

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

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Interviewee: **Dan Keith Williams**

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Interviewer: **Jim Hubbard**

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ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Dan Keith Williams

March 26, 2004

JIM HUBBARD: We start with you saying your name, how old you are, today's date, and where we are.

DAN KEITH WILLIAMS: My name is Dan Keith Williams. I'm 47 years old. We're in the Bronx – the north Bronx –Kingsbridge area. Today's date is March 26, 2004.

JH: So, Dan, where were you born?

DKW: I was born in Buford, South Carolina.

JH: What was that like, where you growing up? Is it a small town?

DKW: It's an extremely small town. Buford, South Carolina is home to Parris Island, which is a Marine Corps training base. Both my parents were in the military. In fact, I was born in a military hospital. But, my family is from Buford. It's a very rural area. When I grew up, the population was probably around 10,000. I guess, for me, I had a difficult childhood, because I never really fit into anything. I basically asked a lot of questions that people never wanted to answer. I was very inquisitive. I come from a family – that's understandably – where men, basically, are passive. And that relationship has to do with slavery, and how black men had to basically stay in the background. And, I ended up being one of those very different people. On a certain level, my family was trying to protect me by trying to keep me quiet. And, the more they tried to keep me quiet, the more questions I asked and not getting answers, I just rebelled more and more and more.

Interestingly, I grew up in a time when integration had just become – forced integration – had just become the thing. In my sixth grade, integration was forced, and

basically there was this whole dynamic where schools became 50% black and 50% white, in a small town. So, basically, they got rid of two schools, and we only had one school.

And I found myself sort of migrating to white kids. And that caused a lot of problems for me, at home, because people in the south and still today – and, I think, in a lot of places, people live in very segregated neighborhoods. And, for us, segregated neighborhoods meant you lived on an island, because Buford is basically about 130 little small islands. The islands were relatively segregated. They aren't anymore, but they were, when I grew up. I was a fish out of water, the whole time. And I rebelled and rebelled and rebelled and I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as I could.

JH: You said, you asked a lot of questions. What kind of questions?

DKW: I used to ask questions about when people would do bad things to people, I'd ask why? Why would God allow this to happen? My parents were in the military, and they moved and they left me and a brother and sister behind, with my great grandparents. My great grandfather died when I was six years old – five years old, actually – something like that. And, after that, it was me and my great grandmother and my brother and my sister. So, I became man of the house when I was in second grade. I was cooking breakfast for my brother and sisters, when I was in the second grade.

JH: So, you're the oldest?

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DKW: Yes, I'm the oldest. And, I would just ask questions about, you know, my great grandfather died, why did he leave us like that, if God's so good? Because religion is really and important part of black southern culture. It's engrained in you, from the day you're born. And, I just started asking all these questions about God, and that's the biggest no-no. That's worse than asking about sex. That concept never even came up.

But, the God thing just got me in a lot of trouble. It really did get me in a lot of trouble, because it got me ostracized, because the matriarchal – women in my family – they sort of put up with me to a certain degree. My great grandmother sort of protected me from all of it, but it was just there. And, I wouldn't stop asking questions. I go to school and ask questions. Why do white people have this, and black people have that. I was just very confrontational about inequality, and what I perceive to be wrong.

JH: So, were you expressing a disbelief in God?

DKW: No, I wanted answers. And, I don't know if asking answers is a disbelief. I think if – to me, to get to the truth, you need answers. And, I understand religion is about faith, but even with faith – and I do have faith. I consider myself a spiritual person, I don't consider myself a religious person at all, anymore. But, I just had this big problem with – these things just didn't add up. If God was good, why were these bad things happening to my family? I come from a place where, crime is, like, what? What's that? The first time I ever owned a key to a house was when I moved to New Orleans and I was, like, 23. The whole time I was in South Carolina, nobody had a lock. What was that?

So, you know, it's this whole thing about where people do good, but, yet, other people do bad to them – and, you know, why people in these substandard environments, while other people have all this other stuff – the disparity. I just kept asking the question.

A funny story – my minister was my history teacher, and he had this thing where he would, basically, abuse little girls in the hallway. He would just run up to them and grab their behinds, all the time. And, I'd go home and ask, why was he doing this? And, the response I'd get back was – you're just too smart, you're being a smart aleck. This is

something that grown people talk about. But, to me, if this is stuff grown people talk about, why is this man doing it in school in front of us. So, if he did it in front of me, I think I'd have the right to ask the question. It got to the point where, actually, I had a great aunt put a spell on me. It got that bad. And, I thought of putting it in back of on my mind, but it was always there.

JH: Which denomination were –

DKW: Southern Baptist – of the African American type, not the Jerry Falwell type.

JH: So, your aunt put a spell –

DKW: A grand-aunt.

JH: But, that wasn't part of the Southern Baptist tradition.

DKW: No, but I think the whole thing – if you look at how – where I'm from, the whole African connection is very, very pronounced. It's not lost. It's very fluid. In fact, when I was born – I was alive – for about the first two years of my life, my great-great-great grandmother was alive, who was a slave. So, you do that addition. And, you just go back two generations, and I can basically track my family back to the beginning of coming to America. And basically, we know where we come from. It's just that fluid. And so, there's that whole side of that Caribbean thing. And, even if you listen to me, sometimes people say, you're not from Jamaica. And, it's not because of the dreds, because the dreds are a relatively recent thing with me. It's because there's a connection and there's a fluidity. Gullah, that's my –

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JH: There's a certain lilt in your voice – it's not quite a southern accent. So, you're growing up in this large, extended black southern family – asking a lot of questions. When does the gay part come in?

DKW: Well, I don't know when the gay part – the sex part came in pretty – I started experimenting with sex when I was probably around 12. And, it was a combination of girls and my cousin, who was a guy. We were the same age, and we spent a lot of time together. We just had a lot of sex. I mean, we were experimenting. We were kids experimenting.

And, I started dating girls, and I don't know – it just never quite worked. And something just clicked. There was nothing physical, other than my thing with my cousin, but I had sex with girls as well, and it just wasn't that. And, I was in love my cousin? No. We're friends. We're still friends, to this day. And we stopped having sex ages ago.

I just suddenly knew that I was attracted to guys. And that was it. That was without having a true – what I call a relationship – with a guy, outside of when I messed around with my cousin. And, I went on an exploration. I guess you want to hear about the exploration.

JH: OK. Yes.

DKW: I'm inquisitive, like I said, and I found out that there were gay bars in Charleston, South Carolina. I was seventeen, and I'm not afraid to explore. So, I just – I worked and saved my money and go on weekends and just go and figure out where things were. I'd just go blindly. And intuitively, I just figured out where things were. You make some mistakes, but you generally find out where things were. My gaydar was at work, so that proves the point.

JH: How far is ... from Buford?

DKW: About sixty-five miles, so this is Greyhound – it's not like I'm walking.

JH: Let's go back and talk about politics. So, as you said, forced integration is coming in at this time, but your parents are in the military, but they're gone. So, how did that – the politics of integration play out within your family?

DKW: Well, I mean, there is an absolute – and to this day – there's an absolute distrust of white people. And that is based on what had happened – reality. And, I don't blame anybody. People can call it whatever they want – it's a reality check. I'm somewhat different, because I, sort of – I guess in the beginning – I was just open and I wouldn't use a broad stroke to describe everyone. And, unfortunately, that's what a lot of people do on both sides. So, I was just open, to see who was what, and I just basically judge people for who they are. I just started migrating to a bunch of white kids who had – I found out – a lot more in common with me. We had a lot more in common than people I spent a little bit of time with, because I really didn't spend a lot of time with kids my own age that were on my island and stuff because – I don't know – I was the guy who sat around and read books all the time. I was the guy who wanted to find out the reason for everything. They wanted to play baseball. They wanted to play football, and I played games – I mean, I played football and everything else, but I spent a lot of time reading. I spent an inordinate time reading.

So, I guess by the time integration came about, I had sort of taught myself a lot of things that I didn't have any outlet for. Then, when I found these kids who, for the most part, were not even from Buford, because they were kids whose parents – they were

military brats. So, these kids had been traveling all over the world, basically. So, you've got all these ideas, all these diverse mindsets, and it worked.

When integration happened there, it happened very differently than it did for most other places. There were no problems at all. There were the usual problems that kids have, but there were no fights, there were no riots or any of things. And, the reason that happened was because, on the one hand, the white kids who were there, came from a different world. They came from – for the most part, integration already existed, because they had been integrated in the whole world, rather than like a little – I'm here in Buford, and the black people lived there and the white people lived there. Yeah, they came to Buford, and they lived in the neighborhood like the white people did. But, that really didn't represent history – their total experience. So, it was different.

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JH: When did you leave Buford?

DKW: The day I graduated high school. Actually, I ran, but I came back. I didn't go home often. I went to college in Spartanburg, South Carolina – redneck capital of the south – that's someplace else – but one of them – pretty redneck. I went to an all-boys school, Wofford College. I was mesmerized for about a year and a half and then I got bored as hell, because it was an elitist school. I came from the country, farm, relatively poor. And, here I am in school with kids who are privileged, whose parents are state senators or owners of companies – the biggest companies in the state. And, I don't know – it just didn't really jive with me really well. Again, I found myself in a situation – I was one of eight black people on a campus of a thousand. That, so much, didn't really bother me, because I could deal. But, it was just the dynamics of the place. I guess the privilege just annoyed me, more than anything else. So, I just needed to get away.

And, one summer, I got – I guess, the first summer in school I got a job, and I ended up in New Orleans, and I fell in love with New Orleans. And, I just went to New Orleans, and I went to UNO – the University of New Orleans – and that bored the hell out of me. But, I stayed in New Orleans for a little while. I was trying to get into Tulane. I had a really good job as a waiter, at a really good hotel. I was making loads of money. But still, my education was really important. But, then, I got a boyfriend – a first real boyfriend. It was ugly. It was beautiful and it was ugly. It was, I guess my first real, real relationship of any significance. But, we both had control issues and we were all very young.

Finally, he just got sort of violent, and I don't believe in violence at all, so I just had to escape. This was after three and half years. I needed to escape that, and I also needed to escape the feeling that I was ghettoized, and not ghettoized because I was black, but because I was gay – because I was living in the French Quarter. I felt that I needed to get away. And, I just looked at my options, and I couldn't really come up with any good ones and then one day I joined the Navy. That's how to get away from gay people. What a big mistake I made – naïve on that point, I was. I'd joined the Navy. Within two weeks, I'd encountered more gay guys than I probably had in all my life. The Navy was crazy.

JH: This was 1979?

DKW: No, I graduated from high school in 1978. This was 1981, I think – no, it was 1979. You're right, because I got out in 1981. I joined the Navy. I did really well there for a moment, and ended up on a ship and ended up in Italy, stationed in Italy on a

ship. NIS is actually the National Investigative Service, started an investigation over gay guys. And, it got really ugly on the ship.

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The ship had 2,000 people on it, and I knew of about 300 gay guys on our ship, including the Lieutenant Commander, who was right under the Commander – so, he's the second guy in charge of ship. It's all very weird. And, the dynamics of that were very weird, because, while it was like – obviously still is – now, it's don't ask, don't tell – then, just don't – you ain't, period.

But, if you were gay, and they needed you, and you had a ability – you were doing a job where they really required you – you'd been there for 10 or 15 years – you can tell them anything. They will not let you go. They just keep you. You can do anything. If they wanted you, they were going to keep you, and they saw what they wanted to see.

I had an incident, where I got beaten up. And this was something that I really repressed and only came back to light in the last year or so – the last two years – but, it was ugly. I got beaten up – I ended up in the hospital for two and half weeks. And this was right in the midst of all this witch-hunting. A lot of people got discharged and people started pointing the finger at me – that I'd ratted people out – which I didn't. I didn't talk to anybody about anything, except about what had happened to me.

So, I was on a ship where I was ostracized. And then, having been beat up, really adds fuel to the fire. And so, the ship was actually leaving to go to Israel, and I knew that if I went to sea, I wouldn't be here. Someone would have pushed me off the side. I would have been a lost cause. So, I went AWOL, and why I went AWOL – but I did it – very, very sort of by the book, if there is such a thing.

I called my Congresswoman and told her what was going on. Fifteen minutes before the ship left, I got off the ship. I got on a train. I went to Rome and turned myself into the US Embassy. And they said, do you have a place to stay? Yeah, I was seeing a boy in Rome, anyway – so, yeah. They said, just go there, and when the ship comes back, we'll deal with it.

So, the ship came back and they court-marshaled me, because I told them I wanted out, because I was gay. But, they court-marshaled me, but they still had to give me an honorable discharge, because I had the right really immaculate records, so there's nothing they could do about it. So, I got out and I was really pissed. They demoted me two grades – but that was only for a week – whatever.

JH: What ship was this?

DKW: The USS Puget Sound.

JH: What was your rank?

DKW: I was PN2.

JH: What did you do?

DKW: I discharged people from the military. [LAUGHS]

JH: What happened to the guys who beat you up?

DKW: Actually, I don't know. And, actually, I'm in the process of finding that out, because I'm pursuing the whole thing now.

JH: But, you were never interrogated by –

DKW: No. I've got all my military records. They're sitting in a file. I have them now. And, basically, it's like this weird little deal. Everything is my file, but I'm in the

hospital, all beaten up, and there's no explanation for any of it – none. It's like everything else is there, but there's really no explanation for this at all.

JH: So, you got an honorable discharge.

DKW: Right. So, they flew me back here. I was angry at God for allowing this. I was angry at the government. I was just angry at America, period. And, I had a boyfriend in Rome, so I just got on a plane. They brought me back to Philadelphia to discharge me, because they couldn't discharge me on foreign soil. So, I stayed in Philadelphia approximately six hours, got back on a plane and came back to Rome and stayed for five years.

JH: Did you stay with the same boyfriend?

DKW: Yeah. We broke up, but we stayed best friends. We lived together the whole time. And from there, I came back to New York.

JH: Before you get to New York, what was it like being an ex-patriot living in Rome?

DKW: It was awesome. I felt at home, it was the weirdest thing – a lot of people do say that, though. Rome just seemed like I belonged there. It just feels that way to me. In the beginning, I was there and my Italian was relatively non-existent, because even when I was in the military, I was there for about what? Ten months, eleven months, whatever. Yeah, I did spend – how did I find an Italian boyfriend? Obviously, I had to do something. I had to be in an environment with Italians. But, still, we spent most of the time in the environment with guys from the ship, so you were still speaking English, most of the time. So, when I went back to Italy, nobody was speaking English to me at all. So, it took me a little adjusting, but I adjusted. And, once I adjusted, I was cool.

The whole mindset was just in tune with what I was thinking. All those questions – you remember me saying I was asking when I was a little kid – it seems like in that environment, I could have asked those questions and would have gotten my answers. Even if it weren't what I wanted to hear, I would have gotten answers.

Here, I wouldn't have gotten answers. It's not just because of where I was at – it's because we live in a very rigid, Victorian society – especially now. We won't even go there. But, we live in a very sort of twisted way – a major contradiction.

And there people – they don't have all the answers, but they're willing to discuss things, talk about things, and deal with them. They don't have all these crazy hang-ups that we sort of inflict upon ourselves, our kids and our families and turn us all into neurotic animals run around, with our heads chopped off. All we want to do is go to K-Mart or Wal-Mart or whatever.

JH: So, there were no issues about being black?

DKW: Oh no, that was a plus – that was an absolute plus. Then it was – now, it's a little different. But, then, it was really a plus. And, in fact, it became a problem for me, because there were some people – I just had to kick people off me, really. It just became an annoyance after awhile, because people just wanted to go to bed with me, to say they went to bed with a black guy. No, I'm not having that no more. In the beginning I thought it was cute, but after a little while, it was, like, no, I can't be bothered with this.

JH: What about the influence of the Catholic church and gay stuff?

DKW: It was never an issue, because I hung out in a world full of progressive, creative people, who paid no attention to the church at all – it meant nothing. We lived three blocks from the Vatican. And, we'd go and visit his parents who lived in Emilia-

Romagna, and the church thing never really – people say, the church is important there, and it does have a lot of influence, but it seems to me the Italians tend to use the church whenever they want to, and when they don't want to use them, they just ignore them.

I think, symbolically, it's extremely powerful. But, in people's day-to-day lives, I think it's not really that powerful. Here, I think it's very funny, because it's almost, kind of the opposite – not quite the opposite – but, the church is not supposed to be important, because there's supposed to be separation of church and state. But, on the other hand, people use religion to basically stop people from having sex, among other things.

JH: Were you working in Italy?

DKW: The interesting thing was, legally, I wasn't supposed to be. But, creative people have creative ways, and there was a whole group of us – about 12 of us – and there were people who were architects, people who were dancers; there were actors, photographers, graphic designers. And, what we do is, we get together and we go wherever – a little town somewhere outside some major city – to find a space and get permission to use it, create an environment. Have a party there for a week, and then move on. The other guys had money, but for me, that was one of the ways I survived, because they had regular, regular jobs.

JH: Why did you decide to go to New York?

DKW: After I broke up with my boyfriend – we worked on a couple of projects and stuff like that – I really got involved – I'd studied history and art, and graphic design clicked with me, when I was in Rome, working in the environment with our group. But I had no training for graphic design at all. And, I figured, if I'm going to do graphic design, I may as well go to New York and go to School.

I hated New York. I only wanted to come to New York for one reason – to go to Parsons, and that was it – end of story. I was going to come to school, go to Parsons and leave. I came to New York, went to Parsons and stayed, instead. I came here and I'd gotten caught up in politics in Italy and the socialist parties and the Communist Party there. It's a nasty word here, but there it is not. My activist thing had sort of gotten grounded a little bit. So, I come here, and I say the word communist and people run from me. I say the word socialist, and people run from me. Don't say that. When I was in New Orleans for awhile, I had been involved in gay issues for a minute, but I got out of it real quick because the racism of it all, just did not work with me at all. So, I just got away from that. And then I came here and I just started looking around to see what was going on. And, out of the clear blue, ACT-UP just showed up. Not out of the clear blue, AIDS had just become the big mess it was to become.

JH: When did you first hear about AIDS?

DKW: I heard about AIDS when I was in Italy. And, there were all kinds of stories. And, I think right about the time I was leaving, there was a little bit of paranoia of American men.

JH: So, it wasn't an important issue in Italy?

DKW: It was not a major issue. I think there was some influence, but not major. I was being reported in the news, because it had become a big thing here. And people – all the misconception, all the falsehoods – all the lies were being propagated all over the place, all kinds of stories, and nobody knew – people would believe in one thing one day and something else the next day. There was no clarity about it, and I guess, at some point, it just became a white gay guys' disease.

JH: That was the perception in Italy?

DKW: I think in Italy – I don't think it was a white gay guy thing – it was a gay guy, period. But, when I got to New York, it turned into the white gay guy disease, basically.

JH: So, when did it become more personal?

DKW: It became personal, first of all, because I was scared. I was pretty active at that point and – I don't know – I was in Italy, but still, I was in Italy where a lot of American guys come as tourists, so it didn't matter. A lot of priests are there from here. It's true. I won't get into the priest thing, that's another story. I was scared. I was concerned. And, it just seemed that after awhile – it just seemed like, whoa – I wasn't, physically – there was nothing there to prove that anything was wrong with me or going to be wrong with me, but something told me that I needed to be concerned. And, it hit home really clearly, when I got a phone call from my ex-boyfriend who told me that he was sick. He didn't say what he was sick about. And, it bothered me for a long time – for a couple of weeks – and then, finally, he got sicker, and then he finally told me what was wrong – that he had HIV. And that sort of blew me out of the water, totally. And he wasn't, like, just my boyfriend. He was my soul mate.

JH: Which boyfriend is this?

DKW: In Italy, and we had broken up, but, like I said, we still lived together. So, that really disturbed me, and I think that's when it really got personal, personal – very personal. So, I moved from there.

JH: What happened with him?

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DKW: Well, what happened with him, he got sick and died real quick, and I was torn up for weeks. Nobody could talk to me, nobody could tell me nothing. It was like my great-grandmother dying, because my great-grandmother dying was really a torturous thing for me, for years. And, with him, it was like the same kind of thing, and I just needed to do something.

His family was, like, obviously pointing the finger, where? At me – the American guy. So, they were angry with me, and I had to straighten things out with them, and I did. I talked to them and it was, like – I'm not sick. At that time, I hadn't had a test, but there was nothing – I didn't have any symptoms or anything. If I'm going to die, I don't want to know right now. I want to wait to find out later.

In about two years, I did take a test, and it was negative, to my big surprise. And then, I went to Italy, and I saw them, and I think it took a lot off of them, because they looked at me – this guy is, like – whoa, there's nothing wrong with him. All of a sudden, my ex-boyfriend had just wasted away in a manner click, click. In about eight or nine months, he's gone.

JH: How did you first hear about ACT-UP?

DKW: I think I went to the Center, and I heard something or saw something or read something in the paper. I cannot, to this day, still put the dots together. But, I can remember going to the meeting.

JH: What was it like that first meeting?

DKW: It was, like, oh my God – these are my people. It was empowering, and on the other hand, it was kind of scary. It was kind of scary because I didn't really know anybody. The crowd was relatively white, very white. And I think, in the back of my

mind – even though those issues are not totally, totally important with me, they're there. And, I think, that sort of played a little thing. But, quickly – I ran into Ortez [Alderson], and that was the end of that. If I ever had an idea that I was getting away, it wasn't happening, because, he's, like, we need more black guys like you. And that was it.

JH: Could you talk a little bit about Ortez, because he's not alive and can't talk for himself.

DKW: I met Ortez at my second or third meeting, and we sort of became buddies real, real quick. And, his philosophy was just totally in tune with what I wanted to hear. And, I considered myself to be in training at that point, because I felt a lot of things, but I couldn't really sort of vocalize them, because I didn't know how to vocalize them. And he just really helped a lot. He helped me sort of put a lot of the anger, frustration and rage I had in words that I could do something about. And, help direct how to get some of that done. But, I think – the things that stick with me today is, Ortez is just someone who said what he believed, at all costs. And, to me, that takes a very courageous person, because most people are very tempered, because they think about the consequences. Even though they might think about them, they're, like – I better not say that. He just didn't. And, to me, that is a very courageous thing.

JH: Do you know if he had a history of political activity before ACT UP?

DKW: I really don't know, because we got caught up in the whole thing about what we were going to do in ACT-UP. So, I know he was doing acting stuff, but that's about it. Beyond that, no – I don't really know. I know he knew his stuff. He knew who to find, who we should go after. He just connected all the dots perfectly. For someone that's coming there green as grass myself, he just sort of, like – here's what we need to

do. And, I just follow very willingly, and there were very few times in my life that I ever followed anybody, because I'm not a follower. That's just me. And, while he wasn't there for a long time, I think he had a major impact. For someone who wasn't there a lot of the time, he had a phenomenal impact, as far as I was concerned – especially – for me being a black guy, he was the kind of role model that I would want to have.

Tape II
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JH: Before we go on, let's situate this in time. So, when was this that you first started going to ACT-UP?

DKW: It was probably 1987.

JH: Do you remember what actions were happening?

DKW: NIH was my first action. So, I was there pretty much – not in the beginning, beginning, but this had to be in 1987. I'm getting my years mixed up. I came back to the US in 1986 – what am I talking about? And, I was at Parsons for a year, before I did anything. So, yeah, 1987.

JH: So, is there more to say about Ortez?

DKW: We did – Ortez – it was funny, he motivated me to do things. I mean, I would never think to go and confront people and Ortez just sort of, like – we're going here. We're going to confront this person and we're going right in their office. We're not even stopping at the secretary. I'm, like, huh? Because – me, it's, like that whole southern thing where you ask for everything – even if you know you're supposed to get it, you just ask and you're polite about it. And, he just sort of, like, helped me, sort of, like – yeah, I can be polite, but I can be aggressive, too. But, that is something that he inspired.

JH: So, who did you go and confront?

DKW: Actually, we went to a couple of people – the Black Leadership Conference – the people who were doing – what was it called? It was called – I don't have the name of it, but it's here in New York, and I don't know what they call it now, but they were, like, the National Black Leadership – the conference was in DC. But, this was with Debra Fraser-Howe [National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS] that whole mess.

The first time we went there, we went there very, very confrontational. And I think they were kicking back. Who are these people and what do they want? And then, we got accused of being, you know – we were sent by the white boys. And that was painful, because, it was, like, no, you can't do anything on your own, you have to be directed. And that, sort of, was the set up, from the get go. It was a total set up, and I'm sure the whole thing with Ortez will probably come up again, later.

What made the situation really complex was that we had all these people, we're trying to save their lives at all costs. But, underlying all of this is all the other nonsense that goes on in American culture – racism is fluid. For me, I don't say that things in ACT-UP were “racist.” I think it was internalized racism that people sort of do, and they have no clue that they're doing it. On the other hand, you've got people who you would consider your allies, who are calling you Uncle Tom, because you're over there with the gay white guys. He just ostracized every damn place. You're ostracizing the black community, because you're hanging out with gay people and the AIDS thing. So, gay people don't want to deal with you. The white people never liked you in the first place. You're nobody. You're way down there.

And, that was something we all sort of struggled with, as a group. And, I think, one of the things that really bothers me, and still bothers me to this day is, another subgroup is black women. And that's why you never really saw a lot of them. They came and they left, just like they came. They never stayed, because the complexity of all of that just got in the way, and, it's like, how many fights can you fight at once?

Yeah – the whole thing was, staying alive. I think, also, with the women, was, they didn't feel a real – I don't know, I can't speak for everyone – but, I think a great chunk of the black women who were there in the beginning didn't feel like they wanted to get involved to do something positive, progressive, political – but, I don't think they felt like it was a death knell for a lot of them. In the beginning – and I think, still, today – the incidence of HIV among lesbians is relatively low.

JH: You're talking about black lesbians coming into ACT-UP?

DKW: Yeah.

JH: Not about the women from Bedford Hills who came in later?

DKW: No, I'm not talking about in the beginning. So, that whole dynamic came up. So, we were fighting battles on all these fronts, where we were trying to get the community – “our community” – to wake up. And then, on the other hand we were, like, saying to people in ACT-UP – hey, these issues are just as important and if we have to modify some things – no, don't change your action, don't do this – if we're going to an action in a certain place, you have to be sensitive to what the consequences are going to be.

JH: You've brought up all these rally big, important issues. I want to take them systematically. Let's go back to the black leadership – what is it that you wanted from them?

DKW: We wanted them to do what they said they'd do. Well, the name was called leadership. If they were the black collect money organization for AIDS, fine – just call themselves that. But, they're if they're not taking any leadership role, then they should – what's the point of the leadership? And, you're talking about – and I think the thing that was scary to us, was, when we found out who these people were – mostly ministers, some politicians, but very conservative. And, if you really look really hard, when it comes to social issues – all the more black people who come, the more conservative they tend to become.

It just doesn't – AIDS and gay people – that's a white boy disease, what are you talking about? We've got a little bit of a problem here, but – that was the attitude. And, we're, like, saying, no, you don't have a little bit of a problem here – you've got a big problem. And their whole focus wanted to be on babies, and they were not interested in gay men. That was, just like, no, no, no, absolutely under no circumstances are were talking about that. That was like – so, you're telling me I don't exist. There was this whole weird thing going on – the reality – all of them had to have known, or knew, or had friends that were gay, but – wait a minute, I'm confused. Somebody please wake me up out of this nightmare.

And so that, in itself, became extremely frustrating. And so, you're fighting that stuff, and you're not getting anywhere. The most positive thing that ever came out of that – we ended up on BET, where we did get – have a little bit of discussion, but nothing

came out of it. To this day – I mean, for me, personally – I think we’ve done nothing. Not WE have done nothing – black communities as a whole have done nothing.

Why is the incidence of HIV among black men what it is today? Because we just let people die off and once that group dies off, we just let another group get infected and play a game. If you want to go DL [down low] culture – where does that all come from? It all comes from this whole nonsense, and it’s all very integrated. DL culture just didn’t pop up – it popped up, because black men – after a wave of black men died from AIDS, they needed to disassociate themselves from gay men. So, they created a “name” for themselves – doing the same thing, dying the same way, but with a different name.

Tape II
00:10:00

That, to me is pathetic. And, I say, for myself and friends I have that, yeah, we did something, but it’s really sad for me. I get a little upset and a little unnerved by it, because I think, you know, we sit around killing ourselves, when the tools are there not to kill yourself. But, if you’re in denial and pretending it’s not there – and that goes, systematically back to what we were talking about – leadership, where you’ve got people from the top, where the church is basically, the voice. And, when the church says something, you basically – if you want to go heaven, you don’t go and sit around and say, no, they’re wrong, like I did. Obviously, I’m not going to heaven – their heaven, anyway. But, I’m not concerned about their heaven, so let them keep it. Most black guys don’t think that way. They want to be in tune.

Right now you have the situation where there are a lot of black gay guys in churches and it’s the phenomena of making music and it’s become really big business. But, they sit in a choir behind a minister who sits there and degrades them for two hours

on Sunday and I'm, like, just go shoot yourself. I'm not trying to be mean, but what's the point?

JH: Have you specifically talked to men in that situation?

DKW: Oh yeah – they dismiss you because – I mean, they always go to the – God has a bigger plan. Sure he does.

JH: Getting back to the late eighties, I'm wondering if this didn't play out somewhat differently in different parts of the city? Specifically, what I'm thinking of is organizations like Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, which did try to deal with the issues of HIV in the black community.

DKW: I think what we're looking at is – yeah – there were small pockets of things going on. But, I think, in the bigger picture – I think when I was looking at it, Ortez was looking at it, and some of the other people were looking at it, we wanted things to be on the same level that “the big guys” in ACT-UP had. We wanted the same respect – not so much respect – we wanted the same response. It wasn't about us, per se. Maybe for some people, it was about personality and they wanted power and they wanted to be on TV or whatever – to be seen. But, I think for me and for a lot of other people, it was more about – this needs to be a level playing field – and it's not a level playing field, not because somebody's got something and they won't give it to us – it's there, but you refuse to use it, because you're in denial. That's what it was about, that's what it's till about – not was, still. It's a very complex thing, but I wouldn't know.

JH: Let's go back to the situation in ACT-UP. So, you're working with Ortez, and who else?

DKW: Well, there are a bunch of people. In the beginning, there were people like – there was Marvin [Palmer], Michael Wiggins, Keith Cylar – I got a list here – Cliff, Allen Robinson, Selwyn, Emily, Ray Navarro, Robert Garcia, for 10 minutes, and a bunch of other people. And, obviously, we all decided to – because in the beginning, there was lot of animosity with some of these people and Ortez, because Ortez was very headstrong. So, these other people had very, very other different views of things. And, that's why, I think a lot of people sort of drifted away and started doing other things and got ... other committees and started doing other things.

JH: Was this Majority Action?

DKW: Yeah.

JH: What kinds of conflicts were there?

DKW: Well, I think it was just personality, because Ortez was really confrontational, and if he thought you were wrong, he would just tell you straight up. And, I think was about having his way. To this day, I don't think any of it was when he wanted to have his way – he wasn't doing it for any personal gain, because, he, philosophically, believed what he was saying, what he was trying to do. So, I don't think it was about for some personal reason.

But, I think people wanted – you know, people were at different places and wanted different things. So, some people just sort of migrated away. A core group of people stayed, and after Ortez died – he went to Chicago, and he wasn't here, and then he died. But, when we wasn't here, it became a whole bunch of other people, doing different things. And, there was no singular person. There were a couple of people doing different things, because even we had our own infighting. I had a very, very big problem

with Emily. We just did not get along, and we had very, very, sort of verbal things going on. That's life.

JH: Were they disagreements about specific actions or general philosophy?

DKW: I think it was – you know what? I think Emily always meant well, but I, honestly – I can be very honest about this now – back then, I wouldn't have known – I just have issues with women being really sort of trying to tell me what to do. And, that goes back to my family. That's my whole personal thing. And so, I think that's part of it. But, also, I think, there was that sub-text of – it's a white woman, also – so it became another issue. And, it wasn't like, you know, on the front of the – but it was there. I don't need a white woman telling me what to do. I mean, I'm a grown black man, I can take care of myself. Do not tell me.

And, I think, plus the fact – because Emily was doing. She was taking care of a number of people – that is a wonderful thing, and I'm not trying to dismiss any of that, but it just played a very sort of weird trick with me, in my head, because it just sort of came out as – first it's a woman, then it's a white woman, and all this. This all sounds like I'm a racist, sexist guy, and I'm not. But, I'm just being very honest about where I was at, and how I acted. But, I didn't start working with anybody or started working with her, because of any of that. I just sort of picked my fights with her. If we had to do something together to get something done, we did it.

JH: What was Emily's last name?

JAMES WENTZY: Gordon.

DKW: Gordon. There were two Emilys – not the little Emily.

JH: ACT-UP is often talked about as this white, gay organization – that’s a reduction of what it really was. Could you talk about it more generally? Were there incidents on the floor that reflected racism, on the part of white members?

DKW: Well, I think people said things. I can’t remember anything very specific. But, you know what? There were number of people who were in tune – and not necessarily black or whatever – there were just a number of people there that were in tune, who just kept things in check. I mean, when somebody would say something off the wall, they got called on it. And, I think, what people feel personally, is one thing, but as a group, we’re pretty cohesive. No matter what, we’re pretty cohesive. And, there were things going on. I had this little tit for tat with Mark Harrington, that had to do with a Gran Fury thing, and I don’t know if you ever heard of this thing, where “We die. They do nothing,” thing, and I designed a poster for it. And he was telling me, this is not worthy, and I’m, like – and it just became, to me, this whole thing that – here is some privileged white boy, trying to tell me what’s right for me. And, I said, hell no. And, it wasn’t personal, it wasn’t personal. To me, it was not about me saying, what you think doesn’t matter. But, it was almost like, you know, I know better for you, than you know for yourself. And, that is such a common thing that goes on in the relationship between blacks and whites in this country.

And, I think, sometimes, people just say no. And, I’m supposed to be in an empowered situation, and somebody’s going to try – at least in my perception – to pull one of those stunts? Hell no – you’re not doing it.

JH: So, you designed this poster?

DKW: Yeah.

JH: And in what situation was he critiquing it?

DKW: It was part of – I can't remember what it was, because Gran Fury was doing something, and they wanted everybody to submit something. But, the poster ended up getting used, anyway. And, I just sort of rode into my background for a little while about – it was, like – who gives you the right, just because – just because you're a white guy, you think you know? You haven't lived in my world. You have no clue. And so, I think that was there, but it wasn't, like – it didn't stop anything from going. If I had to do something with Mark. I never disliked Mark. I see Mark all the time, still.

JH: But, did he have a specific criticism of it?

DKW: It was – I don't know – how can I put this? It has the effect of someone saying to you, you're not ready for primetime. This is stage A, you need to be back there, on the side street. This is the main street. And, I'm, like, no, I'm a graphics designer. I work at *Harper's Bazaar*, I know what I'm doing. I'm not stupid. And so, I just stuck to my guns. But, I learned that. I got that from Ortez, because I think, probably before, I would have, liked, said – okay, do what you need to do.

JH: Can we talk about specific actions that you were involved in?

DKW: Well, NIH was the first thing I ever did, and that was empowering – the whole thing. At NIH, there was no, sort of, everybody broken up into little things. We did posters and stuff for it, but there wasn't anything really, really specific to that – to people of color, per se. It was after that, that we started doing things – we would try to make sure that the whole point of view, as it related to people of color, got integrated into the full message. And, I think that was one of our big things – to make sure that issues of people of color got integrated into the bigger picture. And then, when people are sent,

it's not just all the time – two white guys. A lot of the time, it's fine – but sometimes, no. I don't think it was to a great degree, major, major actions at the beginning, but just doing things – calling people, harassing people, doing what we did with the Debra Fraser-Howe thing.

We had to fight to get on BET, because BET cancelled on us three times, because they didn't want to deal, but we fought. And, certainly, I guess you could call that an action.

But then, we went to Chicago. In Chicago, we did some actions. I can't remember the specifics of it, to be honest, but we did some actions there. When we were in Montreal, we sort of took the lead in doing the – what was that guy's name? He was –

JW: [Secretary of] Health and Human Services.

JH: [Louis] Sullivan.

DKW: Sullivan –

JW: That was in San Francisco

DKW: That was in San Francisco? I'm getting confused. He was really pissed off. But, I think one of the things that really diffused what he was saying was, because the first people he saw were black and brown faces, and I think that pissed him off, even more. And that is a powerful thing. Those were the kinds of things that we were doing. And then we did – and I cannot remember the dates, because I'm really hazy on that – we did a conference at Hunter – a people of color conference with the Latino Caucus. And, it wasn't just for New York – it was ACT-UP from around the country. So, that was pretty cool.

JH: And what was the theme of the conference?

Tape II
00:25:00

DKW: The them of the conference was about gaining access and how people could use the tools that were available in ACT-UP, because ACT-UP was like a gold mine, for someone like me, because it gave me an insight to how you get access to things; how you, sort of know, you should have access, but you've never been able to get in. All of a sudden, the door is sitting there, wide open, and you see everybody, and how it's done. And, you know, it's, like – how do you call somebody at CBS and get a response? I go to ACT-UP, and I find out real quick.

JH: This is for the historical record – how do you do that?

DKW: Well, actually, you know somebody like Ann Northrop – that's how you do it – because ACT-UP had this sort of diverse group of people who tended to be, for the most part, white and affluent, and people who, before AIDS, would have – they came from – not all – I'm sort of generalizing – who had access to things. They had jobs that gave them access. You take one person with access to this, and another person with access to this, and they're all brought together by some common cause, then you've got, almost unlimited resources to do things. And, I think that happens more often than people think. But, for a black person, that's a rare opportunity, and that goes to – well, we're talking about internalized racism, because I don't think most people sit around and nah, I'm not going to let a black person have that information – I really don't. Because then that's just clear up racism. But, because you don't run in that circle, you don't know these people, you never come in contact with them, you have no access – just by default, you have no access. But, ACT-UP gave us access. It changed – to me, it changed some things.

One of the things I've learned, and passed on to a couple of people, is that – I learned this from Ann Northrop – if you want to get press – if you want to be in the newspaper, have something on a Sunday. I never would have thought about this – ever, in my life. And, I told it to a couple of people, and they were blown away – outside of the ACT-UP context. They were totally blown away. Just to prove the point.

JH: Why do you do it on a Sunday?

DKW: Because Sunday tends to be a very slow news day, and you end up on the paper on a Monday – maybe even on the front page, if you did something big.

JH: How did this access work in terms of drugs? Were people – the white guys who had the information about drugs and drug trials – was that information getting to people?

DKW: That's very interesting. I never got involved with the drugs issue at all, and I think, maybe because I had my plate full with a lot of other things anyway, but I think the people who tended to be really, really interested in that, were people who were HIV positive or who had AIDS, and they tended to know more information. And so, I can only talk about how I know some people were very frustrated – how some of the groups were very, very secretive, maybe, and very exclusive. And, basically, to get in, you had to be invited. And, basically, they held something, and they don't want anybody to get it. But, I think, because of the way it all sort of – if you were in ACT-UP, and you wanted certain things – if you couldn't get it, you knew somebody who could get it for you, so you could get it. It sort of trickled down, in certain ways.

But, we go back, exactly to what we were talking about before. You have to want it. So, people in ACT-UP – if you're in ACT-UP – you're a black guy in ACT-UP – you

want access to something for somebody, you know, then you can get it. But, the general public, or the people outside – no, because, first of all, they don't want to know you.

You're a pariah, you're a disease, which has become, sort of, like, this thing, that's going on now – that kids just do – it's like everyone's diseased.

Tape II
00:30:00

JH: This is the way kids talk about each other?

DKW: Yeah, today, now. And, they're all referring to having HIV. As a joke, obviously, but I don't find it funny.

JH: You're not talking about ostracizing kids who actually do have HIV, but it's just a way of saying –

DKW: Yeah. But, just using that word, it's just kind of, ooh. It's always been there. And then you have people like – who am I trying to think of? A number of people who come in – I know Keith was involved in this, and a couple of other people. And they sort of demanded – like, they wanted access. People – I can't remember the name of the groups that were dealing with drugs specifically, but they were, like, people were there demanding and, I guess, people were resistant, but eventually, I think they gave in, and gave people what they wanted to know – the information they wanted to know, the access they wanted.

JH: So, you've mentioned Keith Cylar. Did you work on housing issues at all?

DKW: No. Keith and Charles were there – Charles was there for 10 seconds, with Majority Action. And then, no, that was something they did. I was with Majority Action. I'd been sort of doing needle exchange and that was it for me.

JH: Let's talk about needle exchange. That's a really complex and controversial subject. Why did you first get interested?

DKW: I don't know, because I'm crazy. It's the whole thing about a group of people who are totally outside – talk about being ostracized. Nobody wanted to know you. And, it was – I don't know initially how I got involved, but somebody came to Majority Action and started talking about needle exchange. Oh, I know – the guy who was doing needle exchange in New Haven, Connecticut, and I can't remember his name, to save my life. And he started talking, and I sort of got interested. And, I went out with them a couple of times, and I think there's this whole thing about – you know, you're trying to help somebody, and somebody wants to arrest you for it – it just played totally with me. And so, I was, like – I just did it. It was ugly, it was nasty, but it was very eye-opening, because you've got all these guys – people who hadn't slept for days, people who've got big open sores on their arms.

At first, I was taken aback by it, for a second, but I got over that real quick, because it was, like – if I say, I want everybody to have access to whatever preventative measures that there are out there, then I can't be sort of selective about who can. So, once that sort of clicked in my mind, it was all over. And, I was living on the Lower East Side, so it just made sense.

JH: What part of the city did you do needle exchange in?

DKW: The Lower East Side, in the beginning. I was one of the gang who got arrested and went to court, and went through the whole deal and ended –

JH: OK. Can you tell us the whole story?

DKW: We were doing needle exchange on the Lower East Side for a long time, and the cops would play with us and tell us to stop and finally we just – I think, the group as a whole, had a meeting with some lawyers, and we just said, you know what? We're going to have somebody call the cops, we're going to go to this corner. We set it up as an action, and brought it to ACT-UP. There was a lot of resistance to it – we don't want to know. Because, I mean, it was totally unglamorous. And, it just doesn't work for anything – if you look at the ideal gay guy, needle exchange ain't – that just is not the story. But, we did it. And, we got arrested, went to court.

JH: How many people got arrested?

DKW: Somewhere between seven and nine of us got arrested for that specific thing, that ended up in trial.

JH: Do you remember who else?

DKW: Names – I cannot. I'm clueless right now.

JH: What about the racial breakdown?

DKW: Racially – doing the needle exchange – it was mostly white guys and/or women and myself, and I can't remember any other black person there – not in the beginning.

JH: You've never taken drugs using needles?

DKW: Never.

JH: What about the others?

DKW: I think there were some people who had done drugs and stuff, but my whole thing was I was doing alcohol big time. I was on alcohol maintenance the whole time I was in ACT-UP. That's why I don't remember some things. I don't think that was

the thing. I think these were just people who really saw what the issue was, and they just felt that we really needed to address it, and if we were going to be ACT-UP, and wanted to be honest about what we say we're doing, we need to – like I just said – we can't be selective about what part of AIDS we want to address.

If not using a condom can contribute to the spread of AIDS, then distribute condoms. If sharing needles can contribute to the spread of AIDS, then we need to distribute needles. It's kind of funny, when I think about it, because us being arrested and going to trial, and winning the case, and having the state law change, does, sort of, have an effect on me, yeah! And, sometimes, you know, when people piss me off really bad, and it's like – you sit around and don't do nothing. I'm, like, yeah, have you been arrested and gotten state law changed? And, that usually shut them up, but that's me being a little egotistical, but still. When 300 people do the same thing, change happens.

JH: So, it worked?

DKW: Something worked.

JH: Deciding to go to trial was rather unusual.

DKW: No, we could have just gotten ACD [adjournment contemplating dismissal] and gone about our business. We were – from day one, when we set up the action, that was – nobody was going to accept anything. But, actually, I do remember, and I can't remember who – somebody did accept ACD, and – this is interesting – I can talk about this now, or we can go back to it – about getting arrested.

There are issues about getting arrested – especially, if you're a black guy. I know black guys in ACT-UP, who would never get arrested, because they were afraid of what was going to happen to them. And, maybe because of where I came from, I wasn't afraid

to get arrested. And, in fact, at the Stop the Church action, I was the second person who got arrested. So, I didn't mind at all. It didn't bother me. I had a nice cop, and when I was supposed to go to trial, he refused to come. So, that was even better. So, my case got thrown out. In the needle exchange thing, no. We wanted to go through the whole thing, but we wanted to. We didn't want the easy way out. We wanted to force the issue. It's just like what's going on with gay marriage now. The issue had to be forced.

JH: Did you act as your own lawyer or did you have a lawyer?

DKW: No, actually, we had lawyers. I can't remember her name – she was in ACT-UP, she was a lawyer, she did pro-bono work. I can't remember names. But, we did have lawyers – even though I did get myself in trouble, because I showed up in court one day with needles in my bag – unbeknownst –

JH: They searched you?

DKW: and they arrested me, too. But they let me go.

JH: So you weren't charged with that?

DKW: No.

JH: And, what was the outcome of the trial?

DKW: We actually won the case.

JH: So, you were not guilty.

DKW: Right.

JH: And, was it a jury trial?

DKW: No, it was a judge. It was funny, because I remember, when I was on the stand, I had been out the whole night before, so I was still high as a kite. It was screwed up to say this, but, it worked out perfectly, because the DA, when he asked me these

questions, I had these answers for him – everybody was just rolling, laughing – the judge, he just had to make everybody shut up after awhile. So, it just worked to my advantage. No, I would never do that again, but it was funny.

JH: So, what kind of questions did he ask?

Tape III
00:00:00

DKW: I think one of the questions was, so, how do you find these people to give needles to? I said, well, we go to the same place we go every week. We just stand there, and they show up. And, it wasn't so much, like, what I said – it was my inflection and stuff. It was like that – it was silly. And to me, the whole thing – I was being sarcastic the whole time. And so, it worked for me, anyway. But, that was that. After that, I don't know – my whole world had started to become unraveled.

JH: How so?

DKW: A number of people had died. The alcohol had probably gotten the best of me, and I was just burnt. And people were people were talking about people dying, and I was starting to laugh, because that was just the response. I couldn't cry no more, couldn't feel sad no more, because I'd done it so long. I was just burnt on it. So, I was, like – you know what? At a certain point, I just started to think to myself, I need to get away from here. I need to go away. This is not – and I said it, but I didn't do it. And then, I think, one day, it finally kicked into me. One day, I woke up in the afternoon, and I put my hand through a double plate glass window, in my sleep. Then, I knew, I needed to do something. So, I started looking at what was going on – not that it took me forever to figure it out, but I started thinking about it.

JH: Are there particular deaths that were –

DKW: Well, actually – Ortez, because these were people who were close to me – my ex-boyfriend. But, that had happened in the beginning – Ortez, Ray Navarro, who else? Allen Robinson. Allen became – because me and Ortez were like this, when he was here, except for his boyfriend – we were always together. And then, when Ortez left, Allen Robinson and I were like this. And so, all these people were just being snatched away from me, and then, all the other people I knew in ACT-UP. It was just – and everybody went through all of this, and it was just at a certain point – I don't want to know no more. People were talking about going to a memorial service. It was, like, let me go to a bar and have a drink – let me have 10 drinks, let me have 20 drinks. Let me just knock myself out.

The whole attitude was like, no, I'm not HIV-positive now, but I'm going to die soon. And, people – in the beginning, people were acting like that. I think on the one hand, people were looking for answers, but I think subconsciously, a lot of people were doing the suicidal thing. And a lot of people, who were doing things – all kinds of drugs – all over the place, people were doing drugs, and all kinds of stuff. Like I said, I never messed around with drugs, I'm just an alcohol person, but I just really went crazy with alcohol.

JH: Was your drinking part of an ACT-UP social scene?

DKW: Sometimes, because everybody sort of hung out in the East Village. We sort of took over the East Village and we said, the “regular” gay guys could have the West Village, the East Village belongs to us. And there was that whole dynamic, because ACT-UP became a world of its own. And, if you were in ACT-UP, you were basically non-wanted in the rest of the gay environment, because you were suspect, in the

Tape III
00:05:00

beginning, and I think for a long time. And, if you were bold enough to say it, then, you knew you needed to stay in your own, sort of, world, because other people just weren't about you, they only wanted to know about you for whatever you could give them to help them, which was cool.

But, I think we all ran around in the same world. We all knew each other. We all had parties – Christmas, New Years, all the holidays together. Me, Sharon [Tramutola], Marvin, Michael, Wahn Yoon and myself became family. We did all the holidays together. It was one or each other's houses. So, we all, sort of, like, stuck together.

And, it's a natural thing. You go where you feel safest. But, even in that safety, there is a lot of vulnerability – especially now, because, I think the subtext in the beginning, and for a long time – and I think, even when most of us started to migrate away, there was still that fear. Death was still there. And, it's only recently that, that whole curtain has sort of lifted. Now, we're, like, hey, what the hell am I going to do? I might be living for another 40 years. I've got to find a life.

JH: Are you still drinking?

DKW: No. That's why I'm talking about it.

JH: Right. So, you're in ACT-UP, and you're doing a lot of drinking – so, I have to ask you the hard question. A number of people have talked about, on tape, about you taking money from ACT-UP. So, I wonder if you can tell us what happened.

DKW: Okay, here's the story. And, the drinking only plays part into this story – but this has to do with needle exchange, basically, and I would go on trips and buy needles – and, I think it all started out very innocently enough. Unfortunately, what I

discovered later is, I'm bi-polar, and I just sort of just let my imagination take charge of me, and I just did what I wanted to do. And, when I say, I did what I wanted to do – I never spent any money on myself. Nobody could ever say, I – because people like to say, Dan took the money and bought drugs. I never bought any drugs. I don't do drugs. I can't do drugs. Part of my being bi-polar, it doesn't work. I can't drink that much alcohol. I don't have – no one can ever say I had a big party.

I bought a lot of needles, and I bought a lot of things, and I went to places to buy needles and stuff like that, but I never asked permission. I just did it, on my own. Was I wrong? Yeah. Would I do it again? No. And the reason I said that – I knew this was going to come up, so I'm not afraid of it, because I am in a better place now, because I've addressed some of those things, put them in their proper perspective. I apologized to anybody I might have hurt or feel like I betrayed them. But, I was in a place that I don't want to be ever again – dealing with some issues that I didn't know how to deal with. Those issues are still there – they haven't gone away. But, now I'm dealing with them, I look at them straight up. I'm here talking about them on tape, and I don't care who sees or hears it, because that's reality. Yeah, it was wrong. And, I own up to that responsibility.

I think one of the things that bothered me about how someone might perceive it is that they might use it to diminish what Majority Action might have done and needle exchange might have done. This is something that Dan Williams did, and if you want to hate me, if you want to think I'm a crook, if you want to think I'm the worst person in the world, that's your prerogative. I put it in perspective. I did something wrong. I made a

big mistake. I own up to it. I own up to it because I did it, but I understand why I did it myself. And I don't know what else – if you've got something else you want to ask me?

JH: Well, how did you have access to the money?

DKW: In the beginning – because I would go to places and get needles. And, it ended up – I would go to – you could never get needles in New York, and at first, we were getting needles from the guy from New Haven. And, we started out really small, and then we got bigger and bigger. And, I think we were doing one site and then we started doing four or five sites.

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And, I first figured out that you could go to Virginia and get needles and you could go to a five, six, seven or eight different pharmacies and nobody would say anything. I could take a train, and if I calculated right, I could do one, two, three, four, five stops and come back – figure out where the pharmacies are, all across the train station, do that. When it was in Chicago – because you couldn't do it in Illinois, but you could do it in Michigan, so I took a trip to Michigan and did it and then came back. And we went to San Francisco. I made side trips and bought needles. So, that's pretty much how it went down.

JH: So, you didn't put yourself up in fancy hotels?

DKW: What hotels? No.

JH: How did you actually get the money?

DKW: I just told them, I needed – we needed needles, we needed – apart from needles, we needed bottles, and we had to order bottles. Then, at a certain point, these people wouldn't even sell us bottles because they knew what we were using them for. So, we had to go and buy them, incognito.

Then, in Virginia, they stopped because they realized that I was buying a lot of needles. So, at one place, I would go buy 100 needles. Then, then next time I'd try to go there, they would only sell me 50, so I have to go someplace else. I think we could mail for them somewhere, but it seemed like it didn't really work. But, I would just go to the treasurer, and tell him, how many needles we wanted and just go and buy it.

JH: Who was the treasurer?

DKW: Who was the treasurer? Oh God.

JW: Marvin Shulman.

DKW: Marvin Shulman

JH: Okay, so there were never any questions asked?

DKW: No.

JH: And, you didn't have to give receipts?

DKW: I gave receipts.

JH: So –

DKW: But, they said it wasn't authorized. It wasn't passed by the floor. So, then, they're, like, oh, Dan took this money and Dan and went and did drugs. And, this all happened right around the time when I was burned out. My hand was fucked up, I was in a bad place. I didn't really know what was going on with me, but I was in a really bad place. They had a meeting, and I could have, easily, not gone to that meeting at all and just said, fuck ACT-UP, I'm just disappearing. If you want to arrest me, have the cops come and get me. But, I went, and I said what I had to say and they said, we need for you to give us back this money. And, I'm, like, I don't have it. And, I didn't. It's plain and simple. I didn't. And, after that, I did a couple of things, and I just sort of

migrated away. I didn't feel comfortable, and I understand why I didn't feel comfortable, but I didn't just walk away and hide. I never hid. I never made myself invisible. I never ran somewhere and hid under a rock and said, if you want me for something, come see me. At that point, I was scared, I was embarrassed, I was upset with myself, on a number of levels – but that was just part of it. And, it took me a long time to get a grip with what was going on with me.

Now, I'm in a place – I'm not totally all right with myself, but I'm to a great deal all right with myself. I want to put closure to that, and that's why I'm doing this, right now. It's just one other thing I want to put closure to. The only thing I can say about that is, I hope nobody has to – and it happens, you know – you look at people who are bipolar – things like this do happen. And, again, I don't anybody to ever construe that I'm trying to make excuses for my actions. If somebody really wants to think I'm a bad guy, please go right ahead and do so – I know I'm not. I made mistakes, but look at the whole picture. Like I said, none of the responsibility lies on Majority Action or needle exchange – especially Majority Action, because it had nothing to do with Majority Action – this is needle exchange, anyway. But, even with needle exchange, it was me. I was the person who became responsible for this. And so, I have to bear the burden. And, I'm not passing the buck to Marvin Shulman, either. I'm not passing the buck to anybody. I screwed up.

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JH: The meeting – was that a small group meeting, or the floor?

DKW: It was a small group meeting.

JH: Do you remember who else was there?

DKW: There were a lot of people there. A lot of people tried to convince me not to go. A lot of people who cared about me, tried to convince me. A lot of people who care about me tried to convince me not to do this.

JH: Oh, did they?

DKW: They said, you might get ambushed. But, nobody can ambush me. They can't. The only way you can get ambushed is if you feel vulnerable about something that you have to hide something. It's not like I feel superior or inferior, I just feel okay with myself.

JH: Well, the organization decided not to press charges, so, in effect, it was over a long time ago.

DKW: Yeah, but for me, it's over now. And, it's another one of those things I suppressed. And, it only came back up again, when I started talking with Sarah [Schulman], and I was talking with my therapist, who I see twice a week. And she said, are you sure you want to do this? And I said, yeah. It's life. I've made my share of mistakes in life, and right now, I think I'm a wiser person and think – I know how my mind functions, and things that trigger things to happen. So, I spend a lot of time being really aware of what the ramifications of my actions are.

This time last year, I was homeless – on the street, homeless. Smart enough to have my stuff in storage, but I was homeless, and I was homeless sitting in a shelter for three months.

JH: How did you get to that point?

DKW: Well, actually, I was starting to get it together then, where I was at. The place that I was at was not a legal, legal place to stay. And, I just sort of had this deal

with the landlord, and it was not coming together. I needed to get out of there. My support system wasn't quite working the way it was, and so I ended up, basically, in the street.

But, I never gave up. Look at me. Do I look like I've given up? I, pretty much, kept all my stuff, because I'm smart enough to keep my stuff in storage, but I was out there. And, you know what? To me – being homeless for three months was something that had to happen to me. It was probably the most personally painful thing to ever happen to me, other than the people really close to me, dying.

It hurt, because I felt like everybody had given up on me. I had given up on myself, and that was it. It opened my eyes to the fact that I know I can bounce back. I just don't give up, and that I don't need to be manipulative to get what I want. I just need to use whatever resources are available and do it properly. And, I can get what I want, and I can do the things I want and just be fluid about it.

JH: Did you get any services when you were in the shelter or did you do this on your own?

DKW: I got kicked out of the shelter – that's the services I got, because I got to be such a smart guy, demanding things from people. They threw me out. It was a nasty place – not physically nasty – it was just an abusive place, where you've got people who can't take care of themselves, for whatever reason. They've either got mental health issues, or they've got drug abuse issues, or family violence issues or whatever. And, you're supposed to be in a supportive environment, and you've got staff that's extremely abusive. It was just a nightmare.

But, you know me – I did my own footwork. I was just knocking doors down. If I don't get this, you're going to have to arrest me, because I'm not leaving. So, I got the help I needed. This is how the VA comes back into here – the people who I despise, all of a sudden become a resource, because I'm a vet. So, they came to my aid. And then, when I started dealing with them, then the whole nightmare – what happened to me in the military – resurfaced – and I spoke to a couple of people there, and they told me, get your records, you really need to pursue this matter. So, I got legal counsel, and we're dealing with that.

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So, once again, it's just about me, sort of – rather than leaving these things in the recesses of my mind – it's baggage I'm addressing and just moving on, once and for all.

JH: So, after the problem with the money, you said, you drifted away from ACT-UP. Did you do any AIDS work or political work after that?

DKW: Actually, for awhile I didn't do anything. I just got a freelance job as a graphic designer and just worked. I did nothing else. I was totally aware of everything that was going on, on all levels that had to do with AIDS, that had to do with race, that had to do with sex – whatever. Political issues – I stayed attuned. I was just basically in my own world. I just sort of needed to be myself. And, when I started migrating away from ACT-UP, I just sort of left the whole world. I mean, I moved to the Bronx, from Chelsea. I totally changed worlds and it was a totally different thing. I was in the South Bronx, at that point, and it was kind of weird, because all that ACT-UP stuff was still in me, but I'm going in an area where people are just struggling to survive, so they don't want to hear it. They don't want to know it. They're just worried about where

they're going to get their next meal from. So, they don't want to hear any of this. So, it was frustrating. A little of this, a little of that, but I can't get them to both work together.

So, anyway, I just sort of blended into society, and I just sort of became this regular person, who didn't really do anything. I did things, but I didn't do anything political, per se. I'd have arguments with people all the time – but, that was my personal thing. But, I didn't do anything organized. And, I think, in a certain way, I was just sort of doing my study in the black community, because I found myself totally engulfed in the black world for a minute. And, I got comfortable with it. It was the first time I had probably ever really gotten comfortable with it. At that point, I just wasn't dealing with anything. Any white boy who wanted to talk to me, I was, like, go away. I'm serious. I was. But, it was just a period, and I went through it. And, it was a learning experience, and it put me in touch, and a lot of it holds today, because I think it's just part of my growth process.

I was willing – and still am – willing to accept some of the realities that people sort of put at me, because that's where they're at. But I get extremely frustrated, because people say, well, you did all that, and you do this, but we're here. But, why can't you do this? Because we're not like that. And, I'm, like, but how do we as a community move ahead, if other people don't do things. So, I had that dialogue with some people, and tried to do some things. And some of those people became my friends. I went from sort of being involved in a whole AIDS gay world, where everybody I was around was gay, to a world where most of my friends, now, are straight. They all know I'm gay. It never has been an issue. If it was an issue, it wouldn't work, because I'm not denying who I am just to make them happy.

But, I just sort of found myself in a world of people who are progressive, who are on the same page with most things and we don't sleep with the same kind of people, that's all – end of story. And, to me, that is what it is. I don't need to live in a ghetto. I don't need to ghettoize myself.

ACT-UP was not a ghetto. ACT-UP was a necessity. ACT-UP was a necessity because people wanted to stay alive. People say ACT-UP was fascist – probably so, on some level.

JH: Who said that?

DKW: A couple of people have said that, because of some of the actions we did.

JH: Specifically, what would it refer to?

DKW: A lot of people sort of took offense to things like, when people are aggressive, because I think some people are very comfortable with the fact that – they want change, but they want change to happen in a very orderly, sort of nice, fluid manner, rather than people sort of going and banging on peoples' doors – taking over TV stations, that kind of stuff. That really sort of frightens people, and this was before 9/11, which totally – you did that now, God forbid.

The radical attitude with some people just don't sit well. And, I've heard it said – not once, not twice – I've heard it said tons of times – and there are people who won't forgive us. Gay people won't forgive us for doing the St. Patrick's thing. Those are things that were necessary.

JH: How did you feel about going to the Catholic Church?

DKW: Just as long you don't go in there and break up anything – I didn't care. A church is a church – it's nothing but a building. And, if someone's in the building,

spreading hate and causing people to die, I think you need to go and confront him exactly where he lives. What are you going to do? To me, that's just it, plain and simple. And, the thing that bothers me is that nobody's been willing to do that in a black church, because they're afraid they'll be tarred and feathered out of town. I'd do it, but I'd be by myself, that would be the problem. I'd do it today. I still would do it.

That is the kind of thing that needed to be done. So, I don't perceive it to be a fascist sort of – personally, I don't, but I understand why some people – but, it got things done, a lot of things done. A lot of people are alive, who definitely probably wouldn't – not definitely, probably – definitely wouldn't be here now, perhaps. And, people – but, they say, well, but you didn't have to do it that way. But, if you didn't do it that way, he'd probably be dead – and a lot more people – at the end of the story if not –

Where I come from, my community – my community as a black person, I still feel very hurt by the fact that we, as a community, have not been able to take all those resources that were there, and use it in a much better way, because, honestly, I look back and I think – I'm 47 – that, if I would go out, there is – especially if you're looking at black men, there is a big void between 20-something and 60. There's almost nobody. They're dead. And, when you say that to people, people look at you for a minute, but then they realize what you're talking about. I'd say a good 80% of the people I know – gay guys I know – who are in that range, are dead. I don't know too many people in that age range at all. And now, we're going to have, unfortunately – it seems, maybe – another cycle of the same thing. That's really sort of sad.

I'm not saying, I've done my part. To this point, I've done what I can do as far as that. I've moved on to other things. I'm involved in what's going on in my community right now.

JH: Is there anything about ACT-UP that we haven't covered?

DKW: No. I can't think of anything.

JH: Thank you very much. I really appreciate your forthrightness.

DKW: The truth is the truth is the truth.

[END OF INTERVIEW]