

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

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

Interviewee: **Alan Klein**

Interview Number: **186**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **May 7, 2015**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Alan Klein
May 7, 2015

ALAN KLEIN: It's hard not to look at these guys.

JAMES WENTZY: We try not to make faces.

SARAH SCHULMAN: So, we start with your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

AK: Sure. I'm Alan Klein, and today's date is the seventh of May 2015, and we are in beautiful historic Jackson Heights, Queens.

SS: And how old are you?

AK: I am fifty-one years old.

SS: Okay. I remember you when you were but a boy, Alan. It's true. It's true.

AK: I know. I can hardly remember that, but it's good that somebody does.

SS: It's true. So, where did you grow up?

AK: I grew up in Queens and Long Island. Most of my growing up was done on Long Island.

SS: What did your parents do?

AK: My parents — my mom made a living ordering Chinese food, I think, and answering telephones and talking on it and playing mah jongg. And my dad was a CPA.

SS: Oh, wow. That's so classic.

AK: Jewish much?

SS: Wow. And where did they grow up?

AK: My mom grew up in Whitestone, Queens, actually where I did the first part of my growing up, the first phase, where we both went to the same elementary school actually, P.S. 184. And my dad grew up a few blocks away from my mom, also in Whitestone.

SS: Were your grandparents immigrants?

AK: My grandparents were. Actually, my great-grandparents were immigrants on my mom's side, and on my dad's side, I believe my grandparents moved here when they were kids, from, on my dad's side, Russia and Poland. On my mom's side, they're Sephardic Jews, so from Turkey.

SS: So, you grow up pretty American, actually, in the suburbs.

AK: Yes, I definitely was that suburban kid.

SS: So, did your parents raise you with any kind of values about community or service to community? Did they belong to a synagogue or anything?

AK: They did. We grew up in the Conservative Jewish tradition, though we were not very religious ever, and I think they did give me a good sense of community, not necessarily due to their involvement in the Whitestone Hebrew Center and eventually at Shelter Rock Jewish Center, where I was bar mitzvahed. But they always instilled these values in me, and I think that's what their parents instilled in them.

SS: What was your speech on for your bar mitzvah?

AK: Oh, my god. It's so funny you ask that, because I recently — my dad's down in Florida now, and I went to visit him for my birthday. We had a lot of fun. And he revealed that he could remember his entire bar mitzvah speech, and he's seventy-five. I have no idea. Mine was, you know, a thank-you to my parents, a thank-you to my

friends that attended, and about what it meant, I suppose, to be an adult in the eyes of Judaism. But do I remember the exact content? No.

SS: So, when did you become aware that there was a gay community?

AK: I – well, that’s a great question. I think it’s kind of mixed with my sexual desires and some realities of growing up in the seventies and early eighties. Certainly, I knew that I liked guys, but I didn’t know exactly what that meant. I know in elementary school there was a guy that was absolutely great-looking, and I knew that, and the way I expressed it was to ask my mother to buy the same brands and styles of clothes, whether it was jeans or t-shirts or whatever, that this kid that I really liked wore. And, of course, my mother always got it wrong, which upset me.

00:05:00 Later on, I realized that it was indeed sexual desire, and by the time I was in high school — well, junior high, actually, I realized that I was attracted to some of my classmates, and some of those attractions actually — well, they got actualized, and I actually — I’m saying “actually” a lot. I ended up having a few dalliances with some of the guys in high school, most of whom are straight now.

SS: So, when did you realize that there was, like, a phenomena, like a gay —

AK: Well, I think it was partly pop culture that enlightened me to the gay community in the late seventies. Also, strangely, I would go with my mother to her hoity-toity salon on Long Island and watch the hairdressers, who were extremely flamboyant. But I realized through that that there was something going on, there was actually a community there. It was something that I could feel, something that I could sense, and I knew. And I had some funny experiences with that, particularly when I

guess it was my sister's bat mitzvah, when one of the hairdressers, who later, unfortunately, died of AIDS, came over and I started playing an LP that I had first heard at the hair salon. It was the original Village People, *San Francisco/Hollywood* medley. And I ran out and I said, "Phil, I'm playing this song that I heard at your salon." And he was confused. He didn't know what to say. I think he wanted to maintain his distance, his aesthetic distance. But it showed me that indeed there was something going on that I just wasn't quite aware of at the time.

SS: So, did you become politically aware before you got into gay politics per se?

AK: I was always socially conscious. I think that was something — again, if we go back to my Jewish roots, I think that's something that was instilled in me through my Hebrew School, learning at Hebrew School and through the temple. But I did get involved in gay politics prior to ACT UP. I was heavily involved in the Gay-Straight Alliance at Ithaca College, actually. I worked with an out professor there named Marty Brownstein, who really was an inspiration to me at the time.

SS: And that's where you met our beloved Karl Soehnlein.

AK: I did meet Karl at Ithaca. He wasn't out yet. Our first experience together was certainly more nerve-wracking for him than me, but it was indeed at Ithaca.

SS: So, did you guys move to New York together?

AK: Actually, he was a year behind me, so I moved back home first, literally home to my parents', to my mom's house. My mom and dad had gotten divorced already. When he graduated, he and I moved into an apartment in Astoria

together and just soon after that, we moved into the East Village. We were pioneers in the East Village, gay pioneers.

SS: So, what year did you move to Astoria?

AK: We moved to Astoria, I believe — gosh, it had to be — maybe I moved first. It had to be '87, because I believe we'd just gotten involved in ACT UP. We were at Ron Goldberg's first meeting. We apparently had the same first meeting, which was, I believe — I think it was maybe mid to late April '87.

The way we got — well, our trajectory to that meeting was Karl came in for — while still at Ithaca, came in for the Columbia Student Health Conference that year, and he told me about it and said, "You have to come." Among the list of reasons why I needed to be there was that Larry Kramer was speaking. I'd already known about Larry, so I decided to meet him and Scott Gorenstein and a bunch of other — Mike Kusek and a bunch of other people that later became involved in ACT UP.

00:10:00

And it was an intense, intense event. It was my first exposure to HIV. It was also my first exposure to Larry Kramer live, which was incredible. I remember there were two sections of the auditorium in which he was speaking, and he asked the entire group assembled to stand, so I did. And he looked at the other side of the room and said, "Okay, you can all sit down." And then he looked at us, the remaining group standing, and said, "You're all going to be dead in five years. Now sit down," and then he went on from there. So that was both terrifying and inspiring at the same time.

SS: Did you think you were going to be dead in five years?

AK: No. You know, so many of my friends say they thought that. I never — I never did. I don't know why, but it never — maybe I was just too stupid to think that. But I never thought I would be — no, I just didn't. I don't know why.

SS: So, what compelled you to ACT UP?

AK: Well, Karl — after that speech, I wanted to know more, as did Karl, and we decided to make our way first — there were two meetings in one day. I forget the — I wish I remembered the date. One was a meeting for the March on Washington at the Community Center. We went there and there were two things about the meeting I remember. Well, three things. One, it was incredibly boring. Two — oh, gosh, I forgot his name, one of the organizers of — and it'll come to me, of course, after you guys leave. But one of the organizers was the reason that it was boring, and the other facilitator was Stephen Gendin, and it really didn't matter what Stephen said; we were just transfixed by Stephen Gendin. And I don't remember anything about the meeting except those three things. Well, Stephen was great, and I almost wanted to come back to a March on Washington meeting just because Stephen was a facilitator.

Then we went to the ACT UP meeting. I believe it was the same — I believe it was right after, so it had to be a Monday night, and it may actually have been at — what's the NYU — not NYU. The alternate place we had meetings. It was at the Center, and then we had one on —

JW: Cooper Union?

AK: Yes, I think it was maybe a Cooper Union meeting. In any case, Stephen Gendin was involved in ACT UP, so problem solved. And the first meeting was just in stark contrast to the March on Washington meeting. It was vibrant, exciting, well

organized. Steve Webb was the facilitator then. It might have been Avram [Finkelstein] might be co-facilitator. But it was awe-inspiring, jaw-dropping, amazing, and there was no question that we would be back.

SS: So how did you start working your way through the organization?

AK: Well, we started — both of us started in the Outreach Committee, and that was — it was exciting but also frustrating. There was a lot of debate in the Outreach Committee. Maria was involved and a lot of great —

SS: Maria Maggenti?

AK: Yeah. Were you in Outreach as well?

SS: No.

AK: It was a great committee and we did a lot of great work, but we spent a lot of time quibbling about what ACT UP was and how we would bring — eventually how we would move ACT UP to other cities, and what would the requirements be and how would we know it was actually in ACT UP, and would we certify them, and things like that. We continued to debate as ACT UP chapters started to spring up around the country and eventually internationally. We realized that was not really what the Outreach Committee should be doing.

SS: Because you couldn't control it? Were there requirements?

AK: No. No, that's the thing. Well, we built some requirements in that would help us to recognize other ACT UP chapters, but, no, it was nothing we could obviously enforce. They had to be focused on HIV/AIDS, for one, but other than that, there was not much we could or should do. So, Outreach eventually dealt more with issues around people of color and access and things like that.

After Outreach, I actually started to get involved in the Logistics. It was called Logistics back then, Logistics Committee. And that actually fell more in line with what I studied in school, which was communications and TV and film production.

00:15:00 Organizing actions and the logistics around them was like producing a film.

SS: Can you take us through an action and how you did logistics?

AK: Well, yeah. Well, I was going to say it was actually Dan Butler that had to — he was chairing the Logistics Committee, and he got *Frasier*, so he had to leave and asked me to chair Logistics. And I was like, “Oh, okay, I’ll do that.” And eventually Logistics turned into the Actions Committee, and I chaired, and then chaired with Ron and then Michael Miles and a bunch of other people.

You know, the process of organizing an action was like nothing I had ever experienced. It was the most amazing, amazing work that I think I’ve ever done, because it encompassed so many different things, so many different areas of expertise, and we had all these experts to call on, and everybody did their amazing little piece. My job, the chair of the committee’s job, was to put all those little pieces together, and it was so amazing. And to have that experience in my early twenties was unbelievable and unparalleled, and I don’t think I’ve ever matched that experience.

SS: So, can you give us a concrete example? Like, how would you do logistics? Like, pick an action and tell us how you did it.

AK: Well, my favorite action was Target City Hall, and that’s the one that I was organizer on, and it started — oh, there’s so many different pieces. But after figuring out what this action would look like in the Actions Committee, and also getting buy-in from the room beforehand, and then proposing it to the room, which, as you know,

proposing an action would take four or five hours in front of the room, where you'd go through all the work the committee did for the past prior three weeks in those four hours in order to get ACT UP to approve the action. So, we did.

We treated all our actions, and in particular the Target City Hall action, like you would a film, like you would a brand. It had a name, for instance. It was Target City Hall. We had Ken Woodard design a logo for it. We had Scott Robbe use his film contracts to do what we called Operation Batman, which was to promote the action with the logo and with a teaser of the date, using a high-powered slide projector onto buildings around Manhattan. We did stenciling in preparation for it.

The idea was to first tease it out, so we literally just put — it was March 28th, '89. So, we just put the date. We'd stenciled the date all around the city, with no other information, and then we'd add to it week by week so that people had a clearer vision of what this thing was. The idea was to create buzz and intrigue prior to rolling out the actual action, and it worked. And we did professional things like take out ads. We took out ads in *The New York Times* for that action. Ken Woodard designed some great propaganda that was just amazing. It was, ad-agency-quality work, and indeed he worked for an ad agency, so it —

SS: What agency did he work for?

AK: I think it was — I believe it might have been Ketchum back then.

SS: What was the demand of Target City Hall?

AK: The demand was about Koch releasing funds for — there were a bunch of demands. It was about homeless PWAs. It was about Koch just using his, city's capital, intellectual capital to make HIV a priority in his administration, which, of

course, he never did. And, of course, I think you remember the signs, posters we had that proclaimed, “I’m heterosexual,” with a picture of Koch. And the answer was, “And I’m Carmen Miranda,” and other famous figures.

00:20:00

It was a hugely successful demonstration. We had, I believe, around 3,500, maybe more people, with 200 arrested. It was the biggest demonstration that ACT UP had to that date. It was truly massive. As the posters, another tactic we used was to — and this only — when I was chair and Ron was chair, we had a rule. We’d only use the term “massive” demonstration once a year. The posters would say “massive demonstration.” The idea was that it would presuppose that this would be a *huge* thing that you couldn’t miss. If you were inclined to go out and protest, this was the one to go to, and largely it worked.

SS: Now, would you go to the location to do logistics?

AK: Oh, yeah, absolutely. We would scout it out.

SS: What were you looking for?

AK: It was usually John Kelly that would scout the location with probably Alexis [Danzig] and some other people, and they were looking for the best place, first of all, the safest, best place with the most visibility for the targeted amount of people we had. They would also scout out, as with the affinity groups, the best places to do civil disobedience. And, of course, the Actions Committee, although we knew what affinity groups were involved, we didn’t know what each affinity group was planning. We just knew, just asked them to let us know about where they were doing it, so that we could have legal observers there and so that we could make sure that the flow of the demonstration wasn’t disturbed and that the people on the legal picket were kept safe.

SS: Now, one of our problems in New York City was that our government opposed us, our city government.

AK: Right.

SS: When you compare it to San Francisco, it's the opposite. They had a lot of cooperation. What was the problem in New York?

AK: Well, you know, during the Koch administration, some people have posited that it was because Koch was closeted, and that could very well be, but I also think there are always issues with funding anything in New York, particularly at that time. Koch came after Beame, and the city was a mess financially.

You know, I'm not sure why we did such a bad job compared to San Francisco. Indeed, that was one of the Ann Northrop sound bites for Target City Hall, was comparing the great work that the government in San Francisco did to deal with HIV as compared to what Koch did, which was not a whole hell of a lot.

SS: What did we win at Target City Hall?

AK: What did we win? A whole bunch of publicity. I think it really shamed the Koch administration. We were front page of all the tabloids, and we had coverage in the *Times*, great coverage in the *Times*. We were the top of the news for all the local stations, both 6 and 11. So I think it was a seminal action because it was a real introduction to New York and, indeed, national pop culture.

SS: Okay, great and then where did you go from the Actions Committee, or did you stay there?

AK: I stayed in the Actions Committee through working with Ron, which was amazing, and Duncan Osborne and Andrew Miller and Alexis and John, Jean

Elizabeth Glass, Michael Miles, who was just crazy but fabulous, and that's really where — and I was on Coordinating. Because I chaired the Actions Committee, I was also on the Coordinating Committee for some time, which was both contentious and amazing at various times.

SS: We don't know anything about that. Can you tell us like who was on the Coordinating —

AK: Really?

SS: Yes. And what was it like in there?

AK: Well, it ranged from delicious commentary from Bradley Ball, funny and deadpan but brilliant, to fits of anger. I remember Maria Maggenti literally throwing a book at me during one Coordinating Committee.

SS: Why?

00:25:00

AK: I wish I remembered why. I probably said something stupid. And I kind of moved out of the way as I saw this thing careening through the air, and it hit the wall, you know. But, hey, such was life at the Coordinating Committee. It was where ACT UP did its business, and it was where the various committees coordinated, literally coordinated all these things they were doing, and it generally worked real well.

A lot of the work also happened in the back of the room, on the sides of the room. I remember for Target City Hall I spent the week prior to that action in my East Village Apartment, most of the time sitting in my underwear on my bed, on my old landline talking to people from the minute I got up in the morning till the minute I went to bed at night. And that was with Michelangelo [Signorile] and Jay [Blotcher] and other

people coming over to the apartment and also — well, actually, I'm not sure if Jay and Michelangelo were around yet, but people —

SS: You were on the Lower East Side, I think.

AK: Yeah, we were on Norfolk.

SS: That's right. I came over and you were in your underwear.

AK: Did you really? That's hysterical. Well, you know, because what would happen is, because of all the logistics, I'd have to be talking to people all the time. There was no Internet. There were no emails. So, it was all done by telephone, and I had my checklist and legal pads of paper strewn about my bed while I was in my underwear, writing down and checking off things that needed to be done.

And there were the inevitable controversies, you know. There's sometimes the — I remember during Target City Hall there was an issue. I don't remember what the issue was, but Majority Actions had an issue with something, some issue of people of color, representation of people of color with the demonstration and were threatening at one point to not even be involved with it. And my reaction to that was, you know, all business. "Okay, what do you need?"

SS: Who were you negotiating with, do you remember?

AK: Maybe Ortez [Alderson]. I don't remember. I'm not sure. It might have been a couple of people, and I might have talked to a bunch of people, some more reasonable than others, to talk to the less reasonable ones. But really what it came down to was, "Okay, what do we need to do to work this out? Because we have a demonstration happening, and we need this to work. We've already committed the resources. The issue is there." I guess it was the Issues Committee that worked on that

aspect of it. Outreach was engaged. All the committees were engaged, so the question was, okay, so how do we make this work?

SS: So, in Logistics, in the Actions Committee, and the Coordinating Committee, you, Alan, are constantly focused on the nuts and bolts of making things happen.

AK: Yes.

SS: Where are the theoretical and political issues being discussed?

AK: Well, that was issues, I believe, back then. That was before TAG, before the Treatment Committee. I think the Issues Committee dealt with the whys. They explored those issues and would present them to Actions, and we would actually make the fact sheets. We did fact sheets per Issues, and Ron would do the chants. So, yes, all the nuts and bolts kind of came from all the committees came together in the Actions Committee.

SS: And who was in the Issues Committee?

AK: Oh, that was Mark Harrington and Jim [Eigo] and Iris [Long]. I'm pretty sure that that was the group.

SS: Was Vito [Russo] in that too?

AK: Vito was Media. And interestingly, I was not involved in the Media Committee, which is what I studied in school, but the Media Committee helped us, obviously, to promote the action and then dealt with reporters and producers and video crews on site during the action.

SS: Now, were you involved in the FDA?

AK: Not, not in the – I don't think I – I did some organizing in New York, but that was — I'm trying to think who the organizer was. I know Chip Duckett and Michelangelo, David Corkery, and Vito probably did the media, but I was more a participant in the FDA than I was an organizer.

SS: Were you in an affinity group?

AK: No.

SS: Did you work on Wall Street?

AK: I helped on Wall Street, but I think I was in Outreach when Wall Street — certainly Wall Street 2 happened. Wall Street 1, I was — well, my first demonstration was Federal Plaza.

SS: What was that?

00:30:00 AK: That was the demonstration that I was, at first, dodging TV crew cameras because I hadn't yet come out to some of my family. And then I said to myself, "Screw it. I'm in." I don't remember the actual demands of that particular demonstration.

SS: So, when you're calling — I mean, here you are, this young guy, and you're calling these newspapers, *The New York Times*. What do you say? How do you figure out who to call and what do you say to them?

AK: Well, thankfully, that was something Media Committee did back then. Jay and I did that after ACT UP and during Queer Nation, when we did media for those groups and when we started Public Impact, our PR firm. But thankfully, that was Michelangelo eventually. And I think back – again, I'm not sure who was in the Media Committee during Target City Hall, but they did an amazing job because we had — I

mean, we had CNN there live through the whole thing. Actually, Rose Arce was producing. She produced those segments.

SS: Oh, wow.

AK: And we had Gabe Pressmen there from Channel 4. We had John Slattery, I believe, from Channel 2. So, I mean, we had big reporters down on site with some live coverage. It was actually amazing. I remember CNN *Daybreak* covered it from the moment the broadcast started until we had over 3,500 people there. So, it was just amazing coverage.

SS: How is the liaisioning created between ACT UP's own video crews and these relationships with mainstream media?

AK: I think mainstream media sometimes thought that, like DIVA TV and the other independent video crews might have been in the way, but, oh well. Certainly, from the Actions Committee, and I'm sure Media said the same thing, we loved having — the more cameras, the better. And when they were our cameras, of course, we felt safe with that coverage.

SS: But did you ever use their footage, like did you ever give their footage to the mainstream?

AK: They might have —

SS: You weren't involved?

AK: Oh, yeah, I wasn't really involved with that, but I think way after the fact is when more mainstream media organizations wanted footage, but during that time, if they didn't have their own footage, they generally didn't use the independent footage, I don't think.

SS: So, let's talk about the culture of ACT UP. So, what was it like to be in a couple in ACT UP?

AK: Wow. Well, we were — I think we were ACT UP's original couple, and I say that feeling, well, oh, god, that's so haughty of me, but we really were. I mean, even Larry recognized us as kind of ACT UP's original couple. Certainly, I remember Steve Webb calling us "those two guys from New Jersey" when we first — because Karl lived in New Jersey. I was slightly offended by that, but it was okay. At least we were being recognized by Steve. But we really grew into our roles, me as the Actions guy and Karl as the Outreach guy and eventual facilitator of the Monday night meetings. And socially it was quite amazing. We did everything together, and I do mean everything.

SS: Actually, Michael Nesline describes you as quite a randy young man, in his interview.

AK: Really?

SS: You can go back and look at —

AK: Oh, that's the pot calling the kettle —

SS: So, what was sexuality like in ACT UP?

AK: You know, it's so interesting. I talk about this sometimes with other ACT UPpers that were involved. Obviously, you were not involved the same way that Karl and I were. But it was an extended family that had sex with each other occasionally, and it helped increase the bonds, I think, and it wasn't something — well, I guess it was randy. We were all — how could I not be randy? I was twenty, you know, what twenty-three when I joined ACT UP, and Karl was a year younger or two years younger. So, it was clear that in a highly charged atmosphere where we were working together all the

time, I mean, we had umpteen committee meetings all week long, and then on the weekends still worked on ACT UP, it was inevitable that that kind of sexual expression would happen.

SS: Was it like after parties, like a group sexual thing, or was it like a one-on-one thing?

AK: Yes.

SS: Both?

00:3

AK: Well, you know, there were times that Karl and I would go to a club or a party, and there would be maybe a room where people were doing sexual things.

SS: ACT UP people?

AK: ACT UP people and others. There was, of course, the infamous ACT UP swim parties at my mother's house.

SS: Yes, tell us about that. Yes, what happened there?

AK: Oh, my lord. By the way, Karl and I, I don't think did — yeah, well, maybe we did. And it was, you know, the usual suspects, some major, you know, infamous, known activists that did this. But the ACT UP swim party was — and I wish I remembered the year. It was either the summer of '89 or — I think it was the summer of '89. And I had this bright idea — Karl and I had this bright idea of having everybody — it was an open invitation — to my mom's house on Long Island, the house I grew up in, to swim in the pool. And the first hint that I had that this was a little bit more ambitious than I thought it could ever be was when folks called me en masse from the two train stations, L.I.R.R. stations, that were near my mom's house, letting me know that there were not enough taxis there, and me frantically calling the taxi companies, say, "There

are I don't know how many people coming in from the city, and they're all waiting at both of these train stations. You need to get more drivers out there."

"What do you mean?"

I was like, "You're going to make a lot of money today." And, of course, they did, and people came, you know, by the cab load, by the cabs load. I mean, it was unbelievable.

And the first thing that I — there's two things that happened that started the day off, and this is what compelled me to drink heavily that day. The two things were that Michael Nesline, "Nurse" Nesline, and Michael Miles decided — well, Michael came in with a couple of cake mixes and decided he was going to bake a cake, and Nesline decided he was going to help, but the first thing they needed to do, of course, was rearrange all my mother's cabinets because the baking stuff was mixed in with the cooking stuff, and it didn't make sense to them. So, they started rearranging. Now, my mother's an anal-retentive freak, so I was like, "Oh, god, somebody make me a drink quickly." So, the cabinets were being rearranged.

And then I look into the living room, and my mom still had for our dog, like this doggie gate that was at the entrance to the living room, which was basically a museum. Nobody ever uses the living room in my mother's house. God forbid their jeans were dirty. She has a white couch. I don't know why a neurotic, you know, OCD woman would have a white couch. I have a black couch and it's leather, so wipes away easily.

The first thing I notice in the living room is Bradley Ball smoking a cigarette in my mother's house and putting out the ashes in my mother's good crystal,

you know. And it's a candy dish. And, of course, I demanded another drink immediately. And that's how it started.

And everybody swam, and my mother called during this, and Michael Nesline grabbed the phone from me and said, "Hi, Cynthia, it's Michael Nesline." They knew each other. "Where are your coffee filters?"

And she told him exactly where they were in the cabinet and said, "Would you put Alan back on the phone, please?" She said, "What's going on there?"

And meanwhile, everybody — I'd shushed everybody, said, "Just Mike. We have a couple of friends over using the pool. Don't worry," and hung up.

The next thing that happened was Lee Schy found a stash of Post-It notes and wrote things like, "I was here." Every note had a different message. And he put them in my mother's drawers, her underwear drawer, shoes, my sister's room. Everywhere there were notes from Lee. I mean, and I couldn't find all of them either, so it was pretty clear that — and my mother did eventually figure out that some — in cereal boxes there were notes from Lee. I mean, it was amazingly funny, and I just got drunker and drunker, and, thankfully, Karl remained somewhat more sober.

00:40:00 But then, of course, everybody decided to stay over. I remember going to the Red Lobster, I think, near Roosevelt Field also on Long Island, and we had a visibility action there, apparently, while we ate bad lobster. And then people slept over, and that's where the sexual activity started.

In fact, I had dinner with — well, I'll mention his name — with Ken Kidd, last time. Apparently, I do remember him being there, and then, you know, when he reminded me, yeah, he was part of that mess, too, I mean, it was quite amazing.

SS: So, half these people are HIV-positive. So how was sexuality negotiated in ACT UP?

AK: Well, you know, of course we had safe sex. Some of it was not penetrative sex. Karl and I were always very careful. I don't recall ever during those days having any incidents of unsafe sex. I'm sure people did, and I'm sure people that were positive possibly had unsafe sex with other positive partners, but as far as I knew, we were all very careful.

SS: You know, everyone says that. Everyone we've interviewed, talking about the earliest days, says that everyone had safe sex.

AK: Right. Well, we were scared, we were terrified, but, you know, we were also horny.

SS: But it's more than terrified, because later those anxieties become people who are negative rejecting people who are positive in gay sexual culture, right?

AK: Right. I think that was younger people, though. That was never part of my sexuality, I don't think. And I can speak for Karl. I know that wasn't part of his. I think we were just very careful. I mean, some of the folks that I met, and I didn't have sex with this person I'm about to mention, it was Mark Fotopoulos, who was the first person with AIDS that I really zeroed in on, first one that I knew who was also — who just happened to be absolutely exquisite, you know. I mean, he was a really, really great-looking guy, and it was a mind-fuck at first, because AIDS and, you know, hot didn't go together in media at that time. That was, again, my first exposure to it, and, you know, it

wasn't what it was supposed to be. I wasn't supposed to be turned on by somebody with HIV, but yet there I was.

SS: There was a use of the word “we” in ACT UP. “We have AIDS,” or, “We — .” There was a collective. Did you know every person you knew who was positive and who was negative?

AK: You know, for the most part, I think I did know. But I also think that that “we” was absolutely true, in fact so much so that sometimes being negative, one felt a little guilty for it. And a lot of people, I think, talk about that.

SS: Yeah. Now, what did you do when you friends started to get sick? I mean, Mark, were you friends with him?

AK: I was friends, but we were not close friends. We were friends. We were ACT UP close.

SS: Because he just, like, disappeared, Mark Fotopoulos. Oh, that's too bad that that's happening.

AK: Do we need to –

SS: Can we ask them to stop?

JH: Let's see how long –

AK: They've been gardening back there. We can close the windows, however.

SS: Okay or can we just ask out the window if they can wait half an hour?

AK: They're not going to – probably they don't speak English whatsoever.

JH: And it's –

JW: It stopped.

SS: Okay. Because we have all this footage of Mark Fotopoulos because Jim was photographing him, and one day he just disappears.

AK: I think, you know, word was — and I'm not positive about this, but he was an actor, a good-looking guy. I think he was really concerned about his KS lesions, which were all over, including his face. I think that was a real issue for him. I think it was a problem. But, you know, I remember Mark being there with his — you know, "Living with AIDS. No thanks to you, Mr. Reagan. No thanks to you, Mr. Bush," throughout ACT UP. And he was one of the people that I found an inspiration.

The other person that died that was a mentor to me was Marty Robinson, who really taught me the nuts and bolts. Oops. It sounds like we have a –

JW: Sorry. I don't hear –

00:45:00

AK: We're good? Okay. Well, I was going to say Marty Robinson was really the person that taught me how to do logistics for an action. He really was such an amazing teacher, such an amazing mentor, so great with both protestors and police. He was the person that taught me how to deal with the police, how to organize marshals for actions. We added to that. We eventually added in walkie-talkies and film production devices in order to, I guess, update the GAA tactics that Marty Robinson used for the late eighties.

SS: Well, Marty and Marc Rubin —

AK: Marc, right.

SS: — and Vito, who are all dead now, they were from Gay Liberation. But there weren't a lot of people in ACT UP who had been in Gay Liberation.

AK: That's right. Well, Marty was GLA —

SS: No. I mean that they were from the Gay Liberation Movement.

AK: Movement, okay, right, right.

SS: They were Stonewall era.

AK: Well, I think Marty claims to have been at Stonewall.

SS: That's possible.

AK: Yeah. And perhaps Marc Rubin as well. I don't think Vito was there. But they were invaluable. I mean, it was those guys, women who had been in — you know, in the —

SS: The Women's Movement.

AK: The Women's Movement forever. They're the ones that taught us how to demonstrate.

SS: Well, Marty came from Lavender Hill Mob, right?

AK: Right.

SS: So, he was a ZAP.

AK: That's right. He and Bill Bahlman, who has every flyer, every piece of paper that had anything to do with Lavender Hill. There's an older gentleman, too, whose name escapes me. He always wore a hat. Great guy, amazing.

That's the other thing, too, ACT UP brought together people that would never ever ordinarily be in the same room together. It was just so amazing, and that's

why ACT UP worked, because you had suburban folks like me that were — you know, that had some political yearning, let's say, but I wasn't completely politically active.

You had folks like you that had a real background in politics. Gregg Bordowitz, who was at the Whitney, who was book-smart about politics, Marxism. My god, I didn't know anything about that, you know. Avram, who was, you know, at the pinnacle of pop culture at Vidal Sassoon. You had, models, actors, lawyers, media folks, Vito, David Corkery, all these people together in one room. And it was this beautiful race to a pop cultural middle that made ACT UP work.

SS: Hmm. That's interesting. Now, what about Lee?

AK: Lee Schy?

SS: Yeah.

AK: Lee Schy, who I wish my husband Lee [Floersch] knew, because he would have, like everybody, gotten such a huge kick out of Lee Schy. He was brilliant, could be cutting, sarcastic, had a heart of gold, just an amazing character.

SS: Did you go on his family picnics?

AK: Yes, I did, and they were just — I mean, I was on them and then pictured — wheat-pasted throughout New York with Karl. I think it was the July 4th one on one of the beaches, maybe Rockaway Beach or something like that. And what an amazing talent, and not only was his talent cutting-edge, but the way he showed it to the public was cutting-edge, you know, wheat-pasting these amazing pieces all over the city of New York, I mean, brilliant.

SS: Were you involved when he was sick?

AK: Somewhat. I mean, I feel like I was a support to Joey [Ferrari] at the time, but, you know, Lee was really proud, and it was something that I don't think he wanted. I don't know. I don't think he wanted people to be in his face when all this was happening.

SS: Who were you most closest to physically when they were dying?

AK: Oh, god, there's so many, you know. But I've got to say it was a weird — that's a hard question because that part of — and to this day it's really painful for me, because that part of the crisis was so difficult. I would visit people in the hospital and not know what to say, not know what to do. I remember Karl's mom died around the same time, and I handled it so badly, and I think I handled the death of a lot of our friends badly, you know. I was there but I wasn't there. I don't know what percentage of our friends were there while somebody was actually dying. I wasn't. And, you know, I regret it, but I also — I guess I just never realized. I was so involved in, like you said, the nuts and bolts of ACT UP that I didn't realize how terrified I was.

SS: So, did ACT UP ever do anything that you really disagreed with?

AK: Oh, wow. Probably. You know, I think the publicist in me probably found a way to agree with most everything ACT UP did. For instance, okay, well, I didn't disagree with Stop the Church, but obviously Stop the Church was a contentious action. A lot of people did disagree with it, both inside and outside of ACT UP. But I think it served a purpose. I think it was a great action. It certainly got people thinking and talking about ACT UP, perhaps more so than Target City Hall did, and that was — I believe Stop the Church was '90. So that was an important demonstration, quite frankly,

and I think it forced the Catholic Church to deal with some realities about HIV and AIDS.

SS: Was it '89 or '90, Stop the Church?

JH: December 10, 1989.

AK: '89 and Target City Hall was our second anniversary, so that was March 28th, '89.

SS: Now, what about the split? Were you still in ACT UP when that happened?

AK: Well, see, my split happened because of Queer Nation, not necessarily because of the crazy bureaucracy that was to become ACT UP, but because there was a need and we just needed to deal with that.

SS: What year was that, Queer Nation?

AK: Well, Queer Nation — and, Jim, correct me if I'm wrong — that was '90? So, we started in 1990, and that was right after — I believe Michelangelo, Karl, and I started talking about this around the time that the Andy Rooney thing was happening.

SS: Can you explain for our viewers, whoever they are, what that was?

AK: Oh, god, Andy Rooney was this old crotchety guy that used to do commentary, video commentary. He had a “vlog” on a thing called *60 Minutes*. Does that explain it for the younger viewers, perhaps?

SS: Right. But what was the controversy?

AK: Well, the controversy was he said something wildly homophobic, and you know, we needed to deal with that, and there wasn't really a context in ACT UP.

ACT UP demonstrations, by definition, had to be focused on HIV and AIDS, so there wasn't really an outlet for dealing with that. So, we decided that we would get folks together to meet and decide what to do. And cut to this thing called Queer Nation that not only attracted ACT UPpers who thought that they could escape the bureaucracy, oddly, of ACT UP by joining another group — you know, Queer Nation had its own bureaucracy; of course, any group does — and eventually those people migrated back to ACT UP or dropped out completely.

But Queer Nation also attracted a new group of activists, both old and young, who had never been involved in ACT UP and who wanted to just work on LGBT or, back then, gay and lesbian issues, and they did want a group identity. We debated for a long time about whether to have a name, and most of the ACT UP folk were staunchly against Queer Nation having a name. Maria — what is it — she wanted to mystify, terrify, and enchant people by having — and that's literally a quote from Maria — different names for the different actions that we would organize. And it was after the pipe bomb — a pipe bomb went off at Uncle Charlie's, and we had a protest that night. It got a lot — it mobilized a lot of people the same night to protest that.

00:55:00 But a month — I believe it was a month or so later, we had a Take Back the Night march that attracted anywhere between three and five thousand people, and the affinity group that organized that, of which I was a part, was Queer Nation. And I announced on the bullhorn, when asked by reporters, "What's your group called?" and I said, "Queer Nation." And we were amazed, stunned that *The New York Times* reported it and used the words "Queer Nation."

SS: Oh, wow. Oh, wow.

AK: Well, that sealed the fate. Everybody wanted that to be the name of the group. Of course, again, ACT UP-ers voted no. New folks voted yes. That's how Queer Nation became Queer Nation.

SS: So how was Queer Nation structured?

AK: Very similarly, though I think there was more consensus. We technically didn't have a Coordinating Committee or an Organizing Committee. I think we later developed one, but it was meetings based instead of — what did we call them? Instead of affinity groups. Wait. Which one had working groups? That was —

JW: ACT UP did.

SS: ACT UP had working groups.

AK: Okay. Okay. We called them slightly different things. Either we called them working groups in Queer Nation, and ACT UP had affinity groups, but it was the same kind of thing.

We also wanted to have a lot of fun with it. That's why we did, you know, nights out, where we'd go to an ostensibly straight bar and drink with the natives, if you will, and some of those turned out to be really amazing events. I remember one at McSorley's. Remember that place? Were you there?

SS: Nuh-uh.

AK: Oh, that was a great event because we took over the back of McSorley's, which is a really, really — it's a really straight place. And there were two big round tables in the back. One was a coed bachelor party, and the other was us, and we had like, you know, fifty queers and probably twenty-five, thirty bachelor party attendees. And they started playing Spin the Bottle, so we started doing it too, and they

were applauding us, and we were applauding them. It was a complete love fest. It was great. But then the owners came in and saw the gays and lesbians kissing and were ready to kick us out. Lo and behold, the straight bachelor party said, “No. If you kick them out, we’re leaving too.” And it turned out to be an amazing night and a lot of fun.

SS: So, does that mean you were not in ACT UP anymore?

AK: Well, I was. I attended demonstrations, but I wasn’t as actively involved. I remember, you know, at that point, I think Ron was organizing the Grand Central —

SS: Day of Desperation.

AK: Day of Desperation action. And what a brilliant action. It was such a great — I mean, amazing. Everybody did a great job on that. But, yeah, I was already ensconced in Queer Nation stuff, and there was just so much time in a day, you know. I thought, “Well, I can be involved with both groups.” I had no intention of not being involved in ACT UP, but, you know —

SS: Do you think that was an emotional choice? Because, I mean, those were the grim years of ACT UP, right, when everyone was dying —

AK: That’s right.

SS: — and there we are having Day of Desperation, and then Queer Nation is having drinks in bars.

AK: You know, I’ve never really considered that, but that makes a whole lot of sense that I would want to escape the — or try to escape the, you know, day after day, death after death of ACT UP makes sense. But I wasn’t really escaping, because these were my dear friends and they were still at that point dying.

SS: So, when did you finally get out of all of that?

AK: Well, Queer Nation, I think, started to fizzle, and Karl and I broke up, and that was my first move to California. I moved to San Francisco. But I had already started — well, during the Queer Nation years, I think it was the tail end that Jay Blotcher and I got together and started doing public relations for LG — again, gay and lesbian, back then, organizations, and our first major client was the Center. Actually, we worked with Richard Burns over there. And it was later on that Karl and I broke up, thinking about that now, because Jay and I had a business for a few — I believe a few years, and we did great work.

I remember we talked about ACT UP calling the press, but I remember we pitched a story about gay and lesbian seniors for the organization SAGE. I remember calling the *New York Post* to pitch the story to the City Desk, and the first guy said, “Wait. Is this a joke?” I swear to you.

I said, “No. I’m a publicist. This is my client, and this is a great story. They’re having a social where same-sex seniors are going to be dancing together.” And
01:00:00 actually, Amy Pagnozzi — I think that’s how I met — Amy Pagnozzi covered it and did a great job.

But, yeah, in those days, the press was incredulous. They didn’t understand. “Are you really pitching us a story?” It was kind of great, because we had a great year and we were able to get a lot of stuff published, which was great.

SS: I only have one more question. Do you have guys have anything you want to ask?

JH: Yeah, a couple things. One is, okay, there's this great shot of you at Target City Hall with some device.

AK: Oh, my bullhorn.

JH: No, it's not your bullhorn.

AK: No?

JH: It's either a walkie-talkie or –

AK: Well, I had both. At Target City Hall I had two walkie-talkies, one for Logistics, one for Legal. And I think Logistics shared a channel with Media. And I had a bullhorn with a separate microphone on it. And so, yeah, so I was like, you know, I had — oh, and — oh, my god, and we had giant cell phones that Scott Robbe had. I mean, this is when cell phones were new, and Scott Robbe had — we'd gotten some sort of insurance waivers, and he claimed we were a production company, probably called Target City Hall. And so, we got all this film equipment, including the walkie-talkies, these giant cell phones that were like bricks. And that's how we organized onsite.

JH: So, and where did all this equipment come from?

AK: Some production rental company.

JH: Oh, so it was just rented.

AK: Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah. We did that. I'm not sure if that's — I think that might have been the first demo that we rented all this equipment for, and then for each subsequent big demo, we had to have the same stuff.

JH: There was another question that I can't remember.

SS: Okay. James?

JW: Nothing.

SS: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you can —

AK: Oh, well, this is — I thank you, guys, because it's great. It's great memories and it's great reliving all of it, even the more traumatic stuff, because I think one of the things, aside from faster drug approval processes and getting drug cocktails into people, the other thing that ACT UP gave all of us was a sense of family, a whole lot of humor. Nobody ever talks about the humor. I mean, just the funniest people in the world I've ever known were involved in ACT UP. And also, you know, the other thing that ACT UP doesn't get credit for enough is, as I said before, the Ellen factor, you know. LGBT rights wouldn't be where it is today if not for ACT UP.

SS: Why is that?

AK: Because if you watch some of the old news reports about ACT UP, even the Target City Hall, Gabe Pressmen calls us a coalition of gay groups, and I remember at the time we were not thrilled with that. We wanted to be known as an AIDS activist organization, and I understand, and I wanted it too. But it was a moment in time, a long moment in time when pop culture started to realize that we were actually powerful people, that gays and lesbians were able and willing and proud enough to go out into the streets and demand action from government, demand that people pay attention, demand that pop culture give us our due.

SS: So, you're saying that even though we understood ourselves as AIDS activists, sometimes the media saw as people in the forefront of the gay movement.

AK: That's correct. They did indeed. And I don't think that was to our detriment.

SS: So, my final question — this is what we ask everybody — looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

AK: Wow. The greatest — wow. I mean, there's so many ways that I can take that, from the personal out to obviously ACT UP was responsible, again, for speeding up the drug approval process, getting rid of double-blind placebo studies, leading to the cocktails that people use today.

01:05:00

The downside, of course, was that we never wanted to, back in the very old days of ACT UP, make AIDS/HIV a chronic manageable disease, and that's exactly what happened. So, you know, there's a flipside to everything. I talk about the sense of family, but yet we lost so many family members. So, both positive and negative. For a lot of us, ACT UP was in some sense a pinnacle of both our work and personal achievements, even at our young age. The downside is, well, that we reached a pinnacle at a young age, but also a lot of us have suffered from post-traumatic stress or variations of that. We talked about that at the ACT UP reunion recently, or the non-reunion.

So, there's a flipside. There's positives and negatives to all of that. Another positive for me was just the sense of being able to do anything in ACT UP, but the negative was also I was a kid right out of college. It also interrupted a career. So, there's so much, but ACT UP was everything for so many years for all of us.

SS: Thank you, Alan. See it wasn't so bad

AK: Oh my god. Sorry for the buzz saw.

SS: That was great. Thank you.

AK. Thank you.

SS: That was great. That was great.

AK: Wow

JH: Where was your mother during the pool party?

AK: she was in Florida.