

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Janis Kaleta
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Janis Kaleta – J
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: This is October 29. We're talking to Janis in Vancouver.

J: Great.

GK: So, where we've been starting the discussions with people is just to try to find some common reference points. The reference point we've come to is how did people first hear about AIDS, and what did they hear about it? Can you tell us about that?

J: Yes, I did my homework. So, I think I heard a reference to AIDS in 1984 when I was in Ottawa, sort of a surface reference. And I had no idea what they were talking about. It was related to someone had a blood transfusion and tested positive for HIV. That was it. And I went back to Edmonton where I was for the next three years and involved in the women's movement and at the women's centre – a working women's organization. In Edmonton in those days there were no separate gay or lesbian organizations, so there wasn't any contact really; like, politically or with different groups where that might have come up. So, I can recall nothing, not hearing anything at all, even though I was part of a socialist organization. Maybe there would have been something in our national newspaper that I didn't read.

GK: That you didn't read. [laughter]

J: Yeah, because I have no memory of ever hearing about it until I came to Vancouver. So, that's 1987. Yeah, I'm going to answer the question. [laughter]

GK: Just go for it.

J: 1987. And when I came here, I was still involved in a socialist organization but I...

GK: We can also name it. Is that okay with you?

J: Oh, okay. Sure. International Socialists. So, I was with the Edmonton branch. I moved here with a bunch of Edmontonians and met up with Socialist Challenge, which, as you know, was then predominantly composed of gay men who were activists. And that's where I heard of AIDS. The first action that I did with them was around the Gay Games in 1990. So, it would have been a couple of months before that we started organizing, because the Christian fundamentalist right was warning of the Sodomite invasion and everything. And so that's how I got to know Paul, Torvald [Tom] and Richard Banner – those people. They knew all about it, so did I then.

GK: Okay. So, you came in '87.

J: Yeah.

GK: Was that the time the Socreds were in power?

J: Yeah.

GK: And was that when Bill 34 was introduced – the quarantine legislation?

J: It was introduced before then. There was organizing against it when I came. Had it been passed into legislation at that point? I don't know. I wasn't involved in the coalition.

GK: You weren't. Okay.

J: But when we started ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), it became a very obvious demand that the quarantine legislation be taken off the books.

AS: So, you came into thinking and working on AIDS from a socialist, activist background.

J: Yes. Definitely.

AS: And you said in the women's movement in Edmonton. I'm just always interested in how people were oriented toward AIDS activism. Does that make sense?

J: Right. Yeah. Although nothing happened in Edmonton.

AS: No. I know, but what other...?

J: Yeah. So, in terms of the kind of organizing that I did, that prepared me to be part of ACT UP and organizing, it was movement organizations – some mainstream women's groups but very importantly several socialist feminists, some from Socialist Challenge as well in Edmonton. I helped start a working women's organization and I was the organizer for that. We got government funding to do it for six months of the year or something. And so it was, I think, probably that was my primary school of learning how to organize and think politically in terms of issues and messages. And so by the time I came here and became a member of ACT UP, I had a pretty good toolkit.

AS: Yeah.

GK: So, maybe we should just move into ACT UP because that seems to be the first major involvement in AIDS activism. Can you tell us much about how it got going?

J: Well, I know that... and I'm sure you've talked to people who know way better than I. Like, people from the PWA (People with HIV/AIDS) Society. I know it came out of there, and I know that people like Kevin Robb, and David Lewis, I think – was that it? – started ACT UP. I've read about the reasons why and I'm sure you'll be able to talk to people who actually experienced that.

AS: It's also fine to talk about what you understood.

J: Okay. Right. So, my understanding was that the PWA Society and the other big AIDS organization, AIDS Vancouver, were doing tremendous work in terms of supporting people who were HIV positive and people with AIDS in advocating for them, in researching the treatment options, but they were also getting government funding to do so. There was a conscious decision that they could not engage in political activism or advocacy, and there were people within who wanted to have that avenue and who knew of ACT UP organizations in the States. And so it was those people who came out of People With AIDS Society. I was not at the first meeting, but I understand that most of the people there were from PWA. So, it seems like there was a good handful of people, like 30-something, who wanted to have an activist organization. The next meeting they had done some work in terms of reaching out to the community and saying, "Let's start an ACT UP group." And that's when different groups in the community – different people from different groups – came together. I think it was in a church basement, but I'm not sure. There was, I think, at least 60 people that came out, and very diverse. There were of course people, like Kevin Robb, from the PWA Society, but there were also a lot of women – young women, young dykes – involved in the prison justice movement, radical dykes who immediately would see the appeal of something like this. There were Downtown Eastside people, I say in the sense of you know non-middle class, white gay men living with AIDS; some of them were HIV positive who came. And I think probably that connection would've been around Socialist Challenge's work in those areas. Also, there were straight people, young straight people, artistic types but political – political artists. I'm not sure particularly about lesbians and dykes at the time. Later I was involved in the Vancouver Lesbian Connection, but at the time I wasn't. So, there could've been activists from that centre, from that area, but I wouldn't have noticed them as such. Yeah, so I think it was a really diverse group, much broader than the PWA Society. What was the question?

GK: Well, just how did ACT UP get going? But you're also almost getting to like how it organized? How did it make decisions? How did it contact people? Any of those things would be really useful for us to hear about.

J: Yeah. Well, it's interesting because, you know, you ask these questions and it's like a logical agenda – from here to here to here. And you think, "Well, this is going to take forever" because it's a couple of years of an organization's life, but with ACT UP Vancouver it was like, two months – a couple of months really. So, everything all sort of merged into one, right. I know that we patterned ourselves on ACT UP San Francisco/New York, so organized ourselves in committees prior to the first event. And so we had an Action Committee; we had Research; we had Media, that kind of thing; and we had Arts. But that was the first meeting, or the second meeting or whatever, but right away we're into organizing the August 1 event at Robson Square. And I think maybe when we talk later about what happened, I think that this is the seeds of it. I mean we went right in. We got information from elsewhere, patterned ourselves on that, without really having the type of

organic roots that those bigger organizations had, went right into our first action, which was successful as far as I'm concerned. That's what I can remember in terms of how we organized ourselves. Patterning ourselves on what was going on in the States meant that we were using direct action towards specific purposes. So, we wanted to most of all get education out there; educate the public about what's going on. You know, "Listen up, like this crisis is happening." But also let the powers that be know that there's widespread support and things are going to happen. Get education out there. We were doing that. If you look at the media coverage, that was awesome for that event. Like, Kevin Robb saying things like just point after point about people dying and the inaccessibility of drugs and having the quarantine legislation. So, it was highly successful and we were following a blueprint at that point.

GK: Do you want to tell us more about that first action at Robson Square?

J: Also, I know I'm saying "the artists." That's got a lot to do with the fact that I'm totally non-creative, right. So, it's, "Oh my God. They can do it! They can do our props!" you know. But it was awesome. You've seen the media. Like, the blood on the hands of those in power, but the dummies are the...

AS: Do you remember how they came up with the...?

J: I wasn't in that group at that point, anywhere near that art group.

GK: But you saw them, right?

AS: Well, if you could just describe what it...

J: ...what it meant.

AS: What it was, what it looked like, and what it was like to be there – just paint the picture.

J: Well, I was MC, so I didn't see it. It was behind me, but we had this big banner at the Art Gallery and three mummies basically hanging upside down. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure about that symbolism, what it meant, but I know that it was probably something really cool. The big part that people attending and creating got to participate in was we had tombstones and the sayings on the tombstones represented different groups that were impacted in different ways, whether it's IV drug users, whether it's women with AIDS. And we had the audience or ACT UP members actually standing up and speaking to these and then I guess everybody would've died by then. Like, we did a mass die-in, and then stood up and it was just really powerful. It captured the onlookers' imagination. We had excellent leaflets, information, we handed them out, and it captured the media's imagination. So, there was, you know, anywhere between a 100 and 150 people there at noon. I was thinking today that, the Gay Games I think were due to start a few days after that. So, even though it was a highly successful event, if there were people in town for that I would've expected it to be much bigger, but now I'm projecting backwards.

GK: I asked you just to describe what the first action was like and you've done a wonderful job of that.

J: So, maybe there was something else I wanted to say.

GK: Anything that comes to you at any point, just feel free to say it.

AS: How did it feel to be the MC of that event?

J: Great. It was wonderful. It was such a rush, because we had no idea what kind of response we would get from the people. The media coverage is like a bonus. I mean that's a tactic. You hope you get it, but the main thing is the passers-by. And yeah, so I can just remember people being really positive afterwards. There wasn't any feeling which came, you know, with subsequent actions that "Okay, we're really going to get hammered for this." Like, not everyone's going to like this kind of thing. So, I think that that was the most successful because it set boundaries on what we hoped to accomplish, right. And on the other hand, I can't see how you can just repeat something like that; like, ACT UP couldn't just be a group that goes out and does a successful information rally basically. So, it was a one-off, I think. I'm not saying that it couldn't have been a launch pad, but I don't think it was. It didn't turn out that way.

GK: So, the evaluation within ACT UP was that this was a pretty positive event?

J: Yes.

GK: Were more people drawn into ACT UP because of the event?

J: I can't tell. I can't remember if we grew out of that. I don't recall any growth. I only recall things getting smaller and smaller. So, yeah, I don't think so. It was downtown. Maybe if it was like on the Drive or if it was in the West End, our audience would've been people we were trying to draw into the organization, but I don't think that was an objective during that one. I think it was more of an announcement.

GK: Sounds like it really worked well that way.

J: Yeah.

GK: So, what happens then next within ACT UP in terms of what you remember?

J: So, we started meeting at a community centre and people were still coming out. There wasn't any cohesive understanding about how to move forward. I mean people were again patterning ourselves on the States, so we have to have knowledge of this issue. Well, the people with knowledge were the people from the PWA Society, right. The rest of us were activists who were coming into this. There wasn't much purpose in us immersing ourselves in all of this very detailed information. What was the purpose? We had our experts. But nonetheless we had like, a research workshop. Basically it was just more like a school for the activists, which, to me, isn't the purpose

at all. I think that was a big problem. People were doing things, but it wasn't rooted in anything. The only committee I think that really had a purpose was the Action Committee for organizing actions. So, I can understand why people just sort of fell away, but still the next action – that was the beginning of August – so towards the end of August was Les Mis, right, the Queen E event. There were several groups organizing, notably the groups from Downtown Eastside like End Legislated Poverty had also organized, and ACT UP independently. So, I think there was about 800 people there, but that was from several different groups, right. And it was just like, going into the theatre, it was just covered in people, nobody could get in. I remember at one point we actually, you know we were pushing and we got in before people twigged on what was going on on the inside, and once we got in it was like, "What are we doing here? Vander Zalm's not here. We're early. You never go early." But like, that event – to be there it was really exciting because there was all of these people walking around chanting about different issues, including AIDS issues. I don't think anyone really hated us at that point, but then when the Vander Zalms came and the very well-publicized... I don't know if he owned up to it, but "he" shall remain nameless. Somebody grabbed Bill's legs ... Something like that can happen at a demo and that's what happens. I don't think it was pre-meditated. We certainly didn't discuss doing that. I mean we were into direct action, but we didn't say, "Okay, let's just..." Like, nobody was trying to control that rally. That wasn't our objective at all. There were people from different places doing what they did.

But of course that got all of the publicity and groups like End Legislated Poverty totally distanced themselves from us. We heard at subsequent meetings that ACT UP was not welcome – and this was more from groups that worked with needle-exchanges and such in the Downtown Eastside – that we weren't welcome on that turf. So, there was a real, real division immediately. And it wasn't because of what ACT UP did. It was because ACT UP did things differently than the way those groups would do it. And so the problem wasn't with us. We had different ideas ... and it wasn't just at that rally. It was generally how to organize. Like, whether organization comes from below or whether you should have these, leaders saving you kind of thing. So, unfortunately, that's what happened and for the first time – the result was you know a significant decline in people becoming involved or staying involved in ACT UP. Those of us who remained, it just became more and more a different composition than what had inspired us with the group. I wasn't aware of what was going on out East. I'm sure the comrades in Socialist Challenge totally would be, but we were looking at the States and seeing like, these huge AIDS activist organizations, who were doing all sort of things. Who were leading the way in treatment and doing these things and growing. I don't want to take away from people from those days of ACT UP who thought or are still with us and think that it was a success, because I don't think it was a success. I think that we failed, but not because of anything we did. We failed because of conditions, right, and because of what wasn't ripe at the time.

AS: So, not having a good read of what the political conditions here would make available.

J: I don't think the conditions existed to create an ACT UP group. If they existed, they would've existed originally in PWA Society and come out of that ... I mean a handful of them did, but pulling in the other people shifted the balance. It was too much those of us coming in who were totally committed to the fight, but were kind of alien to it, you know. And there's nothing wrong with that. You need all kinds of people with new perspectives, but you can't have that be the dominant current. Like, it was out of balance.

AS: It's really interesting. Also, the needle exchange question. So, in a lot of places ACT UP, or sometimes PWA Coalitions, were the home – the originator of needle exchanges.

J: I'm not sure of any connection that PWA would've had. I know that there were organizations rooted in the Downtown Eastside, like VANDU (Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users).

GK: Yeah. I think there's a somewhat different history to it.

J: And the needle exchange program ... I mean eventually, or maybe at the time, and I just became aware of it eventually, there were really successful AIDS groups in the Downtown Eastside. Like, service-type of groups doing really good work. So, I'm sure they must have been there then or even before without me knowing.

AS: I hadn't really realized in what quick succession the Robson Square action and the Queen Elizabeth action were. They were both in August. I didn't know that.

J: Yes.

AS: It's quite a lot of pressure to have a brand new group do two major things, and then the second one getting a lot of a particular kind of press.

J: Yeah. I think it's a lot of pressure if you think of it as only one part of what you're doing, because it's, "Oh no. Now we have to do this and that," but I don't even remember thinking that. I'm not certain that people did at the time, that we all didn't just think of it as doing these actions, you know.

GK: So, one of the differences also is that a lot of the ACT UP groups, and certainly for AIDS ACTION NOW! in Toronto, you had a core and then people built around it, around treatment-based activism. But in some ways that's different here because the PWA Coalition, even though it gets incorporated as the PWA Society, is actually still doing a fair amount of that work around treatment. So, that's another difference from other situations because I think AIDS ACTION NOW! focused possibly a little bit too much on that, which is another problem. But I think without having that, that it sounds like to some extent – from what we've heard anyway – that it was opposition to the Sacred government. That was the particular unifying core of what ACT UP was doing.

J: Yes. But therefore how did you do that opposition? By demos, so that was the core.

GK: Right.

J: The actions, right. Yeah.

GK: So, it sounds like it might be worthwhile to then go through the other activities that ACT UP engaged in and then maybe come back to reflect on it more generally. So, after the Queen Elizabeth...

J: ...which was in August. Then September, we took a brief rest while we joined the protest at Joe's Café.

AS: What was the protest at Joe's Café?

J: That was in September of 1990. Joe's Café on the Drive up here, it was a real trendy place, well-known across Canada. And artists, dykes, met there – cappuccinos kind of thing. And everything was fine until one day – I don't know what his problem was – but I guess one of his employees, and we think we know who it is, kicked two lesbians out because they were kissing. And lesbians, dykes, were a very big portion of the scene there, so we organized a boycott. What was really, really interesting about the boycott... well, two things. One, I came out nationally in the *Globe and Mail* to everybody, but that wasn't as important as... so, this isn't as ACT UP, but ACT UP was participating in this. The organizers, it was more of a community organizing event. We had daily pickets there. It is summer of course in September and we had our lawn chairs out and everything. And people from the community, like it's working class, very ethnically diverse came and honked support. Joe has a picture – hopefully it's gone, but who knows – of the Dictator Salazar. So, in the Portuguese community Joe is no big friend of most other than the right wing, but we were actually approached when we were out there leafleting by several women. They'd been trying to do some organizing ... there was a lot of stuff coming out about him at the time in terms of violence against women, sex workers and stuff. And these were Portuguese women, you know, pretty straight women. And they came up to us and took our leaflets and said, "We're so glad that you're doing something about that man." And so there was this real connection that just cut across the divide between lesbians and Portuguese women. Not that there's not Portuguese lesbians. [laughter] Yeah, so that was really good. So, ACT UP went to that as well.

In October, we... and those are the pictures you had of the Sacred Convention, and I noticed a few faces that I had forgotten. So, ACT UP was pulling in ones and twos of new people, but mostly gay activists that had been active around other things. So, yeah, I think we had maybe forty people there, which isn't bad. It's not bad if we're thinking in terms of an activist group organizing in those times, right. But it wasn't growing as ACT UP.

GK: So, that was October. So then that protest was just around...

J: ...the convention, yeah. So, just making noise and handing out information. So, then in January '91. The protest at UTV where you saw John on the car being carried away. Vander Zalm was going to do his State of the Union – State of the Province [laughter] address – and we all met at McDonald's before that and got ketchup. I don't know, there could've been twenty of us. And that's pretty much I think what's left at that time, really. Again, organizing with twenty activists is great fun – or not just great fun, that's facetious – I mean, it's really good to have a group of twenty people to organize with and it was in those days. So, we met in McDonald's and took ketchup and went over there and were quite successful in turning away Lilly in the limo, and Vander Zalm came back. I think eventually he got on, but somebody got... you know, there was pushing and shoving.

It might've been John ended up under a wheel of the limo. It wasn't moving, but it was also John ended up on the hood. So, that got some pretty negative press. Yeah.

AS: And was the object of that to raise a fuss before the State of the Province address or was it actually to make him not able to give the address?

J: I don't think we thought we'd prevent it. I think it was to bring attention to the fact. So, to get some coverage on the fact that people were against what he was doing.

AS: Yeah. That there was a whole part of the province that wasn't included in his...

J: Yeah.

AS: And that was the action with the handprints and paint?

J: On the limo?

GK: No, I think there was another event. The Fall before that, where people actually... and maybe this is the convention, where people actually put their hands with paint on them, on the window, or the walls or something. People were arrested.

J: I don't think I was at that one. No. But I was at the one where people were arrested. That was the one at the Vancouver office of the Health Minister of the time. By then it was a different Health Minister. No, it was John Jansen. Yeah. It used to be Blatherwick didn't it? Oh no, the Chief Medical Health...

GK: I don't know who...

J: This is a long time ago.

GK: We know that.

AS: It's really amazing to remember anything about that.

GK: That you're actually able to talk about it in terms of months is incredible. [laughter]

J: I looked at my album before I came. Okay, that happened then. That was good. That was interesting. We organized for that at Britannia Community Centre – so, in the East End. And again we were down to about fifteen people organizing this, but we also built it. So, we planned this action where seven of us would go into this office and make a point, get media attention, send out faxes, things like that – *faxes*, wow. How were we going to do that? [laughter] Anyhow, so and I think this was really good. We discussed thoroughly that this wasn't just about the actions of seven people. So, we built a rally around it, and so there was a rally. And I think seventy to a hundred people who were marching and coming towards the building, while we were surreptitiously sneaking into this building, and we made it in. And it was great. We got in and the

timing was perfect. They were out there. The cops didn't come before we got to see the people in the office. But we had had a discussion before it about the purpose and we said that we would allow ourselves to be arrested. We weren't charged. But that was it. We weren't going to stay all night. But of course there was one anarchist among us... But I mean, you know, I laugh but the thing is this was really representative of the thinking within the activist group that was left. We weren't thinking as a collective. People were still involved as individuals. So, even though we had a discussion and the group as a whole did not want anyone to force the issue – it was likely that we would get arrested and not charged and that was good enough. The media would be there. But *he*, who we love dearly, grabbed onto a desk when the cops were there; they're moving us out and, "AIDS action! AIDS power! Blood on their hands!" You know, screaming. He wouldn't let go. And I'm almost kicking him saying, "We agreed! Get up!" But anyhow, that was him and that is him. And that was successful. That was successful because we got coverage and we didn't do anything that portrayed us in a bad light. You know, we were putting our bodies on the line.

GK: I think that event was on November 30, the day before World AIDS Day.

J: Was it?

GK: Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Paul was arrested there, right? Paul Craik?

J: I can't remember who the other people were.

GK: Were you arrested?

J: Yes.

GK: Okay. So, maybe you could tell us a bit about what that was like.

J: Well, we weren't charged, right. I'm getting things kind of mixed up here. There's two instances where there were paddy wagons, and I don't know if this was one of them or if the other one was at the Queen E. But I can't remember if I was arrested at the Queen E, but I remember the paddy wagon. So, this woman was with us at John Jansen's office, then that's when it happened. But the funny thing was they had two paddy wagons at one of these events and there's like, I think, four lesbians. And the cops are putting females there and males there, and she said, "I want to go with the guys." And the cop said, "No. You're a female." She said, "My girlfriend's in there. You're going to put me in with my girlfriend?" And he said, "Yes." "Well, I'm a lesbian." And he said, "You're still a female in the eyes of the law. Get in." [laughter] It was great. It was hilarious. We went down. We were all prepared to stay overnight, toothbrushes and everything, but it didn't go any further. We just went down and they just talked to us. I can't remember. I can remember being in a room and maybe having to sign something. I can't recall, but nothing really, which was just fine with me, you know. Fine with the people who were there and had their AIDS drugs.

AS: Yeah. It's a lot of energy to be arrested and be in jail, and people have to help you get out.

J: Yeah, it's not pleasant and people shouldn't have to go through it.

AS: So, what were the core things that were an issue that you were bringing to that action? Because it was the Medical Officer for the Province?

J: Yeah. I can't recall. I can assume, obviously, it's about treatment – like, costs. I don't know if the quarantine legislation had been...

GK: It would've passed by then.

J: And the NDP wasn't in yet. The NDP put in the anti-discrimination stuff, right. So, that would've been one of our demands – to end discrimination based on sexual orientation, because that was throughout. Whatever building it was in, somebody said that the place where they test for STDs was at the back of it or something, so there were issues around like, the AIDS tests. Yeah.

GK: Right. So, anonymous testing? Was that an issue?

J: Yeah. It was pretty standard throughout. We didn't actually win too many of those. But we consistently raised that over that year.

AS: It was also less than a year of work. So, in a lot of cities people have, you know, four-year-long campaigns.

J: Well, this is it. Yeah. That's the whole thing about how quickly it flared up and went down. Part of the reason for the rallies and the demos and direct action was to get our demands met, you know. To get meetings with the government and such, so it was over before we knew it. We didn't lose hope at any point while we were doing it, that we would be able to affect change, but we didn't.

GK: Do you remember any distinct organizing around women's concerns around AIDS and HIV that would've occurred in the context of ACT UP?

J: No. I know that it was one of our areas of concern, but that was taken. It's not that we didn't have those concerns, but we didn't formulate them ourselves and we didn't do any actions that I can recall specifically about that.

AS: And were there sex workers' rights or sex workers involved with ACT UP that you remember?

J: There may have been some men – some young men – maybe. I'm not sure. I don't recall any women. The women with AIDS who were active were in the PWA Society or AIDS Vancouver, right. I don't know if it was Positive Women at that time. So, that was another area where we weren't connected.

GK: What happens to ACT UP after the State of the Province address action? That's January 1991 that we're talking about.

J: Yeah. I think that was our last action and then it was just over. People had just fallen away. There might have been something after that that I missed, or that I just said it's not going anywhere. There's nobody left. Like, the anti-war event that we attended after the bombing. I remember there was a handful of people at least because I was really curious about going to a meeting to find out if this was going to be a hard-sell. We should be there kind of thing. But I mean everybody was just, "Yeah, of course. ACT UP should support this anti-war action."

GK: So, ACT UP had a contingent in that first action against the Gulf War?

J: Yeah, the first after the bombing.

GK: Yeah, it would've been the first Gulf War.

J: I thought you meant the first rally. It was the bombing of Baghdad, right.

GK: So, I'm going to come back to just ask about some of the particular individuals that you mentioned who were involved in ACT UP, just to see if you want to say anything more about them. So, you've mentioned Kevin Robb a number of times. Could you just tell us a bit more about his participation?

J: So, he was one of the ones from the PWA Society that started ACT UP. He was in it right along until, maybe January – the last couple of events. He stuck with it, you know. And I think that that must've been really hard for him, because he was of the group that had the forces; that had the history. He was part of that history and I'm sure you know his hopes for ACT UP would've been that it would be much more meaningful and viable and effective. So, he was very committed, very articulate. I read something he had said to the press somewhere about – the bourgeois press – because he was our spokesperson, him and Ivan Coyote. They were our spokespeople to the media, and they really got the points out. And Kevin was saying something about... and to his great credit as a white, middle-class person with AIDS, lawyer, he stayed part of ACT UP when the balance went towards people living in poverty and radicals, and he was saying, "No. ACT UP is more than just a bunch of white, middle class men or something," and it was like, "Except for you, right Kevin?" [laughter] And so he did an excellent job. He's very intelligent and very clear and knew how to do media. Like, a snippet and get the message out. He put a lot of effort into organizing, which was really nice – good to see. He was a fine man to work with.

GK: What ended up happening with Kevin Robb? Do you know what happened to him?

J: No. I don't know.

GK: We'll try to find out. I remember hearing... I think I met him around that time, but I don't know what happened to him. Another person you mentioned, and this is apparently where the first founding meeting was held in his backyard, is David Lewis?

J: Yeah, and I wasn't there and I don't know.

GK: So, you really had no connection with him?

J: No.

GK: Okay. You mentioned Ivan Coyote. Do you want to say anything about Ivan?

J: Well, about ACT UP? Ivan was a great activist for ACT UP and had a lot of flare and energy.

GK: I guess the other people I was going to ask about were people you might group together as Socialist Challenge type people like Tom/Torvald, Richard, Dan – although, I'm not sure he was ever in Socialist Challenge – and Fred maybe, if he was around.

J: And Paul was, right? Paul Craik.

GK: Paul was. Yeah. So, how did they contribute?

J: I can't remember Tom in ACT UP. I can remember he was in my life. Like, the reason I smiled about the ACT UP banner at the anti-Gulf War action, right, is because I remember the day they bombed Baghdad, which was like, a week before that or something, and my regimen there was to go swimming in the afternoon for pain control and then to come home and sleep for a while. And my daughter woke me up around four o'clock or something like that and she said, "Mom. Tom Patterson just phoned. They bombed Baghdad." And that's the fondest memory I have. [laughter] Not, "Hello, Janis. Tell her I'm just checking on her." - "They bombed Baghdad." So, I know he was around. I think he went to Toronto around that time. I'm not sure. Paul definitely was, but more at the rallies and stuff, right. The organizing... my experience with that group of people, organizing was leading into ACT UP. Like, around the Gay Games, against the Christian Right, and stuff like that. I don't know if Richard Banner was actually involved in ACT UP. He certainly supported it. He wrote for *Angles*, so I'm sure there was like tons of stuff.

GK: Is there anything you'd like to talk about in terms of John's participation?

J: I love talking about John. John was a challenge. [laughter] We became quite close. I can remember I must've met him through the Socialist Challenge boys, through Tom and... because somehow he was writing to me when he was in San Francisco in June of 1990. So, he was sending me postcards – his love life; life, love, and laughter postcards. But they'd say things like, "I'm sending you a package. Take out the ACT UP stuff. If you know people in Queer Nation, give them the material," right. "Love, life and laughter." I knew him then well enough. My memory of John... like, our relationship was, because I was a person with a disability I had a lot of time to organize and spend, as he did, during the day. So, we spent a lot of time together doing poster or whatever. Those were okay because we were relating... I mean it was always about political stuff, but it was on a personal level. Organizing with John was a challenge because John is an individualist, you know. He puts so much energy into fighting for the causes, but there's different

ways of organizing – collective ways. Yeah. It’s like, you know, he has his strengths and he’s done a lot. I know he came out of PWA Society as well, and I know that he was really important in building ACT UP as much as we did. Like, just his presence and his propaganda and his always being willing to talk, all the information in his head. So, you know, a real vital propaganda role.

AS: Do you think that identifying as disabled had an effect on your connection with AIDS organizing?

J: No. I don’t think so. I think what my disability did, because I was unemployable, was give me the time to actually be an activist. I could relate certainly in terms of the poverty that many people with AIDS experienced obviously. Like, the desperate poverty. Not that my poverty was desperate, but I could understand theirs. And the whole thing, when you’re on disability, receiving benefits from the province, no matter how vocal and strong and radical you are when you’re demonstrating and protesting for others – when you walk into that welfare office to get something for yourself, you really understand the “state.” So, I think I related better that way than I would have if I hadn’t had those experiences with disability.

GK: So, you mentioned Queer Nation in terms of what John...

J: Yeah.

GK: Was the group here called Queer Nation or Queer Planet?

J: Well see, that was in ’90, so there must’ve been... I think maybe Tom and those people – those people down there at *Angles*. [laughter] I think there might’ve been some Queer Nation thing. I could see myself probably going, “What’s this *nation*?” at the time. I think that’s where I was politically. So, I wouldn’t know about it. However, Queer Planet came actually after ACT UP. And it was actually some of the activists from ACT UP who started Queer Planet, like Ken Walker I think was central in that. That was sort of centered in the East End, or the Eastside – like, along Commercial Drive – rather than a West End kind of queer thing. They organized some anti-Joe protests ... I don’t know what else they did. I wasn’t involved. I supported it, right. “What’s this *planet* thing?” [laughter]

AS: Better than a nation! Queer cosmos.

GK: Nations and planets. Yes, why set the limit at the planet? [laughter] So, I think we’re starting to head towards the end of the questions, but please feel free to say anything you want to.

AS: I would love to hear your reflections on, or the story of how things stopped with ACT UP. Like, did it just kind of...?

J: I think it just fell away. I think it fell away. Yeah.

AS: There was just never another meeting called?

J: I don't even think I was at the last one, maybe the last one had like, four or five people. I don't know, but it just kept falling away.

GK: So, the last actions would...

J: Like, John thinks it still exists, right. [laughter]

GK: I don't think so. He didn't give us that impression. But the last two actions then would've been the contingent in the anti-war demonstration and the event at the State of the Province address, right?

J: I believe so. I can probably check that before it becomes public knowledge in case there is something significant.

GK: So, after ACT UP did you keep any sort of involvement with any type of AIDS organizing?

J: No. Actually. So, does that mean there wasn't any AIDS like active stuff happening? I don't know. Would I have heard of it? I would've heard of it, I think. Yeah. So, then AIDS in my life became something that I read about or became a personal thing in terms of who I knew. Like, people with AIDS as friends, that kind of thing.

GK: Part of what we're trying to do is also build into this project – because we're talking to people who are still alive – memories of people who have passed away as AIDS activists or as people with AIDS during this period of time. Are there any people you would know of that you'd want to talk about?

J: Well, there's one I want to talk about. And I suppose it's okay to talk about someone on tape. I don't know whether, because they're gone. But a person who was involved in ACT UP from the beginning was Matthew Cross. I can remember Matthew at the first organizing when we were so excited about everything that was happening. Somebody came up and said, "Do you know Matthew?" and I said, "No," and they said, "Matthew Cross. He's Mohawk, from Oka." We were like, [gasp!] because the Oka crisis was just happening. And so Matthew Cross was just this... and I have some pictures. John probably has some in the album as well, because there's this kind of sad picture of us that I have in my album – the denouement. And it's got like, maybe eight people in it. I'm not in it, but my "Women ACT UP" shirt is on someone in it. I must've been standing behind John, but it's sad because I mean what a motley crew we were, you know, at the end of it. But Matthew's in it and Kevin Robb's in it. Matthew was at every rally. He was at every meeting. He was from the Downtown Eastside. So, Carnegie Community Centre – I don't know if you know that's like a Downtown Eastside community centre. It's a hub for people living in the Downtown Eastside politically, but also socially. And Matthew lived down there. He was definitely a Downtown Eastside person with AIDS, and he was very quiet. He was very sweet, but he was very determined. He didn't shout, but he was at the front of the lines. And when ACT UP was no more, I can't remember at what time Matthew died, but between then and when ACT UP ended, I only saw him intermittently, and I saw him at his going away party. It was great. But Matthew kept doing

things. Someone called me and said, “Matthew is going before the Police Board” or something, because he was bringing a charge of racial profiling or something because he had been on his bike in the West End and... not just racial, but along with sexual orientation. But he was, you know, First Nations, like Mohawk. So, he got stalked and harassed by the cops and I think it might’ve happened more than once, but he grieved it or whatever the process is. And I got a call saying, you know, “He’s going. Do you want to go support him?” And so I went down and I sat at the back and he was sitting... they had tables at the Police Board. And the cops – the perpetrators – were sitting over here and Matthew was over there, and he was so strong, like quiet Matthew. Well, he hated the state, but I mean he also hated having attention put on him and to see him sitting up there by himself because he was still fighting... and I sat there and I thought, “I wish ACT UP was here. I wish we could give him the support. He shouldn’t be doing this by himself in this oppressive place,” but he did and he kept fighting whatever was in his life right up until the end. So, that’s tied up with the potential of ACT UP.

GK: And you say you have a picture of him?

J: Yeah, we’ll look in there. He looks pretty neat. He’s got his fist raised. You could crop it. [laughter] And the rest of ACT UP – one, two, three, four.

GK: Yeah, it would be really nice to include that story, but to have a photo or something with it would be really great too.

J: Yeah, that would be awesome.

GK: That’s part of what we want to do. To be able to remember people like that who most people haven’t... it would never have been written down or anything, right. So, we’d really like to be able to do this.

AS: I mean it’s one of the things that just makes me so angry.

J: Yeah. I can see that. I’ll tell you a funny story. Maybe we can put a smile on your face. [laughter] When they had his memorial, or his celebration of life, at Carnegie Centre... and I was only ever seeing him intermittently. I would get these calls, you know, like, “Matthew’s going to court.” “Matthew’s having a party and he wants you there.” Anyhow, I went to Matthew’s memorial and he had such awesome friends, like working class... just warm bricklayers, you know, just salt of the earth as they say. I just loved them all. Like, they don’t know pretention, right. They just know, “Oh. Hi. Who are you?” Anyhow, so people were asked to come up and there was a good turnout – different communities like, Indigenous and a couple of people, from ACT UP, or previously ACT UP. So, I thought I should go up and say something about Matthew. And his friends had spoken, and there had been an obit in *Angles* about him and I had read it. And I went up and I said, “I’m Janis and knew Matthew from ACT UP and bla-bla-bla-bla... I could tell from whoever wrote the good bye to Matthew in *Angles* that you must’ve known him so well,” which I did not. I wasn’t implying that I did, but just that the person that they spoke of, they knew him so well and loved him so much, and I said, “So, I don’t know who Ona is but I think you just wrote a wonderful...” And then this voice came floating up saying, “‘Ona’ is farewell in Mohawk, Janis.” [laughter] Okay. That was

great. So, it turned out to be Bob, his dearest friend who came up to me afterwards and I ended up partying with.

GK: That's a really good story. So, the final two questions we usually ask are is there anything that sort of cropped up during the interview that you feel like you haven't had an opportunity to talk about that you'd like to?

J: No, I'd love another time to hear your thoughts. You're gathering information about ACT UP and just what you think happened.

GK: Well, I think our plan will be to try to do something, at least in the places where we've interviewed people, where we'd try to get people together who we've talked to, get any photo albums and memorabilia together for people. So, if you find any ACT UP banners or anything, those would be really neat things for us to have for that as well. So, we definitely will plan to do that.

J: Good. Yeah. That'd be great.

GK: So, there's nothing else that's cropped up?

AS: I don't think so. I feel like there are lots more things that I'd like to hear you talk about.

GK: But the final question is usually are there other people you think we should talk to that we not have thought of or might not know about?

J: No. I think you've probably, you know... other than John. Maybe something will come up in those pictures, but I'm not...

GK: Okay.

J: Let's have a look at the pictures. [...]

GK: So, thank you so much for all of this. It's been wonderful.

J: Well, it was great. You know, it was so great because I haven't thought about this forever ... like, I don't want to end making it sound like it was not a positive and fulfilling experience. It was all the way going through it, it was and it was worthwhile and valuable. So, it was nice for me to have to revisit that. It just didn't succeed. But, you know, it was good that it happened.

GK: Maybe we should come back to one question, because I think we did skip over one thing, which you partly mentioned, which was the election of the NDP, which happens in 1991.

J: Yeah.

GK: So, does that shift the terrain?

J: I have no idea. It certainly had nothing to do with us. I mean with ACT UP in the sense of... and I certainly don't want to talk about the NDP.

GK: ...in a positive way. I can certainly understand that. I think we can all identify with that one. Okay.

AS: We were at a book launch the other night, and one of the things that we were talking about was what happens when we think about organizations as almost necessarily going to fail, but potentially failing in ways that build capacity or that build possibilities for other things to happen. I find this a really provocative idea. We haven't talked to that many people here, but it does come up in the places where we've talked to people. So, there's the Toronto context, where there's this big AIDS ACTION NOW!, which falls apart and comes back together. There's Nova Scotia that feels sort of similar in scale and similar trajectory as here, but in a really different tone. And I haven't quite figured it out, but I do think that there's some way that ACT UP existed, or that activist tendencies and AIDS activism existed even when they didn't last for many years.

J: Yeah, that there's a connection. There's something there.

AS: Yeah.

J: I mean I was thinking in terms of... it was really when the type of stuff that ACT UP was doing that was so, you know, seen as so divisive by the majority. Then it was the mid-90s that the anti-APEC stuff started, which became the anti-globalization movement. And the things that were going down with the anti-APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) organizing were... if that had come first, what we did, what ACT UP did would have been nothing. It wouldn't even have been a blip, right. "Oh yeah, so that's what activists do." And I was involved in both. So, I was involved in the beginning, the anti-APEC stuff, and it certainly felt the same to me in the sense of the stuff that I had learned. So, maybe if you track the individuals that went on, I mean maybe there's a real value there. Yeah, just because it didn't build, but it was... there was a good number of activists who gained and developed and took that with them.

GK: I also do think when we got this more together it will be interesting to look at possible parallels between ACT UP here and ACT UP in Halifax, even though they're very, very different. They're both short-lived. They don't seemingly accomplish that much themselves. I mean ACT UP's first action in Halifax, which is partially organized with the PWA Coalition is this march that has a donkey leading it, Pedro. They tried to get a pig but couldn't get one, so they got a donkey. But it was actually a fairly large action.

AS: The premier's name was Bacon, which was why the pig would've been...

GK: They couldn't find a pig, so they had to...

J: So, the donkey really didn't work.

AS: Well, the donkey was very stubborn, like the government.

GK: They turned it around so that they were dramatizing with the donkey – the stubbornness and the slowness of the province.

J: Creativity rules.

GK: But on the other hand, the ACT UP group in Halifax – one of its actions is actually in Rumours, the community bar, where they basically just try to stop the music and get people to deal with the AIDS crisis. So, an interesting action, but as a result of that somehow the largest video screen in Atlantic Canada gets ripped, presumably by one of the ACT UP people. So, I mean there's actually ways in which they get blamed for all sorts of things. There's a whole bunch of other stuff going on, but I think there are some similarities there.

J: Yeah.

GK: And another similarity is that the Halifax ACT UP was also not rooted in treatment-based activism. Anyway, there are things that I think will become clearer to us as we go through more of this. There is actually an academic account of ACT UP Vancouver, which unfortunately is cited all the time in other academic studies. Michael Brown, a social geographer wrote this book. He did talk to John. We found that out earlier today.

AS: He's anonymous in the book.

GK: But the only member of ACT UP that he supposedly could find in 1992 was John. If he just had contacted *Angles*, I'm sure this would've been more people. So, Brown basically constructs this story about – how the PWA Coalition was wonderful, ACT UP was bad and out of sync with the consensual politics in Canada and in BC where people just don't engage in civil disobedience. That's the story that's told there. We may actually write something to try to counter-act that.

AS: It's as though none of the things...

GK: ...that you described happened, right? I mean some of them are described but others are not. So, this will actually really help to sort of remap what ACT UP Vancouver was about. I think this is really, really helpful and I think that's one area where we might want to actually write something. Like, it's not our major objective. We don't want to write the decisive history of AIDS activism in Canada. That's not what we want to do, but I think we may want to challenge that because it comes up over and over again when people refer to ACT UP in Canada. That's one of the only references to an ACT UP group in Canada that exists in the academic literature, so everyone then refers to it. It's very dismissive of that entire history. So, I'm really glad you just said the things that you did. And there are people in the States who construct this connection between ACT UP activism and the global justice

movement. There's actually a book that has that in the title called *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Edited by Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, and published by Verso in 2002). So, I think there's actually more to that than perhaps we usually give credence to.

AS: Yeah.

J: Yeah. Good.

GK: Thanks for this.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]