

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

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Interviewee: **Michael Petrelis**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Michael Petrelis

April 21, 2003

MICHAEL PETRELIS: My name is Michael Petrelis. We're in San Francisco, California, at my apartment that I share with my partner, Mike Merrigan. And, today is April 21st, 2003.

SARAH SCHULMAN: How old are you, dear?

MP: I am 44, and quite proud of my wrinkles and gray hair that I have in a few spots. I'm really proud. I'm still here at my great age, at 44.

SS: Where were you born, Michael?

MP: Newark, New Jersey.

SS: Did you grow up there?

MP: For about four or five years, and then my parents moved us to the suburbs, to a little town called Caldwell – also, in New Jersey. Caldwell, New Jersey.

SS: And you went to high school there? Grew up there?

MP: Well, I actually went to an alternative high school in East Orange, New Jersey. And, I was out in high school.

SS: You came out in high school, in the '70s?

MP: Yeah. I guess I came out in 1974, '75, and I graduated in 1977, and I'm happy to say, I wasn't the only out gay or lesbian that I went to high school with. And also, that a few – well they were girls at the time, they're women now – from kindergarten in Caldwell, New Jersey, are also out, and were also out at that time and I've seen them at high school reunion things or at demonstrations.

SS: So, who were the other gay people that you knew, when you were growing up?

MP: Who I knew when I was growing up? Well, one was a teacher I didn't have any classes with him – Bill Sempriora. Unfortunately, he's died of AIDS, since then. A cousin of mine, in Rhode Island. I was really aware of out, gay people growing up.

SS: Did you make a decision to be out, or did it just happen?

MP: Oh, I made a decision and started telling my family and friends and, I have to say – a lot of it had to do with feeling good about having sex. Sex with men – I wasn't into sex with guys my own age, you know? And, I felt really good about being gay and I was really aware of this old slogan that they credit to Frank Kameny: "Gay is Good." And that's how I felt.

SS: So, if you were having sex with men – not with other boys, when you were coming out – is that what you were saying before?

MP: Yeah.

SS: And, did these guys have a gay identity?

MP: Oh yes. Well, one – Bill Sempriora, identified as bisexual – he was married to a straight woman, at this point in his life, but still appreciated men.

SS: So, were these men encouraging you to be out and telling you about the gay community, or were they in a suburban cliché of isolation?

MP: There was strong encouragement to be out and healthy. You know, when I told my mom, she said what is kind of a cliché – that she had known, or certainly thought that I was gay for a few years. And she was fine about it – wanted me to be happy. At one point I remember, soon after I came out, she said in this very matter of fact way, "Well you still have to go to school and do everything you were doing before,"

you know? And that's how it was to my mom. I have an older brother who is 44, and he's also gay. And he came out about a year, maybe two years after I did. [He had] that same supportive family environment when he came out, too.

SS: So, when did you first get involved in the gay community?

MP: You mean politically?

SS: Or socializing, or going to gay events – that kind of thing?

MP: As a teenager, going into Manhattan, specifically to the Ninth Circle bar on West 10th Street. I remember going with a friend of mine from Caldwell, Kenny Shepanski, who was very bi-sexual – in every sense of the word – and my younger sister. I mean anyone could get served at the Ninth Circle – in the mid-'70s – underage. I feel comfortable saying that now because they're closed. It's something else now. And also going to Julius's. Part of the reason I loved going to Julius's, right down the block from the Ninth Circle, was because of this great movie by Paul Mazursky – *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* – it takes place in the '50s. It's not a gay bar per se, then, but it was just something that I had seen on the screen. And I'd say, that's when it first happened – I mean, when I first got involved in the gay community – in the Village, really trying to connect to other gay guys at the time.

SS: So did you go to work right away, after high school, or did you go to college?

MP: Right after high school I hitchhiked across the country, in the summer of '77, because I wanted to see South Dakota. I just had a real thing about seeing South Dakota. And I wound up here, in the summer of '77. I didn't go to college until – I mean, really start school – until the '90s, here in San Francisco.

SS: So, you were living in San Francisco. Were you working?

MP: Somewhat. You've got to remember, this was like '77-'80, when I was living here, and it was quite easy to get by. I remember being on food stamps. There was a much bigger social net, you know. And, did some surviving with some restaurant jobs, and just an awful lot of partying and some politics, because I was here when the whole Harvey Milk thing went down.

SS: So, how did you get involved politically?

MP: You know, I went to the old Gay Community Center on Grove Street. Thank you for asking that question, because I remember getting some house-cleaning jobs through this Gay Community Center.

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SS: Is this San Francisco or New York?

MP: Here in San Francisco, in '77, '78, there was a Gay Community Center on Grove Street, I believe it was. It wasn't much, in terms of what we think of now – like the New York or San Francisco big Gay Community Center – but it was a very great resource for finding an apartment, a job, a gay AA group, things like that.

I would say that would be something I would consider my first connection to an organized, political part of the community. And one day, I'm hitchhiking around San Francisco, because it was another great way to meet guys – hitch-hiking around San Francisco, believe it or not. He picks me up, we have sex, and he just casually mentions that there's a room for rent where he's living at 1800 Market Street. So, my first room to rent, in this big, gorgeous apartment at 1800 Castro Street, is now the site of the San Francisco Gay Community Center. I could take you to the room that was the room where I had my first sex – well I should say my first sex indoors, in San Francisco. I lived there

for about two years. And for me, I found it was easy to get an apartment, get enough work to keep the apartment and enjoy the '70s, and what was going on back then.

But I tell you, when the Harvey Milk assassination and the assassination of Mayor Moscone happened, I wasn't going to meetings. I went to the candlelight vigil thing that happened after they were assassinated, and it was really scary to me, you know? I'm not into guns. That whole thing just was part of it. I remember going to this official memorial service at the San Francisco Opera House. The governor at the time, Jerry Brown was there – a lot of politicians. And I felt scared, you know? Because even inside the City Hall, they're gunning us down. That's how I felt. The night of the White Night riots – which happened when Dan White got basically a slap on the wrist for the assassinations – I have to say, I was on drugs, and I had not been aware that the jury was getting ready to render its decision and everything. And I was partying with this guy, who lived on Market Street, and heard on the radio news – it was radio news – that gays were starting to gather. So – I believe they said, gathering around City Hall. So, I went there. Well things just turned into a riot, you know? I'm sorry I'm rambling.

SS: That's okay. How did that feel, to be part of that?

MP: I can't use that phrase we now throw around very easily these days – I didn't feel "empowered." There was a lot of anger inside of me. And of course I didn't know the details behind this Twinkie defense that Dan White's lawyer had used successfully. I just knew that this straight guy – deranged – had killed yes, a gay man, and a straight man and had been slapped on the wrist for it. It really I would say brought about some outrage in me, and when other demonstrators were – I guess they were using newspaper racks to break the glasses of the doors at City Hall, and others were setting the

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police cars on fire, during this White Night riot – and I was watching. I remember feeling like that was okay – that you had to have this destruction of personal property to send a message – more to gay people here. I wouldn't even say, gay people around the country, much less gay people around the world – a message to gay people here in San Francisco – this was not okay. And we had to look out for ourselves – even with the relative liberal attitudes of San Francisco.

SS: When did you first hear the word AIDS?

MP: I'm not sure, but I can tell you that I was living in New York, before they had even come up with the term GRID, and my friend Mel Bronfman was one of the first people who had died, and they hadn't even called it GRID.

SS: Had you seen him, when he was sick?

MP: No. I was here in San Francisco until about 1980 or so. In '80, or '81, I went back to New York City, and I had met Mel and his boyfriend, Ed Armstrong – again, as a teenager, at the old Man's Country bathhouse – which I think was on West 16th Street in Manhattan. They were just two guys that I got along with really, really well. When I moved back to New York, I got back in touch with them, saw them a little bit, and Mel started getting sick – specifically, with diarrhea that he could just never get rid of. Then he got fevers, then he lost his appetite. He finally went into St. Vincent's Hospital and Mel's parents flew up from Miami, and they weren't good about it. They even had some problems, in terms of letting Mel's long-standing partner, Ed Armstrong, come to the hospital. And the rest of us gay friends – we weren't allowed to go. They didn't want us. The reason they said they didn't want us to see Mel was because he was not in a very good condition. And, he never came out of the hospital. I would say that

within a year of Mel passing – and I believe he passed away in August or September of '80, '81 maybe – a year after Mel passed away was when his partner, Ed, had been contacted by health officials, who were investigating this new disease, and they were wondering if it was GRID. So, that's how I first heard about this disease that we now call AIDS. And your question about, when did I first hear about AIDS – would have been shortly thereafter and I can't remember exactly when or how or why, but I do remember it was from Ed Armstrong, that I heard about GRID.

SS: So when you started to become aware of AIDS, were you concerned that you might have contracted it?

MP: Oh yeah. Oh, yes. Listen, I'd been out of the closet, having sex in the mid to late '70s in New York and San Francisco. And yes, I had had sexually transmitted diseases. So when this new disease came along, it was on my mind that it would be something I might contract.

SS: So what did you do?

MP: Well, I remember going to the clinic – the STD clinic here. I forget where it was here, and when I moved back to New York, I went to –

SS: So you were telling me that you went to the STD clinic.

MP: Yeah, and I remember a lot of concern from the nurses or clinicians at – I think it was called the Gay Men's, or Gay STD Clinic? Sheridan Square above the – there's a Greek restaurant there, and I think, Citicorp Bank – and it was this little space on the second floor – maybe the size of this apartment, was the entire clinic. I remember the clinicians were really concerned that I was there, that I was young, that I had STDs

and that may have been the first time I had seen a poster about GRID or AIDS. It was certainly starting to take hold.

SS: So when did it really fully come into your life?

MP: When I was really, really aware of it. One time, when I went to the Everard baths, which I think were on West 28th Street, and there was a poster up there, and the poster had been drawn by – Howard Cruse? I like his drawings a lot, too. I remember it was a green background, and it's two white guys, in their late 20s, getting undressed, and whatever the safe sex rules at the time were printed to the right of these guys getting undressed in front of lockers and things. That was the first moment when AIDS was really sinking into me and sex and what was going on. Then, I unfortunately received this diagnosis of Kaposi's. It was August 26, 1985. It was like two in the afternoon. I remember that day, it really was a frightening day – in August of '85 – and I had been sick, really, throughout – starting in January, February of 1985, with what one doctor said was just a flu. In the summertime, I had this bump on my arm and the doctor said, "You know, you've got to go see a dermatologist about this." I was like, "What are you talking about? I don't have insurance." And I was doing temp work. So you know, I was still partying. I wasn't worried about having insurance. And he said, "No, you've got to see a dermatologist about this." I go and see this doctor N. Patrick Hennessey at NYU. He had an office at NYU Hospital on First Avenue – takes this biopsy. And I was so naïve. He took the biopsy – he removed this thing, he does this biopsy, and I got the stitches in my arm, and I didn't want to go back and see him a second time because I didn't have the money to pay him for a second time. And I was like, well if there's bad

news they'll call me up and tell me. I don't have anything to worry about. I can't have this AIDS disease.

SS: So you already knew that there was such a thing as Kaposi's Sarcoma and that it was AIDS?

MP: Oh yeah. I was especially aware of Kaposi's, because a number of my friends or acquaintances had it by that time. And, I don't know where I read it – in what publication, straight or gay about a possible link between amyl nitrates and KS – or, at least amyl-nitrate poppers and AIDS.

SS: So what happened? Did they call you?

MP: Well, they called me and said, "Well, the doctor really has to remove those stitches." And I said okay, I'll come in and I'll worry about payment later. This is what I remember – I'm in a room with no windows. We're on First Avenue, and the room is just white and clean and antiseptic, and Patrick Hennessey came in and he's asking me how I'm feeling, and he's starting to remove the few stitches. And he said, "You know, we really have to talk about the results that came in, because unfortunately, it was positive." And I was like, what he's saying is it's positive for the Kaposi's, which means you've got AIDS. I heard these words and just didn't focus on reality at all, and had a breakdown – was just crying. I thought I was going to be dead real soon. And what I was hearing this doctor say to me was two deadly diseases were attacking my body – the KS and the AIDS, and he started to explain that AIDS has brought about the KS, is soon going to bring on all these other illnesses. I couldn't handle it, and I remember I was smoking Camel non-filters at the time, and grabbed a cigarette and just lit up. And, he gets angry at me, and I just couldn't hear him, you know? A few puffs and I'm like,

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“You want me to worry about the smoke in your office, after you’ve just given me this news? I’m just not going to pay attention to that. I need something like a cigarette right now.” And then he and the nurse laughed and I collected myself and finished the medical examination, a little bit later in another office that did have windows.

SS: So, then you had AIDS, as far as you were concerned.

MP: Yeah, as far as they were concerned, and I went into a huge thing of – you’ve made a big mistake, you’ve mixed up my biopsy with someone else’s – denial, you know?

SS: So, what happened after that, in your life?

MP: I calmed down and N. Patrick Hennessey tells me, I’ve got about six months to a year, and that I have to very quickly go to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. I’ve got to interrupt myself at this point, because I remember a few years prior – one thing that really made me aware of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis was a big circus event at Madison Square Garden, because I was working for a film publicist. And a guy who used to work for her came by and said, “Oh, you’ve got to support this circus thing, for the Gay Men’s Health Crisis.” And then of course the circus, when it happened, got lots of attention. That’s how I knew about GMHC. So, in August in ’85, N. Patrick Hennessey is telling me you’ve got six months to a year, you’ve got to go draw up a will at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and figure out what you’re going to do. Also that I had to get a doctor, because I didn’t really have a doctor at the time, you know? He was just seeing me as a dermatologist specialist.

SS: Who did you tell?

MP: I immediately went and saw a good friend from Caldwell, New Jersey, who was working in New York at the time named Traci Register. I had known her since junior high school and she knew that I was going to the doctor's that day and God, while I was there, this Swiss woman who worked there. Her name was Barbara. She knew a little bit about what was going on with me, before going to the doctor and everything. She was really concerned when I showed up. She could just tell I didn't have good news. And I became a little bit friendly with Barbara over '86 or '87, and she eventually passed away from AIDS, herself. And she may have been the first woman I knew, really knew, who had died of AIDS. So, I went and I spoke to my friend Traci, and just tried to figure out what to do in terms of telling my mother, finding a doctor and dealing with all of this fear of dying. No drugs are available, or whatever drugs were available were awfully toxic. Well, they kind of still are, but more so back then.

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You know, I want to say something that was hard for me to acknowledge. I felt like committing suicide. My girlfriend Traci worked in the art world down in SoHo, in Manhattan, and she was up on the 8th or 9th floor, and I'm waiting for her and sort of talking to her friend Barbara, and it was like this real thing. This real desire to not deal with this death sentence that they had just given me that afternoon. And, now that I think back on it, it's almost 20 years later and I think the resistance I had to the news was the important thing that day – that it was just somehow the denial that I went into was protection for me. And the thought of trying to kill myself – just jumping out the window off this building in SoHo left my mind and I had just – I took it little step by little step. Traci and I went and had something to eat, and it was just this little thing of good

childhood friend, girlfriend, trying to say, “Well, let’s just have a Coke and something to eat. Everything else will fall into place later.”

SS: How did you get to Bailey House?

MP: Whoa, that’s a trip. Where I was living at the time – on West 51st or West 52nd Street, was with my friend Martin Sumner. Martin has, unfortunately, passed away of AIDS. Well, Martin had a hard time dealing with this AIDS diagnosis that I had and needed for me to leave. Ugh, what am I going to do? I need a place to live, and I can’t remember who told me – that the city was trying to purchase the River Hotel and turn it into a residence for people with AIDS. And, I’ve got to remember some more of the details, in terms of how this project was stuck in the New York City Council and neighborhood resistance and everything. Basically, I started going to meetings – I mean, meetings of CLGR, Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights – and saying, “Look, I’ve got to find a place to live. I need to find an apartment now, and this thing – they’ve got to open now.” Well, I had left Martin Sumner’s place, and was just staying on different friends’ couches and all –

SS: Michael, I want to interrupt you for a second. What was it in your life that made you feel, just as a person – that you could go to a community organization and say, “You have to help me get a place to live.”

MP: And like going to the Mayor’s gay liaison and – DOH – Department of Health in New York.

SS: I mean to go to CLGR and say, “You have to help me.” What was it in you that enabled you to do that, or think that that was – because a lot of people wouldn’t do that.

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MP: Well, I never took a class in how to assert yourself! I was basically demanding something that didn't exist. There wasn't a residence for people with AIDS at the time. But you know when I heard about the effort to purchase that River Hotel, and turn it into Bailey House, it was like – okay, this has got to be a campaign of mine, because I need a roof over my head and, of course, there must be other people who need this place.

SS: Had you ever done a campaign before for anything?

MP: I'd been involved in some campaigns for different things – like Save the Dolphins, in high school. I had quite an interest in animal rights stuff when I was growing up. But no, I didn't go to demonstrations or meetings or anything like that, and my family is working class Italian and Greek – not all that political. I always remember my mother voting and what have you, but certainly not more than that. Where did it come from? Something inside of me.

And, so that whole campaign was greatly helped by people like Andy Humm, Eleanor Cooper, Tom Smith, Jim Levin and – I would say that one of the things that I wasn't aware of so much, but these other experienced politicians were, was the anger against then-mayor, Ed Koch. I guess I was being selfish, in that I needed a roof over my head, and they saw the larger picture of moving the city administration at the time to address not only AIDS housing issues, but a lot of AIDS issues that the mayor was ignoring – the mayor and Carol Greitzer, who was the councilwoman from that district at the time. I remember going to a community meeting at St. Vincent's Hospital. I didn't even know they had an auditorium at St. Vincent's. She had been dragging her heels on this deal, and I just found that so wrong. And an advisor to Ed Koch was there, John

LoCicero, and I just let them have it. I didn't even wait for the Q&A part to start. I was all by my lonesome self. One other person who was really helpful with getting Bailey House open was Buddy Noro. I didn't even have Buddy Noro with me, and he and I were getting along, going [and] doing things together. And I would say, it was like the same thing – that got me to CLGR. Here's something I need done now. It's going to take a campaign. It's going to take the good people of CLGR and the local politicians to move on this.

I've got to say, if I think about it now – I didn't have a fear I'd get arrested by confronting the Koch guy or Carol Greitzer, or that St. Vincent's would arrest me for interrupting her. I just wasn't going to listen to whatever she wanted to talk about at the time – about garbage collection or something.

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MP: I'm out with a friend and this woman to my right said, "Are you Michael Petrelis?" So of course, I deny it's me. I don't know what FBI agent she is trailing me! And I quickly realize – and I couldn't believe it, because I smoke pot – Emily – I was like, "I can't remember your last name, but you're Emily [Nahmanson] from New York." She says, yes, and I that's how I hooked up with her again. I'm glad you got to her.

SS: Let's get back to Bailey House. So, were you in the first group of people at Bailey House?

MP: Yeah and the administrators were very nervous about me moving in there because of the political stuff that I did. And they agreed to let me in.

SS: When was that?

MP: I would believe it was – it must have been 1986, okay? No, 1986 was when the battle to have the city purchase it and turn it over to the AIDS Resource Center was going on. So, that's going on summer or fall of '86. I believe they took a few months. Maybe it opened in December '86 or January of '87, and I was one of the first people to move in, okay? The reason why I think I can date it that way is because I was looking at Bailey House – in February of '87, I was in the Lavender Hill Mob – an activist group. I was in the Lavender Hill Mob, and Marty Robinson and Bill Bahlman said, "We've got to go to Atlanta to go to this AIDS meeting at the CDC." The issue was mandatory testing of patients going into hospitals, and we were against that, of course, and we had other issues to bring up. So – that meeting took place in February of '87. So, January of '87, I'd say, is when I was allowed to live there.

SS: How did you get involved with the Lavender Hill Mob?

MP: I met Marty Robinson on the street one day, in front of the Gay Community Center on West 13th Street. And I had been aware of Marty over the years, for his involvement in gay politics and the Stonewall Riot things, over the years. When I saw him I was like well, I want to meet you. And I went over and introduced myself, and we became quick friends. I think we were both waiting for a GLAAD meeting to start – though, it wasn't GLAAD then. It was Gay and Lesbian Anti-Defamation League. But, then, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, it turned out, had copyrighted ADL – Anti-Defamation League – so, GLADL had to change its name to GLAAD. That is making me feel so old right now, remembering that kind of –

SS: So did you do any actions with the Lavender Hill Mob?

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MP: Yes I did, and I am quite proud of them, and I am quite proud that we quickly developed a reputation. And for shorthand people would say, “The Mob is here, the Mob is here” – like, when we’d go to City Council meetings to protest this awful Council member from Queens – Joe Lisa. I forget whatever Joe Lisa was proposing or opposing, but we had problems with him so we were showing up at meetings just to let him know. There were a few activists at the time – I don’t even think we called ourselves activists – who were willing to give the politicians a hard time. And I’m saying I don’t know if we were called activists then because we didn’t have ACT UP at that point. I would say I was in the Mob starting in ’85, sometime. Marty met Bill and Jean Elizabeth Glass, Henry Yeager, and the other handful of us – Eric Perez and things.

I would like to talk about one demonstration we did. It was a zap. *New York Newsday* – *Newsday* was publishing a Manhattan version of the paper, and they would publish a calendar everyday – what’s going on today? Culturally and politically. Well, I noticed one day that they were listing an event on Foreign Relations, done at NYU in the Village, and one of the key speakers was William Borders, editor – at that time – this would have been early ’87, late ’86 – editor of the Week in Review section of the *New York Times*. I know it’s going to sound strange to some of these future people, looking at this thing, but there was a time when the *New York Times* would not call us gay or lesbian, except in a quote, or if it was a name of a group. They’d call us homosexuals. It was just the most awful, clinical way they would refer to us. It was terrible. And, I remember saying to Marty Robinson, we’ve got to go to this. We’ve got to challenge this senior news editor to start calling us what we want to be called – gay and lesbian people. Marty agrees, Henry Yeager agrees, Jean Elizabeth – there’s a good little crew of us who

went. And our plan was – we had a little plan – Marty and Bill had the Lavender Hill Mob banner. We had a flyer that laid out our position to give to Borders from the *Times* and other people in the audience. And the plan was – because I could project quite well – that I would start yelling from the audience: “Call us gay! We want to be called gay and lesbian!” So about five or 10 minutes – just like with the Carol Greitzer thing, I’m not waiting for Q&A to start; I’ve got my issues now. And they started yelling and the audience was like, oh be quiet, shut up, shut up. No – this is an important issue. Henry Yeager started handing out flyers, and I kept screaming my demands at Borders: “Change the *Times*, change the *Times*!” Then, Marty Robinson and Bill Bahlman went to the front of the auditorium – stood in front of the panelists, unfurled the Lavender Hill Mob banner and said, “We’re here, because we want to be treated with dignity by this paper. And that means, calling us gay and lesbian.” And then he read from the statement. The security eventually came and got us out. No one was arrested. I recently had an awful exchange with William Borders via e-mail about this, but there was a lot of battling that we had to do, as a relative handful of people in the Mob, when we didn’t really have any big activist groups in New York or the country at the time.

SS: But everyone you just mentioned went into ACT UP.

MP: We blended into it, yeah. But – I don’t know – would you say pre-cursor is the right word to – but look, what was the pre-cursor to the Mob? Gay Activist Alliance. Gay Lesbian – what did GLF stand for?

SS: Gay Liberation Front.

MP: Thank you. You know I understood, later on, my homo history, and where I’d come from. And yeah sure, we were full of ourselves – especially in the early

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days of ACT UP, thinking we had invented the zap – where you quickly go in and do something. You get out, make your point, and get it on the news if you're lucky. But, there are lots of people I've got to remember, who came before me. And, they may not have necessarily screamed at people like William Borders of the *New York Times*, but it was a lot of steps that were being taken over the decades and centuries that we had to do. I'm really happy that I was able to do what I could do, in the '80s in the Mob. We didn't have money. We had some credibility problems with Marty, with me, with Bill – who cares? The issues were not being addressed in most times if we weren't there.

SS: So, let me just ask you about Bailey House – since you were there and you're one of the few people who survives, who actually experienced Bailey House. Can you describe what it was like? How many people were there? Who ran it? What was it like to be in that residence?

MP: Yeah. I believe there were 55 rooms – that they slowly – once they got it opened, they slowly were putting people in there. When it opened, there was this event with Mayor Koch, and he had suggested two or three people per room, and you really couldn't do that, because the rooms were quite small. The people who lived there and who passed away there were a reflection of who was contracting AIDS in New York at the time – men, women, gay and straight, black and white, the whole spectrum of patients. And, it was sometimes tough to watch people who were passing away there – some without any advance that they were passing away. I became good friends with this great guy – James Reed.

SS: I remember him. He was a black man.

MP: Big walrus mustache, and why he liked me I'll never know, but man, did he have a special place in his heart for me. And I remember, he got interested in ACT UP and started coming to ACT UP meetings and everything, and he was just so gentle – which is one of the reasons I really loved him. Because he was a big guy, walrus mustache, really – 250 pounds, and 6'2" and stuff, and I felt quite protected with him around. So he's coming to ACT UP meetings, and we're living at Bailey House together trying to do things, and I remember coming up with this idea that ACT UP New York bought into, which was to go up to New Hampshire in February of '88 and try and put AIDS on the political agenda for the Presidential primaries. And James Reed was all into it and everything, and we got a whole bunch of people and went up there in cars. This was days before we would rent buses and go somewhere.

SS: Who went with you, do you remember?

MP: James Reed, Ortez Alderson, his boyfriend, Arthur.

SS: What was Arthur's last name?

MP: Arthur's last name? I can't remember. Maxine Wolfe – Maxine came along, Maria Maggenti, Gerry – I loved big Gerry – Gerry Wells. There was quite a good crew of us. Andy Humm came, Phil Zwickler. Listen to this: we stayed in a religious order, us men – some of us men stayed in a religious order. I forget how we got hooked up with them. They had lots of space for us to sleep there. And we were just there to do something.

I'm rambling a little bit – bringing this back to James Reed. I said, "Let's hold a news conference in the park, on the main drag there, and invite the candidates to come and speak" – oh, I know what it was – we had made our own AIDS quilt, of our friends

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who had passed away at Bailey House, and the quilt idea was out there. They were already making the official AIDS quilt, and we just felt well, let's do our own. Come on – that was the whole ACT UP model. Do your own thing – when you find an example that works. Well of course Miss Cleve Jones did not like that idea, but who cared. So, we put some of these panels on display in this little park in Manchester, New Hampshire. And David Scondras, who was on the Board of the City Council of Boston – he came and spoke on behalf of Jesse Jackson. And then, Senator Paul Simon and his wife Jean came. I have this picture somewhere of Senator Simon speaking and James Reed is towering over him – like this angel saying, “You're doing the right thing” – coming and speaking about this disease now and at this time and all. Within a week after we got back he had – James Reed – had passed away of a heart attack – suddenly, and without notice. And it just devastated me. It was like, no matter – that I'd guess I'd been dealing with AIDS, GRID for eight years at that point, and losing friends – it was not anything easy, emotionally, to grapple with.

SS: Michael, I remember that day. I remember when you announced it at the meeting and in fact, didn't you have a quilt? Didn't you make a – with his name on it?

MP: I may have.

SS: I think so. That's right.

MP: May have. It was hard. It really was. And, I felt like – I don't know.

SS: Was that your first big action in ACT UP, to do the New Hampshire –

MP: No, my first big thing was the first one! Oh please, no I was at the first one – Wall Street 17. I was one of the Wall Street 17! – the first crew of us to get arrested.

SS: How did that get organized?

MP: Well, to back up just a little bit – February of '87, CDC is holding this meeting. We go down there as the Lavender Hill Mob and create just a ruckus – oh my God – it was just time to get angry at these federal officials – in their faces. Now, there had been some divisions because more mainstream gay/AIDS leaders were trying to work within the system, and we showed up and just – how can you even talk to these people without screaming and yelling at them? So we went there and created some trouble. There was a weird story – I'd love to find it again – by Philip M. Boffey of the *New York Times*, about the divisions among the gay attendees at the meeting, represented by the Mob, and this anger that was coming up from us. Of course, there were some other stories in the *New York Native* at the time. So, we came back to New York. We had a clipping in the *New York Times* – my gosh, we were on the map, and I had got a phone call from Larry Kramer. And he said, "I'd like to come to talk to you, I heard what you'd done down in Atlanta," and everything. So, he comes over –

SS: He called you at home?

MP: At Bailey House.

SS: Did you know him beforehand?

MP: Yeah, I knew who he was before. I'd seen *The Normal Heart* – whatever year that was – at the Public Theater.

SS: But, did he know you before?

MP: No. He was aware of me because of the Mob work in Atlanta.

SS: Okay. So, he called you. Did he come over to Bailey House?

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MP: Yeah. I mean – Jewish mother goes off to Balducci's and gets this bag full of food and says, "Let's bring some food and we'll schmooze and chat" and this and that. He was really quite impressed with what we had done down in Atlanta. And he says that in that speech, in his book about – the speech he made – the first night at the Gay Community Center meeting thing that turned into ACT UP, you know? "Oh, thank God, some crazy people went down to Atlanta and made them angry and got angry and we need more of that," more of that, you know?

SS: What did you do in Atlanta? Do you remember exactly what you did?

MP: Eric Perez and I – maybe even Bill Bahlman – Marty had a problem with it. Marty, as I remember correctly, wouldn't wear – we'd made some concentration camp uniforms. We were quite terrified that this mandatory testing proposal of all patients into the hospitals was going to lead to quarantines and isolation camps. And, we felt it was real important to remember our history – good and bad – in the past century or so, in diseases and persecution. And I think it was Bill Bahlman who came up with this thing – it wasn't Centers for Disease Control CDC, it was Centers for Detention Camps. Let's get some gray shirts, put little bars with numbers – like they had in the Nazi camps, and pink triangles on it. And say, if this proposal goes through, we could, one day, wind up in camps again. We wanted to be outrageous, to make the point that we had to be concerned that our government was considering these kinds of ideas. So, we were screaming at the panelists when they were talking. Again, we were not waiting for Q&A. We were handing out flyers, saying, even though the CDC does not approve drugs, we

want the federal government and the right agencies, like the FDA, to approve new drugs, NIH to develop better drugs, and we want CDC to do better surveillance. Of course, we always had propaganda stuff with us. And, showing up in what we called concentration camps uniforms really made a lot of people angry and unhappy.

SS: Now, was this before the Silence = Death posters were appearing? So, you guys were using the pink triangle thing, before those posters came up?

MP: Yeah.

SS: Okay, so Larry comes over with lox or whatever –

MP: [LAUGHS] And says that he's giving a speech at the Gay Community Center – I think within the next few days, within the next week, and you've got to be there, and you've got to get all your friends to come, and all the patients from Bailey House to come, and anyone you've ever met since grammar school. He goes over the top, in terms of saying, who's got to come. It's not any sort of invitation. It's an order to be there. And like well, what are you going to talk about? I want some answers. And, of course, there's a concern about drugs, development of drugs and what have you. He said, "Don't worry, I'm going to say the right things, just come." And that was my introduction to Larry. So, that was kind of interesting. He came all the way over here, and brings food and says, "You've got to come to the meeting." And of course, I did get on the phone and call up people. And, if I saw them -- the bookstore on Hudson Street –

SS: Oscar Wilde? Craig Rodwell? No, Hudson Street. What was it, Jim?

MP: A Different Light?

SS: Were they on Hudson?

JIM HUBBARD: Well, **A Different Light**, at that time, they probably still were.

MP: Perry [Street].

JH: The space that became **Healthy Pleasures or Gay Treasures** or whatever it's named now.

MP: A Different Light. And you know, I remember going in there and saying, "You've got to come to this meeting" – to the clerks or acquaintances, and I didn't know what Kramer was going to say or do. I certainly had no idea this great group would grow out of it. But, I wanted to help. I wanted to participate in making the meeting happen and hopefully get more people into the Lavender Hill Mob – get more of us out there.

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SS: Okay, so what happened that night? How many people were there?

MP: Okay. This is my recollection. I think there's agreement that we were in that first floor cafeteria room thing and that our backs were to the men's room, and Kramer was by that door leading out to garden thing. And the room was packed. I remember, in terms of celebrities – Martin Sheen was sitting in the audience, because he was friends with Larry, is friends with Larry. Christine Gorman – a writer from *Time* magazine – was there, lots of folks from GMHC, lots of community members. Michael Callen – I remember Michael Callen [and] Michael Hirsch were there, guys from PWAC – People with AIDS Coalition, myself. I can't remember – I don't think James – maybe James Reed was there. So that was late February '87, I believe. It was a Tuesday night. Kramer delivered a fiery speech and I remember he asked half the audience to stand up and he said, "You're all going to be dead in six months, now what are we going to do about it?" And people were really kind of scared – here's this crazy messiah come down

from the mount to deliver his tablets, and you're like – I don't want to say "you're like." *I'm* like, scared and excited at the same time. Kramer made some reference in this speech to the Mob and what we had done down in Atlanta. And, he finished his speech, and – I'd like to hear what other people have to say, because my recollection is – I was all ready to say something, you know? Some of the people in the audience were silent or stunned or scared. I'm like, "Hello, I've got something to say – when are we going to get out there and shut down the streets?" – or whatever crazy idea I was proposing – just like: action, action, action. I don't want to hear no more speeches. Let's get out there. And then of course other people were standing up, with their own ideas about actions that we should take and how we should organize. I didn't feel any real sense of electricity at that point. It just was getting into the nitty-gritty of finding what were the many things we agreed on and finding a way to move forward. I remember Tim Sweeney – second in command at the Gay Men's Health Crisis – was there, and there really was this sense of – we have our disagreements, and yeah, some of us have not liked each other in the past and whatever, but we've got to be in this together, in terms of finding a new way of saying there's a crisis and something must be done by the government.

SS: So what happened at the first real meeting – the next gathering?

MP: My recollection is that Tim Sweeney of GMHC was facilitating the meetings all by himself. There may have been a co-facilitator or a secretary at that point – I can't remember so well. But, people were saying that civil disobedience was the first thing we had to do. So, ideas were tossed out, in terms of shutting down traffic in front of the U.N. I remember, I proposed going out to the FDA office out in Brooklyn somewhere, by a highway – just an impractical idea, but I was like, it's the FDA, we need

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drug approval things. No, that idea didn't go. City Hall was proposed. I believe it was Kramer who suggested Wall Street as the place to go and then, it was like well, who is interested in getting arrested. And then, the discussion moved toward "Well if you get arrested, could you still have your real estate license?" – or other things – stuff I just wasn't concerned with. But wow, there may be some people who are lawyers who could help us when we do get arrested, because I was – let's get arrested, you know? And, I remember an organizing meeting, after one or two – I don't think it was called ACT UP at that time, by the way – the first one or two meetings before we went to Wall Street. We went to someone's apartment, once we had determined who was willing to risk arrest. And, there were about 20 of us and – I'm sorry, I got lost.

SS: That's okay. You were telling me about the organizing for Wall Street and who was there. So, how long after the first meeting was the Wall Street demo?

MP: Well, wait – are we in agreement that the first meeting is Kramer's speech?

SS: Yeah.

MP: It's within a month. My recollection is that it was mid-March, when we went to Wall Street. I have tons of archives in Washington, D.C., and in those archives is this flyer that Kramer, Rodger McFarlane – who else worked on this flyer? I can't remember – laid out our demands. We were going to stage this action on Wall Street. And, I remember, I went to – Harvey Fierstein had a play on Broadway, *Safe Sex*, and I remember going to it – tickets from GMHC was how I got to go there. So, a few of us went, you know? We handed out flyers to the audience saying, you've got to come to

this demo, you've got to come to this demo. There was also – so the flyer lays out [that] we want drugs, drugs into bodies – which drugs we want, when we want them, how they should be approved and stuff like that – and other issues, that were important to us at the time. And Kramer put in a few names – like, the rest of the flyer is laid out professionally and this and that. Then he got out a little typewriter and said, “These people really want you to come – Martin Sheen, Larry Kramer” – and he put my name on it, too. And I thought that's kind of nice, I guess I got a little reputation and stuff. Just go with it, you know?

The Gay Men's Chorus was performing at Avery Fisher Hall and whatever they were performing, Vito Russo was the narrator or something. It wasn't “Peter and the Wolf” but something like that. Vito wanted to make a statement from the stage, and the organizers of the concert were having problems with that. This is culture, it's not politics. Yes, we're concerned with our friends and lovers dying and everything, but you know, this is culture. And what I had heard back from Vito later on was that – “Look, if you don't let me make a statement, and tell the people in this group that I'm going to make a statement from the stage, Petrelis is going to stand up in the audience and start screaming.” And I thought, I'll take that as a compliment – you use the reputation as a screamer to get an announcement out. I'm saying this in part because there was this great dynamic – everyone had a strength. Or, most of us had a strength – whatever it was – that someone else could use to advance all of us, you know? That was the real thing I learned from what Vito had done to make the announcement from the stage of Avery Fisher Hall. So all this outreach is going on, to get people – one: aware that we're getting organized, two: that we're going down to Wall Street, and three: that we need drugs. I

believe it was on a Monday morning when the action happened. I may be wrong about that, because the day before – and I don't think the *New York Times* would have run Kramer's opinion piece the day before, on a Sunday, but Kramer had an excellent op-ed piece the day before the first action took place in the *New York Times*. And it was a good thing he did, because it helped to get some news media there.

SS: How had the meetings grown before the action? Were there more and more people every week? Or, was it after the action that people really started to come?

MP: I think it was after the action that we increased numbers of people coming to meetings. I thought that action on Wall Street was just right. And, I remember being arrested with a woman who was teaching a Saturday morning yoga class for AIDS patients named Preema Lee – and a grandmother and just very concerned. And 17 of us got arrested. Let's see – Neil Broome, myself, Preema Lee, Rodger McFarlane, Frank O'Dowd – rest in peace, he's not with us anymore. Brandon Judell was one of the arrestees. And I'm going to say this on camera – David Tuller was arrested with us. David Tuller was in ACT UP in the early days and in my opinion, went downhill and became a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He went even more downhill, recently, by taking a job at the *New York Times*. Tuller was one of Wall Street's 17. We had Neil Broome, I may have mentioned him twice.

SS: How many people were at the action?

MP: Three to four hundred.

SS: And what was the action, exactly? Can you just describe the action?

MP: Yeah. Kramer used his contacts with Joseph Papp at the Public Theater to get effigies made of federal health administrators like Frank Young of the FDA – these effigies created.

SS: So, those were not made by ACT UP. Those were made by the costume shop at the Public?

MP: That's my recollection. Eddie Murphy – not the comic, the bar security guy – I don't know how to describe Eddie Murphy.

SS: He was part of the Stonewall – he was one of the organizers of the march. He was a big power broker. What was his official title? We're digressing, but I want to digress for a minute.

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SS: Okay. We talked about Wall Street, we talked about New Hampshire.

MP: Yeah, those were early days. They were great, and I remember one meeting in particular where – I can't remember the year, but we had decided to get our message out to the participants of the AIDS walk – the New York AIDS walk, put on by the Gay Men's Health Crisis. And the Honorary Chair was Ed Koch. Well, so many of us had a problem with that, and we're having this meeting – and I think at this time, we did have two facilitators – not just Tim Sweeney from GMHC, and we're trying to plan some sort of interruption of the Mayor and hand out flyers and recruit for new members into ACT UP. And who's helping us organize this, but the guy from GMHC. The point I'm trying to make is that, that was one of the beautiful things of ACT UP, at the time. Even people who worked for organizations that were having to deal with the Mayor or other people we didn't like were still coming to ACT UP and helping us to take care of

the larger issues. And there was just so much great creativity going on. I remember so much about the formation of the committees. Of course now some of those committees have turned – they’ve spun themselves off into non-profit organizations. And at the time, it was one of these – I mean, in the early days of ACT UP, I remember Vito Russo saying – and he’s a big Judy Garland fan – you know, it’s like Mickey and Judy saying, “Let’s put on a movement, let’s put on a show!” – and that’s what we were doing. Someone would stand up and say, we need to do X action, and someone would say, well what are the reasons why? And, who had to come up with the flyer? And, one thing that came out of that was something we called the Issues Committee, and the first few meetings before the Issues Committee, happened at the St. Peter’s Church, because this great woman, Iris Long – she’s got a Ph.D. in Chemistry, I think – she was coming around helping ACT UP. Helping us focus on drugs and good compounds, and she was a volunteer at this hot meals thing for AIDS patients. So, a bunch of us – Herb Spiers, myself, Bill Bahlman – we went up there, helped her and stuff, and then went into a little room and started having some meetings about issues, which were primarily about drugs. And what came out of it, eventually, was the Treatment and Data committee – which we were calling T&D for short – which eventually spun itself off, thank God. For different reasons, you know, those guys left and formed their own group – Treatment Activist Group – what I think TAG stands for. That was the committee I was very interested in. I didn’t have much interest in the Media Committee. I don’t think they called it Propaganda Committee, did they?

SS: I don't think so. I think it was the Media Committee. But, let me get back to T&D – so, you were involved in the Treatment Committee? What treatments were you taking at the time?

MP: The only stuff that I was taking at the time was very limited stuff. My doctor was Joe Sonnabend. It will come to me later, how I got hooked up with Joe Sonnabend, but thank God I did, because he just put a lot of good notions in my head. And one of the things was: avoid AZT. He had real problems. He was familiar with the toxicity of the AZT. I don't remember taking many drugs, except for things like for Herpes and whatever. I didn't have to start this AIDS cocktail with the protease drugs until '96 when my T-cells had really declined. I had good T-cell counts. We didn't have the viral load count thing, back in the late '80s. Basically, Dr. Sonnabend had to depend on white blood counts, platelets and things like that.

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SS: What happened to your KS?

MP: As far as I'm concerned, it went into remission. Now, when I went through this whole process of getting on to Social Security Disability and the Medicare program, it was my hope and expectation that it wouldn't be approved – that there had been this mistake made – and it wasn't. They had not made a mistake. The disability got approved, and also at one point, I had called upon – all right, I had *demand*ed from Moynihan and Congressman Ted Weiss at the time, that they expedite this process. I wanted to know if I was going to get approved or not – to get the federal benefits. And I did.

SS: And, what were the standards in the day? At that moment, what were the standards for having an official AIDS diagnosis and getting benefits?

MP: An opportunistic infection, the clinician's proof of the infection, and – I want to say, and I'm not so sure about it, but I've got this paperwork in my archives – the HTLV-3 test results. Before there was HIV – after the battles between Montagnier and Robert Gallo – was it LAV – Lymphadapathy Associated Virus – or HTLV-3-something – these HLTV retroviral things that Gallo had been working on. And then of course, Chuck Ortleb had his own theories about none of this existing or it was African Swine Fever virus, and what have you. Anyway, my recollection is that when I had to send – and this is with the help of GMHC – what I had to send to Social Security was all of this medical documentation – both from Joe Sonnabend and Patrick Hennessey. And that's what they took and said, “Yeah, you've got AIDS. You're going to be put on disability, because we don't expect you to live.”

SS: So, when you were working on treatments, what projects were you involved in?

MP: Well, things like Drug Buddies – where it was like a little team of us, focused on one drug, and figuring out things like patent rights, where it was in the drug approval or clinical stages.

SS: Which drug did you work on?

MP: I can't remember. There were a lot of guys in that committee I just didn't like at all. I thought they were arrogant in the wrong way – control queens – and I felt that there really wasn't a welcoming attitude towards me, or someone like me, who is basically from the streets, does not have degrees, has not been educated, but still deserves to have input – and you know, say things – if only as someone who's got this disease, you know? And there was a real tension. I remember at the meetings at this little ACT UP

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space in that building – the Port Authority Building in Chelsea – that little office space, that workspace that we had at the time. Just condescension from some of the people, when I'd ask a question that, you know, to me was important, but they thought was just a simple or a silly question. And I thought, that's really not what this group is supposed to be about, you know? We're really supposed to live up to an ideal of empowerment and everything. Of course, I got along with Iris Long. And I thought Jim Eigo did a really good job of finding the balance of having the intelligence to figure out the clinical protocols and chemical make-up and what have you, and helping someone like me understand it.

SS: So what area did you end up working in – primarily – in ACT UP?

MP: Agitation, agitation. I wasn't on the Swim Team. The Swim Team was this group of guys – I don't know who first started joking about it, but I remember first hearing about it from Jay Blotcher: "Oh, he's on the Swim Team." What do you mean, we have a swim team? Guys with nicely developed bodies and pretty looks.

SS: Who was on the Swim Team?

MP: I can't remember any of their names. I can't even say I remember some of their faces. Don't know, but they were eye candy, if you will. I think there was some sort of Organizing, or Tactical Committee thing. I remember going to some of those things with Amy Bauer. Or, maybe it was called Security? I can't remember now – people who would help us have some sense of security when we were doing demonstrations – not folks who were legal support or media support.

I just always felt my – I was most comfortable, always trying to push us further on – that there was a natural tendency to not be too angry, too aggressive. And one

example is, we're upset one year with coverage in the *New York Times* – specifically what was being written by Gina Kolata, and I found out where she lived in Princeton, New Jersey – this got written up in a profile on ACT UP, in *Rolling Stone* magazine. And I was taking my cue from Larry Kramer being over-dramatic, and I said, “There aren't going to be Nuremberg Trials for the AIDS epidemic – we've got to hold people accountable now. Let's go to Gina Kolata's house to deliver a message of” – we want better coverage and we want balance in her stories, because she was always buying into what the drug companies or what the government was saying. There was no voice in her stories from the community or the patients. So, I'm proposing, let's go to her house in Princeton, and the idea got adapted to the point where we sent her pointed Christmas cards.

SS: What do you mean, pointed?

MP: Making points about what we saw as her bad coverage and making suggestions on how she could have expanded her Rolodex to include spokespeople from ACT UP, AIDS patients and everything. One of the things that I thought came out of it was – Mark Harrington developed his relationship with her. So, he started getting himself quoted in her stories, and then we developed issues about whatever Harrington was saying to the *New York Times* as an ACT UP spokesperson.

SS: How many cards did she get?

MP: I don't remember, but – I don't know if the right phrase is push me, pull me or something else, but I remember Tom Cunningham – may he rest in peace – he was like the office – workspace manager, I think is the right term. And I'm like, “Let's go to her house, go over the edge” kind of thing. He says, “No, let's send her postcards and try

and be diplomatic and get her to improve and not piss her off.” You had to have that dynamic going on – of someone being over the top, and then someone pulling us back down to earth.

SS: What were some other events? What year did you move to San Francisco?

MP: I got to San Francisco – I was here in the late '70s to like 1980. I got here again in 1995. But, there was a time when I was back and forth between New York and Washington. I made lots of trouble in Washington.

SS: So, what were some of the other events that you participated in for ACT UP? Were you part of Stop the Church?

MP: Yeah, I was part of Stop the Church. I almost didn't go to that action, because no one would let me in their affinity group.

SS: Why not?

MP: People felt I was too angry, too over the top and – you know, look, I guess I did set myself up as an isolated character for whatever reason. And, I remember talking to Gerry Wells during one of the meetings. We broke up into affinity groups and people were planning things and I just felt really close to Gerry and I thought it would be good to work with her on that action, and she was just kind in saying, “Well, no, I don't think so, not on this action.” So, I just dealt with it. That day rolls around – that Sunday, December 11, 1989, rolled around and I woke up and I almost didn't go because I didn't have an affinity group, and instead, I was just like – I remember some bad things, being raised Roman Catholic. And certainly all of the BS and crap that churches throw at all gay people, not just gays like me who are raised Catholic – I had some issues I wanted to

get out of me that day. So, I did go. I went with my friend, Carl Goodman. Carl Goodman was a member. He was boyfriends at the time with Tom Hannon, who was connected to an underground movement. We used to have an underground movement to help people get drugs, believe it or not. And Tom Hannon was one of the key people in that. Carl said, "Let's go, you know? Let's go see what happens." And I went that day and, God – no pun intended – it was so necessary to do that action. Not just to stand up to the Church, but to stand up to the New York politicians, to stand up to the indifference of the media, national politicians, global institutions like the Vatican. There was just too much driving me to that event that day. And, one thing I remember was that so many of our friends in ACT UP weren't even – the cops had so much security, they couldn't get near Saks Fifth Avenue or Rockefeller Center, in front of it. I guess I would say, I wish more of us who wanted to be on the inside that day had gotten there either sooner or before the cops showed up.

SS: So, you were outside?

MP: I was inside – but I knew about those who couldn't get inside, because when they took us out, after we had done the demonstration, I saw everyone on the other side of Fifth Avenue with the placards. "Know Your Scumbags" was one placard.

SS: So, can you describe what happened inside the church?

MP: I believe this was the ten o'clock mass. And, I'm with my friend Carl Goodman, and we're just like walking around the church, after the earlier mass got out. We're really not seeing anyone from ACT UP. Then, I saw Bill Dobbs walking around, and I don't remember the police on the inside at this point. Carl and I were out in the middle of the church, the center aisle – right on the aisle. And, the mass started.

Archbishop O'Connor made an announcement about – there's an expected demonstration that day, and he wanted his parishioners to stay calm. I believe he mentioned that the Mayor – I think Ed Koch was there that day. There might have been some other politicians in the front pew. And, my recollection is that O'Connor kind of didn't follow the regular mass procedures. He quickly lead the congregation in a prayer, and it was at this point that ACT UP started the action, in terms of different members of different affinity groups stood up, were reading statements about what was wrong with the Church, it's attitudes towards gays and lesbians, it's attitudes towards AIDS and HIV prevention. Some people were going into the aisles and sitting down or laying down on the cold tile. And, I remember I wanted to be heard. And I didn't want to do a sit-down action. So, I sat up on the pew where I was, and started screaming.

SS: What did you say?

MP: “O'Connor, you are killing us. You are killing us!” And I couldn't hear myself, because there's this cacophony of competing voices from the parishioners saying the prayer – I don't remember which prayer it was – [and] ACT UP demonstrators trying to read their state – reading their statements, trying to be heard. I do remember hearing noises of the boots of the cops on the tiles, you know? Which I thought was kind of surprising because there was so much of this noise. And, standing up and screaming, “O'Connor, you're killing us! Just stop it, stop it!” And then, an usher for the church came over and asked me to sit down. I said, “No, I'm not going to sit down!” He goes away and then came back and said, “Please sit down.” I got down in a little bit. Stood up again, started screaming again. This time, there was a policeman who came over to me and said, “You're going to have to sit down.” I said, okay. Sat down, and got up a

minute or so later, doing it again. And I guess it was at that point, I went into this thing of well, it's a Fellini movie. Listen, I'm half-Italian, so I felt like this was fine. This was more than fine for all of the surreal aspects of this. And I eventually was pulled down from standing up on the pews screaming, by two cops. They got me into the aisle. They put the handcuffs on me, and they're leading me out, and as they're leading me out, this fellow says, "Well, who are you?" and everything. And I said, "Why do you want to know?" It turned out to be a reporter from the *Times*. And [he] quotes me the next day and everything. Then I got all this hate mail. I was listed in the phone book and everything.

Tape III
00:25:00

SS: Did you have to go to court?

MP: I can't remember what happened. I remember there were quite a few court appearances for that for a lot of us. I believe there were six or eight folks who challenged it. Most of the charges got dismissed. I don't remember what the misdemeanor charges were. I remember getting out of jail at about five or six in the afternoon, and discovering this was big news.

And you know, on the inside of the system, a number of people in ACT UP were mad at me for having been so loud, for having – a little bit over the top, standing on the pew. It was like well, that's what I wanted to do. And, I think it was later that night, Bill Dobbs told me – or maybe it Jay Blotcher – that the Church was upset. Someone had thrown a communion wafer to the floor. And of course that action is what the church seized on, as this horrible act of blasphemy and outrageousness. It was like, oh please, you can get another wafer, you can't bring your friends back from the dead.

SS: What was that guy's name? Tim something.

MP: Tom Steele? [Kean]

SS: No.

MP: Oh, his mother was a Catholic – my God, I couldn't get into the room. I could barely get into the lobby there, in the old building, before they renovated it. It was just packed. So many people were at the meeting to – non-members were at the meeting to express their outrage and lots were there to say yeah, right on. And, I think the next day is when some members – and I didn't really like this – I found out about it anyway – they organized a news conference at someone's gallery on West Broadway – to like try and do damage control and everything. I remember one of the speakers was Gerry Wells. I calmed down a little bit. At that point, I wasn't going to zap my own group, you know? And it felt good. Gerry's there, she's speaking at this news conference. But I was like, just sitting in the back saying okay, this is okay, you know? I can't remember anything that was said at the next night's meeting, except that Tom – his last name will come to me – the guy who threw the communion wafer to the floor – saying, you know, raised Catholic, my Mom taught Sunday School, and I knew what I was doing and where I was coming from on this. And I really feel that they weren't standing up just for AIDS patients – or people at risk of HIV. We were standing up for a lot of gay people, and yes, oppressed people, who had problems with this Church.

SS: In the long run, what would you say the consequence was of Stop the Church?

MP: Good stuff, good stuff. I believe, first of all, for us, internally, it strengthened us, it was a test of us. And we passed that test. Seeing a very powerful institution wrongfully using its influence regarding public health issues. And civil rights

Tape III
00:30:00

things. It wasn't just the AIDS issues were upset. The Catholic Church was using its non-profit status to lobby against gay rights – equal rights for us. I think that it helped us in ACT UP have more camaraderie amongst ourselves, and also for the New York movement and some of the national gay movement, it was this great development of – here were these really bad cops, okay? And then, all the other groups could appear as much better good cops. And that's a lot – I mean, to have that kind of bad cop fear to instill in politicians and drug companies and what have you, to make it easier for others to go in or, in some cases, even nicer people in ACT UP, go and influence these people – I think was one of the consequences of that. And, it was also – that Stop the Church action, I think it did resonate within a lot of gay people across the country. I know a few months after that, there were similar actions – not as radical – that took place at other churches, where people weren't – ACT UP, other chapters, went to their local churches and read statements outside the churches.

SS: Like where, do you know?

MP: Well, I believe some were in Texas, some were in Florida, certainly here in San Francisco. They went to, I believe it was St. Mary's Church.

SS: Michael, how much of your life were you spending in ACT UP?

MP: A good deal of it, a real good deal of it. I mean, because I was on disability, you know, I was able to do the activism. I don't think I had life – quote, unquote we say, "Get a life." Well, that was my life. When we had the workspaces – hanging out at the workspaces, going to different committee meetings, and then all of the actions that had to be carried out. I felt even actions where we weren't planning to get arrested – I wanted to be there to chant or carry a sign and hand out some literature.

SS: Did you participate in the socializing? Did you go to parties? Did you have sex with guys in ACT UP? Did you go out with them?

MP: No, I did not have sex with guys in ACT UP. Some social stuff – not really. I was good friends, am still friends with Neil Broome. I did go to one or two parties at Frank Smithson’s loft in the West 20’s somewhere. I mean, those who I got along with were real good friends, and stuff. But, I know there were lots of guys there cruising and finding sex partners and all, and that wasn’t me. But, did I get a lot of satisfaction? Did I have a lot of platonic, gay relationships? Yeah, oh it just helped me in so many ways deal with a lot of different issues. I was trying to remember something I wanted to say about – for some reason, it triggered in my mind, remembering Gerry Wells. Her brother passed away of AIDS – and going to Redden’s funeral [home] on West 14th Street and some of her family was there – just trying to help her deal with her loss and her grief. And, remember, there was a bagel shop on the other side of Ninth Avenue or Tenth Avenue, whatever it is, down there.

SS: You were talking before about some of the class conflicts inside ACT UP – do you think that – because Gerry came from a working class Irish family that you guys could connect in some way? Because you were saying – like in T&D, you felt that people were snobby or condescending.

MP: Yeah, in the wrong way. Look, Iris Long, a very educated, chemist type with the Ph.D. after her name and everything, had more than enough time to explain to the “average AIDS patient” some complex issues about drugs and side effects. Whereas others, such as Mark Harrington, I felt were out to overly impress you with their

knowledge and would talk quickly or write 30 page papers on something that you couldn't get through, unless you went to Harvard or something.

SS: Let me ask you about the splits in ACT UP and what happened toward the end. There is no end – ACT UP still exists – but when TAG left. How did you understand that separation?

MP: I always felt that – like Peter Staley, for example, coming from Wall Street and a privileged money background, would have left the group sooner, Mark Harrington – I just blanked on his name, I'm sorry – that there were some elements in ACT UP that didn't have patience for folks from the street or from different backgrounds. And for whatever reason, they stuck with ACT UP through the years and eventually did leave and form other groups. But we all needed each other at a certain point, you know? At the same time, I saw how there were a lot of control issues and a lot of them like Harrington and Staley wanted the control. Now, I can recognize the good contributions that Staley brought with fundraising, that gave us money so we could rent props and buses to get people to different demonstrations and everything, but –

SS: It's interesting, because you have AIDS and they have AIDS, and yet, you're not putting yourself in the same constituency with them, in terms of the separation. Because some people feel that there was in the end, when TAG left, it was because people with AIDS and people who were not HIV were having cross purposes, but actually, you're not saying that. So what do you understand as being the conflict, that actually made them leave, if it wasn't about with AIDS versus without, having different agendas?

MP: I'd say control issues – control over who's setting the agenda. For example, a number of guys on the Treatment and Data Committee felt that as ACT UP members, they should be on federal advisory panels. Whether they were HIV negative or positive wasn't the point so much – it was as ACT UP members, they should have seats on these panels. I didn't think that we should have seats on these panels.

SS: Why?

MP: It was very important to stay outside the system – to maintain a distance. I felt that our anger and outsider status was crucial to moving the federal agencies further along. If you're going to get on a panel, you've got to get along with people. And that, I felt, was a compromising position. And I felt – for example, with David from Lambda Legal Defense Fund. I can't remember David's last name – David Barr – why don't you get on the panel as a staff member from Lambda Legal Defense Fund? Why did it have to be ACT UP? I felt that we were being absorbed into part of the problem when some of these guys wanted to get on those advisory panels. I felt, later on, that was really where some of the beginning of the end was taking place.

SS: Well, looking back now –

Tape IV
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SS: Looking back, we're talking about the fight inside ACT UP, whether or not people should work on the inside. With hindsight, what would you say had been the consequences pro and con, of people going on the inside?

MP: I would say on the pro side that a way could have been found for fellows from the T&D committee to do it with other identification – whether they were working for AmFAR or Lambda Legal Defense – not as ACT UP members, okay? And that the

goal was something I supported – having better drugs developed, more humane protocols and things. But, I just didn't think that it was healthy for the group, because –

SS: But, looking at it now, what was the consequence of it? What did it cause, ultimately?

MP: Well, something of a brain drain, because this core from the T&D committee left, and formed a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. Whereas before, we had our own little Brain Trust to quickly develop position papers on different drugs and their development and status in the approval process with the government. We didn't have that. All of a sudden, it was gone.

SS: Right. I understand the consequence on ACT UP, but what about in the world? Do you think that those guys being on those committees did help get drugs? Made more drugs available? Or, do you think that it didn't?

MP: I would say yeah, that it did help in the long run, to – and to have better and more drugs developed. And of course – then, of course new problems come up, like the price of these drugs, you know? And, side effects and access to them and are they safe for women? Safe for kids?

SS: Well, let's look at something like price. Do you think that there's a relationship between ACT UP being on the inside and the price of the drugs?

MP: Well I think right now, yeah, we did. Part of this larger, cozy relationship between the AIDS groups now – the community-based organizations now – is that they're getting quite a bit of community grants from the big pharmaceutical groups. And then, when – I think those donations adversely affect the groups and mute their criticism, when new drugs are developed and approved at astronomically high prices – even in the

developed world – never mind, for the developing world. And, it’s kind of the same issue I saw with what was wrong with T&D members wanting to get on the advisory committees – that it does, eventually lead to muting your criticism about what is wrong with the high research and development costs that they say goes into these things.

SS: Can you give some specific examples of a specific drug that has a particular price that you feel should be criticized, but people don’t do it, because they’re affiliated with that company?

Tape IV
00:05:00

MP: I would say, most recently, Roche got approval for a new drug called Fuzeon, and the price in the U.S. was set between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year. Now, my little bit of research – I turned up information about how some of the development of this drug was paid for by the U.S. taxpayers through the National Institutes of Health. I think that gives us a right to say that when the government turns the patent over to private pharmaceutical companies, that there is some sort of stipulation – that it is not such an outrageous price.

SS: But, are there activists who are connected to Roche – that you feel that that relationship is keeping them from criticizing this?

MP: I feel that one group, in particular, AmFAR, has not been loudly protesting what is wrong with the price of this drug or waging a public campaign about this price. And you know, they are just one group among many that get donations or own stock in the company. I made many phone calls to AmFAR in the past few months about this issue, and eventually I got like a two-sentence e-mail reply from them, saying, “We are concerned about the high price, and we need to accept donations where we can get them from.”

SS: How much as Roche donated to AmFAR, do you know?

MP: Don't know, but I know that in 2000, AmFAR made a big mistake in their tax returns to the IRS and included information spelling out how they received 2.2 million dollars from Bristol-Meyers Squibb. I feel that that 2.2 million dollars, in many ways, influences relative silence from AmFAR in terms of really addressing, every day, what is wrong with the high price of these drugs, that are bankrupting the ADAP state programs to pay for these drugs.

SS: Is there a particular Bristol-Meyers drug – a specific one that you're thinking of that AmFAR is not saying anything about?

MP: I have to check my thing – my drugs in the kitchen, to tell you. But, I mean, searching around the AmFAR website and different search engines – there's not a whole heck of a lot that you can find that is explaining what AmFAR is doing all the time about these drug prices. I mean, the high drug prices. It's not enough to say, well we're going to Congress and lobbying for more federal funds to subsidize the drugs. You know, you've also got to bring down the price of the drugs. You can't keep turning to the government and saying, more money for the subsidies. It's not addressing the greed – I call it greed – of the drug companies.

SS: Are any of the not-for-profits that began as ACT UP committees – are any of those organizations currently – do you feel that they're in this type of relationships with drug companies?

MP: Which ones? TAG, you mean?

SS: Any of the not-for-profit organizations that now exist, that were formerly ACT UP committees. Do you feel like any of them are not speaking out about specific issues, because they're receiving money from drug companies?

MP: Honestly, I can't say, because I've been involved in so many other AIDS issues since then. My mind can only get focused again on some drugs and the prices when it's back in the news – something that I'm personally interested in.

SS: All I'm just trying to get to is – there was so much concern in ACT UP about ACT UP people becoming insiders and that it would compromise the critique. And I'm wondering if in fact, any of those people who have become insiders are now currently compromised in their critique?

MP: I can't say.

SS: So, you don't know of any specific evidence of that?

MP: No. If you gave me some time on the Web, I'm sure I might find something.

SS: Michael, one thing we've been doing is – everyone we've interviewed who has AIDS, we ask if you wouldn't mind telling us what treatment you're on, just for the historical record?

MP: You mean the current cocktail?

SS: Yeah.

MP: Still on the Acyclovir. I've been on Acyclovir – I don't know how long now – probably more than a decade. I can never remember the initials – it's the Bactrim pill to prevent pneumonia. I take that once a day in the morning. It's something like, MSV – whatever, but it's a Septra-based drug. So, there's that. I take Sporanax to

prevent thrush in my mouth and deal with this skin infection that I have. Okay, now let's go on to Zerit. I take Zerit twice a day, which is part of the protease things. Viracept – I take that twice a day. And Viramune. I take slow niacin, because my doctor and I believe it's good for – I believe – lowering the cholesterol, or one of the side effects that I get from the drugs; multi-vitamins, vitamin B, vitamin C everyday. And, I have to drink a nice big, glassful of psyllium husk, which is basically cardboard, to deal with the diarrhea side effects of Viracept. And I think that's it, for the current cocktail that I'm on.

SS: Are there any things that you're looking towards that's in development now?

MP: Well, last year, my doctor had suggested that I get on – that I consider going to a clinical trial involving this Fuzeon drug. My T-cells have really dropped and my viral load – they've had a hard time controlling it. And I was failing on my second failed cocktail of last year, so that's why he had suggested this, and I just didn't feel that was appropriate at the time, because it's "salvage therapy" – they call it, for people who have really failed the other things. One of my surrogate markers for a good immune system is I'm at 196 pounds, and sure I don't have many T-cells, you know, and other things are wrong with my blood, but I've got some pounds on me. So, that's why I'm sticking with the cocktail that I'm on now. But, I am – despite the high price and what have you – very optimistic that if and when I've got to get on that Fuzeon and the other drugs like that that stop the replication of the HIV, before the protease drugs do, that it's there.

SS: I only have one last question for you.

MP: All right, then I want to say something.

SS: Okay. Looking back, what would you say was – well, first let's start with the negative and end with the positive – what would you say was the biggest disappointment of ACT UP? And, what would you say was its greatest achievement?

MP: The biggest disappointment I'd say is that we weren't able to save more lives. There are sometimes when I have such a difficult time remembering some people – their names, or remembering their faces. And I really don't like that feeling of, they are gone. So, that's what I'd say. Sure, it also would have been nice to have more chapters and more chapters that survived. But, the epidemic, like everything, evolved. On the positive side – God, I think the biggest thing I'd say is that for us, as gay people, around the world, giving us a mechanism to prove ourselves, to love ourselves and make changes in a pretty powerful thing called Healthcare – that has helped patients with other diseases. I'm really glad that I was there, and that there was a spot for me. And there was a place for a lot of different folks in what was ACT UP New York at the time.

SS: Thank you, Michael.

MP: Now can I say something?

SS: Sure.

MP: I want to add something. I worked on this murder of a gay sailor in Japan named Alan Schindler, back in '92, '93, and it was one of the most terrifying activist things that I had to do. And I say I had to do it, because there was a time when – this was before the Matthew Sheppard murder, okay? – here is the murder of a gay guy on the other side of the world – a brutal murder, that is just still horrific in my mind. And I was

like, the only person in the beginning of this case saying, there is something wrong with the Pentagon investigating this death, and there's homophobia involved and everything. I had to go to Japan. And I went to Japan twice to research this case, to demand justice, to monitor the trial of the man who was accused of murdering Schindler and everything. And, I had no money. I had send fundraising letters out to friends saying, "Help send me to Japan, even if it's a one-way ticket" – just send me there, you know? This was at the height of the gays in the military controversy with Clinton. No one was willing to go to Japan. And I was scared at a number of points, because I had to go to a little town, where there was a Navy base and stand up for this kid. I had never met him, certainly, but it just really affected me. I think the strength that I had to find within me to go there, came from ACT UP – that ACT UP taught someone like me – who's pretty aggressive and assertive anyway – how to take on something like the Pentagon, on the other side of the world, and it's quite a gift that I feel that I got from ACT UP.

The other thing that I wanted to add, because I remember you asked me, well, where does some of this stuff come from in you? There's a family legend in my mother's Italian side of the family – my mother was entered into a Shirley Temple look-alike contest in Newark, New Jersey, and my grandmother puts my mother in the contest and says, "She's the prettiest, she's got to win this contest," you know? And my mother doesn't win the contest. Well, my grandmother gets all upset and says, you know, "Oh, this is some Mafia-controlled baby beauty contest!" She throws – she creates a scene. My grandmother throws the table over and she's screaming about – you know, "The Mafia rigs this contest! My daughter's the most beautiful one!" and everything. And, it's like a family legend, because you know, nice, Italian grandmother from outside

Naples and everything, listens to the man. No, when her daughter wasn't treated right, she was going to scream about it, she was going to overturn tables about it. And, I remembered to tell you that because, of course I wasn't there, and you don't necessarily inherit that kind of whatever it takes to do it, but sometimes, you've just got to overturn the tables and remember that, for me, I have a Mediterranean background and that anger is okay.

SS: Was your mother the most beautiful baby?

MP: Yes, she was! And it was Mafia-rigged!

SS: Thank you, Michael.

[END OF INTERVIEW]