

# **A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T**

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**Interviewee: Daniel Wolfe**

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**Interviewer: Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Daniel Wolfe  
February 27, 2010

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so we begin: if you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

DANIEL WOLFE: My name is Daniel Wolfe. I am 49 years old. We're sitting in my apartment in Brooklyn, that I share with my partner, Richard. I'm not sure of today's date. I know that it's late February, and I just got back from a long trip. So I think – is it February –

**SS: What is it, the 27<sup>th</sup>?**

**JIM HUBBARD: The 27<sup>th</sup>.**

DW: February 27<sup>th</sup> –

**SS: 2010.**

DW: – 2010.

**SS: So Daniel, it's just great to do this, because I feel like I've known you a really long time now. Yeah, and I know you have a lot to tell us. So let's just start at the beginning. Where were you born?**

DW: I was born in New Haven, Connecticut. My parents were 19 and 17, respectively. And my mother's family lived outside of New Haven. They were home for Christmas break, and I was born the day after Christmas.

**SS: So you were born in your grandparents' home.**

DW: Yes, outside of my grandparents' home, in the hospital, but yeah.

**SS: Okay. So what was your family life like, specifically in terms of social accountability, community, and those kinds of questions?**

DW: My parents were both middle-class kids, who were retreating from their families as quickly as they could. One of the reasons I was born so early is that they both desired to escape, and this catapulted them out of their families. They were teachers for a little while. And then, in the beginning, in the mid-'60s, began to drop out. And like a lot of people, started experimenting with alternative lifestyles, drugs, some dissatisfaction with the government, etcetera. They participated in some Vietnam marches and some political actions. But as the '60s developed, I think they realized that they actually were not particularly politically inclined, but were community-inclined. So they set off, with me, for California, and made it about as far as Arizona — there were a number of stops in between — where they settled in a kind of hippie community. And I grew up, for part of my life, in a hippie commune.

**SS: What was the name of the commune?**

DW: The name of commune was Rancho Linda Vista, and it was in a town called Oracle, Arizona. Andy Warhol had shot some of “Lonesome Cowboy” there, many years before; and it was a dude ranch that a bunch of people had bought and started to live on communally.

I don't have a picture handy, but my parents both had very long hair, as did I. My father always wore cutoff shorts and sandals, and my mother

wore a little bikini top and cutoff shorts, specifically because she wanted to show off the black rose tattoo between her breasts. She had wanted it to be a heart with anchors and snakes, that said “Bad”; but the tattoo artists refused to do it.

And they moved to the commune, or orbited around the commune, for years. The commune was organized around a community, but not around politics, and in fact was doggedly inward-looking. At the time I was living there, it was a Gestalt community. So there were weekly encounter groups, and –

**SS: For children also?**

DW: Children attended also.

**SS: Okay.**

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00:05:00

DW: Although as a child, I was not loving it. And in some sense, though I had long hair and looked a lot like my parents, played the role of the family conservative; screaming “for Christ’s sake, put some clothes on; I have friends coming over, put those drugs away, and what’s wrong with you?”

My parents drove a white station wagon with green handprints all over it, and I would ask them to drop me off around the corner from school. We went to school outside the commune. My classmates, and others from the town — because this was a small town in Arizona; just about everyone else worked in the copper mine — would gather on the hillside above the swimming pool where my parents and others would swim naked. I always wore a bathing suit. My parents, and others, were very sort of sexually free. There was a lot of exchange

of partners, and attendant drama, and I was very sort of proper. I didn't then wear a tie home for dinner, etcetera. I didn't know how to tie a tie, and I'd actually never even seen a tie. But I remember, at one point, saving up for an AM radio and some hard shoes, both of which were signs for me of connections to the outside world that I wanted to conform to more than –

**SS: So you started in harm reduction at age eight.**

DW: Well, it's interesting. Because I work now in harm reduction, and particularly around drugs, and the harms related to drugs. And one of the things that was always true about my family life was that there were a lot of drugs. And actually, it was one of the more organized and sane aspects of life. There were lots of parts of my life that I felt like were careening; but that wasn't one of them.

So we would go to school, in this very conservative school, and have this intense anti-drugs education. And particularly delivered by a sadistic science teacher, who, if you wanted to get extra credit — which of course, I did — he would ask everyone to stay behind, and he would ask you to join hands and crank a magneto handheld electric generator, to shock everyone. And the longer you could hold on, the more credit you got. But all of the messages were that drugs were completely deadly, and that LSD would change your chromosomes, etcetera. And I of course knew hundreds of people who were doing LSD regularly. And I myself was also tripping with my family, or using drugs. And

there were rules, all kinds of rules. Like never trip with someone you didn't – feel good about. Always call home, always let someone who wasn't using a drug know that you were going to use a drug. Never do a drug in a context where you felt unsafe, etcetera. But those were the sort of everyday rules.

So I think it was one of my first experiences, actually – way before the gay experience, which is also one of these things of seeing the difference between the sort of system version of the world, and your own lived experience or expertise –

**SS: But do you think that your sexual conservatism was because you were gay, or because you –**

DW: No, I wasn't even gay at that point or at least I didn't, I wasn't moving through the world feeling like I was gay. My sexual conservatism was just – that I didn't – the dramas of partner-swapping and things like that were things that seemed very messy to me. And so the encounter groups – there would be moments when – there were peer-led encounter groups. And I just didn't have much trust in the objectivity or good faith of the peers. So it would be one of the other commune members, who'd say, now we're going to talk about why Sarah is sleeping with my wife! Sarah, into the center! And I just found it kind of crazy, and a little bit frightening.

It was more a sort of general prudishness about nakedness and free love. But it wasn't about gay or straight. And actually, my parents, and the

community in general, to its credit, was not too uptight about gay or straight.

Neither of my parents are gay. Both of them have had homosexual experiences. I think it's a great regret of my mother's that she's not a lesbian, because her experiences with men have been perpetually painful for her. But it was more about just wanting some order.

Tape I  
00:10:00

Another thing that was very important for me, growing up, was this: we were quite poor. And for my parents, it was downward mobility, with quotes. Like, they were middle-class people who had good educations, who decided to drop out. So my father could decide to live in a shack with no electricity, and eat just one sack of apples for a week while meditating, etcetera. For me, I felt more anxious about the lack of money, particularly because my parents' own relationship was a little bit unstable. I always felt like the lack of any financial security was – you know that Gloria Steinem — I think it was Gloria Steinem — quote about every woman is one man away from welfare. It very much felt like that. We were already on welfare. But it felt like just living very close to the edge.

**SS: It's interesting that you describe them as apolitical, because you're a lifelong political animal. So I'm just wondering how that part of yourself start to be recognized?**

DW: It's interesting, because I am not a lifelong political animal. I think we'll get to this. But this was really what ACT UP did for me. Before then,

I was quite uninterested in politics, in a way. Or at least I was interested in stories, but not in systems, or change. So when I went to college — I've fast-forwarded a little bit; and I went to Princeton, which was where my father had also gone — and at the time that I went, my father and mother were in the process of splitting. My father moved back to the commune, after we had come east. And he would advise me against Princeton, and said that it was very politically conservative. And at the time, since he was living in a shack, I just thought, anything that had any kind of establishment credibility or aura, he would dismiss. But in fact, he was right; it was an incredibly conservative place.

I majored in Middle East studies, and learned Arabic, and lived in Egypt for part of my time during college, and then later, on a scholarship, after college. But my focus was Medieval history and literature. And I was very careful to stay away from Israeli-Arab things, for example. It was really not in the equation.

That began to shift and change, in part because I got a job working as a writer. And I was a ghostwriter for Anwar Sadat's widow, and then subsequently for Benazir Bhutto, who was then prime minister of Pakistan. Although actually, when I was working for her, she was the opposition leader. I left Pakistan the day she became prime minister the first time.

But my —



**SS: Let me ask you: how did you get that job? Just out of curiosity.**

DW: It was complicated. The real story — the banal story — is that my parents moved back east when it was time for me to go to high school; in part because the '70s were ending. The commune was kind of going through a change. It was sort of tilting toward — it had moved from Gestalt to John Lilly; isolation tanks; and sort of return to the womb, floating in these dark pods, and then dealing with what came up. And then it was moving a little bit toward EST.

Anyway: my parents decided it was time to move back east. And then my father really couldn't handle the 9 to 5, and went back to the commune. My mother remained, and took — one of her many jobs was that of the library clerk at the Bridgehampton library, because they were living out on the end of Long Island, in the Hamptons. And the woman who was writing Rosalynn Carter's autobiography, whose name was Linda Franke, came in, and was checking out a number of books on Egypt. And mother did one of these terrible, although in the end, incredibly great, maternal, "Oh, my son lives in Egypt" speeches. I was living in Egypt at that time, learning Arabic.

And for various reasons, Mrs. Sadat, whose English was not perfect, by any means, and Rosalynn Carter, who had more to say and took longer than anticipated; it became clear that because the Rosalynn Carter project was taking longer and Mrs. Sadat wasn't able to communicate as clearly as she might;

and because the American publishers recognized that American housewives really needed someone who could look with one Egyptian eye, but one eye toward sort of Western Orientalist cliché, and attention to what an American audience wanted; they demanded that Mrs. Sadat get a ghostwriter. And the woman who had the contract for the Sadat book asked if I would just start interviewing Mrs. Sadat.

It was basically, I would go to Washington every week. I came back from Egypt. I started going to Washington every week, and Mrs. Sadat was living in the townhouse of a diamond heiress, friend of Henry Kissinger's, who I think had had some issues, and was away. Mrs. Sadat was in her house, and I would interview Mrs. Sadat every week, about her life. Sort of like an extended version of what we're doing now, but it went on for months.

And then after that, and because it was a kind of successful mix, and because I liked both Mrs. Sadat and the woman who was ultimately, had the contract to write the book, she asked if I would stay and help her. And I sort of started writing a first draft while she was finishing up the Rosalynn Carter book.

**SS: So how did your early exposure to real power – what's been the long-term effect of that on how you look at how things work?**

DW: It's interesting: Mrs. Sadat and Benazir Bhutto were very different, at very different places in their life. Mrs. Sadat was really at the end of – her husband had already been assassinated. She was somewhat in disgrace in

Egypt. And she was not, I did not perceive her as powerful, in the same way. As a result, actually, the book was quite fun to work on, because she had nothing left to lose. And though she wanted people to erect a monument to her husband, and kept his blood-soaked uniform in her closet, waiting for the day when people would recognize what a great man he had been; in general, she was pretty relaxed.

Benazir was a different situation, because she became a viable political candidate in the course of writing the book. And that was the first time that I saw sort of political power in action and up close.

On of the things that I saw was that when power is at stake, the narrative is dramatically altered. So when we had first started the book, she had said all kinds of things. And then when she became a viable candidate, she went back and she said, I know I said “Sarah” was impossible, but I might have to work in coalition with “Sarah.” And I know that James, I said –

**SS: Can you give us one specific thing?**

DW: Well, so, for example, there was a very powerful and reactionary leader in Karachi, Pakistan, whose name was Altaf Hussein, and he led a coalition of basically immigrant – it was like a party that was – very sectarian. And the rumors were that you could go to them and rent a Kalashnikov by the hour. And there was a lot of dark stuff associated with them.

When Benazir needed to start making a calculus about what she was going to say and what she wasn't going to say, she had been incredibly

negative about him. But she had to back off somewhat, because she knew that you can't mess with people who might come after you with machine guns. The ironies are obvious.

And the other thing that the Benazir book taught me was how different it is to be in the opposition than in power. Because she was an incredibly effective and compelling opposition leader. And I was there at a moment of great optimism. People were safety-pinning her picture to their chests. When we traveled in the car together, the car was carried by people; it didn't touch the ground. You were showered — she was showered, and I, by proxy, was showered — with rose petals, and you could go anywhere, and these intense crowds were flocking to see her. So it was a very powerful lesson about righteous opposition. And it was very moving for me, to think that you could stand up against what was, in this case, a military dictator, who had killed her father.

Once she got into power, the story became much more complicated. And in fact, I, who had spent a lot of time, in the early days, when I would say, oh, I'm a ghostwriter for Benazir Bhutto at a party of Pakistanis, and it was like being a sort of celebrity by proxy; people were so interested and so inspired. Later — and this again, of course it's a cliché, but it's also true — after all the compromises you need to make, and all the things that you have to trade away to make deals; I began to stop saying it at all at a certain point, because people were just so disappointed with the way things had played out.

Tape I  
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And they made various excuses. The first time, the military wouldn't let her rule. The second time her husband got in the way. Her husband, who's now, of course, the prime minister himself.

But I think the lesson –

**SS: But how did that influence you, in terms of how you make political decisions?**

DW: It influenced me in terms of really appreciating the righteous opposition, and being a little bit wary of the sort of sausage-making of actual politics. And I came back — but the other thing, the other way it influenced me; and this was, this sort of gets us to the AIDS story — is that Benazir was coming from a very personal place. Like one of the sources of her incredible fervor and compelling opposition was, in some sense, the personal experiences she had had of seeing her father and all of her father's friends, etcetera, imprisoned, killed; her own experience of house arrest, etcetera. And it was clear to me that that was a much stronger place for her to build from, and made her much realer as a political actor than all of the kind of more diffuse wheelings and dealings with the Taliban, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, whoever. And she was much better when she was coming from the personal place.

And it was a reminder to me. I had had a kind of, in all of my time in the Middle East, I was learning a lot, and I had a lot of access to a lot of interesting people and information. But it was increasingly clear to me that

refining my, like what my personal stake was in these things was a very important question for how I organized my own political engagement. And it also was clear that some of the people that I loved most in Egypt would say to me: We've known you long enough now, and you've been here for long enough, to ask you, what the hell are you doing here? Like, what are you doing for the country? Are you just here to live like a king, or to have access? What are you bringing? And that was a very interesting and troubling question.

So that was one of the reasons why I left. I came back to New York, and I started working as an assistant and speechwriter for the former assistant secretary of state for the Near East. And he had –

**SS: Who was that?**

DW: His name is Richard Murphy. He had been the ambassador to Syria and Saudi Arabia. He was a very nice man. But I was feeling increasingly disconnected from any personal stake. At least when you're living in a place, you really, you know all kinds of things, through talking to people and things. And I was really moving toward thinktankland. I was working at the Council on Foreign Relations. And it's a long way from Park Avenue to Syria or Egypt, or whatever – for the kinds of things we were organizing study groups on. And I felt pretty distant.

And I also had the experience, a few times, of actually engaging the Arab-Israeli question. And there too, it was like very confusing. It was sort

of like, what is my stake and role? I was a Jew who spoke Arabic. Lots of people were there who were interested in talking to me, both on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side. But I felt increasingly sort of hollow; I didn't have, this was not, my own piece in the fight was not articulated enough.

And, at the same time, as a sort of backdrop percolating, was my whole gay life, which had been more or less – not suppressed, but sort of in recession during all of these experiences.

**SS: What year are we in now?**

DW: Well – we are jumping back and forth. By the time I was at the Council on Foreign Relations, it was 1988. But the Benazir and Mrs. Sadat books were 1984 to 1988.

**SS: Because let me ask you this: So while you're involved in all this high-level governmental policy, diplomatic power people –**

DW: Um hm.

**SS: – when did you first become aware of AIDS?**

Tape I  
00:25:00

DW: I became aware of AIDS – well, we must, so we must go back. Even before –

**SS: Yes.**

DW: – the –

**SS: After Princeton –**

DW: – even before the high-powered people, even before Princeton, was, before Princeton was homosexuality. So when my parents moved back East, and then my father went back to the commune, my mother and I remained in East Hampton, New York. She was the librarian at Bridgehampton, but we were living in East Hampton. We were quite penniless. My father's attitude was, karma will take care of you. And this kind of confirmed the anxieties I had long felt about fiscal security or insecurity. East Hampton was a very expensive place. But there were local people, who'd been there for a long time. Most of them owned their houses; we didn't. But there was a guy whose business was picking up garbage, and taking care of rich people's houses. And he had a gay son. And his gay son was named Dale. And I adored him.

We weren't – we were occasionally, slept together, but we weren't lovers; we were just best friends. But he was half Cuban and half American, sort of – both of his parents were not very well educated. They turned out to be swingers, which we didn't find out till later, when Dale and I started going to the gay beach in East Hampton. There was a nude beach in East Hampton. And of course, it was lucky to grow up in East Hampton, because the fact that all these people came from the city meant there was some sort of cosmopolitan life, and that also included some sexual perversity and things.

So Dale was my friend in high school. I arrived in high school quite ill-suited to public high school in the East. My parents were still hippies; I



was very, I had never really been in this kind of setting. I felt very alien. I cut my hair, which was a great moment of liberation. But I was still quite queer – not in the sexual sense, but just like, who is this hippie child in the middle of East Hampton High School, where people really took pride in never having been to the city? The name of the school team was the Bonackers, which refers to people who have been in the area for generations. It was before potato fields turned to vineyards and things. It was – though it had this cosmopolitan overlay in the summer, it was pretty remote. And Dale, who was half Cuban, and was sort of, was very gay, was like a great refuge for me. And we were inseparable. And we had other friends, too. But Dale was very much the sort of psychic heart of the group.

And we would go to, there were two gay bars in Bridgehampton, or in between Bridgehampton and East Hampton. They were called The Attic and The Swamp. And they were about a hundred yards, or 200 yards, away from each other. And Dale and I would walk there. We would hitch a ride there, to the bars, and then walk between them, and usually our classmates would drive back and forth on the highway and throw beer cans at the people who were walking between, etcetera.

Anyway, and it was, it was – this is 1976, and it was very much about disco, and poppers, and sex. Although I retained my sort of prudish

attitudes. But Dale was less of a prude and could kind of coax me out of my sort of puritanical inclinations.

So we started hanging out there a lot. And because we were 15 and 16, Dale, who was very charismatic, made friends with the bouncer, whose name was Junie, and who was an intense butch dyke. Grace Jones's twin brother was always there, with his Nigerian fire-eating lover, dancing. And it was fun. It was really fun.

I love dancing, in part because I have always loved subsuming myself in a group. Like it has always felt like a good thing. And that was part of the commune that I really liked. I loved the fact that it was not just a nuclear family, but there were lots of people around. And so Dale and I went there for years.

Tape I  
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And even when I was starting to get, even when I went to Princeton, I would come back, and live this kind of disco life, that was not about — books or things, but was about kind of fun and sensual excess. And, somewhere around there — so, as early as 1982, I guess — people we knew started getting sick.

And I remember that, at this point, my mother had moved into the city and was working at Party Box Caterers. And it was run by a gay guy, and he was the first man that I knew who got — he, at that time, people were saying it was gay cancer. But there were other people who were starting to get sick. No one

exactly knew why. And then Dale got sick. And that, for me – although I had known other people, that was really the major blow. That was so –

**SS: How old was he –**

DW: – frightening.

**SS: – 22?**

DW: He was – I can't remember exactly when he got sick. He died in 1985 or '86. I think he died in 1986, or maybe even 1987. But he started, like – just losing weight, and – these were the days, also, of ARC. Actually – at some point, they defined AIDS, but then there was ARC, which was AIDS-related complex. You didn't necessarily have an AIDS diagnosis, but you had a lot of things that seemed a lot like AIDS. I don't remember when I realized he got sick. I know that I went to the St. Marks Baths, which were still open, on New Year's Eve in 1983 or '84. And at that time, I was aware that something was going on, and I was unsure of where it began and I ended, and I didn't want to be sick. And I remember, when Dale started getting sick, at some point, I guess it became clear that he had AIDS, I guess after 1985. And he never got out of East Hampton.

He got – he was working at the Palm restaurant, which was this restaurant that's a very famous steakhouse, that had opened a branch in East Hampton. And one of the things that had been true for us is that when we were waiters — and you could make a huge amount of money as a waiter. I've never been richer than I was when I was 22, or 23, when you could make five or six

hundred dollars in an evening; it was all tax-free. I had very low overhead; he did, too. So we were constantly going out to brunch, and going to Fire Island, or going into the city. But it was really like this incredibly fun life.

And then he started getting sick. And of course, the Palm – he was the only gay employee at the Palm. It was a very straight, lifelong-waiter kind of place. They were actually extremely good to him; but they didn't have any idea what AIDS was, or what to do.

I didn't have much idea what it was or what to do, even though I knew about it. But as he got worse and worse, and as also I had, as I was going through Princeton and being in Egypt, and then working; it became – the gap between us was sort of widening. And it was a gap of health, on the one hand; and it was a gap of experience on the other, because he never, he didn't go to college. I had a lot of other waiter friends, who were older gay men. And they started getting sick, too.

And it's all a kind of horrible blur for me. I know that basically, they all died; every single one of them. And it was like I was the one who went to college, and I was the one who survived. And I was the one who was the prudish, the sexually prudish one, so was less likely to, like they were wilder than I was.

Tape I  
00:35:00

But for me and for Dale – I remember this incredibly painful thing, when he started to get sick. And at one point, he began to be cognitively impaired. And at one point, he really wanted to come see me, but his parents – I

was living in the city, while I was commuting down to Washington to interview Mrs. Sadat. And his parents pinned my address on his chest, and put him on a bus, and he came to visit. And he found me. But he was just so – sick. He was really, like –

**SS: I want to ask you something. Did you guys talk about it?**

DW: About AIDS?

**SS: Did you sit there, like, you have AIDS, or him saying to you, I have AIDS, I'm going to die?**

DW: No. He – a friend of his from San Francisco came. Well, a few things. One is, his – because we were young kids, and because we were going to gay bars and things where there were older men; we knew people who would sort of get sick. And we would say, oh – I heard Al got sick, or maybe even, Al died. But we didn't talk about it. And we didn't even know – it was really like, I didn't know how to talk about it. At that time, I didn't know other people who were dealing with people who were sick. I mean, I had been studying abroad. I would come back. Dale and friends were kind of like my gay world. I didn't know about GMHC. I started to – I called the hotline, the AIDS hotline at GMHC, as Dale started to get sick, because I was trying to figure out what – I didn't even know what to do. And I was trying to convince him to call. But no; we didn't really talk about it. It was just – it was just sort of happening to us; and sort of washing us away.

And we talked about his friend who had ARC, who actually ended up dying of ARC. And I remember saying ARC and AIDS. But no, we didn't talk about it.

**SS: So how did you find out that he had died?**

DW: The friend, or Dale?

**SS: Dale.**

DW: Oh, no. Well, Dale – I was around when Dale died. Dale got sicker and sicker. And eventually ended up being in the hospital. And it was right around the time when aerosolized pentamidine was becoming available. And Dale had pneumonia – pneumocystis pneumonia. And I did call and find out that – actually, Dale's aunt, Cuban aunt, was a doctor, and she and I somehow had found out that there was this medication that was in experimental trials, and that this medication could save him – or maybe it could save him, we didn't know. But it was like, it was not available. Like, it was impossible to get. It was in clinical trials. He wasn't in a clinical trial. I had never heard of a clinical trial; I had never heard of any of these things. But it was sort of like – my friend is dying in the hospital; is there anything I can do?

And my general – so then Dale ended up being on a respirator, and unable to talk. And he had one of these charts, where you sort of point the letters when you're intubated. And he was – I would go there, and try to talk to him, and he was confused, and trying to spell things out, and I couldn't understand what he

was saying. And that was really – and then he died shortly after one of my last visits there. But that was basically – the overall feeling was, I can't puzzle this out. I don't know what to do. I was – 25 or 26, but just felt totally overwhelmed.

**JAMES WENTZY: Change tapes.**

DW: Okay.

**SS: Did you see any connection between this trauma that you were going through and all of this global policy work that you were doing at the time?**

DW: No. And it became increasingly painful and schizophrenic. Mrs. Sadat and Benazir, etcetera, were not very interested in gay things. I once told Benazir that there had been a San Francisco drag Benazir lookalike contest. And she was so unamused. And my relation to these global things was more of that of a therapist. Like it was sort of, people would talk to me, but I wasn't sort of, my own life was not particularly important. And that was one of the things about being a ghostwriter, was that you were kind of encouraging people to be very much themselves; but you were kind of set on input.

**SS: But you know, what's so incredible about what you've told me so far is that you're having a private little personal trauma problem –**

DW: Um hm.

**SS: – that these people are oblivious and indifferent to –**

DW: Yeah.

**SS: – that is soon about to become their problem –**

DW: Well –

**SS: but nobody knows it.**

DW: And that of course was the – that will bring us to the kind of righteous – A, the righteous opposition, and the split with them. Because of course, eventually I did leave them. And I remember; I was getting more involved – I got more involved with ACT UP. Before I get there, though, I just want to go back to the Dale thing for one thing, because it's – Dale, when he died, then when we took him back to East Hampton, which was this supposedly cosmopolitan place; the funeral parlor did not want to handle his body, because he had AIDS. And his father, who was the garbage man, house-maintenance guy — and who was really – if you didn't know him better, you'd say he was a redneck — he happened to be a nudist swinger. But he was still, like he was a very conservative, not very well spoken, irritating guy, who had, at one point, said he didn't want Dale hanging around our house because he thought my mother was prostitute – or, he was very – but he stood up for his son, and said this is ridiculous. I am putting AIDS in the obituary, and you're going to, we'll buy an expensive, sealed coffin. But you will embalm my child.

And it was, in some sense — and this goes to your point — it was just so much more, it was so courageous. And it was, again, standing up for something that was very local, but very important.



And the global – like all the global power: it's great to have access to prime ministers, and things like that. But it was increasingly unimportant to me. Compared to this private trauma, it was a lot less important. It was very academic.

**SS: Now had you ever been involved in any kind of gay group?**

DW: I had been involved – when I went to Princeton, there were two out gay people in my class –

**SS: Robert Hilferty?**

DW: – me and one other person. Robert Hilferty, he wasn't gay, there.

**SS: Oh –**

DW: That's why he had so much sex in Princeton; because he was closeted. At least when I first entered the class. And that's why Princeton was a – major difficulty for me; both because even though I had gone to high school and I been sort of socialized in the world, I was still a lot further along the hippie spectrum than I had ever understood when I was being the family conservative. I actually found the politics of Princeton shocking. Like I just couldn't believe –in the commune, Ronald Reagan had been a joke. And the idea that people my age would ever support him was just, it was just shocking. And I think people found me equally shocking, even though I had no, I had never read a newspaper or

anything in the commune. But just in general, my inclinations – they regarded me as a Communist.

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And I was involved – I became, I started a gay sexual education – My very first day at Princeton – I had been out with Dale and we had picked up a sailor who ran a private yacht in East Hampton, called the *Te amo*. It was just parked in East Hampton for the week, or whatever. The owners were away. And he was on shore leave, the equivalent of shore leave. And Dale and I had spent a kind of wild time with him on this yacht. And he had –

I arrived in Princeton, and my very first thing that I did when I went to Princeton was to go to the clinic, because I needed to get an STD test. And they were just – they knew nothing about – they gave me a test and that, but they didn't – swab my ass. And I was kind of like, I need you to do that, too. And they were just, what? And I just thought – I don't know what planet this is. But this is not cool.

And again, this was the good side of the commune, is that I wasn't afraid of talking about these things, and I didn't, I hadn't been, I had been sort of quiet about my sexuality and things in my work life. But my, certainly, like I had almost no coming out process, because it was just part of the process of growing up. It wasn't like there was some big secret I was keeping from my family and friends that I then revealed.

So I started a gay sexuality, I said, okay, I want to do trainings for the resident advisors of Princeton about, at least, gay sexual health, in some very basic way, because it's not – you need to know something about this.

So I became a sort of – I wouldn't say activist, but a gay spokesperson. It was very easy to do, since there were no other people.

**SS: No competition.**

DW: The only person was an extremely conservative guy from Jamaica, who was half Chinese, half white, and had grown up – I remember going to see the movie “The Harder They Come” with him, and all of the manors – the plantation houses, were like his aunts' and uncles' houses. And I saw him after Christmas break, and I said – and I had gone back to be a waiter, and gone to the gay bars, etcetera, and he had gone to Belize, to hunt great cats with his father. So it was like, okay. Like I am really by myself.

But I think I was also, I can't remember which years I was head of the gay alliance. But again, very easy to do, because there was – no one else.

So that was my only gay experience. But then, when I started working, there was no – when I had lived in Egypt, I had very good gay friends, including Egyptian friends. And again – so I continued this kind of bifurcated life. My work life, which was more global think tank, or earnest interviewer of powerful political figures; and then my private life, which was more, I would go, my Egyptian friends moved to New York. They were identical twins. Actually, I

think you might know them. But they were, so they lived in the East Village, and we would kind of spread out coats and take turns on who got to sleep on the extension, which was the part that, there was no bed. And I would go out with the them to the Pyramid, etcetera. And I was very, I was always slightly ill-suited for the world of fashion and clubbing, but I really liked it, and it was also interesting counterpoint to the kind of, the other stuff. And I would, the Mrs. Sadat book: so I would commute to Washington two days a week to interview her, and then three days a week, or four days a week, I would hang out with them.

So my life was consistently divided. And it was actually Dale's death and then ACT UP that brought it together, and made it whole.

So when Dale died, I was traumatized. I remember then: at some point — I guess it was probably later, when the Quilt was in Washington; I can't remember when that was — but I do remember going to visit his panel. Oh yeah, it was later. But I noticed that all the people then, all the restaurants that I had worked with for all of those years, and all the catering guys; they were all dead. And I ran into the mother of one of the busboys who, and she herself had been the hostess at one of the restaurants I worked at. And we talked, and I realized that every single person but me, basically, was dead.

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**SS: Why do you think you lived?**

DW: Because I went to college. Basically. And because — all of the global power, blah blah, was actually keeping me in a different channel, with

different people, in different countries. I was in Egypt; they were in the States. Lots fewer people with HIV in Egypt, and I was actually having less sex than they were. But it was just, yeah; I got lucky, and got sort of out of it. And they stayed in it.

**SS: So how did you get to ACT UP?**

DW: So I got to ACT UP – there was a Monday-night drawing class at ABC No Rio that Steve Barker had organized. And it was nude drawing. And part of my – after the Benazir book, in 1988, I sort of, I was in New York, and I was saying, okay; I’ve been doing all this traveling and all this global blah-blah. I’m working at the Council on Foreign Relations. But I do want to kind of have a more integrated New York life.

I had some friends from college who were living in New York, like Loring, who I know you interviewed already, and some others. And I decided I also was kind of torn; do I want to be a writer or an artist; what do I want to be? I decided to go to this live drawing class. And Steve would get all of these very handsome young NYU students to take off their clothes, and we would all sit around, drawing them. And Mark Harrington was in the class. And Hugh Steers. And a bunch of the people. Anyway – and gradually, people stopped going to the class on Monday nights. And I was kind of like, what’s going on, where is everyone going? And then it turned out that they were going to ACT UP meetings.

So I went to – I actually – I went to an ACT UP meeting. And it was before the FDA action. And they were calling for volunteers for affinity groups and things. And Michelangelo Signorile was there, and he was – at that time, I think he was actually – I’m not sure if he was managing his father’s Korean deli, or something. I can’t remember. But anyway – he called for, he said, we really need people to help with media for the FDA action. And I went to his house in the East Village, which was right around the corner from where I was living. I had taken over the Egyptian twins’ East Village apartment. And it was like I went right to an affinity group meeting. And it was interesting. I didn’t really know exactly what I could do. But they were very smart about immediately assigning people work. And it was like Michelangelo and Chip Duckett and people who – and then everyone went, after the meeting to Escuelita. And it was Gregg Bordowitz and Douglas Crimp’s birthday. And that was my first, and I think it was probably – that was the first week I had gone to a meeting. And I remember: Gregg was very sort of handsome, and looked like George Michael, and Douglas was very sort of tall and distinguished. And I remember someone – I think actually I might have brought Loring to the party. But I remember someone saying, oh, Douglas is a distinguished art critic. And I just thought, I don’t know what this is, but I’m glad to be here. And I also had a long – they gave me a huge number of reporters to call, from all over the place. And I just started calling

them. And then I started going back to – then I started going to the Monday-night meetings. It was more fun than the live-drawing class.

**SS: How did the reporters respond when you called about the FDA action?**

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DW: They responded like reporters. They were sort of noncommittal, but interested. I actually felt quite competent to – of course, the aerosolized pentamidine, the lack of aerosolized pentamidine, etcetera – I felt pretty clear about what I was doing, or why – this was connected to something real. It was very brief. I was very brief; they were very brief. I made sure to promise them that we would burn Reagan in effigy, etcetera. And they were like, we're interested. It was quick. And I subsequently spent a lot of time dealing with reporters, and I had dealt with them even when Benazir was elected, etcetera, I spent a lot of time with reporters — they had a lot of business to do, and this was just giving them a heads up, pretty far in advance of the event.

But they were appreciative, and I was appreciative. And then I could go back to the affinity group, and report back that I had called all these people, etcetera. So I felt like I had something to do. And that was great.

And then the FDA action – I went down for the FDA action, and helped with the press. And there was a lot of press. We called them all before. I don't remember if you were there. But there was a lot of good energy around the FDA action, and it felt – I didn't get arrested; I was just helping with the press.

But I felt like – I think they probably gave us walkie talkies, or something. And it felt – fun. And it felt also very much more tied to what my personal experience had been. So even though I was not interviewing the head of the FDA, and I was not even doing anything particularly important in the FDA action, I felt like, A, I was part of a group; B, I was doing something that was sort of helping me atone for the sort of horrible helplessness and guilt that I felt about not being able to help Dale. And I'm not a very good nurse. I'm not very comfortable in hospital, etcetera. I was never one of those people who flocked, even later, to the, be at the hospital a lot.

Michelangelo was funny. It turns out that Gregg was fantastic. It's funny, because Gregg and Douglas and Michelangelo – the course of our relationships played out very differently, and I – don't really speak to Michelangelo now, and don't miss it, and Gregg became one of my closest friends, and Douglas, too. But it was all sort of there at the very beginning. Richard, who I have lived with now for 20 years.

**SS: How did you meet Richard?**

DW: I met Richard at the St. Patrick's – actually, I met Richard – the very first time I met Richard was the last time that I spent time with Benazir in New York. She had come for a state visit, etcetera, and was having something at the Waldorf-Astoria, or something. And I came back. And Loring and Richard, who had been in Gran Fury together, were waiting for me, to talk about another



friend, who was an alcoholic and needed an intervention or something. But I knew Richard from ACT UP. I met him then, and then I started seeing him in ACT UP, on the floor, etcetera, around the needle exchange. I knew him, probably, for about a year before we got together.

But I started meeting – The incredible thing for me about ACT UP was that I felt like – like after the FDA, I think was City Hall, or, I can't remember the sequence of actions. But I would constantly join affinity groups; and participate in teach-ins, or other things. And I felt like all of my skills — which I had developed in interviewing the powerful global players, or in digesting complicated political things, and making them accessible to the American housewife — all of those things, I felt like I could put all of that energy towards something that was actually about my own life and the lives of my friends. And I also began to feel — and of course, ACT UP was very good at stoking that, the righteous anger — I began to feel like the incredible luxury of people who didn't know anything about all of these things that I was dealing with. And this included my bosses and my political colleagues. But it also even included friends, from Princeton or elsewhere, who could say “what is KS” at a party. And I remember just thinking, like – I cannot believe that you don't know what this is. And there was a piece of me that thought, you need to know. It's not okay for you to have no idea what KS is, when so many people that I know are dying from it.

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And ACT UP was one of these things where each affinity group, or each thing I did, whether that was being in CHER, in City Hall, or being on the teach-in task force for Albany, or anything; I grew to know more people. And it became this – I just, I loved this feeling of this network of people, including a lot of people – it was very healing for me about being gay. Because my experience of being gay had been The Swamp and The Attic, and bars and things. But it was pretty much apolitical. And Dale was quite apolitical. One of the reasons we didn't talk about AIDS, I think, is that we didn't talk about anything except going out and having sex. We did not – music – but we did not have a very – there was no theory to our relationship.

But once people started getting sick and everything, it all just seemed, it was kind of the site of trauma, so this was of course me undoing that trauma.

**SS: I want to ask you something. In the ACT UP context, the first time you had an ACT UP friend who died: how was that so different than what you had experienced with Dale?**

DW: Oh, it was just so different. There was no – for one thing, what I experienced with Dale was a total sense of panic about being alone; and also, having no information. I didn't know – I barely knew anything. The first time I had ACT UP friends that died — and actually, a lot fewer of them ended up dying. But even the first time I had ACT UP friends who were sick, which was

like tons of people who were HIV-positive, and who kept talking as if they were going to die in two years, although not all of them did; it was just a totally different experience. Dale died so confused and passive and unable to spell out anything on the alphabetic chart, with the tubes in his throat. And there was no – that incredible sense of helpless – failure to communicate. And also bitterness. Dale died very bitter. So the idea that people were working together to support people who were sick; that, yes, people are going to die, but, never mind; go throw my body on the steps of the White House or the FDA. But even the sense that you were dying as a part of this sort of collective effort to change something, and that there would be eight people with you, and you would never be alone in the hospital, and any of those things. It was all just completely different.

And I still wasn't, as I said, I still wasn't rushing to be at the hospital, and I never felt great about wiping shit off of people's legs, and stuff. But I was also – so much more – I felt like I knew so much more. When I did have to go to the hospital, I knew about what Medicaid would cover and what it wouldn't cover, and what drugs. And like a lot of people, I liked kind of the junior-scientist piece of knowing about things before, maybe some doctors wouldn't know about them. But also, I had friends who were doctors at that point, who I could call.

There was no comparison. It was a completely different experience

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It was still, however, traumatic. And it's funny, because we have a friend who died fairly recently, of lung cancer. And now, I am 49, and I think he died – he actually died, it wasn't that recently. He just had his fourth anniversary of his death. But that was a totally different experience. Being in your twenties and trying to deal with people dying is much different, for me, than being in your forties and trying to deal with –

**SS: Yeah, but also, being in your forties, when all these people died in your twenties –**

DW: Yeah, yeah, exactly, when you've had all this ex-,

**SS: It's not a normal forties.**

DW: Right, exactly.

**SS: It's an abnormal forties.**

DW: But going back to the global-power thing, and everything: the other thing is that though it wasn't as global, and I wasn't talking to the president, or the wife of the president, or anything; the power of ACT UP to access political actors, and sort of hold them to account, was incredibly therapeutic for me. I remember going, walking up – I had been an organizer of some of the Albany stuff. And we had gone up a bunch of times, and gotten arrested, and things. But there was a big ACT UP action. And I remember going up, and people were having a die-in in front of the governor's mansion. And I remember seeing Mark Aurigemma, who was a receptionist at GMHC at that point, talking to someone.

At first I thought, oh, it's interesting, someone has a really good Cuomo mask — the governor of New York, Cuomo. And then I was like, that is not a Cuomo mask, that is Governor Cuomo. And Governor Cuomo, who's incredibly slick, sort of Teflon politician, who had actually stifled any kind of — he was the only one in the Democratic Party in New York; like there was no one after him. But he came out of his house to sort of address all the people lying in front of it. And I remember thinking this is, I did have this feeling of we can get to people. And it was so exciting.

And I even enjoyed all of those juvenile stories about Marlon Fitzwater would be at a Burger King in Montana, and someone from ACT UP would be walking by, and would like throw their Coke in his face, and scream at him. And I just loved the idea that these people could not go anywhere without encountering this issue.

And that's kind of what I felt, also. Like I felt like everywhere I went in New York, there would be someone — I would go to Macy's, and there would be — actually, I very rarely went to Macy's. But the cashier from the Men's Department would be someone from ACT UP. Or you would go to another part of town, and there would be — and I just felt like there were all of these people there. And given that the bar scene had been a kind of atomizing one, in some ways; it was the first time that I felt all of this collectiveness. And it was incredibly powerful.

It was also, if my gayness was one part in recession, my Jewishness was another part. And maybe because I was spending more time in New York. But because there was Gregg and Richard and other sort of amazing and very classic New York Jewish personalities – you. Actually, there were a bunch of people. And it was sort of like – wow, I’ve never even experienced this. Like I didn’t experience it in Arizona, on the commune. And I didn’t experience it at Princeton, which is an incredibly Waspy place. And I didn’t experience it in Egypt. And that was another great thing; just being around all of these different kinds of energy, that were not polite, and were not measured, and were not reverent; but were pooling together, to do this amazing thing. And it was really, like after the experience of Dale and all of that, of just having this thing wash over me, it was such a different feeling, to feel like we are making history, not just being rolled over by it. And it was life-transforming.

I decided I wanted to leave my job at the Council on Foreign Relations. I went actually to work at GMHC. It was – there is a whole ‘nother story about sort of the professional AIDS work. But it was incredibly moving to me, to say. I know this is more local; I know this is less glamorous; I know this is of less interest to people on the planes, and at parties. But this is so much more important. I never had one instant of regret.

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And I remember sitting down with Dick Murphy, who’s very classic G-man ambassador. I used to carry his picture around in my wallet, just to

show people, because you kind of – you kind of couldn't believe that he was, he was a Central Casting ambassador. And I said to him, Dick, I'm leaving; I'm going to go work for Gay Men's Health Crisis.

He had been – one of the last straws was the Gulf War, for me; the first Gulf War, 1988 Gulf War; or whatever; 1989, I can't remember now.

**JW: '91.**

**SS: The Day of Desperation Gulf War.**

DW: The Day of Desperation Gulf War.

**SS: Right.**

DW: So during the Day, well, the Day of Desperation, where – and I don't think it was the Day of Desperation, but Dick had been – his limousine had gotten stopped by gay pride, at some point. And he had been very irritated. And also – he was not able to comprehend why it took so long for his limousine to cross the street, because the parade, I guess it was a long time before the police stopped it. And he mentioned to me – just like his confusion. And one of our other friends wickedly suggested that next year, we should all march with his image on our shirts, so that his wife could say, Dick, I'm not sure, but I think a contingent of people just marched by with your image.

But he just, the first thing he said to me when I said I'm going to work for Gay Men's Health Crisis was, well, they'll have to change the name.

And I was just, I just thought – no. They won't have to change the name. You will have to change your mind.

And Day of Desperation – I was arrested very early, and spent a really long time in jail. But City Hall; any of those things; I would begin, I began to really love the news. Not simply to see myself reflected in it, though of course that was incredibly satisfying and fun. And I was amazed that people would call me, from all around the world; from, if CNN happened to show you being dragged away in New York, someone in the Philippines would call you and say, I just saw you being dragged away. And my family was actually, I think, proud to see that also, even though they remained completely apolitical. And I became quite – I think they came to see me as a kind of Bolshevik; that I was constantly sort of talking about these things everywhere. And it just felt, I just felt very tied in to the universe.

So every article in the newspaper — and this is partly because AIDS is so, cuts across so many different issues — but I felt like I could devour the newspaper, and almost every single article, there was something of relevance to the cause. And I could go out to dinner, and I would look around, and I would see people that I knew.

And of course it was a very small world; I wasn't going that many places, and I became very domestic. After all of this time abroad, I didn't travel for years. But I felt very hooked in. And very gay, in the best possible sense, of



like – it really got me past my prudishness in a way that all of the bar stuff hadn't, because I – the way that ACT UP brought together different kinds of gay people. And the benefit of seeing Ryan Landry's sort of persona, organized in the service of my issue. And also – the people who had been closeted, or sort of – there was such a wide range of people within the relatively narrow range of people.

**SS: Was there a point in ACT UP where you started making decisions strategically about where you wanted to put your energy?**

DW: In ACT UP?

**SS: Yeah.**

DW: Well, I, it was always clear to me that I was better – like I did have some policy-analysis capacity. And I also, like I'm not someone who loved getting up in front of the room, and talking. I found it very intimidating, etcetera. So I was often fact-sheet detail. In terms of the particular issues: personally, because I had grown up on Medicaid; and because, after my mother started working, etcetera, healthcare got much worse, and everything; it was very, I was more interested in the healthcare-access issues than I was in the drugs-into-bodies issues.

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I was also keenly aware that they were much harder issues, in a way; and that when – I was aware, even then, that we were acting kind of as the shock troops of deregulation for the pharmaceutical industry. And that if Peter Staley's picture was on the cover of the Wall Street Journal, it was because we

were serving – we were doing what millions of dollars of PR companies could never have done.

And it was also because I had been in the ghostwriting business, and dealing with the media, etcetera; I was also conscious of the ways in which we were using the media, and also that other people were using us in the media to achieve certain things. So I spent more time with the insurance people, the state issues, things like that.

It was hard, because they – I remember marching down the street once, and the chant, someone had come up with the chant, Single Payer Now. And I remember someone walking by and saying: Single parents now? Why would you want that?

And it was obvious to me that those were much, and needle exchange was the big exception, which was, it was actually something that was, that didn't have a lot of financial implications.

**SS: I want to focus first on the access question. With hindsight: Where was ACT UP at regarding access?**

DW: Access to healthcare –

**SS: Yes.**

DW: – or access to medicines?

**SS: Healthcare.**

DW: If I think back on it, ACT UP was – there were a number of us who were on the sort of nerdy side, who were interested in access issues. I think that “Healthcare is a Right” — which was a slogan that we chanted a lot — was actually a really kind of radical intervention in the U.S. context, where human rights are so sort of, such a slender thing to build anything around, and where healthcare, as we can see now, obviously, is not regarded as a right. But beyond that: I have to say that there was some good thinking. But I don’t think ACT UP was – exempt from going for the easier wins. Like healthcare reform –

**SS: Can you be specific?**

DW: Well, I mean –

**SS: Is there something that we didn’t do that we should have done, or that we did do that you think we shouldn’t have done?**

DW: I don’t think there’s anything that we did do that we shouldn’t have done. And we did, it is true that we came to know what the Health and Hospitals Corporation in New York, HHC, was, in a way that I think most people, even now, would not know. And so we were working on it. But the sort of heroic medical measures, and the miracle of pharmaceutical medicine were more powerful stories, and interests were more aligned to make those things accessible. I don’t think that – obviously, there are differences also between economic justice and sort of getting your insurance to cover things, and what

happens when you have no insurance. I think we did a really good job. I just think it was a much harder thing to achieve.

**SS: Can you give me a specific campaign? And I know you were involved with Peggy Hamburg at some point –**

DW: Yeah.

**SS: Whatever you want to pick.**

DW: Yeah yeah. So specific campaigns that I think worked — and again, there are more complicated things to say about all of them — there was a fair amount of attention to Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and what they would and wouldn't cover, and preexisting conditions, and whether AIDS could be used as a preexisting condition; or whether HIV could be used as a preexisting condition to rule out coverage; or whether it was okay for companies to put caps on how much they spent for HIV.

**SS: Now did Blue Cross try –**

**JW: Hold that thought.**

**SS: Oh, we have to change? Okay.**

**SS: It's a very nice feeling in this house.**

DW: Thank you. It's a nice house; we're very glad to have it.

Have you been doing mostly people's houses?

**SS: We always do, unless they're from out of town, or something.**

DW: That's good.

**SS: Unless some of the people's houses are such a wreck that they don't want to let us in.**

DW: Uh huh.

**SS: That happens occasionally –**

**SS: It's interesting, the spectrum of how people live.**

DW: Oh, I was always int-, that was always the fun thing about going home with people.

**JW: Versus the dead ones.**

DW: That's interesting, too. But it's just so amazing, how people, the different ways people live. Okay.

**SS: So you were going to take me through one of your projects in ACT UP.**

DW: Okay. So a specific project. Actually, maybe I'll take Medicaid, something related to Medicaid, for an example. So Medicaid was something that was always very mysterious to me, and to a lot of people who were receiving it. And the rules were quite complicated. And it turns out that it was a little bit like a game of Red Light, Green Light, which is that the government would contain costs by requiring you to be reauthorized regularly; by

saying you can only visit one clinic per day; etcetera etcetera. So ACT UP actually sat down and analyzed the Medicaid regulations –

**SS: Who did that?**

DW: I did it; Karen Timour; there was a woman named Margaret –

**SS: McCarthy?**

DW: – Margaret McCarthy, who I think actually worked for the city. And she was incredibly important. And I saw her walking down the street the other day. And she looked sort of the same; and I did not. And we passed, and I just, but I just, again, I got this wave of like, I am so glad that Margaret McCarthy put this energy into it. Because she – I can't remember where she worked. But for whatever reason, she really understood the system, and she would spend hours talking to us about it.

So these very minor things — like, what is a utilization threshold? Like how often can they review you, or can they cover you, if you need to go to get your AIDS medicine and also your Methadone or something; can you get reimbursed? — turned out to be incredibly important things. And we organized around it. And sort of proposed fixes for it. And in some cases, that worked.

I think ADAP was another big thing. How much money can you make before the state will cover your drugs? And it ended up being \$44,000. That is a lot – and of course, it should be that the state will cover your drugs no matter how much you make. But at that time, in New York, it was a very

generous thing, to be able to say, you can make \$44,000, and they'll still cover your medicine.

I mean, it's pathetic, to have to think in these terms; it's ridiculous. But compared to other places that I had lived — Arizona, for example, is a state where there was almost no Medicaid at all; where they'd been, they also don't have Martin Luther King Day, and they were the last state in the continent, the U.S., to join. They just feel like anything that the federal government imposes on them, they don't want to play. But sort of chipping away at these —

**JW: Can you hold just for a second?**

DW: Oh, did I mess up the sound?

**JW: Okay.**

DW: Okay. Chipping away at these ways that the states would pretend to cover you, but then would really — screw you over. As far as private insurance — so Blue Cross / Blue Shield — and I, it's hard for me to remember the details, and Karen Timour and Mark Hannay and others were much more, they were really sort of doggedly going to these meetings, and tracking it.

But this whole question of when insurance will cover you — all of the things that we're talking about now — all became clear to me then.

And in New York, insurers can't do what they do to you in all these other states, which is say, oh, I'm sorry you're sick; we're just not going to cover you. They are not allowed to do that. And they're not allowed to do it

because we, and others, forced them to be regulated by the state, and to say, if you have health insurance, you can take it – they have to cover you, they can't turn back the clock and say, once you stop having health insurance, it's like we've never had anything to do with you.

So there were a bunch of those things. And those were all small but important access victories. But the larger question, which is, healthcare is a right, and healthcare for all, and – we could never, there just was not an alignment of interests with other sort of powerful political forces that enabled us to do that in the same way.

**SS: I want to talk about Margaret Hamburg.**

DW: Uh huh.

**SS: Did you work with her?**

DW: I didn't ever work for her.

**SS: Did you deal with her through ACT UP?**

DW: I dealt with her a little bit through ACT UP. I think Richard dealt with her more, around the needle exchange stuff, where she actually was kind of stand-up. She first encountered ACT UP when she was Tony Fauci's assistant. And she came, and Tony Fauci was having sort of hearings with AIDS activists. But then she became – I think she was the head of HHC, the Health and Hospitals Corporation. Or maybe she wasn't; maybe she just became the health commissioner. But I actually didn't – I didn't work with her that much, and I



don't remember – I remember her fondly rather than negatively. That was primarily around the needle exchange stuff. And now, of course, she's the head of the FDA. No idea whether anything that she experienced in New York – how it plays out for her. No.

**SS: How did you get interested in harm reduction?**

DW: I got interested in harm reduction through Richard and Gregg; mostly through Richard. I was always interested in the drugs question, because, as I said, I had grown up using drugs, although they were mostly hallucinogenic drugs. But I was also, I lived in the Lower East Side. I lived on Second Avenue between A and B. My block was a heroin-selling block, for most of the years of the '80s.

**SS: What block was that?**

DW: Second between A and B.

**SS: Oh, okay, sure. So like I could literally hear people calling out the brand names of various –**

DW: Like Toilet?

DW: Or Jordache, or, there were just, I remember they would change. Then, whenever a policeman would come over, everyone would scream, bajango bajango, which means he's coming down. I myself had a little bit of experience of, and had a lot of friends who had a lot more experience, of injection drug use. But I was basically interested in needle exchange because it was one of

these access issues that there were not powerful financial forces that were benefitting from our interventions; and because, again, it was one of these concrete things that we organized around, and won. And it was very hard for me, after Clinton, etcetera, when – it was very hard to see what you were winning. It was very exciting, when you could organize around things, and actually get them. And clean needles were one of those things.

I have to say that I didn't, most of my work wasn't around needle exchange and things, until I started working internationally. In ACT UP, I went to the demonstrations, and because Gregg, because Richard was my lover and Gregg was my friend, and I was – and Steve Barker, who had run the drawing class, ended up becoming quite involved in needle exchange, and Alan Clear, who now runs the Harm Reduction Coalition, who was a photographer; there were a lot of people. And I was in this group called GANG, which was a sort of collective of gay men and lesbians working to support each other in – it wasn't just around HIV stuff. It was sort of like Gran Fury Lite, in a way. It was sort of like the supportive Gran Fury. But Zoe Leonard, who was in that group, had also been doing needle exchange. And she and Richard had gone to Puerto Rico. So there was a lot of, I was sort of on the edge of a lot of overlapping groups that were dealing with needle exchange.

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I wasn't one of the people who was painting the needles before they were distributed. I did show up for the demonstrations. And I did know a lot about it. But it was something that I didn't start working in until much later.

**SS: Okay. Now did you start working professionally in HIV after you left ACT UP, or while you were still in ACT UP?**

DW: No, I was still in ACT UP. I started working professionally in HIV at GMHC. And it was actually the state issues. But I applied for a job as a writer in the Communications Department at GMHC, which I got. And at that time, Gregg Bordowitz was working at GMHC. He was doing the Living with AIDS Show and the Safer Sex videos. And David Barr, who had been our lawyer in Albany, and was also involved in a bunch of the FDA stuff and other things related to treatment access, was working at GMHC. So I knew – and Mark Aurigemma, who had been talking with Cuomo, and who I had worked a lot with on the Albany actions, and who I had been arrested with a few times, and who had done the budget analysis with me, and also knew a lot about benefits and things, because he was working at GMHC. So they were all working there. And I applied for a job there. And though they didn't interview me, I'm sure the fact that they were all there helped me to get the job. Because I had no relevant experience whatsoever, except working on these state issues.

But my first job at GMHC; there were two jobs. One was interviewing people who had been — it was the 10-year anniversary of GMHC —

was interviewing the living founders and others for a kind of retrospective, which was very much tied to my ghostwriting things; it was very familiar. And the other was to this kind of report card on the state response to HIV. So the things that I had learned from Margaret, or Maxine, or others, about how state systems worked; I knew a lot. It was very easy for me to write the report for GMHC.

They presented it. They sort of gave Cuomo a failing grade on AIDS, etcetera. And so it was one of these things where GMHC could benefit from ACT UP. I don't think that a lot, there has been a lot of attention to the ways that those two, like the organized AIDS world and the informal AIDS activist world, sort of nurtured each other. There's a lot about how they have sort of conflicted with each other.

I felt very much able to do both for a while. My first year at GMHC was like incredibly exhilarating, because I was actually getting some money; and I didn't have to work at the Council on Foreign Relations anymore. I could sort of spend my time thinking about this. And also because I was surrounded by my ACT UP colleagues, who I loved, in a professional context. And Richard came to work at GMHC like six months later, too. He had been running a performance institution. So it was like our lives were sort of converging. And he and I moved in together. I started work at GMHC, turned 30, and moved in with Richard the same week.

**SS: So you're about to have your 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.**

DW: Yes. Actually, we had our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary – because I moved in with him a year after we got together.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

DW: So we had our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary already. We're heading to 21.

**SS: Congratulations.**

DW: Thank you.

**SS: So when did you leave ACT UP?**

DW: I left ACT UP, in part, because of the GMHC thing. I left ACT UP – I started to, or I didn't leave, I kind of petered out. So there were times when I would go back to work with, say, City AIDS Action, or some of these other committees, when I really wasn't sort of going to regular meetings anymore. But I left ACT UP – the beginning of the end for me was the tension around questions of engagement with professional AIDS organizations and politicians; and the probably famous discussions that had Tracy Morgan and Heidi Dorow on the one hand –

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I remember very clearly a meeting where Tracy suggested that she thought that – I don't know if I'm remembering it exactly correctly, but the way I remember it is that she recommended that all of us who were working for professional AIDS organizations quit, because the danger of co-optation was too great. This was around these very heated discussions that the Treatment and Data

Committee, which then broke off to become TAG – they were meeting with government officials around trials of AZT and pregnant women, and the famous 076 trial, which was using a placebo and testing AZT in pregnant women. And it was incredibly contentious. But I remember, most of those people that I just mentioned, who were working at GMHC; and a lot of other people; there was a moment of great friction.

**SS: Yeah, but now that we're all grownups and have all been in therapy –**

DW: Yeah.

**SS: – looking back, with hindsight, what do you think it really was about?**

DW: Those exchanges?

**SS: Yeah.**

DW: I find it very hard to know everything that it was about. For me, as I mentioned, there was a piece of it that was about repeating the same tactics, and not being aware of results. So there was a certain number, unlike the FDA, where I felt like we went down there, and we – seized control of the FDA, and actually the regulation system for pharmaceutical products shifted; there were times when — and this was hard, standing in front of empty buildings, and sort of shouting at them — I felt like it was repeating certain things, and that we weren't getting a lot of traction. I think that – it's hard for me also because I think that

personally, the fact that I was putting energy into professional AIDS work meant that I had another outlet for some of that, and I didn't feel – I'm sure that allowed me to leave more easily than I would have. I think that some of those discussions were also about – how you conceptualize solidarity.

For me, GANG was a good example of something that was all about solidarity. It was about a group of people – I loved coming together with that group of people. We met every week. It was a support group for the healthy. It was about imaging things as we would like them to be. So most of the actions we did were actually not critical of the government and things, but they were about things like making performances together, or creating stickers that went on the subway wall, advising people that they would be prosecuted for gay bashing under statutes that didn't exist. It was just – it was really about support. And I think that one of the things that those discussions were about with Tracy and Heidi and the Treatment people were about; who has access, and how you communicate that fact to the rest of the group, and sort of real worries that people who had access would lose sight of the needs of people who didn't.

**SS: And so has that happened?**

DW: I think that – well, a lot of the people who had access also became professional AIDS people, or had become already. I think one other thing that it was about was actually that transition, for people who had been all-volunteer, to actually start drawing salaries for work. And has it happened? It's

happened, to a certain extent. Yeah. actually, I think it's the same discussion about healthcare again. I don't think the way that it was being framed then was very useful. I liked to, and can still like to think, that the work that I was doing – that I actually shouldn't quit, and that it was adding something. But there is no question that there was a splintering, and that part of that splintering was around people who had jobs and access, and people who didn't.

I don't even remember what year all of that stuff was. And I think that to a certain extent, a lot of good work continued even after, even after I stopped going to ACT UP, I felt like a lot of the sort of spirit of that continued, in many different ways. And treatment access did remarkably improve. And most of those people who kept saying "I'll be dead in two years" are not dead. I am still in touch with them. It's a very interesting thing. I even had friends who sort of decided that they didn't feel like being HIV-positive anymore — at least that was no longer the way that they wanted to move through the world, identifying themselves. Even Richard, for example. When he moves through the world now, he's not moving through the world particularly as a former drug user.

So yeah, people's identities shifted. And people professionalized, and a lot of us went back to school, and all those things. I don't know what a lot of other people did. There were so many people in ACT UP – at that moment, when I felt like there was this network everywhere – there were so many people that I knew, that I would never meet if it weren't for ACT UP. Just people who



are very unlike me, in multiple ways. And a lot of them, I don't have any idea what happened to them. They kind of – the water closed behind us.

**SS: So I just have one last question.**

DW: Yes.

**SS: So looking back, what would say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?**

DW: Can I answer – I choose to answer in two ways. One is for me, personally; and the other will be for the sort of global, or at least national.

For me personally, ACT UP's biggest achievement was managing to put together this group of people who, despite all these differences, were actually – and with no hierarchy particularly – there were all kinds of hierarchies, in terms of committees and things, but no, there was no one – I always rejected the sort of Larry Kramer-as-father-of-ACT UP frame. And I remember very clearly a moment when Larry had come and delivered some impassioned but chiding monologue at the end of a meeting. And David Robinson stood up, who was facilitating the meeting, and held up a mitten, and said, Lost and found, lost and found? Immediately after and I was sort of like, that about sums it up.

That there were, to have a group with multiple leaders, and to really manage to shift national discussion, but also by working through all these different affinity groups, with all of these different alliances that shifted in the

group, was just an incredible thing for me. And that it managed to do that, and be queer; I think, for me, is one of the major achievements.

I have to say that I know that ACT UP was not only gay men and lesbians. But there is no way for me to sort of separate out its queerness from its political efficacy, and from its personal healing power for me, about the idea of common cause that was organized around sexuality, but was not actually about only sexuality. And that was just – that was so precious. And this feeling that we were making history, not being pushed around by it, was much more than my Ivy League education, or much more than my access to the ambassadors and the prime ministers, was something that transformed my world view and my sense of myself, and my sense of the possible. And it made me feel like change was possible. I wasn't sure before I joined ACT UP that I believed that things could sort of fundamentally change. And I don't know, if I looked at the ledger of political or regulatory changes, that I would know. But I definitely felt, when I was in the thick of it, that change was possible and that I was part of it, and that my friends were part of it, and that we weren't alone. All of those things. So that was the greatest achievement.

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Greatest disappointment. I don't think that we grew much, beyond a certain point. This is an incredibly ambitious and important thing, that you guys are doing, by interviewing people. But the fact that it's even possible to think

about interviewing all of the rank and file is a testament to ways in which we stayed kind of small.

I was shocked when I watched a film about Berkeley in the '60s, probably 10 years ago, and I realized that a lot of the chants that we were using in ACT UP, about "The whole world is watching," were actually from Berkeley in the '60s. And I am sure that you and Maxine and others who had a kind of, a better political education either knew that, or brought those chants in the first place. But I had no idea.

My political education, about social movements — I'm not talking about who was Gamal Abdel Nasser, the prime minister of Egypt — my political education sort of began and ended with ACT UP. And the fact that we weren't able to really make much common cause with any of the other social movements that were either going on at the time was one of the things that contributed to what I see as its demise.

I know that it continued for years after I wasn't a part of it. And it's funny, because James, in some way, you have a whole experience of it that was sort of after I left. But I still think that we didn't really make common cause with other people who probably could have made us more of a movement.

My anniversary with Richard is the Stop the Church demonstration. And Richard was the support person. And that was one of the bigger ACT UP actions, because it was with WHAM — the Women's Health

Action Mobilization, or whatever. And I think that was probably 6,000 people, or something. It was not a huge thing.

I don't know what we could have done to make it bigger, or make it live longer. But we probably could have done more.

Just one more thing about GANG, I just want to say, because one of ACT UP's other greatest achievements, for me, was performance; like these incredible – like, I have very warm memories about the feelings of being in a group, performing some of these incredibly elaborate spectacles in the service of a political cause. And whether it's lying on the ground, staring up at the sky for a die-in, which is actually something I still regard as sublime. I remember seeing skyscrapers over my head and everything. Or in GANG, we would actually do some kind of performative things together. I never really have had another chance to do that. And it was a very interesting, moving experience for me. It's not something I would ever have thought that I could or would do. And I'm married to – not married, but I am –

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**SS: You're gay-married.**

DW: I'm gay-married. I'm not even gay-married. I'm allied with a playwright. And the whole way that civil disobedience was a performance, and all of the different stages that we took, either physically or sort of metaphorically, was just a really interesting thing for me; and something that I think – it's not something I get now. I sit, in all kinds of meetings. I am very involved politically

with HIV. I am on all kinds of reference groups and global blah blah blah. But it doesn't have that feeling.

So, yeah.

**SS: Thank you, Daniel.**

DW: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for doing this. I can't tell you how important I think it is.

**SS: Thank you.**

DW: And I am actually dying to see what comes out of it. Like all of the projects that will come out of it. I bet you there's going to be a lot of historical work that comes out of it.

**SS: Oh yeah, we're doing everything we can to make that happen.**

DW: Do you guys have any relationship with Mary Marshall Clark?