

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

Interview Transcript 2015.009

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| Interviewee: | Susan Kasurak |
| Interviewers: | Gary Kinsman & Janna Klostermann |
| Place: | Toronto, Ontario |
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16 November 2015

Persons present: Susan Kasurak – SK
Gary Kinsman – GK
Janna Klostermann – JK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

GK: We start all of our interviews with the same question just to establish a bit of a baseline in terms of when people started to be aware of AIDS and what they knew. So, do you have any memory of when you would have first heard about AIDS?

SK: No. Not really.

GK: It doesn't have to be the exact date, but the context...

SK: It would have been sometime in the eighties, and I'm not sure, you know, I would imagine it was the later eighties. I was a student at the University of Western Ontario for a couple of years before transferring to York, and that's when I arrived in Toronto, and got involved with escorting at the Morgentaler Clinic, and that's when I *definitely* heard about it as a crisis from Brent Southin and Glen Brown and Tim McCaskell.

GK: Okay. We'll get back into that.

SK: But, in terms of when I actually heard about HIV or AIDS, I'm not sure.

GK: Yes, and that's fine. Do you remember anything that you might have heard? Like first things you might have heard about it, before you met Brent?

SK: I would have seen mainstream media reports. I might have, if I was going into a doctor, I might have come across something, but I didn't have any contact with certainly the activism around it or anything in the classes that I was taking at Western. I was taking women's studies classes at Western at that time.

GK: Before you would have met Brent and Glen and all those people, did you have any sense of there being a social movement around AIDS? Like, AIDS activism? That people were actually dealing with it as a political issue, and not just a medical one?

SK: I might have, because I was becoming active in London, so I was involved in what was called the London Women's Anti-Apartheid Coalition, and then I went to a number of protests of the London Unemployed Workers Coalition, I guess, and a few Postal Worker Strikes. So, I was *active* in the activist community, but London was a pretty small community, so I might have heard about a social movement, but I don't have any memory of it.

GK: Right. So, you were involved in activism then in London, largely around feminist organizing or?

SK: Solidarity...

GK: Solidarity.

SK: ...work around El Salvador, Nicaragua, and South Africa at that time. I had grown up in Windsor ... My Mother was a college teacher and she was on strike a couple of times and then I moved as a eighteen year old to London and immediately, as a result of my upstairs neighbours, got involved in anti-apartheid work and solidarity work around Nicaragua and EL Salvador. And *then* got interested in women's studies, and through that feminist activism.

GK: Okay. And then at some point you moved to...

SK: Moved to Toronto, and then was taking women's studies at York from Meg Luxton and moved as a student to York actually, because of Meg Luxton. I transferred schools, because I was actually trying to choose between Concordia and York ... I had read Meg Luxton's book, I think it was called *More than a Labour of Love*, and a few others that I can't remember off the top of my head, and so wanted to study at York because of them. And then almost immediately found out about Toronto Socialist Feminist Action, and OCAC (the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics).

GK: So, do you want to tell us a bit more about those groups, and how you got involved in them?

SK: That part I can't remember. I can't remember how I found out about Toronto – TSFA – Toronto Socialist Feminist Action or OCAC. I just know that I started escorting at the Morgentaler clinic, so they had that set up and that's where I ran into the other folks, and I started going to the meetings with Toronto Socialist Feminist Action.

GK: So, that would have been...

SK: I'd imagine I would have heard about it at York through women's studies possibly.

GK: Oh, there was lots of connections there. So, you get involved in the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics and Toronto Socialist Feminist Action. My understanding of Toronto Socialist Feminist Action was it grows out of the initial group that set up the International Women's Day Committee.

SK: I think so.

GK: In Toronto, which I think starts in '78, so it evolves into the eighties.

SK: Yes.

GK: So, I guess...

SK: I attended those meetings in late eighties I guess. I was really young, and really, really impressed, and in awe of everyone I met, and just sort of quietly sat back and tried to learn and absorb as much as I could. You know, basically attended meetings and got really interested in being active ... Because that was something that we talked a lot about in those courses up at York was it wasn't enough just to do theoretical work; we had to engage in some sort of action, and so became interested in that.

GK: So, you got involved through OCAC with some of the clinic escort stuff for the Morgentaler clinic would have been on Harbord then.

SK: On Harbord and then the Scott clinic on Gerard, and that was *intense*. And it was really, really, really exciting, and intense.

JK: What do you mean to be an escort?

SK: We would meet women at, I think they were called safe houses, and bring them in through the back, so they didn't get harassed by anti-choice protestors. And this was at a time when the law was being challenged around abortion, and so there were all kinds of protests around that as well that were quite intense. There was a big push back from the police as well.

GK: Right. I was involved a bit just with the Morgentaler clinic on Harbord. Often anti-choice people would try to blockade the front entrance, so it was important to try to get women in there safely. I was also there that day that... It was actually Judy Rebick, who stopped the guy with the garden sheers, who was trying to attack Morgentaler.

SK: Oh, yeah?

GK: I can't remember what year that was, but those were quite intense situations.

JK: Wow.

SK: Yes, we would try to bring around the back way, so they didn't have to suffer through the abuse. They had little plastic fetuses and pictures. They would even go to the extent of taking pictures of clinic supporters and writing about them and posting their pictures and saying terrible things about them in a newsletter.

GK: It was pretty awful. So, when you were doing this clinic defense work for – and that was organized through OCAC, right?

SK: Yes.

GK: Were you involved in OCAC in a more general way?

SK: I think I attended meetings, but I was not... In any of these groups I was not a key organizer, so I just was absolutely excited, and engaged with what was happening and wanted to be part of it in some way. I wanted to contribute in any way possible, and certainly, you know, went to events that OCAC was putting on, and probably a number of meetings at the Church at Bloor near Spadina of both TSFA and OCAC.

GK: Right. So, you're doing the clinic defense and you meet these guys from AIDS ACTION NOW!

SK: I did! [laughter] I met Bob Gardner and Linda Gardner and Tim McCaskell and Glen Brown and Brent Southin. And from the moment I met those folks, was in complete awe of them. Like, such outstanding organizing abilities. It just made everything else seem less interesting, and wanted to follow them no matter what they were doing, and still would, you know? So, I can't remember the mechanism; probably one of them told me about a meeting or an event, and from that point on I was involved.

GK: But it's because you actually met them doing the clinic defense work that that connection was made.

SK: That's right.

GK: It's important to note that people from AIDS ACTION NOW! were also connected with that clinic defense work.

SK: Exactly.

GK: I know Brent Southin was. I know that Linda and Bob were very involved in OCAC.

SK: Very involved. I'm pretty sure I saw Glen and Tim there as well. It might have been something like they were handing out a flyer for something that was coming up or maybe they spoke at one of the protests, but I became aware of AIDS ACTION NOW! as a result.

GK: So, once you hear about it and you want to follow these people, what happens?

SK: I would have gone to the meetings, and one of your questions was about the steering committee and I don't remember the mechanism around this again, so whether I would have ever attended any of the steering committee meetings... I know I went to a lot of meetings at the 519, and I don't remember what sort of meetings. I know I went to a monthly meeting and it was on a Tuesday, but I don't remember if they were ever steering

committee meetings. I think the steering committee met ahead of time and then went to this monthly meeting.

GK: Yes, I think that was the general members meeting. Probably.

SK: That's right. And then got involved pretty quickly. They had a sub-committee that was organizing the various activists, the various protests, and all of the thinking behind how we would execute the activism, the propaganda and the other pieces that would go along with that.

GK: That was called at that point in time the Activist Brigade?

SK: I think we gave it that name later.

GK: Okay.

SK: You would probably recall this more.

GK: Well it was originally the Public Action Committee, but I think that sort of dies down at some point. I was an initial facilitator of the Public Action Committee.

SK: Okay.

GK: But I could, you know, Brent Southin was involved in that. Greg Pavelich was involved in that, a whole bunch of those types of people would have been involved in that group, but I think later on it doesn't continue to exist and I think the Activist Brigade must have been another attempt to try and organize the activist work.

SK: Yes, and we might have given it that name later, because I think we were meeting in an ad hoc way as need be as things came up. And I felt really comfortable in that, because I felt like I could do something. I felt like this is something, some way that I can contribute, and it was sort of a group of people my age as well at that time. A lot of the thinking work would've been done by the Steering Committee, and the decisions made at that general meeting, I believe, and then we would carry out the action. So, it was organized very differently than what I was seeing at the March 8th Coalition or in some of the other women's organizations, where a lot of the decision making was happening in this very consensus style fashion.

GK: So, your sense was how decisions were made in AIDS ACTION NOW! at that point in time would have been, they came down from the steering committee?

SK: [hesitant] Yes. [laughter]

GK: I'm just trying to get a sense of that.

SK: Yes. And, you know what? At the time, because I was in women's studies, I was sort of thinking through this. Like, what does this decision making model say about the organization? What does it mean? And I remember thinking, "Well, there are some issues around perhaps the decision making, but are we ever getting a lot done! We're getting an immense amount done that I'm not seeing happening in other places." So, it was that debate that I think happens in a lot of organizations, but it was very different than what I was seeing. You've probably talked to other people who've indicated at that time the March 8th Coalition, there were a lot of challenges in the other organizations in the city at that time. I think AIDS ACTION NOW! really stuck out for having really successful actions and winning a lot in a short period of time, and I think doing actions really successfully. And there was this philosophy that, you know, we want—we don't want to hold people here (at actions) for a long time. We want to have, you know, a really visually exciting, quick, pointed action, and I think it was really successful in doing that.

JK: What you do you mean by visually exciting?

SK: The visuals were always really important, and the pictures that I dug up. I don't have... Again, I have this box of things, but you can see from the die-ins that we did. Later on, the posters and the placards were always really important. There was a focus on not having a lot of text, and having a really strong message or visual to go with it. Not having a lot of speeches. This is one – but Brent was Bob Rae behind the mask. I think it was Brent Southin there, and we had this 'Wheel of Misfortune.' So, we spent a lot of time trying to think through the mechanics of how to get the message across in a really immediate way.



GK: And that would have been part of the campaign for the Trillium Drug Funding Plan?

SK: That's right.

GK: Which was quite successful in the end – although, people had to threaten to burn Bob Rae in effigy to actually get it.

SK: That's right. And then a lot of the other – like, the stickers and the temporary tattoos and t-shirts and buttons. Again, a lot of attention paid to how it would look as a way of kind of catching attention.

GK: Yes. Was John Greyson still around in terms of doing some of the visual stuff then?

SK: Yes.

GK: Okay, yeah. Because he certainly...

SK: But not as I remember... I came in after you folks had done the Montreal event, and so that was before me. You turned your backs on...

GK: We did more than that, but yes. That was fun. If the central way you were involved was in activist work, is there any way you could describe how it evolved over the years as you were involved in AIDS ACTION NOW!? It sounds like you get involved either late '89 or into 1990.

SK: Right.

GK: And you must stay involved for a while, so...

SK: I jotted down some of the activist pieces that I remember. So, in the early days, I would imagine it was either '89 or '90, there was Medical Officer of Health, Richard Schabas, who was threatening to quarantine people. And so we did an action around that, and then we did a number of March 8th – International Women's Day – contingents, where we handed out stickers, and had a presence with placards, and actually marched as a contingent. ... And I do have a box of them somewhere. I don't know if you've come across them somewhere else, but we had these fantastic stickers that said, "Women get AIDS; get active." Trying to encourage more activism and involvement. And then we occupied the Minister of Health's offices.

GK: Was that Frances Lankin, then?

SK: I think so. I don't remember.

GK: And were you there?

SK: No. I actually wasn't there that day, because I was working in government.

GK: Right.

SK: I had a job at the Ontario Women's Directorate. Our Ministry was cut back. We were on strike for six weeks under Mike Harris, and then my Ministry was pretty well cut to nothing, so I couldn't do any of those type of events, but I was part of the planning for that. And then I think the most exciting thing that I was involved in was planning those massive die-ins, and we did two of them... It was incredibly labour-intensive. I'm not sure if other people have described it to you, but we had all these little plastic baggies – sandwich baggies – that we stuffed with a button and a sticker, chalk so that we could outline... At the sound of a horn, people in the march were supposed to lie down and chalk the outline of each other. I think after probably a moment of lying down, so we gave them everything they needed in this little sandwich bag kit. It was an immense undertaking. Lots and lots of hours of stuffing these little baggy kits, and it came off really well.

JK: How many people would you say were there?

SK: I think—

JK: A hundred or?

GK: This was done during the Pride parade.

SK: Huge.

JK: Okay. Oh, wow.

GK: They were probably called Pride marches then.

SK: It was a march at that point. I mean, I'm not sure if that's... That's not from Pride day because we've got coats on.



GK: I don't know where that is.

SK: But we did a similar thing. That's Church and Wellesley. You can see Brent there, but we were doing a die-in at that point. We're talking... I mean, I don't know at that time how many – tens of thousands in the Pride march.

JK: Wow.

GK: There would have been thousands of people at least. At the very least.

SK: Yes. So, logistically it was tough, right? Because we're trying to figure out how do you get that word out across the entire march, because it's so spread out, but I thought that was pretty successful. And we did that for, I think, twice that I remember. And this 'Wheel of Misfortune' float that we did, and that was, against Bob Rae, but I think it was around he had promised funding and a catastrophic drug plan, and was backing down over that. We did a lot of oversized things, like, oversized report cards on the status of something or oversized petitions. We did postcard campaigns. We created these large pills, and we organized protests during elections, and the one that I was arrested at, which was Kim Campbell actually going into the 519.

GK: It was Kim Campbell, so it wasn't...

SK: It was Kim Campbell going into the 519. Another event that we did that I love was we put sashes – and I think this was Bob Gardner's idea – we put sashes around the statues at Queen's Park – "Miss Representation," "Miss Funding" – to protest the lack of a catastrophic drug treatment plan, and so we had to get there really early in the morning and put these sashes on, and that was neat. And then we went into Queen's Park with a banner to protest during the question period. So, I was involved in those pieces that I remember.

GK: Those all sound quite exciting.

SK: It was.

GK: Can you tell us how you felt doing these things, because it certainly sounds to me just remembering these things now that they seem so exciting and empowering.

SK: It was really exciting and I have not experienced activism like it really since. ... I haven't been involved in organizing anything like that since. I've attended the OCAP [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty] demonstrations, you know, against Queen's Park and Quebec and all of those things. I've attended and they were pretty exciting and it felt like something was going to change, but my involvement in AIDS ACTION NOW! at that time was exciting because I was involved in the organizing and it felt like we were actually going to win things. I haven't felt that since.

GK: And AIDS ACTION NOW! did win things.

SK: I really felt that about AIDS ACTION NOW! at that time, so it was really, really exciting. And I felt like I was learning a lot, as I said earlier, doing whatever I could do.

GK: Well you're right even in terms of doing the events you've described. AIDS ACTION NOW! was eventually successful in getting the Trillium Drug Funding Program put in place. Even though Schabas wasn't gotten rid of, the plan to change the definition of AIDS and HIV into a virulent disease, which would have led to quarantine possibilities, that never went through. ... And, obviously, in terms of access to treatments, AIDS ACTION NOW! did remarkable things. So, I think you're quite right that the type of politics was effective. Now, would you have any sense that AIDS ACTION NOW! had a direct action focus on politics? That it wasn't waiting for the officials to respond to a letter, but that people were actually willing to put their bodies on the line?

SK: I had that sense, and that's why I was keen to be involved. It was not lobbying. It was not just advocacy. It was direct action, and so it was really, really taken with that focus of AIDS ACTION NOW! It was really appealing.

GK: Great. So, I'm going to come back to some of the things you've talked about, if that's okay, but were there more things you wanted to bring in...?

GK: Do you remember there being a women's caucus of AIDS ACTION NOW!?

GK: Do you remember anything else that AIDS ACTION NOW! might have done around the specific needs of women in relationship to AIDS and HIV?

GK: Right. For the World AIDS Day in 1990, there would have been this die-in at Church and Wellesley that was organized around women's concerns, which may actually be...

A group of people are gathered outdoors for a protest or demonstration. In the foreground, a man in a light blue jacket and blue pants is pointing towards the right. To his left, a woman with curly blonde hair, wearing a blue jacket and light blue pants, is looking towards the right. Further left, a man in a dark jacket is holding a yellow sign that says "DRUG FUNDING NOW". In the center, a man in a dark jacket and white shorts is holding a pink sign that says "STOP Killing Time!". To his right, a man in a white jacket and blue pants is holding a pink sign that says "STOP Killing Time!". In the background, there are trees and a building with a sign that says "PLAC".

GK: And it may be.

SK: And I think actually, I had my mother here from Windsor and I think I brought her to this, but I don't remember.

GK: Did she participate in the die-in?

SK: *She did!* [laughter] So, she went to a die-in with me, and I tend to think it's this one, because we didn't do many outside of Pride day that I remember, and just that's when I got this picture. It sort of made me think that it was perhaps that one.

GK: And do you have any memories of what the discussion might have been leading up to that? Why did AIDS ACTION NOW! decide World AIDS Day 1990 we're going to focus on women and AIDS?

SK: No, but that's not the year. Sorry... I was just stretching to wonder if that was the year that there was a... No. I was thinking maybe, was that the year that there was an international focus from IWD (International Women's Day) itself on HIV and AIDS, but I don't think so.

GK: That's actually something interesting, because no one else has talked about that. Can you tell us a little bit about that? There was one year where there was a focus.

SK: There was, but I don't remember. And I think that there was another year that IWD... There was like, a year of women and AIDS outside of anything from IWD, but again, I don't remember. But, that might have led to us having that as the focus or it might have just been shared. Like, a number of people were involved in both IWD and AIDS ACTION NOW! maybe, and obviously interested in Bob Gardner doing work with OCAC, and shared political interest.

GK: Right. So, when you were involved in AIDS ACTION NOW! was... You've mentioned Darien Taylor, who would have also been co-chair with Glen for a period of time, and then I think co-chair with James Thatcher.

SK: James Thatcher and Brian Farlinger.

GK: Yes, after that. But, Mary Louise Adams was around at least for a while.

SK: She was.

GK: So, she was around when you were first involved?

SK: Yes.

GK: Okay. Because she's quoted in the newspaper article here.

SK: She was. Yes, when I was first involved.

GK: Okay.

SK: And then later, I'm trying to remember her name... Just before I stopped going to meetings another woman, not Louise... Sorry, I forget her name.

GK: Well, later on there's Maggie Atkinson.

SK: Maggie Atkinson!

GK: Who actually becomes the person who sustains AIDS Action Now! for a while. I did want to come back to the time you were arrested.

SK: Okay. [laughter]

GK: That was with Kim Campbell?

SK: Yes, and it was...

GK: So, we actually need to correct that because that's actually on the site in terms of how Brent describes it.

SK: Oh, it is! Oh, okay. So, it was Kim Campbell. We were out front and she was going, I believe, it may not have been the 519; it might have been a ministry building or federal building. It was on Church Street. I think it was the 519 though, or somewhere near there, and she was going in and we were protesting outside. And there was a large police presence, and they were kind of pushing and shoving us. I was on break from my job in the provincial government; rushed over on my lunch hour to participate, and a police officer got behind me and was trying to muscle his way to the front, and pinched my elbow like this, and I threw my elbow back in a reflex motion, and turned around and said to him, "That really hurt. I want your badge number." And that was probably my fatal mistake at that moment, and about five minutes later a bunch of them marched over and placed me under arrest for "assault police." AIDS ACTION NOW! was really good and put me in touch with Bob Kellerman, who basically gave me pro bono legal services or actually I think it cost AIDS ACTION NOW! about two thousand dollars, so I think he probably gave a very reduced rate for that. And then it went to court. If I remember correctly, the judge...I had a restricted order that I couldn't go near Queen's Park for some time, and then when it finally got to court the judge basically – there were two officers testifying – questioned their record of it. Their record at that time said something along the lines that I was trying to climb over them, and at which point I assaulted the one of them. And I think both of their notes matched, and the judge may have said he didn't find it believable, and basically tossed it out, so that was it.

GK: So, when you moved your elbow back did you know it was a cop who was pushing?

SK: Maybe. Maybe, but he really pinched it hard and it was a reflex when I threw my elbow back. My sense of it at the time was that if I hadn't asked for his badge number, nothing would have happened. That happened I think a short time after I was at an OCAC protest in front of the police station that's on Dundas just before University, 52 Division. We were standing in front of a line of police officers, and one had taken his billy club and driven straight into my back here, and so I was kind of very sensitive to their abuse at that point. So, when I realized that – whether I'd known at the time or after when I realized what he had done – that's when I turned around and asked him for his badge number.

GK: Right. So, just to be clear, this was AIDS ACTION NOW! having a protest against Kim Campbell, who was then Prime Minister...

SK: That's right.

GK: ...about AIDS. Was this during the election campaign?

SK: She was only prime minister for a short time, so it might have been during the election campaign. I don't remember.

GK: Okay.

SK: I don't remember that part. I did find my arrest ticket, I guess, a short time ago, and I can locate that again, because I now can use it in the classroom.

GK: Well, that is "assault police," what you did.

SK: Right.

GK: According to them, right?

SK: Right.

GK: So, that's quite interesting. Yes, I didn't know anything about that, because the only other time that I was aware that there were arrests with AIDS ACTION NOW!; is when we did the blockade at the Bristol Myers office around ddi, which is I think before you're involved.

SK: It was before me, yes.

GK: And then there were seven of us arrested although they didn't file the charges against me and Russell Armstrong properly, so we got off.

SK: Okay.

GK: And then at the end, AIDS ACTION NOW! decided that because ddi had been released, it was not worthwhile to proceed with a legal case around this, so Bob Kellerman was also the lawyer for us in that case.

SK: I was actually just standing there with a sign; I had the flu that day, so I was standing there holding my sign, and there was a lot of jostling. I think probably there were a couple different levels of security there; there was probably her PMO security, and probably Toronto police, and a lot of jostling, but I wasn't doing anything really interesting. I was standing there with a sign.

JK: So, you weren't hopping over both of them?

SK: No! I wasn't climbing over two six foot tall police officers! [laughter]

GK: Just to be clear.

JK: Just on the record.

SK: I had the flu...

GK: I'm sure you were really looking to be arrested at that particular occasion.

SK: No, as a civil servant, I was not interested in being arrested at all.

GK: So, did they just ticket you or did they take you to the station?

SK: I got a ticket and I had to go down to the station.

GK: And they took you?

SK: They either took me or I met them there...

GK: Well, "assault police" is a heavy-duty charge.

SK: It is.

GK: You're a major criminal!

SK: A major criminal! [laughter] I actually went to the doctor afterwards, and photographed the bruise and everything. So, that I had that, but it was a little bit worrisome for me, because I was working in government at that time, but it was nothing heroic unfortunately that I was doing. I was just standing there with a sign.

GK: But you never got in any trouble, because of it after?

SK: No, I didn't.

GK: Oh, that's good. I was going to ask you if you remember any other actions or organizing you were involved in. Maybe one way of trying to get into that is just having you describe the photos and images, and any memories that come up around them.

SK: Yeah, when I look at these I think a lot about the visuals, and I think about Clare Meridew, who was my girlfriend at the time. Clare Meridew was this exceedingly talented graphic designer ... So, this image, Gary you would remember, was already there – the AIDS ACTION NOW! one, but Clare pulled together a lot of the later imagery in just an absolutely brilliant way. We would sort of pitch the idea to her, and she would generate placards and stickers and tattoos and come up with the design for things. And so when I look at the pictures – and these are the best ones – I think about Clare executing a lot of the visuals for it that were so important and, you know, helping us generate the various components. Even of that sandwich bag that we used for the die-in or how the 'Wheel of Misfortune' would look, so I think a lot about Clare, who might be someone that would be good to interview. I can get you her contact information if you haven't received it yet.

GK: No, we haven't. I think I've seen her name once in the *AIDS ACTION NEWS* somewhere.

SK: Okay. This one... I'm sure Clare helped us come up with this placard here for the die-in.



JK: What does the placard say?

SK: Anonymous HIV test. It's pink and yellow with the AIDS ACTION NOW! We would have been holding it up, so really simple idea to have a die-in in front the Ministry, and earlier I said Church and Wellesley, but this is actually in front of the Ministry of Health at Bay and Wellesley. So, quick action with strong visuals again.

GK: And that one may actually be around anonymous testing then and not around women and AIDS issues at all, so who knows.

SK: Yes. Unfortunately, I don't remember. So, this would have been participating in another march of some kind; it wouldn't have been one of ours. It's obviously taking place at night, but I don't remember. I'm sorry. Right there? That's Brent Paterson.



GK: You're right.

SK: Know why I remember? I got the same haircut as him, and he always wore his hat over his hair to keep down the bangs and I remember thinking, "Oh, I need to do that because my bangs are flipping up all the time!"

JK: And do you know who he's with in the picture?

SK: That's me.



JK: Oh, okay! [laughter]

SK: Much younger version of me. And is that...?

GK: That's James.

SK: James Thatcher. That's what I thought. Clare came up with this design that's on his t-shirt; we had stickers for it. "We're sick of lousy health care," "Treatment access now" or "Treatments now." And so that was a lot of work. At that time what we wanted to say, and how does...

GK: That's a lot thinner James than earlier on.

SK: Yes. And this looks like similar placards, right? So, it looks like we publicly... We

used these lot. These ones. They could have been at that women's protest – "Stop killing time." There's Julia Barnett, who you've probably spoken to.



GK: Yes, we have. Her interview is on our site.

SK: And “Drug Funding now.” So, as I say, I do have a whole box of old stickers.

GK: We’d love to see that at some point.

SK: Yeah? Okay, when I find it I will ship it your way.

GK: Right.

JK: And do you mind if we would take these and scan and them and bring them back?

SK: No, go right ahead.

JK: Oh, okay. They’re beautiful.

SK: These are just unrelated ones. This is something on an old floppy ... It says AIDS ACTION NOW! Of course, I didn’t find the relevant box, but I found these little bits and pieces, so I have to figure out how to access that at some point. There’s that one... And that looks like it was—



GK: That was a postcard.

SK: Postcard for...

GK: I remember there being a postcard campaign. Oh no, this is actually... I know what it is.

SK: it is a clip from Nancy Nicols' film.

GK: Yeah, I know it was "Gay Pride and Prejudice." I remember that, but this is actually... I have no idea what it is. Anyway, we can look at this some other time. So beyond that, do you remember anything else you would have been involved in in organizing around with AIDS ACTION NOW!?

SK: Not off the top of my head. I remember going to a really fantastic... Well, it was like an AGM out of the city at a resort, and all kinds of meetings, but I don't remember the specifics of it.

GK: Yes, that's fine. At some point you decide, or for whatever reason, you are not involved in AIDS ACTION NOW! anymore. Do you have any sense about how that occurred or when that occurred?

SK: I think it's when I actually started teaching, so I lost my job in the government when Mike Harris came in. We were on strike and then I lost my job and I decided to go back to school, and took a year off to travel in between. And I think that's when I stopped being involved and I came back and was completely immersed and basically lost all of my time and energy to anything but teaching for several years. I know that that happened around '97 for me, but I'm not sure how involved I was in '96 even.

GK: Right. Okay. And it sounds from talking to other people that in AIDS ACTION NOW!, there's a fundamental shift in '95, '96 ... Like, the new developments around the drug cocktail are becoming visible to people. And it's also the case that people who were HIV-positive, who thought for sure they were going to die, begin to realize that maybe they're not, and there seems to be sort of a waning of energy ...

SK: There was.

GK: ...of the activism at that point. And it sounds like Maggie is actually the person who holds AIDS ACTION NOW! together through a number of those years.

SK: That sounds right. I remember that I and maybe we started doing fewer and fewer protests. There was some discussion about what some of the AIDS service organizations were looking like. The same sort of things you saw in the women's movement when shelters and other organizations – rape crisis centres – get set up. How do you deal with whether or not they get absorbed into, you know, sort of lose touch with what's happening in the grassroots. So, I think there was definitely a lessening of activity from probably '95-96 on from what I remember. Even in looking at what I could remember when I was going back through my memory, it seemed from that point on there was less.

JK: You mentioned the escorting work before with your other activist work, when you were involved with AIDS ACTION NOW! did you do any hospital visits or support in that way or was it more with the direct action?

SK: No. I became friends with a number of people. Not necessarily people who were involved immediately in AIDS ACTION NOW!, but within the community and became part of some support teams at that time. Not necessarily. No. Not with people who were involved in AIDS ACTION NOW!

JK: Oh, okay.

SK: Just from actually starting to work in the community. Because I came out... So, when I was at Western... I didn't come out until I moved to York University. And then when I came to York I came out, got involved in the women's community. Queer Nation was sort of getting started in Toronto at that time and got involved a little bit with that by just going to their events. So, a lot was happening at the same time.

GK: Do you have any memories about Queer Nation?

SK: Just going to a kiss-in at the Eaton Centre. And a terrible event, where – I don't know if you remember this – I think it was a Halloween march where we marched from the 519 down to Carleton and then back up Yonge, and we got pelted with things from a hotel on Carleton. And then actually the police escorted everyone back to the 519 for safety, but other than that I don't remember much. I would have gone to whatever they were putting on.

GK: Do you remember there was an event that AIDS ACTION NOW! supported that was – this would have been at the initiation of the first gulf war – there was a joint AIDS ACTION NOW!, Queer Nation march that... It was a feeder march.

SK: Yes. I went to that. I helped... We made a huge banner that took us hours and hours and hours. And actually, I was there with... Did Brent Southin talk about this? We were there. I think we stayed most of the night in front of the Embassy with our banners. That would have been '91, right?

GK: Yes.

SK; Yes. I was there.

GK: Okay. Another question we often ask people is, just do you remember what you were reading in terms of what would have provided you with information around?

SK: I remember being given your book.

GK: Oh god! That wasn't what I was looking for! [laughter] That's the right answer! [laughter]

SK: No, I remember definitely being given your book. And I think it might have been on the reading list of one of the classes I was taking at that time. I wrote down a few, so I came across these. There were two books that I found on my bookshelf – *Women, AIDS and Activism* and *AIDS Cultural Activism*. I remember those and reading *Xtra!* ... There was always this challenge with whether or not *Xtra!* was going to cover what we were doing. Outside of that, I don't remember anything else. And I think Sarah Schulman wrote a book that I remember reading, but I'm not sure when, about her activist history.

GK: Okay. So, you would have got most of your information around AIDS and AIDS activism from things like *Xtra!*?

SK: No. At that time I would have gotten it from AIDS ACTION NOW! from stuff that was being written.

GK: In the newsletter.

SK: Yes.

GK: In AIDS ACTION NEWS, yes.

SK: And at the meetings.

GK: Okay.

SK: So, anything that was coming out.

JK: Were you involved with helping to write it as well?

SK: No. From what I remember that Tim and Glen and Bob and others.

GK: Okay. So, one other thing were trying to is to not only have the memories and narratives of people who are still around who were involved in AIDS ACTION NOW!, but also to have the memories of people, who have passed away. Now this obviously is more difficult to talk about, so if I raise matters that you don't want to think about at all that's fine, but are there any particular people you would have remembered working with during those years, who died?

SK: Yes. Greg Pavelich, Brian Farlinger, and James Thatcher, I remember really well. And such fantastic memories of Greg. He was such a great presence; so positive and such amazing contributions to AIDS ACTION NOW! And James and Brian. Brian's contribution was... I don't know if you remember, did you go to his memorial?

GK: No, but I know that... Wasn't Mike Harris there?

SK: Mike Harris was at his memorial. I mean he was such an interesting guy, because he was, you know, I guess from the establishment and then became an activist through AIDS ACTION NOW!, So, I remember those folks really, really well.

GK: Yes, I mean there's actually a layer of people in relationship to AIDS ACTION NOW! who were part of the elite, become HIV-positive, and actually become activists around it, who to some extent try to use some of those official connections as well.

SK: Brian did that, and James as well.

GK: Both of them. Yes.

SK: And then of that group, I think, Bob Gardner, who died recently, just stands out for me, because of his absolutely critical work for OCAC and for AIDS ACTION NOW! He was always really encouraging. So, even if some of us felt completely out of our league in terms of activism or, you know, thinking work, he would still say through his approach and attitude to us, "You're really important. We need your involvement," and be really – it's something that we don't often think about – he would come over at the beginning of an event and say hi to you and welcome you. Bob was completely intimidating for me, and absolutely essential to my continued involvement, because he was so encouraging and inclusive.

GK: Was that in part also because he bridged OCAC and AIDS ACTION NOW!?

SK: Maybe. I think it was part of his personality as well, that he really wanted to continue to build and to have others involved. But, for me at that time, AIDS ACTION NOW! was really like a little mini community. It was really, really welcoming. And at a time when there was a lot happening in other organizations in the city that perhaps would mean that they weren't as welcoming, AIDS ACTION NOW! was really, really a great home. And I think, for me, as someone at the time who was a student doing women's studies at York and wanting to be an activist a lot of the action that I saw happening in the city was coming from AIDS Action Now!, so for me it all came down to that.

GK: That's great. I was just going to mention some other people's names. And, I don't know if you even would have met some of these people. Do you have memories of Doug Wilson, who would have been around when you first got involved?

SK: I know the name, but I don't remember him. Same with Michael Lynch.

GK: Yeah, Michael Lynch would have not been involved at all by the time you were.

SK: No, that's right.

GK: Did you ever run into George Smith?

SK: I remember the name, but I don't remember running into him.

GK: Someone named Michael Smith?

SK: Michael Smith? Yes.

GK: Okay! Tell us about Michael.

SK: I just remember hearing the name, and seeing pictures and hearing stories – fantastic activist stories, but I don't remember anything any personal meetings with him.

GK: Would you have run across Kalpesh Oza? He was on the steering committee at least for a while.

SK: No.

GK: Okay. And, again, I don't really know in terms of the periodization, so anyone else that you can remember?

SK: Again, my immediate circle there would have been David Chu, Brent Patterson, Brent Southin, Clare Meridew, Julia Barnett and Glen Brown, who was this big link between what was happening at the steering committee and what the activist group was doing, and later Darien Taylor.

JK: Do you have any funny memories or memories that stand out of your work with those people?

SK: Many funny stories... Organizing the die-in was really intense. It was a lot a lot of, you know, what I call grunt work. Just hours and hours and hours of stuffing, and there was very little glamour in doing some of those things or making up the banners.

JK: Would you work as a group or?

SK: We did. We worked as group in someone's space. A number of times we actually worked in John Greyson's. He had an apartment in an artist's co-op ...

GK: Beaver Hall.

SK: Was it Beaver Hall?

GK: Yeah, which is near OCAD.

SK: Okay, so we used that space several times I think to manufacture things, and all the running around to try to find someone who can make 10,000 stickers [laughter] – a union shop – someone who can make 10,000 buttons or find 10,000 pieces of chalk or, you know, get a source for 10,000 tattoos. There was a lot of running around at that time.

GK: Right. We're moving towards the end of this. I wanted to maybe come back to one thing, because you have reflected on the significance and importance of AIDS ACTION NOW! in your life in terms of activism. Is there anything more you wanted to say about that in terms of... It sounds like it really tied a lot of things together for you, for a period of time anyway.

SK: Yes. So, when I met the AIDS ACTION NOW! folks I was pretty young. And as I said, I was studying and got involved with the clinic support. AIDS Action Now! was absolutely essential to gaining an interest in activism, figuring out what worked and what didn't. And to this day when I go to a protest and there's speeches that go on for an hour, I think back to those meetings in AIDS ACTION NOW! about how, you know, that's the quickest way to lose people. And I think back to all the discussions that were happening at that time about how to organize something that will be effective. To this day I think about how those lessons could be really helpful now. But, for me, it was really the only time when I've been able to be involved in that kind of really meaningful organizing; what felt like organizing to win. I've been involved in all kinds of things since then, very little with a direct action focus and very little with that kind of sense of urgency of a crisis, and I think that really shaped it, right? It's a crisis. And same with the abortion fight at that time; both were kind of single-issue crisis campaigns with direct action associated with it. And so since then, as I said, I've gone to events, but haven't been involved. And I feel like an armchair critic [laughter] of those events given my earlier involvement with AIDS ACTION NOW! and being someone who was able to help execute some of the things, but since that time haven't had the great chance to do it again. But, it really shaped how I think about certainly actions I go to or organizing.

GK: So, we're coming to the last two questions. As we've been talking is there anything else you have remembered that you want to talk about or anything that you haven't had an opportunity to mention?

SK: No. I guess, and I've said this earlier, I just remember being in awe of the people who were organizing. Very much feeling my inexperience, my age, my lack of skills at that time – certainly probably to this day, but – feeling that sense of awe over the people who were involved in AIDS ACTION NOW! and feeling really inspired by them. So, the key people who were involved.

JK: How old were you when you first got involved?

SK: So I would have been 24? Maybe 24? 23, 24, 25... It felt really intimidating. I know I talked to David about that – David Chu, who was involved. And, to some extent, I know Clare later on. We just felt intimidated by the level of what was being discussed and some of the strategizing. And so as I've indicated earlier, I was really just, you know, keen to do whatever activist work I could with them and learn from it. I pictured at that point a lifetime of possible change. We were on the cusp of something, and we had a lot of power, and the world really was going to look different later. And, of course, that hasn't happened

across the board. We've seen roll back after roll back after roll back in many areas. But, that sense I had at that time... Because I think of AIDS ACTION NOW! and what it was doing, had this great sense of possibility, of all kinds of change in many areas.

JK: And a built in sense of purpose!

SK: Yes.

GK: That's great. The last question really is, other people we should talk to. So, obviously, from what you've said David Chu is one of them.

SK: And I was thinking David Chu, Brent – of ones that you've probably heard about... David Chu, Brent Paterson and Clare Meridew, and I can give you Clare's contact information.

GK: Right. Do you have any contact with David anymore?

SK: No. I saw him a couple of years ago, but I didn't see him. I thought I might see him at Bob's memorial, but I didn't see him there.

GK: Anyone else you can think of? We've got a big list of people to interview in Toronto.

SK: You do. Okay.

GK: But I think that we'll try to... I mean we really are probably not going to get to go to Europe, so I don't think Brent Patterson.

SK: And Brent Patterson doesn't come back ever. Does he?

GK: I don't know. Certainly, when I raised it with Glen and with somebody else it just didn't seem like a possibility.

SK: Okay.

GK: So I don't know. But, yes, we'd love to talk to Brent Paterson.

SK: Well, no I can't think of anyone else.

GK: This is all really been extremely helpful, so great.

SK: Well, as you can see, I was a peripheral member, but it had a big impact on my thinking.

GK: Yes, and we also wanted to talk to a diversity of people who were involved in AIDS activism. Not just people who were the central core or "leaders," but people who were involved in all sorts of different ways.

SK: Right.

GK: This has been really good.

JK: Yes, it was beautiful.

GK: And very helpful in terms of understanding a lot more about AIDS ACTION NOW! So, the last thing we do is just thank you for your participation.

SK: Oh, well thank you for the project. It's fantastic. ... And I worked very closely at that time with both Brent Southin and Brent Patterson. Spent a lot of time with those two stuffing.

GK: You were known as the Activist Brigade, which really equalled the stuffers of the packages.

SK: [laughter] Oh, well, I was doing a lot of that! ... I think about that when I go to Pride day today. How remarkable it was that we were trying to create this really significant moment in the middle of Pride day to focus attention, and now you just can't picture anything like that ever happening.

GK: You couldn't do it now, and you would never get the agreement of the Pride committee to do it.

SK: No. It was this great moment. It's not a march; it's a parade now. So, that was pretty remarkable.

GK: Yes. Those pretty significant mass things that thousands of people participated in, and that's really quite incredible.

SK: I remember the one year we had the float. Just the mechanics of pulling that float together were huge.

GK: Yes. For sure.

SK: Yes. Again, when I look at Pride day today it's just, you know, a little demoralizing. More than a little demoralizing.

GK: Yes ... I also helped organize Pride in Sudbury, so in smaller centers there's still a different dynamic that can exist around Pride. But yes, I completely agree with you about that. It just couldn't happen anymore. It would have to happen in some other way or at some other event. So, unless they're something else you want to say?

SK: No. I'm sorry if I haven't been more helpful.

GK: No, this has been very helpful —

SK: I mean it was really peripheral activist type work, and that's what I took away from AIDS ACTION NOW!

GK: I often think that people who think they were more peripheral were probably more central than they think, because without the work that you did these actions wouldn't have happened. I mean when we talked to Renee she was actually the secretary – a woman of colour made into the secretary of AIDS ACTION NOW! pretty early on. But, that's also important work, right? It's really important to reflect that diversity of involvement in people.

JK: And to think about the amount of grunt work that would go into bringing about change!

SK: Yes. Often that kind of gets lost, right? That this was actually quite a bit of grunt work. And I've noticed in the organizations I've been involved since that often once we leave the table, we've done the thinking work; there's no one left to do the grunt work. People don't want to do that grunt work anymore, including me (!) and it just never happens. And so we come back to the next meeting – we're thinking about it all again and nothing's happened in the meanwhile.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]