

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Renee du Plessis
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Renee du Plessis – RP
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: So, we're talking to Renee du Plessis. It's October 31, 2014.

GK: The question we start with is when you first heard about AIDS and what you heard. Do you have any memories of that?

RP: Well, I'm not sure that I'm going to remember in chronological order. So, it's just memories in one way or another, but because I had many friends who were gay and had been impacted in one way or another, you know, it was always around in conversations. Because I've been involved in various forms of activism – well, I've always been an activist because of my upbringing. But I guess when it really, really hit me was... I had a freelance job at a Museum in Toronto, and both founders had been working for that organization. I mean they were very, very well known in that world, and they had founded this museum and both died of AIDS. As the executive leaders they had individual offices. And I remember when I came into work, I had not actually met them but I'd known of their work. The museum was short on space and they were looking for a place to put me as well, but there was no place. And I said, "What do you mean? There's two rooms over there," and it's, "Well, you don't want to go in there, Renee," and I said, "What do you mean you don't want to go in there?" And finally staff "confidentially" told me, "The reason why you don't want to go into those rooms is that you might get AIDS because the two people who had those offices had died of AIDS." I was like, "What?!" I just found it so incredible and unbelievable that people believed you got AIDS from walking into a room.

I received permission to clear one of the rooms and use it as my office and staff reacted very nervously around me and expressed fear that I might end up contaminated and pass on AIDS to them. So, I was really struck that in spite of all the enormous respect and love that the staff had had for these two men, the fact that they had AIDS prevented rational actions. I really felt I had to mobilize and address in some small way the ignorance and fear that was around. Also, I had been working, in film at the time, and on the board of directors was a member of AIDS ACTION NOW! [AAN!] and I told him I wanted to make some contribution but not a major big involvement because I wasn't sure of what role I could play. Max suggested that I attend the Steering Committee of AAN! and decide then. I went with him but I thought I would just get an idea of what the organization was about and what small contribution I could make. But instead this was a working meeting and they were looking for people to take up some of the positions on the Steering Committee. Max proceeded to tell them that I'd be willing to do the secretarial work. I thought okay if that's what needs to be done, opening correspondence, etc.

GK: So, that's how that connection was made with AIDS ACTION NOW!? I didn't know that.

RP: Well, I mean through people like Patrick I had known about it, but I hadn't really been involved per se. And then Max said he highly recommended me...

GK: So, it's all Max's fault. [laughter]

RP: And then he was gone - like that.

GK: Max was around but never really involved in AIDS ACTION NOW!

RP: Yes, and then I don't think I ever saw him again at another AIDS ACTION NOW! meeting after that. [laughter] I was like, "Jeez, Max. Really?" Yes, and so that's how I became involved in the activist work of AIDS ACTION NOW! although I had been around on the periphery of it all through various activist friends who were involved in one way or another, either by signing petitions or attending events with them.

AS: Can you talk a little bit more about your background as an activist or about your experiences?

RP: Well, my father is South African and had been a member of the ANC (the African National Congress). And through the ANC we were always involved in the various liberation struggles, whether it was the IRA (the Irish Republican Army)... those kind of movements. I grew up in that world. My parents had always, because of their life, had always made us as children very aware that we owed the "community." We owed the community - our people, and our people were anybody who was actually dispossessed. So, all my life I've always been involved in various actions and as an adult I always tried to choose non-mainstream organizations, because I felt those were the ones that never get funding, support, and often they were closer to my belief about changing society. And so that is one of the reasons I got into AIDS ACTION NOW! - but why do you stay, you know, or make any sort of commitment? Really it had to do with, for me, these were the people who were the most affected in a very immediate way, from what I was reading and seeing. And they had organized themselves and they were articulating the possible solutions. And so I thought, "That's great, because I don't want to be articulating and I don't want to be creating." I like the idea of the people most affected taking leadership and defining what my support would be. And that's how it's always been, whether it's in First Nations work or women's work, I have always seen it as being, "Who's the most affected by the particular problem that the group is representing?" Am I answering the question?

AS: Yeah, beautifully.

GK: That's great.

RP: Anyway.

GK: Maybe before we move back to the Steering Committee and the type of things you did in relationship to the Steering Committee... So, you knew about AIDS. Can you remember how

you began to hear about AIDS as something that activists actually did things around – that wasn't just a medical or a health issue, but people were actually doing things about it?

RP: Well, I don't know that I ever knew of it beyond the medical – like, the awareness – beyond things like individual circumstances, like the Museum. But I had also done a stint as a freelance contract worker in one of the hospitals, and their people had been coming through for, let us say, chemotherapy, and I was working in a children's section. It happened to be that chemotherapy was taking place right next to it. And so you would see things like the medical records people would refuse to touch the chart of somebody who was designated as having AIDS. The hospital had set up a process whereby nobody was supposed to know, who had AIDS – but everybody knew what the particular coloured circle meant if it was on the chart, what that meant.

I never forgot this moment – this young man of about 30 was coming for chemo and he was just furious and angry, he was dying and nobody would help in any way... and he was angry with the way they treated him. He would be screaming in the hallways, and staff just would not respond to him and find out what he needed. And I remember having to go up and say, you know, "Can I get you a glass of water or whatever?" I was totally stunned that health care workers were so over-the-top reactionary. Of all people, they were the ones who should've known what AIDS was and how you could get AIDS, and that they were creating this bizarre, very unwelcoming situation when they were supposed to be the healers. He had been complaining about the way everyone was dressing up in their masks and responding to him not as a person but as a contamination, just what we see with Ebola right now. You know, like, "You won't even touch me," and I found myself being really challenged by him emotionally that I needed to do something so others in his situation wouldn't have the same experience at the end of their young lives.

So, I think that was part of the motivation, that I experienced various incidents like that. And it seemed to me that – partly because of the media hysteria, I suppose – but you were hearing about it everywhere, and also listening to people and their conversations, and what they were saying. Separate from anything to do with homophobia I think was that the most disturbing thing for me was the reaction of health care workers. So, I think that more than anything really kept pushing me to be involved. "What's the most urgent need to change this hysteria?" and, you know, "So how can I contribute?"

GK: So, Max gets you to go to this Steering Committee meeting. What was it like?

RP: All men. [laughter] Okay, I mean I knew that, you know, the leading activists were gay men, but I was actually very stunned to see the make up of the steering committee as that limited given that it wasn't just men who were affected. And I have to say – and this is really my own personal background – but I always notice how there are never any First Nations or non-white people, or women. Also everyone seemed so middle class with respectable jobs and... it wasn't the poor or dispossessed at the table. But I accepted it because of the people that I did know there were people that I really deeply respected, because of other work that they did as activists or through their own work experiences. So, I would've seen them as allies. And so in a way those were things that I just sort of could put aside, because it's been my experience in Canada that that tends to be, you know, the reality that you work with. And so at the time it wasn't particularly significant. It was just something, you know, I had experienced over and over again in Canada. So, that was my

initial reaction. But on the other hand I was also very impressed that the room was packed. It seemed to me that it was a very large Steering Committee.

AS: Yeah, but I think the point about the constitution is so important because, of course, people of colour, racialized people, Indigenous people are really affected by and, you know, experienced lots of oppression and vectors of vulnerability around AIDS and HIV also.

RP: In various private conversations that I had with the people I came to know there was a sense of urgency and particularity as to what was the main goal and purpose of AIDS ACTION NOW! was. And I came from an upbringing where liberation movements encompassed all voices on paper, but the reality is that, the most disenfranchised voices are rarely heard and rarely get to define the primary goals of the movement. We historically don't seem to be very included except to use our bodies for numbers and labour. So, I was at first resigned that this was also going to be the way AAN! played out.

And with the leadership that I did come to know, they were always very particular about, because of the urgency, the fact that they were dying, if you will, and the purpose was to get drugs. So, this is all we're focusing on and we can't do everything. We're not here to, you know, to work on all those other struggles that may be out there. And fair enough.

This might be more with hindsight perhaps, and "hindsight," that's not the right word, but I would say through my experiences and the learnings I've come to have – is that sometimes the poor, the disenfranchised, also have to step up... if you want to be part of defining the struggle. You might not feel you're welcome. You feel that *they* need to make you welcome; *they* need to do the outreach and whatever, but it's not that one-way. You also have to force yourself, accept the loneliness of reminding the middle class that success can only occur when my concerns are incorporated. They may not be different but more people will come to understand and participate if you include me. I'm not going away because the realization of your goals will only be fully achieved if you include my concerns.

GK: So, you're at the Steering Committee... you end up at the very first meeting you're at taking responsibility for becoming...

RP: I don't know if it was the very first. I know it was brought up. But it was definitely by the second one.

GK: Right. You become what people would call a recording secretary... What did you do?

RP: Well, really, at the beginning it was all about the mail that they had and nobody was really able to deal with it. I had been aware that I didn't want to do that much work so that's why, you know, "What does this involve?" And so it was, "Well, the mail really needs to be done." "Oh yeah. That kind of thing I can do." So, it was answering the mail doing secretarial type of things – you know, the lady stuff. My job seemed to grow, you know, over time. Just like the treasury part of it was only really because with the person leaving and nobody seemed to have the time, nobody was stepping forward. And then it was like, "Well, what does that really involve?" and somebody, George I believe actually mentioned, "Well, Renee, why don't you do that?" And I think in my mind especially, or at least I know that was always behind it, I didn't want to be involved in the sense of

setting direction in any way. It was, “What do you need done in this task, that task?” but not in the politics of it, the direction and any of that, because I was acutely aware and I would say I was made to be acutely aware of the fact that this was not my organization. This was a gay men’s organization, right. So, and that was, “Okay, fair enough. Whatever.”

GK: Were you also made aware that it was like, a gay men’s group that was also for HIV-positive people in part too?

RP: Well, with different people like, Michael Smith, being involved, I would say over time I became aware that it was not necessarily as narrow as was being presented. Certainly that HIV positive men would be the primary shapers of the policies was often used as a tool to subdue dissent. But which HIV positive men could lead was a fluid thing. There were interpretations by various steering committee members that determined policy.

And as I got to know more people and other non-members – well, actually, the interpretation of what it was and why it existed and how it was supposed to function – kept changing as I started meeting all these other people who felt it was their organization as well, and had different interpretations of its purpose and direction. And I really got the sense – and I don’t think I would change my mind in any way – that it had really been presented as an umbrella organization as opposed to just as narrow as I had originally thought it was. And perhaps I chose also to believe that because the people I was the most comfortable with politically held those perspectives too. And so I probably listened more to them or heard more from them because they were invariably the people I would also socialize with.

AS: Yeah. Well, and also just thinking about the picture of your political orientation as taking leadership by those most affected, right – that there are lots of people affected and then there was this sort of reality that gay men are dying more. It seems like there was a perception that this is the group most affected, and therefore the group to take leadership from.

RP: Yes, definitely. Definitely. But I think I would say the challenges were that the group that was the most affected was not exclusively well educated, with a multitude of resources. Gay men also included poor men and First Nations men and immigrant men, you know. And then it started also getting to be where I became more and more aware of criticism that lesbians were holding, and that women in general were holding, both to the organization and what they were doing and their presumptions on who was actually the most affected.

AS: Yeah, exactly.

RP: So, yeah...

AS: And I mean, this may be jumping ahead too soon, so you can redirect if you want to. One of the things that I’ve been wanting to get a picture of is there are all of these other organizations that come into being – COMBAT [Community Organizations Mutually Battling AIDS Together], Black CAP [Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention], PASAN [Prisoners with AIDS Support Action Network], Voices of Positive Women, and other organizations that are

organized in some way around political identity categories – so not just simple identity, but understanding that as a political category. And it hasn't been clear to me whether AIDS ACTION NOW! created a context in which other groups could then focus – and maybe it's not possible to say a general thing about this – or if those groups needed to distinguish themselves in some way in opposition to AIDS ACTION NOW! Does that make sense as a question?

RP: Yes. If I'm understanding you correctly, I think by the time I became aware of organizations or groups like the ones that you were talking about, I became aware or felt that there was antagonism or a sense of being excluded deliberately from AAN! because reality meant that you could not exclude other factors when dealing with AIDS. There were other factors that affected women and their ability to access medications etc. And so there was part of that, "Well, but you're not willing to look at that larger picture and so that means our needs can't be met here." But at the same time, I also felt because I had not come from Toronto, so I didn't really know, or I had not experienced the various movement histories, in Toronto. These players had histories that played itself out in the development and the creation of AIDS ACTION NOW! And so how activists including various gay activists ended up developing, or the work they had done, and who had become allies and who hadn't in all that past history, affected also whether other people felt that they were welcome or not, and their concerns were welcome or not... I'm not sure that I'm explaining myself properly.

GK: Yes. That's great.

RP: And so we can't ever forget that any development of the organization is coloured very much by who starts it and what their histories are with other people and other organizations. And so I think AIDS ACTION NOW! very much was a baby of that kind of history. I would say that about quite a few of the men by the time, I got involved – because I also wasn't with the original grouping. There had been a shift in the leadership towards the people that I got to know as the leaders when I first got involved. They would've been people who believed themselves to be sympathetic to women's concerns, and would believe that their experiences reflected that too. And I'm not so sure that they were necessarily wrong in that, but that doesn't mean that it turned out to be that way.

GK: Yeah, that's really clear. My sense is that you get involved around '89? I mean the original group is...

RP: When I got involved in it George and Tim were the major leaders.

GK: And Michael Lynch wasn't really part of the picture anymore.

RP: Well, he was on the periphery, you know.

GK: So, he was involved for about the first half year. It may have been that fall, the fall of '88 maybe.

RP: Because I remember him being at a couple of meetings, but... I have no sense that he had been the major leader. By the time I got involved I would've said that it was definitely Tim and...

GK: ...and George.

RP: Yeah. And actually there was somebody else too. I can't remember now.

GK: No, that's fine. I'm just trying to get a sense of when you got involved. So, the group started in late '87, but didn't become a public organization until the beginning of '88. And I suspect you weren't involved until the following fall.

RP: That may well be.

GK: Yeah, because Michael Lynch wouldn't have been around anymore.

RP: No, I think there was somebody else. It might have been Glen Brown. I don't remember that Tim and George were... I think soon after I joined they became really, by definition of the positions, the leaders, but just when I joined they weren't quite there yet.

AS: We do have – just not printed out – a sequence of who chaired when. So, this is something that exists in the world that we can know. We don't have to know it right now.
[laughter]

RP: Yeah. Memories.

AS: I mean this was a long time ago.

RP: Yes.

GK: Maybe we should go along the strand that we're going, and then we can come back to other things. One group that does emerge that actually approaches AIDS ACTION NOW! for support is a group called COMBAT and Jackie. And I don't know if you had much contact with her at all.

RP: I don't believe that I did. And I have to say – and I was trying to remember when you emailed me whether I remember her but I don't really remember any of the approaches or, you know, conversations or anything. If I remember anything of the challenges, they're in a more general way. And I would say this specific struggle that in one way was encompassed by Michael Smith, would've had the most lasting impression and impact on me, because it was also about why I was either booted out or left. It depends on how one looks at it.

GK: Do you want to tell us maybe more about that, about the impact of Michael and what he was involved in?

RP: Well, I mean Michael had defined himself to me as an anarchist. I don't know if that would have necessarily been how I defined him. I would've actually said... I wouldn't have put that label necessarily there as much as I would say that he was... very much interested in inclusion politics and very, very aware of First Nations and others who were really disenfranchised from within the gay movement itself. Because there was also a sense of the very proper look – that the success of it was how you dressed, how you behaved, and that didn't mean men wearing dresses kind of thing. And so I was very intrigued by Michael. I really enjoyed him. I found him always making me think in different ways, so I paid a lot of attention to what he had to say. And Patrick was also more and more, I felt, involved from that perspective. And he was somebody I respected too, so I was also listening to what he had to say. And then there were people who were very supportive of AIDS ACTION NOW! but had chosen for a variety of reasons not to actually join the group. And they were people I quite respected, and so I was also listening to what they were saying. And the commonality seemed to be that it was very much... it was becoming more exclusive and more narrow and not encompassing other people who had AIDS. And I remember there were a number of First Nations men who had made some criticisms and that went nowhere. And then of course a number of women... And I don't remember so much that it was Jackie. I'm trying to remember who... because I remember mainly white women knocking on the door. And there were two, not just Karen. I really remember Karen because she was quite involved with Michael and she was just a very, very intelligent woman. And so it was really interesting – especially coming from a perspective of homeless people, it was really interesting to hear what her criticisms of AAN! and the leaders were.

And so just hearing various people who were in one way or another respected and yet they were really challenged by this group that they felt was putting a stranglehold onto what the direction should be and how we presented things. By the time I became aware of their criticisms, I was also feeling, "Why are we so limited in focus. I thought the group was for *all* people who were struggling with AIDS, not just this narrow group. At the table were these great minds and people with a lot of energy and experience, including people like George and Tim, and their history and personal partnerings suggested a more inclusive approach. So at first I thought maybe they hadn't heard the knocking at the door. Sometimes as leaders you can get not to hear things because you are doing all the work. And so that's when I started to align myself more with other voices and try and get other perspectives presented.

And it had always seemed to me – if I remember correctly, and it's what I'm thinking I'm remembering – was that the Steering Committee never ever said that they didn't incorporate all those other groups of people and their concerns. So, it was a bit stunning for me to finally realize that it didn't. But it didn't because the particular leaders were interpreting it that way and I felt were feeling unfairly threatened by the challenges.

I remember a conversation with one of the leaders, who just point blank said, "Well, I'm the one who's dying, not you." I was made to feel, because my involvement was not... because I wasn't dying or my health wasn't affected directly that I didn't have any legitimacy. It was troubling for me, because those people not at the table were also dying. And so I was just very troubled and feeling very conflicted for a while because I was giving my energy to something that I felt wrongly excluded legitimate claims.

AS: Could anyone come to Steering Committee meetings?

RP: Yes. At the time that I was involved, anybody who was a member could come. But it seemed to me that, at the beginning you saw more of those people and it was not necessarily in the meetings themselves that they got answers or believed that they were being told “No. No. No,” as much as they were in the outside conversations that were taking place that led them to believe that, right. Because the Steering Committee itself often was very directed on this needed to be done, that needed to be done, this letter needed to be answered, we needed to raise money for drugs, to tasks as opposed to conversations about the politics of it. That happened a lot I felt outside – no reason why it shouldn’t have been. And we did have a number of meetings and as the challenges became more vocal and intense, there were more meetings outside of the Steering Committee, and those different perspectives were increasingly being presented. And I know that there was a certain point when I felt more and more women were trying to come in and were repelled. And the only other woman that I consistently saw, at this difficult time was Sunday. She was sort of in the same position as me – because we had a number of conversations – where we had both thought we were just helping because it was our friends or whatever, but we never saw ourselves as leaders in any way. And I don’t think we were encouraged in any way to be leaders. So, in a funny way we were being given this work but no attempt was to make space for us as leaders, not that I think either one of us wanted to make decisions, but it was a little challenging to find out that you have no value beyond critical tasks.

AS: Did you feel that you had a position on the Steering Committee? It sounds like it was a kind of responsibility to bring some of these conversations that you were hearing to that context, right.

RP: I’m not sure that I would say that I felt that as much because I felt I was always being made aware that I had no role beyond doing tasks. Although I increasingly also felt that my presence as a woman of colour was helping to legitimize an exclusion that I was not comfortable with.

And I’m not sure that doing tasks really bothered me per se because that’s really all I had ever wanted to do, but because of my history I felt very troubled morally that I was knowing that these conversations and voices were saying, “What about us?” and I increasingly felt obligated, that it was my duty to help those voices have representation at the Steering Committee.

I really believed in Tim and George. I mean they were my comrades as well as friends, and I had no reason to believe that they wouldn’t have wanted diverse representation. So, I was puzzled at what I believed of them and what I was seeing happening. I increasingly felt challenged that I had to support somebody or some vision or grouping. And I was constantly being reminded that it wasn’t my organization if I did mildly even support those who were criticizing. At a certain point my own politics would have said, “Well, actually, it is my organization. It’s not only white middle class gay men’s fight; it’s my fight,” right. That actually became the most troubling and difficult time for me. On the one hand, I didn’t want to feel that I was trying to take over... because I didn’t have AIDS and I was constantly being reminded that I wouldn’t be that person, but at the same time I had been brought up and never questioned, and felt no need to question, that all struggles are my struggles, and that it’s not gay or whatever, you know. So, there was that moral – I don’t know if moral is the right word – but I felt very conflicted, and that was my own conversation that I had to deal with myself, and at a certain point I decided, “I’m sorry. It’s my struggle as well.” And so therefore, yes, I have to help and openly chose to help.

GK: Do you remember any of the more formalized places where those conversations would have taken place? Like, any retreats or meetings?

RP: Well, there was a retreat.

GK: Yes, the Hart House retreat.

RP: Yes, and so I remember... I remember just before the retreat took place of participating in conversations with non-Steering Committee members to be prepared and that we needed to discuss a more open organization and if that meant pushing to have it as a vote to have this discussion and move in that direction.

And I remember, I was made to feel that I shouldn't be talking. It wasn't my place. I should be letting other people (people with AIDS) talk and then support them in my vote. I really saw that I was now at a juncture where I was on a different side from the defined leaders of the Steering Committee and I felt the antagonism towards those people, like Michael, who were trying to articulate a more open organization. I personally felt people were being invalidated if they did not have AIDS or were women. I certainly felt that the senior leaders, if you will, really became aware of the challenge and the potential major support that the majority of members might have to a more open organization and made the decision that they were going to grab control and that maybe was the beginning to get rid of people. It was their duty to find out who – duty's not the right word – but their role perhaps to find out just who the leaders of those challenges were. It was a very, very intense retreat.

AS: Sounds awful.

RP: When you've had history, activist history, you're used to it in a funny way. It's just that I thought I'd been careful not to end up in this position, but you couldn't not react to the desire for a more inclusive organization. So, you know, and with hindsight too, once again, it's like sometimes a movement has to be that narrow if they want to succeed, and it's the definition of what success is, right. At least that is what was presented. But I guess I felt that... if it was that narrow in just getting medications but not addressing issues of access due to poverty or other determinants of health, then why did the leaders present that this was an inclusive organization.

And then the first major event in Montreal when the Americans came opened my eyes even further as to how narrow we had become in deciding who could benefit from the organization and how conservative our actions were. And actually it was also the first time that I realized we had a bigger impact than just in Toronto, which was really in many ways the focus for the organization. We considered ourselves the leading organization in Canada and there had been a lot of pride in being that. But in the lead up to Montreal, we were getting letters from all over Canada and the world asking for help... I remember this really sad letter from this guy in Brazil who had heard of us and wrote, "I don't have very much money but I want to contribute because of your work and it will help me in the future and I've got nobody and no organization here" – we really couldn't not respond. Not that we had to take on the world or anything like that, but it was like we can't close the doors for those others in need – could we not find ways to respond to their needs.

Montreal, was really, for me, the eye opener of how conservative we really were compared with the Americans and how they behaved. On the one hand, we judged them and their strategies for the conference as so American, “let us come in and take it over.” But on the other hand, especially when we took the stage, and after our speech we were told to go so that the scientists could continue with *their* conference and important work without people living with AIDS and HIV and all the Canadians started leaving and the Americans said no, “we will determine when we leave.” I was so impressed with their resistance to being compliant with the direction determined by the voices of authority. I do remember though once again that when needed - they wanted a woman to be one of the speakers so it would seem like an inclusive movement and I was the only woman around and so an American guy goes, “So you can say... da da da” And I was like, “No. I’m not speaking. I’m not a public speaker.” “But we need a woman.” [laughter] “Well, it’s not going to be me.” And people were talking to me, trying to convince and I was just like, “Eh.” I mean number one, because I can’t speak publicly; it makes me very nervous, and I’m not a good speaker. But it was also just, “Gee. This is very male.”

GK: Do you have any other memories of being in Montreal?

RP: Well, all the organizing meetings, right. And so I was at all of them, but they were really run by the Americans in many ways ... I mean it was interesting because on the one hand the Americans put it out there, you know, “We’re in Canada. You guys get to set the parameters,” but you could tell from everything they were pushing and doing that they felt we were very conservative in our approach and style. And there were various conversations, where we would get together, and say “Oh... no, no... I don’t know if we want to do this and go there and wherever” and then the Canadians would think that everybody had come to an agreement on something but the Americans came back and they were just moving, moving, moving it forward and were very, very vocal and physical, if you will. I felt we didn’t know how to deal with them. And we really let them, whether rightly or wrongly, we let them control it. And, yeah, that march out was a laugh for me because there the Canadian activists left the stage but the Americans stayed on the stage... [laughter] That was so funny.

GK: Did you do work in the activist centre? I can’t remember if it was on Parc Street.

RP: Yes.

GK: Do you remember that?

RP: Yes. Yeah.

GK: And were you doing work there?

RP: Well, yeah, it was like doing the signs and that kind of stuff, and then you’d have to sit for the meetings. I never felt that I was really there for the meetings to make decisions as much as it was just another number to help convince who you needed to convince, right. Because I think at that time I was still perceived as obedient, following the line.

GK: Do you remember the people from Montreal who were there, the Réaction SIDA people?

RP: A little. I have to say that what I really remember about the Quebec people were that there were two people that various people felt were actually police informers because they were very extreme in what they wanted us to do. And so I remember there were various conversations like, “We shouldn’t trust them”. And then at one point someone said, “They’re Trotskyists, so whatever,” but it always seemed to be that the people they thought were police informers – and it’s not “they,” other groups that were involved always seemed to say that – but you just felt that those two people were sort of out of synch with what they kept trying to push.

As far as Réaction SIDA, what I would describe as the legitimate Quebec group, I felt that there was a disconnect and part of it was that, you know, we didn’t speak French and we didn’t make any attempt to have people around that could have been speaking French. And so there was that French-English division, but I also think that the French group actually probably felt in terms of action more compatible with the Americans in some ways. And there had been, you know, some, again, private conversations that I remember with the Quebec group feeling, just like the Canadian group had felt with the Americans, that “Well, you’re determining rather than us, but this is our home.” Yet before Montreal itself, I had gone to another event in Quebec City, and I remembered there when we were with French Canadians, them just being in awe of AIDS ACTION NOW! and the action, the work they were doing – i.e. getting the drugs, etc.

GK: Do you remember if that was a Canadian AIDS Society conference?

RP: Yes, it was. Yeah.

GK: So, you actually got to go to that.

RP: Well, I think I was already going to be in Montreal visiting and the steering committee was looking for some more reps who could pay their own way and Quebec City wasn’t far, so I was encouraged to go. At the time it was fun in a way too, you know, because I was learning still about the organization and the work it was doing.

GK: Right. Maybe before coming back to the tensions and conflicts within AIDS ACTION NOW! and you eventually decision to leave it, do you have any other memories of actions you might have been involved in? I mean not necessarily organizing, but that you might have been present at – like, die-ins or demonstrations, or occupations of buildings?

RP: Yeah. I remember them happening. I remember I was at different ones, but to be honest I don’t have any strong memories of any of them. I don’t know that I remember them being any different from any other work I would’ve done in any organizations. They never stood out for me, right. Certainly, there was often a sense of comradeship. They validated that sense of feeling. And I remember another activity at the time but it nothing to do with AIDS ACTION NOW! That was of course Doug Wilson’s campaign and then his illness, right. There, AIDS did very much play in the background and was a decisive force, and I was very closely involved in that.

AS: Would you say something more about what that was and what happened?

RP: Well, Doug had decided to run for political office and I was very involved in his nomination process, and surprisingly he won. And I remember it, number one, because he had needed to get all these people to sign up for the NDP and I had no issue with signing up for the NDP, but many of people and activists in AIDS ACTION NOW! who would vote for Doug, did not want to take out memberships in the party. I remember wondering why - it's just a tool. It does matter to get an openly gay man who was HIV positive elected. It was interesting for me that grassroots organizations... individuals keep their hands away from "POLITICS" whereas, for me, you use all the tools you have in liberation struggles. And I also remember the campaign because the NDP had a star running against Doug and so when he lost – he lost significantly – Ed Broadbent was the leader at the time of the NDP and I have never ever forgiven Ed, even though I had other reasons never to like him and support him, but he refused to have his photo taken with Doug, which was what he did with all official candidates. And he probably would say now that it was, "Well, Anton had been a star and was more electable..." He came across as homophobic to me.

GK: Oh. It was Anton Kuerti, who also made anti-gay remarks. That's why he lost.

RP: I don't think it was just that. I mean he really was not a politician. So, this was a star person who on the basis of the fact that, well, he was a well-known musician, but did not have any political background and history. So, the inappropriateness of what he said was indicative of most things he communicated because he wasn't necessarily informed and didn't have the people there to help him with that. It was just – he's a star; he's was going to get votes, and that was it – whereas somebody like Doug, who had community organizing history and had put work in and understood politics up to a certain point was more effective in speaking publicly, right. It was actually though a real shock that Doug won the nomination.

Winning the nomination led Doug to believe that he *really* was going to win this riding ... I was a bit taken aback because the riding involved the richest community, and the person who was running for the Conservatives was you know truly the Establishment, even though she was a closeted lesbian ... I mean we're talking about major money in her family and everything like that. Doug's campaign for me was more an opportunity to put on the table issues of concern that needed to be heard. So I was taken aback about how Doug was trying to run the campaign. And he was very indifferent to everybody else's opinions and the work that they were trying to do – constantly undermining them because he felt they needed to do it his way only. And then he fell ill with AIDS, severely ill, but it turned out he had known all along. I remember quite a few of us who had been doing really, really all the work, and hard work, from the nomination process right through, were really taken aback that he'd never been honest with us or felt he should've told us that there was the potential, given that he had known that he could get very ill. It even more could have given us an opportunity to present issues that those who had AIDS didn't have an opportunity to present. Also everybody knew that if you had AIDS at that time that you should not be putting yourself under that kind of stress and work. So, you would've resulted in a – what's the opposite of remission?

AS: ...relapse.

RP: Relapse. Thank you. That's the word. And so we could've made informed choices because we really worked our asses off. And so we had this sense of like real anger with Doug like, "We could've gotten somebody else in," or whatever "So, damn it, why?" you know. But then the tragedy of him possibly dying too was like... So, once again you were conflicted. On the one hand, you know, this is courageous, this is important, and then it's like, and all our work came to naught. And so that, from a political perspective, it was, "Dammit," but at the human level... it was also very hard.

GK: Yeah, but he did recover from that because that's all before the retreat.

RP: Yes, yes.

GK: And he was actually in much better shape then. I mean I remember him actually talking at the retreat about, you know, "You know I almost died, right?" And he was involved in AIDS ACTION NOW! for the next couple of years.

RP: He was, and more so before he ran, and then because of that I think also... and then came back.

GK: Yeah. Well, he tried to set up a cross-country People Living with AIDS and HIV network which unfortunately never got off the ground, which actually would've made things rather different.

AS: Yes.

RP: But so, yes, to answer your question, I actually don't really remember a lot of the demonstrations we went to, the petitions we signed and all that. I remember doing it, but I don't really remember... All I really would say from that was just a sense of we were doing something and the goodwill and energy that was coming from that with the people involved. But increasingly all those various things... the people who were doing them began to feel very challenged, because the Steering Committee was seeing a lot of this as being not the direction we should be going in and we're doing too much and whatever. And so instead of just "endorsing," if that was the right word to use, actually trying *not* to have people...

AS: ...doing demonstrations and...

RP: Yeah. At least that was my memory of it.

GK: So, after the Hart House farm retreat, which happens at the end of the summer in '89, can you sort of sketch out for you what happens after that?

RP: So, then things started to get more and more tense and I won't remember chronologically but then the conversations of "Who are we?" "What are we?" and "Our Purpose" really ramped up. And my memory was that Tim and George and whoever else supported them were increasingly nervous and tense and trying more and more to try to control the organization. And more conversations started being as to who was legitimate and who wasn't. Conversely, at the same

time more of the other groups started knocking on their door and saying, we are part of this, right? And so it was a personal time of feeling very confused, very conflicted and just starting to talk to more and more people to try to sort it all out for me of what my role was and where I should be and getting more and more disturbed by the meetings and tone of the meetings and conversations.

When I made my decision of “Whose side are you on?” I felt targeted and increasingly being made to feel that I was not the right person for the organization. The final moment for me was in the basement of - I forgot where. I remember Olivia Chow was at the meeting as a guest - and it was the big meeting to discuss who we were, what we were, etc. I’d already had my conversations with Tim and George and them telling me that my support for the others was not right. For some reason I remember Patrick being very involved at that point in supporting Michael - and I’m saying it’s Michael’s but it wasn’t Michael but the groups he supported, if you will. I had been at various meetings prior to this one, making very clear my take and my support and being increasingly isolated by the leaders at committee meetings.

Anyway, at this basement meeting there was a huge circle of people, and I came in. I don’t remember if I was early or whatever, but there was a large group of people already. And then we all had to sit down. And I sat and nobody sat on either side of me, like in either chair. Like, nobody, not even Patrick. I was very clearly isolated as I was the only person who had no-one sitting by them. So, that told me that there is no place for me and if I hadn’t gotten the message it was pointedly made throughout the meeting, without using my name, was made very clear that this was not an organization for women. And it was probably the first time in my life that I was told - not by using my name, but told - in front of everybody that even non-white, not gay, woman had privileges over people dying of AIDS.

Afterwards I remember talking with Patrick, because I was a little furious that it was just me that was pointedly excluded instead of all the other activists like him and Michael who had also been involved in trying to open up the organization. Michael had given me a heads up that he felt it was a lost cause and he knew that this is going nowhere and he was going to withdraw. I remember thinking at least Patrick would be right next to me and he wasn’t. And afterwards he was, “Well, that’s my community - where I get my support and sense of identity and belonging and expressing the need to remain part of the particular community, whereas I had choices as to what my community could be.”

AS: Were Michael and others at that meeting, or had he already stepped back?

RP: I don’t remember if Michael was actually at the meeting but others were, and for some reason I want to say that Michael was there, but to be honest I don’t remember. But at the time, Michael was also getting sick in a significant way. No, now I’ll say he wasn’t at the meeting because I remember he had gotten *really* sick. And afterwards he did come and speak to me because the Steering Committee... I had all the documents, etc., and they accused me of not turning the correspondence and other documents over to them once I had “left” the organization.. But nobody had actually asked me for it and so they sent Michael to, and I said, “Well, Michael, all you have to do is ask and here it is.” Because I wasn’t officially off but it had been made very clear to me that I wasn’t welcome anymore. And so, fair enough, and so when I gave him all this stuff he and I had a long chat and he explained to me that, because he’d become very ill, that he had rethought what he had been doing and the positions he had, and that he was more open now to their narrow focus and understood it. And so, while he wasn’t going to be working with them, it wasn’t clear as to

whether it was because he was just now ill or whether he really felt that that should now be the only focus. And then, after he died, well up to his death, I mean then he became... he was very confused and so conversations were more difficult. But we continued to talk up until his death. And I felt, “fair enough.”

You know, I wasn’t bitter in any way. At least, I don’t believe I was bitter in any way with what happened, partly because I had political history. But at the same time, I was shocked because these were also my friends, and I felt in some ways, people weren’t being up front with me. It was one thing... You could say, “Renee, we feel there’s no place for you.” And as long as you can give me your reasons, you know, “Well, you have your political interpretation and I have mine and if you don’t feel that I am welcome and what I represent is welcome, well, fair enough,” you know – whatever. And because it was a death sentence kind of politics that was occurring, who am I to say to somebody who’s dying or believes themselves to be dying that, “Oh no, I’m right.” Maybe it was the fact that when it’s personal friends that it’s the hardest to say. And maybe because of who I am as a woman – non-white etc – maybe it’s a bit challenging for white men to say that. Because you could still pass, whereas somebody like me can’t change my colour kind of thing, right. I was handicapped too so there was that too. I remember all that. Oh my god, yeah. And for a little while, I kept in touch with certain people and I knew I was very disappointed, because it just seemed to me that it closed... the organization closed itself more and more. And by that time, there had been I think real challenges from especially, that I was aware of, of women’s groups, and they sounded extremely valid, and I felt that AIDS ACTION NOW! was really being challenged in a way that I don’t think they ever foresaw. Like, they saw us as the big challenge, but in reality the big challenge was coming and I think women really were going to be it ... that was my interpretation. That there were real challenges of what are you doing and who you’re doing it for – became extremely pointed and valid after I left, outside of the organization anyway.

GK: In this context, do you have any memory of there was a constitutional amendment that was put forward that fall? I was in Saint John’s, so I really don’t know what happened, but it was basically to establish general members meetings that would be the decision-making bodies and the Steering Committee would be...

RP: I mean all credit to Tim and George who were very, especially George, were aware of the legal ways in which you could – what is the correct word? Ensure that nobody else... to ensure control of an organization. I mean they had that history and also establishment capabilities, so every meeting, Steering Committee meeting, up until the one I was told to leave from in essence, more and more this became the sole topic of discussion. And more and more things like Robert’s Rules, and all these things kept being brought up and it was very much the way that they were trying to wrest control. And they really took it personally and they really did a lot of work to find those rules and regulations and to have this all written down. And while they didn’t make any secret of the reasons why they were doing it, at the same time, I felt, they truly believed... it was not that they wanted the individual control, as much as it was what it represented. Those groups out there represented a different interpretation of what they believed was needed and required. And so as all the resources were there within AIDS ACTION NOW! – how were you going to mobilize and control that, except through this legal process, if you will. So, that was my sense of it. And the conversations were very, very heated, and very painful. Because most of the people on the AIDS ACTION NOW! Steering Committee for me were in various phases of where they were either

interested in it or not. I think there were quite a few people whose political involvement previously had not been with disenfranchised people at all. So, they really were willing to give it over to Tim and George without any real struggle. I mean they were fabulous communicators and so they were really able to cut people's legs off, if you will, and stifle dissent. And lots of people were leaving. And I remember that was also part of my sense of urgency of supporting the other groups was because people were leaving and it was due to all of this, right. And so that's really all I think I can say and the particularities I don't really remember.

GK: So, you had some links through friends with what continues to happen with AIDS ACTION NOW!

RP: For a while I did, until I moved to Montreal. And then I also chose not to have any more links with people too. Part of it was, you know... whether Tim felt that or not, I really felt I had been a friend of his and I had known that he was ill as well. And so I was very troubled because I wanted to support him and yet I wasn't wanted... as I said, they were very effective communicators, so they had a really good ability to make you feel like crap. And you were like the devil incarnate and you were a horrible person. And I mean, I stayed at their house and everything. So, just the personal relationships, it was just like, god, I don't know that I can have any reminders of it, because it was painful in a way, understandable, but still. It was like, "Yeah, I don't think I want any reminders."

So, I would say that the rest of my involvement was more and more in terms of at a distance with anything with AIDS beyond, you know, signing petitions, giving money or whatever. But other than that I just felt, "Okay. Well..." And it was funny because it was at the very time that those other organizations actually started to develop and I should've... gone and worked with some of them, right. But in reality, part of it also was I had really respected Tim and George and so it was like, "Geez," you know.

At a lot of organizations, that are more disenfranchised, not mainstream, it's a lot of work to be involved in keeping the organizations running because often it's only one person that does it all and I had originally joined so that I didn't have to do all that kind of work. And so it was like, do I want to do this? And so in a way it was a cop out for me too, to be able to say "Okay, I don't want to really do all this work. And I'm hurt, and so therefore whatever." And for a long time it did stay with me to, you know, wonder about everybody and think about could I have done things differently, and all that. But I mean, as I said, it's not like it was the first struggle I'd ever been in. So, it was just, "Okay, that's what we do on the left." [laughter] We're kings of that. So, yeah... I don't know. Am I answering your question though?

GK: Yes. This is great. I mean for us in terms of learning more things it is quite important. I was going to move into talking about people who have passed who you would've known in AIDS ACTION NOW!, but Alexis do you have any other questions before that?

AS: It's very generous of you to tell us these things.

RP: Oh, really?

AS: It's really useful.

RP: Well, I'll be honest. You know, because of my history, I have to say that I don't have any sense of ownership over anything. Like, even this for me, it's like I can in some ways say, none of this is really my struggle, if you will, because it's all my struggle in trying to be a progressive person. So, even though, yes, friends died and I lost friends who are still alive but no longer friends, it's also "Well, it's par for the course," kind of thing. So, I don't know that I'm really being generous because I don't know that I have ownership... well, I have not chosen to take ownership of any of it, right.

AS: Well, and that's what I think is important, that every group that I've ever been in has had some version of this. So, it matters to me, but it also happened. And so people did things, right. It matters to me to not be Pollyanna or simplistic about how hard it is. That's what I'm experiencing as really wonderful.

GK: And I think you're adding to the picture we've started to develop with various stories we've collected from AIDS ACTION NOW! Like, a very different... Well, it's not entirely different perspective from other people, but it's really a very valuable part of the stories that we want to record. Are there more general reflections on AIDS ACTION NOW! that you wanted to make? Part of what we're trying to do is remember the people who have died, so part of what we want to do on the website is to not just have the people who are still alive that we've talked to, but also have some memories of the people who were activists who died.

RP: I think the only other thing I'd have said about AIDS ACTION NOW! or the atmosphere at that time was that once I left I became even more aware of just how many people were attempting to bring to the attention of the world who was being affected, and that it wasn't just this very narrow – from my perspective – group. And in a way, my leave-taking of that time too sort of occurred at a time when AIDS in a funny way started becoming more legitimate and maybe Montreal was an example of that.

It ended up being coopted. I felt the whole progressive representation that AIDS ACTION NOW! had been for me, that began to be more and more coopted. An example was *Vanity Fair* magazine and they felt they'd been terribly brave to do a page of all the people who had died, whether they had been in Hollywood or, you know, Establishment, legitimate people. And there was like, "Oh my god," you know, like, "there's a whole page of them," or whatever. And for me that was sort of like, wow, so all of this now was becoming legitimate and all of it was being defined by those legitimate people and organizations; at the very same time that the people who really paid the price – the poor and disenfranchised – nobody was really looking at them. And they were there screaming and whatever. And those individual, courageous people who were struggling to have representation in various organizations, at the very time that they were like coming to the fore that was being encompassed by a more established kind of thing. And in a funny way, the struggle we went through with AIDS ACTION NOW! for me was a representation of that in a small way. So, I guess that's really the only other reflection that I remember having.

GK: You've already told us a little bit about people like George and Doug and Michael, and there may have been other people that you knew who were activists in AIDS ACTION NOW! during that period of time who died. Like, Bernard Courte died during that period. I don't

think you would've necessarily had a lot of contact with him. Is there anything you want to share with us about other memories of those people?

RP: I don't know. I mean they're personal and that had nothing to do with AIDS ACTION NOW! So, I'm not sure that there's anything, you know, to... I mean, like, George's dungeon and all that kind of stuff. Like, those are very personal. [laughter]

GK: But if you want to talk about it, go ahead.

RP: I mean I remember the kind of conversations people would have with me – being such a visible “only woman” kind of thing – was “Well, why would you be involved in this?” And, “Well why? It's a gay man's thing” and whatever... and being sort of surprised that progressive people would be asking me that question. And yet at the same time, almost in a funny way, being really welcomed overwhelmingly precisely because I was that. So, that people like George and Tim and everybody else like were incredibly welcoming at the beginning because, in a funny way, I think I did provide some legitimacy that a progressive person would've had about – “Well, we're not just this narrow group” too... and being very generous with their learnings, intellectually and that... and then, being welcomed into their homes and lives and learning stuff. One of the reasons I had always supported gay liberation, if you will, struggles, was that I had grown up with a very different family situation, and the standard mother-father and marriage thing, especially marriage for me, was something that was very unsatisfying. And I could never understand why gay men would want to be fighting for marriage, right. [laughter]

GK: Neither can I.

RP: And I had originally thought, well, I had found the lesbian world that I knew – which I'd been exposed to – very much about coupledness and this very narrow thing. And I was like, “Okay, there's nothing there for me to learn,” because it seemed a bit too much like the typical, Establishment view of relationships. With gay men, there's like all varieties of relationships and challenges of what a relationship is... so, I learned more there. And so that's partly why I actually did get involved in what others might have seen exclusively as gay liberation movements and work. Things like going to George's house and him introducing me to his S&M and dungeon and everything, you know. And then there was Tim and Richard's relationships and all that. I was like, “Yeah, this is the kind of stuff you're looking for. Like, how else can people live their lives satisfactorily and happily?” So, it was lots of fun too in many ways because you learned so much in a very enjoyable way. [laughter]

Or again what I told you about Doug and the disappointments and you know seeing how very Establishment really a lot of people were. And I remember all the parties that there were, and with AIDS and with all these people dying, and all of a sudden everybody was looking for that monogamous relationship. And I was like, “Wait a second. I came to this because you were supposed to be looking at other ways of living and establishing connections,” you know. And so I was like, “Whatttt is going on here?” And a lot of the people that were dying at the time... for me that was the most puzzling thing, was... and maybe because they didn't really have political histories, and so one immediately goes in times of crisis to what is legitimated. But it was

constantly a puzzlement for me, it was like “Whatttt? But this is not what I’m fighting for.” [laughter] And so, I don’t know... Is that the kind of thing you’re talking about?

GK: Yeah, but I mean you also hinted earlier that you might’ve been involved with Michael later when he was quite sick. We’re also interested in hearing things like that.

RP: Oh yes. Yes. So, it was really neat. His dad came, and his brother I believe – definitely his dad. And I got to spend some time with his father, so I learned more about Michael’s history while Michael was still alive. You know, the British boarding school. His father had been a journalist and his father ... Michael didn’t at any point say to me – he might’ve said to other people – he had been very challenging for his father, but his father in some ways had been distant because of his work.

His father when he spoke with me always spoke with enormous pride of Michael. And while he might’ve been puzzled only because of the cost for Michael, at the same time he was really proud and humbled by the breadth of diverse people who loved Michael. And so it was interesting to see... and certainly, from what his father said, of how his father had accepted his persona and presentations of himself. So, it was neat to see that with Michael, especially as an example of where someone wasn’t rejected by a family member because there often seemed to be an awful lot of that.

Like, with Doug I don’t remember him ever talking positively about his family, you know. And so... there had been none of his family, except the family he created for himself. Whereas somebody like Tim and his sister... and she was a really neat woman even though she was exasperated by Tim. And part of it was like, “Why does he always look for the stuff or relationships that are likely to get him into trouble?” You know, kind of thing. She had no issues with, you know, him being gay or what his relationship was or any of that. It was just like, “Why does he have to do...? He’s just always finds trouble when we travel or whatever.” You know, and she’s so matter of fact and you’re just like, “Wow.” And so it was neat to see them, that it wasn’t always people who... however they believed their relationships to be and had understood their relationships to be with their families, sometimes it wasn’t that they were rejected, but perhaps they rejected too, you know. And in other cases of being very loved.

And then Sunday, who was such a tremendous support to AIDS ACTION NOW! in just doing the work whatever it needed to be. To be clear, she was just doing the graphic work and all of that, and yet time after time, doing the difficult work of supporting men who were dying, Like, with Michael, helping him to die, you know, and her tremendous strength that she was able to give. Now, there was a hero.... not somebody who would’ve perhaps been acknowledged really, but truly a hero. I mean opening her home and everything, and yet being a single mom trying to raise a kid at the same time. So, I don’t know that I’m offering you the people dying of...

GK: That’s quite helpful and quite important. I mean maybe just a sort of follow-up question around Michael. Do you remember seeing his play – “Person Livid with AIDS?”

RP: Yes.

GK: We haven’t had anyone describe going to that. So, if you...

RP: I don't actually remember the play to be honest with you. I suspect I would've been rather critical of it, because you know I'm always critical around the media and film. And in some ways, what I remember when I read the script and that was that it was... it wasn't a professional job, you know. And I was all into when you're trying to do stuff, use professionals and that. And it was very personal, but I remember being surprised at the effort he made, knowing that he was ill, to do this. Obviously, it had tremendous meaning for him. The showing I went to there were a lot of people at, but it was again Michael's diverse group of people, right – a lot of people who described themselves as Faeries and I remember there were quite a few First Nations people and a lot of squatters. I don't remember, when I went to it, that there were a lot of the legitimate crowd. And so you know I mean everyone was thrilled and happy for him, but yeah, I don't really remember being impressed with the play.

AS: It never sounds like Michael was one of the people that was aiming for sort of bourgeois, monogamous marriage. Every description that I've heard of him sort of sounds like there was much more kind of complex love and family being practiced.

RP: No, but Michael did talk about how he... when he was really dying, he did talk about how he had rethought his parents and father, right. And so he was more understanding of them. And so when you're saying that he wasn't one of those that was moving toward a more conventional... in some ways, and forgive me because I don't know the words, but in reconciling with certain things, it was more an acceptance of those conventionalities perhaps, right. So, just like with the whole AIDS ACTION NOW! and coming to terms in forgiving and accepting, and perhaps believing they might have been right, when – I don't know that he ever used the word "right" – but nonetheless that it was not something to ignore and discard, whereas originally it was to push and move it elsewhere. But no, it had its own legitimacy and I need to take it just for that and nothing else kind of thing, which on the one hand made you feel betrayed in a way 'cause it was like, "Dammit. We did a lot of work here." And all of us ended up losing people in this. And now it's all okay. I felt to a degree that Tim and George also used that reconciliation to be, "Yes. So, see... you were wrong." But at the same time, how do you say to a dying person, "What the hell?"

But no, I think the original things that I'd been looking for, how do people create lives that are not this conventional life? Oh sure, Michael was a great person to be involved with and show you that. But just like Tim's sister was also about, "Why do you place yourself in dangerous situations?" I have to say for me it was like, "Okay, this is very different. But, oh my god, I don't want to be squatting," you know, kind of thing and that kind of lifestyle. That's not the right word, but that life and those challenges and if you want to challenge issues of poverty and that, do you need to live your life in a world of poverty, you know? So, it was interesting from that perspective but it was also my middle-classness saying, "No, I don't want to live as a poor person," because it's violent and... yeah.

GK: Were you at the memorial service for Michael after he died?

RP: Yes.

GK: Can you tell us anything about that?

RP: I remember that it wasn't very large. There were lots of people that came but it was sort of a small event. I can't remember where it actually was held. For some reason, I seem to think it was at the funeral home itself, but I could be wrong. And Sunday's the person to talk to because she did all the work. I remember candles were lit, poems were read, and there was a lot of crying, but crying in a very celebratory way. Michael had worked with Sunday as to what he wanted said and presented, but she had said that – because he was losing his mind – some of the stuff she had to interpret because he would start but then he would wander off and she couldn't quite figure out how he wanted it done. So, she had to also interpret a lot. She was very exhausted by looking after him, and I remember her being very, very tired. I mean no question that she was going to do it. It was the right thing to do and everything, but in many ways she was often really alone doing it. But there were a lot of people that came, and again, his father and brother I believe it was. They had no role, except I think it was his brother. Somebody read something. But I remember afterwards having tea with his dad, and his dad talked as I told you about it, and being very stunned at how loved he was; and so many tears. I remember it being dark and the candles and yeah, in a funny way, being very much that gentle, naughty Michael.

GK: That's a really nice way to put it. Do you remember being in the film with Michael? On the rooftop of where John Greyson used to live...?

RP: Oh my god.

GK: Yes, you and he were both the dilettantes.

AS: I forgot that that was you.

RP: I didn't remember it, but I remember it now. John did ask us to do something and I so respected John but I don't remember the video. Oh my god.

GK: We have a copy of that if you ever want to see it.

RP: Oh my god. I don't know if I want to. [laughter]

GK: Well, you were adorable in it. Michael's in it much more.

RP: It's interesting that you mention John, but I would've put you and John – and there were a number of people like you two – where I had been really surprised, especially with people like you and John who I respect enormously, and I had been very surprised that you weren't in the forefront of AIDS ACTION NOW! I remember being puzzled as to why you weren't. And having some conversations with people and finding that they were being very careful in their interactions with AAN!

In some ways, you guys seemed to be more aware of the challenges of this group. And I found it very interesting afterwards when I was thinking through all that. There had been cracks all along and you guys had been far more aware of it, but I think very respectful of the work they were doing and what needed to be done, and process. And so you guys were there. You supported, you know and everything but I always remember being, "Hmm... why weren't you the lead?" You

know, so why certain people became the lead and others didn't and chose to do important work but... and "outsider" is not the right word, but... what is the right word? No, that's not the right... You were there. You were doing the work in parallel, but...

AS: ...but not like, being the Chair of the Steering Committee. Yeah.

RP: And yet perhaps far wiser than what we had, right. I don't know. I mean I'm just throwing that out there because sometimes who you have as a leader – well, always who you have as a leader – can determine a lot of things, and how they get played out. But I remember having conversations with even you and John where, you know, there were some messages being sent out – well, observations rather sent out – that should've been, had I had a brain, I'd be like "What are you getting yourself into, Renee?"

GK: I mean part of it was John really wanted to do artistic, cultural stuff in his videos, right. But I mean if you look at some of the videos he produced, I think you sort of get a sense of what his take was. For a whole bunch of reasons, I prioritized working in the Public Action Committee, and then when I was on the east coast, I wasn't really around much except for the summers, right. So, that's why I was at the retreat but not after... I was gone.

RP: Yeah, but as I say, I mean people like you and John would prioritize different things. And I think we didn't often respect those of us – the activism in a very, very direct way – perhaps didn't respect how much that was also activism of the same kind really.

AS: The vision that you get when you watch like *The Pink Pimpernel*, the film that you're in... just, we watched it and I said to Gary, "I didn't know that the majority of gay people in Toronto at this time were men of colour and women." And Gary said, "Well, it's a little bit of creative license about representing, you know." [laughter].

RP: And yet they were there. And that's what was I guess more tragic than anything was that there definitely were people, but yeah. I don't know. I hope it doesn't sound in any way that I don't respect what Tim and George did, and the outcome. I really do have tremendous respect for both of them, but, you know, it was a particular time and moment in history. But yeah, not to take everything away from what they did.

AS: No, that's clear.

RP: Ok.

GK: To me it's really clear. So, we're basically at the end. We always have these two final questions. As we've been talking, is there anything else that's sort of cropped up that you haven't had the opportunity to talk about that you want to?

RP: I think that I remember... I do want to give a shout out to this mainly because it was one of the motivations of why I got involved – the health care experience I had. At the time that I lived in Toronto, my doctor had been one of the few doctors who had been at the forefront of working on

AIDS and with AIDS clients, and in a very quiet way. So, Philip Berger and his physician were partners?

GK: Yeah.

RP: My family doctor was one of his partners. And Phil was more in the media, and all that, but his group as a whole... I mean these were really tremendous doctors and nurses or health care workers ... I mean because I haven't been to Toronto since, and don't really know what's happened with everybody, but I think we forget too how very challenged they were and how lonely. When you're Establishment in one way or another – and I don't know if they would have ever said that they were the Establishment because of the group they organized – how brave they really were. And the fact that they just accepted clients, you know. And my personal experience with them, and the way they presented healing and giving you options and it was fine, "You want to try this," whatever. And especially because I work in health care and just remembering their bravery. AIDS ACTION NOW! – it was one thing, but there were other very legitimized organizations and people doing really tremendous work and we often forget that. For those of us who work in a different politically active way, that they really were our allies and we could've used them more effectively. "Used." [laughter] I've been thinking about that too, yeah, because I remember having discussions with my doctor. And just really appreciating, you know, his patience and willingness to talk. Because he really took on a lot of people that nobody else would. I don't really have anything else to say, but I guess I was just aware of that.

AS: Yeah. I think that's important and we've been talking a little bit also about Ebola, right – the political response to Ebola. And there just recently has been a couple of ACT UP members making some sort of video statements that are basically like, "We're going to get involved in this because we're seeing a reproduction of a..."

RP: Yes, and, you know, it's funny that you say that because the whole Ebola situation this for me has just been like, oh my god, we never seem to learn anything in how to respond. There's no movement forward and... I'm sure there is if you really stand back, but at the same time it's like, good god, what a disaster.

GK: And just one thing I wanted to add about the doctors doing work around HIV, actually the original founding group of AIDS ACTION NOW! involved doctors.

RP: Ah. Are you kidding?

GK: I mean it sort of fell away, but Michael Hulton was involved. I don't know if Philip Berger was ever directly involved. But there certainly were doctors at the initial meetings. I just wanted you to know that. And there were certain types of working relationships, but the doctors didn't stay centrally involved. The three groups that came together to form AIDS ACTION NOW! were primary care physicians, some HIV positive gay men, and some gay activists who weren't HIV positive, that's where it actually came from.

AS: The last thing that we ask, which I think that we've probably covered is just the question of whether there are other people that you think we should be sure to talk to.

RP: I really didn't keep in touch with people at all, I'm afraid I don't.

AS: Well, it's twenty-five years ago, so it's kind of amazing.

RP: Actually, you know, the one thing I remember and this... when the break-up occurred and I remember that Rob Champagne had a conversation with a number of people, like Tim and George and that, because there was a lot of pain I think on both sides, or distress in some way, but they had been really inimical in their own way and Rob had basically spoken very strongly to them about what they had done. And I remember just really loving him for that, because he actually helped me distance myself from it. So, those kinds of people; we forget about our supports. So, I don't know where you find those people, because I do not remember who they all were, but the various supports of the people that have been involved with... the Michaels, the Karens, or whatever.

AS: Thank you. Thank you so much.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]