ACT UP
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Interviewee: **Michelangelo Signorile**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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MICHELANGELO SIGNORILE: I'm Michelangelo Signorile. I am 42 years old, and it is September 20th [2003], and we are at the ACT UP Oral History office.

SARAH SCHULMAN: So Mike, you're a native New Yorker. You grew up on Staten Island. Were you ever involved in any organized politics, before you came to ACT UP?

MS: I'd never been involved in politics at all, wasn't really political. I voted – that was about it, in terms of being political before ACT UP. And I was really one of these people who was very apolitical, in the gay scene in New York, going to a lot of parties, going to nightclubs. I was covering parties – as a journalist – and that was my life before ACT UP.

SS: How did you decide to be out? You were out as a journalist, before you came to ACT UP, and you said were covering the gay scene.

MS: Well, what was interesting about the world – even the world of celebrity and fashion and gossip and journalism – entertainment journalism in New York – is that even though we all thought we were out, we weren't really out. We were out to each other – those of us who were gay or lesbian, who were writers or publicists. We were certainly known to be gay to the other straight people around us – but nobody ever talked about it. That's sort of how we were. That's how gayness was – it was something seen, but not spoken about. If you figured it out, you figured it out. If you didn't, you were clueless. And, that seemed to work for everybody. Homosexuality was something straight people were and are uncomfortable with, so they didn't want to talk about it. The gay people who wanted to move up didn't want to really talk about it. And you can

convince yourself in that atmosphere, though, that you are accepted, because nobody was attacking you, nobody was saying anything. You were keeping it quiet, and that was all fine.

It was AIDS that suddenly shook that whole dynamic up – shook that whole way of defining one's self up, because it suddenly made the gay people more visible. It marked the gay people – the gay men, in that scene – and it also demanded something from everyone, whether they were gay or straight. And you were either going to go one of two ways: you were going to go totally into denial, and not deal with this thing – whether you were gay or straight, in that whole world – or, you were going to get involved and do something, whether that be benefits and things like that, or more political work.

SS: Before AIDS started, you were working for a bunch of commercial magazines.

MS: In the early to mid-'80s, I was working for – first, for a publicity firm, as a publicist – entertainment publicity, but we were a very specialized form of public relations firm. We were just column planters. We just got our clients into gossip columns – Liz Smith, *People* magazine, Page Six in the *New York Post*. They might have their other publicists – they usually did – and then, we were sort of hired out to just get them in those columns, and we had every movie company as a client, so we'd make sure to get every film into those columns. We had almost all the Broadway shows – or, at least a fair amount of them. We had some celebrities and others. And we would go to a lot of parties, and we would collect a lot of gossip and dirt, and then we would give that dirt to the columnists, and in exchange, they would write about our clients.

And I went from there into covering these parties, more as a journalist, writing a column for *New York Nightlife* magazine – a magazine that was popular back then. And, I also wrote for *People* magazine. And I was working for *Daily News Record*, which was
00:05:00 sort of the male version of *Women's Wear Daily*, of the men's fashion scene. And I was traveling and covering events outside of New York, and that kind of thing.

SS: And how were you living out your own gay life at that time?

MS: Well, I was going to parties every night. I was hanging out with other columnists who were gay. We were being our version of out and open – which was, if you knew, you knew, if you didn't, you didn't. Everybody knew, but again, it wasn't something you really talked about. And we were also going out to gay clubs and bars on our own, after these parties. So, my day would start sort of late in the day. By noon I'd wake up, and then maybe I'd write a bit, and then get my copy out, and then I'd start going to cocktail parties and then into these other events – movie openings, whatever – and then, go dancing, after midnight, at the gay clubs.

SS: Okay. So, how did AIDS first show itself to you, in that circuit?

MS: Well, the thing about AIDS with that world was there was such denial that it was present through my entire eight-year time in that world, and hadn't yet broken through. Because, I remember being in college – before I even had my first job – I remember hearing about this disease that they were talking about, in 1981. I was still in college and we were on the dance floor, and somebody was saying, "You know, there's this disease, and they say poppers may cause it." And, somebody passed us a bottle of poppers. So, that was the first realization of AIDS. I then came to New York. Obviously, it was there – it wasn't getting much coverage, in the very early years. Even

so though in that world, people were dying, people were disappearing, people were talking about it. There were some benefits and whatnot that were organized. Everything was very low key, and it was something we just didn't talk about too much. It was something – you started to realize that we thought we were all so accepted, but the straight people started to distance themselves from this. There became a chasm between gay and straight.

SS: Can you think of any particular individuals whose illness was a catalyst for that kind of division in your world?

MS: There aren't any particular people who are very well known, that I can think of. But, I can certainly remember other gay men, on that scene, who just freaked out about AIDS – didn't want to know anything about it, didn't want to talk about it. I mean, some really freaked out – just sort of dropped out, completely. Michael Musto was a good friend of mine from the *Village Voice* – still is – columnist at the *Village Voice*. He and I were talking about it a lot. He was getting angry and he was noticing, as a columnist covering the scene, what was happening – that all these people were in denial. Nobody wanted to talk about it. The party scene was just gurgling on, and even a lot of the gay men that we knew were just sort of not wanting to deal with it. So, we were – and maybe a couple of other people we knew – not many though – getting angry, wanting to talk about it more, and others just sort of freaking out and running away.

SS: Was there any particular person in your life, whose illness brought it closer to home for you? Or, was it just an observation of the community?

MS: A close friend of mine – who I went to college with – probably was there on that night on the dance floor, when somebody passed the poppers in 1981, and said,

"There's this new disease, and they say poppers causes it." He became very ill and died in 1987. And that became for me – it suddenly hit home in a much bigger way.

SS: So when did you decide to get involved politically around AIDS?

MS: Well, it was 1988 – Musto and I had been talking about this. We had
00:10:00 started to see how the scene was dealing with it, which was people were either dropping out, or there were very formalized sorts of benefits that socialites and others were organizing. And we had a bad taste about that too, because they were just becoming other parties to go to – people taking pictures. Everybody was sort of – AIDS was becoming glamorized, in a way, but there still was no anger about what was happening. We were angry about the fact that people were dying that we knew. Why is no one saying anything? Why aren't we hearing anything? Why is there no criticism of the government? I think, for us too – because we weren't very political – it was less about the government and more about the media. Why aren't we seeing more discussion of what's going on, or what's not going on? All we see are these benefits and whatnot, and aren't we just helping it all to keep going by writing about these benefits?

So, we were kind of torn as to what to do. And, I remember, we were at a bar one night – we were at Boy Bar, in the East Village, and these two guys came up and started talking to us, and trying to get us to go to ACT UP. And, I guess my first recollection of ACT UP was I had probably seen something on television or in a magazine – something like that – and I immediately thought, ACT UP are these crazy radicals. They get arrested and this and that. And these guys – they were nice guys and they were cute, but they didn't really seem like that, or whatever. And, so they were talking us up for awhile, and then they went away. And then Michael says, "Well, what do you think? Is this

what the answer is? Do you think we should go to this group, because we've been talking about wanting to do something? Maybe we should go there." And I said, "Michael, this group – they protest in the street, they get arrested, they throw things, they have signs, they're crazy." And he said, "Yeah, but these guys are really cute." So, we went to ACT UP. That was really the only reason we went. And, it was then – both of us just went through a real eye-opening transformation on all of these issues. Suddenly, everything we'd kind of been having – perceiving, but couldn't get the words out about, they had all the words. And the facts, and the figures and the data.

SS: So how did you first plug in?

MS: We went to a meeting and I remember people like Iris Long, and other people – Jim Eigo, who had all of these enormous facts and data – other people getting up, making the political critique, the media critique, and it just electrified me. And Michael Musto was with me. He went home and wrote the first piece for the *Village Voice* about ACT UP. The *Village Voice* had still not done a piece.

SS: Before the Goldstein piece?

MS: Before the Goldstein piece. Michael Musto did a column in his gossip column, on ACT UP. And there'd been criticism of the *Voice*, for not having gone there yet. And it took Michael, I think, to kick-start it. I then just immediately got involved with the Media Committee, because I saw that as an area where I could make a difference with my contacts, and what I had learned, and what I was seeing.

SS: So, when you came to the Media Committee, who was there? And what were they doing?

MS: Bob Rafsky was there. Vito Russo was – I believe – I don't know who was chairing the committee at that time. I think it was Vito Russo, or Vito Russo was just stepping down. But I remember we met at Vito Russo's apartment a couple of times. David Corkery was there, Bob Rafsky – a bunch of other people who were either in media or in publicity, in PR.

SS: Had you know any of them from before?

MS: No. I knew of Vito Russo. I didn't know any of them before that, or what they did or what they were about. They were incredibly detailed about what they thought needed to be done, and I was trying to plug into what I could do, what I could add to it.

SS: So, what was their strategy?

MS: Their strategy was to use whatever the group was doing – whether it was actions and protests that were going to get a lot of attention, or people in the Treatment
00:15:00 and Data Committee, who were uncovering information that needed to be put out there. That wouldn't be about some spectacular protest. That would be about trying to work *New York Times* reporters – get the news out that way. Their strategy was to work on several fronts. Publicize the demonstrations, but also work on editors and reporters to get the information out there that wasn't being written about.

SS: Okay. So let's talk about some of the different publications and what their relationships were with ACT UP. Let's start with the *New York Times*. ACT UP had a long, contentious relationship with the *New York Times*. So when you came in, what was the situation, and what was the strategy for transforming it?

MS: When I came in, Bob Rafsky and – well, when I came in, I think that relationship with the *New York Times* that ACT UP always had – that was contentious –

was probably the same between the Media Committee of ACT UP and the *New York Times*. That changed rapidly, after I got there, because Bob Rafsky, who was with Rubenstein Associates, who were handling Donald Trump and other people – he had enormous contacts that the *Times*. David Corkery had come from ABC – he had a lot of contacts. The Media Committee of ACT UP was starting to get a better relationship with the *New York Times* and with reporters there than the rest of the group. It sort of became a good cop/bad cop scenario. The rest of the group might protest the *Times*, but we would be on the phone with those reporters, sort of in a more neutral position. We would be there to get them the information, after ACT UP might have attacked them for not putting something there. Even though we knew a lot of these reporters were terrible, we knew that we couldn't – we had to educate them. We could not just yell at them and scream at them and say, okay, they're bad. We had to be the ones to be nice to them – always be there, call them up, leave messages, let them believe that they actually came up with the story that we educated them on, do damage control when they got it screwed up – call them up, try to get it corrected. We tried to really work them, in the way that publicists do.

So it was a very interesting dynamic, because we weren't just representing a group that needed publicity. We were representing a group that was attacking the media, often. And I think in that sense, it put us in a very interesting position. But we approached it, I think, in a very business-like manner. We had information that they needed, if they really wanted to get ahead on this epidemic. And, we also had a very theatrical group here, that caused a lot of commotion, and they wanted to be plugged into that. And as ACT UP became more successful at getting the message out, and more well

known, many more reporters wanted to have a contact in ACT UP, or with ACT UP. And so, we found ourselves having more and more connections with reporters.

SS: Looking back with hindsight, how would you have characterized why the *Times* was unable at the beginning to really represent the AIDS crisis?

MS: The *New York Times* had, first and foremost, an institutionalized homophobia that was impenetrable. The AIDS epidemic arose within a period of time in which Abe Rosenthal had created a chill throughout the newspaper around the issue of homosexuality. So nothing dealing with homosexuality could really get in the paper – at least, not that often. There had to be a real, huge reason for something to even be put in the paper. I wound up doing a story years later, interviewing many of the *Times* reporters who were there. I did a story for *The Advocate*, and came to learn that they were doing what they could to work within this situation and keep their jobs. They were hiding from editors on the gay issue. They were – some of them – trying to get things in subversively.

00:20:00 Others of them just not dealing with it at all. Many of them fearful for their jobs. Many of them were deeply in the closet. When you have an environment like that, and then suddenly this health crisis emerges with this group, it's a recipe for disaster. So, the early part of the coverage with the *Times*, I think – you can't ignore the institutionalized homophobia, and how it was just simply –

SS: What was the core motive of his homophobia?

MS: Abe Rosenthal had just grade-A anti-gay, homophobic sentiments. He came back from overseas in 1963 – or sometime in the sixties – and suddenly was running the Metro desk, and it was a new New York. He looked out and he saw a new New York – homosexuals on the streets, holding hands. This thing was becoming more

visible. It scared the daylights out of him. He assigned one of the most homophobic stories the New York Times had ever written at that time – that ran on the front page.

SS: What was that?

MS: It was a story all about this rise of homosexuality in New York. And it really was about the visibility on the streets. And of course, that was all coming into the Stonewall riots, and the 1960s into the '70s, and I think it just scared him to death.

And then even then into the eighties, he was doing what he could – like many homophobes of that time – to clamp down on this. Maybe it would never – if we just clamp down hard enough, it won't come out. And that created, among many of the straight editors as well, as sort of – the *New York Times*, still today – and always – has been a place where everybody is sucking up to everybody. And when they change editors, it's a whole new shuffling of the deck, of who you're going to suck up to. When the editor-in-chief is this raging homophobe – even if you're a good liberal heterosexual editor, you're going to play to that. And if you do anything else, you're not going to get far.

SS: What about the openly gay and lesbian people like Stephen Holden or Jennifer Dunning, in the early days of AIDS? Were they involved internally? Were they helpful to ACT UP at all?

MS: There were gay people at the *Times* who were helpful to us. I don't know how open they really were. Certainly in 1987 or 1988, they might have been a little more open than they were. But they were certainly not speaking out in any forceful manner. None of that really came until later on, in the early nineties, and when Rosenthal clearly had waned, lost his power. He was on the op-ed page, but his power had waned, and

people like Jeff Schmaltz, himself, became a person with AIDS that everybody at the *Times* was close to and was pretty high up. He was an editor that people respected and reporter people respected. But, that was in the early nineties. In the eighties, there was still a fear, and we were in contact with some gay and lesbian reporters who helped us, but I have to say, I even think they were fearful of speaking to us – to people in ACT UP.

SS: So, what was the nuts and bolts process of how the ACT UP Media Committee changed the coverage in the *Times*?

MS: Well, we really tried to influence most the science editors and the science reporters. And I'm not sure if it was because we saw a strategy of, it's going to be harder to change this kind of institutionalized homophobia from the more social issues point of view – change the coverage. We need to make all of this about science or whatever. I'm not sure if it was consciously about that. But, I think that we knew that we were on solid ground, when we could say, here are the facts of the epidemic. Here's what's going on. And those reporters then could go back and say well, here's what's happening, and here's what we're not covering, and here's what we are covering. And, we knew that we had – we were dealing, often with reporters who were not very, themselves, educated on the issues. They made some really bad mistakes, but our approach was to try to educate
00:25:00 them, and sort of move out from there, to the rest of the paper.

SS: Do you remember any particularly notable mistakes?

MS: We went through so many things with Gina Kolata, as I think much of ACT UP did.

SS: Could you characterize that a little bit?

MS: You know, to be honest, I even forget what the nuts and bolts of it was, but Gina Kolata would sometimes – I think that the *New York Times* reporters in general are juggling this weird – they're dealing with industry and contacts in industry. They're dealing with government and contacts in government, and then, they're dealing with advocates. When you're talking about say, the coverage of a disease – they're dealing with advocates and people representing the people with the disease. And I believe that no matter how much they want to do the best coverage, they always have to worry about paying off different people in those three groups, in order to keep those contacts going. So just when we'd see the coverage getting better, we'd see a story that – in which clearly, the reporter became a mouthpiece for a drug company. Or, the mouthpiece for the government, even though we knew that we had educated that reporter. And of course, they would never admit or say that's what happened. They would always sort of say, "Well, I looked at all the issues, and I thought this." Or, "I didn't really know this." So that was a constant battle. And, I think that if I were to go back and look at every debacle we had, it was always about – the story, when it was bad, it was because it was weighted toward the drug industry or the government, in a way that we knew that reporter had to know better. But, there were some times they were doing it to keep their contacts – to keep them happy.

SS: What was the breakthrough coverage, do you remember?

MS: I can't remember one particular story that I would say is the breakthrough coverage, but what I do remember is that we started to – it was more about placement of stories. And we started to see – because we had the goods, and we nurtured many of these reporters – and it wasn't just the *New York Times*. There were television reporters

we were very much in contact with. There were people at the other papers – at the *LA Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*. It became a competitive story, and people wanted it. And what we started to see was – because we were great sources for information and because we would tell them – because we would basically pick our favorites, they would start to make sure that placement of the story represented that. In other words, we would get – and of course, it wasn't an ironclad promise, because they would never do that – but we would get an assurance that the story would be on the front page of the *New York Times*, if we didn't give it to anybody else. If we gave it to anybody else, or we put it out in a press release, or put it on the wire – well, it might be on page A-16, and it'll be in the other papers, too, but we knew that if we got on the front page of the *New York Times*, then we would have it in all the other papers the next day, and we would have it on the front page of the *New York Times*. And I remember that that was a dynamic that started to happen quite often.

SS: What were some ACT UP stories that got on the front page of the *New York Times*?

MS: Most of them were stories about failings in the pharmaceutical industry, or failings at the Health and Human Services Department, in the government – little scoops, where ACT UP would find something out. One of the committees would give it to us. The FDA throwing cold water on a drug, quietly, without wanting to say anything – that would be something. We were developing contacts at the drug companies and at the HHS that were better than the reporters. So we were getting them information, and then they would go and check it with their contacts. And a lot of it was about exposing things in the bureaucracy of the government – particularly at the FDA.

SS: So, what was the dynamic between the Media Committee and the

00:30:00 **floor? Did you ever had a time where the floor announced an action and your heart sank, because you knew it was going to sabotage relationships or it would be hard to spin?**

MS: You know, I never did. I can't speak for everybody on the Media Committee, and how they sometimes might have said, "Oh no, what is ACT UP doing now? How are we going to do this one?" I never did, and I would say probably most people didn't. ACT UP was based on an incredible amount of loyalty to a central idea – that we had to get the message out, and that everything that we were doing was decided democratically, and that we as the Media Committee were simply to be used for whatever. And I think we were very aware that we didn't want it to every shift the other way – that we would come up with the idea, because it was the best idea from our point of view, and then try to really convince the floor. Whatever actions came out of the floor – whatever demonstrations, whatever decisions for a protest – we just then took it and said, "Okay, how do we work this? What ways do we work this?" We were also doing projects on our own that had nothing to do with the floor – nothing to do with publicizing demonstrations, or getting scoops out to reporters about drugs or the government. We were, for instance – we had a project in which we created an AIDS buzzwords poster, that all the words that were just constantly wrong, that reporters were using – like "AIDS victim" – that really were biased. AIDS victim, because it did not acknowledge people living, and living with AIDS. We preferred "people with AIDS." We created this poster, and we mailed it to, I think, over 2000 journalists around the country, and it was on walls in newsrooms, in science departments at television stations and at newspapers. And so,

we were doing a lot of projects on our own that were media activism, on our own, that were irrespective of the floor.

SS: Did you ever have heart-to-hearts with people who are in the insides of these papers, about you being out and them being in the closet and you being an activist?

MS: Yeah, yeah. And, I would say that, certainly at places beyond the *New York Times*, where people who were – might have been a little bit more comfortable. Beyond the Rosenthal era at the *New York Times*, people were more out, they were more open with us. There was never ever a spoken, sort of, "Okay, you're gay, I'm gay, I'm going to push your agenda" sort of thing. But, it was understood. We all have to work together. I'm going to do what I can. We're pushing it from the inside. We're doing what we have to. There was always that kind of relationship. And, it wasn't just with gay and lesbian reporters. There were many straight reporters who would acknowledge to us – we're dealing with horrible editors and this and that, and we're going to do what we can.

SS: Can you tell us the names of any of these people who were helpful?

MS: I can't remember. I honestly can't remember names of specific people who were helpful with us. But, there was one scene – this is more so about how reporters just would help us with our agenda – not necessarily always because they wanted to be helpful to the cause – but also because they knew what made good TV and what made good news. Brian Williams – who's now that big sub-anchor on NBC. He's kind of the Tom Brokaw in waiting, and he's on MSNBC – before he was with NBC, he was with local CBS News here. And I remember, we were doing a protest at City Hall, and it was

a die-in, outside of City Hall, and he asked us if we could time the die-on for exactly at six o'clock, for when he went live, so that he would have great television. And you know in talking with us about it, he was very much telling us how much he supported the cause,
00:35:00 and he wanted to make sure that we got the most dramatic footage out there. "So, can you time it for 6:07?" Or something like that. So, we were basically timing for when they came back from a commercial break to do the die-in. And we were fine with it, and he was fine with it. I don't think he'd want many people to know about that now, but they were clearly – whether it was because they were helpful with our agenda, or knew they wanted good TV, working with us in that way.

SS: Did the people who did the die-in understand that that was happening?

MS: Yeah, yeah, I think everybody knew. We just put the word out that the die-in is happening at 6:07 and the cameras are going on.

SS: What were some of the specific actions that you did media for?

MS: The FDA – Seize Control of the FDA – was I think, the first big one, although I had worked on some smaller actions. That was the first really big one. And then, the other really big one was Target City Hall. And, in between – God knows, dozens of them.

SS: Which came first?

MS: Seize Control of the FDA.

SS: Okay, so why don't you tell us what was the media plan for that?

MS: Well, looking back at the FDA action now, I'm sort of sometimes amazed at what we did for the time, and of course sometimes, you laugh at the technology we

used and this and that. Because we had, what was then – that was 1988 – what was then considered a cell phone, which were these satellite phones that were huge. They were these giant, battery-operated things, with giant antennas. And that was like, state of the art, I remember. And we were like, we're going to get a bunch of these phones, and we got little battery-operated television sets, so that we could monitor the coverage. Looking back, it's all so primitive – but I'm also thinking that we were really on the edge of the technology, and using technology. When I look at all of these protests today – the anti-globalization protest and the way the internet is used, and the way video cameras are used – that all we were really, at the beginning of that, in ACT UP – whether it was the use of footage and video footage, or just using everything we could – what was then a cell phone and little battery-operated televisions and whatever.

The thing about the FDA action that I think was really extraordinary, in terms of a group organizing media, was the detail that the Media Committee really got to, because we had such an incredible pool of people, on the Media Committee, from various aspects of publicity, because they were from different industries. So that, most people organizing an activity – whether it's a benefit or whatever – I mean, none of them have the benefit of having a team of people who some were in book publicity, some were in entertainment publicity, some had done protest actions. We had this team of people. So everybody brought these enormous skills to that action that I think had not been done before. We had Chip Duckett, who had been doing cookbooks, and doing publicity for cookbooks. And you think, okay, how could that benefit ACT UP? Well, he knew how to do pre-publicity – or what for us became pre-publicity on the action. He knew how to do publicity in markets around the United States, because you would send cookbook authors

on tour. So, you wouldn't just do your national shows – like your "Oprah" or "Donahue" – there's all little mini-Oprahs in every city, and that's what they would send cookbook authors to do. So we – what he said to us was, "Look, we also have the luxury of – we don't have to send anybody on tour. We have people in every single city, in every market." So, before the protest, we booked people on local TV shows, on local radio, around the country, in markets around the country. We sent out glossy press kits.

SS: These were ACT UP members from other chapters?

MS: These were ACT UP members from chapters around the US. We sent out hundreds of press kits to these producers and we had a team that we called on the Media Committee – a sub-committee, called the Little Publicists. And they spent days and days
00:40:00 – once these press kits got to these producers at these talk shows – TV and radio, and markets around the country, the Little Publicists would call them up and say, "Did you get our press kit? There's this huge action coming. It's going to be huge news – the largest thing since the storming of the Pentagon." We kept saying that. We didn't realize how big the Pentagon was, we just kept saying that. So, it became the largest thing since the storming of the Pentagon. So of course, the storming of the Pentagon was thousands and thousands of people – but that was our mantra. And of course, they would hear that and they'd say, "Well, we have to book somebody locally on this." And that then helped to make it bigger. So, it was all that kind of sophisticated hype machine of – you know, we're going to tell them it's going to be big, and they're going to then make it big. Then the day it happens, they have to cover it, because it's the largest thing since the storming of the Pentagon.

MS: So, we booked people on these radio and television talk shows around the country. And of course, we said it was going to be the largest protest since the storming of the Pentagon, in terms of the drama. But also, in terms of the issue, and in terms of how it was affecting people, we played to a middle-America audience, in that respect. We talked about families devastated by AIDS. We talked about mothers and their sons and their daughters. And that we had people in those markets who were people with AIDS, as well as mothers and fathers. So we very much played to St. Louis, and Denver and Detroit and all these places. Why it was important to get them all – in addition to getting, of course, perhaps one of the few talk shows in those markets that probably ever dealt with AIDS – in addition to getting visibility for people with AIDS – doing this was also going to force all the newspapers and the TV in those markets to have to cover the demonstration when it happened, because there'd been all this pre-publicity. And what we were also doing, in the process, was empowering the local activists in all of those communities to do media, because we were doing it from New York, but we had people from Media Committees in every one of those cities who would actually then – you know, we would hand it off. We'd do the booking, and then we'd hand it off. And then we'd say, "Okay, now you have the contact, put it in your book, and these people are going to become very valuable for you, for publicizing AIDS, from here on in – for all the protests that you're going to do."

So, the FDA demonstration – it had so many things going on, and one of the major things was also empowering and educating Media Committee people in the various ACT UPs around the country, to speak. What was amazing, of course, to me on the day of the protest – the morning of the protest, or I think it was actually the night before – we

were watching the local news on television in Washington, D.C., and the yellow tape was all outside of the FDA, and they were pre-publicizing our whole demonstration for the next day. And they were saying, "The FDA is gearing up for what is going to be the largest demonstration since the storming of the Pentagon." And I was just like, oh my God, we've created the largest demonstration since the storming of the Pentagon – whether or not, it is going to be the largest demonstration since the storming of the Pentagon. Numbers-wise, it wasn't, but in the larger, mythical sense it was, because the media said it was.

SS: How many people did show up, do you remember?

MS: Five hundred people or something like that. It was a few hundred.

SS: One thing that's really interesting in the system that you're describing is that there's a lot of trust – where you're trusting that the person from Cincinnati, who's going to represent this action on TV, is going to be able to present it in an articulate and clear way.

MS: Well, we also have teach-ins for all of the people who are going to be spokespeople. And we would do them on the phone. And we would make sure to educate people, get people from Treatment and Data Committee from the other committees of ACT UP, who had the information, and then people like Ann Northrop – who could break it all down into a sound byte – we would have them speak to these
00:45:00 people on the phone, so that we were able – and yeah, a lot of it then was about take it and run with it. You're now going to empower yourself to do this. And we just heard great reports from people back, about the kinds of publicity they were able to do for

months after that demonstration, because they now had the tools and the phone numbers to do it.

Another thing that was just another extraordinary piece of media that helped us to, again, bring the demonstration local, was Urvashi Vaid, who was at that time the PR person or the Public Communications person for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force – she had done the 198[6], had helped to organize a demonstration at the Supreme Court steps, after the Hardwick sodomy decision. And she devised this plan that then she brought to ACT UP, and she worked with us on the Media Committee in ACT UP New York to use for the FDA demonstration. And it was her plan to make sure that we got front-page placement on the demonstration, the next day, in papers around the country. Because we had people coming from around the country to the demonstration – coming from every media market – Washington is also a place that has a Bureau Chief from every paper around the country. And so this plan she used at the Supreme Court Hardwick decision protest, we used at the FDA – which was, we basically lined people up with signs from the cities that they came from. At the demonstration, we lined them up and we made an announcement to reporters, "You will now find people from your cities who are here." And they were there in line – Cincinnati, Detroit, Denver, Portland, Oregon. And those reporters all just ran, because they're all the Bureau Chiefs in Washington from those newspapers – they all just ran. And the television people too, that might have been from those places. And that made the difference between the protests getting page five in the Arizona paper, or the Dallas *Morning News*, and being on the front page, because there was a local person there.

So we did that kind of detail, for the publicity. And I think that, to me, was the beginning of really using every tool you could. And of course, we were also doing an enormous amount around radio and drive time on radio, because the other thing about our demonstration was, if it wasn't the largest one since the storming of the Pentagon, it was the longest one, since the storming of the Pentagon. It began at seven in the morning, and it was still going on at six o'clock at night, and we were able for that to get live drive time on radio, across the country. And, there's nothing that radio people love more than to hook into something live. So, we have people set up for live call-in shows around the country, as drive time was happening. And we were reaching people in their cars, as they driving, and that kind of thing. And, it was the same system that we used. We had people lined up from the different cities, because again, it was a huge draw for the radio station in St. Louis to have somebody from St. Louis at the demonstration in Washington. So, it was that kind of detail that I think we really perfected in a way that I'm not sure a lot of other protest movements had done.

SS: What about the issue of official spokespeople? Was that very controversial on the floor of ACT UP?

MS: I think that the idea of official spokespeople had to have been something that was problematic for people. Certainly, the idea of leaders was always a problem with ACT UP, and of people who were spokespeople. But what was interesting at least about the Media Committee was, we had – I don't know why, maybe it was because we got the message out – we had enormous respect from the floor. In many ways, more than many of the other committees. We were not a controversial committee. There was never any division. There were never any big fights. There was always good news coming

00:50:00

from the Media Committee. And if there was an issue about spokespeople, I feel it was blunted by people really trusting the Media Committee to make the right decisions, and we made our decisions based on who had the information, who had the knowledge, who could make the case best. And also, one issue we were always grappling with was representation – women, people of color, the scope of the AIDS epidemic, and not always having gay white men. If anything was an issue of spokespeople – that was an issue that sometimes was brought to us, and that we tried to deal with. But, I don't think we ever had a real sort of meltdown around the idea of spokespeople.

SS: Let's get back to the thing about the Task Force, because Urvashi, individually, cooperated a great deal with ACT UP, but ideologically the Task Force and ACT UP were not following the same strategy at the time. So was that an official relationship or is that a personal relationship?

MS: Urvashi Vaid is just a person who loves activism and loves grassroots activism and was really attracted to ACT UP, personally. And I think that yes, that was in spite of her organization having more of a distance from it. And one thing about the Task Force – unlike probably some of the other groups – was they certainly weren't going to limit the amount of participation that people at the Task Force could have in grassroots politics outside, in direct action groups. So, she was doing what she could at the Task Force. But I think that she was also wanting to help us and ACT UP. And part of it might have been – I don't know, maybe the Task Force wanted to have a better relationship with ACT UP too, and be helpful. It should be helping direct action groups do what they have to do.

There was never a good relationship – that's an understatement – there was often a bad relationship between ACT UP and HRC, Human Rights Campaign – which was then the Human Rights Campaign Fund – and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and all of the national groups, at one point or another. GLAAD – Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – because none of them were at that time really pushing and really speaking out in the way that ACT UP felt it needed to be said. There was too much posturing. There was too much trying to play within the Beltway, within the system, that got people nowhere. One thing that I think was always – attention, how much attention to do we focus on them, and how much attention do we just simply give to the issue and do it ourselves? And, I think there were often factions within ACT UP that just wanted to change NGLTF, and change the Human Rights Campaign, and spend an inordinate amount of time criticizing them. There were others, and I think the floor would gravitate towards this side eventually, that just said, "You know what? We don't have time for that. We're going to take the issue to Washington and do it ourselves, and they will follow us." And they did. In the end, there was a good cop, bad cop relationship.

SS: In terms of creating footage for television – the video activists inside ACT UP – were you ever able to use their footage? Was their footage ever fed to TV?

MS: I think on occasion we provided footage that video activists in ACT UP had given to us, for some TV stations that needed it. But mostly, they had their own video. TV stations would use their own.

SS: Was there ever a freak show element to the coverage? Screaming homosexuals or people with AIDS demonstrating?

MS: Oh, there would always be skewed coverage, sensational coverage, freak show coverage. And we, on the Media Committee, were probably more critical and more angry about coverage, and less satisfied than a lot of people in the group sometimes, because some people – if they just saw something on "ABC News" about a protest,

00:55:00 they'd be happy. We were often very critical and very much concerned with the quality of the coverage. One thing about ACT UP that kind of blunted that was that when there was a protest, because the signs and the theatrics and the costumes and everything else were so good, and so focused and so pointed, that no matter what the media – particularly TV media did – the picture was there, and the message would get out, even if it was just one second of a sign getting out there. We always said we have really good material to work with here. This isn't like having a bad Broadway show that you have to publicize. We had really great material to work with, and it would often make the coverage better. Even if the reporter was skewing the story, the visual was good.

SS: Back to the issue of gender and racial representation in the media. As we've been working on this project, one of the contradictions that has emerged is a lot of people of color will describe the group as though there were no people of color in it. And, a lot of the women will describe it as though there were very few women in it. When you actually look at it, that's actually not the case. There were lots of different people of color and women who came through ACT UP, but they were not in the mainstream representation for the most part. And I know that a lot of the white men in ACT UP were the ones who had the media relationships, and certainly, the media were mostly white men themselves, so that's who they would see. But

how was that discussed in the Media Committee? And how was that attempted to be addressed? What was the ongoing struggle with that?

MS: There was an ongoing struggle around how the reporters – particularly at a demonstration – would pan out over the crowd and then, who they would zoom in on. That was always something that we had very little control over. If there were a bunch of people protesting down in front of the Stock Exchange, and a camera crew showed up and they wanted sound bytes, they would just go to the people they wanted to talk to, and often, those were men – gay men – because they were seeing AIDS as a gay male disease and a gay white male disease. So that was a constant struggle. We would often try to work them – because we always worked reporters at a demonstration. We had everything from press kits for them to – at the FDA, we had donuts and coffee for them. We would always try to chat them up, and then, try to swing them over to other people – people who might have more knowledge about a topic, and people who represented AIDS in a more diverse way. And so we would often try to bring them over to women and people of color. We were always in touch with Majority Action – which was the committee that was focused on people of color issues. We knew who spoke about what issue and whatnot. So, we would try to bring them around. We weren't always successful, and I don't think they often wanted to talk to those people, and it was always a struggle for us. Even in terms of booking talk shows, we would try to do it, and they would often not want people who were – I remember we had somebody up against Patrick Buchanan on "Crossfire," and I remember, specifically they said, you know, we want a young man – they wanted a certain age group, and this kind of thing. And we sort of fought them about that, and I don't know how we decided on it, but it wound up being Peter Staley.

SS: The stockbroker. This question about AIDS as a gay disease. This was a big campaign in ACT UP – especially in the early days – to try to persuade the country that AIDS was not a gay disease. Although ultimately, in many ways, it has panned out to be that. What was your experience with trying to spin that argument and its evolution? What do you see as its long-term consequences?

MS: I think we were very successful in keeping AIDS out there in the public by pushing the idea that this disease was not a gay disease. That it might have been
01:00:00 emerging within the gay male community, among other communities right now, but that it would soon – and that's what scientists were telling us, and that's what others were telling us – that it would soon envelope and go into the larger straight "mainstream" population, and we used that. We used that because that was going to get us more coverage. That was going to bring this issue home to people. That was going to make people think – whether it was about going to *Cosmopolitan* and throwing condoms at Helen Gurley Brown, or talking to people about what was going to happen to their teenage girls and boys who were straight – we talked about how this as a disease that was going to affect everyone.

I think that, looking back at the time, I think it was one of those things where 60% of it – we believed it, but 40% of it – we just knew that it really was going to get us more coverage, and that we had to position it that way. And, when you believe something 60%, it's pretty easy to push it. I think some of us knew, in the back of our minds, that it might not happen. We also were dealing with – and you know, you're forced into reactive positions, often, because of the right wing. We were dealing with an organized campaign, among the right, to say it was not a heterosexual disease. We had Michael

Fumento, whose book wound up coming out a couple of years later, *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS* – which, if you read it now, he makes a lot of points that actually came true, but at the time, he was being used – and allowing himself to be used – by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and all of these right-wing people who were wanting to demonize homosexuals and tattoo us, and everything else. We were forced, basically, to fight that notion. And sometimes you are just forced into that, and you just have to say okay, we have to talk about it as a disease that's going to affect everyone, even if we might not necessarily believe it 100%. If the choice was do or die – literally – we had to do it that way.

SS: There's something that's so poignant about that argument, because it's like recognizing that our lives didn't really matter, that they would only care if it was about somebody else.

MS: Yeah, and at that time they did only care if they thought – well, I shouldn't say they would only care if they thought it was about them. That was one tack. They also cared if they actually saw people with AIDS – whether they were gay, straight or whatever – which they weren't seeing in the media. They also cared if they saw a mother, who had a son who was gay, who was dying of AIDS. They also cared if they saw families with children and women with their babies who were infected with HIV. We used all of those strategies. And sometimes yeah, there were people who would care just if they actually saw a gay person with AIDS, but they had never seen it. So we used that strategy, too. We just used whatever we could.

SS: Okay, let's go to Target City Hall – what was the media campaign there?

MS: Target City Hall – we used much of the model we had used for the FDA, creating slick press kits, with the logo – that bull's-eye that was stickered onto the press kits. Because there wasn't a national protest in the same way, where you had people coming from around the country, and it wasn't a national issue, it was focused on New York – it was a little bit different. And so we were dealing with, more so – in a way, it was much easier for us. All the money and time we had spent booking people on radio stations around the country, we could now focus all of that on radio stations just in New York. I remember when we did the FDA, we had stark choices: do we do 50 markets, 75 markets, 150 markets? Each one adds several thousand dollars onto the thing – at least the budget we were using. For a PR firm – a real PR firm would have added fifty and sixty thousand dollars onto it. With Target City Hall, we didn't have to worry about trying to do all these other markets. We could do New York, in a very, very intense way. New York has an enormous amount of radio, television, and print. And so we really just saturated the local media with the topic.

SS: What was the demand of Target City Hall?

01:05:00 MS: I can't even remember – there were a lot of demands of Target City Hall, from needle exchange to hospitals. The city's hospitals at the time – I think that was probably one of the major issues that we were pushing, because there was a crisis throughout the city, and people with AIDS were in hallways, and hospitals were shutting down. And much of the public didn't really know – and yet, it is an issue that much of the public would only really be concerned about if it became more public because then, it's just not about AIDS as well, it's about the hospitals are falling apart and we have to

do something. So, that was a major issue. But there were so many demands with Target City Hall – from what the mayor was doing, to what the City Council was doing.

SS: What was the action?

MS: We rang City Hall, I think. Gosh, I can't even remember. What – did we ring City Hall with sheets? There were die-ins – it was all that stuff. Several things went on.

SS: Let's talk about Stop the Church. I have a very funny memory of you actually, at Stop the Church. We were all going inside the church before the mass, trying to look inconspicuous, and I think you were wearing a full-length fake fur coat and you had like shopping bags from Saks or something. And I thought, there's Mike and he's looking ridiculous. Were you involved in the media work for Stop the Church?

MS: By that point, I had left and was working at *OutWeek*. So, I wasn't working on media stuff for Stop the Church. I think people had come to us and talked to us about it. The Media Committee had grown, and there were so many other people involved and doing stuff. I just wasn't involved anymore.

SS: What was your analysis of the media coverage of Stop the Church?

MS: The media coverage was totally focused on the communion wafer being thrown on the floor. Right? Is that what –?

SS: It was Tom whatshisname –

MS: Tom Keane went up and took the communion wafer and threw it on the floor. The media coverage was totally focused on that, and obviously then on the anger of activists, and not necessarily on the issues. And, I don't know how else – what the

Media Committee could do to try to refocus it, because it was an act that was so sacrilegious to Catholics, and then probably to other people who are of other faiths, who just saw it as this sacrilege to their faith – not anything that really bothered me, in particular, but clearly bothers a lot of people. But I think it's hard then to focus the media attention on the issues, because everything was focused on that. And, I do think that it was – the Church's standing in the city, at the time. I think the public was very open to the message that we were putting forth, about the Church meddling in government, and using its power and affecting the epidemic in extraordinary ways. I think the public was open to that. I think the public was seeing the Church as being too domineering. So, I don't know that the issues would have been very hard for us to really push, but that particular incident did obscure much of the coverage and the focus on the issues.

SS: Do you feel that that coverage hurt ACT UP?

MS: You know, I don't think it did. I don't think it hurt ACT UP. ACT UP by that point had become a very well oiled machine in the public's eyes – this activist group that did a lot of things that brought attention to the AIDS epidemic. If you hated them already – if you were a homophobe, and you were somebody who was totally against ACT UP and people with AIDS, and gay people, whatever – the Stop the Church thing didn't change your mind in the positive, but it wasn't like it was going to – it was just more fodder. If you were somebody who thought they did great work, I think you looked
01:10:00 at that action and said well, somebody in the group went too far and did this thing, and it was just about that action. I don't think that it somehow tarnished ACT UP, in the long run. I think ACT UP's larger reputation was based on its body of work, so to speak. And, I don't think that people would have judged it – people's decisions on ACT UP

were based on all of ACT UP's protests and work and what it did, whether you liked them or didn't. There were certainly people who hated that action – and many gay people, too – but I don't think it affected what they thought of ACT UP in general. If they didn't like ACT UP and didn't like direct action, than they didn't like it even more. And if they did like ACT UP and direct action, they just thought that action went wrong.

SS: What was your experience of it?

MS: I'm biased in a way, because I relate to the anger that Tom Keane and other Catholics have about the Church. And there was always a fine line in ACT UP, which was a great fine line. It always is what made the group electric. There was always a fine line with expressing your anger and doing an action that really put a message out there, in a very cohesive way. There was always a fine line like that – whether it was being at the FDA and the windows broke, or whatever. And the anger always made ACT UP very powerful, and it was a balancing act. It was always a balancing act of, just show enough of it, that then the rest of the message isn't obscured. You show too much of it, and then you're just an angry mob. But showing none of it would have just been a really dull group that would have gone nowhere. So to me it was always a balance. And I got off on the anger, almost all the time, that ACT UP was expressing. And that particular action, I personally got off on the anger that Tom was expressing to the church. I think I can step back and see that from a strategic point, it might not have helped the action, and getting focus onto the issues. But then I think you get into a larger discussion of what is the purpose of the action – of any action? Is it to express our anger, or to get the message out? Or both? And it certainly was successful at expressing the anger. And sometimes, some actions just are about that.

SS: It's interesting that ACT UP's reputation was always: "They're angry!" People felt threatened, or there was a tone of danger or almost violence, in the image. But actually we never did anything violent, and we never really fully expressed any of the pain that people were living with. We were very well behaved, frankly.

MS: I think a lot of it was shtick. A lot of it was pose and presentation. We were a very well produced organization that could produce great signs and great protests, and show a lot of anger. Now, that doesn't mean that that anger has to eventually become violence. But we did have anger. It rarely, if ever, became violent. The anger though helped us, because it made the group seem powerful. I think it brought more attention to us. Having that slightly ominous pose worked.

SS: Do you think people knew it was a pose? What was people's relationship to –?

MS: I'm not sure that they did. I'm not sure what they really thought. I think a lot of the public really thought, those AIDS activists – I'm scared of them. And, I'm not necessarily saying that all those people thought our message was bad. I think some of them agreed and still said, I'm scared of them. And the truth is, that brings respect. I think another group you could look at like that, in years passed, was Greenpeace. People would see the actions they did – whether they agreed or not – and say, "They really have guts." And I really think that's how people looked at ACT UP, wherever they stood on it. And for whatever it's worth, that has a certain cachet in our culture. It shows that you're not just half-hearted about the issue. You really care about it, and it plays in the media.

SS: What about internally – the ACT UP people themselves? Did they think it was a pose?

01:15:00 MS: I think in ACT UP, there was a lot of anger – at the government, at the media – for the way that the epidemic was being handled. And people's personal lives were in turmoil, were turned upside down. And I think, in a way, what the group provided was a way to channel that anger, in a way that helped to try to change things. But I don't think the anger was false. I don't think it was ever false.

SS: And why do you think there was never any violence on our part?

MS: There were too many people in ACT UP who were very, very conscious of – who came from other movements, feminists, people who had worked in the Civil Rights movement – who really valued non-violence in a major way, and had an enormous impact on the group and on its thinking, and on its basic values. And, there was a basic value in ACT UP that violence was just not to be a tactic that we used. And what's interesting is, even that wasn't a sort of doctrinaire position. Sometimes people did get really angry, and something happened. Sometimes the cops pushed too hard and people pushed the cops back. That was all understood. It was understood that we were human, so I'm not saying that the people in ACT UP really valued non-violence – it wasn't to the extreme of, that would never happen. I think I understood that we were human and that things happened, but as a basic tactic it was never going to be something that we were going to use. And for those like me, who did not come from a political background, I could have gone either way. If the values within the group – if there enough people in the group who said, we have to tear down the building – and you saw those discussions on the floor – I could have gone that way, but there were enough people in the group –

and I really do think it was the many lesbians who had been in the feminist movement, who said no, that's not the way to go, and made a cohesive case for why, and why it would make things worse. And I think it was all decided upon in a way that people said no, violence isn't going to be the thing we're going to use.

SS: But you also had – on one hand, you had Larry [Kramer] making that speech about how we should all learn how to use guns like the Irgun. You had inflammatory stuff. But then – I mean honestly, gay people have never beaten up straight people, whether they were in political movements or not. There never was a history of gay people being violent. Why is that?

MS: Except for maybe, Stonewall, or people fighting back or throwing chairs or rocks or whatever. I don't know. I'm of two minds about it. I sometimes wonder if the movement itself became so – it's a self-fulfilling prophecy – the movement itself became so connected with non-violence that it's just an option people wouldn't gravitate toward. Or that the activists, who are organizing actions – I think there's always that element that sort of brings cooler heads. I just don't see – we've never had spontaneous incidents – aside from Stonewall and the riots. We never have had real spontaneous outbursts of anger, and I can't even imagine people actually – I mean, outbursts of violence. I can't imagine people actually organizing violent actions.

SS: But, don't you think it's related to homosexuality? We had an entire movement of people who died, and they could have done all kinds of things knowing they were going to die and not have to pay the consequences, and not a single person did.

MS: I know. People have always remarked on – look at what the gay people were pushed up against. Look at what was happening here. People were literally dying, and it never rose to the level of violence. I guess I don't want to go into the area of saying that there's something innate about homosexuality –

01:20:00 **SS: Well not innate, but culturally – because we're the only community that's never done that.**

MS: Culturally, meaning – are we the only community that's not done that because masculinity is not what it is in this community, as it is in other communities? I mean, when you see outbursts of violence – when you see the LA riots, when you see outbursts of violence in other communities, isn't it often traditional masculinity that's operating there? Straight men acting out in a way that the culture has taught them? And, is that not something that gay men nurture and bring up? We put on a nice pose of masculinity, but it's not the violence connected with masculinity – that I would say, yes. I would say that might be one reason why.

SS: Let's talk about *OutWeek*. *OutWeek* was to ACT UP as *Pravda* was to the communist party. It wasn't official, but it was unofficially the cultural expression of ACT UP counter-culture and politics. So can you tell us how it got started, and how you got involved in it?

MS: *OutWeek* came about when a bunch of us who had been working on the Media Committee, and other people in ACT UP were just talking about how we needed a publication. All that existed in New York at the time was the *Native*, which had gone in this weird direction. And people really wanted something that would be the voice of this

politics coming out of ACT UP. And so, we were talking about it a lot – people were talking about it, and the buzz just got around ACT UP. By that point, ACT UP had become this larger than life thing, and people in other cities were plugged in. We had heard from Kendall Morrison, who was up in Boston – involved with ACT UP, up there. And he was a guy – he was a person with AIDS, who had made lots of money in the phone sex business, and he became somehow involved with Gabriel Rotello. I don't know if Gabriel Rotello sought him out, or he came to Gabriel and said, "I'd like to do this magazine." Gabriel said other people have been talking about it. Whatever it was, it just sort of coalesced in that way. I was approached –

SS: By Gabriel?

MS: By Gabriel. Or maybe I had spoken to Gabriel about this idea, before that. It's all so sketchy now, when you look back. But, I wrote all this is in *Queer in America* – so I'm sure that I've documented this properly somewhere. And we went to Andrew Miller, who was also at ACT UP, and had done news reporting, and we talked to him. And then we went back and talked to Kendall, and somehow it just started happening, almost like without us even realizing what we were doing. We started this publication that was basically – its infusion of cash was coming from the phone sex industry. And of course, we would run phone sex ads and that kind of thing.

SS: It's interesting, because right at the time that this was starting, *The Advocate*, which had always been funded by sex ads, stopped running them because they were trying to clean up their image. So, you were really going in a completely other direction than the national gay media.

MS: Did they do it at that point or later? I'm not sure exactly when *The Advocate* took the phone sex ads out, but at that time, we just didn't – there wasn't even a thought of oh, we shouldn't have these ads, or something like that. I mean, it was very much – sex was very much a part of the ACT UP culture, so having phone sex ads just seemed appropriate and fine.

SS: So you officially left ACT UP when you went to *OutWeek*?

MS: I didn't in the beginning officially leave, but it sort of just happened that way. I was still on the Media Committee in the first few months, or the first few weeks. But I was just so busy at *OutWeek* that it was impossible to do it. There was never really though a clear delineation between *OutWeek* and ACT UP – not just in the coverage, but
01:25:00 certainly everyone at *OutWeek* – even as it grew bigger, and even the people on the business side, were all in ACT UP. And often, there'd be these confluent – things would just come together, where we were all just merged into one again.

I remember one particular protest that ACT UP did, but it was sort of ACT UP doing it, but it was *OutWeek*, but it grew out of my columns in *OutWeek*, which was the protest against Pat Buckley, who was co-chairing Skating for Life with Peggy Fleming at the Armory on 29th Street, which happened to be across the street from *OutWeek*'s offices. And Pat Buckley, of course, was suddenly getting into AIDS charity, because it was very fashionable, and her friend Judy Peabody was doing it and had urged her to come. But meanwhile, her husband had just written that all people with AIDS should be tattooed – Bill Buckley. So, I was writing columns pointing that out, and critical of both of them, and putting out the whole idea of women – the "ladies who lunch," who become this sort of PR arm of their husbands – cleaning up the name and doing the charity work,

while the husbands are writing these things that are becoming policy. And a bunch of people in ACT UP sort of grooved off of those columns, and did a demonstration and asked us if they could –

SS: At Skating for Life?

MS: At Skating for Life. They asked if they could use our building to put a giant banner outside the *OutWeek* offices that could greet Pat Buckley when she arrived. Of course, because I had been writing about it – I'd been writing that ACT UP was going to do something and this and that – it became the *scandale* of the gossip columns in New York, for weeks, with Liz Smith and all of these people writing either actual columns about it, or coded things about it. And rumors going around that Pat Buckley was going to have blood poured on her at the skating benefit and all kinds of things.

SS: It was tainted blood –

MS: And her saying well, maybe she wouldn't go, and Peggy Fleming was getting cold feet, so to speak. It was all just getting crazy. And then, that day – oh, and I'll never forget – the Reagans came to visit them the day before the benefit, and that was in the news. So there was a picture of their house, and what was unbelievable was that this had become such an issue in the gossip columns that – I guess this is what rich people do for each other when they're in a crisis or something – people went and put flowers outside of Pat Buckley's door, as support for this horrible thing that was happening to her in the social world of the AIDS activists coming after her. And we had a banner. ACT UP came and, like I said it was all who was in ACT UP and who was in *OutWeek*. There was a banner hanging from the *OutWeek* offices that said, "Pat Buckley: Number One AIDS Charity Hostess" and "Bill Buckley: Number One AIDS Hypocrite,"

or something like that. Of course we then ran pictures of it in *OutWeek* the next week. So, there were always those sorts of ACT UP, *OutWeek* connected protests, where it was all very much the same thing.

SS: What was your title at *OutWeek*?

MS: I was the Features Editor, and I wrote Gossip Watch, my column every week.

SS: Did *OutWeek* ever attack ACT UP, or criticize ACT UP?

MS: Probably. Yes. Well first of all, there were a lot of voices in *OutWeek*, and a lot of them were from ACT UP. Some of them might not have been officially in ACT UP. ACT UP had so much self-criticism in the group. That all played out in *OutWeek*. People were always criticizing ACT UP, elements of ACT UP, each other in ACT UP. The Letters page of ACT UP was unbelievable – often attacking *OutWeek* and ACT UP by people inside and outside of ACT UP. What was great about *OutWeek* was that it was broadening the ACT UP world, because it might have been ACT UP's *Pravda*, but it was also on every newsstand in the city and other people were reading it who hated ACT UP, and hated *OutWeek*, but they would read it. And so, it was kind of really
01:30:00 broadening the debate to the people who – in the gay community – who really needed to be engaged. And they changed their minds a lot of times, and sometimes they wouldn't. But, we'd see this progress on the Letters page. So, there'd be a lot of criticism of ACT UP. And, even our editorials, there were times when we criticized ACT UP, or people in ACT UP, and I remember it being controversial, too. People would be mad at *OutWeek*.

SS: Do you remember any specifics?

MS: There was one particular thing that we did that was really controversial, and I cannot remember – but I know that Gabriel would. Gabriel not only details in his mind, I think, everything that happened at *OutWeek*, but he's written everything down. You should talk to him if you want to –

SS: Definitely. When did *OutWeek* fold?

MS: *OutWeek* folded in June of '91.

SS: Okay, and what was its circulation at its height?

MS: You know, that was always another one of those mythical things that we never really knew the real numbers, because there were the numbers we put out there – which we would say, 50 or 60,000 or whatever. And then there were the real numbers, which were often like, 8,000, 10,000, 20,000 – maybe at the peak. Part of it was that when I look back at the model for community newspapers then, and alternative newspapers then, and look at it now, I realize we were on the cusp of the old model -- where you sell it on a newsstand. And if we were in today's market and had these boxes out on the street and it was free, I think *OutWeek* would have had huge circulation. I think people – if they were on every box – if they were in boxes on every corner, I think it would have probably been as widely read as the *Voice* and *New York Press* and others.

SS: So, then you guys folded before the ACT UP split?

MS: Yes.

SS: And did you return to ACT UP, after *OutWeek* folded?

MS: No.

SS: Why was that?

MS: By the middle of my reign at *OutWeek*, which was two years, I really had not been involved with ACT UP at all – even though I was – I would always write, praise ACT UP, and I would always use all of ACT UP philosophies in my attacks on the gossip columnists, or whatever. But I really had gotten involved in so many other things. And by the time *OutWeek* folded, I had a book proposal that I was putting together. I had an editor who came to me, having me write *Queer in America*. So I was working on the book. I went over to *The Advocate*. I really was just doing other things.

SS: I want to talk a little bit about the interior culture of ACT UP. What was your social experience? How many nights a week were you involved in ACT UP?

MS: I was involved with ACT UP every night – somehow, some way – because there were committee meetings, there were sub-committee meetings, there was the actual meeting on Monday night. There was maybe meeting some people for dinner to talk informally about stuff, and maybe have some fun. There was going to The Bar, where everybody would be from ACT UP – The Bar on 4th Street, or the Tunnel Bar, or wherever else, where everybody would be. And then there were ACT UP events, there were ACT UP benefits. There were all of that. And then there was whoever you were dating in ACT UP. So, I was involved in ACT UP quite a bit.

SS: So at that point, did you have any romantic or close friendship relationships with people who were outside of ACT UP?

MS: No. I became totally immersed in ACT UP, and dropped everything. My entire career fell apart, previously, because I was previously going around to parties and writing for these magazines and hanging around with a whole different crowd of people –

all the people on the club scene. And I really grew to have a real anger toward many of them for not being involved, for not doing anything, for still going to the parties. I remember deadlines passing and I couldn't get copy in, because I stopped going. And, it
01:35:00 was a sort of process – especially through the beginning of ACT UP, my involvement with ACT UP – that *OutWeek* really saved me in the end. Just when I was on my last penny, I got this job. I didn't care though that my career had fallen apart, because I felt I was doing work that really fulfilled me and that I loved.

SS: Did ACT UP change the way you related to men in terms of sex and relationships?

MS: I guess it did, but not just men – gay people – gay, lesbian people in general, because my entrée into being gay was through that whole nightclub scene, and the club scene. You know, we're not brought up with gay and lesbian people all around us. We all make our first impressions based on – well I guess today, people watch "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and make their first impression.

SS: Let's hope not!

MS: We all make them – major first impressions on what your entrée was into the gay community. I came in through the club scene, and the nightclub scene – a very cutthroat, ruthless, egotistical, every person for themselves, and just be fabulous as you can be – that's what I thought gay people were. So ACT UP for me, was a whole other look at the gay and lesbian community, and working with lesbians, and having lesbian friends, which – in the club scene, there were some publicists who were lesbians, but gay men and lesbians just didn't hang out together, and ACT UP was that sort of place where there was a lot of coming together. So it definitely changed my relationships with gay

men and with lesbians, because it just opened up to me a whole different look at the gay community – and I would say, a much more caring and loving aspect of being gay. Because, on that club scene, it wasn't that people cared about each other – it was all about every person for themselves, and in ACT UP, it was about people really caring about each other.

SS: How did you know that? How was that expressed?

MS: Just the way people treated me, and the way – just initially, from the beginning – how close people would get to you, just in a manner of days. Your experiences with them. Going through things like going to jail and whatever – how you bonded with people. And people giving of themselves and saying, "Look, if you really want to talk, here's my number." And you didn't even know that person – or, whatever. So it opened up a whole different way of relating for me – to gay men, and lesbians.

SS: Do you feel sexually competitive within the subculture of ACT UP? Because we've talked to some people who say, "Oh, there was the Swim Team, and those were the guys that everybody wanted." And other people who felt really comfortable in the sexual culture of ACT UP.

MS: There definitely was the A-list on the sexual underground, or the sexual terrain, of ACT UP. That's everywhere, really, isn't it? And at least in ACT UP, they were less snooty than everybody else. They still hung out with you. Maybe they didn't sleep with everybody. Although, I really do think that they did in a way. I think there might have been that A-list of how people looked, but I think that a lot of those people did sleep with people who were not in their same league, physically. I think people bonded in other ways, and those things did happen. And sometimes it was about just a

one-night stand, and sometimes it wasn't. My own personal experience with it – I can't really separate from being the Chair of the Media Committee, which was a position of a bit of prominence too, and I was speaking before the floor a lot. So, I may have a different perspective, because people generally treated me well – including the people on the Swim Team – whereas, maybe they wouldn't do it to somebody who was not as popular, before the group.

SS: So, being on the floor, and taking responsibility in ACT UP, also translated into more sex and more romantic possibilities?

MS: Certainly, more popularity – more people wanting to hang out with you. And yeah, maybe more sex. I don't know. I don't know if the people who slept with me would have slept with me otherwise. I didn't sleep with that many people in ACT UP,

01:40:00 quite honestly. I had a boyfriend for a lot of the period I was in ACT UP.

SS: A boyfriend who was in ACT UP?

MS: Gregg Bordowitz. We planned the Target City Hall together. It was like our child, and then we had no child after it was done. And we broke up.

SS: What was it like being a couple in ACT UP? Did people treat you like a couple?

MS: It was very difficult to be in a couple, because everybody knew your business – including who your boyfriend was sleeping with. In a way that it just might not be – because everybody's life was ACT UP, you know, whereas in the larger world if your boyfriend's fooling around, well hopefully he's doing it in a whole other realm somewhere, right? In ACT UP, it was somebody else on another committee.

SS: And she was a lesbian.

MS: That's right. So everybody knew your business, before you did. It was very small town, very small town in that way – very provincial.

SS: What about safe sex? Did people have safe sex in ACT UP?

MS: Yeah, my own interaction with people, and from what I knew of people, yeah, I think ACT UP was really – I think there was that one big controversy over the ACT UP benefits at The World – that had a back room – and they weren't necessarily people using condoms all the time, in the back room. And I don't even know if at that time we were even talking about it for anal sex. I think – it might have just been for oral sex. I don't remember what the exact controversy was.

SS: Was it discussed on the floor?

MS: Yes, it became a big thing on the floor.

SS: Was this the Aldo Hernandez thing? That's not The World; that was Meat.

MS: No, this was not Aldo Hernandez. There was another fellow. Maybe it was Aldo? Where was –

SS: At Meat? Because we interviewed him about this. On 14th Street.

MS: That might have been another –

JIM HUBBARD: Wasn't it Dean Johnson?

MS: Dean Johnson – that was at The World. It was not Aldo, there was another fellow; he was also Hispanic. What was his name? I forgot. But he was very angry about it. Very, very angry. Garcia.

SS: Robert Garcia?

MS: There were two Garcias –

SS: Robert who died? The little guy?

MS: Yeah.

SS: And how was it discussed on the floor? I don't remember this.

MS: Should we be supporting this? Should this be a benefit for us, if people are having unprotected sex? And the other side was well, we're all about people empowering themselves, not policing them. So there was that debate, back and forth. I think in the end it was resolved with Robert Garcia and a bunch of people were just going to go there and force condoms on people.

SS: And what about people who were HIV-positive versus negative, in terms of sexual relationships inside ACT UP? How was that negotiated?

MS: My feeling was that the culture of ACT UP was so – other people may say differently – I don't think there was a negative/positive divide at all. I think it was the opposite. It was like you weren't supposed to think about that at all. And you were supposed to show that if you were negative, you sleep with positive people, and you're supposed to lead by example, right? So, I think there was a lot of that sort of not thinking about people's HIV status, and – I mean Gregg was positive, I was negative. I think there were a lot of couples like that, too.

SS: I want to talk about the rapidity of death in ACT UP, at a certain point. You left in about '89?

MS: Yeah, '90. I think I was still going to meetings – just not as much.

SS: Because in that era, there were just people dying every week. It was very severe. And particularly I'm thinking of Bob Rafsky, whose illness progressed in a very public kind of way. It's hard to characterize, but working with people who

were dying in front of you – did you guys talk to each other about – when someone like Bob was that sick, did you talk to him about it?

01:45:00 MS: No. There was a certain – my experience is that there was a certain usefulness to ACT UP's work, which was to keep the death at arm's length in a – well, keep the sickness at arm's length, in a way. I mean for some people, I think it might have been the opposite – it was a way to really bond with people, particularly if they were sick themselves. But I think for some of us – particularly if we were doing a lot of work, were on committees and doing a lot of work – rather than say being there every Monday, and then showing up for demonstrations – and I do think those two different groups of people got different things from ACT UP. I think for those of us who were doing a lot of work on a lot of committees, the work was a way to keep the death at arm's length and to keep trudging ahead. And there was that ethic in ACT UP – that nothing was ever going to stop a protest, or nothing was ever going to stop anything. Holidays – AIDS doesn't take a holiday. And there was that thing about death, too – someone died? Well, we're going to go out and protest. That's what we do. We're not going to stop. We can't be too maudlin. We can't be this, we can't be that. And I think a lot of that was just a way of not dealing with the death. And I remember with Bob – no, there was not any sort of touchy-feely, I have to reconnect with Bob, and be with him during his illness and this and that. It was like – Bob was sick, we knew. We knew other people who were sick. And then Bob died, and you know – we had our cry, and we lost somebody important, but there was another protest to do.

SS: Was there ever anyone who you really sat down with them and talked with them about what they were going through, as they were dying in ACT UP?

MS: Well, I – again, my experience – the work allowed me to remove myself even while I talked to people about their illness, because being on the Media Committee, I had to talk to people. We had to have people with AIDS for the cameras too, and for the reporters, and we had to talk to them about their experiences. And we had to have it almost down to a science – a person with ARC, a person with AIDS, a person with this, one who has this opportunistic infection, that opportunistic infection. We had them all written down, we had it all catalogued, and we interviewed them all the time. Then, if a reporter needed X, we would call up Mark Fotopoulos. We would call them up. So I was always talking to them, about their experiences, and yes, looking for the saddest, sappiest stories that sold. So I was always very much connected to exactly what people were going through, but also being able to remove myself, because I was doing a job.

SS: Was there ever like, one person who broke that for you?

MS: I think for me, Vito Russo – it really just was something that was very difficult for me when he died, because he had in many ways been the backbone of the Media Committee, even if he wasn't involved anymore, for a long time. We were always in touch with him. He always knew what we were doing, and I was very personally – I was really upset when he had died, and felt directionless.

SS: Have you come to a place in your life, where you've come to understand what the cumulative effect that being around all of that illness and death ultimately has been on you, or is that something that still remains to be understood?

MS: No, I think I thought about it a lot, and I think that I was always thinking about it then, and trying to – I think a lot of the struggle and a lot of doing the work that I

was doing, was trying to put it in a place. I think we're always trying to put things in a place. Where does something fit in your life experiences? Everything is supposed to fit.

01:50:00 And I think what I was trying to do then – and I've thought about it a lot since then, was trying to – by doing the work I was doing, I was trying to put all of this death in a place, right? Okay, my relationship to someone's death was about it being a story or this or that, or way to cope with it. And of course, that was never adequate for me – not on an emotional level. It might have been, for the moment, but then later you rethink it and realize that that never really worked. It was a little scam that I was pulling on myself.

SS: I just have one last thing I want to ask you. Looking back historically, what would you say was ACT UP's biggest disappointment for you, in terms of what it was not able to achieve? And what do you see as its greatest achievement?

MS: ACT UP's greatest achievement – I'll start with that one – was in overhauling the drug approval process in this country in dramatic ways, for all other illnesses – in terms of a tangible thing, in terms of something you could look at, in that way. I think ACT UP's larger achievement – culturally and socially – was the enormous impact it had on the gay movement that we are still feeling. It was a giant wave that went out – it might have slowed, as all waves do – but, it's still there, it's still having an impact. It jump-started what I see as everything – everything's that's happened since then goes back to ACT UP. People don't know it, they may not realize it, but if they actually sat down and connected the dots, they'd see. Not just in terms of the people – but you can look at the people who left ACT UP and where they went and the influence they had – you can do that. Just that alone, will show the dots. The influence in the gay movement and beyond – in politics and culture, television, films, whatever. But even if you didn't

connect just the people – beyond the people there were the ideas and the philosophy, the politics, the culture, that came out of ACT UP, that is still with us, and has had an enormous impact on this country.

SS: What about disappointment?

MS: The disappointment for me – and, I'm not sure – maybe I'm expecting too much, but was, that it didn't sustain – that it eventually fractured in that predictable way that you see happen to movements, and that it sort of just didn't retain that energy. And, I'm not sure that that's something anybody should have expected, but I would have hoped that that would have translated into something else. Or, maybe it needed to dissolve that way.

SS: Okay, thank you Mike. You told us a lot of stuff we didn't have before; we really appreciate it.