

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

Interview Transcript 2016.007

Interviewee:	Anthony Mohamed
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Anthony Mohamed – AM
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: What I start by saying is that it's April 3rd and we're talking to Anthony Mohamed in Toronto. Thank you so much for having us.

AM: Thank you for having me.

GK: The first question we usually start off with is – these are general questions we ask everyone – do you have any memories when you think back on it about when you would have first heard about AIDS, and what you heard?

AM: Okay. Now, that's an interesting question because I remember I was very young in the early '80s and my parents and I, we would be watching the 11 o'clock news. And, of course, there were some reports during that time of gay men in New York and San Francisco getting ill. And there was no name for it—people were saying that there was a rare cancer and pneumonia that was affecting gay men specifically, in these two cities. And it was kind of a non-eventful news story, it was a “by the way.” It's important to set the context for that time as well. In Canada and the United States there were no real protections. There were no legal protections for LGBT people. And in fact, at that time it was very much “gay” and then sometimes the “lesbian” would be added to that, but the “B” and the “T” were quite invisible in terms of the movement. In Ontario, for example, Bill 7 hadn't passed until 1987 and that was a bill to add sexual orientation to the grounds that prohibited discrimination within the Ontario Human Rights code.

I remember there were no gay characters on television, so in terms of role models for myself. I remember Jack Tripper on *Three's Company* [laughter], where he was pretending to be gay so that he could live with two women and share an apartment. And that was about it. There weren't any other role models. So, it's important to understand the context at the time. People were being beaten up and sometimes killed for being lesbian or gay. Bashings were common during Pride celebrations or any types of public expressions of community. We'd often be targeted and people would throw eggs at us. I remember one Halloween night walking down Yonge Street and being pelted with eggs. So, it's important to understand the context. And it wasn't just homophobia and transphobia, although I don't know if the transphobia was being articulated. It was certainly present at that time. But, certainly racism and sexism were very much on the books and very much recorded during those times; and were quite blatant, and acceptably so, by many quarters of society. As a result ... It was going to be a big struggle to get any kinds of protection or rights.

So, with that context in mind and what I said earlier about seeing a few news clips, about a strange cancer or a strange pneumonia that was affecting gay men in San Francisco and New York, I remember being on a bus going to visit my family in Winnipeg. It was a bus from Toronto to Winnipeg. And the bus stopped at about, I don't know, 2:30am in Sault Saint Marie and there were a number of free magazines in the bus station. I remember picking up one and it was a picture of two men holding hands, but it was just their hands, it wasn't showing who they were, so it was two male hands holding each other. The title on the lead story was "the Gay Plague." So I picked that magazine and I read an article on the bus on my way to Winnipeg. The essence of the article was that this was a punishment from God for wrong doings. And that was a really hard thing to read, especially as I was coming out at that time. I was trying to understand my own feelings and where I was going to be, and everyone's telling you, "It's a sin against God, it's a sin against nature, and it's a sin against society..." Those were the messages that were coming in loud and clear. And then you had this strange illness that was affecting people. So again, I just wasn't sure how to digest that at that time. I'd say that those were my memories of the first time I heard about HIV and AIDS. Well, AIDS, and what became HIV and AIDS.

AS: It's interesting how many of us have this co-emergence of sexuality with this sense of danger or threat, right? Like, biological sin somehow.

AM: That's right.

GK: So, the other question we often ask people is, you're aware of AIDS, but is there a time where you begin to think about AIDS as being perhaps not simply just a medical or health question but also a political or an activist question?

AM: Very much so. I mean, at the time when AIDS really started affecting the community in Toronto... And when I say affecting, it came like a storm. You know, people starting getting ill, people starting looking ill. You couldn't walk down the street without seeing someone. And there were whispers within the community, "Oh, he has it. Oh, he has it." Women, especially the lesbian community, they really took up the torch in terms of forming care teams and around the clock care for people who were dying. I know that we use the term "people living with HIV or AIDS" now, but at that time it was people who were *dying* of AIDS. There were no medications; there were no medical advances in this area. But, the thing that I found interesting in terms of when it became more than just a medical concern was the response from the medical community in terms of how people were being treated. Partners weren't able to see their partners. Family members were saying, "No, this person is not part of our family," in regards to the partner. So, it became a rights issue in that respect. You know, Ronald Reagan took so long to even mention AIDS. And the reality is, I know that we're in Canada, but the US is such a leader in so many areas, including medical research, and for the president to take so long to say something, it impacted not just the United States but also the entire world.

So, that became a political issue. I remember, for myself, everyone who was doing gay rights work almost all of a sudden started doing AIDS activism. It went from one to the other in a very smooth transition and there was no real separation. We had heard that people who use injection drugs were also at risk for getting HIV, but certainly the driving force behind the AIDS movement at the

beginning came from the lesbian and gay community of the time. The hemophilia community and the IV drug using communities came together as part of the activism, but certainly the driving force was people who were doing gay rights work.

I had set the context earlier about the time period. So, with all of this involved it was easy to see why people would go ignored or mistreated. And, of course, there was an incredible amount of uncertainty among public services – police, nursing, etc. What do we do? How transmissible is this? We don't know. You know, should we wear gloves? Should we not wear gloves? All of those kinds of questions came up. And those are reasonable questions. However, at the same time people within the community, we were hugging and kissing people living with AIDS and nothing was being transferred, so it was very anger provoking that people wouldn't touch people living with AIDS, or this idea of using separate dishes, all of those kinds of things. I understand the uncertainty and I understand why that happened. But, in terms of your question about when was it more than a medical issue and when did it become a social and political issue, were those types of things that had occurred.

GK: If my memory is right, which it could be completely wrong, were you involved with Gay Youth Toronto?

AM: That's right.

GK: And were there other groups you were involved in prior to getting involved in AIDS related stuff, where you learned things from and that you took with you into AIDS organizing?

AM: For sure. When I was coming out... First of all, I was very involved with my church as a youngster. I went to a Pentecostal church in the West end of Toronto, and there was an incident of homophobia within the church. I don't know if you want me to expand on that or not...

AS: Yes.

AM: Basically, what happened was an issue with my pastor... I was very much involved with the youth group and there was another young boy who was struggling with his sexuality, and he went to the pastor to talk about it. And the pastor asked him during their counseling sessions, if there were others within the group that were struggling with their sexuality, and he mentioned my name. Anyway, the pastor came to my house and he asked me if it was true that I thought that I was gay and I said yes. You know, I was maybe fourteen or fifteen. I said, yes. And I thought saying yes would be a good thing because there would be someone to talk to who was an adult, etc. I was running the sound system and I was helping out in the daycare. First of all, he asked me to stop doing the sound system, which I never really understood. [laughter] And then he asked me to stop helping out in the daycare, and then he asked me to stop coming altogether. So, that was two weeks after the initial meeting. That was really hard because all of my friends were part of the youth group, and I was at the church five nights a week to run the sound system. And then my parents got confused. You know, "What's going on? Why aren't you going to church? You were

heavily involved.” And it was very hard to tell them because I wasn’t out to my parents, so I didn’t know what to tell them. That was really hard.

It took me a while to realize that, you know, God didn't hurt me – it was this person that hurt me. And it’s important to make that distinction. It’s also important to understand that the Deacons reacted when they found out, as I had started at that church as a baby and grew up in the church, so they were very upset. They actually asked him to leave.

AS: Amazing. I mean, that shouldn’t be amazing ...

AM: It shouldn’t be amazing, but it was. Yes. So, as a result of that incident I remember I never really felt comfortable going back full time to that particular church. It took me over thirty years now to find a welcoming church environment and luckily we found one just down the street from our home, so I’ve been attending there for almost nine years. A mainstream Baptist church, who would have thunk?

AS: Amazing!

AM: Right? Who would have thunk? [laughter] But, they're extremely welcoming. Of course, we’re completely out. As a result of that incident when I was young... I did come out to my parents eventually. They didn’t know how to handle it. They had never heard about homosexuality except in a negative context, so it was very hard for them at first, but their love was unconditional. It was a growing experience for them and, of course, we have had a very close relationship ever since, the whole family.

Anyway, as a result of the incident with the church I was looking for a youth group and I had gone to my school, to my guidance counselor – and this is again reflective of the times – the guidance counselor told me that he wasn’t allowed to talk about issues of sexuality because he would get in trouble with the school board. I had heard of a church – MCC Toronto, Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto – that was reaching out to lesbian and gay people. And I called and I actually spoke to Brent Hawkes and I said, “Do you have a youth group?” And he said, “We don’t have a youth group, but there is one that meets at the 519.” And that was Gay Youth Toronto, which became Lesbian and Gays of Toronto, which is now Lesbian and Gay... [laughter] well no, it kept expanding to the full alphabet of our communities. Anyway, so he told me about the lesbian and gay youth group at the 519. And I remember being really nervous walking on Church Street, peeking into the window saying, “Does anyone look gay?” [laughter] Not sure what I was looking for or what “looks gay,” but I remember being really nervous. And I walked up the steps of the 519 and there was a woman named Joan who used to work at the front desk, and I went up to her and I said, “Is this where the youth group meets?” And she goes, “Which youth group?” [laughter] It was very funny! Her purpose was she wanted me to say the name. She told me this much later. So, I said the name, [whispers] “The Gay Youth Group,” and she told me where it was. Anyway, it was wonderful to enter those doors and to meet other young people who were having similar feelings as my own and going through similar experiences. So, in about six months time I eventually became part of the steering committee of the youth group and we had a coming out group. So I was helping facilitate the coming out group, because it was all done by volunteers within the

group. That was an incredible training ground for welcoming people, accepting people for where they're at, because some people were just questioning. They weren't necessarily gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual, but they were certainly questioning at that age. So, that was a wonderful experience. I found it to be very white, however, and as a result I found myself searching for environments that reflected other aspects of my identity as well.

So, there were two other groups that I remember joining at that time. One was Zami, which was the group for Blacks and West Indians. And being from Trinidad it was wonderful to find a place that was culturally respectful and also a very lesbian and gay affirming space. It was a small group at that time and, you know, we'd have some discussions and then we'd go for ice cream. That was kind of the essence of that group. That group turned out to be wonderful. It was also very African-Caribbean and that was great in terms of the cultural aspects, but I found my South Asian heritage made it important for me to find a lesbian and gay affirming space for that. And there was a group called Khush [Khush: South Asian Gay Men of Toronto]... And everyone met at the 519 in those days. You need to understand, it was the hub of activity. There were no other spaces. So, Khush met there on Wednesdays, the lesbian and gay youth was on Tuesdays, and Zami was on Fridays, I think, so it was like, my week was full going from group to group.

And then AIDS hit. And it was like, "Oh my goodness, we have to do something here!" And there wasn't much to do. People were scrambling. We had no messages. We didn't know about anything called safer sex or anything like that at the time. It was just people were dying and it seemed like governments and health care systems were not responding appropriately, and as a result we needed to do something for ourselves. That's what we realized. I remember being at the AIDS Committee of Toronto [ACT] opening.

GK: Was that in '83?

AM: That was around that time.

GK: Was that when it was above Kentucky Fried Chicken?

AM: Yes. [laughter]

GK: I was one of their first three employees. One of the things that the staff used to joke about was we were secretly conducting a study on whether massive consumption of Kentucky Fried Chicken had anything to do with the development of AIDS. Because, you'd have the board come in and just be chomping on all of this horrible smelling stuff.

AM: The smell. Oh yeah! [laughter] The smell of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

GK: But that was only a joke. We weren't really doing it.

AM: No, I know. [...] Anyway, the AIDS Committee of Toronto was set up to fill that gap in terms of care, but also to form a hub of activism. It was strange because there were kind of two paths. Like, people who were looking at the medical and the caring side, and then other people were looking at

the activism side... I say that there were two paths, but really there was one path, right? Like, it was impossible to separate the two. You ended up caring for people or going to their funeral. By the late '80s I remember it was like one funeral a month, and there were funeral homes that wouldn't accept the bodies. There was one funeral home downtown that was known to accept the bodies and as a result many of the funerals were at this particular funeral home. And going to a funeral once a month, opening *Xtra!* and looking at the section called "Proud Lives" and you would check and see who's dead yet, and it was not a pleasant time. The amount of faces every week was overwhelming when *Xtra!* would come out. And this was pre-email and instant communication, so you didn't know about everything for quite a few days...

AS: So, you're at the first meeting of ACT. And some time later AIDS ACTION NOW! starts?

AM: AIDS ACTION NOW! started, and there was a similar group that was functioning called Queer Nation. Queer Nation was very much focused on LGBT rights and how we could advance that. It was more of an activist group and they organized protests, etc. So, there was some overlap there between AIDS ACTION NOW! and Queer Nation because a lot of the members were members of both, and members of all the groups. And we're talking about when Pride was much smaller, right?. You'd go there and you'd see everybody you knew. [laughter] Now you're lucky if you bump into a few friends because it's gotten so big. But in those days everyone kind of knew each other, who was active in the community, who was organizing. So in terms of the organizing aspects of the community, we all pretty much knew each other.

So, AIDS ACTION NOW!... I can't remember my first encounter with AIDS ACTION NOW! I know I wasn't part of the founding. I was part of the wider support and activist network, so I wasn't part of the Steering Committee or anything. It was probably that AIDS ACTION NOW! had organized a protest and I showed up. That's what I remember and a lot of people showed up. Like, it wasn't a small group, right? People were very angry that very little attention was being paid to this health crisis that was heavily impacting the community. And as a result of that activism I think it heavily advanced the LBGT rights movement ... Stories of discrimination were on the 11 o'clock news almost nightly, and often if it was a medical story about HIV/AIDS the fact that they were interviewing a gay man on television made all the difference. Because this was a time when gay people in general were not seen in the media. And in terms of young people like myself, what it did was it told us that we were not alone. And it was funny... Like, I don't remember having a fear about AIDS. It was more about coming out and being able to accept who I am. I mean it's part of that youthful thing too, you know, about "nothing can touch me." [laughter] But, the reality is at that time I don't remember having a fear about HIV/AIDS. I remember having questions about who I am as a person, so seeing gay people on TV, hearing that there were pushes to protect LGBT people from discrimination – these were all things that were very important to me. But in terms of HIV/AIDS, it was something that was affecting older people, right? It wasn't affecting us.

GK: Right.

AM: We were young people. We were invincible, and that was kind of the attitude at that time.

GK: Maybe just to step back for a moment and then come back to AIDS ACTION NOW! Were you involved in the AIDS Committee of Toronto in any sense?

AM: Not in a formal capacity, more as a volunteer when things needed to be done.

GK: In terms of support work you might have done or anything like that.

AM: I know I was volunteering a lot. Toronto Public Health were looking for people to do peer education around HIV and AIDS. It was funny. It was everything from hand washing to limiting partners, those types of messages. And then eventually when condoms were showing positive results that was incorporated into the key messages. And so what Toronto Public Health did was they gathered up a number of people who were doing this work already, and it was a lot of people who were active within the LGBT movements and the beginnings of an AIDS movement at that time. So, I was one of those people. And we'd reach out to different areas and populations. That was obviously the other thing that came about was after the AIDS Committee of Toronto was established and things were moving along... I mean it took a while, but eventually people realized that there were many communities that were not being reached, and within communities of colour especially. People were feeling like there were no services directed at those communities that were both culturally and linguistically appropriate for providing care. As a result, a number of groups started... The first one I remember was the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention [Black CAP] and that was great. That became the model for many other groups. You know, Gay Asians Toronto formed what's now Asian Community AIDS Services. And the South Asian community, through Khush, we managed to found what became the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention [ASAAP]. I was the first full time coordinator and eventual executive director of the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention. It was from 1990 to 1993, I was employed there, but I think we founded it in 1988. I remember it being called SAC – the South Asian AIDS Coalition – at the time, and then that became the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention. All those groups are still alive today and still doing wonderful work within the various communities that they're a part of.

GK: Do you want to tell us anything more about your memories of being involved as the first staff person and executive director?

AM: Oh, sure. Yes. When I started at ASAAP I remember we didn't really have office space, and I remember typing up one of the first applications to the city to get funding on my mother's typewriter in her bedroom. [laughter] Eventually we got some funding and we were able to establish an office. I was the only staff person at that time. There was a summer coordinator prior to me and she was wonderful in establishing the organization, but it clearly needed more resources than one person on a part time basis, so as a result it expanded. Thank God for the support from the city and eventually the province and the feds for the AIDS organizations at that time. I remember the reason why it happened was because there was a Tamil man who had trouble accessing services and the AIDS Committee of Toronto called Khush and asked if there was anyone who a) spoke the language, but also b) was willing to provide care and services with this gentleman. That's when we realized there was a gap. There was something missing here. That's when we formed SAC and that eventually became ASAAP.

In the early days, we were all part of an AIDS community. There was the formation of an AIDS community. And we'd have meetings together. In terms of community specific action, there would be meetings within the Toronto area ... I remember within the Ontario AIDS Network there was a People of Colour Coalition, and within Toronto there was the AIDS Cultural Network. That's what it was called, the AIDS Cultural Network. And these were the groups that were targeting specific populations, so there were some groups that targeted women – Voices of Positive Women – and there were some groups that targeted ethno-racial communities or specific age groups. All these groups became part of the AIDS Cultural Network. And it was a very helpful network because we empowered each other. We were able to empower each other to do the work that was necessary; that we felt mainstream AIDS organizations weren't doing, or didn't know how to do. Eventually it became the AIDS community. It was much broader than those smaller groups or the networks. We definitely became an AIDS community, and AIDS ACTION NOW! was very much a part of that community. It was kind of the protest arm, if you will.

And I find with any kind of change you need those different aspects. You need people on the street, you need people at the negotiation table, and you need people who will implement whatever changes occur. And I found within the AIDS movement having those three things were very much alive, and AIDS ACTION NOW! was a key contributor to that arm of: "something is wrong here and something needs to happen." The negotiating side were the kind of diplomatic folks who would go to the table, and sometimes that included AIDS ACTION NOW!, who would go to the negotiating table with decision makers. And then there were the groups that were all set up to implement any changes, and that's what I think made the AIDS movement so powerful. That and, of course, the fact that people who were impacted by HIV and AIDS were very much a part of that movement from the start, so their voices were not only valuable, but they were *valued*. And that's what makes it different. And from what we were talking about earlier, you know, that AIDS movement really impacted other health movements. Other health movements said, "Well, look at what the AIDS movement is doing." All of a sudden there's new drugs and there's new treatments, and AIDS today – thank God – has become a chronic long-term illness as opposed to the death sentence it once was. And many of the advances within HIV and AIDS has affected advancements in cancer research, advancement in other illnesses. And people looked to the AIDS movement history to see how they could organize. And I see that happening now all the time. Things like this project, about documenting AIDS activism, I think, will be very helpful to folks who are looking for starting something similar within their communities.

GK: We certainly hope so.

AM: Yes.

AS: I think sometimes I have this image of what happened in Toronto is that there was ACT and there was AIDS ACTION NOW! – and I'll be a little bit harsh – and they were failing to do appropriate and cultural identity-based stuff, and then in response other groups arose. And the way that you're narrating it, and the way Douglas Stewart narrated it feels more organic actually. Like, less oppositional and more growing toward a need...

AM: Within the smaller groups and the ethno-cultural communities I found the discussion was always that we need all of this to work well, so we needed ACT, we needed AIDS ACTION NOW! to work well together, and we needed our groups because, we had direct access to communities that were not being reached. So, I agree that it was completely symbiotic. I'm not going to say there wasn't conflict. Of course there was conflict. Within all communities and within all movements there's conflict and, you know, "They did this," or "They said that," or something along those lines. But the core of what we were as an AIDS movement, we were very much one and we spoke with one voice often. I mean there were conflicts, but I don't remember anything so dramatic, at least not within the Toronto area, that said the "white AIDS movement" and the "people of colour AIDS movement" really clashed. It was more or less let's see how we can complement the work that we are both doing.

AS: Right, and how friction can actually move things to be more effective and more...

AM: That's right. And eventually it's become that way, and you see now that... I'm not going to say AIDS is over because it's certainly not. Anyone reading should understand that AIDS is not over. There's still a lot of work to be done, but because AIDS has become more manageable within society it's almost like a breathing stage we're at. Like, let's take a breath and let's truly see what's next in terms of where the AIDS community is going.

AS: So, when you were talking about the AIDS Cultural Network, would there be formal meetings where a representative from Black CAP and a representative from ASAAP would...

AM: That's correct. There were representatives from a variety of groups and we'd meet, I think, monthly. We met at the Toronto District School Board building, and I think it was just whoever had access to some space, so the meetings did move around, but I seem to remember that space. And we even managed to find some money as a network and hire a coordinator. Yes, she was wonderful. She brought us all together, and we were trying to see what lessons we could learn from different community-specific outreach that we could share, and also how we could speak with one voice.

AS: And were there things that everyone held in common that were effective?

AM: For sure. Like, for example, from many of the African communities there was puppetry that was often used within the communities to tell a story, and people found that puppets were something that was quite universal. So, those types of lessons that we can get from one community can certainly translate into things that were culturally appropriate. The images of the puppets and the type of puppets were different from community to community, but it's those types of things that really helped us reach out and reach in within our own communities. And remember, within those communities we weren't often just doing AIDS education, we were also doing anti-homophobia and, of course, equity work in general. So it just wasn't homophobia, it was all the phobias and isms out there that we needed to attack. But we needed to attack it from a place of understanding of where our communities were at, as opposed to an external person going in and saying, "This is where you need to be."

AS: Or saying there's nothing to be worked with in this community.

AM: That's right, and just ignoring it, which often happens in equity work. So, it's funny how within the AIDS movement we had to address all these equity issues, all these medical issues, all these political issues at the same time, *and* we had to care for ourselves and for our friends. That was really tough. It was not an easy thing to do. But, I have to say, the community came together and there were days when I was in awe of how many people would show up at an AIDS ACTION NOW! rally, or write a letter or say something. Just say something, or come out. Just come out, which was very much a political act, especially in those days.

GK: Given you just mentioned AIDS ACTION NOW!, maybe this is an appropriate time to come back to see how you were involved in it, or what you remember about AIDS ACTION NOW! It is one of our areas of focus.

AM: Yes, I know. I'm trying to remember. That's the thing! You know, I found a picture of me in front of an AIDS ACTION NOW! banner. [laughter]

GK: You were there!

AM: I don't know if you want it or not. I'll try to forward it to you.

GK: That'd be great.

AM: It's a scanned photo.

AS: That would be wonderful.

AM: And if I can find other things, like, from ASAAP, I'll scan those in for you. What I remember about AIDS ACTION NOW!, I remember going to rallies. And, like I said, I remember AIDS ACTION NOW! was the political arm. Not so much the political arm but the *loud* political arm! [laughter] And we needed that loudness at the time. So, the people who organized marches and rallies, and responded to things that were holding back drug access, for example, those types of things that were really important to everyone within the community. You know, when a drug was approved in the States but wasn't approved in Canada as yet, it was in groups like AIDS ACTION NOW! where that type of, "C'mon, let's get on with this!" discussion not only occurred, but was expressed, and expressed publically. Yes, that's what I remember about AIDS ACTION NOW! And I remember the meetings at the 519. I remember going to a few meetings and having a debate about whether or not we should do this or not say that. I'm trying to think about something specific, but if my memory can come up with that, about whether or not we should say stuff...

AS: Would you have been there as yourself or as the executive director for ASAAP?

AM: Both. Well, first by myself. And then during that time when I was at ASAAP. But then even after ASAAP I remember being involved with AIDS ACTION NOW! and going to events.

GK: If I'm not mistaken you were present at some of the meetings of the public action committee.

AM: Right.

GK: Which was the group within AIDS ACTION NOW! that was most responsible for organizing demonstrations.

AM: Demonstrations. And that's what I remember the most is the demonstrations. They were important to me because they caused the much needed discussions to occur.

GK: So, I think that actually how you were mostly connected at least early on while I was still in Toronto. I mean later I don't know. I do have this memory of you speaking... I think it was the first time Simon Nkoli was ever in Toronto, and it was I think maybe even outside the 519 and there was some sort of rally or something. I think you even spoke on behalf on AIDS ACTION NOW! Do you have any memories of that?

AM: I don't have any memories! [laughter]

GK: But you have memories of Simon Nkoli!

AM: I remember Simon and I was often speaking, but I'm trying to recall if I spoke on behalf of AIDS ACTION NOW! or if it was because it was some passionate issue and it was probably around the anti-Apartheid connection. Because Simon was working on anti-Apartheid in South Africa, but he was also working on advancing AIDS care specifically within the townships and, of course, we wanted to support him. And so, if I remember speaking, I remember speaking in support of the movement in South Africa at the time. It was such a different time period. I'm trying to recall. Things were so different than what they are today, you know? The fact that we can even talk about these issues with relative freedom is so different. We did these things in private. We had these discussions in private. We didn't have them in public or on YouTube or on social media. So, it's very interesting how... I'm shocked at how things have changed. I remember in 1994 after Nelson Mandela was elected President and visiting was easier for people of colour, I went to South Africa to continue the work with Simon. We lived together in Johannesburg while he was working at the Soweto AIDS Project.

AS: So, two things are striking me. One is that you just had an enormous amount of energy to be doing all of these different things. Like, to be working on the Simon Nkoli stuff and all of these different things. Also, it sounds like you were standing in front of the banner and speaking. Do you feel like that was something about you personally or was that part of the moment of the movement that you could do that?

AM: Well, it's interesting. For me, I never liked bullies from my own personal experiences. Like, I was bashed as a teenager. You know, the incident with my pastor. But the other aspect was that there were always two guiding principles that have guided where I've gone with my work and they also come from the church. So, there's a discussion that Jesus has, where the people are

asking him, “What are the greatest commandments?” And he responds by saying, “There are two commandments and you’ve heard them before. The first one is love God and the second one is love your neighbour as yourself.” It’s those two things that have really guided my path ever since the beginning, and my involvement with equity work up to this day has always been guided by those two principles. And I’ve found that my involvement with AIDS ACTION NOW! and the wider AIDS movement was as a result of, “I need to show love to my neighbour.” And people were not showing love to so many people at that time, and as a result it started my activism, it kick started my activism.

AS: And how did it feel—I mean, you were talking about that quality of having to have these discussions in private and then you talked also about having a sense of there being this AIDS community. Can you just talk a little bit about the feeling of that, or what that was like in that moment? I think people don’t remember.

AM: Well, the community seemed smaller, first of all. It seemed a lot smaller than it is today. And so most people knew each other. And when I say we were having those discussions in private, we were often having them in people’s living rooms and people’s basements, sometimes at the 519. That was the most public, actually, when we were at the 519. When we were in people’s living rooms it was more like, “Do you think we should say this?” And we were having those ethical debates about, you know, is it okay to say that we have sex, as gay people? We actually do have sex, right? [laughter] And some people were saying, “No, we shouldn’t focus on that aspect. We should focus on another aspect.” It was interesting to have those discussions. And whether or not there should be public displays of affection. So, there were those types of debates that were both ethical and political at the same time that were happening in private. Also, in terms of HIV and AIDS, the discrimination within the community towards people who were living with the illness was there. Sometimes it was very subtle, but it was very much there. People were whispering and pointing fingers and saying, “Oh, stay away from that guy,” things like that. Again, it comes back to—where’s the love? The core of all of this was love. And I think that that was the core of the activist stream, of the diplomatic stream, and of the care and support stream.

AS: Yes. Like that way of thinking about it as, you know, demonstrations as a form of love.

AM: It’s because you care enough to put yourself out there on the street.

AS: Yes. Thank you.

GK: Okay. So, basically our last two questions are... The first one is, is there anything that popped into your head or you’ve thought about as we’ve been talking that you haven’t had the opportunity to say?

AM: I don’t think so. I think I’ve said everything that I wanted to say... I mean there are so many memories that are flooding into my head. I was thinking even about my time with ASAAP and the board of directors and the dynamic that would come within a community board, and who owns AIDS, you know? Is it people living with HIV ... You know, there was always that conflict about who owns AIDS. There were those kinds of frictions that happened, and it goes back to the comment

earlier about how friction sometimes feeds movements. And there was a lot of friction. [laughter] But, it wasn't a *conflict* friction, it was more of a, "Okay, we have this friction. Let's see where we can go. Let's still see what we can do." Like it was never, "Get out of my face!" It was never that type of friction. Anyway, I'm just having so many memories come back.

GK: So, that's one of our last questions, and the other one is – an you've already mentioned a number of people we might want to talk to – are there specific individuals that you can think of who you would think we should try to talk to about documenting and remembering AIDS activism in this time period that we're talking about?

AM: Yes.

GK: One person I was going to ask you about was you mentioned the coordinator of the AIDS Cultural Network...

AM: Sarah... Oh my goodness, what's her last name? I'd have to go back into my archives to find her last name. Sarah...

AS: It'll come when you least expect it.

AM: And then, Kaushalya Bannerji. She was the summer coordinator at ASAAP prior to me.

GK: Yes, I'd forgotten about that. That's Himani's daughter.

AM: Yes, Himani's daughter.

AM: Yes, and, of course, Doug Stewart. You said you've spoken to him.

GK: Right.

AM: Glen Brown.

GK: We've talked to him.

AM: Tim McCaskell... Right? Like, a lot of the names, we'd all have the same list, but I'm trying to recall specific people. Darien Taylor? Did you speak to Darien?

AS: Yes, we did.

AM: Who else? There's also so many people who have died since then.

AS: And if you want to name any of those names... One of the things that we're trying to do is remember some of the people that did incredible things who won't necessarily be remembered.

AM: For sure. Well, Kalpesh Oza...

GK: Tell us about Kalpesh.

AM: Kalpesh... I met Kalpesh in Montreal. I remember going there for a... What was the name of the group? I can't remember the name of the group. Anyway, it was an LGBT people of colour group in Montreal and they were having a meeting, and I went to the meeting in Montreal in probably around 1990. And that's when I met Kalpesh for the first time. He was very active in the AIDS movement in Montreal. I told him, "We need a public voice like yours in Toronto." And he considered it, and he actually moved to Toronto within a few months. And he became part of the board of ASAAP and was very helpful. Unfortunately, he passed away a few years later. But, his contributions were tremendous in terms of helping us. He was an openly gay man, South Asian, who was living with HIV and AIDS at that time, and it was very rare to have someone so articulate and so able to share their personal stories with the public. That contribution alone helped us move ASAAP forward in a way that wouldn't have been possible without his participation. So, it was sad when he passed. The care team was tremendous, and it was people of all backgrounds who came together to care for him.

AS: It sounds from quite a few stories like he also connected with a lot of different people who all felt a strong connection with him.

AM: That's right. Yes, very much so. We had a strong connection. It wasn't always cordial or amicable, but it was strong. And that was around so many issues, oh my. But, in terms of the memory, it was an incredible growing experience for me to have known him, and I'm grateful for his contributions.

AS: And now we have the source of how Kalpesh came to move to Toronto.

GK: It's all because of you. [laughter]

AM: It's all because of me. [laughter]

AS: We would never have known that. [laughter]

GK: We are going to try to do these memories sections, which we're starting to put together for particular individuals. The different comments that people have made about people are going to be collected and put into the memories section. There will be one on Kalpesh, and I think we're actually going to do a specific interview with Punam as well, who was quite involved in the care team.

AM: Oh, Punam was involved, yes. She was a big name straight through. That's the thing! I mean I know that you know all these names. [laughter] Well, now I'm thinking of the board of ASAAP. Al-Noor Wissangi, he was around in those days. Karim Ladak. Deep Khosla. Deep now lives in Vancouver. And Amita Handa, she's a DJ. She's still DJ'ing now, but she was heavily involved. Vinita Srivastava. All these names... I'm trying to recall. There were others... There was Lipika, Lipika

Banerjee. She was on the board. I remember handing out condoms with her at Carabana.
[laughter] It was fun. That was so much fun. It was more the reactions of people that were fun.

AS: How would they react?

AM: Well, sometimes they would react with gratitude, but when they understood that we were coming from an AIDS organization it was almost like, with fear. With some people it was like, “Oh no! I shouldn’t take it because I’m not going to get AIDS.”

AS: I’m going to get AIDS, if I take that condom!

AM: Right. [laughter] It was an interesting experience. Yes, there were so many people. Oh my goodness. But, anyway. Alright, I’ll try and find the pictures.

AS: That would be wonderful.

GK: Anyway, this has been really wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing some time with us.

AS: Thank you.

AM: I hope it's helpful.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]