

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

Interview Transcript 16

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Interviewee:	Richard Banner
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Richard Banner – RB
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

GK: So, we start off the interviews basically with just trying to establish a common point of reference, which is how did you first hear about AIDS? What did you hear?

RB: The first thing that I was aware of is that there is something happening in the United States. I think it was because at *Angles* we used to get some of the American publications like *New York Native*, *Windy City Times*, and *The Body Politic*. And I think *The Body Politic* is probably where I got most of the information. So, I was aware that there was initially a mysterious disease that seemed to be affecting the four Hs [hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, homosexuals, and Haitians] and I don't remember if it was the activism around AIDS that I first heard about or the medical issues. I just sort of lump them all together in my memory; although, you know, obviously the activism came sometime after the initial awareness. But I think there wasn't much awareness around here until the activism made it something that was happening in the media that we heard about. And I don't remember hearing any local cases until then. You know, I didn't hear about local cases until I was reading about it in the papers.

GK: Right. Maybe we should just step back for a moment. So, you were already involved in *Angles* when you first heard about AIDS.

RB: Yes.

GK: So, maybe you could just create a little bit of a context for us about what was *Angles*? What was the project behind it?

RB: *Angles* was a community newspaper for the lesbian and gay communities. It was initially a newsletter for the Vancouver Gay Community Centre, and a group of us negotiated with the Community Centre to use it as the basis of a self-funded community magazine, volunteer-run, all of the articles and everything in it was produced by people in the community writing for us. And I guess it was 1982 that it first existed as *Angles*, so around the same time that the AIDS crisis was becoming known. So, it was sort of early in *Angles* history, I think, that we started being aware of it and covering whatever little bit we heard of it then. The first thing that I remember about AIDS in *Angles* – I think it was in *Angles*, unless it was in the *VGCC News* [the forerunner of *Angles*] – was a series of cartoons that one of our graphic artists produced for us. It was his initiative, I shouldn't say, "for us," he produced it and we published it. They were really kind of focusing on what he sort of saw as overreaction. And so it was cartoons about the hysteria around AIDS in the US, and that's the first concrete thing that I can remember that we put in the paper.

AS: And so you'd been involved with *Angles* from the beginning?

RB: Uh-huh. When I started, I was with the newsletter for a couple of years probably, and then was part of the group that made it an independent organization.

AS: One of the things that I've been thinking about, for example in Toronto, the bath raids had brought together the gay and lesbian community in a kind of resistant mode, right? And I wondered if you could just very quickly – I know it's kind of a huge question – say what the texture of the gay community here was before AIDS happened. So, there's a community centre, there was a publication...

RB: The most visible part of the community was probably around the bar scene and quite a diversity of community groups – sports groups, cultural groups. In the first issues of *Angles* magazine we had a listing. We kept up a continuous listing of community groups, and it took up a full page of groups and contacts. So, that's probably, those kind of social connections were probably the most visible parts of the community. The lesbian community was quite separate from the gay male community, but people were trying to maintain contacts and have people work together. The Gay Community Centre changed its name to Gay and Lesbian Community Centre and had lesbian and gay co-chairs. And in *Angles* we always tried to make sure to bring in representation from the lesbian community. But they were tenuous links. There were differences between the communities. And there were geographical differences between the communities.

AS: So, this neighbourhood that we're in [off Commercial Drive] would've been a more lesbian community? What were the geographical...?

RB: It was identified as a lesbian community, you know, to whatever extent that represents reality. Lesbians and gays were all over the community, but it was sort of a centre here. The Vancouver Lesbian Centre was a block over there on Commercial Drive.

AS: Had there been any sort of anchor, like, nodes or locuses of activism in the gay and lesbian community in sort of the early '80s?

RB: Before I was in Vancouver, there was some organizing around visibility. One thing I remember was the *Vancouver Sun* refused classified ads for a gay community organization. I forget exactly what it was.

GK: Was that the GATE *Gay Tide* case that went all the way to the Supreme Court?

RB: Yeah. That's right. That was before I was in Vancouver, but it was one of the things that I was aware of. But there weren't a whole lot of high profile activities like that. The first thing that I was involved in was a human rights case involving Rob Joyce, who was a social worker who was fired. There were allegations about his conduct, which he rejected, and there was a small support group around him.

AS: Good, thanks.

GK: Yeah. That helps to create a little bit more of the context. So, you moved to Vancouver. Did you bring with you, when you came into working on *Angles* and also eventually connections with AIDS activism, experiences from other types of movements or a political take on things?

RB: I had been involved in environmental activist organizations. I lived in the Kootenays for three years and was very involved in some of the actions there. They were community-based, focused on protecting local environmental values primarily, but also in the groups that I was involved in were trying to link up different environmental organizations across British Columbia in a BC energy coalition, I think it was, because the specific focus was that we were concerned about hydroelectric development and nuclear power. So, that was the particular focus of that group, but I think what I took out of it is that it was focused on organizing at a community level in a very consensus kind of, ground-up approach and I took that with me into what I was doing in the gay community here in Vancouver. I thought it was important to organize for visibility and to respond to discrimination and forms of oppression in the community, and to do that at a community-level. To have the people in the community taking political action for their own rights, protection, so that how I saw that political action was activating the community. Not a more elitist kind of approach, to go and lead the vanguard.

GK: So, maybe just to come back for a moment to what you were reading. You talked about how, when you were working at *Angles*, you obviously were looking at some of the stuff coming from the States – the *New York Native* and publications like that, but also *The Body Politic*. Anything you remember about the issues or topics that would have come up through those readings and your engagement with those readings? I mean largely about AIDS elsewhere and the response to AIDS elsewhere.

RB: A couple of things, I guess: Well, one is that – aside from the sort of medical issue, the uncertainty about what the issue was, how to respond to it – the reactions to it seemed to be very repressive, particularly around sexual activity. And we, the newspaper and I personally, wanted to have a much more sex-positive approach to life in the gay community, to being a gay man. So, we were very mistrustful of that anti-sex message that seemed to be one of the poles of organizing in the United States, and what we saw in *The Body Politic* was a very different approach, and one that I identified with much more. I clearly remember a large article, I think, in *The Body Politic* that talked about trying to maintain sort of an active sexual identity using condoms for safe sex, and I think probably also talking about testing – that might've been different, anyways – testing for AIDS being something that was not useful, you couldn't do anything about it, if you had a positive test; the message was have sex safely by using condoms. The same message would've been true whether you tested positive or not. So, what was the point? So, those were the kinds of things that I can remember, but there was a very sex-negative message and *The Body Politic* had what seemed to me to be a pretty strong sex-positive alternative that appeared to be quite a sound, reasonable one.

GK: So, *Angles* sort of tried to take up a similar type of perspective in the Vancouver context?

RB: Not *Angles* as such. *Angles*, because we were a community newspaper, very seldom took a position as the newspaper, but we were open to people contributing articles reflecting their own opinions and the people who wrote for us took that kind of position. I think if someone had written an opposing article, we would have published it. I can't remember anybody doing that. Quite likely they would have felt unwelcome in doing that; I don't know. We had members in the collective who were card-carrying Conservatives, but most of them left after a while.

GK: You mentioned the whole question around testing, and I know that this is actually something that came up in *Angles* and may have had some relationship to the – jumping ahead a little bit – PWA [People with HIV/AIDS] Coalition and Kevin Brown behind the scenes. But *Angles* seemed to have put forward a position that some people suggested, David Myers in particular, that *Angles* was basically saying people shouldn't get tested. It was very early on, before there's any treatment available and that sort of thing, so along those same lines as what you were just saying.

RB: Yeah. I don't think *Angles* ever had a position to that effect, but certainly that was a position that was represented in the paper.

GK: Okay. And did that come from the people who were involved early on in AIDS organizing in the city?

RB: I can't remember where it came from specifically. I mean for me personally, I think I was aware that that was an issue because there was a debate in the community. People were talking about whether to get tested, and the line that I'm talking about in *The Body Politic*, just seemed like a clear response.

AS: And really this quality of actually what's good for people, right, in this context.

RB: If you had a positive diagnosis and positive test, the likelihood of discrimination was very high and the ability to do anything about it was very low.

AS: Yeah. It seems like a really important shift to say, "We're not going to live our lives as though we're not able to have sex."

RB: "We have other values and we're not going to let this change us."

AS: Yeah.

RB: Yeah. I think that was a sentiment around it, although I can't remember anyone saying it that explicitly, but I think that kind of crystallizes a sentiment.

AS: Yeah. When I hear people talk about this it really feels like it's an important line of continuity, right, saying, "We're not ashamed of being queer. We're not ashamed of being gay or lesbian. We're not ashamed of our..." Like, we're positive. Actually, we're living our

lives and having a community. Gary, you've described it as being sort of a community responsibility for everyone practicing safer sex with the assumption that everyone could be positive and that doesn't change how we interact with each other.

GK: So, the first organization that emerges here is AIDS Vancouver, which actually happens later than places like Toronto. I think it's in about... I don't think it's until '84-'85 that AIDS Vancouver actually comes together.

RB: Was AIDS Vancouver the first? Yes, it was, wasn't it? I was thinking PWA Coalition might've been, but that separated from AIDS Vancouver to focus more on service.

GK: Do you want to tell us anything more about that?

RB: I can't remember when AIDS Vancouver started. I remember they sent us some letters to the editor in *Angles*, which I edited and they objected to. They just wanted an unedited reprint of their article and I thought they were being wordy and repetitious, and I cut it down. But I knew that they were providing support for people with AIDS. I think it was social support they were trying to get funding, money for people to live on, food, because there was no support in the early days. And they were going after I think the health authorities, the Ministry of Health, to try to get living support for people to be able to maintain their health and pay for whatever medication was available at the time. I'm pretty sure that was before AZT [zidovudine], and I don't think there were any clear medical treatments, but it was a response in the community to try to support people who needed help.

There were divisions within AIDS Vancouver. Some people wanted a more high profile activist orientation. Some people just wanted to lobby the ministries – the Ministry of Health and Social Services, probably. And probably that led to the split. I'm not even sure it's a split. It's just an offspring, where PWA took over the service providing and AIDS Vancouver still had some role in that... maybe coordinating funding. They had a broader educational role, not focused so much on service. More on prevention and working with medical professionals in developing care roles, as well lobbying the ministries. People in the PWA Coalition were just focused on staying alive, dealing with their health, didn't have a lot of extra energy to go out on political campaigns. So, AIDS Vancouver took that role. But because they were focusing a lot on working with bureaucrats, trying to raise funding, they didn't feel that they could take any sort of public activist kind of a role. I think with the PWA Coalition... in fact, even the name PWA Coalition reflected a position that they took that they were not a lesbian, or not a gay community organization. They were an organization for the range of people who had AIDS or HIV. And that led to some divisions within the gay community because people felt that they were doing fundraising for our community, and they didn't want that money to be diffused among other people. I mean I'm sure that there was an element of looking at drug-users and saying, "They got AIDS because of their own fault, not like us." I think there was an element of that, but they got over it. And I think the PWA Coalition has always been quite clear in focusing on everybody who suffers from the disease, without raising any kinds of questions of what community are you in or where do you come from.

GK: So, the PWA Coalition, if my memory's right, comes together in '86 and almost immediately it's involved in a campaign for the viral lab and a demonstration in Victoria. Do you have any memories of that?

RB: I remember that there was a campaign, nothing very concrete.

AS: What was the viral lab?

RB: I think it was specialized lab that would be able to do viral research and testing. I think Vancouver was doing some very good medical research work. I think Julio Montaner was one of the early researchers working in Vancouver, and I think people had a lot of respect for what he was doing, but he didn't have the resources that he needed. People wanted more money allocated to AIDS research, as well as social support, so funding was... I mean demand was quite broad because there was nothing there. So, the PWA Coalition, I guess, felt that a particular need was a viral lab and they organized around that.

AS: That research would happen here in BC?

RB: Yeah. My recollection is that it was so that services would be available here in Vancouver, but that may be fuzzy.

GK: I think in other places across the Canadian state, you could actually test for viral load, but at that point you couldn't do that here.

RB: That sounds right, yeah.

GK: So, it actually really limited what...

AS: ...what people could know.

GK: Once treatments became available, that knowledge is really important.

AS: Yeah.

GK: Another early campaign of the PWA Coalition, and I think Kevin and Warren played a particularly important role in that – Kevin Brown and Warren Jensen – was trying to get AZT. Once it became known that AZT might be beneficial, trying to get access to it. Do you have any memories of that?

RB: I remember that that was a focus of that campaign, and that they were, among the people behind it. I think the issue was very limited supplies initially and they were very expensive. And there was the testing issue, because it wasn't clear how effective it was, how the treatment protocols... they were doing testing, giving people different doses or dummy doses – placebos. And so the people who were in the tests would share their drugs and try to just use whatever was available to support each other.

AS: Yeah, which I'm sure the scientists were like, "Great!" [laughter]

RB: I'm sure they were, but different points of view.

AS: Exactly. Was that an explicit conversation that people had that? Like, "Look, we're not going to have some people just on placebos. Let's..."

RB: Yeah.

AS: How did people talk about it?

RB: I don't know that I can say definitely because it's something that I was aware of but I wasn't involved in those conversations. It's just that people were saying that this is what was happening.

GK: Is there anything more that you can remember from those years about the PWA Coalition or some of the people who were involved in it? I mean the first AIDS demonstrations in the Canadian state were actually here, right. The viral lab one was actually the first demonstration ever held across the Canadian state. So, the first treatment activism was actually here, not anywhere else. It was actually in Vancouver.

RB: I didn't remember that. Not much more that I can say concretely.

GK: That's fine. Jumping ahead, you were involved in – and this overlaps with some of the people involved in *Angles* as well – a group called the Front for Active Gay Socialism, or FAGS, which I think actually tried to do some work around the AIDS crisis. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

RB: FAGS grew out of a discussion group that I think initially was mostly people in *Angles*, who were involved in. It was kind of a discussion group that we had in the '80s. We talked about life and politics and how they fit together. So, after a year or two of talk we decided we wanted to have some more constructive component to what we were doing, and I think actually the first thing that we did was the annual Pride Parade. And for that we needed a banner, so we made up the name and we thought something provocative that would stand out at the parade would be a good thing. And those of us who were in it at that time all identified as socialist, so we thought a good name. I think Tom Patterson probably came up with it.

AS: He was good at acronyms.

RB: Yeah. He was quite imaginative. So, there was the parade. Around AIDS, I think I can remember that we wrote some letters to the Social Credit government at the time, in our name. Not because we actually expected a response, but just because we wanted to have it on record and see if they actually said anything, what it would be. They didn't, but we organized a community meeting. I think it was to take sort of a model around solidarity with Palestinians, actually I think is where the idea came from, saying that we stand side-by-side with these oppressed people. And

as a community we wanted to say that people with AIDS are part of our community. We're standing with them. Probably it was a response to the quarantine legislation, or to talk about it. And I think it was a well-attended community meeting. Several hundred people came. I don't remember this concretely, if there was anything coming out of it. I think there were follow up meetings and activities. One of the most important things that we got out of it, I think, was just making contact with other people in the community around the AIDS issues and sort of knowing who was who and where they stood, so that when the first meetings of the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation [CRHL] were called we had some idea of who people were and how to make contact with them.

AS: So, just to back up, how many people were in FAGS and how long?

RB: It varied. It was a small group – anywhere from four or five to ten or twelve. I think it was Tom Patterson, myself, Paul Craik, Dan Guinan, Fred Gilbertson were probably all involved around that time. Other people joined us as we became more visible. Some people from the initial discussion group just weren't really that interested and left.

AS: The more active?

RB: Yeah.

AS: I'm just curious about – you were talking at the beginning about how your involvement in environmental and anti-nuke work informed the way that you organized with *Angles* and otherwise – was there a kind of general socialist tendency that was active in Vancouver at the time?

RB: There were groups on the far left. Tom was a member of Socialist Challenge at the time... was it before that? I forget when the names changed?

GK: It was one of the names they used.

RB: Yeah. I later joined Socialist Challenge, but not until after the CRHL ended I think, because I was busy. So, I'd been aware of groups on the Left and anarchism, and, you know, those were political things that interested me and they affected my way of thinking about political organizing, but I wasn't a systematic member of any organization. But Tom was and he was one of the people who focused specifically on socialism in the gay community as a principle and it was one that we identified with. And Fred Gilbertson was an active member of a far left organization, earlier in his career; he wasn't at that point.

GK: He'd been in the Revolutionary Workers League.

RB: Right. That's right.

GK: So, one of the things you mentioned was Bill 34, the quarantine legislation. Maybe we could just step back for a moment to tell us a little bit about what that was about.

RB: The Social Credit government at the time, under Bill Bennett, was fiscally conservative and focused on cutting back government expenses. Bill Bennett retired and was succeeded by Bill Vander Zalm, who was socially conservative. One of the first things that he did was trying to cut back on abortion, and funding public schools and in particular funding Christian schools, which was his constituency. And along with that was very homophobic rhetoric and when they looked at the issue of AIDS their response was lock them up. And conservative cabinet members talked about locking up people with AIDS. So, they introduced Bill 34, which was an amendment to the Health Act to allow the quarantine of people with – probably it didn't specifically say AIDS – communicable diseases or something, I don't remember the exact language. And so the community immediately reacted to that. I mean I think that we knew something... like, we were expecting something like that because of who the Vander Zalm government was. And I think pretty much as soon as it was introduced, probably it was AIDS Vancouver that called the first meeting, and we went to the meeting. It was a large, well-attended meeting, but not particularly productive because it got into discussions about how it should be organized and what the name would be, so a lot of people left in frustration. But I think, if I remember correctly, that what it did was it said that people could organize sort of autonomously as long as they supported a statement of principles and there was a group that was drafted to come up with a statement of principles, and I think there was a fair amount of pretty open sense that people should be organizing without having to go through an approval of the organization, which didn't have the structure to do approvals anyway. So, there were a number of actions organized – pickets of MLA's offices, government offices, I think there was a parade, that kind of stuff.

GK: So, that's the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation?

RB: Right, yeah.

GK: Were there differences within the gay community and AIDS groups about how to respond to Bill 34?

RB: Probably. I don't remember specifically, but I think it was probably the same kinds of things. At that initial meeting, most of the people there did not have an activist orientation. They were more interested in using political lobbying, petitions, that kind of stuff, to tell the government that they should do something without the sense of really building a strong resistance based on people being out in the streets. So, yeah, that difference was there. And I'm sure that there was probably a lot of lobbying and petition writing, letter writing, but I wasn't very much aware of it.

GK: My memory around this is that Bob Tivey ended up having to resign as Chair of AIDS Vancouver because he wanted to actually speak out against the legislation as a whole, and AIDS Vancouver and the BC Civil Liberties Association, including Stan Persky, adopted this approach of wanting to reform Bill 34. So, there were actually some difficulties there.

RB: Yeah. I think you're right. I didn't remember that specifically, but now that you do, I think you are right. The BC Civil Liberties Association – I don't remember if they were there or I think that they came up with a position after those organizing meetings. BC Civil Liberties – Stan Persky was

a director, probably still is – took a kind of a nuanced position that it might be appropriate to have some kind of quarantine in extreme medical cases, but that it wasn't necessarily justified in this case. And they got a lot of criticism for that. There were others, you know, who were working with local politicians, MLAs. So yeah, there were those different streams of organizing.

AS: But there was a significant stream of people that said, “We’re not interested in having any form of health legislation that governs whether people with AIDS or other communicable...” that were just like, “No, no. No legislation.”

RB: Yeah. Well, there were a lot of people who said that Bill 34 should be defeated. There were, well, a fairly good representation at public meetings. There were dozens of people there and at the first meeting hundreds, I think. So, you know, getting dozens of people to an actual organizing, working meeting...

AS: ...is pretty good.

RB: Yeah.

AS: What were you involved with in that Coalition? Do you remember any specific actions or activities?

RB: I'm trying to remember. I can remember being at pickets or events, but specifically, it's pretty vague. There was a rally at the Legislature, which I wasn't at.

GK: That's in Victoria?

RB: Yes. There was an occupation of the provincial health officer's office, a lot of demonstrations. I don't think I was at a lot of them. I remember organizing several of them. You know, I remember being in the meetings, and saying, “Ok, who's going to be where?” and “How are we going to get money,” but I can't actually specifically remember events where I was out on the street. You know, I was, but which one – I don't know.

AS: Well, and you were still involved with *Angles* then.

RB: Yeah. So, that took a fair amount of time.

AS: Yeah, and also just writing about something, and getting other people's perspectives shifts how we remember, I think. You know?

RB: Yeah.

GK: In terms of who was involved in the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation, it grew out of the AIDS groups and the gay scene, but did it involve other groups of people? I mean there seems to be a fair amount of lesbian involvement in it.

RB: Yes.

GK: Also, some sex worker involvement, or at least sex worker advocate involvement. I don't know if you have any memories of that.

RB: I remember that that was probably was the first thing where we were working closely with a lot of women – lesbian – organizers. I think that brought together lesbians and gay men. And Bet Cecill, who was a nurse, was one of the leading... she was a spokesperson for the CRHL. Karen Tulchinsky – there was a march and rally and she gave a speech that drew parallels with the early repression of Jews in Germany, with the repression and threats to lock up people with AIDS, and her saying, “Don’t let it get started because you can’t stop it.” And we reprinted her speech in *Angles* and some people thought, “Oh, that’s going too far.”

GK: Do you remember Marie Arrington and ASP [the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes] being involved?

RB: Yeah. I remember them. I wonder whether it was with CRHL or not; it’s hard to say. I think they probably were, but I remember them being involved in lots of other things as well, so whether it was that or not, I couldn’t say for sure.

GK: Okay. So, what happens with the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation and Bill 34?

RB: The Bill passed. I don’t think it was ever used. I can’t remember any time when it was used, because there’s, you know, plenty of other abilities in the *Criminal Code* to lock people up if you need to. I think that after the Bill passed the CRHL just kind of faded away because it was so narrowly focused and the people in it were so diverse. There wasn’t really a basis for continuing to work together. The more activist people who kind of met each other around the CRHL were the ones who then became involved in ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power]. And, you know, people had been talking about the need for a more visible, action-oriented, expressive, creative kind of protest, and it wasn’t there in AIDS Vancouver or in any other organization around. I think it was shortly after CRHL just kind of faded away essentially I think that somebody, probably... well, who was it? I’m not sure who called the first meetings of ACT UP. I remember it happened in somebody’s backyard.

GK: I think it was... do you remember somebody named David Lewis?

RB: That name sounds familiar.

GK: Anyways, at least in this book and John Kozachenko says that it was in his backyard that the meeting takes place. So, it was in a backyard.

RB: Yup. It was in a backyard. And there were police in cars across the street taking pictures.

AS: Wow. How would they have heard about it?

RB: It was pretty well announced. There was probably something in *Angles* saying that there'll be an organizing meeting. Yeah. So, there were at least a couple of cars and police taking pictures. And because of that, at the organizing meeting people were saying, "Be cautious what you say" and there were no specific... we didn't organize anything specifically, but we just said, "Yeah, let's organize a chapter of ACT UP." ACT UP is very autonomous and people organized their own events, so people went off and organized more demonstrations. I don't think that ACT UP ever had a lot of presence in Vancouver, partly because shortly after 1990 the Social Credit government lost power and the NDP came in, and the NDP had a much more positive relationship with the gay and lesbian community. They amended the *Human Rights Act* to extend protection to lesbians and gays and a variety of other things. I think they made funding much more widely available and provided services, supported the Doctor Peter Centre. So, I think things were quite different after the NDP came in. I think it was 1990. I could be wrong about the date, but it was right around then.

GK: It was November 1991 when the NDP got elected. Yeah, because ACT UP is not formed until 1990 here. And it continues to do direct action-oriented stuff at least until January of '91, so I'm just wondering when that might shift. And the last thing I'm aware of was a protest against Vander Zalm's State of the Province address, which was in January 1991.

RB: Oh.

GK: So, it might be slightly later, that's all. But can you tell us anything more about ACT UP? What was it like to be in that backyard meeting beyond the police being present?

AS: How many people were there? Was it big?

RB: Twenty or thirty I think. I was kind of a low-key meeting. It wasn't the kind of... you know, a lot of anger and loud voices that other ACT UP groups have kind of had, partly probably because of the police and just being such a visible location. We didn't go away marching and protesting.

AS: Were there a lot of people there from the CRHL?

RB: There were people there who had been active, in the more activist parts of the CRHL.

AS: You were saying there was this kind of sense of Vancouver AIDS being... there's mostly prevention work, legislative stuff, and then PWA Coalition moves off to focus more on care and support. So, were there people who were at the ACT UP meeting who might've been involved with either of those kinds of constituencies?

RB: I think it drew some of both. I think there were people there from AIDS Vancouver and there were people there from the activist part of the CRHL and there were people I didn't know. So, at that meeting it was fairly diverse.

AS: Do you remember if there was kind of conscious representation or attention to people who were getting involved with ACT UP who were living HIV and AIDS themselves? Or was that something that was at issue at all?

RB: I don't remember it being discussed specifically. I think there were people living with AIDS at the meeting. I'm pretty sure there were, but I don't recall it being a particular issue that anybody talked about.

AS: Right. It's interesting, you know, because some places it's like, "We need to really make sure that people living with HIV and AIDS are at the centre in the leadership."

RB: Uh-huh. Well, I don't think it had a formal leadership. And wherever there was a leadership, you know, for organizations that got that developed, there were people from AIDS Vancouver, there was... I think it was AIDS Vancouver. Yeah, at one point people were saying they should be led by people living with AIDS and they said, "Well, those people are busy looking after their health. They just don't have the energy to run a busy organization." So, that's how professionalism happens – nothing wrong with it at that level.

AS: Right. And do you remember just how – I'm asking this question partially because we're in the age where it's like, "Okay. We're starting an organization. I'll pass around an email list and we'll announce something on Facebook." So, I'm just really always interested in the practicalities.

RB: Passed around a list and people put their names and phone numbers on it.

AS: Uh-huh. And so if you were calling another meeting, people would've called around and said this is the next meeting.

RB: Yes.

AS: Where did they happen?

RB: Well, small organization, like committee work, in fact even organizing events, activities – it probably happened in somebody's living room because there would only be half a dozen people probably. There were a few bigger meetings. I think there was one at the Chinese Cultural Centre because it was a big room that was probably... it was between the Commercial Drive centre and the West End, so it was sort of a...

AS: Middle.

RB: Yeah, middle ground. And they had a big room available for rent. I think it was an education meeting, sharing ideas and talking about strategies.

AS: And if you remember, would there have been someone who says, "We'll facilitate," or a couple of people who would facilitate the meeting?

RB: It would usually be at least a couple of people facilitating, often male and female. The meetings that I remember were not very executive. Like, there wouldn't have been the executive sitting at a table at the front.

AS: Enforcing Robert's Rules.

RB: Exactly. Yeah, that never happened. [laughter] No, it was pretty informal. And that's the way that most of the organizing that I've been involved with in Vancouver seems to happen.

GK: You said there were demonstrations and pickets, and there were obviously arrests involved with what happened with ACT UP, if you can tell us anything about any of those.

RB: Let's see. I think this was ACT UP. There was a cabinet office at Canada Place. I think, the BC Government or Federal cabinet office. Anyway, there was a demonstration down there and people put red paint on their hands and put bloody marks on the walls. And they were arrested, some of them. I don't think there were any charges or they were prosecuted. There was an occupation of a health ministry office near Vancouver Hospital. They were eventually evicted by the police, but I don't think there were any charges there either. I think they just closed the office and, at the end of the day the police said, "You've gotta go out now and if you don't we're going to take you out," and they said, "We're not going to go out," and they took them out. Probably brought them to police headquarters for a while and then let them go.

AS: Sort of catch and release.

RB: Yeah, I can remember meeting with people like, eight or nine o'clock at night. They were getting out of jail.

AS: Uh-huh. "Hello. Welcome out of jail." [laughter]

RB: Yes.

AS: Did people have training in civil disobedience?

RB: There was training. Yup. There were training sessions that were set up. I don't remember if I was ever at any of them. I'd done some training in the Kootenays for the environmental stuff, so probably I just felt that I had done it before; I didn't need it. And wasn't really intending to get arrested myself.

GK: There were also two demonstrations where there were at least some heavier duty actions that happened – one was outside the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

RB: Let's see. Premier Vander Zalm and his wife were going to *Les Mis*, which just seemed offensively ironic. They were there as like, a public event. I don't know how everybody knew that they were going to be there, but somehow. Maybe they posted their schedules or something and

somebody read it, “We’re going to go and meet him there.” And so they were there – twenty, maybe thirty people with picket signs. I wasn’t at that one but that’s what I heard. Somebody got carried away and spat at Lillian Vander Zalm. Probably it was just a totally unplanned thing that just, she was the unhappy recipient [laughter], but that led to some police arrests, I think. It got a lot of media attention, but I don’t think it actually amounted to very much either.

GK: And I think there was also something that happened at the state of the province address, which is in...

RB: Is that the one in Victoria? Must’ve been. That was probably the march/rally at the Legislature. And I remember there was a busload of people from Vancouver going there, but I wasn’t there either. A lot of people went. There was picketing, I think. I don’t remember anything more of it.

GK: So, what seems to happen to ACT UP after that?

RB: I think it faded away. I think the need wasn’t there so much. With the NDP government, they were actually relatively responsive. They came up with some money, probably not as much as people were asking for but... And the treatment protocols were probably getting better and there was less critical need. There was support for people living with AIDS. I think AIDS Vancouver – or ACT UP maybe – probably AIDS Vancouver too, was at the international conference in 1996, I think it was. And I think that ACT UP Vancouver – whoever was left in it at that point, probably not many people – intended to do some kind of high visibility action. They may have marched into the auditorium at one point. I don’t remember it being very much more than just a presence.

AS: Uh-huh. And that would’ve been the conference where they announced anti-retroviral therapy, right, in ’96.

RB: Probably. Yeah.

AS: That sort of shifts a lot of the energy around some of the urgency of...

RB: And at that conference, people with AIDS were involved in organizing the conference and being on the panels. So, they were well represented at the conference. I think might’ve been maybe the first international conference or something. It might’ve been the one that was co-organized with AIDS organizations or something like that.

AS: Again, sort of toggling back, how was drug funding in BC organized? Like, if you were living with AIDS in ’91 or ’92 and there was an option to – potentially you could tolerate AZT – would you be able to? Was it funded; was it covered?

RB: I don’t think it was. This isn’t something I know about personally.

GK: I think you’re right. It wasn’t funded. It was actually one of the few places across the Canadian state where it was not totally funded. The PWA Coalition and Society and I think

ACT UP to some extent also organized around that. And I think that did change with the NDP government.

RB: Yeah. I'm sure it did.

AS: Right, because that would've been one of the things that would've been murderous.

RB: Well, it's probably one of the reasons that they were focusing on the Social Credit government, because they did have a moralistic line. They probably didn't put it in those terms but that's how we saw it, that they just didn't want to put up the money. They said, "It's experimental. It's too much money. It's going to cost us too much. We're just not going to do it." But I know people did have some access. I think it was through experimental treatment protocols that drugs were provided, probably by the drug companies for a limited time and I think the medical community was quite good at doing everything it could to provide access.

AS: It seems like the Doctor Peter Foundation – there's these various kinds of core points in the Vancouver context. Did having those things here affect the way activism in, for example, ACT UP would've been?

RB: I'm sure it did. I'm not sure I could say how. There were a number... well, I'm not sure that it affected activism as such, except by maybe drawing people out who otherwise would have been activists – drawing them into more support and other kinds of organizations. Yeah, thinking about it now, there were people who I think, just from the personal contact that I had with them, were involved in AIDS support service organizations who I'm sure would have been involved in activist organizations had they not had that outlet, that way of providing the support that they thought was needed.

AS: Yeah, that kind of way of caring.

RB: I think the initial funding for PWA and AIDS Vancouver came from the city. It might have been under Michael Harcourt, a relatively liberal mayor. So, by having some access and some potential, just sympathetic politicians to talk to, it gave them hope that you could actually do something by working with government. And so for some people, they thought that was a more productive way of spending their time than being out organizing on the street. I think probably, you know, having both kinds of organizing there – both are critical but I think probably respecting the position that the other, that each had – I think we supported each other and created a political milieu in which more could happen. I think either one of them without the other probably would have accomplished less.

AS: Yeah. So, having the explicit negotiation and working with... and then also the confrontation.

RB: Yeah.

AS: Interesting.

GK: Looking back on it now, is there some connection between the early treatment and viral lab activism of the original founders of the PWA Coalition, the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation, and some of what ACT UP did? Do you think these changed what happened here in terms of the response to AIDS, like that type of activism? I mean clearly there were AIDS service organizations that were developing and eventually the PWA Coalition becomes the PWA Society and becomes more like that; although, it was always different too. But did that change the situation for people living with AIDS and HIV? I mean also the quarantine legislation was never used, right? So, even if the CRHL was unable to defeat the legislation, it probably helped to create a context in which it couldn't be used.

RB: Yeah, I think that's true. I think having those organizations changes the political context within the community by just providing a certain kind of outlet. So, it de-emphasizes more community activist organizing, and it professionalizes it. Within the organizations in place, and they're hiring staff and getting people who know and have specific skills and just accounting and logistics, as well as lobbying and getting more money. That takes away the need for having a really involved community that's demanding what people think they need. So, it's... yeah, it's depoliticizing.

AS: So, when you're talking about that, one of the things is that – and I think I've seen this too – people get involved in organizations. The organizations have government funding. The government funding means that you can't take an explicitly political view and I just wanted to ask... one way to hear that is to say that it depoliticizes individual people, but it kind of sounded from what you were just saying maybe it also had a depoliticizing effect on the whole community, and I wondered about...

RB: I think it does. You know, if people think that nothing is happening then they're going to want to do something about it themselves. If it looks like things are happening, even if it's not exactly what they want or it's not at the level that's needed, then maybe you try to talk to the politicians or sign a petition, but you don't organize on the streets and say, "We need another 10 percent to meet our budget this year." [laughter]

GK: So, after the ACT UP period is over, are you involved in any AIDS organizing beyond... I mean you're still involved in *Angles* for a number of years while it's still around, but do you have any other direct involvement in AIDS organizing after that?

RB: Not really. No. After that, I joined Socialist Challenge because it had a bigger political conception and a more systematic way of looking at politics and I wanted to see what that was. And I stayed involved with that for ten or fifteen years, I think. And that took time away from, you know, just not being able to be so directly involved. I was involved in other activities. What was I involved in? Anti-violence campaigns. Working on *Angles* and that took a lot of my energy. And then when *Angles* did die, I think I just kind of withdrew quite a bit after that, probably I was just kind of burned out at that point.

GK: So, we also are asking people for their memories of people living with AIDS and HIV who might've been involved in some of this activism who have died. Obviously, it's not

always an easy thing to talk about, so if you don't want to answer about particular individuals please feel free not to. But some of the people who were involved in the... I mean obviously all the original founders of the PWA Coalition are now dead and I think John's the only one, who was somewhat around at the beginning, who's still around. But do you have any memories of Kevin Brown or Warren Jensen or any of the other founders of the PWA Coalition? Part of what we want to do is construct each city, entries not just around transcripts, but also around memories of people who have died because we want the people who died, who we can't possibly interview, to also be present in what we're doing.

RB: Yeah. I wasn't closely involved with many of the people in the AIDS Vancouver, PWA Coalition. There were a number of people who were working at *Angles* who died. Some of them – Fred Gilbertson was one. He was quite central at *Angles* for many years and when he first found that he had AIDS, he was happy because he was losing weight, and he had felt oppressed and very troubled, personally troubled, in the gay community because as a fat man he thought that there was no room for him. He felt personally rejected for quite a long time. And his first reactions were, "I'm losing weight. I'm happy." Then his health got seriously bad, and then went up and down for a while. He was my closest friend at the time and I think of him frequently.

AS: How did he get involved with *Angles*?

RB: How did he get involved? I was involved in *Angles*. I was always interested in writing and editing and so I joined the newsletter collective at the time, and he was with the Rob Joyce support committee, whenever it was. I think I probably was too and we were probably working together on that, and I was writing an article for the newsletter, whichever one it was at the time. And asked him to edit it and work with me on it or something and I convinced him to keep working with the paper and he eventually became quite central in the newspaper.

GK: Was that after he was really involved in the post office? He was also an activist in CUPW [Canadian Union of Postal Workers] for a long time.

RB: Yeah, it was. Was he a postie? I don't think he was at the time. I don't remember what he was doing when I first met him.

GK: He went in and out of the post office. He was a manager for a while, too.

RB: Yeah.

GK: So, Fred's one of the people that you remember.

AS: When did he die?

RB: 1990.

GK: [referring to a document] **Yeah, this is just published in early 1991, so probably November 1, 1990.**

AS: **Was he involved in FAGS too?**

RB: Yeah.

AS: **Yeah.**

RB: Tom Patterson was another. He was so energetic and creative when he was in an “up” mood that he just brought people along with him and he was the spark that just made a lot of things happen. He had so many ideas and he was so energetic and enthusiastic about them you just wanted to go and help him with it. And while he was living here, except for his mental health problems, he was healthy. He left here around 1992 – I forget exactly, 1990 – and went to Toronto. And I know that he died there several years later.

GK: **And changed his name to Torvald.**

RB: Yes. He said when his family immigrated, I think from Norway, they had to change their names from whatever their original name was, and he wanted to reclaim his ethnic past.

GK: **Yeah. And he was involved in various things in Toronto.**

RB: Yeah.

GK: **The campaign for the repeal of the youth pornography law and other things.**

RB: Yeah.

GK: **I first met Tom in 1983 at the Marx Conference in Winnipeg, and he was this young little thing. Anyway, yeah, he had boundless energy.**

RB: Yes. I think when he was diagnosed as manic... not manic. What do they call it now?

GK: **Bipolar.**

RB: Bipolar. I think that was kind of a relief to him because it explained why he went in these up and down periods and he felt that he was able to get some treatment; although the treatment I think didn't work for him that well. Probably better than it might have been, but yeah, I mean he was just an energetic inspiration and to lose him is quite sad.

GK: **There was a memorial held for him in Toronto. Was there one here as well?**

RB: No.

GK: There wasn't one here? Okay. I didn't know that. I mean I was in Sudbury then, so I wrote something for the people in Toronto but I didn't actually get to go to his.

AS: And other people?

RB: I think the thing that I would like to say is that I know many people who are living with AIDS now, who have been for many years and who are maintaining their health. So, although AIDS is and has been, you know, it's a crippling, fatal disease – many people are living positively and that's because of their own personal strength and I think because of support they get within the community, as well as the good work of medical researchers. And I think that that's what I would like to say. Many people have died. I've known far more than I'd like to remember, but many people are also doing well, and I'd like to keep a focus on them too.

GK: For sure. That's a good comment to make. So, we're coming to the end, but is there anything that's cropped up as we've been talking that you have thought of; that you haven't had an opportunity to speak about, or something from your notes?

RB: It's pretty thorough. There's an incident that I was recalling as I was sort of thinking about this. At *Angles*, we covered AIDS pretty erratically because we didn't have any expertise. And there are a couple of people who would monitor the news around AIDS for us and they would write articles, but quite often their articles were focusing on critical ways of... over the side effects of treatments like AZT; especially in the early years when they were quite strong treatments and had severe effects, and alternative views about causation – whether there were multiple levels of causation or not. So, probably that's how it came across a lot in the newspaper and I can remember that Doctor Montaner phoned our office once and said, "Why are you doing this? You're giving people the wrong information." And I said that, "We're not experts and we're not trying... We just want to put out information that we think people should be aware of." And I invited them to send us, tell us what you think is a better way of thinking about it, which he didn't do, which is too bad. But I just sort of think if you look at *Angles* coverage around AIDS, it's probably pretty weird. [laughter]

Looks like that's about it. I think it's pretty good that you're doing this kind of work, so that those memories... I mean mine are pretty vague and hard to make concrete at this point, so I'm glad that somebody's getting things down and getting different points of view and ideas – different ways of looking at what happened and seeing things that I wasn't even aware of, I'm sure. There were a couple of names actually that I thought of – Alan Herbert and Gordon Price. They were probably both on city council at the time. Alan Herbert was I think in AIDS Vancouver. I think he was on the executive of AIDS Vancouver – Chairman of the board or something like that – while he was a member of Vancouver city council. Gordon Price was a member of council. At the time, there were actually three gay men on the conservative government of the city.

AS: Weird.

RB: It's kind of weird, yeah. Quite bizarre.

AS: And they were conservatives.

RB: Well, the conservative, the Non Partisan Association as it is called, the municipal party, is a property-owners organization and their interest is in supporting business and keeping taxes down. Socially, I don't think they have much...

AS: ...one way or the other. Yeah.

RB: Yeah. So, the fact that three organizers with good connections in the community wanted to be on their council – the NPA probably thought if they got the connections, then they'll get the votes and if they support property values, let them in. So, yeah, we had this weird situation for a while. But they would give you probably a very different point of view from mine, and would probably be interesting to talk to.

GK: And Gordon Price was also involved in the “Shame the Johns” organizing.

RB: Yes, he was.

GK: In the early 1980s.

RB: Yeah, must've been. He's currently a planning professor at SFU [Simon Fraser University].

GK: And Alan?

RB: Herbert. I saw his name come up recently. I'm pretty sure he's retired but I'm not sure. I think he might've been a doctor. Maybe. I don't remember.

GK: Anyone else that you can think of? Like, who might've been involved in the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation or ACT UP?

RB: Maybe Janis Kaleta. She was in the International Socialists.

GK: We're talking to her.

RB: Ah, good. I couldn't remember if...

GK: She was involved in ACT UP at least.

RB: Yeah, but I wasn't sure if it was later that I knew her or if it was during that period.

GK: We'll find out.

RB: Good. That's about it. Nothing else comes to mind. I can leave you my notes if it's useful.

AS: Yeah, that'd be great. Thank you so much.

GK: Thank you. Yeah, this is great.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]