire world within two weeks, because it was very much a feeling of, it's my turn now. I've waited long enough, and I've watched everyone else have relationships all these years, and I'm not going to be quiet about this. And she and I were then together for 17 years and raised her two children from a previous marriage together. Working at *Ms.* certainly was a congenial atmosphere to be out in, but I was then out everywhere else. I went on to work as a writer at "Good Morning America" in 1981, and then went to the "CBS Morning News" in 1982 and was there for the next five years and was out at all these jobs, and everywhere else.

Tape I
00:15:00

SS: So, did you ever work in the gay movement during those years, when you were in news?

AN: No. I had been very involved in feminist stuff in the '70s, starting with

my association with Gloria. I marched in that first Women's March down Fifth Avenue, in the fall of 1970 with Gloria, and had been involved in a lot of demonstrations and actions then – and still anti-war stuff in the early '70s, but nothing terribly involved. I certainly never got arrested, never did anything more than just join major demonstrations and write for *Ms.* and do a lot of feminist stuff there. And then, in the 10 years that ended the '70s to late '80s, I was concentrating on my career. And when I was working at “Good Morning America” at ABC and at the “CBS Morning News,” I was burrowing from within. I was, certainly, bringing a leftist perspective to everything I did there – much to the horror of a lot of the people I worked with. I accomplished some stuff, but didn't have any formal involvement with any movement stuff.

And then, in 1987, fed up with mainstream news and deciding – having spent about a year calling my bosses intellectually bankrupt – another endearing moment. But, I'd been promoted. I'd been given increasing responsibility. I was a senior person at the “CBS Morning News”. I had not felt that my career had really been hampered either by my being out as a lesbian or my political point of view. But, I was just fed up. There were limits to what I could do there, and it was making me increasingly unhappy, so I quit. I quit at the beginning of 1987 without any plans of anything and spent several months trying to figure out what I was going to do next, and had lunch with someone one day who – because I'd decided that the joke I'd been telling for years – that what I really wanted was to be a gym teacher, but I was afraid of fulfilling the stereotype, was true. I really did want to be a gym teacher, and I really had been afraid of fulfilling the stereotype. So, I started thinking along those lines, and I had lunch with a friend one day who said, well how about the Harvey Milk School – go be a gym teacher there. And I

thought, wow, what a great idea. I can take all those young, gay boys and make them the city softball champs.

So, I went down to talk to Joyce Hunter and Andy Humm – neither of whom I had known – although I’d worked with Andy’s ex-boyfriend at “Good Morning America” – a guy named David Sloan, so I’d heard about him. And I told them what I wanted to do, and they said, “We have about six kids in the school and we don’t have a gym and no one likes sports and no, you can’t teach Jane Austen on the side. You can’t do any of that, but we’re starting an education department, and we need to hire someone who will go out and be an advocate for AIDS education.” And I said, “Well, okay” – because I’d covered the epidemic since it started in my news jobs, starting in ’81, when it was first discovered or observed. “But, I don’t really know enough about it to teach it, so you don’t want me to actually teach this stuff, do you?” “No, no, no, we just want you to go to public meetings and speak up on behalf of this” or whatever. And I said, “All right, let me get this straight – you want to pay me cash money to do public speaking? Okay.” So, in spite of the fact that the salary was, literally, a quarter of what I had been making at CBS, I thought, this will make me happy.

SS: Did you have gay men in your life before that?

AN: Some – at CBS, in fact, although I was the only out person there – at CBS and at ABC. But, there were a lot of gay men around who were out to me, and who I knew. And some who were close to me and who were very worried about AIDS, when they first became aware of it.

SS: Prior to taking this job, had you known anyone who had AIDS?

AN: No, I had not known anyone. And, of course, when I went to work at

Hetrick-Martin, I immediately met people who were HIV-infected or had AIDS. But, mostly what happened – as I began to learn about it – was that I immediately figured out that this was the Vietnam war all over again. It was about people in power, not caring about the lives of people who didn't have power, and being willing to accept a system of attrition, where people would die. And that, while certainly, it was about gay men, it was also about race and sex and class and it was all the same issues. And it became very clear to me that this was the equivalent, all these years later. And when I then found out – about six months into this job, or maybe even less – about ACT UP, and that there were people going out in the streets and demonstrating, as I had done some of in anti-war stuff and feminist stuff – I thought, wow, here's my home. This is what I can get involved in, because this is what feels good to me.

SS: I just want to ask you a little bit about AIDS culture and Hetrick-Martin, before you got to ACT UP. Now, Hetrick and Martin both had AIDS, right?

AN: Yes, and both died of it.

SS: And, were there students who were HIV?

AN: Yes, they have both the Harvey Milk School and an after-school program and a street outreach program to kids who are working the streets. So, there was a large population of clients in one or another of those programs with HIV. And, in fact, when I came there, one of the first things that happened within days of my coming there was the memorial service, within the agency, for a kid who had been in either the after-school program or in the school, who had just died.

SS: So, what was it like to be working somewhere, where the bosses had

AIDS, where the students had AIDS? How did that effect you, do you remember?

AN: I just found it sort of intellectually compelling. It seemed to me enormously interesting to be working with both staff and clients who were HIV infected. It seemed to me the most interesting thing in the world to be close to people who had to deal with, perhaps the most – I'm losing my vocabulary for this – the most urgent kind of issues. I just found it so much more interesting than anything I had been dealing with. And I found, going from mainstream news – you know, these big, glamorous jobs at CBS and ABC – to this little social service agency, that I was far happier, because I was far more engaged at Hetrick-Martin than I was at CBS or ABC.

SS: Did you feel comfortable having personal conversations with people with AIDS about what they were experiencing while you were there?

AN: Completely.

SS: What was that like?

AN: I don't know if it had to do with the fact that I immediately did become an AIDS educator. Hetrick-Martin sent me to a sexuality class that the City Department of Health gives to people who work around the city in various jobs. And, I don't know if I actually went to GMHC for trainings, but I certainly read a lot of their literature. I had taken the job, not expecting to have to know anything about this. But, from the first day, it became clear, that I did have to become educated about this, and the more I read, the more interested I was, and somehow, it was not the least bit daunting to talk to real people about their real lives. It was completely compelling and easy and free. Maybe it was because the people I was working with knew what they were talking about and knew what they were going through, and were part of a professional system that was dealing

with all this. I immediately got to know many people living with AIDS and dealing with it in a way that was real and immediate. And so, there didn't seem to be any barriers in talking to people or dealing with them. And, it just became the most natural thing in the world, to be part of that community.

SS: So, you came to ACT UP, and who did you go with the first time?

AN: Well, I had actually gone to something called the War Conference in February of 1988. I had gone to work at Hetrick-Martin in the fall of 1987, and the people working there were people like Andy and Joyce and Damian Martin was running the agency, and Pamela Sneed was running the after-school program, and Steve Ashkenazi was the chief social worker – all these people who were very big movement people. It was quite a star system – not a star system, but just an agency jam-packed with important, interesting people. And Joyce was one of the main organizers of this thing called the War Conference, which was an effort by lesbian and gay activists to get together a couple hundred of the most active or most “important” activists from around the country to – in the midst of an exploding AIDS epidemic, the Reagan administration, a lot of sense of being under siege, to get people together for a strategy meeting. So, they booked a conference center in suburban or rural Virginia, and invited people from around the country, and when I heard about this, I said, oh, I want to go to this. So, even though I was a complete novice in the movement and had only been at Hetrick-Martin for a few months, I said, “Joyce, please, please, can I come?” And she said yes. She and Vivian Shapiro and someone else. And I knew Vivian, too. Vivian, in fact, was the one I had had lunch with, who had recommended that I go to Hetrick-Martin. And there was this third person who organized this, who basically pulled out their Rolodexes and invited

everyone they knew. So, I went, and, of course, met everybody in the course of a few days who was doing something – not everybody, clearly, but that group. And, there were a few people there who were involved in ACT UP, and who were getting up at big plenary sessions and yelling at people and saying, “You have to come join ACT UP! You have to get out in the streets, you have to do something!”

SS: Do you remember who it was?

AN: You’ll laugh when I tell you, Jim Fouratt. And, a couple of other people, but he’s the one I most remember. And so I thought, oh, okay, I have to go. So, I came back to New York and went to the Monday night meeting the next Monday, which was March 1, 1988. And I walked in, and there were a couple hundred people at the community center, doing what they did then. And I fell in love. It was truly love at first sight for me, in that room. And I immediately recognized it as a bunch of cranky individualists who clearly couldn’t get along with any authority figure anywhere and were just all there, being themselves and arguing with each other, and getting stuff done, and having a great time. I never looked back. I just immediately started going to the meetings regularly and got arrested for the first time, at the end of that month, in the first anniversary action at Wall Street or lower Broadway. And got arrested with a couple of hundred people.

SS: What was the purpose of that action?

AN: Well, first of all – to celebrate the first anniversary, which was enough of a reason, at that point. And, I want to say, lowering the price of AZT, but I’m not absolutely positive. But, it could have been that. Government indifference was always a major theme – the refusal of people in power to do anything about the fact that people

were dying.

SS: Ann, you're the person I want to ask this of – why was there so much neglect?

AN: By people in power? Homophobia, racism, sexism, class. People in power did not feel personally affected. They didn't like the people they thought were, and they thought they could get away with it. Why do we have poverty in this country? Why do we have an inadequate education system? Why do we have joblessness? Why do we have anything? Why, in a country as rich as this, do we have so many people living in misery and in terrible conditions? And it's because people in power don't care. It's because all they care about is their own ambition.

SS: But, why do you think – you said, cranky individuals, when you were characterizing the ACT UP personality. What was it about those people that led them to that strategy, which was a contested strategy in the day?

AN: Sure. And I think different people have employed different strategies, and I think there is a finite number of people who will go out in the street and scream and yell and get arrested. So, I've always seen that as a particular universe of people, and I've always objected to the thought that we can convince everybody to come out in the street. I have said, repeatedly – and I have this habit of quoting myself – I think that gay white men thought they had privilege in this country and were shocked to find out they didn't, and that people in power were prepared to let them die. And when they figured that out, they got very angry about it – a lot of them. Some of them just slunk off into corners and accepted that, but a lot of them got really angry, and that's what made ACT UP happen. It was the people who got angry about not having privilege.

Now, I think most of the women who were in ACT UP and the old lefties were people who were there because they did see the connections, and did see the issues across various social movements over a period of time. And did see it as being about power versus lack of power, did see it as being about class, did see it as being about homophobia or race or sex. But, the gay white men there with HIV were there for their own personal survival, and out of their own anger at not having privilege. And that's why the rifts eventually developed in ACT UP, because there was a group of people who were there only for their own survival, and who did not see that their survival, to a large extent, depended on them seeing the larger issues. So, the splits that developed, I think, were between the people who saw the larger issues, and those who were there.

SS: But is that really true, because some of those people are still alive today – and some of the larger issues have been abandoned.

AN: Yes, you're absolutely right. They succeeded to a large extent in maintaining their survival by staying narrowly focused and making their own demands. So, yeah – although, I think, ultimately – I would like to think, ultimately, let's put it that way – that it requires a larger vision. But, yes, they did succeed to some extent – in buying some time, by staying narrowing focused.

SS: You were very key in the whole media perspective that ACT UP developed, and I'm hoping that you can help us understand, a little bit, how that happened. When you came in – did you go right into Media, when you first came into ACT UP?

AN: I don't think that I was ever part of the Media Committee. But, I had a lot to do, I like to think, with helping activists understand the media and manipulate the

media or use it to our own ends. I have always resisted being the PR person, because I have been – and like to think I continue to be – a journalist, and journalists don't like, for the most part, being PR people. But, because I had been part of the mainstream media, I understood it, and I could explain it to activists, and therefore, help strategize how to take that knowledge and use it to our own ends. And I still do media trainings to this day – of activists in various movements, including the anti-IMF World Bank activists, welfare mothers – I've done media training for. I continue to do it across the board for people who want to have an impact.

What I understood when I went to Hetrick-Martin and got involved in ACT UP, and started to learn about the epidemic, was how little I had understood it as a journalist – how ignorant I was – as a journalist, in spite of having been aware of it from the first reports of 1981. I really didn't get it, as a journalist. And that made me understand that journalists, in general, don't get it. I also discovered, in going to work for a social service agency, that journalists do not understand life, in general, and that they sit in their little submarine offices with no windows and work very long hours and work very hard, but have very little interaction with human beings and do not understand what's going on out in the world. And that was shocking to me – to learn how ignorant I had been, and how ignorant journalists in general were. And I had been the leftist in journalism, who had some experience of things like the feminist movement or the anti-war movement. But, I was almost as ignorant as the rest of them. So, I did a lot of thinking about that and started doing media trainings, where I would start off by saying, “There are two words you need to know, in thinking about journalists: ignorant and arrogant. They know nothing, but they think they know everything. And therefore, they don't want to listen.

They are not open to conversations where they learn. If you are going to affect what they say and do – if you're going to teach them – you have to do it in a manipulative way, because if you go to them and say, you don't understand this, they say, fuck you, go away. I know everything, I am a journalist.”

SS: Now, who did you do these trainings for?

AN: I talked to the Media Committee. I talked to the room, in general. We strategized about how to deal with the press one on one; how to talk to them, how to approach them. And, we also talked about how to act at demonstrations in ways that would have an impact on the media coverage.

SS: Let's go through each of those. The first thing was, how to speak to the press. Now, could anyone in ACT UP speak to the press?

AN: Well, it's my contention that anyone could, but you had to know how to do it. You had to know that the main approach is to flatter the press.

SS: Let me backtrack – what I mean is, was anyone allowed to?

AN: There was a Media Committee, and they were assigned to talk to the press. So, just as there was an Actions Committee that would plan how to do an action, there was a Media Committee that was responsible for getting press coverage of whatever issue we were trying to illuminate. And the whole point of demonstrations – let's not forget – was about bringing issues to public attention, with the hope of putting public pressure on people in power to make change, because it was our analysis that the reason change didn't happen was because there was no pressure on people in power to make change. So, our strategy was to bring things out into the open so that people would be horrified, so that the people in power would be embarrassed and would make change out of that

embarrassment – a strategy, which I think, worked, to a great extent. But, that was the equation.

SS: Doesn't that imply that somewhere, somebody has to care what happens to gay people?

AN: Well – I don't know. Maybe. Or, maybe it's just human beings being deathly ill and that somehow strikes a chord with people, or maybe people care that pharmaceutical companies are making too much money and that strikes a chord with them. I can't tell you, for sure, what actually got to people. But I know that people in power did feel embarrassed in some way that made them make some change, or pretend to, at least.

SS: Okay, so let's say there was going to be an ACT UP action. Now, would people be told, if the press comes to you, speak to them. Or, would they be told, if the press comes to you, refer them to the Media Committee?

AN: Well, there were various levels of this. First of all, the Media Committee's job was to get the press to the action. So, the first discussion was about how to do that. How do you get the press to pay attention? Well, first of all, you do plan an action that is interesting enough, that you think the press is going to care about it. But, you have to woo the press. You have to find a way to get them there. Some of that is about writing a press release that you send to the press that's interesting enough to make them look at it and say, oh, I better go cover that – that's going to be important or interesting or crazy, and will make good pictures and put wild people on television.

But, we also know that the press doesn't generally read press releases, so that's one little thing you have to, for instance, tell the Media Committee. Don't expect to get

the press there, just by sending them a press release, because they're going to throw it in the waste basket, and you're just going to have to do it all over again. So, you have to call them. And you have to find the right person to speak to. So, you have to know how to call a newspaper or television station and say – not ask to speak to a specific person, but say – I'm calling about this, who should I speak to? And let them tell you who to speak to. Then you have to know how to talk to that person, and how to present this. And you do it first by asking them questions, and saying, what do you know about this? What's your opinion of such and such? Rather than just throwing something at them. And then, lead them into being interested about this, and say, well, what you may not know is such and such. Or, we're doing this, that you might find interesting, and sort of make them think it's their idea to come do this, rather than haranguing them or lecturing them about – you should be there, and you should be covering this. That will make them sit home, guaranteed.

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: So you worked with the Media Committee. Did the Media Committee have input into how the actions were constructed? Or, was it, once the actions were decided then the Media Committee went to work?

AN: I'm not sure I can give you a real answer to that. I think it went back and forth to some extent, but I don't have any clear memory of the actual choreography in that.

SS: Can you talk about some specific journalists and their relationships to ACT UP, while you were working with them?

AN: There was the guy at the *Times* who, early on, was writing good stuff, and then got transferred to writing obituaries, because his stuff began to be seen by the *Times*

as too sympathetic.

SS: Was that David Dunlap?

AN: No. It was a straight guy. I could figure out his name, if I look back at stuff, but I'm forgetting it. Laurie Garrett at *Newsday* was extremely smart and sympathetic and wrote a lot of good, lengthy stuff. Robert Bazell at NBC was an idiot, who never really understood anything and did very superficial pieces. I'm trying to think who else – there was a really good, long, *Rolling Stone* piece at one point. I can't remember who wrote that, but it was good. *Spin Magazine* did some good stuff.

SS: Celia something.

AN: And included a condom in one issue, I think.

SS: What was the whole issue at *The New York Times*? What was the trajectory of that?

AN: You know, I think Mike Signorile can give you a better –

SS: He's better on that?

AN: And maybe Alan Klein.

SS: Okay. So, what kind of people were on the Media Committee? Did they all have media backgrounds?

AN: Well, Mike Signorile ran the Media Committee early on, and he had a PR background and a sort of nightlife columnist background. But, he was hip to the press in many ways. But, it wasn't a hard news background. Alan Klein, who also was a significant Media Committee person, eventually went into PR, but I'm not sure that he had a media background. It wasn't so much people who knew a lot, as people who were ambitious to do that kind of work, who were media junkies in one way or another, and

who were willing to talk to the press and work the press. Mike, I remember, at one point – his entire apartment was full of press kits and media stuff, and he really was one-man band for a long time there.

SS: What about zapping the media, which is something that we did. Do you remember any specific examples of that?

AN: Well, the most famous and largest example was in – I want to say, January '91 – the Day of Desperation. When there were a series of actions. There were actions planned in the morning, at various locations. There was a major action, in the evening, at Grand Central Station, where several hundred people gathered on the floor of Grand Central and demonstrated and eventually went out in the street and got arrested. But, to preview that – the night before, the plan was to invade various evening news broadcasts, live. And, in fact, ACT UP members succeeded in invading the CBS “Evening News with Dan Rather,” live on the air, and “The McNeil-Lehrer Report,” at PBS. They got stopped trying to go into NBC. The security stopped them somewhere, before they got to the studio. And there was a rumor that we had decided to leave ABC alone because Peter Jennings had been so enlightened about AIDS, but the real truth was, we didn't have enough information about how to get into the building. And so, ABC was not a target that night.

Tape II
00:05:00

SS: And you were involved in planning this?

AN: I was involved in planning the CBS action, because I had worked at CBS, and the small affinity group came to me and said, we want to go into CBS, we know you used to work there, can you work with us to tell us how to do it? The end of this story is that Dan Rather hates me, because he blames me for this invasion. And I like to say, it

wasn't my idea, and I didn't go do it. But, the fact is, I did tell them how to do it.

SS: So, how did they do it?

AN: First of all, they took my ID card, which I still had, because CBS had neglected to take it back from me at the time, and they copied it and put their own faces on and made their own ID cards. And I diagramed the floor plan of the building on West 57th Street – the broadcast center for CBS – where the evening news is done. And, it was very simple, because they had just built a new “Evening News” studio, which was very close to the front door. So, I told them, all you have to do is go in the front door, go by the security desk, flash your ID card – they won't look at it closely – all you have to do is make a gesture, and they'll let you go through. And then you go straight down this corridor, take a left, go through these doors, and you're in the “Evening News.” And if you dress in business suits, and just stand off to the side, you probably won't be challenged, and if anyone does ask you who you are, just say you're a salesman from Black Rock – the CBS headquarters building, and you're there, showing clients the “Evening News.” And so, they did a dry run of this, a couple of weeks before, and did just like that, and it worked. They stood there, about 20 feet from Dan Rather, live on the air, and no one said a word to them. No one asked them. They had their cover stories planned, but no one said a word to them, because their whole attitude got them through.

So, on the appointed day, they did exactly the same thing and went right in, and stood right in the same place, right at the side of the broadcast, and a couple of minutes into the broadcast, ripped off their clothes, having their ACT UP t-shirts underneath, and just popped up in front of the camera, yelling, “Money for AIDS, Not for War!” because it was right at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, which Bush Sr. had just started. And so,

the theme for all of this was, basically, money for AIDS, not for war.

And producers tackled them, and they got hauled off and arrested, and the “Evening News” went to black and came back, and Rather was upset, apologizing to the viewers for this dastardly interruption. And this became such a big deal, that other newscasts took the clip of this and played it all over the world. I talked to someone who saw it broadcast on CNN, when they were in Jerusalem, doing war coverage. So, it became a very big deal. And, meanwhile, another group went into PBS and managed to handcuff themselves to Robert McNeil’s chair, and, they may have gotten arrested ultimately, but he let them sit there for awhile, and talked to them on the air, for a little bit. Before then, I think handing the broadcast over to Lehrer and dragging them out.

SS: When someone decides to do an action like that, what is the goal?

AN: The goal is public attention. The whole idea was to bring a sense of urgency to the AIDS epidemic; to say, people are dying, we can do something about this, we must do something about this, and at the moment, we’re not doing anything about it. So, it was always to make it an emergency, to make people see that this was something we had to deal with, immediately. And to bring all that out into public view, because, otherwise it wasn’t being talked about. And, people who were working on the crisis in other ways – social service agencies or whatever – were doing their daily work, but it wasn’t accomplishing what needed to be accomplished.

SS: What was an action that you think really failed, in terms of the media?

AN: I’m sure people would like me to say, the St. Patrick’s Cathedral demonstration, but I will defend that one until the day I die. I’m not having any success

evoking anything in particular.

SS: Were there any strategies that you tried that didn't work?

AN: Well, it was often hard to get the media to pay attention. If you did a sort of run-of-the-mill demonstration, where you just showed up and did a sort of moving picket on a sidewalk somewhere, you often could not get a lot of press there, or not get people to pay attention. And so, our actions were planned, for the most part, to be quite dramatic, with the understanding that that was how you got the media attention. I'm sure there are many that I would say did fail, because they didn't get enough attention. But, on the other hand, I think everything we did was important and valuable.

SS: Well, this question of the relationship between getting media attention and the nature of the actions – this is something I'm really interested in. Do you feel that the people who planned the actions were thinking that if they were very dramatic, they would get more media attention?

AN: Absolutely.

SS: Or do you think they were very dramatic and you guys brought the media to them?

AN: No, I think actions were planned specifically to be dramatic, to get media attention. You have two audiences when you do an action – one is the audience of people immediate there, wherever you're targeting, and the other is the public in general. And one of my lines is, you're not talking to the media, you're talking through the media. The news media are a vehicle to talk to a larger audience – meaning, the general public or people in power who are watching, or whomever. But, you're trying to reach that general public, or you're trying to reach the people immediately on site, and both can be valuable

and important. But, actions are always, always, always planned to be dramatic enough to capture public attention, including the news media.

SS: Now was there ever a time when authority just fought back? Was there any kind of repression or brutality that greeted all of this?

AN: Oh no, it was all easy. [LAUGHS] Sorry. Certainly the fact that we were arrested repeatedly was an indication of the powers that be trying to stop this. The fact that we were held longer and longer – held overnight, ultimately – instead of just a couple of hours, at first, was an attempt to shut us down. The fact that the judicial system – meaning the politicians who control the judicial system, as I found out, being a part of all this – was willing to impose higher and higher charges against people, and less and less willing to let us off with probation, was an indication of a crackdown. The fact that we were kept barricaded further and further away from our targets was an indication of that. But, mostly, the fact that we were infiltrated by the FBI, which we found out sometime afterwards.

SS: What was your evidence for that?

AN: The Center for Constitutional Rights eventually discovered some documentation from the FBI that they had, in fact, infiltrated ACT UP.

SS: Were you aware of this documentation?

AN: I think I saw some of it. It was, what's-her-name? Margaret – Kuntsler's widow.

SS: Margaret Ratner?

AN: Yes, I think, who came up with it. You should talk to her. And, I don't know that I have the actual proof on this, but I ended up thinking that that was, in fact,

what was going on when the women in ACT UP were being harassed and terrorized with anonymous mailings and threatening things, and when all the split happened, and they thought it was the men who are angry at them, who are doing some of that. I think a lot of that was about FBI sabotage.

SS: Do you believe that those harassing actions actually occurred?

AN: I do.

SS: And you believe that they were created by the FBI?

AN: I do.

SS: Well, very interesting. That's a first. I'll have to pursue that.

AN: That may be a unique theory. I know there are other theories – like, they didn't happen, and maybe that's the FBI infiltration.

SS: Who was in ACT UP that has access to this material?

AN: I don't know. But, I would check with Margaret Ratner, at CCR, to try to track it down. But, it came out a few years after that time, and the timing seemed to be coincidental with that time, when that whole split happened and all that horror was taking place.

SS: Now, what actions were you really involved in, in terms of media?

AN: In terms of media?

SS: Yes.

AN: The attack on the FDA was one that I had a fair amount to do with, because, along with Vito Russo and a guy named John Thomas from Dallas, I was one of the three – the three of us were the speakers at the press conference at the FDA that morning. And, I guess I had helped with the strategy where – because we had activists

from all over the country for that action, we had found people from all over and designated them as media spokespeople. And the national press did show up to that action in quite large numbers. And so, when Vito and John and I finished speaking, Mike, I think, Signorile, turned to the press and said, all right, now, over there are people from 20 different states, each holding a little placard, saying where they're from, ready to be your local spokesperson on these issues. And the press sort of did this doubletake, and this collective intake of breath of, oh my God, and then there was this stampede over to these people, because that was exactly what they wanted – was this local angle. That's what the press always wants. So, we were so prepared for them, they just couldn't believe it.

SS: How did they treat you?

AN: Well, I had a sound byte on the "CBS Evening News" that night, but they misspelled my name, which I thought was ironic. [LAUGHS] They were – the press doesn't care about people. They care about getting their sound bytes, they care about putting good pictures on TV. They're oblivious, basically. They're just treating you as product.

SS: Were gay people in these media organizations, any special kind of help?

AN: Some were a help and some were a hindrance. Some didn't want to be identified as having any familiarity with us, and some were more sympathetic and more knowledgeable. So, we had both experiences. It was exactly what I expected it to be. The media were ignorant, so, to some extent, you could manipulate them into doing stuff, and sometimes you just had to throw up your hands. In training activists on how to act at

a demonstration – how to interact with the press – because we did talk to people before every major demonstration about what you should say, in talking to the press. But, it became clear, very quickly, that the press was so stupid and so lazy, that they would come to every demonstration and ask one question: “Why are you here?” That was it. And they had no understanding of any issue, and no ability to ask questions about any issue. And all they were going to put on the air or in the newspaper was the answer to the question, “Why are you here?” They had no room for anything more sophisticated. So, it was very limited what you could do. So, mostly, you were trying to get the right headline, or try, when you could, to talk to a reporter to educate them about the issue, because 95 percent of any news story is what the reporter is saying. The sound bytes are a very tiny part of any story. I would tell people, watch the evening news, and time how much of a story is the reporter’s narration, and how much is the sound byte, and you’ll find that the sound byte is a very small portion of the story. So, it’s far less important for you to come up with right sound byte, than it is for you to talk to the reporter before they do the story and educate them, so they will reflect your point of view in their narration more than in just the sound byte.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: Okay, now let’s talk Stop the Church. I actually remember you, inside the church, saying, “We’re fighting for your lives, too!” – which I’ll never forget. It was a great sound byte. Were you involved in media for that event?

AN: If you see the documentary *Stop the Church*, you’ll see me talking to the pre-action meeting the night before and talking about talking through the media, rather than to the media, and how to characterize this, and how to characterize the issues. Because I wasn’t ever really involved in calling the media – I taught other people how to

do that. I don't think I solicited the media, but I did talk to the demonstrators who were planning to do it the next day, about how to spin this, or how to describe it in a way that would make sense, because we knew for the months before when we debated this among ourselves, that it was going to be very hard for people to understand this.

SS: How do you feel it was ultimately the press coverage? What was the consequence?

AN: It was the demonstration we did that got the most worldwide press coverage in tones that were horrified. And there are people who to this day think it was a very big mistake for us to do that because they think it was very negative publicity. And certainly, for years afterwards, when I would, say, go into a classroom to do AIDS education and, for some reason, mention having done this, people would yell at me. And, there are people who still – almost 15 years later – will talk about this as a horrible thing. Or, Rosie O'Donnell said, "I don't think people ought to be going into churches and doing demonstrations." But, I, in my heart of hearts think it was a brilliant and wonderful and positive action, because it brought out the issues. And we said for years in ACT UP, that our job was not to be liked – that we were not doing what we were doing, to get the public to like us. We were doing what we were doing to accomplish something about particular issues, and I think we did that, enormously successfully. And, we weren't liked, but we forced people to pay attention and forced change, I think, much quicker than it would have happened now. We didn't accomplish nearly what I would like to accomplish, but to the extent that we did things, I think it was tremendous and had nothing to do with being liked or admired. That action did end up on the front page of every newspaper in the world, I think, and mostly because Tom Keene crumbled the host,

which I support him doing. But, I was raised in a family that hates Catholicism, and even though they were all right-wing republicans who voted for Barry Goldwater, they liked the fact that I got arrested in St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was so strange. My DAR member grandmother thought it was just a lovely thing to do.

But, my favorite story, actually, is from Gabriel Rotello who, several days after the action, talked to his mother in suburban Danbury, Connecticut, who said to him, "You know, my friends and I have been talking about this," – as was the whole world, at that point – "and we've decided that before this demonstration, we thought gay people were sort of weak and wimpy. But now, we think gay people are strong and angry." That was it, for me. That did it. That was exactly what I wanted to accomplish, and I couldn't have been happier.

Tape II
00:25:00

SS: Did you receive a lot of criticism from other gay people about the tactics of ACT UP at the time?

AN: I almost got fired from my job at Hetrick-Martin. Damien Martin almost had a heart attack in the hall, screaming at me about this. Andy Humm, who is one of my closest friends to this day, who I work with and play golf with and live next door to, screamed at me for doing it – thought it was a terrible thing to do. Many, many gay people and straight people and all sorts of people hated this action and thought it was absolutely horrible. And, within ACT UP, it was huge debate. There were many people within ACT UP who never liked that demonstration and thought it was an awful thing to do.

SS: Let's talk a little bit about the culture of ACT UP, or the sub-culture of ACT UP. What was your relationship with the other women in ACT UP?

AN: Mixed. I really liked most of the women in ACT UP, but I also was not for very long a member of the Women's Committee, and that had to do, frankly, with the fact that I went to a couple of meetings of the Women's Committee and thought that there were a couple of people running those meetings who were tremendously dictatorial and not interested in a collective kind of experience and a democratic experience, but really wanted to tell people what to do. So, I didn't go back. But I think I had a very good relationship with most of the women in ACT UP, but I also think I was seen as someone who was close to the men, and there were a lot of men I was close to and felt good about. But, I like to think my friendships spanned a wide range of people.

SS: Were you involved in any of the lesbian socializing or dating or any of that?

AN: No, because I was very married at the time. I was in the midst of my 17 year relationship. I had two kids. I was a PTA Mom, actually, going out and getting arrested – which made me, actually, very popular with the kids. And, I was older than a lot of them. When I joined ACT UP, I was just short of my 39th birthday, so I was not one of the 20-somethings running around, starting a social life.

SS: Were there other parents in ACT UP?

AN: Yes, absolutely. And one person I was close to, because of our common parental experience was Bob Rafsky, who had a daughter, who he just adored and spent a lot of time talking about. And a lot of others, sure.

SS: How did your kids understand what you were doing?

AN: They loved it. They thought it was terrific. They were very proud of me. We were all Upper West Side liberals – that's where I was living at the time, and their

friends all knew what I was doing, and everybody thought it was great and completely supported it, and were proud of it. My wife/partner/girlfriend, Linda, was someone I referred to as being as political as a couch. She was not involved. But, that was okay with me. I was doing what I was doing, and I didn't need her to be involved, too. A lot of activists seemed to want a sort of activist relationship, where both are involved, but that was not high on my agenda. She would come to occasional demonstrations – especially if they were in our neighborhood. If it became geographically convenient, she would show up, but for the most part, not.

SS: One of the things that's very common to people who are in ACT UP was that there was a period of time in which there was an enormous amount of death – people were dying very rapidly. Did you go to memorial services?

Tape II
00:30:00

AN: Oh yeah, sure. And, I sort of am a fatalist about death and about life. I don't believe in God. I don't believe we're going off to some other existence. I don't believe that life is meaningful, in particular. I think we're another species of animals who are here to do whatever we're doing for our life span, who've succeeded in messing up the planet a great deal and, luckily, the planet will survive us, and we'll disappear before it does. But, I don't attach some huge significance to life. I'd like to have a lot of it. I'm enjoying it. But, I expect all of us to die, and some people die earlier, and some people die later and I've seen various people die in various ways over many years. But, the memorial services were, certainly, occasions in and of themselves. And, I'm not entirely comfortable about funerals because the person is dead, so who are we there for? Each other, presumably. And, I go to occasions like that, to sort of have that interaction among those of us who are still alive. But, I'm a little confused about the purpose of

these things. But, I've certainly seen my share of wild memorial services, and I do remember, for instance, Bob Rafsky's where several people got up and argued about who was the most beloved ex, and things like that. The drama is appealing. I'm enough of a drama junkie to enjoy that.

SS: Was there any one individual whose death really stands out for you, affected you more deeply than the others?

AN: Rafsky was certainly one.

SS: Did you talk to him a lot about his illness?

AN: Somewhat, but not – I talked to him about his daughter and about life and certainly about his feeling about impending death.

SS: What was it like, watching people get sicker?

AN: Sad. I would say just a really tremendous feeling of sadness, but I do feel sort of fatalistic about a lot of this. I was there to try to save people's lives and try to make change in the world. But, ultimately – I've lost two brothers in accidental deaths over the years. My parents have died and most of my other relatives of their generation, certainly. And, I lost a very good friend at CBS to cancer – that affected me a lot. So, the AIDS deaths are horrendous, and one of my best friends who died of AIDS was a guy I worked with at CBS who was not particularly involved in ACT UP.

SS: What was his name?

AN: Andrew Wright. He died in '94. So, I don't have a special place for this, so much, as I have just a feeling of sadness at the loss of these people who were tremendous people, along the way – every last one of them.

SS: What do you think it would take for there to be another social

movement like ACT UP, in this country?

Tape II
00:35:00

AN: Well, I despair at the fact that there isn't one right now. My experience over the years has been – whether it's the civil rights or the anti-war movement, or the feminist movement, or the gay rights and AIDS movements – that it's about people feeling personally urgent about their situation. I cannot imagine why people don't feel more urgent at the moment about what's happening to them – although, some of it is about, also, feeling the possibility of the power of change, and I think there's a lot of despair and lack of empowerment right now. I'm not sure.

SS: You've articulated different mechanisms for urgency, inside ACT UP – the people who were, themselves, had AIDS. They had a certain kind of urgency. But then, there's people like you – bystanders, really – who took the responsibility of intervening. And these are different types of people. There was a sense of coalition between those two different types of people. What makes that happen, that coming together?

AN: I wish I had a good answer for you on that. It seems to be a kind of naturally occurring chemistry that I'm not sure can be predicted or manufactured.

SS: Do you think it's gendered? Do you think that men would come together for you, as bystanders?

AN: No, absolutely not. I do not, and I think that's been proven time and time again.

SS: Why not?

AN: Because men do not feel personally involved in the lives of women, and don't feel they have a stake in the lives of women. And, the power imbalance, I think,

naturally makes men – their gaze is upward, not downward. And, they don't feel they have a stake.

SS: How do you feel about that? Seeing how much you've contributed.

AN: I like to joke about it, actually. I like to point out that if we ever get this cloning thing right, men will just disappear, because they'll be completely unnecessary, and then we'll see their true irrelevance in life. Sometimes, I'm angry, sometimes I laugh, sometimes I just am oblivious. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. I try to live my life on a daily basis in ways that make me happy, and take my opportunities to make as many cracks about it as possible. I do a weekly cable TV show called "Gay USA", with Andy Humm, and I am constantly sitting there, making cracks about the irrelevance or stupidity of men. But, I also get along with a lot of men, and enjoy them, and am truly happy to be friendly with them – including the men in this room.

SS: I'm going to ask you this again, in a more serious way, because I've known you for a long time, and you're 10 years older than me, and you've contributed a lot of things that I've benefited from. How can women get subjectivity? Where we are the thing? Where we're not generous bystanders, or people bringing gifts or talents to somebody else's situation?

AN: I certainly think that women have to take responsibility for themselves in their own situation, and they have to get over expecting men – I think women have to take power, is the real answer. And, I am encouraged by the extent to which I have seen that happening, over the last 30 years. I want more of it and I think it is a sort of an inevitable trajectory we are on – although, I think men are digging in their heels, and my image for a long time has been of men sort of in the trenches with machine guns, fighting

off the oncoming hoards of women, who are going to take all their jobs and their place in the world. But, I think that is an inevitable evolution. And, I think women have to not expect men to jump on the bandwagon. I think men ought to jump on the bandwagon for their own good and their own survival, because, ultimately, we will take over, and if they want to still be around, they're going to have to join with us, or really brushed off into nothingness. But, I think for women to expect men to jump on for any reason other than that kind of survival is naïve and self-defeating. I think we ought to go ahead and take care of ourselves.

SS: Is this relevant to the split in ACT UP and its decline?

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: So really, what is your understanding of the split and the decline of ACT UP?

AN: I do think that the split had to do with people who were interested in immediately saving their own lives versus those who had a bigger vision, bigger issues, or were interested in saving other people's lives, and, to some extent, a misunderstanding between those two groups. I thought it was quite tragic.

SS: What was the misunderstanding?

AN: That we were all on the same path and that these issues converged, rather than having to fight each other. I thought it was a complete misunderstanding to think that these were opposite and exclusive points of view. And, I think the feeling between the two factions that they were fighting against each other was erroneous.

SS: Who were the two factions?

AN: Well, there was what became the TAG group – what went off to work independently as the Treatment Action Group – Peter Staley, Mark Harrington and

others. And, certainly one component of that was that they wanted to get funding from pharmaceutical companies to do their work, and that was certainly unacceptable within ACT UP. So, if they were dedicated to that, then they were, inevitably, going to have to break off, because that was not going to work within the group. But, I think their feeling that women wanting to work on issues pertaining to women was hurtful to them was wrong, and to bring issues of race into it – and they saw that as distracting or whatever, I think that was wrong. So, I think they were short-sighted. On the other hand, they went off to do what they did, and I think they feel successful in what they did, and certainly, they've done a lot of work with pharmaceutical companies in doing drug research and stuff, and I'm sure some of that has been productive. And, the suspicion among the women of that group, I think, was also a little over the top. And, I don't know about whether the harassment was real, and whether those incidents really happened, or who really did them. But, I do think that FBI sabotage may have had a lot to do with it.

SS: What were the concrete issues on the floor, around which all of this dissension emerged?

AN: You know, I have only the vaguest memory of it. I do remember something about women's issues specifically versus drug research, and probably treatment versus prevention.

SS: When you say women's issues, do you mean the campaign to change the definition of AIDS?

AN: That was part of it, but it also had to do with, I think, the trial of AZT and pregnant women. I think that was part of it. I don't think I remember specifically enough to be accurate.

SS: Okay.

AN: I also think there's another factor working here. We were meeting at Cooper Union, at the time. We had outgrown the Community Center, in terms of numbers. Those meetings at the Center had become so packed, that we looked for a bigger space and, in fact, for awhile, when we were meeting in the Great Hall at Cooper Union, there were as many as 600 people coming every Monday night to the meetings. But, Cooper Union was a terrible, terrible space. It divided people, rather than bringing them together. It was too big. It offered too many opportunities for people to sort of wander off and engage in their own side conversations. It's a bad room to try to focus anything. The acoustics, the sight lines, the pillars in the middle of the room, make it very hard to hold a focused meeting where everybody can pay attention to each other, and I think that was a physical impediment to the success of the group, at that point. And someone once said to me that the natural life of any volunteer activist group is three years, and, at that point, we were way beyond that, and I think we have to understand that it was inevitable that this movement would have a beginning, a middle and an end. And, while ACT UP still meets and still does things, it is just a handful of people. I think ACT UP existed much, much longer and much more successfully than most movement groups like this. But, people died, people moved on to other things in their lives. People took jobs in the AIDS field. All sorts of things happened to dilute the group over time. So, I think that's an inevitable trajectory.

SS: Well, as we're sitting here, there's a global AIDS crisis, and part of that crisis is a crisis of access, in that we now see certain kinds of medications available to certain people in certain countries, and completely unavailable globally.

Do you see any relationship between the debates in ACT UP, and the crisis in access today?

AN: I think there's a lot I want to say about this, but define the question a little more.

SS: It seems that somewhere, the idea of people's right to healthcare – all people – which was part of ACT UP's platform, early on – somewhere in the world AIDS movement that became a secondary or forgotten element – especially with the development of the new medications. And, I'm trying to understand if there's any historical relationship between the way access was viewed in ACT UP and the way it's ended up in the world that we live in now?

AN: I think the universal right to healthcare was a supposed platform playing for ACT UP early on. I think it was too difficult. I think it's natural to reach for the easier, faster thing, and that became the specific drugs and once better drugs were available, a lot of that stuff did fall away. And, when the group split, that diluted the ability or willingness to demand universal healthcare. I think that's just too high a mountain to climb, or was, for ACT UP and its particular configuration. And, we haven't seen much progress on it in this country since then, either. So, I think that difficulty is real and frustrating.

The stuff about the global epidemic is a glass I prefer to look at as half full. There were a few people, like Eric Sawyer, who were working on global issues really early on, and were part of the beginning of attention to this, globally. But, it was really just in the year 2000 that a few people in ACT UP said, you know, we really ought to pay attention to global issues, and we really ought to try to do something about this epidemic in Africa.

And, Bob Lederer was a main person, and a lot of us – and there weren't a lot of us left, at that point – but, those of us who were there, mostly, sort of went, what are you crazy? We're suddenly going to take on the African epidemic? We can't do anything with that. But, he and a couple of others persisted and a group got together – we found out that the United States had specifically blocked access to drugs in South Africa, and that, in fact, Vice President Al Gore had sat at a meeting and refused access – had upheld the pharmaceutical companies – all the while, the administration is saying they care about this stuff – and that infuriated us. And we said, we can go get Al Gore, he's running for President. And, it just so happened that he was about to make his official announcement of his candidacy. It wasn't a surprise, but he was doing his sort of media event of the announcement of his candidacy, and he was going to start one morning in his hometown of Carthage, Tennessee. And then, he was going to fly to New Hampshire to do an announcement, the next morning there, because of the New Hampshire primary. And then, get on a plane to New York and that afternoon do an announcement in New York.

Tape III
00:10:00

So, a bunch of people piled into a couple of cars and drove to Tennessee and went to the early morning rally. And they had little signs that they concealed under their shirts and some either bull horns or foghorn kinds of things, and they very intelligently, with all this training experience, looked at where the cameras were, and looked at where Al Gore was and planted themselves right in the middle, so that the cameras would – in shooting Al Gore – would see them, when they popped up. And when Al Gore started to speak – a few minutes into his speech – they popped up with these signs saying, “Gore's Greed Kills” – and did this whole demonstration. And that became the news, because everyone knew Al Gore was running for President. No one cared about that. But, the fact that

AIDS demonstrators had shown up to claim that the administration was killing people in Africa, became the big headline. And Gore was certainly taken completely by surprise. And, suddenly, the AIDS epidemic around the world became a headline. Who knew we could do this, with a few people showing up in Tennessee? So, they do that, then they get back in their cars and they drive back to New York.

Meanwhile, a different group has gone off to New Hampshire. And, when they get to the gym where Gore's going to make his announcement – they're late, of course, because activists don't like to do early morning stuff. So, they come to the gym, the gym is packed, and they're escorted to sit on the stage next to Gore. [LAUGHS] Activists have to be lucky, as well as smart. So, Gore gets up to speak, and two minutes into his speech, they stand up, right next to him, and unfurl a huge banner, you know – “Gore's Greed Kills” – and they're tossing stuff around. And Tipper comes out with her camera, and gets in front to take pictures of all this. And, there's a big picture in the newspaper of Al Gore, standing at the podium, and the activists right next to him with their banner. And he's freaking out again. So, then he gets on a plane to come to New York. Well, meanwhile, the people who've been to Tennessee have gotten back to New York, so they go to Federal Hall, where he's making his announcement. So, he gets to New York, he gets up to make a speech, and boom, he's hit again, by the same people.

Well, within 24 hours, the African AIDS epidemic had become front page news, all over the country, because of these little targeted actions and just the leap of faith that said, we can do something about this. And everything you have seen since then in the subsequent three years about the creation of the Global Fund, all of Bush's stuff, giving money for AIDS which, by the way, is just smoke and mirrors – but, the attention to

AIDS all over the world. Last week, we mentioned on the show there is now an ACT UP Katmandu, in Nepal. The empowerment movement for people with AIDS may be dead here, but it has spread around the world, in ways that none of us could ever have dreamed. And I think that's brilliant and magnificent.

SS: Did Gore ever change his position?

AN: He claimed to change his position. People in power will scramble to cover up anything. But, the fact is, the United States continued then and continues now to claim it cares about the epidemic, but, in fact, go to all these meetings and continue to support the pharmaceutical companies. So, there is an ongoing battle around the world with the US in the worst position trying to support major pharmaceutical company profits and restrict access to drugs for people who need them.

SS: Are you still active with ACT UP?

AN: A little bit. I am still one of the co-treasurers of ACT UP/New York. I go to actions occasionally, but I have stopped going to the regular weekly Monday night meetings. I started doing something else on Monday nights and just got out of the habit of going. And, the few times I have been, it hasn't been as interesting or fun or compelling. And, I also – 15 years after I started there – I have reached a point, I realize in the last year or so, where I need a break. And I need to recharge myself and – you know, I'm doing this cable show weekly, and I've been doing that for seven years now, and I continue to do that, and we do an AIDS news segment every week. And I continue to stay up with the issues, and I continue to talk about it and think about it and consider myself involved. But, I realize I'm just not going to as many demonstrations these days, because it just doesn't feel as compelling to me, on any subject.

SS: One last question. Looking back over your 15 years in ACT UP, what do you believe is ACT UP's greatest achievement?

AN: It would be easy to say, forcing the creation of drugs, I guess, and thereby saving a lot of lives. I do think that. But, I think it's mostly about empowering people. I think it's about giving gay people, certainly, a sense of dignity and self-respect. What I've heard, endlessly, over the years is how proud people are of ACT UP. And, I guess it goes back to what Gabriel Rotello's mother said, that we are strong and angry. I think self-respect is the greatest gift, really, that you can give people. And, I think ACT UP is all about that.

SS: Okay, thank you Ann.

[END OF INTERVIEW]