

Transcription of Interview with Sarah Schulman, by Karl (K.M.) Soehnlein

Author of "Let the Record Show"

Phone call recorded in two parts, first on Otter.ai and then via my own QuickTime

Karl Soehnlein 0:01

Oh yeah, this website LGBTQ Nation which is like part of a group of websites that includes Queerty and some other ones. They have me use this browser based thing where the, the computer listens and transcribes and records as we go. So that's what's happening on this end.

So could you, just so I can make sure it's picking up your voice, just say like, my name is Sarah Schulman, just something basic and clear that I can get down here.

Sarah Schulman 0:33

Yes, this is Sarah Schulman it's June 14 and I'm in my apartment in New York.

KS 0:39

Good.

Your voice is getting recorded that's great. Okay, cool.

So, congratulations first of all, I read the entire book in about six days. I couldn't put it down and I was so excited to. Oh gosh. Where do I even start without what excited me. I mean getting the entirety of this ACTUP Oral History Project into an organized and digestible and kind of curated form, allowed me to really understand ACT UP in a way that even though I lived through it and think about it all the time, I don't know that I fully understood before. So that was certainly an overall impression of the group. And I'm not sure that everyone in this kind of audience is aware of everything about ACT UP, so this is going to be a little bit of me talking to you as a friend and comrade and a little bit of kind of asking some basic clarifying questions for the audience. So we'll be navigating that, that, you know, dichotomy a little bit. I think what I'd love for you to answer first if you could, would just be to explain what the ACT UP oral history project was and why you started to collect these interviews 20 years ago, before this book was actually begun. Could you start there?

SS 2:14

Well, it starts a lot earlier than that, so I was a reporter for the gay and lesbian and feminist newspapers in the late 70s and early 80s And what people don't realize is that the mainstream media completely ignored us. And so we had our own press and the reporters for those newspapers worked for free, as in most of the staff, and in some cases, all of the staff. The issue at the time that I was covering at City Hall was that there was no gay rights bill in New York City. So what that meant was that people could be fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, denied public accommodation like restaurants and hotels. And this was, this was the priority issue for the New York City gay community. Mayor Koch was the mayor, he was in the closet, he was horrible. And he really did nothing for us.

Then in '81 scientists observed the pattern that came to be known as AIDS, though we now know that AIDS is probably 100 years old, and that it probably was in New York in 19, in the 60s and 70s but science didn't know this up until 1981. And so this article came out in the New York Times: "41 cases of rare cancer found in homosexuals in San Francisco." Now, what people need to know to understand that headline was that at that time there was an obsession with just announcing what the cause of homosexuality was. So now we know that there's no such thing as homosexuality, it's different in each person, and that there's all kinds of reasons, or factors but also now we understand that trying to find the reason is itself a stigmatizing action because nobody tries to find out why people like sports, for example, right. So the theory at the time was that it was, it was one thing and it was biological, and they were doing things like saying your homosexuality is attached to the hypothalamus of your brain and it was like, ridiculous, it was pseudoscience. But this implied that homosexuality itself was a biological disease. So when gay people had a pattern of disease, it was connected in the public and then science's mind to the disease of homosexuality. So the first name for this disease was Gay Related Immune Deficiency. And there was a phrase gay cancer; now we know that cancer can't be gay. It's an absurd concept, but at the time, that's what that language reflected.

So the first five years of AIDS, 40,000 people died, and the government did nothing, and pharma basically tried to recycle failed cancer drugs that they held the patents for, because there was a huge market and they were looking for a drug where you take a pill and your AIDS goes away. So they wanted a drug that withstood everyone who had AIDS. The word AIDS is kind of like the word cancer, it's an umbrella term, but each person manifests it differently. And so just for people who don't understand, AIDS means that your immune system doesn't work, and so you don't die of AIDS, you die of infections that are caused because you have no immune system and those are called opportunistic infections; so it could be pneumonia, dementia, blindness. You could starve to death because your body can't process nutrition; all those are the different ways that people actually die.

So, in those first five years I worked as an AIDS reporter, among other things that I did, I also was a novelist and I wrote plays, and all kinds of things, but I covered mostly the social justice aspects of AIDS. So I covered Pediatric AIDS, there were a lot of people in New York born was born HIV positive at the time, and they were mostly poor. I covered women being excluded from experimental drug trials. I covered homeless people with AIDS. And I also did like community based things. I covered the closing of the bathhouses. The first time a PWA was arrested, a man named David Summers, doing civil disobedience.

Anyway, what the gay community did in those first five years, was try to replicate social services that we were deprived of, because not only did gay people have no rights, so like if your partner died of AIDS, you couldn't inherit the lease for example, but also familial homophobia was pervasive, and was the cultural norm. So a lot of people with AIDS had no family support whatsoever, so there were all of these kind of social service, or things that were founded, like people would walk your dog or somebody would be your buddy and do your grocery shopping, or God's Love We Deliver would bring food, but there was no political response. Then at the end of 86 and the beginning of 87, this started to change a little with the Hardwick decision,

which was the Supreme Court upheld the sodomy law. And this was a blow to gay people, it was in the middle of this horrible epidemic, people are dropping dead. And when the government should have done something to help us, they reinforced our illegality. And in fact gay sex was illegal nationally until 2003, in the United States. So there started to be these demonstrations against the Hardwick decision that were very angry, and didn't have permits and were people meeting in the streets, and that was sort of happening. And then there were two affinity groups that were founded before Act UP. One was the silence = death graphic collective who did the famous logo and made a poster and put it up around the city. And then there was a zap group called the Lavender Hill Mob, so Zap was a strategy that came out of gay liberation. And to do that you have to be completely outside of power because it means like bursting in and fucking up everything. And these guys dressed up in concentration camp uniforms and busted up a CDC meeting. So that's what happened right before ACT UP was founded.

So in March of 1987 Larry Kramer, the writer, gave a speech at the Gay Lesbian Center and the audience members decided that they wanted to meet and start a political group so a few days later they met and they founded ACT UP, AIDS coalition to unleash power. And then for the next six years which are the years that I covered my book, ACT UP achieved incredible victories, I mean it's very hard to find another movement of people so outside of power that was able to accomplish so much. So just to hit the high points, ACT UP basically forced pharma to restructure the way that they researched, medications, ACT UP forced the Food and Drug Administration to make experimental drugs available, that even if it hadn't been approved. ACT UP forced the CDC to change the definition of AIDS, so that women with AIDS could qualify for benefits and experimental drug trials. ACT UP made needle exchange legal in New York City, ACT UP stopped the Catholic Church from inhibiting condom distribution in the public schools, and ACT UP started Housing Works, a program for homeless people with AIDS. ACT UP achieved reform in private insurance that made 500,000 People with HIV, eligible for insurance, and also ACT UP changed the way that gay people and people with aids saw themselves and were seen in mass media. And that's phenomenal.

In 1992 12 members of ACT UP split and started something called Treatment Action Group. And even though hundreds of people remained, the group was very demoralized. 1993 was a very rough year in ACT UP. There were three major political funerals of three men who were in the same affinity group. ACT UP conducted the Ashes Action where people brought ashes of their loved ones to the White House lawn. It was very desperate time and ACT UP dissipated, even though it still exists today.

In 96 was the protease inhibitors, drugs that really started to work, or were introduced in people who thought that they were going to dive retreated to their corners to put their lives back together. 99 is the Internet revolution. And this left ACT UP in the dust, because none of our materials are digitized. So as everyone started going online. If you searched ACT UP you wouldn't find anything. And it was as though we never existed, then in 2001, which was considered the 20th anniversary of AIDS, even though it's just the 20th anniversary of noticing AIDS, is when I heard a radio show, where this guy said "at first America had trouble with

people with AIDS and then they came around,” and I was like no, actually thousands of people thought until the day they died and forced this country to change who gets what.

So that's when Jim and I realized that we had to create some kind of raw data that was digitized, with the idea that other people, these mysterious other people, would analyze the data. So we started the oral history project in 2001. And we had financial support from Urvashi Vaid at the Ford Foundation. And over the next 18 years we interviewed 188 people, and we made all the transcripts available for free. We've had over 14 million hits since that time. However, these mysterious people who were supposed to analyze the data never appeared, and instead a re-historicization of ACT UP started to take place that was sort of based on the John Wayne heroic white male individual model, where Larry Kramer was suddenly the leader of ACT UP. And I'll just say for the record that I interviewed 188 people and nobody from ACT UP thinks Larry Kramer was the leader of ACT UP. It's a media construction.

SS13:25

And then, you know, this idea that five white individuals who were treatment activists were the individual heroes who on their own changed AIDS this became the status quo understanding, and it felt like a state of emergency, and we tried to find someone else to write the book. We couldn't find anyone to do it. And so Jim and I decided I was gonna have to do it. So I took three years and I reread all the interviews -- I had conducted all of them but two -- And I realized right away that I could not tell the story chronologically because it wouldn't be accurate, because so much was happening at the same time and that that was one of the tactics that actually made it effective. So I had to cohere kind of like higher tropes, and I ended up mentioning I think 140 people. So, you get a much more realistic sense of not only that organization but in general that change happens because of collectivities and communities and coalitions. And that's really how it works.

KS 14:36

Thank you. That's a beautiful summary and covers a lot of the stuff that I was gonna ask you. But let me just dive in and let's jump into some of these kinds of particular things that you put in the book, so I was really struck that one of the first lengthy chapters in the book is about Puerto Ricans in ACT UP, because there is this idea that ACT UP was a group of white men. So can you talk about why you put the spotlight on Puerto Ricans in ACT Up as one of the earliest chapters in the book to tell the story that,

SS 15:12

Yes, and this is kind of also kind of a lengthy answer so I apologize in advance, so ACT UP was a predominantly white male organization, but it was not an exclusively white male organization, and there's a big difference. And the influences of women and people of color and the reach, are fascinating to understand, because ACT UP being a predominantly white male organization won more victories for women for people and people of color, than any other group in HIV history. So in order to understand how that happened we have to look at what role these people played. So there's three ways that women and people of color influenced the organization. The first is that they tended to come from previous movements and have a lot

more political experience whether it was Anti-Fascist student movements in Latin America, whether it was reproductive rights movement, women's peace movement, women's health movement. And most of the men, the older men came from gay liberation, but most of the men had never been politically active before. So a lot of the ideas like patient centered politics or nonviolent civil disobedience, these were concrete things that were actually brought to the organization by individual people who I named in the book, so you can see that.

The second is more zeitgeisty. Like most people in ACT UP were born in the 40s, 50s and 60s. And so growing up as queer kids, we didn't know about gay community or gay movement or anything like that. BUT we did see black resistance on television or in Life Magazine or Jet magazine or came from families that were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. So we saw black people sitting in at lunch counters, standing up to the police, and doing very creative and theatrical nonviolent civil disobedience. And later on I was researching the book I went back and reread Martin Luther King's article about Birmingham jail where he lays out his theory of direct action and that's exactly what ACT UP did, even though we never mentioned it. So clearly we had internalized certain kinds of ideas about direct action from black resistance and that was a big influence.

And the third thing is that, although the Monday night meeting tended to be mostly white and male -- there were quite a few white women there as well -- when people left that meeting, they went to work on projects that were coalitional, so they were working on needle exchange they were working with homeless people they were working with women with HIV with prisoners, with mothers, with Haitians, and the people that they were reaching and in coalition with and doing long term projects -- like the CDC definition was a four year project -- those people were often not in the room, but they were associated with ACT UP and they benefited, from those relationships. So their reach was out, way beyond the white gay male community. What's interesting in the reception of the book, which has been like 98% rapturous, is that there's a little 2% of white guys who think that I'm that I'm foregrounding women and people of color, but I'm not. I'm just saying what they did. And it's never been said before, so it stands out.

So like for example, I have three chapters on Latinos in the book. The first one is on ACT UP Puerto Rico. The second is Patricia and Ray Navarro; Patricia was the only parent of a person with AIDS who really became an integrated ACT UP member. She was a working class straight Chicana from California. And then the final conclusion as a discussion with Caesar Carrasco, from Chile, who was in the Latino caucus. And these three characters are not connected to each other, you know it's three different realms of Latino thought, and work. There were four committees in ACT UP that Latinos participated in that you know that were specific to Latino experience and at the end of the book series our lists, I think like 30 or 35 names of Latinos who were in ACT UP. So, it was a significant presence, even though it's, it stands out because it's never been historicized in the context of white ACT UP, but there it is. And then there were other people like Aldo Hernandez and Robert Garcia, they're also in the book.

KS 20:13

So, the, the gains that happened, specifically in Puerto Rico are something that, for example, as an active member of ACT UP, I was not particularly aware of, right? And one of the things that's so interesting to me about the book, is the idea that you outline that things happened, kind of a horizontally in ACT UP right, they sort of happened all over the place. And I think the room itself the big room at the center that we used to meet in on Monday night as a kind of spatial metaphor for that right, like things were happening in the corners, and that's sort of what ACT UP was, that there was a kind of center if you will, which is often the, the, the organizing of street protest or direct action that happened in civil disobedience mode and then there's all the direct action that happened in other ways, in all these spaces at the same time. Can you talk a little bit about that structure because it's really fascinating to get that picture over the course of reading the book.

SS 21:26

Well, one thing is that everyone thought that what they and their friends were doing was what ACT UP was doing. There was very little awareness, almost nobody had an organization-wide view. And that's because people were very busy, but also because there was not a consensus based organization, so you didn't have to have agreement to do things, and people were not forced into homogeneity of action or analysis, inherited one line principle of unity, direct action to end the AIDS crisis,

KS 22:02

Can you define direct action just for people who don't know that term,

SS 22:06

Direct action.

KS

Yeah.

SS

Okay so using Dr. King's description, which fits ACT UP, you become the expert on your issue, you design the solution, instead of being in an infantilized relationship with power asking them to fix it. You present your reasonable, winnable and doable solution to the powers that be, and when they refuse, you do what Dr. King called self-purification, or ACT UP called nonviolent civil disobedience training. And you prepare theatrical nonviolent actions, that communicate through the media, in other words that you attract media coverage with the creative side of your action, but the action conveys to the watching public, the content of your campaign. And in this way you pressure the powers that be to adapt your solution. So the classic example is when black students would sit in at segregated lunch counters. They did have a demonstration outside with sign saying, you know, stop segregated lunch counters, but when they *sat* at the counter that was a direct action because they created an image of the world that they were trying to create.

And that's what ACT UP did when it disrupted mass at St Patrick's Cathedral, even though there was a demonstration of 7000 people outside, because they showed that they were not going to allow their lives to be threatened by this political organization, the Catholic Church, it's no business as usual. And the thing about no business as usual, is that if you're ambitious, or you think, Oh I want to have a career at the New York times, Oh, I want to work in the US government, I want to do this, then you can't do no business as usual. Because you're, you're giving that up, that giving up trying to please them, because there's a higher purpose, which in this case was the lives of the members of ACT UP in and in our larger communities. So, so anyway, so the principle of unity was direct action to end the AIDS crisis, and that was as opposed to social service professions, which we did not do. So if you were willing to do direct action to end the AIDS crisis you could basically do it.

So let's take something like a needle exchange. Needle exchange was controversial. We had a black mayor at the time, David Dinkins, the black community did not support needle exchange, he was ambivalent about needle exchange. There were people in ACT UP who were ambivalent about it, and they could argue about it. But ultimately if you didn't want to do it, you just wouldn't do it. You wouldn't try to stop somebody else from doing it, you would take your like-minded people and you would go organize the thing that you wanted to do. And because of that radical democracy structure, so many different things are going on at the same time.

SS

Okay, so as a result there was the widest possible range of kinds of actions, kinds of campaigns, but also different milieu in which they took place. So, like while you know, the Asian Pacific Islander caucus, which is something that I write about that I don't think has been included in the whitening history of ACT UP -- they were going to Asian gay bars and doing safe sex information using lucky red money packets from Chinese New Year to hand out condoms to communities who were not being addressed by the social service system, you know and like so like that they were doing that. And then there were people who were working with prisoners, there was a lot of activity with prisoner activists for incarcerated people with HIV and then for when they got out of prison, you know, just like these two things are not related to each other, but they were all happening at the same time. And that's why ACT UP succeeded, because it made it possible for people to respond, from where they were at, instead of trying to force people into a homogeneity it that never works. And it's a really good lesson about Big Tent politics, you know and how really good leadership enables people to be effective, from where they are at.

KS 27:19

Yeah, one of the things that always struck me about ACT UP and that came back to me personally when I was following the Occupy movement was that I thought about how every ACT UP action that I took part in -- and I was someone who took part in a lot of the street, public forms of direct action. And we always had a flyer with our demands. It was always very clear why we were doing what we're doing to anyone who asked, we could hand that sheet to an onlooker, we knew ourselves what we were doing and what we were asking for. And I often

struggled with occupy, and this is a simplification and what was a big moment, but I often struggled to understand what the demands were. It often seemed like there was an analysis.

SS

Well they didn't have demands.

KS

Right, there's a theory and an analysis but there's no actual, there's no call to action.

SS 28:18

Well there's a history to that, because historically in the United States we've had two different kinds of movements: utopian movements or revolutionary movements and reform movements. And reform movements are like emancipation, women's suffrage, abortion rights, AIDS activism, you know they're demanding and enacting policy changes or legal changes, but they're not getting rid of capitalism, for example. And then there are utopian movements like utopian socialists or the anarchists of the 1920s or the hippie movement or gay liberation. And those movements, what I, what I find looking back -- or black power versus civil rights, for example -- looking back, when both movements are vibrant is actually when the society moves forward, the best, because they're dynamic with each other, you know, and, but if you don't have concrete demands, and nobody else has them either, it's very hard to move forward, you can't.

KS 29:30

And I love this point in in the book when you say that, ACT UP didn't begin with theory. The theory grew out of the actions that people took. Can you say a little more about what that is.

SS 29:43

Right, so there was a traditional leftist idea called praxis, that came from Gramsci, which was that you develop your theory like Marxism, and then you apply it actively. But Maxine Wolf, who was in a sense the resident left philosopher of ACT UP, she would say that your theory, that if you do it the other way, if you do action first, your theory will *emerge*, that's the word that she used. Because if you're doing an action, you have to make decisions about how you're going to do it, and making those decisions is when you cohere your values. And so going action-first for a movement of people who are desperate and don't have time, is the most effective way. And then you never end up with these sorts of empty theoretical debates where nothing is at stake, that never happened and ACT UP and when that does happen, it just derails it further action anyway.

KS 30:48

I remember when the group of the ISO came in and briefly tried to take over ACT UP and what they were essentially doing was theorizing first and not proposing action

SS 31:01

That happened twice; also New Alliance Party tried to take over ACT UP.

KS 31:04

Right. And they didn't gain any traction because they weren't people that were creating actions, doing the work and creating solutions.

SS 31:15

Right. There were people in ACT UP from another left formation that was called the May 19 Communist organization and they come out of the Weathermen, but by the time they got to ACT UP they did not act as a unit, so that would be like, Marian Banzhaf, Risa Dennenberg and what's his name who used to do all the organic treatments, his lover's name was John Riley, do you know I mean, it's not Robert, it's something like that. Anyway they came from that kind of sectarian background, but they didn't act that way. They were very, very productive and individuated members, and so there was no problem.

KS 32:07

There's so many things I want to ask and I think what happens with this -- I'm so sorry this is all bound to tech -- I think what's going to happen at a certain point is that the transcribing is going to stop and I'm going to have to switch to another platform so beware, I may have to jostle this. Okay, I want to ask you a question that a younger friend of mine, he's, you know I'm in my 50s He's probably in his early 40s, who's done a lot of organizing he, when he was younger, and now is a nurse, a health care worker, and asked me, I said what would you ask about ACT UP, and I told him I was talking to you, and he wanted to know about group dynamics, how people reconcile differences and quote "if anyone ever apologize to anyone else on the floor of ACT UP." And I know you have a lot to say about conflict, so yeah just even a sense of, of what you learned people and what you remember because you were there, of how those kinds of differences got resolved and action was allowed to move forward.

SS 33:17

Well, you know, it was a very sexual organization and so there was a lot of like breakups and jealousies and stuff like that. But that, if I remember one time somebody getting mad at Greg, who was sort of the Romeo of Act up, and saying something from the floor, but otherwise no, , except. So, at the beginning of ACT UP, and you know this I only know from interviewing, but most people told me that at the beginning of ACT UP everybody did safe sex, and people didn't know who was positive and who was negative, also because there were no good treatments, a lot of people didn't want to get tested because there were no treatments anyway so why get tested. So there's just an assumption that we all have HIV and people for most part used condoms. That started to break down. After a few years, and there was an incident where, so there was nightlife that was attached to ACT UP there were two clubs in the meatpacking district that occupied the same space, Clit Club and Meat, and Clit Club was run by Julie Tolentino. Jocelyn Taylor and Lola Flash, and they were all in ACT UP and Meat was run by Aldo Hernandez, who was in ACT UP. And there was some kind of sex, that took place at meat, or somebody claimed it took place there that was not quote safe sex and it was brought up on the floor. So that's one example but that's very rare.

What I think is really interesting is the Michael Petrelis situation, that when we did the action at the church in December 1989 ACT UP decided to do a silent die in. And we all agreed on that. And then we went to the church to do a silent die in and Michael jumped up on the pews and started screaming at O'Connor, "you're killing us you're killing us" in his New Jersey accent, "Stop it, stop it." And it was total chaos and, you know, people got arrested and the whole thing was kind of crazy, but it's kind of what made the action succeed. Anyway, as the post action meeting, you know some people were mad at Michael because he had violated the group agreement, but no one ever suggested that he be shunned or kicked out of the organization, it was not a concept, because in order to do that you have to have a supremacy ideology about yourself, that you are clean and you are good and the other person is bad and they must be removed. And when you're in a group of profoundly oppressed people who are sharing your trauma that was never operative. So I think that that's very revealing.

KS 36:03

And it's interesting too, in the book you, you, I believe quote Michaels saying that he, nobody would have in their affinity group right so that's a way, it's not a shunning but it's an organizing decision that this small group of people is going to work closely together, and because you don't follow the plan, we're not interested in working with you right?

SS 36:27

Well it also shows how human everything was, you know, like, a historic action is determined because Michael was mad and he acted out, I mean there's a lot of acting out, there's people od-ing and stealing money and pretending that they were positive when they were negative and there's like all kinds of stuff going on because we were all human and it was a very difficult situation and there was no expectation that people were going to be 100%, clean and pure and good, that was not the expectation. Homosexuality itself was something that was condemned and still an illegality, and we didn't have the sense of ourselves, as you know superior. So that, that shows in group dynamics.

KS 37:13

We also had a really strong sense that no one else out there understood what we were doing or prioritized what we were doing right, our families were not with us, you know, in my case like my straight friends from college who I loved and had fun with but were not interested in being activists, you know, the people that you might have partied with before you came to ACT UP but if they weren't interested in like getting in the street with you, then you just lost those friendships, essentially, we had a very strong sense of who got it and who didn't.

SS 37:46

Yeah, and even when you know people stole money, they were not kicked out of the organization. Right.

KS 37:52

Yeah, exactly. I still so many questions, but I'm very mindful of your time, how are you doing with time by the way,

SS I'm just fine I have plenty of time.

KS

Okay, great. Right, I may be this may be around a point where the quote unquote free transcription stops so hang on, if that happens. I'm looking at my notes here ... Oh okay, I know what I want to get to: inside versus outside. This is obviously another gigantic subject and I love the way that throughout the book you keep returning to this idea of access, right, who goes inside and talks to the powers that be, who stays outside and you know blocks the street in front of the place where the power that be are. That's a simple way of saying it but I think you see the inside outside dichotomy as more nuanced than that. So talk about that if you would.

SS 38:57

Inside-outside was a strategy that only some people knew that we were doing -- the inside people. It was never really discussed as a strategy that ACT UP would embrace, it was something that inside people relied on. So for example, Larry Kramer. There were some people in ACT UP who were very very elite, right, and most of the white guys were not. But at the time, the whole government was white and male, the whole media was white and male, the private sector was white and male, and if you were a gay man in that system you tended to be in the closet. So, the rest of us were dealing with power, the apparatus of power which there was no one like us in that system. So Larry for example went to Yale with the president of Bristol Myers. So he called him up and got a meeting, so he went, you know, where like you could go to a meeting of pharma or, and there would be Mark Harrington who was brilliant, but he went to Harvard, or you know somebody who had been a stockbroker or whatever and there would be like a catered lunch and they would sit with pharma, and they have that access. But when the women tried to change the CDC definition. So most of the, although there were some men who worked on that most of the people who worked on that were either women with HIV who tended to be poor or women of color, although there were some exceptions, like Kerry Duran who was white and gay but mostly it was straight women of color.

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INTERVIEW CONTINUES HERE VIA QUICKTIME, exported to Otter as Part 2

KS 0:00

Okay, great. If you would go ahead and continue where you were with Carrie Duran, yeah.

SS

And White lesbians from ACT UP. So you had like Terry McGovern, who was a poverty lawyer who was a 29 year old lesbian who was suing the government, or Risa Dennenberg, who was a nurse working in the Bronx with women with HIV.

SS 0:25

That formation was so un, there was no one on the inside who looked like any of those people. There were no out lesbians in the government, there are hardly any women in the government, certainly not women of color, certainly not anyone HIV positive, it took them two years to even be able to get a meeting.

SS 0:45

You know, so like, and it took them four years to win. And by the time they won, most of the HIV positive women leaders of the movement were dead.

SS 0:55

So you know, the difference in access within the same organization is so profound when you juxtapose those two groups. So "inside" didn't work for them.

SS 1:09

You know, so those were some of the problems. And then as I learned by as I started interviewing, which I didn't know beforehand, there was a little puppet mastery going on from time to time, where ACT UP would be corralled into these all-organization-wide actions. But the real goal was to get a seat at the table for some of the treatment activists. And I'm not saying that that was bad. That could have been good. But I don't think people knew it.

SS 1:43

Like there's, we have footage of the post-action meeting after the -- when I say we I mean me and Jim Hubbard, and I didn't use this in the book -- but after the NIH action, and there's Maria Maggenti and Bob Rafsky, saying, Why did we do that action?

SS 2:01

And so I started asking people, when I interviewed them, why did we do the NIH action, and usually ACT UP people are very informed, because everyone could be a spokesperson, right? So we had all these teach-ins and everything. The rank and file was very sophisticated to the issues. So it was rare that every person I asked, nobody knew the answer.

SS 2:23

And what I ended up sort of understanding, and I hope it's conveyed by the time you get to the Brian Zabcik interview, is that the main reason we did that action was to get our treatment activists a seat at the tables, the NIH, which is fine, but I don't think anyone knew that.

KS 2:41

Right. Right. Yeah, that was all very interesting for me personally, because I was, I was not at the NIH and I was less involved with ACT UP by that point, in part because my mother had just died. And my life went through personal changes. And I was burned out, I had burned out of facilitating and I never understood what the NIH was about.

So I thought that was because I was outside of the loop. But then when I read the book, I thought, oh, a lot of people didn't understand what the NIH was about.

SS

Well, that contributed to the split, is one of my arguments, that there was a feeling of unease among some of the rank and file that they were being manipulated, that they didn't actually know what was going on. And so you know, the argument that people make that, Oh, it was a split between people who wanted to be in the streets and people who wanted to be inside. That's absurd. That's not what it was about. And I never say that. But I think that this feeling of distrust started with this kind of puppet mastery thing.

SS 3:47

And, and on the other hand, as I say, in the book, maybe they were right, because clearly, really, only white males, for the most part, could get anywhere with the inside. So if they had mentored women or people of color instead of young white men, maybe they wouldn't have gotten anywhere. And I raised that in the book, you know, it's something that we can't answer, but certainly worth thinking about.

KS 4:14

Yeah, I tend to have this sense that, I believe you quote, Maxine, a saying in the book that, you know, part of the reason ACT UP ended is because things end, right that that that, that you can't sustain that kind of energy in that kind of level. And of course, there's the fact that people are dying and that people are burned out and that the priorities change among some members versus others. The other thing I always felt was that Clinton getting in power had an effect on ACT UP as well, right? Because ACT UP was defined by the Reagan Bush ignoring of AIDS and suddenly you have someone who was listening to us and was saying things about HIV. I mean, the democrats had an HIV positive speaker at the convention in 1992, right?

SS

Bob Hattoy

KS 5:06

Right? There were these outward signs that we were going to get some help. Do you have any sense of that in your own? What came up in interviews.

SS

There were people in ACT UP, you know, who got jobs. in the beginning of the book, I call it AIDS, Inc. AIDS Incorporated. And there are people today who are still earning their living from AIDS who were ACT UP activists. And you know, Ann Northrop suggests this in the book, and also Larry Kramer told me this privately, I didn't put it in the book. But they thought that the main reason that TAG left was that they wanted to take money from pharma, which they never would have been able to do if they were in ACT UP. And you know, and they had salaries and why not, you know, it's fine that they have salaries. I don't have any problem with that. But

SS 5:56

yeah, once you're in a bureaucratic organization, you have to get your funding to keep getting paid. And that's not the same as a political movement. That's why ACT UP never paid anyone

and, you know, the lawyers who were mostly lesbians, I have a whole chapter on them. I mean, Laurie Cohen did like 10,000 cases for free. Right, the only person who ever made money in ACT UP was Sean Strub from direct mail. You know, so there was, so once you start being dependent on the state and on corporations for your funding, obviously, your relationship to them changes. And I'm not saying that that's bad, but it does create a change.

KS

Yeah. And it also takes away one of those Dr. King tenets, right, which is that you don't ask people to solve your problems. You don't ask people in power to solve your problems, you tell them what you need them to do to solve them. Yeah. So that starts to change, or gets shaped differently if you're sitting at the table with them having those conversations

SS

and then you become them also.

KS

Okay, I'm gonna ask two more questions and then we're gonna stop because I have way more than I can handle for this. And you and I can always talk another time too, which I would love. So one question is about Larry Kramer. And one question is just more personally about you.

KS 8:28

I was one of those kids, as you know, who heard Larry Kramer speak when I was 21 years old. And he did one of his rabble rousing speeches saying this half of the room, you're all going to be dead in 10 years, and what are you going to do about it? And the solution that he offered in the spring of 1987, was to join ACT UP. And so I did. So for me, Larry's a personally important part of my story. And then as you know, I actually clashed with Larry, once I was involved with ACT UP, you know, a couple of years later, so my question is, do you think Larry had a role in ACT UP beyond being that kind of motivator that got a lot of people sort of shamed or inspired to join the group? Do you think he had another role inside ACT UP? What was it?

SS

YES, which was, I think, you know, because of familial homophobia, most of us did not have the approval of our fathers. And Larry was like a bad father. You know, if you didn't worship him, he would withhold and he would punish you and embarrass you. But then he would come back and love you, you know, and it was a substitute.

SS 9:35

I think it made him very important in a lot of people's lives for that reason, you know, socially, Larry was a rich man with a lot of access, who yelled, and most men like him did not do that. And that made him special. And it's just like Peter Staley. I mean, how many stockbrokers from JP Morgan joined ACT UP? One. You know, so these guys came from a lot of privilege, and they felt in sense superior for it on some level, but they were exceptions. And what they did was really important. And if more people with power had done what they did, we would have probably gotten where we wanted to go faster.

SS 10:19

But Larry was not the leader of ACTUP. That is a media construction.

KS

Right

SS

Internally, he was chaotic. Like I remember when he wanted us to make him the president. And we said no, and he stormed out and didn't come back for months. Then he came back and said they're dancing in the streets in San Francisco, they have the cure, Compound Q, you know, I remember when he said we should pick up arms like the Irgun. You know, he was nuts in a certain way, like, he wanted attention and but one good thing he did do was he told people to listen to Iris Long. He and Vito both said that, and they were right. But he wasn't like a great organizer. He didn't have concepts for actions. He, you know, he just threw his weight around in a certain way. And we needed that. Some of us needed it emotionally.

KS

Yeah. And I think this idea of the bad father is interesting, because I can speak as a young gay man looking for essentially what you would call your elders. Right. I mean, Larry was not the only older person I listened to.

SS

Maxine. He and Maxine were the two old people.

KS

Yeah, yeah. For me, Marty Robinson and Ortez Alderson and Herb Spiers

SS

Vito. They all died.

KS

Yeah. And there were there were a lot of gay men from the generation before me who, you know, unconsciously I think I just put into the role of teacher and mentor and advisor and father, right, at that point.

KS 11:55

So, Sarah, what was, what does ACT UP mean to you? Just personally, like, I understand you as a historian and a journalist, and, and in an assimilator of stuff, who, who, who writes, you know, out of that place of absorption and digestion. But what about you as like a, you know, a young out lesbian in New York City in the 80s? Like, why did you join ACT UP versus like just sit on the sideline?

SS 12:27

Well, you know, I had already been in the reproductive rights movement in the 70s. And I had a lot of activist experience. I started publishing novels in 84. I was writing plays, I was doing the downtown thing, I had a whole other life that wasn't ACT UP. And I had been covering aids for five years before I came to ACT UP.

SS 12:51

So I, it was part of my ongoing life. But it didn't start my life. And there were things in ACT UP, that bothered me and that I was alienated by. And like, one of the things is the split, I was not involved in that, I did not take a side and that at all, the whole thing, I was, you know, that was done by a small group of people. Most in ACT UP just sat there and watched the whole ship sink. And I get associated with it, because people think that it was the women versus the men. And, you know, but it wasn't. So there were things about ACT UP that I found annoying and alienating, but I had another life.

KS 13:33

So it wasn't, it wasn't where you formed your political consciousness. But you stuck around and did things like go into St. Patrick's and, and so on. So why did you do that?

SS

Because ACT UP had resources that no movement I didn't have ever had. And I remember the first time I tabled for ACT UP, it was at Wigstock at Tompkins Square Park, not the year that you were gay bashed. But before that, and like I'm selling these buttons, and I had done that in other previous movements, but the guys would open their wallets and hand me a 20 or \$40 because they had money. And I had just never seen that before. It was like my first experience of heterosexual privilege in some way. So it was an exciting machine because there was access. And there were people I made friends with who I really liked, and who I'm still friends with today. And, you know, that kept me involved. But I never was compelled to try to be in leadership. Because it wasn't my thing, really.

SS 14:41

I mean, I ended up writing this book, you know, by default, because we couldn't find anyone else to do it. And it was like an emergency. But it's like This was not my, you know, this is not what I usually do. Like I'm a novelist, and I write the kind of books, even when I write nonfiction books, they're very emotionally motivated and I have to look into my soul to produce the ideas. This was different. It was like a research project. And I just knew that what was happening was the history was being so distorted that we would never recover, and that it had to be done.

SS 15:22

So that's why I did it. It was like service, really.

KS

So the book is called Let the Record Show. So your sense as you wrote it in part two, correct or voice, the historical record, as voiced by all these people you spoke to? Is that a fair way to describe it?

SS

That's one of the meanings. The other meaning is that ACTUP had a show at the New Museum very early before Gran Fury was created. And it was called Let the Record Show. And it was based on Nuremberg imagery. And early act UP had a lot of Holocaust imagery.

SS 15:56

And the idea was that Nazi leaders were finally put on trial, and they were called to account. And the hope was that or the expectation was that the people who caused our friends' deaths, the people who caused 600,000 people to die in this country, would be made accountable, the record would show, but it never happened. So, when Ronald Reagan died, or Jesse Helms died, AIDS was hardly ever mentioned. And I just wanted to make a record of who, who allowed people to die and who saved people's lives.

KS 16:34

Yeah, that it resonates with me, I actually have a chapter in my book called Let the Record Show as well, and it, it resonated with me. I mean, in 1988, I was part of the committee that did that was in charge of the presence at the gay pride parade that year. And that was the year that we made these kind of big signs that were kind of carried like, like a like a, like a Roman litter right, with four people underneath and these kind of triangle things and they had the faces of our enemies with the word GUILTY, stamped above, and then their quotations.

SS

They all Jim's film, yeah,

KS

they all wilted in the humidity that year. We didn't make them New York proof.

KS 17:17

But I remember, you know, being with Tom Kalin in the photo studio, because he had access to that large format printer, and we made those, we stayed up all night and made those things together. And, you know, there was this real sense that we were going to use the Pride Parade to name our enemies, right. And Anthony Fauci was one of them, right?

SS

That's right. Anthony Fauci has been reborn as the hero of AIDS. Even Rachel Maddow said that recently, but it's not true. In the book I show that three times that innovative activists, Jim Eigo, Richard Elovich and Linda Merideth, all told about going to Fauci, either about women, drug users or parallel track and he, you know, rejected their ideas and had to be forced into them. So it's again, that John Wayne thing.

KS 18:16

Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

All right. I want to talk to you again, someday, but I'm going to stop this now for the sake of this particular assignment.

And, yeah, I mean, just personally, I want to just say, I've known you since I think 88. Right. And, and we've had so many conversations, and so many different overlapping things. But I think this book, even though it was service, and something you didn't want to write, and something that was kind of there for the record, versus something that grew out of you artistically, like so much your other work, like, for me,

KS 18:55

this is a book that I'm really happy to have, happy to have read, happy to be in the index for. You know, it's a, it's, I think all of us who were in ACT UP, and who have not forgotten it, and who mark it as one of the more important and formative times of our life, have been struggling to understand what it was. And I think this is a great piece of that understanding for me. So I feel really glad.

SS

Thank you Karl, I feel like crying, that's so nice

KS

You're welcome, Sarah, thank you. I mean, I feel like you know, my experience and ACT UP is very different in some ways than a lot of the places that are highlighted in this book, but I feel like I finally understand how we all stood on the same kind of plane together, right. You know, sort of side by side doing our different things and making that work and enriching each other. And yeah, it's just really given me a lot of a lot of insight that I didn't really have, which is kind of remarkable since I never stopped thinking about it.

SS 20:03

Thank you so much.

All right, take care. Bye

KS

bye.

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