

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

Interview Transcript 62

2017.008

Interviewee:	Chris Aucoin
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell
Collection:	Halifax, NS
Date of Interview:	December 6, 2017

6 December 2017

Persons present: Chris Aucoin – CA
Alexis Shotwell – AS

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: We are in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and we're talking to Chris Aucoin. It's the 6th of December 2017. Thank you so much for making this time, I'm really glad.

CA: You're welcome.

AS: So, we start with a few general questions that we ask everyone, to kind of set the stage. We just open by asking when you first remember hearing about HIV and AIDS.

CA: My first recollection is seeing something on the evening news. I've thought about this a few times. My best sense is that it was probably 1981, or early 1982. It was a news story out of San Francisco, where there was a community office, very much obviously a grassroots thing. I can't remember what was being said, but I remember at the time seeing it, and you could feel the sense of urgency coming through the TV screen--talking about this thing that was happening to gay men. I just turned 17 that previous summer, and I'd just come out to the first person during that fall. I was just starting to accept my identity as a gay man. Within six months of that, I'm seeing this on the evening news. While I had a sense of, "If I'm gay, maybe this is relevant," it seemed so far away.

AS: Were you in Nova Scotia?

CA: I grew up in Cape Breton, so this would have been in Glace Bay. San Francisco was a world away. But that's the first recollection. But I remember thinking, in the moment, "Is this something that I need to worry about or not?" And, "I'm not sure. It seems so far away. This is all--this is all new to me." So, that was my first awareness of it.

AS: Yes. Then, I mean, growing up as a gay teen in Glace Bay, do you want to say anything about how that shaped you?

CA: I don't know--it's interesting. I certainly had a fair bit of internalized homophobia, which is to be expected. I was in, you know, a working-class community, in a working class family. Catholic. All of those things. Ironically, I kind of sidestepped some of the worst of what I might have experienced because I detached myself from organized religion at a young age, mentally.

AS: Before?

CA: Before this. At about age 11, I was already questioning whether Catholicism or Christianity was the right fit for me. I forever had internal conversations going on in my head. I wasn't having these conversations with people, but in my head I was always having these debates and conversations. Organized religion was something I was very conscious of, by age 11, thinking, "This doesn't fit for me." I detached myself from it. So, a lot of the baggage I might have had once I started exploring what my sexuality was, I kind of sidestepped, because I was no longer carrying the Catholic guilt. I had other stuff, being working class. Our grandmother, who lived with us and had very Victorian morality kind of, embedded about sexuality generally, but not about gay stuff in particular. Of course, there was all the schoolyard stuff, which I incorporated. But I think I dodged a bit of a bullet in terms of the Catholic things, because I no longer identified as Catholic by age 12.

AS: Yes. That's amazing.

CA: And by my later teens I didn't have any use for organized religion. I was still questioning, but, yes.

AS: So, then at some point you start to connect with putting HIV and AIDS in a political context, or having it be something that you could act on or think about working with other people. How did that happen?

CA: Well, after high school, in the fall of '82, I came to Halifax. I've been living in Halifax pretty much ever since. I was still in the process of coming out socially. That, for me, was a very gradual thing. I wasn't in a rush. I'd support it academically more than I did personally, for a while. I was a psychology major, so, I went to the library and looked up everything I could find. There wasn't much. What was there wasn't much help. But I was searching for information. I started getting involved in community politics as a student, and student politics. Then over time that kind of social justice, maybe political involvement, developed. Later on, I got involved in gay community politics, which seemed like the next step for me. That probably happened late '80s.

AS: As a student what kinds of things were you doing?

CA: Well, I was involved very much in our student union. So, the students' societies was actually my portfolio. I was the internal vice president in my fourth year, and I was in charge of overseeing all students' societies on campus. I was very involved with the

students' societies, especially around performing arts, because I'm a performing arts junky. So, the drama club and the coffee house society, and we did a musical once a year, so there were all of those things. I DJ'd a lot of the community dances on campus; I was in charge of all of that stuff. Ironically, part of that also kind of -- growing up in a working-class community and very much in a union town, coal mining town, that kind of social justice stuff was always in the background. My mother had been very involved at various points when I was growing up, in community-based activism around, anti-poverty issues, although she wouldn't have talked about it that way. During one long, extended miner strike, when there was no miners' pay available, you know, she and other women in the community organized around setting up a food bank and a clothing bank, because families had kids that were going to need new school clothes come September, and they were all growing out of the ones that they had. You know, they'd pool together their resources and made the best of what was available by sharing, and everybody's trading. So you got hand-me-downs from a neighbor down the street as opposed to an older sibling, because that's what was available at the time. I watched that happen growing up, and I kind of got sensitized to politics, in terms of economic politics and class politics. Although I didn't have those terms at the time, later on I realized that's what was happening.

AS: That's what was going on, yes.

CA: Later on, when I started getting involved at university, when I got to university, I was looking at things through a class lens as a student, because I was a working class student surrounded by upper middle class kids. That's the norm at university campuses. It's like, "Oh!" I was very much an outsider because of that. Being gay was kind of secondary to my sense of class identity. Now, when I started getting involved in the gay community which was, like I said, probably 1987 or 1988 around there, the local bar, which was the social place where I found myself, was run and owned by the local gay organization in Halifax. So, I started going to their meetings. For a while I was just the guy sitting in the back of the room and not saying anything. Then, as of 1990, I ended up becoming the staff person. I got involved in a big way.

AS: The bar was Rumours?

CA: Yes. Rumours was the bar, and it was owned by what was then called the Gay and Lesbian Association of Nova Scotia, when I got involved.

AS: My family moved here when I was fourteen, and so I remember Rumors being really an institution when I was going to bars when I was young. It's only actually

since doing these interviews that I have found out or realized that it was community-owned. I find that really amazing.

CA: It is. That was a very unique arrangement, that it was community-owned.

AS: Can you talk a little bit about that?

CA: I mean, I know some of the history before that, of how it came to be. It started as a New Years' Eve dance booked in a space that had a big crowd, and then they booked another-- you know, there had been a community organization called the Gay Alliance for Equality, and they organized a New Years' dance. It went really well. They thought, "Well, let's hold another dance," and a series of dances became a series of weekends to booking a space full time, which became the original Turret, what was called the Turret, because of the building was in--it was a turret, on the third floor, which housed the DJ booth. I'd never been in that bar. I know the history through friends who were around during that. That is how it evolved to this community organization, which reorganized around support, and having a gay phone line, and doing political work, and they ended up running a bar. It was kind of by accident. A happy accident, because it worked out really well. For many years they actually had a cash cow that could help support things. By the time I got involved, they had just recently bought the building, which is now on Gottingen Street, which eventually became the home of the Rumors club, in its second incarnation. I got hired as a staff person in 1990, in a newly created job. My paycheck was coming out of bar revenue. So, not only had they gotten to the point where they bought a building with a huge mortgage... or, they didn't own it outright, but they got to the point where they bought a building. They had the intentions, over the long term, of being eventually renovated, to turn it into a community center, beyond just hosting a bar and my office. That was as close as we got to a community center; having a meeting space and my office there. It was a really interesting way to get resources, because there was no funding available through usual channels, government sources or foundations at that time. We made our own.

AS: I don't know if we should go further into the Rumors line, because there's a whole bunch of things I want to hear about.

CA: Oh, there's a whole bunch of things there. Let's sidestep that and focus on the...
[laughter]

AS: Okay, so let's back up and focus on getting involved more in gay organizing and AIDS organizing. How did that come, what was that like?

CA: Well, like I said, I was kind of on the peripheries of the Gay Alliance for Equality, who ran Rumours. I had been going to their meetings for a while. Then I left town for the better part of a year. When I came back from that I was looking for a job. I saw this posting for this position, which was the staff position that they'd recently created. I applied for it, with a vengeance. Because when I was going through my coming out in my grade 12 year, I was the stereotypical suicidal gay teen. It was a brief period for me, but part of what got me through that episode and in the fall of 1981, was I promised myself that I would find a way to change things so that no other queer kid had to go through the shit that I was going through in that moment. That's what got me through my dark night of the soul. You know, "I'm at a scary place right now. I know this is wrong. I don't know how or why, or the details, but I know this is wrong. That I shouldn't be here. It's not my fault." For whatever reasons, I had that sense of, "This is not my fault, this shit that I'm going through." Once I assessed what I was doing in the moment, and that I was, you know, on the verge of taking my life, I thought, "No. That's not the right thing to do either." So I needed something future-gazing to look forward to. I thought, "That's my goal. I need to find a way to change things." My undergraduate degree at university was supposed to be leading to, you know, medicine, to go onto psychiatry, I was going to become this, you know, kickass therapist and help queer kids. Then I realized that's not the path for me, for any number of reasons. We don't need to go into it. But I was still searching for a way to live out that promise I made to myself. When I saw this job posting, I thought, "That's it!" So, I went after it with a vengeance. I landed the job. I went after the job because I wanted to focus on doing work with youth. I saw this as an opportunity to do that.

But the job was a catch-all. It was created in part because at the time, the organization wanted to have somebody who would do media work. Because every time there was a reason to talk to the media, nobody on the board of directors was willing to, for fear of losing their job the next day. There was no human rights protection, and that was a legitimate concern. That was an ongoing challenge. Beyond that, you know, they had resources that had accumulated over time. They thought, "Well, maybe it's time now to actually get somebody who can do political work for us on a regular basis with some continuity." Alongside the media stuff. The public education stuff. I went after it because I saw the youth support angle of it, but the rest of it came part and parcel. I ended up getting the job, and my office was in the front lobby space of what had been the Rumors club when it was on Gottingen street, the old movie theatre building. Across the street was the Nova Scotia Person with AIDS [PWA] Coalition, which had just formed, maybe two years earlier. That was their old location, was across the street. I was given an office, but we had no photocopier. I had a phone on a desk. That was my office. I brought in my own electric typewriter. The board had arranged for me to have access to the office across the street at the PWA Coalition so I could make photocopies. Running back and forth across the street

on a regular basis, I got to know the staff, and some of the key volunteers, because at that time it was a very, very active, very much member organization. That's why it formed. It formed by people who were infected, to address their concerns. It was very much an angry and activist organization, at least in its initial incarnation. That was my introduction to the politics of AIDS, being around it, not being part of it, but being near it, being on the edge of it, and hearing what was going on, and getting to know some of the key players at the time.

AS: Can you talk about who some of those people were? Or what the vibe was like walking up the stairs into their space?

CA: I mean, I didn't have a personal relationship with any of the key players. Like I said, I was very much on the periphery initially. Parallel to that I had friends socially who I'd find out over the years leading up to this, you know, one of whom was HIV positive. That had an impact on me, personally. But I hadn't quite made those connections yet. The first people I really got to know, like I said, were actually mostly staff, because that's who I would see when I'd go over, anyway, so the ED at the time, Robert Allan, I got to know. JJ Lyons, who ran the office. I'm not sure what his actual title was, but he was a big presence there, and usually up front at the reception desk. Some of the members I got to know eventually over time, because we would cross paths in other ways. Around that same time, there had been the beginnings of a Gay Men's Leather Fetish group that got formed. Some of the core membership of that overlapped with the PWA guys, as well as my existing social circle. So that's actually how I got to know some of the members, was actually through this social club that formed, that was called Tight Rope. It was through that that I had a more personal membership with people like Terry Martin and Wilson Hodder in particular, as the two key people that became part of my social life.

AS: Do you think that there's some piece of the politics of leather pleasure that produced space for people to also be doing HIV activism? Or do you think that that was just a happenstance? Because there are a lot of places where people who are part of leather community have been really key.

CA: Well, we didn't have a preexisting leather community, and the AIDS work was already happening.

AS: Ah, okay.

CA: The leather community evolved kind of later. I do remember at one point, amongst there being, what became a topic of conversation within the leather group, of some people that weren't aware of the status of some of the members, saying, "Well, we shouldn't have

any HIV positive members." I remember that coming up within that social group at a certain point. I don't think it really informed it. I think it was happenstance, and like I said, I think the timing of it might have... if it had happened in a different order, perhaps that might have been the case.

AS: Right.

CA: But the PHA [persons having AIDS and HIV infection] work was already well underway.

AS: It was ongoing.

CA: Yes.

AS: Right. Then, what happens next? You're staffing, you're going across...

CA: I was working across the street. I was paying attention to what was going on locally, but I was also working really hard to tap into what was happening politically all over North America. I was trying to latch onto any queer media I could get. Most of the publications were coming out of the US. I was aware of a lot of that. I became aware very quickly that there had been a recent pattern where many queer community organizations, largely went into decline, because all of the energy and resources suddenly got pushed into AIDS work. I became very self-conscious when I took the job, that there's a real danger of that happening as well. I saw the work that I was hired to do as being important in its own right, but also a relevant part of, a necessary component of, moving forward an agenda around HIV issues, as well as just broader LGBTQ -- what we now would call LGBTQ issues. At the time we were still using the language, you know, "gay and lesbian." And the "lesbian" was only a recent addition for that organization, a couple of years earlier. The language evolved over time. For the work I was doing, for my paycheck, I was very conscious about where that line was drawn. I realized it would be very easy to get pulled into what the coalition was doing across the street. Very quickly, once I was established in the job, we would get requests for a speaker. To a church group, many to lots of high school classes... I'd basically end up going on a regular basis doing, you know, homosexuality 101 talks, to groups of-- some very formal, and some very informal groups, on a regular basis. Inevitably the subject would come up, but I would always make sure to focus on the broader, legal and human rights stuff. That was my assigned agenda, and I realized was still an important agenda in its own right, but I realized it was going to be, historically, a lot of interplay, that each informed the other and helped the other. I knew that the visibility of HIV/AIDS was really pushing queer rights stuff, and vice versa, that the queer rights stuff would make it easier to address resource issues around HIV/AIDS. I knew there was a symbiosis there, but I

realized that we had to work forward on both. I was really careful to make sure that I didn't get pulled into just doing AIDS work.

AS: Yes, and that feels really vital in terms of really looking at like, having this passion for youth, right? And queer youth, learning about themselves, and not having the only thing that they learn or know be like,

CA: A disease you're going to die from.

AS: Yes. "You're doomed," Right? There's so many people we've talked to, who their experience of coming out was coming out into the AIDS crisis, and having you know, a whole different set of---

CA: Yes. That being the only message.

I guess, for a while that kept me out of direct involvement. Like I said, over time, I gradually got to know the guys across the street, and there was also, as I said, a social circle that evolved around the same time that overlapped both organizations. Because there was a lot of overlap in both organizations. I was often around for some of the early demonstrations, and actions, and that kind of thing. But I was usually there wearing my work hat. Being conscious about, "Am I here as an observer? Am I here as a participant? Am I off duty right now? Like, which role am I playing today?" That was constantly a kind of shifting chess game. Because there were times when I was one of the marchers, there were times when I was on the sidelines taking photos, there were times when, you know, we were doing an action where people might have gotten arrested, and I was very conscious that I was there as an observer to see what happened, so that somebody could speak to the media, or go to the authorities, or something, if something was inappropriate, or whatever. My place in what was going on shifted a lot.

AS: Do you have any memories of any of those early protests or rallies that you want to share?

CA: A few of them. I noticed in your question, the donkey march. I was definitely around for that.

AS: Can you talk about that?

CA: I only have the vaguest recollection of it. It seems to me... do you know what the date for that was?

AS: I think that it was in 1990. It was World AIDS Day, we think.

CA: Yes, that kind of hits my memory, yes. I remember thinking at the time, "The symbolism is great." I was aware that there was nobody out at the House, which was the destination. So, they marched the donkey down, you know, through the streets, I think it even went down Spring Garden Road. Because they wanted to have high visibility, so, take the most obvious route to get down to Province House. Then, on the steps there, they had kind of hung the banner, and had the donkey there, and did the photo op thing, and speeches were made. But I was aware that here was nobody inside the building at the time. So, I thought the public education angle, and the media angle, was useful, but I thought that the timing was unfortunate. I mean, there were times we needed a strategist, like what's the bang for the buck, there's nobody in there that could actually---

AS: Receive this...

CA: Yes, receive this right now. I thought that was unfortunate.

AS: In that march there was, I think, there were times when people stopped at intersections and--

CA: Had a die-in?

AS: Yes.

CA: Yes. I specifically remember standing on the corner up here. On the corner of South Park and Spring Garden, where the die-in happened. That's actually, that's one of the occasions where I thought, "We might see arrests happen" [laughter] depending on how this plays out. Nothing did, you know, it happened, and drivers were confused and puzzled, and the general public was confused and puzzled, like, "What's going on?" But it didn't drag on too long, where any confrontations happened, so there was, you know, it was very peaceful. Then people got up and kept moving along. So, but I remember specifically at this intersection.

AS: Yes. That's a pretty big intervention to do in Halifax.

CA: Yes, and for Halifax to do that? At the time, that was groundbreaking! [laughter] To do something like that, to actually--civil disobedience. In a planned, concrete way.

AS: Confrontational.

CA: Yep. Especially around this issue.

AS: Yes. Did that feel moving?

CA: I just remember being scared! [laughter] I didn't know what was going to happen next. I remember being relieved when, you know, police didn't have to be called in, and people didn't get out of their cars and--

AS: Yes, start hurting anyone...

CA: --start harassing anybody, or hurting anybody. But yes.

AS: Yes. Any other memories of those early days of activism?

CA: I was present and participated in the blockade that we did around, down at the dockyard, over Simon Thwaites' dismissal.

AS: I would love for you to talk about that. Do you remember much about it?

CA: I'm not sure when it was. That was probably a little later, in terms of a timeline. It was an information protest. So, basically, you know, the crosswalk that---the main entrance for vehicles to get into the dockyard, there's a crosswalk across it. So, every time the light changed, when it was legal to cross, there was a steady stream of us with placards and handing out leaflets, keeping traffic from going through. You know, it was about getting attention and getting public education and media attention to Simon's situation at the time. I just remember it being a nice day, and I remember being there with a lot of people who were also my friends. So it was also a social activity, because we were there with people we knew and liked and hung out with and partied with, but we also had an agenda there, and we were very conscious of the fact that we were pissing people off. But we were doing it for a reason.

AS: It's really important that that happened.

CA: Yes. I mean, there weren't a whole lot of public demonstrations, that I recall. Those are kind of probably the main two or three. The donkey... I didn't realize that the donkey and the die-ins were the same, but I mean, I know I was at both, so. That kind of makes sense. I remember, like I said, I remember the Simon Thwaites at the crosswalk down at the

dockyard. Of course, each time there was a pride march there was a significant contingent within that, also, carrying placards about HIV/AIDS. you know, I--the first of the annual marches started in 1988. I wasn't at the 1988 march, and I don't think I was at the 1989, but as of 1990 forward, I was at pretty much at every one since, in some capacity.

AS: So, you had this kind of work relationship with the PWA coalition. And there was at the same time another AIDS formation in Halifax; can you say anything about that?

CA: Yes. In the early days, I didn't have much firsthand knowledge, and again, the proximity being across the street from the PHA, and getting to know that crowd, I kind of, you know, started to hear some of the rumblings about why there was a second organization, how they came about, but I wasn't around for that, and I didn't have any firsthand experience with what was then known as...

AS: MACAIDS.

CA: MACAIDS. Metro Area Committee on AIDS. Through my job, you know, I did have some contact with them. I remember at one point, latching onto... what was the movie? There was a movie that was coming out, that was getting a lot of advance buzz in the gay media of the day. Within my job, I was looking for educational opportunities, but also fundraising opportunities, because even though I had a salary and an office, I had no budget. So, I was looking for ways to raise money toward some programme things that I wanted to pursue. So, I knew this movie was coming, and it was called Longtime Companion. It was probably the first big AIDS movie. It might not have been the first, but it was the first relatively big profile AIDS movie. It got a lot of advanced buzz, so I got in touch with Empire Theatres, to say "I heard this is coming. Is it coming to Halifax? If so, when? Can I organize a benefit around it?" It's like, "Well, yes, yes, and yes. But, by the way, the ED [executive director] of MACAIDS is already asked the same question, so why don't you talk to him and sort out who is doing what?" So, I said "Fine." So, I contacted Paul McNair, who was the then-executive director. Paul said, "Yes, we're doing it, would you like to do it together? And we'll split the work and split the proceeds?" I said, "Sure." So, I mean, but I don't remember, beyond doing that event, where we each essentially did our own thing and divided up responsibilities, having much interaction with that organization at the time. They were mostly, if I recall correctly, focused on direct services to those infected. They were doing some education. You know, there was a very early poster. I have a copy of it in my office... it's a front-on view of Michelangelo's David. I can't remember the language on it--

AS: Maybe we could take a picture of it before we go.

CA: Yes, I can grab that for you.

AS: That would be great.

CA: So, I remember seeing that early information and, you know, seeing condoms available in the bar from time to time. But beyond that, they didn't have much of a presence in my immediate life, at that point.

AS: Yes. So, then you start to get--oh, the Gay Health Association. I wanted to ask if you have any memory of that.

CA: My understanding, and again, that preceded my community involvement, was that the Gay Health Association was started by four or five guys in direct response to the first few diagnoses locally. They started doing some fundraising to bring in pamphlets from San Francisco, and wanted to do a media story, and I don't know which station it was, one of the local supper-hour news shows was interested and said, "You can't use that name."

AS: Huh.

CA: That's how they became the Metro Area Committee on AIDS. They were actually--that was actually the beginning of what became that organization. But that's how the name came about, and that's why the change of identity.

AS: That's fascinating.

CA: They wouldn't do a news piece on the supper hour news and call it a gay organization. But they were willing to talk about the subject. They said, "Well, we want to talk about the subject, that's the priority, we'll drop the gay name, and we can work it out."

AS: Fascinating.

CA: Actually, I can't remember if it's four or five, but anyway, all four or five of those men are still alive. I know Scott... last name is not coming to me, we're Facebook friends [laughter] Anyway, Scott was one of them. at the time, he was the manager of Rumours. I know that there were also a couple of people I only know by name. People I didn't know personally. At various points I've done local community history work, because community history is sort of a pet project of mine--I'm an amateur historian. So, at various points I've collected information. I do have the names of the four men involved, I don't just have it in my head right now.

AS: That's great. Okay, so, we could talk a little bit more about how you get more involved--we sort of have this branch here, option [laughter] of how you get more involved in doing more work with the AIDS stuff, or we could talk about some of these specific cases, like Simon's case, or Eric Smith's case.

CA: I don't know a whole lot about individual cases. Because, again, I was kind of on the periphery of those things, and for the longest while just focusing on the gay and lesbian political work, and public education work.

AS: Well, I guess, the question is really not like, "What's happening with these cases?" because we've talked to both Simon and Eric. But more, what the fact of these cases--going on and becoming quite public, if that had any effect on your life as a gay man or your experience doing the organizing that you were doing?

CA: Yes. It had some impact, because again, the media and public perception that gay and AIDS were you know, were always connected, that had already been established by the time I was involved doing the work. That's why I realized, I needed to be clear about where my boundaries were, in terms of the work. So, anytime I was doing work focusing on the gay and lesbian angle, it would come up, whether it was in a high school class or whether it was with a journalist, and vice versa. So, it was impossible to avoid it, but I was always careful about which parts of that I owned and could speak to. How AIDS phobia fit into homophobia was my angle on that. You know, I was aware that the work I was doing was hopefully about discounting the homophobia, to undermine the AIDS phobia, ultimately, as well. The more personal way HIV/AIDS entered my life, is that in 1991, I met and became a partner with an HIV positive man. So, that was no local political story, that was just a personal story. He wasn't from here, he just moved from Ontario. I met him the week he arrived. A week later we met again. Suddenly we were just this instant couple.

AS: What was his name?

CA: Ben. You know, on our second date he told me he was positive, and I understood in the moment that he was taking a social risk by disclosing that he was positive. But I also understood part of what he was saying was, "I don't expect to have long to live." That's a real heavy message. [laughter]

AS: On your second date! [laughter]

CA: On the second date!

AS: When did you get together, what year was that?

CA: That was June of 1991. He'd just moved here because of his diagnosis, he'd made major life decisions, including quitting a corporate job at Toronto that he hated, and pursuing something that he'd wanted to do years earlier but hadn't, which was to go to University and study marine biology. That's how he ended up in Halifax, because it was one coast or the other, and he ended up in Halifax.

AS: That's amazing.

CA: I met him, like I said, and he'd barely arrived. His furniture wasn't even here when I had met him! Like I said, we became an instant couple. So, he came here to go to school because he wanted to study marine biology. Animals and environmental stuff--that was his political passion, was environmental issues and animal rights issues, and those sorts of things. We bonded over having political interests as well as sexual and other interests. Over time, he ended up getting a job with--well, the two AIDS organizations, as of about 1994-95, were forced into a shotgun marriage by the federal funders, who basically said, "There's two Halifax organizations, we're not going to continue to fund both. You guys figure it out." And that's how this organization, which I now work for, came to be. Around that same time, they were looking for an office manager, and Ben had had a business background. He'd done a business degree, because that's what his parents wanted him to do. This wasn't--that was the thing that he didn't want to do. He'd always wanted to do biology. But he had this business background and he was looking for work at the time. So, he ended up becoming the office manager for the new combined organization. He did that job for a number of years. Through him, that's part of how I kind of got pulled back into--because my job with the Gay and Lesbian Association only lasted for a year and a half. That organization then fell on some hard times, financially. I was laid off from my position because we didn't have the money to pay me, quite literally. I had to move on to do other things as well. I ended up going back to school and starting a Master's degree not long after that. I moved out of doing community work for a while. He kind of got pulled into it by becoming a staff person. Then around that same time I ended up on the board of the new organization, because they were still sorting out, you know, the joining of the two. I was briefly on the board, and then was briefly on staff, then left staff and back on the board... but during that whole time, he was on staff. So, through him I was very connected to what was going on, and as well, to his own personal situation with his health, and the implications of that socially and personally, etc., etc.

AS: When we've talked to people, it sounded like the merger was pretty difficult, in terms of--

CA: Yes... I don't know the details. I have always had a sense that in part, the PWA Coalition formed because they weren't... whatever specific needs weren't being met within the existing organization, and they just decided they were doing their own thing. For some people, that just might have been a practical thing. For some people, I do have a sense there was a lot of anger attached to that. I don't know the details, because I didn't live it, and I wasn't there. From an observer's point of view, I was very aware, when I did get involved with the Gay and Lesbian Association, you know, I had some involvement with each organization, that the PWA Coalition was very much the public, angry voice [pounds fist on table] it was the activists' voice portion. Whether that was the intention or not, it certainly came with the territory. Whereas the other organization, within the community, had developed a reputation, deserved or not, of being way too conservative, and not interested in ruffling feathers. They didn't want to, you know, challenge the government ministers about X Y or Z. Just wanted to quietly do their work, and focus on the services that they were providing. So, that very difference in personalities--this big, boisterous energy and this, we don't want to ruffle feathers--you know, that certainly meant when there was the forced shotgun wedding, that yes, there was a lot of animosity, rightly or wrongly, from those two camps. I worried about how this new organization was going to play out. I got involved with the board of directors during the time that they were still hammering out the new bylaws for this merged organization. The people around the board table, some of whom came from one organization, some of whom came from the other organization, were working through this, and that was great. I realized during the year or two that followed, that merged board, most of the people who had been both staff, because they merged the staff as well, and at the time, there was a lot more AIDS money available. The merged staff ended up being like, fifteen or twenty people, it was a fairly large group. We don't have a fraction of those resources today! But the merged group ended up being quite large, and of course, they had to figure out what to do. Over the few years that followed, I realized that what happened was, the new organization was still basically the bulk of the staff as well as the bulk of the board, was still actually the PWA crowd. The other group, kind of, after the merger, walked away. Or drifted away, in one way or another. The activist voice got silenced, because the people who were now responsible for all of this work, and a much bigger pile of this work, just had too much on their plate, and were struggling to keep up with it. Providing all these services that they hadn't had the responsibility for before, deal with the funding and the ongoing, you know, the Krever Inquiry was something that was emerging, you know, and going on around that time. So, there's all kinds of things that required a lot of time and attention, both politically, and in terms of service provision, that really changed what was possible. So, again, more as an observer as opposed to a

participant, I had this sense that the activist voice got silenced. Whether it was by accident or design, it got silenced to a large degree. Now, also, you know, some key figures also were dying. Or had passed on already. That's part of it, as well, as those things evolve, and as sometimes key personalities will make or break how visible an organization is or what voice an organization has. So, that changes things as well.

AS: Yes. People get tired.

CA: People get tired, and they get burned out. Or you know, they just have had enough and they need to focus on self-care for a while, and step back.

AS: Were there other people who were... I mean like, being on the board and being really involved, were there other people like you who hadn't particularly had a really strong stake in either the PWA Coalition or MACAIDS? Or were you one of the only people that...

CA: I think I was probably one of the few. I can't think of any particular individuals. I was always aware that I kind of felt like an outsider to both. Because I was brought in during the merger, in terms of that role. Actually, I was specifically invited in at the time to be-- there was a gay men's focused project at the time, and the staff who were responsible for that reached out to me and said, "You know, I would like to have" and I can't remember if it was formal or informal, but he said, "We want to have a gay men's health rep,"

AS: Right. Someone on the board.

CA: On the board. Because of my interest specifically in queer community stuff, and in mental health, and in broader queer health stuff generally, he said I'd be a good fit. That's how I got invited in. So, I wasn't coming from either side. I was kind of in this third category. In that role, I wasn't there for very long. It got complicated. With my partner being on staff and me being on the board, that got really awkward and complicated at times, and I didn't want to make his workplace more challenging than it was inherently was [laughter] because of the work they're doing. so, it was easier for just one of us to be directly involved.

AS: Yes. do you remember anything of Ben's experiences in those early years as office manager?

CA: I mean, it wasn't the skillset that he wanted to be exercising. But because of where it was, it meant a lot to him personally. I know he took... I know that had meaning for him,

that he was involved in the work. But you know, in an administrative capacity. But he would have sooner been working with animals [laughter] or...

AS: Sea critters

CA: Or sea critters. [laughter] He was a water person. Yes.

AS: Yes.

CA: You know, and maybe he--he ended up going after the job after trying to find work in his preferred area at the time. But you know, early '90s, major recession going on, and the likely employers were universities or government, and they were all cutting back, or funding was on hold, and so there were, you know, he did to have a few short terms jobs in that direction, but they were just that. you know, places like VIO, where he would have liked to have worked, they were letting staff go at the time, so, it wasn't the right time to be looking in that direction.

AS: And were you involved at all, or aware of the ACT UP group that started in Halifax?

CA: Yep. I was a member. I have the t-shirt still.

AS: You do? [laughter] Can you talk about that, how it started?

CA: Well, it was already kind of organized and under way before I got involved. I'm not quite sure why. I do remember it was already kind of established, and I was kind of a late arrival at the dance. I remember going to an information session that they'd organized with some local lawyers to get some advice on doing civil disobedience work, and what, you know, if you were arrested, how to navigate that and manage all of that. I remember going to an information session about that. I don't actually recall, I think I was still on staff at GALA at the time. So, perhaps I kind of didn't, for the same reasons that I didn't get directly involved in AIDS work, I kind of stayed out of what I saw as street theatre. I'm not, that's not, I'm not denigrating what they did. I think there's huge value in public protest. But I knew from my job, I had to walk a very careful line, because part of what I was doing was being a media spokesperson, and doing outreach to government and bureaucrats. So, if you want to have their ear, you can't be pissing them off in front of the TV cameras. At least to some degree. I did that on occasion as well, when the opportunity presented itself and it made sense to, but as a regular plan of attack, I was trying to be kind of the middle ground. So that if something got on the agenda because of protest by the AIDS activists or by ACT

UP, I could then be a safe place for a politician to have a conversation with off the record, or whatever, to follow something up.

AS: And to suggest, maybe, "Here is a policy option that could address this..."

CA: Yes. I've always been... the experiences I had during those, really it was kind of a four year period, because I was in the job for a year and a half, I stayed on as president of the organization after the job ceased to exist at GALA for an additional, almost two years. So I was there for almost four years, essentially doing the same thing, I was the spokesperson, and doing political work, paid and then unpaid [laughter] and I went back to school, and was a grad student at the same time. But I became really aware that the angry activists got stuff on the evening news. Getting things on the evening news is important, and then they need to have someone explain to the general public what the issues are. As an observer of political activism, regardless of what the issue is, I've long been fascinated by how many causes don't seem to make that connection. They think that getting on the evening news makes the general public aware of the issue, and that they already get the issue. It's almost always the case that they don't get the issue. You actually have to explain it in very plain language to the general public. That doesn't happen enough. Then, you do have to follow it up with the policy ideas, and putting forth policy ideas that are actually going to have a chance at moving forward. That's a piece of work that most causes never even get to. I mean, the most obvious example, and this came out of my student activism days, I mean from the time I was undergrad in 1982 to the present, I think every single year there's a huge march about student tuition going on in Halifax. Every year it gets in the paper, and every year it happens, and every year it's the same chants, and it's been going on for at least 30 years, 35 years plus, and then nobody does anything to follow up. So, nothing changes. Nothing happens. But somehow that's where the energy goes, into this huge public protest. To me, it's an example of how not to do it, because people think you're accomplishing something when you're actually not. It just ultimately kind of reads as a bunch of whiny kids. That's unfortunate, because that's not the reality for the vast majority. I was on student loan, I had to work while I was at university to survive going through school, and I had a huge student debt afterwards. You know, I knew lots of people who were in a similar boat, I knew people who had to drop out of school because of economic situations. So, I realized that there were genuine issues to be resolved, but they weren't being resolved with the activism that was happening around the issue.

So, I was always very aware of the need for doing those--of having activists poised to piss people off and get on the evening news and get it on the supper hour news, but you need to follow that up, and do what I would always refer to as the "shirt and tie activism." You need to have the meeting with the minister. Sometimes that has to be off the record. Fine, if it

gets the job done, fine. Sometimes you give them the policy and you write it for them and they take credit for it, that's fine, if it gets the job done. There are times when I wrote memos to opposition critics in the House, while the legislature was sitting, with questions to ask the minister that needed to be asked. It was fine to let the opposition critic take credit for that. But the questions need to be asked, because that moved the agenda forward. You know, it was a fast moving and complex game to play, and I really enjoyed the game, because I like puzzle solving, and I like games, and I like strategy, and it was a really fascinating role to work within. Yes.

AS: In Toronto, there's--one of the people who was involved with AIDS ACTION NOW!, George Smith, people have told us that he framed this as, you need to have demonstrations and you need to have documents.

CA: Yes.

AS: So, you need to show that you have the power and the people who are angry, and then you need to have a draft of the policy or a draft of the memo ready.

CA: Yes. parallel to all of this, and it's probably not in your list of questions, there was another organization called Lesbian and Gay Rights Nova Scotia, which was formed, again, a couple of years before I came onto the scene, and it was a group of LGBTQ activists, the language of the day, lesbian and gay activists, who organized for the sole purpose of getting the Human Rights Act changed in Nova Scotia to include sexual orientation. They weren't a membership organization, they didn't have any funding, they weren't answerable to anybody but themselves, and they were very up front about the fact that "We're not answerable to anybody but ourselves, we've decided that we're going to take on doing this piece of lobbying work." So, when I got hired for the Gay and Lesbian Association which, on paper, had had, you know, political change on its agenda since it was formed fifteen years earlier, but really hadn't gotten around to it for any number of reasons, or I hadn't done anything in that direction for a long time, so that's why this group thought, well, somebody needs to it. We've got interest and let's do that. So, they were doing the shirt and tie political lobbying, and had been for a while. They'd done a little bit of street theatre around it, and some of those people kind of spilled over into what became ACT UP. So, it was a little bit of cross-pollination there, perhaps. But when I took the job, I realized, "Well, they're doing this work as queer symbiosis, but they're also doing this work as a bunch of volunteers, I've now been hired as a staff person to help move forward this laundry list of community agenda items, so, I'm a resource, I just went to them and said, "Look, I'm new to this. But I've got a 40-hour work week, which you can make use of. So, what can I do to facilitate that?" So, I got to learn some of the shirt and tie stuff by watching and being

involved with what they were doing. Over time, I ended up doing more and more of that, because I was available, and that was part of the reason my job was created, so somebody would be able to respond to media, respond to government, when necessary, and not have to wait till when somebody got home from work, or maybe the next day. Because when media wants to talk to you, they want to talk to you now. They have a 4 o'clock deadline, otherwise they move onto a different story. So, getting back the next day is too late. The political process isn't quite the same, but certainly has a similar pattern, that you need to respond to things when the opportunity presents itself. Timing can be everything. Opportunities sometimes come and go like that [snaps]. There were a few situations in terms of the Human Rights legislation getting changed where that was the case, and because I had that job and I was available, I was able to step in and do things that were informed by that other organization who I wasn't working for officially, but my work was informed by what they were doing.

AS: This beautifully encapsulates the ways that that the timing of political opportunities can be so dependent on infrastructure, right? Like, if you don't have the infrastructure to have someone who's there with a phone who can talk to the reporter, or show up to the thing--that's the huge thing about not having very many organizations that last, right?

CA: Yes. the institutional memory of what's come before and where things are and what needs to be done next. I mean, because I come in as a newbie who wanted to do support for queer kids, and all of a sudden I end up doing this media work, which, I seem to have a natural affinity for, and was kind of exiting, and the political work, which I discovered I liked as well, so that was kind of exciting.

In doing that, as I said, I was aware of how each fed the other. You know, we'd be lobbying for the human rights act to get changed, and we had a Premier at the time who is on public record as saying it was never going to happen while he was there. John Buchanan. Then all of a sudden, John Buchannan gets appointed to the Senate, and there's a new Conservative leader. They want to distance themselves from the previous regime to have hope to win the next election. And, you know, for several years before that, once a year, the NDP as an opposition party, on opposition day, which is Wednesday in the provincial legislature, would introduce a bill to add sexual orientation, and every year it would not even get to a vote, because they would kill it. The government would talk it out. There's a time limit as to how much time they had, so they would talk it out so that it would never even get to a vote, so nothing would be on record. But, you know, that would get attention on the matter. At the time we had a Human Rights Commission, that was an activist Human Rights Commission, which is unusual, and certainly hasn't existed I don't think anytime since then.

But for a couple years it was a very activist Human Rights Commission. One of the things they did at the time was to publicly announce that they would reinterpret sex as one of the protected grounds to include sexual orientation, and start accepting cases on that basis. This was a large part to pressure the government to just move forward on that. So, you know, a number of things had happened that had built up a groundwork, so when this opportunity presented itself, a new Premier, who wanted to distance himself from the previous premier (and this was a very public issue on which the previous premier had had a different position), it was an easy thing to latch onto as a possibility. That coincided with Eric Smith's situation, as a Nova Scotia government employee who had been forced out of the classroom because of his HIV diagnosis going public illegally. He'd been, you know, he'd been fighting for several years at that point to go back to work, to go back into the classroom. That wasn't going to happen, so, at a certain point, they decided that he was, you know--

AS: A consultant ...?

CA: Yes, they decided he was a consultant to the Department of Education, which was just a way to say, "You're still on payroll, but we're pushing you aside for a while." Anyway, at a certain point, Eric came to a place where, for health reasons, he needed to step back from the fight, which had been going on for several years at that point. I remember getting a call from a friend in the media saying, "Oh, Eric Smith is getting a news conference tomorrow." I said, "Okay," I had a friend in the mainstream media, a professional journalist who was part of my circle of contacts. So, I went Wednesday morning to see Eric's press conference, and he read a prepared statement that basically said, "On the advice of my doctor, for health reasons, I'm stepping back from my fight to go back to the classroom." But this was in a government office, and the press conference was being organized by someone who was clearly a government staff person. So, Eric read his statement and then, of course, the journalist wanted to ask questions in more detail. She literally grabbed Eric by the arm and led him out of the room before he'd had a chance to answer anything. Now, that's a really weird thing to happen at what's supposed to be Eric Smith's press conference, because this isn't Eric Smith's--that's not Eric Smith that's deciding what's going on right now! So, that's Wednesday. On Thursday I got a call from a journalist who had run into the attorney general of the province. He said, "Oh, by the way, tomorrow we're introducing sexual orientation to the Human Rights Act. You're probably going to be -- you and your community -- " because he knew he was a gay man -- "You're probably going to be really pleased about that, it's going to happen tomorrow, just to get a head's up. He calls me and says, "I just was told this by the attorney general." Part of that story was that he also said that, "Oh you know, you should be really happy, in part because the amendments we're putting forth have come from the Human Rights commission, so I'm sure you'll be happy

with them." That's what it was. I thought, "That's really odd, because I've got a really, really close contact at the Human Rights Commission, and if they were drafting something, I think I would know about it by now. I haven't heard anything. So, let me make a call." So, I called my friend who was a Human Rights Commissioner. It was news to her. She said, "I'll call my boss." She called her boss. News to him. She relayed this back to me. I said, "That's really interesting. Eric Smith just stepped down from a fight, there's a rush job of a draft being submitted tomorrow, supposedly coming from the Human Rights Commission, but they don't know anything about it... there's some really weird stuff going on." So, the next day I go out to the house, and the media pool in those days, I don't think it happens anymore, but there used to always be a media pool when the house was sitting, there's a little room downstairs where the journalists can hang out, you know, to cover the political bit. The news wire, the local papers, or whatever, TV. So, I went down. I knew that they would have drafts of what was going to be introduced that day. They had an advance copy, in part so they could start writing the story and then fill in the blanks with the sound bites from whoever. I got a draft of what was being submitted before it was actually submitted in the house, and I read through it and I thought--and, at that point, I'd been working with LGRNS for a year and a half, and I was familiar with what the NDP had submitted in the past as draft legislation. I'd seen various versions of what a human rights amendment might look like, what would be the area and what was desirable and that kind of thing. I'd seen various versions, so I thought, I was thinking, "Well, first of all as a document, just reading this, it clearly is a hodgepodge patchwork quilt from different places. This is clearly a rush job. It's not in the same voice from start to finish, it contradicts itself in places, and beyond adding sexual orientation there's a couple things here that are just wrong or scary, including government giving itself an entire opt-out provision not to have to live up to any human rights protections itself." I thought, "That shouldn't be there" [laughter]. So, as I'm reading through this, I thought, "Okay, there are some questions that need to get asked as soon as the minister introduces it." So, that's when I wrote my memo to the opposition critic saying, "Here's three key questions that need to be asked about this from the get-go." One is, you know, this did not come from the Human Rights Commission. Why are we being told it did? Why is the government giving itself an opt-out clause, not to have to live up to any of its own legislation on Human Rights? Then there was a third thing, which I don't recall. But those were the two main things. Those questions got asked, and the minister was caught off guard, and embarrassed, because the staff apparently had told him that it came from the Human Rights Commission, so he was really unhappy after that. He went back and said, "What the hell is going on?" I don't know what fall out might have happened from that. But very quickly, the government was then very open to making changes. Which is what I knew needed to happen in the moment. If it went through as presented it was going to be really problematic, and we'd be stuck with it for years. So, the only way-- my thought was, in the moment, if we can hit hard fast up front about what's wrong with it, we can--

AS: Create a window...

CA: Create a window. It certainly did. So, when it went to a law amendments committee, they were really open to that, and of course, by then, we all had our own draft of what it should be, and had then worked with, you know, LGRNS, who was the main lobbying group. I did a presentation on behalf of my organization saying essentially the same thing, but wearing a different hat. The--at least one, if not both, of the AIDS organizations made their own independent presentation in law amendments, as well, speaking to the issue. Because what was included as well was adding disability and a clear understanding that HIV status would be included under disability, so there was an HIV/AIDS-specific angle to it. So, all of that went through and got incorporated and got massaged, and what had passed--we didn't get everything that we wanted, but the core stuff and the important stuff got through and got passed.

AS: Amazing.

CA: Again, that was a matter of knowing what was going on, having those connections, being available to respond in that moment when there was an opportunity to say, "This is a problem," and nail it [laughter] to the door right away, that you're not going to get away with that. But like I said, to me, I've never confirmed this, but I've always assumed that Eric made a deal. "I'll go away and stop being a thorn in your side if you add sexual orientation." I expect the deal required a non-disclosure clause on his part, that he would have signed. Eric had always been very up front about the fact that he saw his fight to get his job back as being bigger than just him and HIV.

AS: Yes. He'd worked on that for years.

CA: He'd worked on that for years. Yes. That happened, came down in what, 1987 or 1988? This is 1991. So, like I said, you can't separate the progress that was made on LGBTQ stuff from what was going on with HIV/AIDS stuff. That wasn't just the case here in Halifax, or Nova Scotia, that was the case everywhere. I mean, visibility, HIV/AIDS is like, how gay marriage became possible. In 1990, if anybody had asked me if that was possible I'd say "Not in my lifetime. We'll make progress, but that's way too far." You know? And then...

AS: Yes.

CA: But it was because of the visibility that all of a sudden, queers were no longer just those scary stereotypes. It was somebody I know, somebody my family, and that happened

because somebody was outed as having HIV/AIDS. That really, really fast-tracked everything. It made it human to all kinds of people. You know? And at all levels of society. without that, we wouldn't be nearly as far as we are with that. At least not in the developed world.

AS: Yes, the organizing that people did. I mean, I've thought a lot about the ways that, if there hadn't--and this is something that Gary talks about, too--that if there hadn't already been a gay movement, where people had been fighting back, and you know, living their lives with dignity, right? That if that hadn't happened, there wouldn't have been the kind of political response to HIV/AIDS. So, that's always a really--what we've been talking about throughout, is this space between AIDS-specific things and gay specific or queer-specific things, how those have been synergistic, right?

CA: For sure. I mean, I didn't live this or see this firsthand myself, but I've also heard other people comment on how, specific to the AIDS movement, that the women's movement, out of the 60s and the 70s, especially around women's reproductive health, also helped inform what happened with HIV/AIDS. Especially in North America and in the West. Especially in the early days when, you know, it wasn't just gay men who were at the table. A lot of lesbian women who were friends with those gay men became caretakers and advocates and allies in those early days, as well. It was clearly the case at the PWA Coalition. I mean I remember people like Maureen Shabib being on the-- I don't know if she was on the board but she was very involved. There were other people who were very, you know, for who clearly they weren't living with this disease, but they were living with friends who were living with this disease. It was part of their world, as well.

AS: Yes. It was a seamless part of their political life. We've heard a lot of stories about people who were involved in AIDS organizing saying, "Well, of course we would go to the pro-choice rally. That was a just a basic part of people's access to health choices." So, that's also something that I also have really appreciated about having these conversations with people. It's really, these were not separate, you know? These were connected struggles that people saw, grounds for solidarity.

CA: Common threads.

AS: Yes. Okay, so. Can we talk a little bit about the Rumors early '90s piece? [laughter] So, the conflicts around Rumors?

CA: Sure.

AS: So, there was this ACT UP action, we understand, in 1991, at Rumors. Or, maybe two interventions. Anyway, just talk about ACT UP and Rumors.

CA: [laughter] Well, there are two things that I'm aware of. Like I said, officially I was an ACT UP member, and I had the t-shirt. But I largely step back from that, because of my day job. So, I can't remember which happened first, but there are two incidents that come to mind. Rumors was a big former movie house. So, it's this large auditorium, and at one end where the screen would have been, there was a stage. Before it became a gay bar it had been a live band venue for a number of years. They built a stage under the screen, which was still there. So, we still had this 1950s movie screen that came with the building, that we'd roll up to do drag shows and things with, community events with. We'd also use it to project videos on. Because this is the late '80s into the '90s, this is when music videos are really, really big. So, if you're a club, you had to have music videos. That was part of the gig as well. So, we had this big screen on stage. You know, it's close to two stories tall, and probably thirty feet wide, forty feet wide, it's a large screen.

AS: Huge!

CA: This one Saturday night, ACT UP wants to do this action, and they decide that the way they'll do it is they'll rush on stage. There were stairwells on either side of this stage area that led up to backstage and behind the screen. They came out from behind the screen, and on stage, while there's music playing, yelling at people. I was there that night, and I remember being somewhere near or on the dance floor looking up. it's like, "Oh, there are people on stage! What are they doing?" Because you couldn't hear what they were saying, you couldn't make out what was happening, it was just confusing. Everybody who noticed was kind of puzzled as to what's going on. So, whatever action they intended, it didn't work. So, fine. They either disbanded or staff pushed them off the stage, and most people kind of thought that was that. A day or two later, staff discovered that the screen now had a rip in it. The assumption was it happened as a result of them going on stage. they banned those who were known to be part of the action, as a result of that. Of course, that opened into a big fight about, well, "How can you prove this, maybe the rip was already there," back and forth back and forth. So, that's one thing that I was aware of, was that action.

The other was on, when we did get the Human Rights Act changed, the vote on that happened in late June of 1991. Which, at the time, also was the period when Halifax Pride happened. It's since changed its dates. But at the time, it was always the end of June, echoing the dates for the Stonewall Riots. For quite a few months there had been a regular group of guys who, on the dance floor, especially in the warmer weather, would often take their shirts off on the dance floor. I was one of them. I was often one of these first guys. I

loved to dance. When I danced, it was an aerobics workout. I work up a sweat pretty quickly, and it's more comfortable not to have a shirt on. For some guys, that was the issue, for some guys they just liked kind of exposing themselves and that was fine too. But there was always a core group of guys who would do this on a regular basis. For a while there had been some ruffled feathers with women in the community not being happy about people exposing themselves, for various reasons, even though it was just a shirt off. Nothing had really become of it. Some of the women who were involved with ACT UP, although I don't know if it was officially and ACT UP action decided, this Saturday of Pride week, the day after the House votes on getting the Human Rights Act passed, We're going to celebrate in a big way. They decided that how they would celebrate would be to take their shirts off and, as a group, all had organized when a certain song came on, that was the cue that they were going to run to the center of the dance floor, rip their shirts off, and dance. It was a more personal as opposed to protest action. Fine. Not only did they do that, but also they had Silence = Death stickers, the black background with the pink triangle, over their nipples. So, they weren't fully naked from the waist down, their areolas would be covered (whether that made them legal or not was a point of debate, but anyway, this action happened). When it happened, those of us on the dance floor, especially those of us who had our shirts off already, joined their circle. it was a really strange, powerful, emotional moment of celebration. The fallout from that, was okay, was the bar management, and of course, by extensions, the board of directors for the organization, kind of freaking out a day after. Saying, "Ok, if women take their shirts off, will the liquor board shut us down? If the liquor board shuts us down, we have no income, we lose the building, and we lose the organization, yada yada." You know, legitimate concerns as a business operator.

Many of the women who were involved in the action saw it as a one-time thing, weren't interested in this being a regular thing, they wanted to kind of prove a point, that if it's a queer space and if it's a celebratory space, the same rules should apply for all. But this idea about, well, what's the dress code, and is it the same for men and women, within a community-controlled space, became a hot button topic, which a bunch of issues got attached to. Within the membership of the organization, because the building the bar was in was owned by a membership organization, the membership decided they wanted to have a voice in this. So, it became a debate about the association of dress code for the club that was a gay community-controlled space. That discussion of a dress code became highly, highly charged, and...what's the word I'm looking for?

AS: Contentious?

CA: Oh yes, really contentious. It really fragmented the community into pockets. Again, focused on different issues. I remember being present during all of this, as the board was

trying to decide what's the policy that will appease everybody. It was clear to me immediately that there isn't one policy that's going to appease everybody. But everybody was talking about the dress code, but talking about different sets of issues. They were using the same language, but talking about different things. As somebody with a psychology background, I was watching this kind of as an observer thinking, "This is a really fascinating example of mass miscommunication." There was clearly a gender line to that, but it wasn't just on gender, although that was a really strong theme. I realized that there were at least four, or maybe five, camps in this room, using the same language to talk about entirely different sets of issues. For some people, it was that there was this, you know, this abstract concept of just fairness. That was pretty clear, and that was one of the easiest things to kind of make sense of. Then there was, some of the men, who just said, "No. We just want to party, we want to do what we've always done. Stop bothering us," kind of thing. There were some people for whom hot sweaty guys and or girls, with their shirts off, they just found offensive. One person even said, "I don't want somebody's hot sweaty naked body rubbing up against my silk shirt." So, there was that aspect of it. Then there were some women who were arguing in terms of, "If it's going to be a community space that's inclusive of women, it needs to be a psychologically safe space. a lot of women have traumatic histories of assault with men, it doesn't matter that you're gay men, if you see a man without a shirt on, that can be a triggering event." And there had been a request for years, especially for March 8, International Women's Day, to have women's-only events. for years, the organization wouldn't allow a women's-only event to happen on that day. They would have women's programming, but not be exclusive to women. so that had been a sore point for a while, in terms of creating a women's only space, that all women in the community could feel safe and comfortable, because some just didn't as long as men were in the room at all, and/or men in the room without their shirt on.

So, there were all these various different things going on at the same time. But theoretically, it was a talk about the dress code. Some people refer to it as the Dress Code Wars. It was hugely contentious, very fractious, and ultimately, nobody was happy with the outcome. Initially the organization decided, well, all people have to have their tops on, so it felt more restrictive, and for those you know, for some, especially for some of my male friends who had been involved politically for a long time, they saw that as regressive. That if we're having a community-controlled space, as far as gay liberation, in its strictest sense, always was, was it was about saying, "We're going to be queer and our sex-lives are political. If we can't express that in the community-controlled space, then what's the point of a community-controlled space?" And on a theoretical basis, I understand that. But that bumps up against-- the safe space for women, it bumps up against--there was no answer that everybody was going to be happy with. Because I was staff, I felt silenced during all of that, because I was staff. But I had very strong opinions about what was going on. I was part

of the shirtless guys' crowd. They were my friends. Because I didn't step forward and speak publicly with them, I got disowned by many of them. I was an ally to the women who were arguing for a safe space, but they didn't see me an ally. I couldn't speak to any position publicly. For that, I got [laughter] either vilified or brushed off by everybody, because I didn't support their position. So, I had a lot of personal costs as a result of that. Literally lost good friends over it. Ultimately, the fight about it destroyed the mood of the space. Which destroyed the income of the space. Which is why I got laid off. In a matter of... that the women with their shirts off event was Saturday the end of July, I got laid off, I think it was early October. Within two months the business had dropped so much, our cashflow had dropped so much, that to survive, they had to cut back to what's necessary to keep the business operating to pay the mortgage to pay the core staff, and I wasn't part of that. there wasn't enough cash to move beyond that. So, I got laid off.

But it wasn't just about the dress code. That's the part that I get frustrated with when people talk about not being--people sometimes even now, who were around at the time, will talk about, "I don't understand why it was such a big deal, it was just a dress code." It wasn't just a dress code. It was so much more than that. But that's how it got framed, that this is about a dress code. It's not. It's about a whole bunch of really important issues that couldn't get resolved adequately in the time and space that was there. I did actually write a submission to the board during that process, because I didn't feel like I could speak publicly, but I thought, "I have something to say." And my suggestion was not to establish one uniform, all-purposes-for-all-people dress code. I actually said, "You aren't going to find one answer that will resolve this, so let's acknowledge that, and come up with a strategy of things, including providing women's-only programming opportunities within the space when that makes sense..."

AS: Including, like, for International Women's Day...

CA: Because that's what they're asking for. They're asking for the opportunity to have it be an entirely psychologically safe space for all women within the women's community. We can give that. We have the capacity to give that. Why aren't we? Let's address that need. Let's address the need that men have to want to be celebratory about their sexuality. That's a legitimate community need as well. It's different, and it looks very different, and some people write it off as frivolous, it's not frivolous, it's more meaningful than that. I grew up with major body shame, as did many gay men of that era. Being able to take my shirt off in the bar, that was huge for me, personally. I know that's different than somebody needing psychological safe space, and I understand the difference, but that's not unimportant in its own right, either.

AS: And you know, we just spoke to Brenda Barnes, and she described being one of the women--so it's also, it's like, that kind of visceral joy of being able to be safe enough as a woman to take your shirt off, is precious, right? And rare. So, it's also like--

CA: Even for many of the gay men.

AS: Of course.

CA: There's many gay men who--we'd been doing it for months, probably more than a year even, and it was clear that there was always men on the sidelines who wanted to, but didn't feel they could, for whatever was holding them back, whether it was body image, whether it was internalized homophobia--any number of things, about what that meant for them. But yes, it was clear that there were always people that were very aware that it was happening, and you could see them looking in a way that, it wasn't about them checking you out, that wasn't what the looks were about -- some maybe -- but there was other stuff that was going on. It was clear that being near that, sometimes, was valuable for people. Even if they weren't participating in it. They wanted to be near that energy, that celebration. That's what it was for me. It was a celebration. I loved to dance. I loved dancing with my male friends as a group. When we had our shirts off, there was a different level to that. that's hard to explain to people who haven't experienced it.

AS: Yes. Thank you for telling this story. I know it's painful. I really appreciate it, because I feel like... we make a lot of mistakes thinking that we need to have a single answer.

CA: Yes. [laughter]

AS: And it's too bad! [laughter]

CA: I'm a firm believer... well, I think we make a lot of mistakes, not only about the single answer, but that it's a perfect answer--that there's a perfect solution to everything. I, for many, many years now, and I can't remember where this originated, but for many years now, for myself, I've adopted the... kind of a personal mantra, that there isn't a perfect solution, but that doesn't mean that we can't look for the best imperfect solution, or series thereof. I think that's what people--we live in a culture that tells us there's one right answer to everything. I mean, looking at it from a philosophical point of view, I studied philosophy in university as well, and that is part of what I took away from philosophy, which is, western philosophy teaches us that there's one right answer to every question. When I was

watching that debate happen, that's what I was--years, went I went back to do my master's degree, I analyzed that event in terms of the meaning of truth and the one right answer, and all of those dialogues that we have embedded in this culture that we're not even conscious off, that play out. That's how they play out. Because everybody there was of the position, "What I'm speaking is truth for me. Therefore it's right, and if you disagree with me, you're either a fool or a liar, and you're my enemy." And that's how every person in the room was processing what was going on. So, they weren't hearing each other, they were only hearing, "You're my enemy right now, in this context." Making sense of that, like I said, there was definitely a very gendered line on that, and making sense of that gendered--because when I did my paper it was on gendered communication, so I thought, "here's a really fascinating example of how that played out in my world!" Suddenly it made sense that people were processing it that way, that they would react the ways that they did, and not be able to hear the other side of what was going on, or the other sides, because like I said, there were many sides.

AS: Okay, so. Let's move into talking about how you got more involved in the work that you continued to do in relation to AIDS.

CA: So, I stepped back from, like I said, the gay community work. My position ceased to be because of the funding that was the fallout from the dress code fights. Or what Robin Metcalfe calls the Shirtless Wars. I stayed on for another two years after I got laid off. The board at the time, with all that had happened, was feeling kind of burnt out, and also at a loss as to how to turn things around again. I'd been a key employee, so I was very familiar with the internal work of the organization, having been a key employee for the past year and a half. So, as the next AGM was approaching, I decided to run for the board, I decided to run for president of the board, or the chair, whatever it was called, with an agenda exclusively and limited to, let's just turn the finances of the organization around, so we don't lose this building, so we still have this long term plan for the community center, so we can get back to doing community programming. But we can't do that without the cash cow. As dysfunctional as the organization was, and as problematic as it was to sell alcohol to a community where alcohol problems were an issue, there was all that stuff as well. I was aware of all of that, but it was also our best shot to continue to have resources to continue to do valuable work. So I thought, I'm not ready to just give up on that. I tapped a few people on the shoulder so that we would have a core group of the right skillsets to run the business. Because the financial end of it things wasn't my forte, but I had a background in some service industry stuff, so I had ideas about that as well as the club aspect, which I was really interested in that, and the music, and the programming side. So, I found a friend who was a realtor who ran as treasurer. I ran as the chair, and there was one or two other people, and we ran as a slate, it wasn't individual candidates, we said, "We're running as a

slate, we're running with this agenda, just to get the finances stabilized so we don't lose this place." The old board were all stepping down anyway, nobody was reoffering, so there was going to be a vacuum if nobody stepped forward. We not surprisingly got in, by accident or design. Or by default, because the rest were leaving. We set to work to try to bring the finances of the organization around. There were a lot of challenges with that, but within a year we did. Things weren't as robust as they had been before the big debacle, but that was also complicated by the fact that there was a new gay bar in town that we were competing with. There was a recession underway, which was just depressing everything. So, the resources to reestablish my position, whether I was in it or not, didn't come to be. But the organization was at least stabilized again. It wasn't losing money. The mortgage, which when I took office was like three months behind, you know, we were in definite threat of foreclosure at that point. Having a new board gave the bank a reason to hesitate... the first thing we did was go to the bank and say, "Look, we have a new board. We're looking at turning this thing around. Give us some breathing room." And so, we did. We managed to stabilize the finances, get things back onto an even keel. Then I left partway through my second term. I stayed on for a second term just to allow for continuity, and the vice chair wasn't keen to move up too quickly, but I also knew I needed to move on with my own life, and I was going back to school and had started a Master's degree during this, so I wanted to focus on school and moving forward.

So, I went to school. I completed my Master's degree eventually on a part-time basis, took a job as a travelling sales rep for a few years because I just needed a good income. I'm a culture junkie, and a bookworm, life long, and the job was specific to, was actually not for profit job, ironically, but it was a sales role, because it was a national umbrella sales team for a coalition of small presses in Canada. Small literary presses. that appealed to me. It also included almost all the drama in Canada, and I'm a theatre junkie, it also included almost all the LGBTQ stuff in Canada. All the women's stuff. All of the niche market stuff. Non-mainstream stuff. You know, small presses across the country. It was a good fit for me at the time.

AS: And you travelled around the Maritimes?

CA: Yes. Atlantic Canada was my territory. The four main provinces. I did that for a while. While I was doing that, I piggybacked on that doing... I'd started self-publishing some queer-specific publications. In particular, while I was doing my Master's degree, as a summer job, because the economy was still in decline and there were no summer jobs so I thought, I'll create my own! I had been involved in the community newsletter, which had been *Gayzette*, harkening back to the early days as GAE, overtime it changed its name to *Wayves*. I was the staff person, again, because nobody was willing to be a public contact, I

became, because I was the staff person it became easy for me to be the contact person for ad sales. So I was the ad sales person for that publication for a few years as a part time side job, I would get a commission for the ads that I sold. Through doing that for a few years, I got really familiar with who that ad base was, and I saw the need for things like a community phone book. So, the summer I turned in my masters, when there was no summer jobs available, I thought, "Well, I'm going to publish Halifax's gay community phone book." So, I did that. I went back to the advertisers and sold the ads, compiled the content, and published what I called the Pride Guide. 1995 was the first one, Halifax specific, and maybe a year and a half later I did a second one, which went province-wide. Eventually it became a regional publication, and there were five or six editions before I stopped. Using that same name, the Pride Guide. It went from being Halifax to Nova Scotia to Atlantic Canada. But when I was on the road as a sales rep, that made it possible for me to then build a network of contacts in the rest of the region, so it was easier for me to expand it to a regional publication. So, for me, even though it was a business venture, a small one, and a part-time thing, while I was doing my Master's and then later on as a sales rep, it was a way to kind of keep involved with the community and provide support.

One of the things I first realized when I took a job back in 1990 was that everybody needs a place to get information from, and this was pre-internet. So where do they go? Print publications or a phone line. Well, we have a phone line. So we needed to set up a second line as an information line where we just have a recording of, "Here's what's happening at the club this week," you know, community meetings, and which events are coming up, and all that stuff, you know, branded and number specific to that purpose so that on a regular basis people could just call anytime to find out what was happening, specific to the organization and things in the community. But over time I thought, well, you know, we need print stuff as well. Because if somebody's travelling from the region or is new or is moving out, all those things. then, over time, that also paralleled with including all of the AIDS organizations in the region. Eventually I left that job because I was having health problems. I went on disability for over two years. I was diagnosed HIV positive in 1998, but that wasn't the main problem, I had mental health challenges, and I suffered from depression as a result of my diagnosis. My long-term relationship broke up because of my diagnosis. Combined with a sleep disorder that took a while to get properly diagnosed, which was feeding into the depression. My mental illness, which was part of the background, but all those things have similar manifestations and symptoms. So, while I was on disability, officially because of a diagnosis of depression, I was very conscious that there was something more than depression going on, but it took a long time to tease out which part is the depression and which part is the sleep disorder, which eventually got diagnosed, and its like, "Oh, that explains a whole lot about what's been going on in the last few years of my life," and then the--

AS: The environmental...

CA: That would come later, but in retrospect that was part of the landscape as well. Over time that was becoming a bigger challenge. It had always been there, but it had always just been, “Oh I don’t like being around fluorescents,” it was never an obstacle, it was just a nuisance kind of thing. Over time it became more prevalent, and there’s different theories as to why that might be the case. But anyway, I was on disability for two and a half years. That ended my sales job. The sleep disorder ended. I couldn’t go back to that job once I was able to work again. When I came out of that two years of disability, once I reclaimed my health enough to go back to work, I was starting over again. I ended up landing a job with what is now Feed Nova Scotia. The position was Director of Advocacy and Planning Services. So, it was going back to grassroots, social justice policy work. Which was what appealed to me. I oversaw the support services and the phone line where people called because of food security issues. Of course, that was never the only thing they were calling for. If they have food security issues, they’re having housing, economic challenges, health challenges, all those sorts of things. It was my background in having been involved in the HIV activism, in the gay and lesbian activism and the human rights activism and social justice stuff that got me a foot in the door for that job. I needed to get back on my feet, and they gave me an opportunity. Unfortunately that job also came to an end a year and a half into it because of financial challenges. I got laid off. Then I was kind of at a loss as to what to do, and I went back to school, did a diploma in graphic design, because I was becoming aware that the environmental stuff was becoming more pronounced. Wasn’t sure if that would ever stop becoming worse, and was worried about not being able to work in a standard work environment. I thought, well, I’ve always dabbled in doing this publishing stuff, and all the posters and newsletters for the organizations I was involved in, and I liked that and had a natural affinity for it, and so I thought I’d focus on that, something I could do at home on my own schedule, if working from home is the only option I’ve got health wise. So, that was my thing at the time for that. The economy was tanking again. I desperately needed a job, and saw a posting for a halftime position doing the gay men’s health work here, for AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia, almost ten years ago. Ten years next year. I took that halftime job while I was then doing whatever freelance work I could get doing graphic design or other contract work, ever since, and as of a year and a half ago I’m fulltime here. So, it’s been a long, kind of convoluted path. I didn’t want to go back to not-for-profit work, I’ve had the rug pulled out from under me way too many times, usually for the same reasons -- funding. So, you know, the low pay and the insecurity of that gets real tiring after a while. Lots of people don’t last beyond their first position in the not-for-profit world, but I stuck it out, because the work has always been meaningful. I’ve always felt drawn to it, and felt I had something to offer to it. But when I took the job here, it’s the same thing, I wasn’t

planning for the long-term. It was an 8 month long term position that got extended, and extended, and extended, and extended. Now it's my tenth year. This is where I'm at now. I really like what I'm doing. Again, funding is a challenge. But, yes.

AS: Yes. Amazing. Well, we're coming to the end. So, there will be a spot where I say, is there anything you want to say that you haven't said? But one of the things we're trying to capture always is the memories of people who were lost to the epidemic. so, we have a section of the website of memories of people where we sort of bring together memories, and so, just if there's anyone that you wanted to mention or tell a story about who was involved with the AIDS organizing who died, or just who was part of the gay community in that time.

CA: Yes. Back in the late '80s, the first person I was aware of, at least, who was HIV positive, was a guy named Jeff Derling. I didn't know him very well. When I first met Jeff a year or two earlier, I think he had a bit of a crush on me. I was oblivious to that. I was so green when I first started going to the gay bar. I was coming out on campus very gradually, but it was actually three or four years before I ventured into Rumours on my own the first time. When I finally did, I lived in the place, for the first six months. I went dancing five nights a week. I wasn't able to talk to anybody, but I had to be there to dance, because I needed to be in a queer space, and dancing was my thing, so that's what I'd do, I'd go in and dance for two hours nonstop and then I'd leave. Anyway, one of the first guys I got to know at the bar was this guy, Jeff. One night he said, "You know, we should go to a movie sometime. Not a date, we should just go to a movie," I said, "Okay let's go to a movie sometime." And he shows up with a rose. It's the first time any man had ever given me a flower. I don't remember what the movie was. But I wasn't interested, I liked Jeff as a friend, and no more than that, and he was okay with that. We remained friends, but we, sometimes we wouldn't see each other for a month at a time, and anyway, at one point, I hadn't seen him for a while, and I ran into him on the street one day, walking through the north end, and we just started catching up. so, walking down the street, that's when he told me that he was HIV positive. This is about 1987, I guess, maybe '86. It was all still very new to me, I wasn't yet involved with GALA or any of the political stuff, and I was still just kind of coming out, socially. But it was the first time it became real to me. Somebody I knew. Somebody who was even a year younger than I am, that has this disease. I remember that was the catalyst for me to go to my doctor and ask for an HIV test for the first time. I wasn't out to my doctor before this. when I brought it out she said, "Well, why?" I said, "Well, I'm a sexually active gay man. I just had a friend come to me and say that he is. I don't know if I am or not, and I think I should probably know." And my doctor said, "I advise against getting tested, and here's why," he said, "I have other clients who are gay men, I've just recently had one who tested positive, he's otherwise healthy, but his diagnosis has so disrupted his mental health,

that he's spiraling." He said, "I don't want to see that happen to you," he said, "I already know enough about you that you are a healthy, physically active person, you look after your health," I'm a former athlete, so I always was very self-aware about my physical health, and worked at that, and still do. He said, "There's no treatment, there's no cure. All the things I would tell you to look after your health, I already know you're doing." So, he said, "Keep doing that. Protect yourself." But he said, "I don't see the advantage right now of knowing whether you are positive or not." And that was probably 1986, maybe '87. I didn't actually have an HIV test until I met the man who became my partner. After we started dating, I figured, "Well, I should probably check on a regular basis, just in case."

AS: And by that time there would have also been... bad treatments, but...

CA: Early treatments. AZT was around. But Jeff was... Jeff, like I said, Jeff was the first person who made it real for me.

AS: And he was a Nova Scotia person? He was from here?

CA: Yes. He was from here. At the time he was living in Halifax. I think he was from.... I can't remember now for sure, whether it was the Valley or the South Shore. Not long after the conversation where he told me he was positive, he moved back home, because his health wasn't great, and I guess he wanted to be near his family, or his family wanted him to be near them, not sure what. Periodically he would show up in town, once in a while, and whenever he'd see me at the bar we'd always hit the dance floor together and dance because he knew I loved to dance. Then I lost touch with him again, and then eventually, at that time, there used to be a couple of other regional, within the province, small ASOs in different parts of the province. Whichever one was in his area, I remember, at one point, because we'd get all this mail at *Wayves*, when I was still very involved with the community newspaper, we'd get all this mail and newsletters from various organizations around the region, and I remember getting a newsletter from that area of the province's ASO, and seeing his obituary in it. That's how I had found out he had passed. Jeff was, like I said, the first person who made it real for me.

Over time, because the work I was doing in the community I moved in, I dated a few people who I knew to be HIV positive before I got my long-term partner. But because of what I did for a living, and the world I worked in, I was as well informed as you could be. I wasn't naïve. But what information we had at that time was also pretty basic and simple. So, when I finally met Dan, and he told me, I understood the implications of what he told me. I wasn't scared off by that. Before that, the two people who are most significant for me that I got to know were Terry and Wilson. Wilson was on the board of GALA when I got hired. So I got to

know him. He was also in the PWA Coalition at the time. Terry, I'm not sure if Terry was on the board, but he was around a lot as well. They were a couple. They were also part of Tightrope, the gay men's leather group that was established. I got to know them socially, through that, in addition to them being involved with both organizations. We became pretty good friends. Years later when I was on the board, Wilson was a mainstay of the PWA Coalition, and then when the organizations merged, he was still on the board, and he was the chair for many years of this organization, up until almost until he died. As their health was declining, Wilson being Wilson, I don't know if you know Wilson...

AS: I never knew him, but people have described him as being a really strong person.

CA: Yes. [laughter] Strong is a good word. Wilson had a... no bullshit, take no prisoners type of personality. If he had something to say he would say it no matter who was in the room, using whatever language he thought was appropriate to say it. He could be pretty salty. He was ex-navy. It showed. He was also a Buddhist, which seemed a weird fit with all of the other stuff going on. This Buddhist, ex-navy leatherman. But total commitment to the cause. So, as Terry's health started to decline more seriously, Wilson made arrangements so Terry could die at home. That meant, of course, not only having access to trained healthcare, in terms of nurses coming in and taking care of whatever needed to be taken care of, but of having 24-hour palliative care, community support. That wasn't uncommon at the time, but this was kind of taking it to a new level of doing it in your own home while your partner is still living there. So, I agreed to be part of Terry's palliative care team. I arrived at their home in Dartmouth for what was going to be my first shift, my first four-hour shift, and before I got upstairs to where Terry's room, the nurse came down and said, "Wilson, you need to come now." Terry was passing away while I was there. While I was in the house. I wasn't in the room. A few years later, Wilson was in the final stages. I agreed to be part of his palliative care team. I was on duty the day Wilson died. I put in my shift. He had been unconscious for several days at that point.

AS: He was at home?

CA: At home. Same thing. He insisted that he was going to die in his own bed. He had enough push that he made sure that that would happen. There were a lot of people around. I mean, and we knew it was close. The last shift I put in, the nurse who was on duty when I arrived said, "He's been in a lot of pain, so if you need to add morphine to his IV drip, here's how to do so." I agreed to be the person who would take responsibility for being able to do that if necessary. I put in my shift. There were a lot of people who lived in that house, because we knew it was close and people wanted to be close by. At the end of my shift I offered someone else a drive home. Another colleague from, actually who had also been

very involved with the PWA Coalition. After I dropped him off, I just had an instinct to turn around and go back to the house. I went back to the house.

Wilson's breathing had gotten really weak and labored. At one point I was in the room alone with him, and I asked for some private time, and... in those final weeks, leading up to that, he'd even invited a local TV crew into his room to say, "This is what dying of AIDS looks like," I mean, that's how committed he was to the cause. He saw that as a teachable moment, to say, "This is important, this still matters, this is still the reality. People need to face up to the reality." That's the kind of person Wilson was. So, at this point, I knew there was no coming back. So, I didn't know if he could hear me or not, but I just started talking to him, and telling him that it was okay to let go now [crying]. That everything he could possibly do he'd already done. He'd already survived for years on single T-cells, if you know what that means. I think he even joked at one point about having named them. Maybe that was somebody else. But for so long, he'd had no immune system to speak of, but somehow just through sheer will and determination, he kept going. But even that was no longer going to happen. So, I remember talking to him that just, it was okay. It was okay to finally let go. Not long after that, his breathing really got a lot quieter. I called down the stairs to other people, saying that he might be close, so that other people could come up. I think there were probably four or five of us around the bed when he took his last breath. Despite the reasons he was dying, if you have to go, to do it in your own home, to make arrangements to have people who care about you and know you around you in those final moments, it's the way to do it. He made sure that that happened for Terry, and he made sure that that happened for himself. My one big regret about Wilson's death is that some months prior to that, he asked me about being his second, for an assisted suicide. I couldn't bring myself to commit to that. He never asked a second time. I don't know if he was angry with me or not, but he didn't bring it up again. I know he was disappointed. I don't think I was the first person he asked. I was probably... Wilson, being the control freak that he was, had already made most of the arrangements for what he wanted for funeral services, that included who was to speak about what. Who the backup speakers were. [laughter] The plan B. So, all those arrangements were just a checklist, we knew what had to happen and in what order. he'd asked Al McNaught, who now works, I guess in Truro, to be one of the people to speak at his service. if Al wasn't available, I was the back-up for that spot. I think Wilson died the first week of July. Al was away at the World AIDS Conference, around that same time, so he was out of the country, and so I ended up just stepping into the role. I spoke to how Wilson was a family man. What that meant wasn't the usual, his family of origin in Newfoundland, and I talked about his family, i.e., Terry, and his broader family in the leather community and his broader family in the queer community, his broader family in the PHA community. Family has many meanings.

So, Jeff and Wilson and Terry are probably the three most significant people we've lost, for me. Due to the disease. I've lost other people. But not specifically to the disease. My former partner was killed twelve years ago, but that was a drunk driving incident, where he was the victim. For me, that was one of the ironies at the time, that when I met Ben, he was expecting to die, and I expected him to die as well, and that didn't happen. He was as healthy as a horse. He was either diagnosed very early in those days they didn't really have a sense of the--the status quo understanding was if you were diagnosed as HIV positive you had at best two years, and to wrap up your life. that's what he was told! "Wrap up your life." By the time the cocktail arrived in '96, he was still doing very well, so he got to benefit from that. So, when he was finally killed by a drunk driver, the fact that he had survived and been healthy and productive and continued to work throughout the entirety of that, seems so ironic in some ways. For me personally I thought, expecting that he was going to die not long after meeting him, about six months into dating he came down with the flu, and of course, he assumed that was the beginning of the end. I didn't know whether it was or it wasn't. But it was just the flu, and he bounced back from it. Later on in our relationship, I knew medication came out that had a rare, but potentially fatal, side effect. I can't remember what it was called. Anyway, Ben was on this medication. He had symptoms of the side effect, contacted the doctor, said, "Well, should I stop taking this?" They said, "No, you're probably fine." Days later, he was at work, at the AIDS Coalition. I got a call from one of his colleagues saying, "They've just taken Ben to the hospital, you should go," and I didn't know if he was going to make it through the next 24 hours. This was after my diagnosis, and coincidentally, I was on the same medication, which came with a warning card and a 1-800 number, and I carried it around in my wallet because that's the kind of person I am. So, I got to emergency and went to the attending physician and said, "What's going on? What's the prognosis?" And they said, "Well, he seems stable, so we're going to send him home." I said, "No you're not." I said, "Here, take this card. You call this number. You find out, because I already know that this is a reaction to this drug, so you find out what that means. I don't know why it's potentially fatal, you need to find out why it's potentially fatal, because he's not leaving here until he's in a safe harbor." They kept him till they knew he was okay. So, twice I prepared myself for his death and it didn't happen. I wasn't prepared when it did.

AS: Thank you for sharing this. It feels equally important to have the memory of Jeff as the memory other people have told us about Terry and Wilson, but it feels to me like, and they were really important to that history here, but I just think a lot about the, you know, people like Ben and Jeff, who wouldn't have their names in the minutes necessarily, you know? Who were really vital.

So, we're just in this space of, if anything else has come up that you haven't been able to say, or that you're thinking of now?

CA: I'm just scanning the questions to see if there's anything we missed, or anything we needed to add. Oh, I know one thing. Probably my first actual involvement around AIDS was in the late '80s, before I really got involved politically, I mentioned I was entrenched in theatre, and for a while I studied acting at Dalhousie, and I'd been involved in choirs and children's theatre groups growing up. I loved performing. I'd been a competitive figure skater. So, the dancing and music and performing and all of that had always been a big part of my life. In the late '80s, for some of the first AIDS vigils, Glen Walton organized a vigil choir. I knew Glen through the gay community, but I also knew Glen was very much a theatre person at the time and he was a local filmmaker. He invited me to be part of that. That was my first actual organized involvement, I was part of the choir that performed that... probably two or maybe three years. Those vigils happened at Saint George's.

AS: Do you know why they were there?

CA: The minister at the time was a gay man, I think is the only reason they were there. I know that he had a lot of flack from his parish or congregation about how much he got the church involved with AIDS and the gay community. I know not long after that, the vigils moved to non-church spaces, and have been, I think, essentially ever since, in non-church spaces. For many queer people and gay people in particular, life experiences, especially thirty years ago with organized religion, were usually pretty unpleasant. It was one of the ironies with Wilson's service, is he actually specified which church it was to happen in, only because it was a congregation that was welcoming. He wasn't even--he identified as Buddhist, so it wasn't even about the denomination, he saw it about the space, about the venue, a community that was welcoming to him.

AS: Do you know what sort of Buddhism he practiced?

CA: I don't. I could probably find out, if you wanted to know. I know somebody would probably know. Al Stuart would probably know.

AS: Yes, so, those cultural spaces of being involved are really important.

CA: Yes. Last week we just had the latest Halifax vigil, and that's the challenge every year, is to find a space that feels appropriate, but isn't in a church, because that's still something that many within our community, that we want to have present, wouldn't feel comfortable

with. It's not always the easiest criteria to meet [laughter] It's been in many different places over time.

AS: We usually end by just asking if there are other people you think we should talk to.

CA: I think I had a conversation with Gary at the very beginning of this project. [laughter] When Gary first approached me I said, "Well, I wasn't really involved in the AIDS activism, I was around it, I know a lot of the players who were." I sort of gave him a laundry list of so and so and so and so. Those who are still around, I mean, Eric Smith, obviously, Janet Connors. Al McNaught in Truro.

AS: And he was involved with more Truro-based stuff, or?

CA: Well, he was on our board here, and for some years, he was chair after Wilson. He was very involved. He's always lived in Truro, that's his home, but he was involved provincially and nationally, at various points. He's been around forever, he's been open about being a PHA for as long as I've known him, so twenty-five plus years. If he hasn't been talked to, he's probably worth following up with.

AS: Yes, we haven't talked with him. That would be great. well, this is also, if people come to mind when you get the transcript, this is...

CA: Yes. I remember early on having lunch with Gary in town and suggesting a long list of name [laughter]

AS: Yes, I think you did give is many of the people that we have talked to since! [laughter]

CA: I'm sure not all of them were surprises.

AS: Great, okay. Well, thank you so much. This has been really important. I know that you don't feel that you were centrally involved, but the things that you've talked about were really vital. So, thank you.

CA: You're welcome. Glad to help.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]