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AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Bet Cecill
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Bet Cecill – BC
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: It's September 17, 2016, and we're talking to Bet Cecill.

GK: So, where we start all of our interviews, just so we have a common reference point, is—thinking back, do you have any memory of when you would have first heard about AIDS, and what you would have heard?

BC: Actually, I do. It's really interesting. I remember where I was, and I remember reading it in... *The Advocate*? Anyway, it was a gay paper, and it was when they were calling it Gay Related Immune Deficiency [GRID].

GK: Right.

BC: It was a little paragraph. I was talking to Yvette Perreault, so if you haven't talked to Yvette, you should, and she's in Toronto. I was in her apartment in Vancouver, and I had read it. I don't know why that stuck in my mind because it was a little paragraph, and certainly nothing much. But I remember exactly where I was. It's just weird.

GK: So, do you remember hearing more stuff about AIDS after that?

BC: After that? The next thing that pops into my mind, but I'm quite sure it isn't the next, was—it was just an ongoing bunch of prejudices about gay men, and you know, the whole nine yards. And I also knew several men who were sick with AIDS in Vancouver. Also, I was really involved with doing activism through the Lesbian Center. My bailiwick was coalition work, pretty much, and so I did a lot of work with men, in one way or the other—Richard Banner being one of them, in particular. So, it's funny, the first thing that sticks out in my mind, but I'm sure it isn't the first, was the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation [CRHL], which was a blast. It was actually fun. And you don't normally think of demonstrations and stuff like that as being fun, but this one was. Bill Vander Zalm was the premier. It was Vander Zalm that convinced me that I really should start voting again. [laughter] I was doing the Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee routine at that point in my life, and then we got Vander Zalm, and I was like, "Okay. Maybe it really does make a difference." Anyway, we all got dressed up in fake furs and whatever. They were doing a fundraiser at a fancy downtown hotel, which had a big portcullis, or whatever that thing is called that comes over, and as people were driving up we start handing out leaflets. Of course, they thought we were part of their crowd. They would take them, and then

there would be this look of horror on their faces! As soon as they got inside we started chanting. Everything just echoed. We had a blast. It was really good. And it worked. I personally was involved in it for a bit of organizing about the quarantine stuff.

GK: Do you want to step back and tell us a bit about the quarantine legislation?

BC: They wanted legislation – I can't remember what the bill number was – but they wanted legislation that would allow them to quarantine people with AIDS, which in that case was generally men with AIDS. They wanted to be able to put them in quarantine. And the whole push, from our perspective, was instead for personal responsibility. "You need to be responsible for your own health. You need to be using a condom. You need to make sure your partners are using a condom." There was an anti-, I don't know if this was necessarily part of the CRHL, but there was an anti-testing component to a lot of the work we were doing, too. That was really interesting, because I was working as a nurse at the time; I was changing a bed and I stuck my hand in and I got a needle stick. It was very interesting to listen to my own conversation about whether I wanted this man tested. "Of course, I wanted this man—No! No! No! It isn't going to make any difference," because at the time the only treatment was...

GK: AZT?

BC: AZT. That was the only treatment, and they weren't going to do it preventatively at that point anyway, so it was like, "Okay, whatever." His HIV status was, in fact, immaterial. But my first reaction was I wanted to know. Thinking back, I think he was probably a drug addict. I had no idea if he was HIV positive or not. But, there was the needle.

AS: And it's really amazing, isn't it, especially in that moment where there's not really much that can be done with testing. So, when the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation started—I guess I want to hear about many, many things. But one of them is, when the quarantine legislation was coming out, it is kind of targeting gay men. Can you just say more about what it meant to be doing lesbian organizing in a coalitional way, such that that would be something that you would be taking responsibility for?

BC: You mean, "As a lesbian, why would I be doing that?" Is that the question? Well, I'm one of those weird lesbians that thinks that we're all people, too. I'm working personally, my push is to work for a world that we all get to be in. That's not always made me popular. So, it totally made sense to me. My organization was in this weird no-man's-land, or no-woman's-land, or no-person's-land, or whatever you want to say, because there were a lot of feminists that were not too thrilled with who we are. We were women, but we were also very much queer, too, so we were in this sort of funny place. There were members who didn't want to work with men, and that's all

right. That's fine, you don't want to do it, there are people who will do it. But they supported us. Our basis of unity said, "We will work with men and personal preferences will be taken into account." We had a very broad vision of the kind of world we were trying to create. So, it totally made sense. Plus, the fact that many of us knew gay men, and many of us knew gay men who had been sick, and got sick. The gay and lesbian conferences were being organized at that point. There were two, maybe three. I'm not sure which.

GK: I think I met you at the one at UBC [University of British Columbia], maybe in about '86.

BC: You might have. I think that's quite possible.

GK: So, the organization you were centered in during this period of time, was it the Vancouver Lesbian Connection [VLC]?

BC: Yes.

GK: And that was related to the Vancouver Lesbian Centre?

BC: Yes, we ran the Centre. The Centre was one of our projects. They just happened to have the same initials. It's the Centre that a lot of people think of. We actually at one point had a vision, you know, there were gonna be Lesbian Centres all through the province, but we never got that far.

AS: Were you involved in starting the Vancouver Lesbian Connection?

BC: It was my dream, and I spent a couple of years finding other people who had that dream. My dream came out of – and this was another thing that didn't make me very popular in some circles – but it came out of [Vancouver] Rape Relief. Because we had – I have – some very strong objections to some of what Rape Relief believes. But the vision—I wanted the same kind of breadth of vision in lesbian organizing as Rape Relief had. Where it was support, it was education, it was action. It wasn't just, you know, drag the babies out of the river, it was go after the fuckers that are putting them in the river. It was big thinking, and wide-ranging. And it was anti-racist, anti-classist as well. So, there was all of that. They had some problems with some issues, for sure. They still do. I left after a couple of years, as a principled supporter who couldn't be there anymore. But, that got me fired up, and that was my introduction to political organizing, too.

GK: Was Rape Relief?

BC: It was Rape Relief. So, talk about jumping into the deep end, oh my god. And in the middle of a whole bunch of wars that were really, really ugly. That's a topic for

another paper maybe. I hope somebody will do one someday, because there's a lot to be said about some of that.

AS: I think it structures Vancouver feminism in a way that...

BC: It does, and very unfortunately. I think it's really unfortunate. There's still people that walk into the room and if they were on the opposite side, they kinda [gives side eye]. When I moved onto the coast there was a very prominent member of WAVAW, who was living here on the coast and was in the same social circle. It was like "Okay, what am I going to do about this?" Hmm... "You're going to take a deep breath and you're going to be a grown up." So, we both took deep breaths and were grown-ups. We always said we would have a bunch of conversations about those days, which we never did, and then she died. It's still, it absolutely is a fault line in organizing in Vancouver that is really unfortunate.

AS: And WAVAW, what was WAVAW?

BC: Women Against Violence Against Women. They were the breakaway, they were... Rape Relief was the rape crisis centre and then there were, depending on who you talk to, what the issues were, there were women who didn't like what was happening. They went to form their own rape crisis centre, and never the 'tween shall meet nor speak. It was really quite disgusting. My take is that some of the issues were in fact about government versus grassroots. I believe that was what the basic issue was.

GK: At that point and time. It was also about whether to accept state funding or not.

BC: Yes, and, of course, there were a whole bunch of personal stuff that got into it—ex-partners, and ex-lovers, and God only knows what else.

GK: So WAVAW was a group that was interested in accepting state funding.

BC: Yes, exactly.

AS: Is that also a line that runs through AIDS work? Like, how to think about—

BC: Yes. Well, and we need both! It's just like, "Hello people!" You know? There's no one road. Both have advantages. If you're pushing at the state, you can go glacially slowly, but sometimes you can move things. Victim Services I don't think was a great improvement over a lot of things, to be quite honest with you. But anyway, yes.

AS: So, Vancouver Lesbian Connection ran the Centre? And there was also a phone line?

BC: No that was LIL, that was the Lesbian Information Line—Yes, we also had a phone line. But their phone line kind of stopped pretty much not too long after ours. Actually, they're the first people that did a lesbian phone line in Vancouver. If you want some contacts for that I have them. Kate Stewart, in fact. Kate could tell you a bunch of other people, too. They had been going for several years, and just as a phone line. And then we opened the Centre—we did some fundraising, and then we opened the Centre. We had a phone line, we had drop-in groups. We were all volunteers, so of course we made horrible mistakes. Eventually everything crashed and burned. But that's another story—that's one I *really* want someone to do a book about. Anyway, did support groups, and did coalition work, and... oh god, radio, TV, anything we could get our message out, did some high school speaks, that kind of stuff.

GK: What years roughly would that have been?

BC: '85 to '95, roughly. I think we started organizing in '84. It took us a year to write a basis of unity.

GK: It can.

BC: I still have it, actually. It's a really good one. It's quite good. I don't think I would disagree with any of it yet.

GK: So maybe coming back to the whole...

BC: Sorry, I'm going astray here.

GK: No, no, no. This is great!

AS: We want another context. It matters to think about it.

GK: And we're also really interested in what experiences and political perspectives people bring with them to their engagement with AIDS work. So, we always ask those types of questions. So, we sort of already got through some of that, and that's really good. So, maybe to come back to the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation, who else would have been involved, how was it organized, do you have any memories of that?

BC: I want to say Fred Gilbertson...

GK: That's probably true.

BC: Fred and I worked together a lot. He was fabulous—we co-chaired so many meetings. I miss Fred. I still miss Fred. Fred died of AIDS, as you know. He was the first man, in fact – this is probably a bit of an aside – but he was the first man, in fact,

that I ever sat down with and we just traded experiences. We were different gender, different class, different physical type, and not entirely differing in sexuality, but somewhat differing in sexuality. Certainly, I am more of a top, and he was way more of a bottom. I wasn't as heavily down that road as he was, period. But we just traded experiences. Like, what it was like for me, and what it was like for him. There was no imbalance. I mean, I guess our imbalances balanced. [laughter] It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I treasure it. I've met other people since then that I have had some of that kind of experience with, but I miss Fred. I miss Fred a lot. He was a wonderful man.

Anyway, so Fred. I don't know. I just remember a whole bunch of community meetings in various and sundry places. Letters to the editor, letters to the MLAs, letters to everybody and their dog.

AS: Because the push for quarantine was coming down from the provincial government? Conservatives?

GK: Socreds [Social Credit Party]

BC: Socred. Well, they are Conservative but the name of the party in BC is Socred. And they're kind of there for a little time, I don't even know if they exist anymore.

GK: They basically led themselves into the Liberals.

BC: Well yes, that's true. The Liberals are not liberal, not even close. We won't go down that road right now.

GK: One of the things that some people have talked about is the differences of opinion around the quarantine legislation. There seems to have been differences between AIDS Vancouver and the BC Civil Liberties Association and Stan Persky, on the side who was sort of talking about, "We just need to reform it a little bit and everything will be okay." And Stan Persky actually wrote an article in *This Magazine* arguing that position. And the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation, and sort of more Lefty people, arguing, "No. It just needs to be done away with." Do you remember any of those disagreements?

BC: Not specifically. All I remember is the very firm opinion, which I still hold, that people need to be responsible for their own health decisions, and I don't want the state making that decision. Are there places where I would change that opinion? [sigh] Maybe in places where you don't have the option to be responsible, i.e., for some kind of communicable disease, heavily communicable disease, where you walk down the street... which is some of the TB [tuberculosis] legislation, actually, in the past... I guess I might have a different opinion. But when you're talking about something that I am, or you are entering into – unless you are being raped –

consensually, that's up to you. I'm sorry. And we need to do whatever we can do to make it possible for people to make those choices. As we know for women, in particular, it can be more problematic. But that's where we need to be putting our energy, in my opinion. And the assholes that don't disclose their HIV status, well that's not okay if you've been asked, for sure. But if you haven't been asked... I don't know, I wouldn't sleep with somebody without protection until I knew them. I just wouldn't.

GK: Right.

BC: Even as a dyke. Even though that's a rare way of transmitting, it's not unheard of. I had a female lover with AIDS, too, and I learned a lot about safe sex.

AS: And then it's about, how do you have practices—I mean, in certain ways I look now at my students in Ottawa and I feel like there's drug resistant syphilis everywhere, drug resistant gonorrhea is coming back. I feel like everyone needs to be fucking as though everyone's got everything. You can still enjoy each other, you know?

BC: It's true. One of the things that occurred to me back then about the whole AIDS thing was that men got to experience sex as being dangerous as women have forever—pregnancy being the main one, of course. But sex, except for dykes, has never been something women could do without thinking. I mean, sometimes we did, but it was dangerous! It *is* dangerous to do without thinking. That reality became true for men as well. Not that I would necessarily wish it on anybody. But it certainly gave a way to have a conversation that didn't happen before as readily.

GK: For sure.

AS: Yeah, the consequentialness of it.

BC: Yeah! There's consequences. Or there can be.

GK: So, the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation does a lot of organizing. You've described some aspects of that. Anything else you remember about what it did? Or how it was organized? Did you have meetings where decisions were made by majority vote? Was it consensus based?

BC: It disappeared after the quarantine legislation. Because it was diverse—it was really diverse. I remember looking around the room and seeing some pretty right-wing people in that room. I don't mean just right wing in relationship to the far left, either. They were men, but they were men who were concerned about this particular issue. It fell apart afterwards, so there was nothing that happened after the fight against the legislation.

How did we make decisions? That's a very good question. I think it must have been a majority vote. I think it must have been. I don't recall anything else. I don't even recall a decision about how to make a decision—one of those lovely discussions. [laughter] No, I don't remember that. And I am picturing everything from fairly small to some really big spaces, too. I mean, there were meetings where there were – my guess is – well over a hundred people. There were also meetings that were a lot smaller. I know Fred and I chaired a number of them, but certainly not all of them. I am trying to remember who were the other people that chaired some. Who's the guy that got kicked out of AIDS Vancouver?

GK: Are you talking about Bob Tivey?

BC: Yes!

GK: Okay. Tell us about him.

BC: He got kicked out because he wouldn't knuckle under to some government bull shit. I can't remember what it was, though.

GK: I do know that he argued for a critical position on the quarantine legislation, and AIDS Vancouver was...

BC: That would have been what it was.

GK: I wasn't quite sure if that was the reason why he got turfed.

BC: I think you're right. Although I am not absolutely 100% sure. I know he got let go because he had a principled position about something. It would probably be that. Do you know where Bob is?

GK: I actually don't know what happened to Bob Tivey...

So, CRHL is a fairly diverse group that falls apart. Our understanding is the legislation actually passes after some reforms to it. So, it's actually passed, but never really implemented. That's my understanding.

BC: Damn.

GK: But that's not how all people remember it, right?

BC: My memory is of it being defeated, but you could be right. It was never implemented. I would be sure of that. That's very interesting.

GK: Like, for instance, Paul would have said that the significance of the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation was that it was this sort of first

wave of more AIDS activist organizing. And that its success was not so much in preventing the legislation from being passed, but in preventing it from being implemented.

BC: You might be right. That might be correct actually. When you say that, that vaguely rings a bell. I can't say that for sure, one way or the other. But that actually does ring a bell. I would be very sure it was never implemented.

AS: Yes. And some people have also said versions of, "There were changes made to it and it was never implemented." So something passed, but maybe it wasn't the thing that Vander Zalm and the Socred government wanted. So it might be both. There might be wins in changing what the legislation was, and the overall win in changing the possibility of them ever actually quarantining anyone.

BC: That's very interesting.

AS: We need to look more into that.

GK: Yes. So, one other question relating to The Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation is the connection with sex workers. Do you remember if there was a connection there?

BC: That's one of the things that VLC was doing, actually, which didn't make us popular in some other circles. I am trying to remember. You know who you should talk to? Does Kairn Mladenovic Karen Ledenovick's name come up? I finally found her again after many, many years. She's married to some guy and living in Toronto, but we're in phone contact and Facebook contact. She was working at... there was a group called... there was Sally DeQuadros, Karen and Marie Arrington...

GK: There was ASP [Alliance of Safety of Prostitutes] and there was POWER [Prostitutes and Other Women for Equal Rights].

BC: Yes. And both of them were in both. Karen has continued to be a shit disturber outside of Toronto, but I think on somewhat different issues. If I can get you in touch... I'll see if she would like to follow-up.

GK: Especially if she's in Toronto. That makes it easy for us to make connections at some point.

BC: She's delightful. She's intelligent. She has a very sharp tongue. She will give you a very good interview. Should you decide to go there or should she decide to do that. Delightful woman.

GK: That'd be great.

BC: Sally DeQuadros is dead as I know. Marie Arrington is alive. Karen might be able to get you in touch. I tried to find Marie a couple of years ago and sent her an email through a contact and never got an answer. So, I'm not sure what's up there. Probably worth a try. How were they involved? That's what I'm trying to remember. I don't know. I'm sort of trying to picture any of them being in these particular meetings. I can't say they were and I can't say they weren't, to be honest with you. I don't know.

Certainly, I mean one of the things that had been going on around that period of time was – and this was some of the right wing faces I saw in the room was – what's his name? He was a Vancouver city councilor leading the charge to get prostitutes out of...

GK: Are you talking about Gordon Price?

BC: Yes, of course. [laughter] So, that was some of the sort of peripheral work some of us were doing as well in support. But I can't come up with a lot of specifics. Except that as a part of our basis of unity we are in favour of free choice about a whole bunch of things and that would be one of them. But I seem to remember seeing Gordon Price in the room for the CRHL. I could be wrong, so if that's slanderous...

GK: The sense that I think we got from talking to – I don't know who it was – whether it was Dan or Paul or Richard, was that the coalition sort of started off with broad meetings around the quarantine legislation. Then as it got more focused, some people fell away. So, I imagine that if Gordon Price was there at some meetings he wouldn't have stayed around.

So, you did mention before we started to do the interview that there was some organizing around women living with AIDS in Vancouver. I don't know when that would have happened, but it would be interesting to learn more about it.

BC: I'm trying to nail down the year. I couldn't... so, I do the years by where I was living and who I was sleeping with. We're talking really... it wasn't before VLC, I don't think. Wow! I know where I was living. Somewhere, maybe, late 80s, as a guess. But the Positive Women's Network I'm pretty sure still exists. I'm not sure who's involved in it. I know that Evelyn Beheshti was the founder. And her mother is also a dyke, but I think her mother has now died. And I can't remember what her mother's name is, but somebody might know something about the early history of that organization. And her two moms were in and out of VLC periodically, but not heavily involved. So, I didn't know them super well. That was certainly Evelyn's response to getting a positive diagnosis—was to go start an organization to figure out what to do. She was a pretty dynamite woman. That's about all I know about that at this point.

GK: That's fine. That's great.

BC: The only other person I know that knew more is also dead, Catherine White. She died in a plane crash about five years ago. She's someone else. It's too bad she's not here, because she could tell you a lot about another whole facet. You might get some leads through the woman who was her partner when she died. I'm not sure what name she's going by right now, either probably S.D. or Sid, I'm not sure which, Holman, H-O-L-M-A-N. She's the artistic director of a queer arts festival in Vancouver. Very talented photographer. She did this amazing street photography thing where they had, on bus shelters, all kinds of huge pictures of gay men and lesbians, and I guess probably trans people, too. I'm not sure about that. It was really successful. That was about five or six years ago. She might be able to give you... She and Catherine were partners for ten years or so, I guess, before Catherine was killed. And she may have some more information for you.

AS: And Catherine was involved with the Positive Women's Network?

BC: She was a really, really good friend of Evelyn's. I'm not sure whether she had been involved with the Positive Women's Network or not. She also... Catherine wrote the book, literally, on trans stuff in the Downtown East Side. When I met her, she was working for Look Out – that was a really long time ago – and then was working for... I think it's Three Bridges. And had done a whole bunch with that particular demographic of people. That's another network you might want to tap, particularly in terms of some AIDS activism and stuff.

AS: Yes.

BC: Oh! Oh! There was – now was this specifically focused on AIDS? – Catherine and I were just getting together when we did a sit in with Sally DeQuadros and a bunch of other people from POWER. A sit-in in the church. Yes. But I think that was specifically focused on prostitution, not on AIDS.

GK: I think it might have been around the expulsion from the West End.

BC: It might have been. Yes, it probably was.

GK: Was it St. Paul's Church?

BC: Yes.

GK: Yes.

BC: Yes. They have a fairly comfortable floor. [laughter] I can tell you that much. We were there all night.

AS: Wow!

BC: Interesting way to spend your honeymoon, but anyway.

GK: We were just there, was it yesterday? Yesterday we were at the unveiling of the memorial for the sex workers expelled from the West End. I don't know if you've heard of it.

BC: No! I didn't even know about that.

GK: Jamie-Lee...

BC: Jamie-Lee Hamilton. Oh! That's why her picture was on Facebook.

GK: She and Becki Ross were behind that.

BC: OK. Oh, really? Oh, cool!

GK: I think Jamie-Lee was talking about having taking sanctuary in the church.

BC: Yeah, I think she was there with us, as I recall. I don't know Jamie super well, but I know her. We know each other enough to say "Hi" and "How are you?" and that kind of stuff.

AS: Yes.

BC: When major amounts of shit hit the fan at the end of VLC, she was one of the few people that actually would show up in public and speak to me. But anyway, that's another big story. But we won't go there.

GK: So, the next sort of major form of organization that we're aware of around AIDS activism is this ACT UP! group that formed. Did you have anything to do with it?

BC: No, not personally. Though I can recall... I mean, I assume that if there was anything to be signed, or rally to be shown up at, we were there, but I was not personally involved in it. And I don't think VLC was personally involved in any of the organizing of ACT UP! here in Vancouver.

GK: So, then there seems to be some other lesbian forms of organizing—well, there's Queer Nation. Do you have any relationship to it? Or Queer Planet; it's unclear exactly what it called itself here.

BC: No. The other lesbian things that were going on that we were more – I was more – aware of was something called Dykes for Dykedom.

GK: Right.

AS: Will you talk about that a little bit?

BC: I'm drawing a blank on names, but I can see the faces now. They'll come back in a minute. Oh! And Dykes and Fags? Dykes and Fags Together... Dykes and Fags... Oh! What the heck was the name of that group?

GK: Well there was a Fags group that would have been Fred and Richard and all those people.

BC: Yeah, but there was also a group that was Dykes and Fags.

GK: Okay.

BC: I can't remember the name. These are all kind of little groups of about four, five, or six people. Most of us sort of knew each other. What was Dykes for Dykedom focused on? I can't remember to be truthful. [laughter]

AS: It just had an awesome name.

BC: Yes. It was a good name! It was Louise Proulx, who now lives in Montreal, and... she just changed her name... Oh, I can see her face... it might come to me... Myrna, or Myrn. I saw her recently at a Kinder Morgan protest. I think her last name is McLoughlin.

GK: By the way, you'll get the transcript back. So, you can always fill stuff in.

BC: There were a few others. I can't remember who, and I can't remember specifically what they were focused on doing, to be honest with you. They met in VLC. I remember being at some meetings... Dyke and Fag Liberation! That's what it was, Dyke and Fag Liberation! Was Richard Banner in that? Paul, maybe. They would probably know though. I can't remember. I can't remember who was in it now. Except I think I was. I can't remember what we were doing though. [laughter]

GK: They talk a bit about Fags and that sort of organizing in, at least in Paul and Richard's, and I think in Dan's interviews, that are on our site.

BC: I'll have to go see those. That'll be really interesting. It'll bring back a lot of interesting memories.

GK: So there were other lesbian groups, LABIA and Lesbian Avengers...

BC: Lesbian Avengers I can't remember. Again, I remember them meeting at VLC. I can't remember what their focus was. Aviva Lazar, I think. I don't even know if she's still in Vancouver. I haven't seen her for years—about thirty or forty probably. But probably you can find somebody that knows what Aviva's last name was. It's amazing, Facebook is a wonderful resource. Lesbian Avengers, and what was the other one?

GK: LABIA.

BC: LABIA, I don't remember anything about LABIA.

GK: Okay.

BC: I'm not even sure they existed in Vancouver.

AS: Apparently it was Lesbians Against Boys Invading Anywhere, was the acronym.

BC: Well, that makes sense for a certain... See, I've never been a separatist. That's never been my shtick.

AS: I think it might have been an anti-imperialist... Anyway. But Lesbian Avengers; Aviva was involved with Lesbian Avengers?

BC: Aviva was part of the Lesbian Avengers and she rode a motorcycle.

GK: Well, that's good. Did Lesbian Avengers have something to do with the emergence of the Dyke march here, or where did that come from?

BC: Oh, maybe. Maybe. Mmm, that could be. I can't remember who did that organizing, because... there were a few things we didn't try and do. You know? That was not something we organized. Who did that initial organizing, I wonder? Because that's still going. Though they have trouble every year to find people to do it. I don't know. We can probably find out though. Somebody will remember.

AS: Yes.

BC: There's enough of us still hanging around who still can remember some things. Yes, I don't know who was doing that. That was very specifically dyke folks. You know, the Pride marches in the West End were great when there were fifty of us and we didn't have a permit. And then they became so corporate, and also very dominated by a particular kind of man. Not just by men, but by men with a particular kind of sensibility, shall we say. I just stopped going to them years ago. It was like, boring. [laughs] You know? Really boring!

GK: Yes. I stopped going to Toronto Pride. It was only like, Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, and then Black Lives Matter that got me sort of going back to them.

BC: That shook things up a little, didn't it?

GK: Oh, it certainly did.

GK: Do you have any more questions?

AS: Well, one of the things that we're always interested in is the general sense, or how it was to be living in Vancouver when AIDS was becoming a political issue. So, if you just had any sort of general things about what that was like, coming out of queer and lesbian organizing. And how AIDS affected the community in Vancouver? How it felt?

BC: Well, you know it was – by the way, anything I'm saying is not necessarily shared by all the people I've worked with. I probably should say that – but it really drew communities together as well. I mean, it's one of those "the ill wind blows no good" departments, and although it blew a lot more ill for the gay male community, obviously. But there was a working together, and a common – I mean, maybe it was ever thus, and I hope it isn't always to be – but you know, most women can see that other people needed to be included, period. So, you know, we do come from that kind of a place to begin with. Maybe that's a comment about relative privilege, or relative lack of privilege, I'm not sure. I think that probably is the source of it, but anyway, whatever. So yes, it drew some stuff together. It drew some stuff together. It was appalling, and it was also exciting. I was working at St. Paul's as a nurse. I got that job sort of just in the middle of that. And that was an amazing experience. St. Paul's did quite a good job. It was really interesting. I would always come out to my patients and it made a big difference. Except for the one man who said, "Well that's nice dear but I got it from a prostitute." [laughter] I didn't ask what the gender of the prostitute was, it didn't occur to me at the time. I was just so embarrassed, I just kind of went "Ooh, well, like, whatever. Sorry about that. Sorry about making an assumption." But yes, there was a whole bunch of stories. Then there was a young woman, actually. But that's not about activism. I've got a really touching story about a young woman with AIDS.

GK: Well, one of the things we are interested in doing is constructing a sort of "Memories" section about people who did die. I mean, I was going to come back to ask you more questions about Fred.

AS: And I'm also really interested in the experience of being a nurse at St. Paul's. I know it's not like going to a demonstration and handing out flyers, but it seems to me like it was political that St. Paul's actually stepped up.

BC: I am one of these that says, “You know, everything is political.” Whatever you do, wherever you are, if you bring yourself, and you bring yourself with some authenticity and integrity, you make a difference. One way or the other. If you don’t, that also makes a difference. And not one I generally tend to support. So yes, it was. On the surface they were doing a really good job, and then there was the head respirologist, a doctor, whose last name I think was Lawson, but I could be wrong. He said to a seventy-five year old man who had AIDS (he was married, he had children) that he had been a closet case. His wife’s response to the children was – actually, her response in front of me – was to say about the closet case comment, “What an awful thing to find out about your father.” I looked at her and I said, “How awful was it for him to have to live that way?” I remember that. So, I mean, there was still shit there, of course. But there’s always shit. There still is shit, you know? But by and large the nursing staff did a really good job. We got a lot of support, by and large.

I worked in palliative care for a while. I worked on the big medical wards and then I worked in palliative care. Most of our clients in palliative care were gay men. I saw some amazing, absolutely heart-touching responses. Men took care of each other in a way that is rare. Really, really, rare. I only saw one heterosexual man take care of his wife the way gay men took care of each other in there, by and large. It was quite amazing. I saw women taking care of their husbands, or whatever. But heterosexual men—I mean, I’m making a broad generality, but heterosexual men don’t know how to do that. They’re not raised to do that, not trained to do that, not whatever. It doesn’t mean they don’t care, and it doesn’t mean those men didn’t care. Because they did, many of them, most of them I would say. I mean, men crawled into bed, they held each other, they played music, they laughed. And oh, there was one guy, I can’t remember his name – which is probably just as well because there’s confidentiality and all that rot (well, it’s not rot) – he was a skater, he was a figure skater, an Olympic figure skater. He got AIDS and then became a fashion designer. And he was a very difficult man. He got really pissed off one day and stopped all of his meds. And got better. He got a lot better. He went home! [laughter] He came back several times after that, but it was the cocktail of stuff that people were taking. You know: This to do this, and then this to fix that, then this one to fix that, then da-da-da-da-da. You don’t have *any* idea what is going on inside your body when you put that kind of stuff in there! Anyway, he would have cocktails on Friday evenings...

AS: In the hospital?

BC: In the hospital. Except that they were mock cocktails, but they would have a little parasol in your glass. And if you were on his shit list you didn’t get invited. [laughter] He was as big around as a toothpick. He was scrawny and skinny. He was waiting for his nephew or niece, I can’t remember which one it was now. Anyway, one of his siblings was having a baby, and there’s this absolutely heartbreaking picture of him holding this healthy, healthy baby. And there’s this guy who is basically a skeleton, you know? Everybody’s standing and sitting, and he’s holding

the baby, and everybody's got their mock cocktails with their parasols. Yeah, there were just some amazing, amazing, amazing things that happened in that period of time.

And there was a young woman. I'll tell you this story because there's a connection to here on the coast. There was a young woman who'd been a street kid, and she got AIDS. She was a heroin user. So, in the beginning of time we used to find her nodding off in the little socializing area, I can't remember what they called it now. But she had a social worker who gave a shit. And they wouldn't send her away because nobody would take her. So, she lived the last two years of her life on 7B, I believe it was. The music therapist, there is a music therapist that lives here on the coast, who I remember he came and he did music therapy and he was just starting – Noel Silver – and he was just, do you know him?

GK: No.

BC: Because he worked a lot, he was a gay man and he was working a lot with gay men, too, I think. But he came in and he did music therapy with her. And this young woman had probably the happiest two years of her life in St. Paul's Hospital, dying of AIDS. And when she died, she died really suddenly, which was a really good thing. She had a stroke and was gone in, I don't know, twelve hours, I guess. Yeah. It was an amazing tribute to St. Paul's. I mean, that group of people. It was the social worker, the social worker who said, "It's not her fault that she's an urban coyote." I remember that phrase so well. She was an "urban coyote." And Noel was just starting, it was his practicum, I guess. So, he's, you know how you are when you're starting out.

AS: Super enthusiastic.

BC: Super enthusiastic and pulling it all out. Anyways, it has nothing to do with activism other than in the more subtle way. But it is a wonderful story.

GK: For sure.

BC: I can't remember her name, though. I can see—she drew pictures. Oh, she drew the most amazing pictures. They were up on the walls in the nursing station for a long time. I remember one had a black sky with this rainbow going through it. I can still see the picture. Probably Noel had something to do with drawing that picture. I'm not sure. Anyway, I ran into him about a year ago, and he said something about his name was Noel and he was a music therapist. And I looked at him and I was like "Noel Silver? Do you remember?" Anyway, it was cool.

AS: And he lives here now? On the coast?

BC: Yes.

AS: I now really do think that everybody who was involved with AIDS has moved to the sunshine coast.

BC: Yes, there's a lot of us over here.

AS: And so, were you working as a nurse all through the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation?

BC: I can't remember how long. I wasn't very good at doing the responsible things in terms of money. I quit nursing and to work in the film industry, because I always wanted to be a carpenter. That is really another story. I can't remember if I was starting working as a nurse then or not.

AS: I've been interested in the medical side, that there seemed to have been, you know, doctors also involved.

BC: My big focus was on the activism and on the politics of it. Well, there wasn't a heck of a lot that could be – was being – done in terms of the medical end of it at that point. AZT was about it. And you know, there were an awful lot of people with Kaposi's [sarcoma] and whatever, other really obvious manifestations walking around. No, I didn't... Oh! But Montana, his last name was Montana.

GK: Is he a doctor?

BC: Yes. Luke.

GK: That's sort of what I'm thinking of too. He was one of the main doctors at St. Paul's, wasn't he?

BC: Yes, and he was doing... I'd be really interested to hear what he had to say... I think he has continued to be quite an active voice. They set up the HIV Centre for Excellence. And there was another one. There were two of them involved. There's a nurse that I know who was a dyke who got involved with a lot of the dykes. Oh, I know who you should talk to for women! Kath... Oh, she's on my Facebook. She's a friend of a friend. She's positive. She was on a bus trip in Africa and the bus was in an accident. And she had a cut, and she got HIV. She was partnered to... Anyway. Oh my god, the genealogy of some of these stories is so amazing. But let's cut to the chase. Kath Webster. I can put you in touch with her. I think she got diagnosed in the 90s, is my guess. And she would have some more to say. I know that she's still doing some workshops and stuff like that too.

AS: Okay, good.

GK: So, we're sort of moving towards the end of the interview. There's basically two questions we sort of end off with. Which is, any memories of people who died of AIDS during this period – which you've been telling us a bit about – but I wondered if you wanted to come back to talk about Fred a bit more. Because we haven't yet done this, because I think the only one we've got for Vancouver is Torvald Patterson, who would have been Tom.

BC: Oh! I know who Torvald is, but I didn't know him well.

GK: But I think we want to do something around Fred. So, if you wanted to say anything more about Fred.

BC: Well, Richard Banner should have a lot to say about Fred.

GK: We do have comments from a number of those people about Fred. But if there's anything more you wanted to say about Fred this would be the opportunity.

BC: This would be the time to do it. He was a brilliant chair. If something was breaking on gender lines Fred would pick it up really quickly. Way, way quicker than I would, actually. I really liked working with him, as well as the personal relationship we developed out of that. But I really liked working with him. On a personal level, Fred was special. It was the first time in my life that I developed a friendship with a man that was absolutely even. We were from different genders, different class backgrounds, and to some degree different sexualities. And we traded experiences. It really was magical. We learned from one another. I miss him. I miss him a lot—as a friend and as a political partner.

AS: Was he a Vancouverite? Or had he moved?

BC: I think he was from the interior somewhere.

AS: Okay.

BC: I'm not positive, but I want to say Salmon Arm, or somewhere in the interior is my guess. Richard would know, I'm sure. Well, I took care of Fred in the last couple of days of his life, actually.

AS: He died at home?

BC: No, he was in the hospital. It was quick.

AS: Did his family come, or was it a case where...?

BC: I don't think so, no. I don't recall if they did. If they did, I wasn't there. Let's put it that way. Thankfully for Fred it was—when he went, he went down fairly quickly. Like, a matter of days, as I recall. He had been doing fairly well, until then. Still was putting in ads in *Angles*, in the personal section.

GK: Sounds like Fred.

BC: Mmhmm!

GK: So, I guess the last two questions. Just in terms of thinking about things as we've been talking about them, is there anything else that you wanted to talk about, that you haven't had an opportunity to yet? Just thinking back on those years.

BC: I wish we could develop the same the degree of passion about a whole bunch of political things that need to be... [laughter] Although my current passions are around environmental issues, because—well, it's really obvious why. But you don't want it to be something that's killing people. Which eventually, if we don't take care of the planet, it's going to do. Well, it already is killing people. It's just not right here.

GK: Right.

BC: Stop the rant, Bet! [laughter] I mean, that was the good stuff. The good stuff was about the connections. It was about the activism. It was about people giving a shit and doing something about it. Of course, the bad stuff was the number of people who died. And the bad stuff was also that a lot of men were seen – and a lot of women too, but it doesn't affect us as much here in North America – are seen as a chronic disease. And “Oh well, you know, we'll just do what we feel like doing and then we can deal with it afterwards.” That scares me. And the other thing that's happened, which actually I saw and a couple of other people saw really early on, was this was going to hit reserves. And, of course, it has. And that's a whole bunch of stuff that is not being taken care of. So, if you want to talk about a nice little white middle class, mostly white middle-class queers, we're doing okay. If you want to talk about most of the rest of the world, it's not okay. It's really not okay. And it's really hard to get people motivated. I actually haven't been focusing on that, because I've been focusing on – I mean, you can only do so many things in one day – I've been focusing mostly on environmental things. But it's still there. The problems are still there. And I still say, “If you don't do something, nothing's going to change. And if you *do* do something, it might change.” That's the only way I can look at it. There're days when I go “Oh! Screw it all.” But you can't unsee what you've already seen, or I can't unsee what I've already seen.

So, I don't know if I've got anything else to say in particular.

GK: You've already also told us about all sorts of other people to talk to. I think the only thing – unless you have another question – is to thank you.

AS: This has just been really wonderful.

BC: Well thank you. It was nice to see you again [to Gary].

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]